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# Jacopo Bassano, Regionalism and Rural Painting

The paintings of Jacopo Bassano (ca. 1510-92) have long been understood as a reflection of the fact that he was born, worked and died in the small market town of Bassano del Grappa in the Veneto region of northeast Italy. Many feature strikingly naturalistic depictions of peasants and farmyard animals, apparently based closely on the appearances of agrarian life in the Bassano area. But despite the provincial look of such works, Bassano often drew on formal and literary sources derived from the mainstream of culture in later sixteenth-century Italy. Those of his works featuring details of local life were typically made for export to patrons and collectors at some remove (socially and culturally, as well as geographically) from the immediate contingences of peasant life in the countryside around Bassano del Grappa. While such homely productions appear to depict the local world of some pre-modern communitarian *Gemeinschaft*, they are better understood as knowing late Renaissance productions that stage the idea of the 'simplicities' of agrarian life for the enjoyment of a wide constituency of sophisticated outsiders. Despite its appearance of specificity or localness, Bassano's painting of rural life was founded on generic and translatable cultural values, and can thus be taken as a marker of the emergent social *Gesellschaft* of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the support of a Visiting Senior Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in Visual Art at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D. C. and a generous travel grant from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation of New York, both of which helped enormously in my work on this article. For the distinction between earlier communitarian social organization and modern society see Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1887).

## *The Regional Identity of Jacopo Bassano*

Jacopo Bassano's residence in his home town has long been seen as the underlying factor defining his work. In the evaluation of academic-classicist writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Bassano's local identity was typically seen as the main cause of his artistic failure. For Luigi Lanzi (1795) Bassano was a painter of limited ideas that were too often repeated: 'a fault to be attributed to his situation, it being an indisputable fact, that the conceptions of artists ... become enlarged and increased in great capitals, and diminish in small places.'<sup>2</sup> But the Venetian art historian and patriot Carlo Ridolfi (1648) had earlier insisted that Bassano's special achievement was to have shown that villages could be 'no less worthy of respect than the cities by means of paintings'.<sup>3</sup> And this kind of appreciation of Bassano's supposed commitment to his indigenous culture was revived in the nineteenth century, when the painter's close engagement with his native town was understood as the source of his artistic originality. Giambattista Baseggio (1847) claimed that the painter reserved his best work for Bassano del Grappa itself 'such that elsewhere his works ... were not carried through with that loving care he deployed in his home place'.<sup>4</sup> Echoes of this idea of Bassano's essential localness can still sometimes be found in the more recent literature, when he is evocatively imagined as 'the lonely craftsman of the Brenta', who worked in an

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<sup>2</sup> Luigi Lanzi, *The History of Painting in Italy*, 3 vols, trans. Thomas Roscoe (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847) vol 2, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup> Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte: ovvero le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello stato descritti da Carlo Ridolfi* (Venice, 1648), Detlev von Hadeln (ed), 2 vols (Berlin: G. Grote, 1914-24) vol 1, p. 377.

<sup>4</sup> Giambattista Baseggio, 'Della pittura e dell'intaglio in rame in Bassano' in Jacopo Ferrazzi (ed), *Di Bassano e dei Bassanesi illustri* (Bassano del Grappa: Tipografia, Baseggio Editrice, 1847), p. 21.

independent style of his own, beyond the reach of the classicizing orthodoxies of the wider tradition of sixteenth-century art.<sup>5</sup>

