

Giovanni Bellini's 'Madonna and Child' (Reg. no. 35-4)



Medium = Oil paint on wood panel

Date painted = Late 1480s

The Artist

Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516) was born into a family of artists in Venice. His father, Jacopo, and his brother, Gentile, both worked for the city government. His brother-in-law was another famous artist, Andrea Mantegna. Gentile Bellini spent some time in Muslim-ruled Istanbul as an official guest of the Sultan [= tentative link to our Islamic collections], and painted many works showing the costume and customs of the city at that time (this visit featured in a 2006 Exhibition at the National Gallery in London).

Some of the most famous Venetian artists of the period, including Giorgione and Titian, worked in Giovanni Bellini's studio at the beginning of their careers. The German artist Durer visited Bellini in Venice when the latter was very old, and wrote that Giovanni was still very much respected in the city.

Giovanni Bellini is particularly famed for his numerous interpretations of the 'Madonna and Child' theme. His treatment of the subject varies from quite formal, almost hierarchical images, to a variety of compositions which stress the tenderly intimate relationship between mother and baby. -Another 'Madonna and Child' by Giovanni Bellini, painted slightly earlier than that in The Burrell Collection can be seen at Kelvingrove, in the Italian Art gallery.

Provenance and Burrell's purchase

Sir William Burrell purchased the painting from the dealer Arnold Seligmann in June 1936, for £4,500. Although Burrell was generally less interested in Italian paintings than those from Northern Europe, he was persuaded to buy this important work. Three respected international experts all testified, in writing, to its genuine status as a work by Bellini, and Sir Kenneth Clark (then Director of the National Gallery in London) also advised Burrell of its desirability. Immediately following its purchase, the picture was sent to the National Gallery in London and displayed there. With other works from the National Gallery, it was sent to Wales and stored underground for the duration of World War II. After the war, it was sent to Glasgow [n.b. Sir William Burrell's Deed of Gift to the City, signed in 1944, had happened in the meantime].

Prior to Burrell's ownership, we know that the painting was in Rome, in the collection of the Barberini family, from the 17th century. It was sold on in 1935, and was exhibited in the exhibition of Italian art held in Paris in that year. It has been attributed to various artists in the past, including Perino del Vaga and Niccolo Rondinelli (who was a pupil of Bellini). Several variants of the composition exist, including at least one which features a landscape view in the right-hand background [ours has definitely never had a landscape here].

Description of the painting

The image is of the type known as 'the Maternal Virgin' - meaning that it emphasises the tender relationship between mother and child, rather than presenting the two figures in a more formal, static relationship, like an icon.

The figures appear to stand in a narrow space, between a green-coloured cloth which hangs behind them and a marble parapet in front, on which the child Jesus stands. This compositional device places them in a kind of 'neutral space' - the hanging (or 'cloth of honour') emphasising the high status of the subjects [see also The Kimberley Throne' for high-status implications of backcloths in an earthly setting]. The balustrade visually separates them from the real, earthly, space in front of the picture, where the viewers are situated. The mood is a mixture of playful and solemn. Jesus holds a sprig of flowers dangling from a fine thread which he holds delicately between his thumb and forefinger. The Virgin Mary supports Jesus gently with one hand, and holds the other hand beneath the sprig of flowers, as if to catch it if it falls. Both she and Jesus gaze downwards, towards and beyond the floral sprig. Many people have tried to identify the plant from which the sprig is taken, as it is certainly symbolic in some way. So far, the most popular identification is Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*), emblematic meanings of which vary from 'love' to 'virginity' to 'Sacred to Bacchus', depending on the source consulted (obviously, in this particular case, it won't be the third of these!). However, the actual identity of the plant is perhaps less important than the fact that the plant sprig - whatever it is - is literally 'hanging by a thread'. This composition, and others by Bellini, show the Madonna looking contemplative, her bearing one of dignified sadness as she experiences foreknowledge of Jesus's cruel fate, his suffering, crucifixion and death. The plant sprig, given this context, can be read as a symbol of Jesus's earthly life being held in balance, or 'hanging by a thread' as the saying goes.

This painting, as most other religious artworks of the time, was intended to be used as a focus for prayer and meditation. Worshippers, especially women, would be encouraged by works like this to imagine themselves in the Madonna's position - having pre-knowledge that their son was destined to die horribly, but unable to prevent this, as God's greater purpose must ultimately be fulfilled for the sake of everyone. Although other artists used similar compositions in order to evoke this emotional response, Bellini was particularly successful, and he and his workshop created numerous popular variations on the theme. The painting has unfortunately been over-cleaned in the past (before Burrell purchased it), so many areas of paint have lost their original richness of colour and detail.

The gilded frame, in the classical architectural style known as 'tabernacle' or 'aedicular' is contemporary with the painting, and may be its original one.

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