

RELATIONAL AESTHETICS ▪ Alexander Nagel on Bellini and Giorgione



From left: Giovanni Bellini, *Saint Francis in the Desert*, ca. 1475–80, oil on panel, 49 × 55 7/8". Giorgione, *Three Philosophers*, 1508–1509, oil on canvas, 49 3/4 × 57 1/2".

IN GIOVANNI BELLINI'S *Saint Francis in the Desert*, ca. 1475–80 in the Frick Collection, New York, the gaunt saint opens his arms and raises his head as his eyes roll upward and his mouth opens in prayer, or maybe just a gasp. He is small in a large world, a humble receiver flooded by a signal beaming down from on high. Many scholars believe this is the scene of Saint Francis's stigmatization minus the traditional iconographic trappings—no floating seraph-winged crucifix searing the saint with his wounds and no brother Leo, the usual witness to the miracle. I subscribe to an alternate view: that the picture transforms the template of Francis's stigmatization into a different scene altogether, at once less and more familiar—a day in the life of an ecstatic holy man. A book lies on his rough-hewn desk, but the saint has closed it and stepped into the open. Facing the sky, he opens his arms; his hands bear the stigmata, now discreet marks, already part of him. Breaking through the clouds and electrifying the laurel

tree at left is nothing other than the irradiating force of the sun, and the saint has turned and opened to receive it, like a heliotrope. In his *Canticle of the Sun*, composed after the stigmatization and shortly before his death in 1226, Francis celebrates "Sir Brother Sun" as the most special of God's creatures, because "his" splendor illuminates us with a direct signal from God.

The painting was first documented in 1525, when it was described by the Venetian patrician Marcantonio Michiel, one of a new breed of collector and connoisseur, who took it upon himself to tour and inventory the principal art collections in northern Italy, as well as the churches and public venues where notable art could be seen. If this were what period texts typically called a *stimmate di san francesco*, Michiel would have named it that, just as he carefully identified the subjects of many other works, often naming far more obscure characters and stories, for the simple reason that he wanted his entries to point unambiguously to

the works they itemized. Yet rather than apply the well-known title to Bellini's painting, he describes what it shows: "The panel of Saint Francis in the desert, in oil, was the work of Zuan Bellini, begun by him for messer Zuan Michiel [a relative of Marcantonio's], and it has a landscape that is marvelously finished and refined." (At the time, "desert" referred generally to an uninhabited wilderness.)

For the past three years, Bellini's painting has been exhibited in the former home of the Whitney Museum of American Art on Madison Avenue, transforming one room of Marcel Breuer's building into a modernist chapel. In October 2023, for the exhibition "Bellini and Giorgione in the House of Taddeo Contarini," Giorgione's *Three Philosophers*, 1508–1509, was flown in from Vienna and placed near Bellini's painting for the first time in four centuries. The two works last hung together in the palace appointed by the Venetian patrician Taddeo Contarini, where Michiel saw them in 1525, together with other works by both Bellini and Giorgione. In a short and highly informative catalogue, the Frick's head curator, Xavier Salomon, reconstructs Contarini's collection and takes the important new step of credibly identifying the (still existing) palace where the works hung in the sixteenth century.

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Face-to-face at the Frick Madison, the two paintings offered an anatomy of artistic revolution: The elder artist does something unprecedented and the younger one (probably a pupil) goes on to make painting a different thing. We are watching a new culture come into being, where critics and connoisseurs understood artists in relation to other artists and works of art in relation to other works, whether from different times and places or from the artist's own career. In this new world, artists claimed the status of authors and poets, and Giorgione was its Bob Dylan, personifying a generational turn reflected in newly billowing fashions and flowing long hair. (You can admire a paragon of the new type in the dreamy *Portrait of a Man in a Red Hat* of about 1520 by Giorgione's pupil Titian, also at the Frick.) Giorgione's clients were to an unusual degree young—poets, scholars, and philosophical seekers who continued to pursue their intellectual interests even as they grew up to become merchants, politicians, and prelates.

Of comparable size and format, both paintings show figures standing on a rocky foreground shelf separated from a lush, peaceful landscape background where a town nestles in a valley. In both, the natural world becomes dominant, releasing the human actors into a newly associative relation with the earth and universe they inhabit. If *Saint Francis* reworks the scene of the stigmatization into a less episodic image of spiritual communion, *Three Philosophers* works through an even better-known subject, the Adoration of the Magi.

