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Painting a Story: Gentile Bellini’s Procession in Piazza San Marco

Artists have long been faced with the challenge of successfully translating words and meanings into a uniquely visual experience with expressive dimensions. This genre of visual art is suggestive of what literary critics would call “reportage”, in which the author considers spatial, temporal, and descriptive aspects in the selection and manipulation of past events.\(^1\) The Renaissance witnessed countless endeavors in this genre on the part of its artists, particularly in religious narratives, but few can truly be deemed to be canonical works of art. The Scuola Grande Giovanni Evangelista in Venice houses one of the most important and controversial narrative cycles, *The Miracle of the True Cross*.

This sequence of eight paintings, commissioned by the Scuola San Giovanni, was a collaborative effort of Bellini, Vittore Carpaccio, Lazzaro Bastiani, Giovanni Mansueti and Benedetto Diana (the ninth piece by Perugino was never completed).\(^2\) Collectively, the paintings depict the 1369 presentation of a Relic, a piece of the Holy cross, and the seven miracles that followed during the procession of Corpus Christi, celebrated on the Thursday after the Trinity Sunday to commemorate the holy Eucharist.\(^3\) The history behind the relic is highly debated; some sources say Philipe de Mazieres, chancellor of the Kingdom of Cyprus, gave it to the confraternity\(^4\) while others believe it to be the subject of *Fuerta sacra* (holy theft) from various pillaging exploits of the fourteenth century amongst the Mediterranean cities.\(^5\) Regardless of these conflicting theories of origin, it is agreed that the Relic is considered to be a symbol of Venetian prestige, power, and wealth.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Ibid.
Gentile Bellini, who lead the decoration of the Sala della Croce of the Scuola di S Giovanni Evangelista, produced three of the eight scenes of the sequence himself.\(^7\) Gentile’s visual language renders him truly successful in the depiction of the “pictorial narrative.”\(^8\) Bellini’s Procession in Piazza San Marco, though not his most renowned painting aesthetically of the three, provides a significant subject for exploring visual narration, its controversies and its complexities. The painting incorporates three plot lines: the first being the Basilica San Marco (c. 11\(^{th}\) century) and its “emblematic role” as the third structure built to contain the remains of Venice’s patron Saint, San Marco.\(^9\) The work also includes the Miracle performed for de’Salis, a merchant whose son is healed by the reliquary. And lastly, the painting narrates the beginning and significance of the relic’s procession through Venice.

Bellini’s visual language shapes the interpretation of the narrative within *Procession in Piazza San Marco*. An understanding of and appreciation for Bellini’s narrative complexity in this particular piece stem from an examination of: his artistic background and the influences of his personal study, development and style; the intricacies of the painting itself in terms of its composition, technique and colour; and its visual positioning and display within the Scuola San Giovanni and the ensuing dialogue it generates.

**Bellini’s Artistic Background and its Influence**

Born in Venice in 1429, the son of Jacopo Bellini, Gentile, along with his brother Giovanni, was taught the rudiments of drawing, and soon surpassed his father’s ability.\(^10\) The brothers became integral members of the family workshop that received primarily religious commissions by various ecclesiastical communities of Venice. Bellini’s first narrative cycle was the completion of his father’s Story of the Cross in addition to the Cross of Christ.\(^11\) These contributed enormously to his reputation.

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\(^7\) Grove Art Online, “Scuola Grandi di S Marco.”
\(^8\) Lucinda Hawkins, “Gentile Bellini.”
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid., 489.
as an artist, earning him a knighthood by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III in 1469.
Soon after his return from a lengthy period living in Constantinople working as a portrait artist for the Emperor Mehamet, Bellini began the commission of the sequence of the Miracle of the Cross for the Scuola San Giovanni, which he and his brother had long since been members. Visari himself would state in his collection of biographies that “Gentile’s vast diversity of subjects serve to prove the great spirit, art, invention, and judgment of Gentile, each detail being most excellently wrought in itself, as well as the composition of the whole.” This work would become widely acknowledged for the incorporation of the impressive narrative conventions that Bellini had developed and would become the reason his pieces became the most celebrated among his contemporaries in the Scuola. As one of his final artistic endeavors, The Miracle of the True Cross benefited from the great experience and stylistic maturity he had developed over his lifetime.