The evidence suggests, however, that Bassano was a self-consciously progressive artist of the later Renaissance, whose outwardly orientated career was very unlike that of his parochial father Francesco da Ponte, with whom he initially trained. As a young man, Jacopo went to Venice to join the thriving cosmopolitan workshop of Bonifacio de' Pitati where one of the leading lights of Venetian painting, Jacopo Tintoretto, may also have been a pupil.<sup>6</sup> Although the young Bassano soon returned home, his complexly evolving style owed much to his on-going engagement with the cutting-edge artistic culture of the metropolis. From around the time of his inheritance of the family workshop in 1539, the painter often signed his works as 'Jacobus a Ponte'/bassanensis'. The adoption of this hybrid signature indicates the distinctive double orientation of his career, as local *and* non-local. For if 'Jacobus a Ponte' ('at the bridge') announced the precise location of his workshop near the bridge over the river Brenta at the heart of the town, as 'bassanensis', or 'Bassanesi' he identified himself in much less specific terms: as a painter from Bassano del Grappa, open to commissions and to the cultural purview of outsiders from beyond its walls.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> W.R. Rearick in Beverly Louise Brown and Paola Marini (eds), *Jacopo Bassano c. 1510-1592*, (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1993), p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte*, vol 1, p. 384. For Bonifacio and his workshop see Philip Cottrell, *Bonifacio's Enterprise: Bonifacio de' Pitati and Venetian Painting*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the hybrid form 'Jac. A Ponte/bassanensis', the painter often signed himself as 'IAC.s BASS.s'; 'G.Bassan.'; 'IAC.s/BASSANESI'; 'JAC.BASSANE'; 'JAC.BASS.'; or simply as 'J.B.'.

The kind of rural painting discussed below can be seen as a response to the geopolitical position of Bassano del Grappa in the sixteenth century, when it was a subservient satellite of the all-powerful city of Venice, located some forty-five miles to the southeast. As we shall see, the painter developed a dialogic kind of imagery that sought, on the one hand, to validate rural life in the local area, while on the other demonstrating its conformity to the cultural mores of Venice. While his rural paintings certainly pay much greater attention to the 'real' appearances of peasant life in the sixteenth-century countryside than had previously been the case in Renaissance painting, the objectivity of the view offered is constantly compromised by its accommodation of the values of the artistic tradition of Venice.

Bassano's approach reflects the changing relationship between artistic centres and peripheries in sixteenth-century Italy. If the multi-centred production typical of earlier centuries had given way to the predominance of the 'progressive' Renaissance centres of Rome, Florence and Venice, then artists working in smaller towns were in danger of being 'peripheralized' as a result, and needed to demonstrate connection with these newly powerful loci of cultural production.<sup>8</sup> The centralization of Italian culture may have stimulated a newly self-conscious kind of 'regionalism', with the artists who continued to work in subservient towns seeking to define the cultural value of their work, while at the same time demonstrating its ultimate compatibility with the aesthetic models or styles favoured at the centre. Given this underlying allegiance, the approach of such artists was different in kind to the more independently defined

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<sup>8</sup> Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg, 'Centro e periferia' in Giovanni Previtali (ed), *Storia dell'arte italiana, 1: Materiali e problem 1. Questioni e metodi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), pp. 5-66; Stephen J. Campbell, 'Artistic Geographies' in Michael Wyatt (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 17-39.

identity that had sustained artistic traditions in smaller towns and villages in earlier centuries. Bassano's art took on a 'regional' character, defining itself as distinct by the inclusion of certain localizing rural markers; but it inevitably gave a mediated account of this immediate sphere, always implicitly indicating its subservience to the dominant tastes of Venice.

In his analysis of the term 'regional', Raymond Williams noted the essential 'tension within the word, as between a distinct area and a definite part' and that 'everything depends ... on the term of relation: a part of what?'.<sup>9</sup> This kind of internal tension or dialectic might be said to have defined the artistic career of Jacopo Bassano, who certainly aimed to promote his local town as a 'distinct area' while at the same time acknowledging its identity as a 'definite part' of the wider socio-political entity of the Venetian Republic. The painter seems to have understood the subservient position of Bassano del Grappa as a *dominio* of this all-powerful *dominante* as an opportunity rather than a problem.<sup>10</sup> His presentation of regionalized imagery, primarily defined by the inclusion of details of agrarian life around Bassano del Grappa, won him especial renown in the metropolis, probably because it reconfirmed the productive urban-rural relationship between Venice and its increasingly important territories on the mainland.

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1976), p. 264.

<sup>10</sup> Gino Benzoni, 'Dal centro alla periferia: qualche spunto ai fini di un fondale per Jacopo Bassano', *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, Vol. 153, 1995, pp. 1-27; Sarah Blake McHam, 'Padua, Treviso and Bassano' in Peter Humfrey (ed), *Venice and the Veneto: Artistic Centres of the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 207-251.

