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Giorgione. London

by TOM NICHOLS

THE SMALL EXHIBITION *In the Age of Giorgione* at the **Royal Academy of Arts, London** (to 5th June), appears like a stimulus to a learned and exclusive conversation between connoisseurs. We would suggest, the organisers seem to say, that this or that work is similar enough to that one hanging nearby to support this or that attribution. And the catalogue follows this object-by-object approach, giving an old-fashioned account of the varying opinions of the great art historians of past and present regarding attribution and date of the work displayed.¹ But this approach certainly comes at the expense of wider insight regarding the many interpretative questions that the Giorgione phenomenon raises. Little is known about the artist, who died in relative obscurity around the age of thirty in 1510, perhaps having painted less than twenty works. To what extent, one can legitimately ask, was Giorgione always something of a mythic figure, whose very obscurity served to stimulate the various aspirations and fantasies of his many admirers among painters, patrons and collectors? The question regarding which pictures, exactly, Giorgione painted has always challenged attempts to define his artistic personality. What seems beyond question, however, is the explosive impact his short career had on painting in Venice in the opening decades of the sixteenth century. He appears to have been a pivotal figure in the transformation of the local tradition of painting towards a more modern, secular and individual style, as is indicated by certain of his paintings included in the Royal Academy's exhibition. One important insight offered by the current show is the evident difference in quality it reveals between works by Giorgione himself and those by his followers in Venice and the Veneto. If their response typically reduced Giorgione's inventions to predictable romantic posturing in the rehearsal of fashionable pastoral or poetic tropes, then his own works were always more challenging, ambiguous and complex.

The exhibition opens superbly in the first room with an impressive array of masterpieces of portraiture including a Giovanni Bellini (cat. no.3; Fig.55); two portraits painted in Venice in 1505 by the visiting Albrecht Dürer (nos.4 and 6); and two examples by Giorgione himself. *The Portrait of a young man* (the 'Giustiniani portrait') (no.1) is good enough to merit this attribution, albeit as an early work of c.1498–1500, while the *Portrait of a man* (the 'Terris portrait') of c.1506–08 (no.5; Fig.56) indicates the rapidity of the young master's progress and is one of the highlights of the exhibition. Giorgione's works largely contradict Bellini's still-quattrocento concern with the public and documentary dimensions of portraiture. In place of Bellini's conception of the individual person as an adjunct to, or symbol of, the social hierarchy, Giorgione promotes a new kind of identity that owes relatively little to the civically orientated world of his master. So much is already apparent in the finely understated Giustiniani portrait, which subtly undermines the distancing formality of Bellini's portraiture through details such as the unbuttoned shirt with a glimpse of underclothes beneath, the hand casually placed over the foreground parapet and the febrile elusiveness of the sitter's glance. In the marvellous Terris portrait, this approach is taken further still, though now with reference to Leonardo da Vinci and Dürer, both of whom had recently visited Venice. If the accurate minuteness of Dürer's technique sets Giorgione a new kind of standard for the depiction of the real, then the Venetian clearly more than matched his northern rival in terms of conveying his sitter's refined personality. Allowing the subject's form to emerge out of a darkened penumbra in the manner of Leonardo, Giorgione also makes us aware of our

constitutive role in the making or reading of his complex psychology, tinged with melancholy. Rather than allowing his sitter something of the objectivity of a monumentalised antique portrait bust, as Bellini does in the portrait hanging nearby, Giorgione emphasises only the transience of a passing emotional connection.

But the kind of comparative focus initiated between these top-drawer paintings in the first room is quickly lost in the two that follow, which feature, respectively, a somewhat wearying succession of lesser Giorgionesque portraits and some 'landscapes', or at least religious and mythological subject pictures in which landscape plays a significant role. There is not enough to explain to visitors why they must follow this focus on portraits and landscapes, though of course the choice may be significant enough, given Giorgione's apparent preference for small-scale and private work. More problematic is the loss of focus on Giorgione's own work in favour of those of his lesser contemporaries and followers. Many of the works attributed to him, including the *Portrait of an archer* (no.7), *Knight and groom* (no.9), *Portrait of a young man (Antonio Brocado?)* (no.10) and *Trial of Moses* (no.11), appear very doubtful as Giorgiones. Rather than drawing us closer to an understanding of the master, these works stand as a motley and disparate group, and appear to have been painted by widely different artists working at different times and in different styles, albeit employing a loosely Giorgionesque subject-matter. A work such as the gauchely sentimental *Portrait of the young man and his servant* (no.2) is probably not even a Venetian painting, and may date from the 1520s or 1530s, several decades after Giorgione's death, while the inclusion of the *Portrait of a young man* (the 'Goldman portrait') (no.13), with an unlikely attribution to Titian, does little to dispel the sense of art-historical confusion.

