

# BELLINI

## THE FATHER OF VENETIAN PAINTING



Albrecht Dürer, the great German engraver, classified the great Venetian painter **Giovanni Bellini** as “the best painter of all.” The highly-respected art historian Roberto Longhi, in his *Viatico Compendia* (1945), defined Bellini as “one of the greatest poets of Italy” and assessed his style as “starting off Byzantine, then becoming Gothic, later following in the footsteps of Mantegna and the Paduan School, then turning for inspiration to Piero and Antonello, and finally becoming Giorgione-esque.” In fact, Bellini was, before Leonardo da Vinci, the great inventor of the representation in the same painting of human emotions and nature, both imbued with a soft, deeply Venetian light.

In the March 2008 issue of *Inside the Vatican*, I published an interview with **Antonio Paolucci**, the then newly-appointed director of the Vatican Museums. This distinguished art historian is also president of the committee responsible for the magnificent temporary exhibitions in the *Scuderie*, or the former stables of Rome’s Quirinal Palace, where Italy’s president lives. When I asked Paolucci which of all the exhibitions he’d ever organized “most challenged his scholarly research expertise,” he replied: “The one I’m working on now, about the Renaissance Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini, which will open at the *Scuderie* in September.”

Some scholars say that during his long life, Bellini (1430-1516) painted as many as 300 works. Tragically, more than two-thirds of these paintings were destroyed by fire over the centuries, or otherwise lost. About 100 survive.

Also known as “Giambellino,” Giovanni was the illegitimate son of an unknown mother and **Jacopo Bellini** (1396-1470), himself an accomplished Venetian painter. Giovanni’s brother, Gentile Bellini, was also an exceptional painter. And his brother-in-law was the great painter **Andrea Mantegna**.

Thus, Bellini was born into a family of artists, and into an extremely active workshop, and what’s more, in a city, Venice, where all the greatest Italian artists of his day were living: **Antonello Messina** (the subject of another landmark exhibition held at the *Scuderie* in 2006), **Giorgione**, **Titian**, (both Bellini’s pupils), and even **Leonardo da Vinci** (if only briefly). The city also attracted visits from foreign artists, like Dürer, and from great public art commissioners and private collectors.

Bellini was a consummate Venetian artist, who, unlike many of his contemporaries, including his brother, supposedly never left *La Serenissima* (the nickname for Venice), though some scholars insist that he went to Pesaro to work on his altarpiece there. Of the profoundest significance in the development of Bellini’s style was Antonello da Messina’s arrival in Venice in

Below, top, *The Pesaro Altarpiece*, one of the most famous religious paintings of the Italian Renaissance. Below, bottom, *Madonna and Child with Donor*. Opposite page: *The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple*, Bellini's oldest surviving painting and the logo for the exhibition

1475-76. It is not known whether Antonello, who was approximately 10 years Giovanni's senior, had traveled to Flanders or whether he had only studied Flemish works — in particular those of Van Eyck — while he was apprenticed to Niccolò Colantonio in Naples. In any case, thanks to this Flemish master, Antonello introduced oil paints and Flemish pictorial techniques like detailed landscape backgrounds to Italy, and in particular to Bellini, who had up until then painted only in tempera. In all likelihood, through Antonello, Bellini would also have had access to collections of Venetian nobles that contained Flemish pieces. Contact with Antonello undoubtedly explains why several of Bellini's Madonnas wear blue veils similar to the one worn by the Madonna in Antonello da Messina's astonishing *Annunciation*.

On in Rome until January 11, 2008, is the first monographic exhibition on Giovanni Bellini since the one held in the Doge's Palace in Venice in 1949.

"From the 1949 exhibit, what emerged was the image of Bellini as an extraordinary painter, but mainly for his many Madonnas with Child," the curator, Mauro Lucco, said at the press preview. "We did not want to approach this event with works representing that theme. Instead, we have tried to show Bellini as a great painter of figures, the great revolutionary of Italian painting." Thus, this 2008 *Giovanni Bellini* exhibition gathers more than 60 works, almost all painted on wood, from private collections and 48 leading museums from all over the world: Baltimore, Florence, London, Madrid, Milan, New York, Ottawa, Paris, San Paolo, Washington, D.C., and Zagreb, to name a few.

It took more than three years to organize due to the paintings' immense value (the insurance estimate comes close to 500 million euros), their often huge size, and their fragile condition; 13 works required pre-exhibition restoration.

Such is the case of the seven-meters tall *Pala di Pesaro* or *Pesaro Altarpiece*, finally reunited with its *cymatium*, crowning upper piece or cornice, now in the Vatican Museums, on display in solitary splendor in Room I. Also entitled *The Coronation of the Virgin*, this masterpiece of Italian art, precisely dateable to 1471-1474, is a milestone in Bellini's long (he painted up to a few months before his death) and prolific career. "It is



the perfect expressive maturity of an artist whom we imagine as not yet 40," the curators, Mauro Lucco and Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa, explain in their complimentary brochure available at the entrance. "Here the relationship between divine and human is very naturally and simply translated into landscape, a relationship that becomes mental perspective."

The rest of the exhibition is displayed in another nine rooms on two floors, each floor in more or less chronological order.

Ironically, up until this exhibition, there was little documentation for the chronology of Bellini's early bio and works. The first document to mention his name dates to 1459 and his oldest dated painting is the *Madonna degli Alberetti* in Venice's Accademia Museum, which is signed and dated

1487 when the artist was already past 50. Extensive research in Venetian archives and the painstaking restoration, which has revealed splendid preparatory drawings beneath the paint, have helped to clarify this matter.

Although Bellini is best known for his numerous Madonnas with Child (25 are on display here) and his crucifixions and *pietàs*, the several paintings in "*Between Public and Private: The Great Commissions*" show how Bellini, a man of deep religious faith, combines his "Christian" dimension and his "lay" or "public" side as a painter. For example, "the *Altarpiece of Doge Agostino Barbarigo* (1488, Church of San Pietro Martire, Murano) is a large votive canvas," explain the curators, "commissioned to celebrate the Venetian aristocrat's election as Doge and destined to grace his palazzo.

"As was usual, the Doge was presented by St. Mark, the patron saint of the Venetian Republic, to the Madonna with the blessing Child."

After being displayed in the *Scuderie* (Via XXIV Maggio 16, tel. 06-39967500, [www.scuderiequirinale.it](http://www.scuderiequirinale.it). Hours: Sunday-Thursday: 10 AM to 8 PM; Friday and Saturday: 10 AM to 10:30 PM, Entrance: 10 euros), the exhibition is due to return home, to the *Accademia* and the *Correr Museum* in Venice, where it will be possible to see several works not lent to Rome. A word of advice to those lucky enough to see this unrepeatable exhibition: read up on Bellini and his times before going. ○

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