## *Bassano's Rural Painting and its Venetian Patronage*

The term 'rural painting' used in this article refers to those paintings in which visual priority is given to anonymous crowds of contemporary-looking peasants, domesticated animals and farming equipment, shown in a verdant landscape. Seen in the wider context of his oeuvre, such productions are less frequent than more conventional works that focussed exclusively on the actions of biblical or historical actors in settings that remain undefined, or that feature monumental perspectival architecture. Nonetheless, Bassano greatly expanded his repertoire of rural works through the course of his career, and it was this type of painting that was quickly identified as his most characteristic by leading writers on art of the period. Giorgio Vasari (1568) noted that Bassano was known for 'his little things and paintings of animals of all sorts', and Raffaello Borghini (1584) that he painted 'natural landscapes and especially animals, and various household furnishings ('masserizie della casa')'.<sup>11</sup> The category of rural painting can be legitimately extended to include Bassano's depictions of country kitchens, market stalls and workshops, typically shown as outdoor scenes featuring artisans, traders and servants at work. His occasional depictions of domestic animals in close-up views can also be considered as a sub-set of his rural painting (Fig. 5).

Bassano's early interest in this kind of imagery is evident from his frequent depiction of biblical subjects which had traditionally allowed for depictions of the countryside, such as the 'Flight into Egypt' and the 'Adoration of the Shepherds' (Figs. 1-2).<sup>12</sup> From the

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<sup>11</sup>See Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite dei piu eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1878-85), Vol. 7, p. 455 and Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo* (Florence; Giorgio Marescotti, Florence, 1584), p. 563.

<sup>12</sup> For the paintings illustrated here see *Jacopo Bassano c. 1510-1592*, cat. nos. 16 and 17.

1550s onwards, he added religious themes that were much more unusual in Renaissance art, but that provided further opportunities to show details of the rural world, depicting subjects such as the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* (Fig. 20), the *Parable of the Sower*, and the journeys of the Old Testament prophets Jacob and Abraham (Fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> After 1570, he greatly increased his painted output of this kind once again with the help of his four painter-sons, producing painting cycles or series featuring the 'Story of Noah' the 'Seasons' (Fig. 6), the 'Months', the 'Elements' (Fig. 18) and the 'Zodiacal Signs'. The workshop came to hold a stock of paintings with related rural subjects in more than twenty standardized formats.<sup>14</sup>

It has been argued that such imagery was initially developed for local Bassanese patrons in a sacred context, only to be subsequently transformed into secular genre for export by the painter's sons, Francesco and Leandro.<sup>15</sup> But a telling division between local and non-local commissions quickly emerged with Bassano's earlier career indicating that his peasant paintings were never really intended to meet the tastes of the country people of the area. In the upright altarpieces that he regularly painted for churches in the villages and small towns around Bassano peasants and animals sometimes occur, but typically as tiny figures in the distant landscape while the foreground scene is dominated by monumental sacred actors of a more conventional

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<sup>13</sup> All of these subjects are known in more than one version, suggesting their immediate popularity with patrons. See *Jacopo Bassano c. 1510-1592*, cat. nos. 30, 33, 44.

<sup>14</sup> See W. R. Rearick's calculation in *Jacopo Bassano c. 1510-1592*, pp. 142-3. See also Carlo Corsato, 'Dai Dal Ponte ai Bassano. L'eredità di Jacopo, le botteghe dei figli e l'identità artistica di Michele Pietra, 1578-1656', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 37, No. 73, 2016, pp. 195-248.

<sup>15</sup> Michelangelo Muraro (ed), *Il libro secondo di Francesco e Jacopo Bassano* (Bassano del Grappa: G. B. Verci Editrice, , 1992), pp. 50-51.



type.<sup>16</sup> Jacopo's rural depictions apparently found more fertile ground for development in paintings destined for patrons and places at some remove from the immediacies of peasant life around Bassano. The horizontal shape of Jacopo's repeated depictions of the 'Flight' and the 'Adoration', like the smaller scale of works such as the *Sleeping Shepherd* and the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* (Figs. 4 and 20), indicate that they were typically made for the private homes of wealthy clients, as does their early appearance in noble or princely collections in Venice and Rome.<sup>17</sup> In the 1640s, Ridolfi saw an Adoration of the Shepherds, probably identifiable with the painting now in the Galleria Nazionale in Rome (Fig. 15), in the palazzo of the wealthy Venetian merchant Cristoforo Orsetti, who owned a major collection of Venetian paintings and whose sixteenth-century ancestors might conceivably have commissioned Bassano's work.<sup>18</sup>

