

GIOVANNI BELLINI

LANDSCAPES OF FAITH IN RENAISSANCE VENICE

Landscapes are among the most admired features in the paintings of Giovanni Bellini (Venice, about 1435–1516). Mountains, walled towns, castles, caves, rocks, trees, plants and flowers, sunrises and sunsets are as much the protagonists of his work as human figures. Bellini employed landscape as a device to complement religious subjects and to enhance the meditational role of his paintings, which were typically intended for the private devotion of highly sophisticated patrons. The devotional component of his pictures—the isolated crucifix in a landscape, the *sacra conversazione* (a silent conversation between the Virgin and saints), or the image of Saint Jerome in the wilderness—is always infused with a refined sensitivity to the natural world. Bellini's paintings present expressively charged interpretations of characters and symbols, familiar from sacred stories, immersed in a realm of lived experience to a degree that was entirely unprecedented in Italian artistic tradition. Bellini thus transformed conventional symbolic motifs into convincing yet poetic depictions of the Venetian mainland. Such innovation represented a crucial transition to a new consideration of painting as an aid to devotion that was also worthy of aesthetic appreciation. In this way Bellini's art marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of European painting.

BELLINI'S CAREER

Giovanni Bellini (about 1435–1516), one of the most illustrious artists of the Renaissance, was a leading master in all types of painting practiced in fifteenth-century Venice. He focused at first on small paintings intended for private devotion, later creating portraits of poignant intensity as well as some of the most innovative altarpieces of the period. Toward the end of his long life, he added the new genres of mythological and secular allegory to his repertory. Bellini was among a number of painters of his generation who championed the shift from the use of egg tempera, traditional in Italy, to the technique of oil pioneered in the Netherlands, occasionally using both binding agents in the same work. He showed an extraordinary capacity to absorb a wide range of artistic influences, from the iconic, spiritual tone of Venice's Byzantine heritage to the painstaking attention to detail of the Netherlandish tradition. He responded to the innovative art of his father, Jacopo, and of his brother-in-law Andrea Mantegna; the raw expressivity of Donatello's sculptures; the seamless union of perspective and color in the works of Piero della Francesca and Antonello da Messina; and even later in life to the subtle atmospheric qualities of the paintings of Giorgione, who was young enough to be his grandson. It was primarily thanks to Bellini that the Venetian school of painting was transformed during the later fifteenth century from one of local standing to one of international repute.

*Zambelin se puol dir la primavera
Del mondo tuto in ato de pitura:
Perché da lù deriva ogni verdura
E senza lù l'arte un inverno giera.*

Giovanni Bellini can be said to be the spring of the whole world in the practice of painting, because all green scenery derives from him, and without him art would have been a winter.

Marco Boschini, 1660
Italian painter and engraver

The invention, for which your excellency wrote me to find a design, will need to be adjusted according to the imagination of Bellini, who is pleased when many stipulations do not limit his style, it being accustomed, as he says, always to wander at will in paintings, so that to the best of his ability they may satisfy whoever admires them.

Pietro Bembo to Isabella d'Este, 1506

Italian poet and writer / Marchioness of Mantua

In all that concerns the imaginative conception of the subject, in the harmonizing of all the accessories, to produce a single profound impression on the emotions, above all, in the large and reposeful spaciousness of the composition, Bellini is, surely, the more to be admired.

Roger Fry, 1899

English artist and art critic

Giovanni Bellini knows the earth well, paints it to the full, and to the smallest fig-leaf and falling flower, blue hill and white-walled city, glittering robe and golden hair; to each he will give its lustre and loveliness, and then he proclaims that heaven is bright.

John Ruskin, 1856

English writer and art critic

Giovanni Bellini has praised me highly to many gentlemen. Everyone tells me what an upright man he is, so that I am really friendly with him. He is very old and yet he is the best painter of all.

Albrecht Dürer, 1506

German painter and printmaker

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