

Giovanni Bellini's Feast of the Gods: A Brief Look at Its Patronage and Program

Rina Vecchiola

Writer's comment: When writing this paper, I was conscious of the fact that it would be my final paper for an art history course at UC Davis. This paper is part of the learning process for writing about art that has expanded over my four years of studying art history. The most important thing I learned, a lesson I took to heart when working on this paper, was to start researching early. I also learned that there is no way to fight reserve-book-room fines, which can easily add up to a great expense as you forget to return or renew books on time because you lost track of days and hours working through the night to finish a paper.

—Rina Vecchiola

Instructor's comment: Art History 178C focuses on Italian art in the early 1500s, the time of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian. The first paper analyzes the uses of historical evidence and the standards of artistic evaluation in the Lives of the Artists by Giorgio Vasari, who knew Michelangelo and Titian personally, in comparison with a modern book on one of the artists discussed in class. Students barely have time for a quick breath before starting the second, slightly longer paper. This can be a conventional report, but in the best papers, students define and explore problems of knowledge about art. Rina's paper is exceptionally well rounded. It addresses historical, literary, stylistic, and technical evidence, and it shows how interpretations develop over time through a series of proposals and critiques by various scholars.

—Jeffrey Ruda, Program in Art History

Giovanni Bellini laid the stylistic foundation for the "Venetian School" of art in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries, establishing it on a level with the schools of Rome and Florence. Bellini lived from about 1430 until 1516 and came from a family of painters that included Andrea Mantegna, his brother-in-law. Bellini's style is characterized by an optically believable treatment of light and shadow that gives his scenes an atmospheric and sensory quality. Light and color work to represent forms and figures, which is an observational versus a structural approach to design. Like Giorgione, his Venetian contemporary, Bellini is notable for the use of landscape to develop a mood in his works, a mood described by viewers as dreamy melancholy. He is best known for his paintings of religious subjects, especially those of the Madonna and Christ Child enthroned.

Much modern scholarly debate centers on Bellini's famous *Feast of the Gods*, a painting done late in his life with a pagan theme which is unique in the artist's surviving oeuvre. Discussion of the painting examines issues of patronage—who commissioned it and why, what setting it was meant for—and issues of program—who developed the visual language and what sources were used. Besides its artistic content and style, another important item of distinction which has received much attention is the history of the repainting of *Feast of the Gods*. By piecing together various theories and discoveries, one can develop an adequate history and description of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* which addresses these themes of patronage, program, and artistic evaluation.

The *Feast of the Gods* was commissioned by Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, and was finished and paid for in 1514. Edgar Wind, in his 1948 study of the painting, speculates that Isabella d'Este, Alfonso's sister, was the first to commission Bellini to do a pagan subject painting for her Grotto in Mantua (Wind 41–42). Cecil Gould accepts Wind's view, supported by the evidence of correspondence between Isabella, Bellini, and their mutual friend Pietro Bembo (4–5). Other scholars believe there to have been two different paintings and that *Feast of the Gods* was always meant to hang in Alfonso's *camerino d'alabastro*. Regardless of who first commissioned the painting, the situation points to the growing trend in the early 1500s for patrons like the d'Este family to search out commissions on the basis of artist rather than subject. More important than the content of the art was that it was created by a particular artist with a certain reputation.

The character of the patron has some merit in examining commissioned paintings like *Feast of the Gods*. Alfonso d'Este was often represented as a soldier in portraits, and was a notable historic figure for his adversarial relationship with Pope Julius II. He is described by art historians as having an interest in humanism and in mythological "erotica" (Wind). There is substantial documentation that shows that Alfonso tried to commission paintings from several famous artists of Rome and Florence including Raphael, Fra Bartolommeo, and Michelangelo (Shearman 218–19). Ultimately, Alfonso is best known as the patron of Titian's *Bacchanals*.

Around the time of his marriage to Lucrezia Borgia in 1502, Alfonso began work on the design of his study adjacent to his bedroom and commissioned Bellini to paint *Feast of the Gods* to adorn its walls. Charles Hope has studied the design, arrangement, and history of the room, known as the *camerino d'alabastro*, and notes that it was not quite finished at the time of the Bellini commission (649). The *camerino* was a private room with a rectangular plan that eventually housed three bacchanals by Titian, one bacchanal by Alfonso's court painter Dosso Dossi, and Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*. Hope identifies the arrangement of the paintings as follows: the Bellini hung in the center of the long wall facing windows on the other side, two of Titian's works flanked the Bellini, and the Dosso and the remaining Titian hung on the short walls by the doorways (644). This arrangement contradicts Vasari's description of the room but is supported by a variety of documentation and accepted by most scholars. We can now visualize the original setting of *Feast of the Gods*, a work which was always meant to hold a central position in the private collection of the *studiolo* of Alfonso d'Este. The *studiolo* remained its home until 1598, when the Vatican seized the contents of the room.