From an early point in his career, Jacopo received patronage from the leading Venetian patricians who ran the business of the Republic in Bassano in the role of podestà, though opportunities for the development of rural imagery in the typically quasi-official

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<sup>16</sup> See the examples of Bassano's country altarpieces at Santa Caterina di Lusiana, Angarano, Asolo and Cassola illustrated in Livia Alberton Vinco da Sasso and Vittoria Romani (eds), *Sulle Tracce di Jacopo Bassano* (Bassano del Grappa: Minchio, 1994), pp. 16-7, 18-9, 34-5, 36-7 and 44-5. Conversely, the predominantly locally commissioned paintings now in the Museo Civico at Bassano tellingly feature very few images of peasants and animals: see Giuliana Ericani and Federica Millozzi (eds.), *I Bassano del Museo di Bassano* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> The version of the *Adoration* now in the Galleria Borghese was in this great princely collection by 1650. An exception is Jacopo's earliest *Flight into Egypt* of 1534 (Bassano, Museo Civico), featuring three peasants, ordered by the rector of S Girolamo in Bassano: See *Il Libro Secondo*, p. 260, 121v.

<sup>18</sup> Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte*, vol. 1, p. 394. For Orsetti's extensive art collection see Linda Borean and Stefania Mason, 'Cristoforo Orsetti e i suoi quadri di "perfetta mano"' in eds. Linda Borean and Stefania Mason, *Figure di collezionisti a Venezia tra Cinque e Seicento*, (Udine: Forum, 2002), pp. 119-57.

public works they commissioned was limited.<sup>19</sup> In 1554, however, Bassano produced a painting of the unusual subject of the *Miracle of the Quails and Manna* for Domenico Priuli, scion of the famous Venetian patrician family: a work that has been described as ‘a premonition of the pastoral genre’ that he was later to become famous for.<sup>20</sup> Another rural painting featuring two hunting dogs had been commissioned by the Venetian noble Antonio Zentani in 1547 (Fig. 5).<sup>21</sup> Given that Tintoretto directly quoted one of these animals in an important religious work for a Venetian church of 1547-8, it is likely that Bassano’s unusual ‘dog portrait’ was on display in his patron’s Venetian palazzo soon after it was painted.<sup>22</sup> A similar pattern of export to the metropolis probably became the norm as time went by, particularly as the workshop began to expand its repertoire of works of this type. Some of the later sets of rural paintings mentioned above were probably produced in Venice rather than Bassano, especially following the move to the city of Jacopo’s two most ambitious painter-sons, Francesco (1578) and Leandro (1588).

Even before the opening of new Bassano *botteghe* in the metropolis, rural painting was readily identified with Jacopo Bassano’s name in Venice. In 1571, for example, Rocco Benedetti noted the particular impression that his works of this kind made in an

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of Bassano’s commissions from the Venetian patriciate: W. R. Rearick, ‘I clienti veneziani di Jacopo Bassano’ in S. J. Freedberg, W. R. Rearick, P. Berdini (eds.), *Jacopo Bassano (1510c.-1592)*, (Bassano del Grappa: Bollteino del Museo Civico, 1996/7), pp.51-82

<sup>20</sup> *Il Libro Secondo*, p. 118, c. 37v. ; Rearick, ‘I clienti veneziani di Jacopo Bassano’ p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Il Libro Secondo*, p. 70, 6v, 7r.

