

Venice and the Renaissance

Background Notes

Jane Angelini — 17 April 2024



Gentile Bellini, *A Procession in St Mark's Square*, 1490. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

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Historical Background

During the Middle Ages Venice was regarded as the freest of Italy's many free cities. The Venetians were unique, not just in the way that they lived and governed, but also in the way in which they were forced to look for a means to subsist. Rather like a city in the desert, Venice had no farmland to feed her inhabitants, while the lagoon yielded only fish and salt. Venetian merchant seamen gradually developed an unparalleled network of long-distance trade routes. By the 14th century Venice was one of the most thriving metropolitan centres in Western Europe, with a population of about 120,000. Venetian ships sailed to Alexandria and Beirut in the eastern Mediterranean, to Constantinople and into the Black Sea, through the straits of Gibraltar to northwest Europe, and around the southern tip of Italy to Sicily and North Africa. Venice's trading partners affected not only the city's economic prosperity, but also its cultural identity, making it probably the most culturally diverse city in Europe, a fact clearly depicted in many of its paintings.

Cardinal Bessarion, the great 15th century humanist who was from Trebizond on the Black Sea and called himself a 'Greek', wrote in the document giving his library to the city of Venice that "no place is more suitable, or more appropriate for my fellow countrymen in particular. The peoples of almost the whole world come together in great numbers in your city, but especially the Greeks, whose first port of call as they sail from their own lands is Venice. They have besides a familiar relationship with you; when they put ashore at your city it seems that they are entering another Byzantium".



Cardinal Bessarion's letter announcing the donation of his library.

The multi-racial, market orientated, outward-looking nature of Venetian Renaissance society, with its fondness for the textures and colours of the bazaar, is reflected in the surfaces of its art and, at times, in the themes. In the 15th century, Venice was just as much a Renaissance city as Florence, but in a different way. One of the paradoxes is that whilst in its drive and openness to new ideas Venice was an exemplary Renaissance city, it was also the most thoroughly opposed to the notion of a Renaissance. The Venetians believed that the Classical world of Greece and Rome had much that was worth emulating and admiring but the idea that the more recent past must in the process be thrown over or rejected as barbaric or old fashioned, was anathema to them. Venice was founded on accretion rather than rejection, with synthesis as its guiding principle. Just as they took things and ideas from many places so too did they take from many eras. Embracing the classical past never meant, to the Venetian mind, rejecting the legacy of Byzantium, or of the European Middle Ages. Anything the Venetians loved, they kept. And this was very much how they made their world. Venice was not thrown into the Dark Ages in the same way as the rest of Europe and Italy. Its links with the orient through trade, and particularly its links with the great Mediterranean metropolis – Byzantium – meant that there was always a thread of continuity with the Classical past.

Venetian Renaissance Art and the Artists 1400's - 1580

By the mid 15th century Venetian patrons and artists were well aware of the vogue for the classical style that was sweeping across Italy and in part it was a phenomenon driven by Venetian artists – such as **Jacobo Bellini** (1400-1470), whose antiquarian interests were shared by his son-in-law Mantenga. But in Venice itself, Renaissance classical style stole up more quietly and gradually. There was no Florentine Revolution, no gang of four like Brunelleschi, Donatello, Masaccio and Ghiberti, and no corresponding sense that the gothic was to become a discontinued line. Unlike Florence, where there was often ferocious competition between different artists and very much of a cult of the artist as an individual, in Venice there was more of a tradition of the artists'

communal enterprise. Whilst the great Florentines strove to discard the past, and create something new, Venetian artists often belonged to family workshops where sons did not kill or strive to supersede the fathers, they were happy to learn from them. Perhaps the most important of these family workshops was the one created by **Jacobo Bellini** and passed on to his sons **Gentile and Giovanni**.

The father, Jacobo, is less well known, but clearly his sons' greatness was partly due to their father who was the first to master the mathematics of Florentine linear perspective. He plunged himself into the study of the antique past and was the first Venetian to bring classical mythology vividly to life. He was one of the first to depict the world around him, its labourers and workers as well as its aristocrats, with documentary objectivity. His sketchbooks laid out the future of Venetian art itself: its strains of mythological fantasy; its realism; its preoccupation with the depiction of the landscape and atmospheric effects; its portrayals of human consciousness and feeling. The Bellini family laid the ground for the Venetian master painters of the 16th century when the Venetian School's ground-breaking emphasis on *colorito*, or using color to create forms, made it distinct from the Florentine Renaissance emphasis on *disegno*, or drawing the forms then filling in the colour. This resulted in works of revolutionary dynamism, unparalleled richness, and distinct psychological expression.