The invention of the program for Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* must have taken into account its proposed setting as the highlight of Alfonso's private studio and considered the duke's interest in pagan subjects. *Feast of the Gods*, all scholars agree, is a visual representation of the story of Priapus and Lotus, when, in the aftermath of a festival celebrating Bacchus, Priapus became enamored of Lotus. As Priapus attempted to have his way with the sleeping nymph, the donkey of Silenus brayed and Lotus woke up and fled. Priapus, embarrassed by the sudden attention given to his indiscretion, slaughtered the ass. This story is the basis for the pagan annual ritual of sacrificing a donkey to the god Priapus. Humanist subjects of this kind were not popular in Venice, so it is significant that the patron was the Duke of Ferrara; this suggests that the lack of demand for pagan scenes among Bellini's Venetian patrons is the reason that the artist painted so few works with similar themes (Goffen 242).

There has been some scholarly dispute concerning sources for the program of *Feast of the Gods*. Edgar Wind believes that Bembo, as a close friend of both the d'Este family and Bellini, was the artist's advisor on the ancient story of Priapus and Lotus, a theme chosen to commemorate the marriage of Alfonso and Lucrezia. Ovid's *Fasti* was Bellini's and Bembo's source for a description of the scene and events (Wind). Wind feels that the mood of *Priapea*, a classical poetry collection for which Bembo's circle prepared a critical edition in 1514, imbues Bellini's painting with its sentimental and ironic humor. Wind identifies several of the figures as mythological portraits based on members of the d'Este family and their courts. Bellini represented the collection of Olympian gods and mythological forest creatures in a playful manner, somewhat indecorous, mindful that "the ancients themselves had treated their sacred subjects with irony." Wind recognizes that "to laugh at the pagan gods with understanding became a sign of humanist grace" and believes that this idea emerged as a part of the program development for *Feast of the Gods* through Bembo's assistance of Bellini.

Wind's theory assumed the figures in *Feast of the Gods* to be essentially how Bellini had intended and painted them to look; that is, they are meant to be interpreted as pagan gods distinguished by their attributes. However, in 1956 John Walker reinterpreted the painting using x-ray pictures to argue that the attributes of the gods were additions made to the original figure group by a second artist, additions that mask Bellini's primary intended meaning (48-62). Philipp Fehl uses this "discovery" to expand upon and alter Wind's theory on the sources and content of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* (43). Fehl does not discuss the role of an advisor to Bellini or to the patron. He assumes that Bellini followed a different account of the Priapus-Lotus story than Ovid's *Fasti*, one that describes the witnesses of the scene as common people and not gods. The text Fehl believes to be Bellini's source is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and, more specifically, its Italian translation, the *Ovidio volgarizzato* by Giovanni de'Bonsignori (45-46). The "rationalizing Christian point of view" of de'Bonsignori's edition and the coarse woodcut that accompanies the text are taken to be Bellini's inspiration (49). Thus, Fehl examines the work in terms of the artist's ability to interplay within a single scene the mortal and immortal realms in a "discrete" manner, "rich in humorous innuendo but still decorous." In contrast, the additions of the attributes are heavy

handed, intended to make the viewer "laugh where Bellini made us smile." Fehl believes Bellini's original work, which he titles *Lotos and Priapus*, to have been the core of inspiration for the paintings that later accompanied it in the *camerino* of Alfonso (51).

Recent evidence, however, has revealed that Fehl's "attempt to reconstruct the sources and meaning of Bellini's 'original' painting must now be thoroughly reconsidered," because his assessment is based on Walker's incorrect reading of the x-rays of *Feast of the Gods*, which wrongly concluded that the gods' attributes were added by another hand (Colantuono 238). John Shearman has laid to rest several issues concerning patronage and program by showing that Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* was always meant to be delivered to Alfonso in Ferrara, and that it was in Ferrara in 1511 that Mario Equicola conceived of six "fables or histories" for the canvases intended to decorate Alfonso's *studiolo* (213). Equicola drew from several humanist sources of ancient and contemporary texts to devise the *invenzioni* for the paintings. David Bull's cleaning and technical analysis shows that the figures exist today as Bellini painted and intended them to look with their distinguishing attributes, and that only the landscape was repainted by another artist—first by Dosso Dossi, and ultimately by Titian (Bull 34).