Dressed in exotic clothing with an antique air, the figures retain Magi-like qualities, down to the range from old to middle-aged to young, though the sequence is now reversed, with the youngest closest to the cave, seated rather than kneeling, while the turbaned figure in the painting's center, facing the viewer while turning from the young to the old philosopher, remains virtually unchanged from countless Adoration scenes. Completely missing are the Virgin and child in the cave, leaving the three impressive figures alone in the painting's right half, all dressed up with nowhere in particular to go. They are now, as Michiel describes them, "three philosophers in a landscape."

Once again, Michiel would have had no problem naming individual philosophers or identifying the Magi if that is what he or the painting's owner thought they were. For example, he identifies another painting by Giorgione, also in Contarini's collection, as a "birth of Paris" (a lost work known through copies), a rare subject that in Giorgione's depiction looked a lot like a Nativity of Christ, with a baby lying on the ground, a woman and old man sitting nearby, and shepherds standing to one side. Yet Michiel knew exactly what it was, or he was told what it was by the painting's owner, just as he knew or was instructed that, despite appearances, Bellini's painting was not to be identified as a stigmatization but described as Saint Francis in the wilderness.

On occasion Michiel could not make out a subject but knew there was one, and in those cases he introduces

an ellipsis (. . .) as a placeholder, to be filled in later. In the entry for *Three Philosophers*, by contrast, there is no reaching for answers, just an extensive, evenhanded description: "the canvas painted in oils of the three philosophers in the landscape, two standing and one seated who contemplates the solar rays with that rock depicted so marvelously; it was begun by Giorgione and finished by Sebastiano Veneziano." (Giorgione died young of the plague in 1510, and Sebastiano, later called Sebastiano del Piombo, was his pupil and associate. To my eye the youngest philosopher looks like pure Sebastiano.) Michiel does this in only one other instance, Giorgione's equally mysterious *Tempest*, owned by Contarini's neighbor and brother-in-law Gabriele Vendramin, which he describes as "the little landscape on canvas with the tempest with the gypsy and soldier." It is hard to believe that within twenty years the owners of these two paintings, both of whom probably knew the painter, forgot what their subjects were while remembering the at times recherché subjects of their other works. Michiel was not being laconic when he refrained from naming these figures, nor was he stumped, leaving blanks to be filled in later. For him and evidently for the paintings' owners, the figures were generic in the sense that they represented genera—philosopher, soldier, etc.—rather than specific characters in known stories.

A painting on panel such as Bellini's carried a certain formality and was expected to convey sanctioned imagery. Giorgione used the new and relatively inexpensive support of canvas, an experimental zone for independent pictures. (Later on, it became the standard support for painting of all kinds and was put to all the traditional uses.) The idea of working free of known subjects, or of dissolving subject matter while leaving its traces visible, may seem more at home in post-Romantic and modernist painting rather than Renaissance art, but the young literary figures of Giorgione's milieu were interested in experiments of just this sort. The most prominent of them, Pietro Bembo, wrote in 1505 that poets will take one subject or another as a basis on which to "spread out their falsehoods and their strangest ideas, but will also bring a single subject around to different ends . . . as if one kind of food, whether sweet or sour by nature, could be so dressed that it may have now one and now another flavor." Messing around with subject matter as fusion cuisine? These were just the people to draw parallel experiments in painting from Giorgione.

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT living in a pre-Copernican world, where the earth is the pearl of the cosmos, the universe's special baby, receiving heavenly "influences" not by chance but through a series of celestial spheres that are like lenses focused on our terrarium. And here we stand, endowed with minds capable of understanding this basic fact—that we are here on this earth because we were created, as in a petri dish, by a higher intelligence. These two paintings share that universe but inhabit it in different ways.

View of "Bellini and Giorgione in the House of Taddeo Contarini," 2023–24, Frick Madison, New York. From left: Giorgione, *Three Philosophers*, 1508–1509; Giovanni Bellini, *Saint Francis in the Desert*, ca. 1475–80. Photo: Joseph Coscia Jr.





Giovanni Bellini, *Pala di Pesaro Altarpiece* (detail), ca. 1475, oil and tempera on wood, 21' 2" × 13' 11 3/8" × 21' 9 5/8".

