EXHIBITION REVIEW


Jacopo Bellini, the astute founder of a family workshop, collaborated first with his two sons, Gentile, the eldest, and Giovanni (born out of wedlock), and then arranged the marriage of his daughter Nicolosia to Andrea Mantegna in 1453. Thus, Jacopo brought into the family a brilliant young parvenu, almost an autodidact who had attracted the attention of humanist patronage in Padua. The exhibition at the National Gallery London, until late January 2019, explores the relationship of the brothers in law in surprising ways. It will open in a slightly different form at the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, on 1 March 2019. At the beginning, Jacopo’s altarpieces are contrasted with his radically innovative book of drawings from the British Museum, known as the Bible of Venetian art, with compositions predictive of later Venetian painting by his workshop. Unlike any other exhibition, this one is about artistic collaboration between Bellini and Mantegna created by curatorial cooperation between the National Gallery in London and the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, with spectacular loans from other museums, and extensive research over many years. This kind of close analysis of how the Renaissance occurred in Northern Italy is unprecedented in the early modern field. In art historiography a similar approach was taken when showing how Picasso and Braque competitively created Cubism.

The exhibition often uses data from conservation, interrogating well-known pictures with the latest scientific means to reveal new insights about how they were made. In the exhibition Mantegna emerges as the strategic artist, deciding on a style that he consistently develops, while Bellini is always surprising, unpredictable, questioning, deeply religious and competitive. Some of these paintings originated in close proximity, but for the first time are placed in meaningful confrontations 500 years after they were created. One of the most surprising revelations concerns the two versions of the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, one by Mantegna in Berlin from the mid-1450s, the other by Bellini in Venice from the mid-1470s (Figure 1). Mantegna’s version may include a self-portrait on the right side, with his wife Nicolosia, with whom he had seven children, on the left. Conservators have revealed that Bellini *traced* the composition from Mantegna’s
version, painted some 20 years earlier. Yet Bellini did not make a literal copy. Rather, it is a significantly different personal version, adding a possible unfinished self-portrait on the right and his wife Ginevra on the left. Some interpretations have a psychological component given Giovanni’s illegitimacy. These themes are explored in an unconventional catalogue, in this case the subject of ‘When Bellini traced Mantegna: Two Paintings of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple’ in an essay by Neville Rowley, the curator of Italian paintings in Berlin. The thematic organization of the catalogue works effectively, allowing for short comparative interpretations such as Rowley’s essay, and the results are often provocative, challenging and circumvent conventional clichés as in a normal catalogue. This confrontation of the two presentations was the subject of an earlier exhibition at the Querini Stampalia Museum, Venice.¹

The London installation contextualised the two artists, mixing drawings with paintings, reliefs and sculpture. In the principal room, the late works by Bellini and Mantegna were shown in an arrangement that differed from that of previous monographic shows. Caroline Campbell, the curator from the National Gallery, chose the three best-preserved Triumphs by Mantegna from Hampton Court Palace, in a new system of framing. Notably, the impact of a few was much more effective than showing all nine, as happened in the recent exhibition of the Royal Collection of Charles I at the Royal Academy in London. At the end of one wall was a small, recently discovered drawing, a tiny object next to a very large series of canvases, an early idea by Mantegna for one of the Triumphs. Some naysayers questioned the attribution, but no one could doubt its relevance to what Mantegna described as ‘My Triumphs’. On the end wall were two works in grisailles, Mantegna’s last painting of an obscure classical subject, The Introduction of the Cult of Cybèle to Rome (London) with Bellini’s The Continence of Publius Cornelius Scipio (Washington), a commission he undertook in order to finish the cycle for the Cornaro family Camerino. Despite the plethora of Venetian exhibitions, the two canvasses had never been shown together before. Bellini was infinitely more ambitious in the size and interpretation of his subject, the paint much more fluent and illusionistic. In the past, Bellini’s classical subjects have been dismissed as being by an artist who once asserted he was not interested in painting classical subjects. Here, Bellini shows himself as a supreme interpreter of the classical tradition – hardly surprising as there are more classical inscriptions on his works than in those of other contemporaries.

The research for the exhibition has led to many more outcomes than an exhibition and a catalogue. In Berlin there is a second exhibition, Bellini Plus, that examines conservation problems with works by the Bellini family, which have not been exhibited since before the Second World War. It is full of surprises. The London exhibition is accompanied by an edition of the National Gallery Technical Bulletin, no. 38, which gives a detailed account of Bellini’s development as a draughtsman, as shown in underdrawings revealed by infra-red radiography. To date, no other artist has been surveyed in such depth, with secure points from dated works that may be compared to the more problematic (as to dating and attribution) works
on paper. Some of the new drawings are of ravishing beauty, putting on full dis-
play Bellini’s developing meticulous drawing style, the most remarkable of all
being of Doge Loredan’s eyes (Figure 2), which shows a technique with elabor-
ately hatched shadows and reveals the portrait as drawn from life. Once seen, this
underdrawing will compel the viewer to understand Bellini’s portrait as an image
of hauteur and mature wisdom. The stellar piece in the Bulletin is Jill Dunkerton’s
account of her four-year restoration of the Martyrdom of St Peter Martyr, and her
painstaking removal of the repaints of Felice Schiavone from the early nine-
teenth century.

At an in-house colloquium for curators and specialists, David Alan Brown pre-
sented sensational discoveries about Bellini’s Feast of the Gods. One might have
thought the painting had yielded its secrets, having become a classic study about
how research in conservation could result in ever-changing interpretations about
how Bellini, and then Titian, reworked the painting. A new form of reflectography
that reveals different compositions in colour at different levels has shown even
more pentimenti than those published already, and allow Brown, in his forthcom-
ing monograph on the painting, to be published by Skira in 2019, to reconstruct
precisely how Bellini left the painting before Titian reworked the left background.
A head under Jupiter’s sleeve, a disembodied hand on Mercury’s head, a reposi-
tioning of Sylvanus and many other details, according to Brown redefine Bellini’s
relationship with Alfonso d’Este, as they were made in response to this patron’s wishes.

Would such an exhibition ever occur in Australia? Regrettably, despite the distinction of our conservators in Australian museums, no curator or director has ever devised an exhibition with such an emphasis (or even a minimal one) on research from conservation, such as the very successful Louvre dossiers exhibitions. Such an exhibition could be achieved equally well with Australian art. Nor are our conservation departments furnished with the most recent equipment to develop such projects in relation to our national collections. Perhaps with time this may change.

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