While the delicately lit landscape of *Il tramonto* (no.19) may be by the master himself, the inclusion of at least one or two more 'canonical' Giorgiones (the *Three philosophers* and the *Laura* in Vienna, for example; or better still, the *Sleeping Venus* in Dresden or the *Tempest* in Venice), while probably impossible, would have helped to shape the exhibition more convincingly around its key figure. It would perhaps also have discouraged some of the more optimistic attributions to Giorgione featured in these rooms. Arguably, only the Giustiniani and Terris portraits mentioned above, parts of the *Tramonto*, the *Three ages of man* (no.38) and *La vecchia* (no.39) can be considered as by Giorgione. That amounts to just five of the forty-seven paintings on show, although the organisers claim that they have gathered as many as thirteen works by, or attributed to, the painter.

It is understandable that there was no opportunity to borrow the extraordinary altarpiece that Giorgione painted around 1500 for the cathedral of his home town of Castelfranco Veneto (*Virgin and Child with Sts Liberale and Francis*). The organisers certainly did well to obliquely indicate its influence in Venice by the inclusion of works such as Domenico Mancini's *Virgin and Child* (no.35), a work closely based on Giovanni Bellini's S. Zaccaria altarpiece of 1505 that was itself deeply influenced by Giorgione's introspective painting. But in this penultimate room of the show, featuring larger-scaled sacred paintings, there are no works convincingly attributable to Giorgione. It is hard to accept either of the two Virgins in this room as by him (from the Hermitage, St Petersburg, no.27; and from the Ashmolean, Oxford, no.28). What this room does (perhaps inadvertently) reveal is Giorgione's relative lack of influence in the rapidly developing field of religious art in Venice, which quickly fell under the sway of Sebastiano del Piombo and (especially) the young Titian. The curators are surely right to attribute the Glasgow *Christ and the adulterous woman* to the latter painter (no.34). It possesses his tell-tale dynamic narrative urgency, along with visual attention to vibrantly contrasting local colours and shiny billowing draperies, all of which are departures

from the concentrated stillness of Giorgione's imagery, his dislike of sudden movements or dramatic events, and his tendency to bind closely related colour tones together within a painting.

The display in the final room, featuring examples of allegorical or moralising genre-portraits pioneered by Giorgione in Venice, coheres around the master's striking *La vecchia* (no.39; Fig.58). In expressive terms, this work tellingly towers above the more facilely 'poetic' Giorgionesque examples surrounding it, and appears quite distinct in its approach. Giorgione maintains a sobering restraint before the gruesome facts of nature presented in his aged subject. He offers an unsparing pictorial description of the old woman's dry wrinkled skin, wizened hands, rheumy eyes and yellowing tooth stumps, as she apparently upbraids her (female?) viewer with the lessons provided by her own ageing. Although the work is not a portrait in the conventional sense, Giorgione nonetheless dramatically intensified the conventions of the type to create an image of extraordinary realism. Despite the *memento mori* theme, Giorgione's lowly sitter maintains a moving quality of self-possession and personal identity, which contrasts with the histrionics of the equivalent figure in Giovanni Cariani's crude painting of *Judith* hanging nearby (no.45; Fig.57), where the ugly old crone exists only as a flattering foil to the beautiful young heroine. This final comparison in the exhibition suggests that Giorgionesque painters frequently (perhaps routinely) misrepresented the elusive master they adulated. The predominant actors in their art, whether swooning lovers, handsome men, chivalric soldiers, dreamy musicians and poets or sexualised biblical heroines, have less to do with Giorgione himself than might at first appear. Giorgione may have originated such themes, but he seems always to have offered something more complexly resistant to the visual clichés of young romantic life.

1 Catalogue: *In the Age of Giorgione*. By Simone Facchinetti and Arturo Galansino. 165 pp. incl. 69 col. ill. (Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2016), £30 (HB). ISBN 978-1-910350-26-3.