In *Three Philosophers*, the earth engulfs the picture, making everything mysterious, even uncanny. Is there another European painting, centuries before or after this one, that is so lopsided in its construction? It would have been even stranger before the canvas lost about eight inches at the left, as we can appreciate in seventeenth-century copies of the painting that show the mouth of the shaggy concavity almost in its entirety—a dark opening that can only be read as an absence, even a symbol of absence. A fig sapling grows out of the darkness, innumerable pebbles lie on the rocky ground, and a vast sky goes through changes in the distance. Larger truths certainly order the cosmos, but the philosophers operate in a more limited sphere of accumulated human knowledge (the eldest philosopher's tablet with its astronomical diagrams) and their own observations (the young philosopher actively studying “the solar rays”). In the period, *philosopher* meant above all a natural philosopher, meaning an astronomer, as when Amerigo Vespucci in his nearly contemporary *Letter on the New World* says that in the Southern Hemisphere (off the

coast of Brazil) the night sky reveals constellations unknown to Europeans and “not compatible with the [received] opinions of the philosophers.”

This is a structural inversion of *Saint Francis*, who turns his back to the dark cave, leaving his book behind, and steps into a crystalline landscape that is vast and open, yet responsive, humming in the warmth of the light of God. Solar rays here are not observed with compass in hand; they are divine truth itself, and Francis is simply and instantly filled with it. In contrast to Bellini's clarity and transparency, Giorgione courts obscurity and incompleteness, not only in the way he foregrounds a dark ravine, inviting us to peer into it looking for answers, but also in the way he applies paint. Bellini's “marvelously finished and refined” landscape is in perfect focus. Paint is meant to disappear in the presentation of things, as in the Netherlandish painting so prized by Italians of the time. We see this world from high up, in an impersonal survey. In Giorgione, we are low down, viewing a world where things fall into shadow and get lost in distant atmosphere—a world as

it is perceived, contingent and changing. In the rocky foreground, where Giorgione comes closest to Bellini's careful rendering of nature's details, we only need to step forward for these rocks and pebbles to turn into smudges and streaks of paint that the painter left clearly visible. Giorgione had absorbed the previous century's lessons in pictorial realism—his painting summons a world and draws us in—but it is now insistently a world made by a painter.

Bellini's Francis is at home in his retreat. One can feel the pleasure and care the saint put into crafting the simple gate, desk, and trellis now overgrown with vines, working with the materials in his environment. And the ecstasy he is experiencing is really a penetrating certainty that he is at home in the universe, directly in the eye-beam of God. Giorgione's philosophers, by contrast, are elegantly dressed visitors from an Oriental antiquity who have landed in a foreign wilderness. Perhaps the profoundest legacy of the Magi story taken over by Giorgione is this quality of displacement, the essential fact that those wise men were global travelers, drawn far from their homes in search of knowledge that would change their view of the world.

A HIGHLY UNUSUAL VISION of displaced astronomers, contemplating their world and universe: How could this not in some way be connected to the recent European encounters with worlds never before known? Venice was a hub for printed news and images of the New World, and in 1506, just a few years before this painting was made, the cosmographer Giovan Matteo Contarini, a relative of the Giorgione collector Taddeo Contarini, designed one of the first and most influential world maps showing the newly discovered lands. One hundred eighty degrees of the map are devoted to the known world of Europe, Africa, and the proximate parts of Asia, while the other half reveals the new territories across the Atlantic together with the easternmost and thus least known parts of Asia. Fully one half of the globe, the map proclaims, had been opened to us within the previous fifteen years—nothing less than a world-historical revelation. On his visit to Contarini's house, Michiel was focused on paintings, but a later inventory lists a “map of the world on paper glued to canvas” hanging proudly in a gold frame on the mezzanine floor, either Giovan Matteo Contarini's map or a later one with an even fuller description of the New World.

In Giorgione's painting, the sun dropping out of sight over the horizon confirms that the spheres of the cosmos move in orbits and time is told in circles. Now, finally, Europeans were coming to know the earth's other side, which receives the sun's light during the hours when their own world is in darkness, and the southern half of the globe, where life on earth unfolds under different constellations. The philosophers stand all to one side, opposite “that rock depicted so marvelously,” an opening in the earth worthy of half a painting. □

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