<sup>22</sup> For Tintoretto’s quotation of Bassano’s dog in his *Christ Washing His Disciples Feet* (1548-9, Madrid, Museo del Prado) see the discussion in Miguel Falomir (ed.), *Tintoretto* (Madrid: Museo di Prado, 2007), pp. 230-31.

exhibition of paintings by leading masters held on the Rialto bridge following the Venetian victory at the Battle of Lepanto, describing the master as ‘miraculous in the painting of pastoral things’.<sup>23</sup> From this time onwards, works including extensive descriptions of the countryside featured in the *palazzi* of leading Venetian patricians. Nicolò (or possibly Daniele) Barbarigo commissioned the version of the *Sacrifice of Noah* (ca. 1574, Potsdam, Stiftung Schlösser und Gärten Potsdam-Sanssouci), Marino Grimani owned versions of the ‘Flight into Egypt’ and the ‘Adoration of the Shepherds’ (present locations unknown); and Giacomo Contarini, commissioned a painting of *Jacob’s Return to Canaan* (ca. 1580, Venice, Ducal Palace).<sup>24</sup> The *cittadino* civil servant, Simone Lando, was well appraised of this quickly-developing patrician taste, and bought a set of the Seasons and a painting of *Noah’s Ark* for his palazzo. On his death in 1585, Lando bequeathed his Bassanos to the Venetian church of Santa Maria Maggiore, where they remained for much of the following century and were much admired and copied by artists and connoisseurs.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rocco Benedetti, *Ragguaglio delle Alegrezze, Solenità, e Feste fatte in Venetia per la felice Vittoria al Clariss. Sig. Girolamo Diedo, digniss. Consigliere di Corfù* (Venice: Perchacchino, 1571), unpaginated.

<sup>24</sup> It is possible that Daniele Barbarigo, builder of the new family palace on the Grand Canal in the late 1560s, may have been Bassano’s patron, rather than Nicolò, as suggested in *Jacopo Bassano ca. 1510-92*, cat. no. 49. See Bernard Aikema, *Jacopo Bassano and His Public: Moralizing Pictures in an Age of Reform, ca. 1535-1600* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 194 nt. 92. For Grimani’s paintings see Michel Hochmann, ‘Le mécénat de Marino Grimani’, *Revue de l’Art*, Vol. 95, 1992, p. 44. For more on the extensive Barbarigo and Contarini collections see Patricia Fortuni Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture and the Family* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 242-3.

<sup>25</sup> Carlo Corsato, ‘La devozione di Simone Lando e la pittura di genere in Jacopo Bassano’, *Venezia Cinquecento*, Vol. 33 n. 45, 2013, pp. 139-78. See also Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia Città Nobilissima et*

## *Reflections of Patrician Farming Interests*

In the period when Bassano developed his rural imagery, the Venetian ruling caste was undergoing a gradual process of social and economic reorientation necessitated by the gradual loss of their long-standing maritime trading Empire in the East. Patricians increasingly turned attention to their farming estates on the *terra ferma* in areas such as Bassano del Grappa, and sought to adopt a more elevated social identity closer to that of the landed aristocracies of mainland Italy and Europe.<sup>26</sup> It is clear, however, that this did not typically involve the wholesale abandonment of the traditional urban and mercantile life of the nobility in Venice. Many sixteenth-century patricians continued to prioritize trade and business in the city, and were typically absentee landowners in the countryside, maintaining a dual identity between their town and country business interests.<sup>27</sup> Their agricultural investments reflected these priorities and were often mercantile and capitalistic in kind. Some followed the sharecropping regime known as the *mezzadria*, buying up large tracts of land, building farmhouses and purchasing livestock before renting out their farms to the local peasant families who became their

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*Singolare con le aggiunte di Giustiniano Martinioni* [reprint of the 1663 edition, ed. Lino Moretti, Venice: Fillippi Editore, 1998], p. 270, where the *Noah's Ark* is described as an 'opera mirabilissima che viene copiata del continuo da studiosi della Pittura'.

<sup>26</sup> See Frederic C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 202-73; Ugo Tucci, 'The Psychology of the Venetian Merchant in the Sixteenth Century' in John Hale (ed.), *Renaissance Venice* (London, Roman and Littlefield, 1973), pp. 346-78.