Mapping Storylines Through Composition.

Bellini’s compositional aspects are what create and define the plot lines and key components of the Procession in the Piazza San Marco as a “pictorial narrative.” The Procession is rigidly organized, somewhat reminiscent of a public document with an unfolding of events with greater detail. The compositional arrangement places the viewer within a setting and presents the focal points that define the painting’s story line essential to the interpretation of the narrative it conveys.

Set in the Piazza San Marco, Bellini is careful to include all lavish ornamentation and grand architecture, important cultural elements that are necessary to ensure a clear statement of Venetian prosperity. In fact, Bellini makes significant functional alterations to the townscape by moving the bell tower across the Piazza so as to unite the city’s religious and civil dimensions, known as the

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12 Grove Art Online, “Scuola Grandi di S Marco.”
13 Lucinda Hawkins, “Gentile Bellini.”
16 Lucinda Hawkins, “Gentile Bellini.”
“myth of Venice.” The monumental architecture becomes frame-like in an attempt to capture and contain the events within its spacious inner courtyard.

Also, Bellini’s “perspectorial view” creates a significant amount of space, “a dynamic storytelling device,” in which he engages in the juxtaposition of various focal points according to the painting’s three principle subjects. The first focal point, which some deem to be of the most important compositional elements and a keystone of the narrative image, is the Basilica san Marco itself. It is the paragon of Venetian ideals and thus embodies a monumental significance to the setting and storyline. It renders itself analogous to the centrally located vanishing point where the viewer’s eyes are directly drawn upon it and are immediately entranced by its lavish detail and opulence.

As if to enhance its representational superiority, an invisible axis rides vertically through the middle of the Basilica and horizontally under it. This Greek cross is centrally located within Bellini’s canvas and seemingly mirrors the symbolism of the cross both as abstract and concrete entity in the painting. The Basilica is the largest element of the painting and “dominates the upper half of the canvas which, according to contemporary spatial conventions, was the privileged pictorial zone.” Its grand stature and positioning within the painting seem to contradict its background status. Consequently, there is great emphasis placed on the “Venetian panorama” obviously glorified by San Marco’ commanding “size and pictorial presence.” Within the crowded canvas, only the architecture is depicted with the utmost visual clarity, remaining the most visible object of Bellini’s painting, an unusual compositional arrangement that strengthens the role of the Basilica within the narrative.

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18 Ibid.
20 Lucinda Hawkins, “Gentile Bellini.”
23 Ibid., 30.
24 Ibid., 29.
As a second focal point, the miracle is not always discernable at first glance. The merchant, dressed in red, kneels behind the reliquary. While it seems in a position of honor nearly centrally positioned on the canvas, unlike other paintings of the sequence that offset the miracle as if an unimportant “everyday occurrence,” it is obscured by the overpowering detail and chaotic plethora of figures in addition to a magnificently rendered background weakening it as a point of interest within the narrative, such as is characteristic of a sub plot.

The third focal point, the principal foreground element, is the Procession of the reliquary itself, illustrating another main narrative plot line. The piece is dominated by the orthogonal, as the cityscape causes the viewers’ eyes to travel horizontally with the procession, sweeping east to west through the Piazza. Thus it is believed to recall the initial journey of the relic into Venice. The relic is only illustrated in profile and suffers from a diminished status, lost within the crowd. This motif translates visually into the painting’s directionality, a “suggested forward movement” enhanced by the profile positioning of the figures and the slow processional motion the scene captures. Though situated in the foreground, the procession’s position at the very bottom of the canvas takes away from its prominence as the viewer’s attention is immediately drawn inward rather than resting on the peripheral elements of composition again emphasizing the San Marco.

On that note, it is interesting to consider Bellini’s parallel between the Basilica and the relic of the True Cross. Both have distinctly similar ornamentation: “reflective surfaces, golden veneer, suggestive metalwork, tracery, delicately twisting lines, jewels glistening within gilded frames.” These two elements of Bellini’s composition can be seen as interchangeable – both seem to be key visual aspects of the setting and the narrative plot of the larger composition. Bellini recalls their similar functions as objects of “social and sacred duality characteristic of Venice” and more

26 Lucinda Hawkins, “Gentile Bellini.”
28 Ibid., 38.
particularly ceremonial importance.  

As a whole, the “careful rendering of church, piazza and the Venetian populace is a fabulous pictorial elaboration of the simple verbal cueing of a story set in Piazza San Marco.” Bellini’s creative composition only enhances the layering of storylines, themes, and symbols contributing to his work’s artistic complexity yet successful visual narration.