Artists in Venice painted primarily in oils, first on wood panels, then pioneering the use of canvas, which was better suited to the humid climate of the city, and emphasized the play of naturalistic light and atmosphere and dramatic, sometimes theatrical, human movement.

Renaissance patronage was inseparable from the resulting arts and Venice was far less dependent on ruling aristocratic families and rulers than counterparts in Florence and were freer to work for whom they pleased. Many of their commissions came from the *scuole*, confraternal social institutions unique to Venice and some of them extremely wealthy. Other commissions came from churches and private individuals, some of these outside Venice, They painted on their own terms, refusing to be dictated to and setting their own prices, a freedom other Italian painters would have

envied and a reflection on the fact that there was plenty of work and money in Venice.

Less constrained by the strictures of the Catholic church and with a culture of female courtesans, it is unsurprising that Venetian nudes were ground-breaking. The artists had easy access to live models, rather than being dependant on classical statues, and the integral sensuality and sense of *joie de vivre* of Venetian painters of the 16th century can here be seen at its best.



Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1534
(detail). Gallerie degli Uffizi,
Florence

The artists we will look at are:

Gentile Bellini (c.1429 – 1507) Gentile acquired his father's eye for documentary detail and put it to use in his own paintings, such as the procession in the Piazza San Marco which shows an unprecedented and extraordinary degree of topographical accuracy. This was achieved through the medium of oil which allowed him to work slowly and meticulously, correcting errors, adding nuances and textures. He was also known as a Venetian orientalist due to the number of paintings set in the eastern Mediterranean and was a leading exponent of cross-cultural exchange.

Giovanni Bellini (d. 1516) Giovanni transformed his father's ideas on linear perspective, landscape, and oil painting, producing superbly atmospheric work, rather like Leonardo's. He was a friend of Dürer, a frequent presence in Venice and actively sought to learn from him.

Giovanni's use of colour is crucial to any understanding of Venetian painting in general and Titian's work in particular.

Bellini pioneered Venetian portraiture and use of oils, both of which dominated Venetian painting. His approach became the distinctive Venetian style, emphasizing colour contrasts, naturalistic light, and a focus on pattern and texture, as the fabrics seem to clothe a three-dimensional form, beckoning the viewer to touch them. Venetian artists did not aspire to the classical harmony and beauty of Renaissance Florence and Rome, but rather to the ripple of light and the shimmer of colour, and created a new, more intimate relationship to the viewer.



Giovanni Bellini, *Sacred Conversation*, 1505. San Zaccharia, Venice

Vittore Carpaccio (1460-1525/6) was initially influenced by Giovanni Bellini, but went on to develop his own style. Like many other Venetian painters, he found full time employment in the city and rarely needed to venture away. His great cycles of painting demonstrate his hallmark poetic fantasy and tendency, like Gentile Bellini, to turn any commission into an excuse to illustrate the life of the city of Venice

Giorgione (1477/8 -1510), like Giovanni Bellini, made a significant contribution to the unique use of colour in Venetian composition. A contribution which his contemporary Titian perfected. A maverick

painter, influenced by recently printed and widely available, pastoral and love poetry his paintings are famously sensuous and enigmatic and mark him as Venetian creator of “mood landscapes” . He was the first renaissance painter to create paintings for art lovers, rather than public commission.



Giorgione, *The Tempest*, 1506.
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

Titian (c. 1485 -1576) was the titan of the 16th century whose reputation and influence beyond Venice was far more extensive than that of any other Venetian Renaissance painter. He was fiercely competitive and prided himself on his position as amongst the greatest artists of the day, able to combine Michelangelo's brilliant draughtsmanship with Raphael's sense of grace and harmony. His portraits are incomparable.

Paolo Veronese (1528 -1588) , made a speciality of huge pictures of biblical and ecclesiastical banquets. His trademark ingredients are the fluently organised composition of numerous figures, imposing, classical, rich, yet harmonised colours, splendid textiles, servants, bustle, dogs and a strong element of humour. He influenced later artists like Peter Paul Rubens, Watteau, Delacroix, and Renoir. The art critic Théophile Gautier described him as, "the greatest colourist who ever lived," and Delacroix wrote, that Veronese "made light without violent contrasts, which we are always told is impossible, and maintained the strength of hue in shadow."



Veronese, Juno Showering Gifts on Venetia, 1560s. Palazzo Ducale, Venice

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