<sup>27</sup> Daniele Beltrami, *La penetrazione economica dei veneziani in terraferma: forze di lavoro e proprietà fondiaria nelle campagne venete dei secoli XVII e XVIII* (Venice : Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1961).

tenants.<sup>28</sup> The inventorial quality of certain of Bassano's rural paintings, featuring detailed visual descriptions of the farming 'kit', as if arranged for the inspection of its owners, may indirectly reflect this distanced relation of Bassano's still-urban patrons. Embedded among the myriad of carefully described farmyard animals and 'masserizie della casa' displayed to view in the Barbarigo *Sacrifice of Noah*, for example, is a chest emblazoned with the family coat of arms: an object that indicates not only the family's patronage of the painting but also its proprietorial relationship to the rural world depicted.<sup>29</sup> Nicolò Barbarigo had served as a podestà in Verona, and the family had farming interests on the *terra ferma* in the area of Noventa Vicentina near Vicenza, where they built a large villa toward the end of the century. As has been noted, the Barbarigo's power over agricultural life in the area was so absolute that the local village was re-built to accommodate the family's villa.<sup>30</sup> The rebuilding featured to the right of Bassano's painting cannot be directly ascribed to this later development, and the landscape featured remains generic. But the special appeal of the painting to its original patrons was nonetheless made with the suggestion of their land ownership in the countryside in mind.

It may be that Bassano's typical emphasis on the detailed depiction of farm animals in his rural paintings reflects a specifically patrician approach to agriculture on the *terra*

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<sup>28</sup> Guido Perocco and Antonio Salvadori, *Civiltà di Venezia, L'Età Moderna* (Venice: Stamperia di Venezia Editrice, 1976), vol 3, p. 884. Christopher F. Black, *Early Modern Italy: A Social History* (London: Routledge, 2000) pp. 44-7.

<sup>29</sup> The painting was probably commissioned to hang in the Venetian family palace in Rio San Polo around 1574: *Jacopo Bassano c. 1510-1592*, cat. no. 49.

<sup>30</sup> Michelangelo Muraro and Paolo Marton, *Venetian Villas* (Cologne : Könemann, 1999), pp. 58-9.

Barbarigo land ownership on the *terra ferma* extended back to the late fifteenth century (see p. 174).

*ferma*, given the special concern of Venetian estate owners with livestock herds, as against the more traditional and local practice of crop rotation.<sup>31</sup> Farming with animals was still contentious in social and economic terms, given its potentially deleterious impact on food supply for the local population. In his *Tre discorsi sopra il modo d'alzar acque da'luoghi bassi* of 1567, the agronomist Giuseppe Ceredi reports heated discussion on the relative merits of livestock and arable farming framed in terms of the conflicting interests of an absentee landowning class and the local peasantry. 'It would always be better', says one of Ceredi's interlocutors, 'especially for the poor, if they went without meat and cheese, rather than without bread'.<sup>32</sup> The discussion Ceredi reports did not concern the Bassano region directly, but such conflicts were probably widespread across much of Northern Italy in the sixteenth century. As Fernand Braudel pointed out, acre for acre crop cultivation easily outstripped animal farming in terms of its food yield throughout the early modern period, and to this extent fed the impoverished in ways that livestock did not.<sup>33</sup>

The presence of multitudes of sleek and well-fed farm animals in Bassano's paintings may indicate that the artist accommodated his high-ranking and wealthy patrons' agrarian aspirations in this regard. In the *Parable of the Sower* (ca. 1561, Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection) a peasant scatters seeds in the background, while in

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<sup>31</sup> Salvatore Ciriaco, *Acqua e agricoltura: Venezia, l'Olanda e la bonifica europea in età moderna* (Francoangeli, Padua, 1994), pp. 19-61.

<sup>32</sup> 'e sarebbe meglio, specialmente per li poveri, che loro mancasse piu presto la carne, e il formaggio, che il pane': Giuseppe Ceredi, *Tre discorsi sopra il modo d'alzar acque da'luoghi bassi ...* (Parma: Seth Viotti, 1567), p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle : économie et capitalisme, XVe-XVIIIe siècle, Vol. 1 : Les Structures du Quotidien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1986), p. 81.