**Visual Description with Technique and Colour**

Bellini’s distinct composition relies heavily on technical conventions to visually explain the Procession’s narrative genre. It is important to consider that Gentile would be one of the first Venetian artists to master oil on canvas painting as opposed to fresco, something he learned from his father and developed throughout his carrier. The lack of documentation from the Scuola’s decorative endeavors renders the particularities of Bellini’s work somewhat ambiguous. Bellini was well known for his distinctly traditional application of Venetian stylistic devices and depicted Venetian culture in its elegance, wealth, and dress that are enchanting to the viewer. In the Procession, the people reflect prosperity, splendor, and opulence. Visari states: “truly great were the labor and diligence of his work.” The persons are dressed with rich garments to further enhance the ceremonial act that occurs and can be seen as an “extraordinary portrait gallery of their social context and its mindset.”

In addition, the architecture mimics the magnificence of the garb with its lavish details - tracery, pinnacles, sculpted relief, decorated arches, lancet windows, and so on. Thus, “Bellini’s bountiful accumulation of detail [is] a form of visual authentication” becoming a language through which to translate particularities of the story within the Procession scene.

While the detail is so abundantly used, it is Bellini’s mastery of perspective, both

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29 Ibid., 36-31.
30 Ibid., 28.
32 Richard Tillinghast, “Exhibition Notes: Bellini and the East at the National Gallery in London,” 47.
34 Elizabeth RODINI. “Narrative In Bellini’s Procession In Piazza San Marco,” 29.
atmospheric and linear that engages the viewer directly within the townscape. Bellini’s first independent work was a portrait of the Venetian Patriarch, Lorenzo Giustiani for Santa Maria dell Orto. This particular piece would uncover the uniqueness of Bellini’s style as meticulously detailed, of which the Procession is considered the model. Henceforth, portraiture became a staple of Bellini’s work in addition to those religious commissions. His portraits became characteristically expressive and less stylized as his work progressed.\textsuperscript{35} In the \textit{Procession}, Bellini would take many portraits from life and, diminishing them according to their position within the scene,\textsuperscript{36} he would strategically incorporate “explicit, suggested, or subtly disguised likeness of clients, patrons, benefactors, distinguished officers, delegations, and family, political, or artistic lobbies”\textsuperscript{37} further contributing to the over use of detail to give character, truthfulness, and livelihood to the storying of the Procession.

Conversely, the linearity of Bellini’s style is a prominent attribute in much of his work. The early “dry linear style” of Bellini’s brother-in-law, Andrea Mantegna, encouraged Bellini’s subsequent mastery of perspective.\textsuperscript{38} Bellini’s linear perspective defines the focal aspects within the narrative composition. It draws the eye of the viewer into the Piazza giving depth and dimension to the canvas further enhanced by the white lines on the ground of the piazza. The linearity further creates spatial divisions between background, foreground, and middle ground as well as the left, center, right wings of the painting. The rigidity of the application of perspective gives a somewhat fragmented look to the elements of the painting as if they were juxtaposed systematically on the canvas creating a layered look.

Color, as a component of visual language, is often overlooked in Bellini’s paintings due to the overwhelming technical detail. Nevertheless, pigmentation is a crucial descriptive technique in narrative cycles. The Procession in the Piazza San Marco has a very subtle color scheme without the dramatic contrast between light and shadow. The chosen colors add to the realism of the painting’s

\textsuperscript{35} Lucinda Hawkins, “Gentile Bellini.”
\textsuperscript{38} Lucinda Hawkins, “Gentile Bellini.”
subject. The architecture has a fairly consistent, uniform colour scheme of siennas and golds to enhance its compositional continuity as a frame. These colors also have the effect of enhancing the visual wealth and magnificence of San Marco. The ground of the Piazza is very neutral in tone so as to contrast the figures. These carefully rendered persons, representing both secular and religious factions of Venice, are colored according to wealth and position. Their movement is enhanced by the realistic play of shadows in their garments. There is a three-dimensional quality enhanced by the use of distinct color schemes in each of the background, middle ground, and foreground, contributing to the distinctly fragmented look and the separation of distinct narrative components that make up the painting as a whole.