Taking into account these recent discoveries, which have proven true, Anthony Colantuono re-examines Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*, paying close attention to Equicola's "assumptions and methods in conceiving the pictorial imagery" to show that the "classical literary topos of Halcyon Days is central to Equicola's poetical invention, and is closely related to the nuptial themes of the other bacchanals that were to accompany Bellini's painting in the *camerino d'alabastro*." Colantuono, like Wind, maintains that the source of *Feast* was Ovid's *Fasti*, but acknowledges that Bellini goes further visually to incorporate other texts. The artist was directed by Equicola, a literary authority, to use the Macrobian infant Bacchus to symbolize the winter solstice, the time of year that was recognized as the setting for the story of Priapus and Lotus. Using other devices as well, Equicola attempts to "correct" or "complete" Ovid's story, integrating several classical literary accounts to figure out which gods should be represented at this particular winter-solstice festival of Bacchus. Also, the landscape in *Feast of the Gods* is meant to refer to a specific site identified as the setting of the story. Colantuono elaborates on the importance of the kingfisher image, which Fehl made a brief mention of, to show that the events depicted in *Feast* are meant to be interpreted in a "natural-philosophical" sense and not from a moralizing perspective. He rejects Wind's idea of mythological portraits but accepts the view that the painting was done to commemorate a marriage. Colantuono, in his re-examination based on recent evidence, stresses "the socio-historical fact of the division of labor between the poet-inventor and the painter in the production of Early Renaissance paintings" throughout his study of Equicola's role in creating the program for Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* (239–55).

From technical, historical, and esthetic considerations of the various repaints of *Feast*, Bellini's unique style and method become evident and identifiable. The x-rays in Walker's analysis of the painting show the original landscape to have been a complete

screen of trees behind the figure group in the foreground. Bellini was the earliest Venetian to develop the idea of grandiose landscape. Another notable feature discovered in the x-rays was that the figures' attributes had been added separately. It was not unlike Bellini to apply "last-minute" revisions to the surface of his works (Goffen 244). Bull's later cleaning and analysis more clearly explains the history of the repaints, finding that the alterations made to the figures are "painted in a manner consistent with Bellini's methods" and add the humor necessary to identify the figures as pagan gods (37). Also, it is Bull's verifiable conclusion that Bellini's landscape was repainted twice by two different hands and that Dosso Dossi is responsible for the first repaint, of which there remain the pheasant and leaves in the righthand corner. There is also no doubt that Titian is the artist who reworked the majority of the landscape after Dosso to fill in the left side with a mound of rocks and trees (Bull 37). His motivation may have been to better relate the older, more sedate *Feast of the Gods* with his bacchanals so that Bellini's creation did not seem overpowered by the paintings that shared its wall.

Bellini's treatment of the figures in *Feast of the Gods* is the first evocation of a mood of erotic sensuousness in paintings of pagan subjects (Ruda). The work depicts the moment when Priapus' lust is at its highest level—he lifts up Lotus' skirt, while the donkey at the far left is just about to bray loudly. It is the moment of heightened silence, and the festival-goers now are still and calm, drowsy with wine. The nymphs stand tranquil and noiseless, some with breasts bared or hair softly tousled to make them desirable. The gestures of the central male-female couple and of the group to the right are intimate and almost erotic. Similarly, the pose of the sleeping Lotus is both innocent and mildly provocative. The way in which Bellini infuses the scene with melodic color next to gentle intensification of shadow to compose the figure group adds to the overall seductive quality of his famous painting.

What was begun by Bellini in fashioning the means to represent pagan themes in oil painting was taken even further by his student Titian. It was believed that the program for *Feast of the Gods* was uniquely Bellini's creation, thought up alone or with assistance from the humanist Bembo, and that later Titian simply created works to complement *Feast*. With the discovery of Equicola's role in creating *invenzioni* for six bacchanals, we now understand Titian's visual program to have originated at the same time. Since Titian produced the works for the camerino five or more years after Bellini, the style is his own yet based on the optical effects of the Venetian school "founded" by Bellini. Thus, Titian's works are infinitely more dramatic and lively, and his style became the new mode for depicting "pagan fantasies," with its roots in antiquity and influences from Renaissance masters. Bellini's "tranquil beauty and cynical humor" has withstood Titian's "lion" handling to maintain in the eyes of the art world an "unsurpassable quality" all its own (Gould 15). Bellini will forever be revered for his optical accomplishments of light, color, and figure to setting integration in oil painting.

With the commission of *Feast of the Gods*, Bellini achieved a high point in his creative and artistic development. He was in his eighties and a mature artist stylistically in the early 1500s when he worked on *Feast*. The pagan subject matter allowed Bellini greater creative freedom with fewer conventions to follow, except those from antiquity and

humanist study. He painted the pagan gods with an ironic humor that he could not express in his religious works. The grace and skill with which Bellini painted *Feast* attests to the artist's real interest in the theme, regardless of who invented the pictorial schema. A viewer today would never be able to completely understand the sixteenth-century symbolism and meaning inherent in *Feast of the Gods*, but everyone can appreciate the painting's timeless beauty.

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