

BOOKS

Reviews

David Alan Brown
Giovanni Bellini. The Last Works
 Skira, 400pp, €75 (hb)

Julius von Schlosser thought the most highly desirable art-history book would be a monograph based on a single work of art, emphasising the “island” nature of a masterpiece. David Alan Brown magnificent study of Bellini’s *The Feast of the Gods* (1514) – the result of a long acquaintance with the painting during his more than four decades at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC – is just such a book. Despite a title that promises to look at all the late works, which he does in detail, the book continually revolves around *The Feast of the Gods*, and presents absolute novelties in interpretation that will contribute to our understanding of Venetian Renaissance painting forever.

Brown introduces his study with the observation that Bellini, who enjoyed longevity, had the luck or misfortune to live on into the 16th century. He implies that *The Feast* is a 15th-century painting despite its date. Brown accepts Pietro Bembo’s characterisation of Bellini’s creative practice, as defined for Isabella d’Este, Marchioness of Mantua, when Bellini insists that he will wander as he wishes (*vagare alla sua voglia*), thus asserting his artistic independence to sources and patrons. Here, Brown is disinterested in iconography or style, preferring a curatorial analysis of individual works. He accepts Edgar Wind’s interpretation (1948) of the subject of *The Feast of the Gods* as the rape of Lotis by Priapus, surrounded by a group of bibulous gods and goddesses. Brown’s writing has a meditative quality, so that the reader is persuaded to understand how Bellini read his sources and departed from them, and how he searched for compositional ideas among illustrated editions of Ovid’s *Fasti*. Brown takes us through the genesis of Bellini’s search to understand how to represent his subject, beginning with a set of instructions from the humanist Mario



Computer simulation of Bellini’s *The Feast of the Gods* (1514) without the unsympathetic interventions by Dosso Dossi and Titian (left), and the original painting in Washington, DC

A spotlight on ‘The Feast of the Gods’

More than 40 years’ study of Bellini has gone into this outstanding book. By **Jaynie Anderson**

Equicola, then an analysis of the classical texts that reveal how Bellini departed from Ovid’s text to arrive at his own definition of the subject, presumably in consultation with the patron, Alfonso d’Este, Duke of Ferrara. Brown dedicates a fascinating biographical chapter to the formation of Alfonso’s taste. The literature on Bellini is huge, and Brown is generous in his reading of others, often bringing in ideas from previous scholars that enrich his readings of Bellini’s imagery.

The Feast of the Gods has played a changing role in how art-historical opinion evolves according to data emerging from conservation, beginning with the classic study by John Walker (1956), superseded by the later analyses of David Bull and Joyce Plesters (1990). In this latest stage, the scientific laboratory at the Washington National Gallery gives new information taken with

non-invasive multispectral scanning. (There is a detailed appendix explaining and illustrating the findings). We can understand more clearly, for example, how Bellini made changes, notably to the position of Silvanus, as a self-correction to his composition; then Brown shows how Bellini made other later changes when the painting was complete, such as the eroticisation of the nymphs’ clothing, the addition of décolletage and the suggestive positioning of Neptune’s hand on Amphitrite’s upper thigh. Brown argues (as others have before him) that these secondary changes were made in response to Alfonso’s demands and that Bellini may have travelled to Ferrara after the work was completed. The volume is sumptuously illustrated with surprising details of known works and important new discoveries revealing what is beneath the surface of the

painting. The new computer simulation of *The Feast of the Gods* as it may have left Bellini’s workshop (without the unsympathetic additions by Dosso Dossi and Titian) is a revelation, showing a spiky rustic forest rather than an idyllic grove.

An enthralling appendix defines the changing critical fortunes of Bellini from his earliest biographers until the most recent exhibitions. Brown is adamant that the fashionable concept of late style is irrelevant. He is similarly dismissive of the constantly asserted belief that Bellini’s later works owed much to Giorgione. He fails to consider what Giorgione as a teenager in Bellini’s workshop may have learnt from the older artist. Brown does speculate bravely on what a teenage Titian may have executed in the Bellini workshop (the Prado *Virgin and Child with Saints*). For this reviewer, the quality control in the workshop

appears to be too tight to allow for the recognition of individual hands. The recent (2019) discovery of a drawing by Giorgione and an accompanying inscription shows Giorgione’s thinking in red chalk in a spiky style. It has not been noticed that this Sydney drawing is very like the underdrawing on Bellini’s Brera Madonna (around 1510), so much so that one could argue Bellini’s very technique could at times be imitative of Giorgione’s underdrawing in the last decade of his life. But this is a minor quibble in what is an outstanding contribution to the literature on Bellini, with a wealth of significant observation.

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