Description “functions as narrative in Bellini’s canvas - [it] is the basic device of representation.” With, his attention to detail and a well-developed manner with rigorous technical attributes, Bellini articulates narrative meaning by rendering each element and its function distinctly in the overall composition of the work.

Dynamics of Visual Positioning and Display

Bellini’s carefully composed Procession creates a visual experience that compensates for its lack of linguistic expression. The audience feels part of the narrative just as one can travel within the pages of a book. “The process of looking at such cycles is highly physical, often requiring necks to crane and bodies to twist in pursuit of unfolding of the story. Such circumstances force an awareness of space and orientation upon viewers that smaller, close-up presentations do not.” When viewed, those aspects of composition, technique, and style that translate the story of the Procession though the Piazza, emerge from the canvas. The viewers of the painting become onlookers of the procession as if looking through a window, able to see what the figures in the painting do not, the Basilica San Marco in all its glory and de’Salis, kneeling in prayer. Moreover, from outside the painting, the

39 Elizabeth Rodini. “Narrative In Bellini’s Procession In Piazza San Marco.”
Greek cross and central axis look like a raised cross above the viewers, alluding to God’s hierarchy. Similarly, both relic and San Marco look down upon their audience, positioned in a place of authority and superiority reflecting their religious power over the people and, symbolically, over Venice. This outsider position is reminiscent of the omniscient narrator in literature, in which the reader can see all and know all of what occurs.

As part of a larger narrative cycle, the Procession in the Piazza San Marco engages dynamically with the other paintings to ensure “spatial continuity” and consequently, story cohesiveness. The “familiar trajectories (beginning to end) of verbal storing” are integral to the visual translation and mapping of the Miracle of the Cross cycle, “a narrative grounded in space, orientation, and the literal navigation among its various episodes.” As a whole, the cycle is an integral part of the decoration of San Giovanni’s albergo (meeting hall) wherein it was positioned on the wall in a place of honor and distinction, the west wall directly across from the alter where the relic was displayed. There is a resulting dialogue between these objects, “the painted and the historical,” due to the distinct trajectory between them. The distinct visual similarities between the reliquaries and subject piece are enhanced as a result of this face to face positioning.

Thus, The Procession’s distinct story telling is enhanced by strategic interpretative strategies that complement those formal elements of Bellini’s visual language by providing the audience with narrative insight through the very process of viewing.

Bellini’s Procession in the Piazza San Marco is a defining painting of the difficult narrative genre. Its successful story telling is the result of a distinctly expressive composition that clearly defines the setting, subjects, and themes. The story is further highlighted by Bellini’s technical components whereby the viewer grasps a more concrete understanding of what they see, why it is important, and to what effect. And finally, the piece’s visual display and positioning unites aspects

42 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
of the story both individually (just the Procession) and collectively (the entire sequence), producing fluidity and cohesion between plot lines and an overall narrative progression. These elaborate aesthetic and stylistic techniques were developed throughout a long and prosperous career where Bellini’s ability to produce such effective visual language flourished. Although the Procession was commissioned first, it took much longer to complete than the other paintings due to its sheer size and detail, Bellini’s other projects, and his failing health. He died in 1507 and was given an honorable burial by his brother Giovanni in S. Giovanni e Paolo.

The Procession is conserved today in the Galleria dell Academia, sponsored by the Vendramin family, members of the Scuola’s confraternity. And while many agree that Gentile Bellini’s “works lack the visual sophistication and expressive power of painting by Giovanni and the Venetian artists of the next generation,” Bellini’s success both financially and in terms of his reputation as an artist with many important works leaves to question whether or not his talent and contributions to the Renaissance were overlooked.

47 Gentil Augusto and others, Paintings in Venice: Stories of the Relic of the Cross, 185.
48 Lucinda Hawkins, “Gentile Bellini.”
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