the *Summer* from the Seasons series maize or wheat is harvested in the middle distance (Fig. 6). But in the foreground of this painting sheep-shearing is given pride of place among the rural occupations. In many other of Bassano's rural paintings sheep, along with cattle, asses, mules, goats, rabbits, and chickens take precedence over crops. Crowding into the foreground picture space, their large and healthy bodies vie for attention with the peasants who tend them (Figs 1, 2, 3, 4, 15, 20). In Bassano's earlier works of this type these animals are often freighted with conventional symbolism determined by the given religious narrative. Increasingly, however, they are released from these age-old sacralising meanings, taking on a new secular and mercantile identity as potentially valuable livestock populating the country estate. The extent to which Bassano idealized the still 'backward' rural situation in the Veneto, from an urbanized patrician perspective, is evident from the fact that the take up of livestock farming across the region was notoriously slow, with less than 20% of Veneto land given over to pasture for animals across much of the *terra ferma*. The availability of cheap imports from Hungary meant that domesticated animals never quite dominated the rural scene in the way that Bassano presented in the rural paintings he so often sent to Venice.<sup>34</sup>

Bassano del Grappa and its environs may have gained particular significance to Venice as a successful centre of agricultural improvement and production in the mid sixteenth-century, when major projects of water irrigation and canalization were in progress. Venetian patricians funded a series of canalizations on the Brenta naming the new man-

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<sup>34</sup> Daniele Beltrami, *Saggi di storia dell'agricoltura nella Repubblica di Venezia durante l'età moderna*

(Venice : Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1955), pp. 41-3. Ugo Tucci, 'L'Ungheria e gli approvvigionamenti Veneziani del bovini nel Cinquecento', *Studi Humanitatis 2 : Rapporti veneti-ungheresi all'epoca del Rinascimento*, Venice, 1975, pp. 153-71.

made waterways -which largely served agricultural purposes- after their families (the Grimana, the Capella, the Morosina etc.).<sup>35</sup> At least one of Bassano's patrons, Domenico Priuli, was a patrician with a particular interest in such schemes, given his ownership of water mills on the Brenta at pie' di Castello near Bassano, though the painting he commissioned makes no direct reference to his local business. In a fine painting of ca. 1577 Bassano depicted a local blacksmith's shop under the guise of a mythological subject (Fig. 19).<sup>36</sup> The connection of such a work with irrigation and drainage schemes in the Bassano area is perhaps tangential. Yet the hammers and bellows used in iron working in the sixteenth century were largely dependent on the ready supply of water. And to this extent the view of a shop, set in an evocative Bassanese landscape, suggests the region as a site of particularly successful and 'progressive' *terra ferma* labour and production.<sup>37</sup>

Although the original patron of the *Forge of Vulcan* is not known, it maybe that it was not commissioned by a locally-based client, as we shall see below. Even where a more immediate link to agricultural interests in the Bassano region can be documented among Bassano's patrons, such is the case with Antonio Zentani who owned an estate at Cittadella, five miles south of Bassano, it appears that the patron was probably an absent landowner of the type described above who spent the majority of his time in

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<sup>35</sup> Ciriaco, *Acqua e agricoltura*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Miguel Falomir, *Los Bassanos en la España del Siglo de Oro*, (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 2001) pp. 138-41.

<sup>37</sup> For the essential role of water in early modern iron making: C. S. Smith and R. J. Forbes, 'Metallurgy and Assaying' in Charles Singer et al (ed.), *A History of Technology, III. From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution, c. 1500-1750* (New York and London: Oxford University Press) pp. 51-3.



Venice.<sup>38</sup> The painting Zentani commissioned, an unprecedentedly 'accurate' double portrait of two hunting dogs that he probably owned, may have served as a kind of memento of the pleasures of country life on his estate to be enjoyed from the comfort of his palazzo in Venice. Few if any works of Bassano's rural type can be traced to the lavish patrician villa/farmhouses on the *terra ferma* itself: buildings which were typically decorated with carefully historicized and idealized *all'antica* fresco cycles in the manner of Veronese, and which studiously avoid direct reference to the realities of peasant life on the farm.<sup>39</sup> The extensive descriptions of such conditions given in Bassano's paintings may have been encouraged precisely by the fact that they were primarily viewed away from the immediate rural context, in the urban *palazzi* of Venice.

If this kind of distance from the immediate contingencies of rural life was essential to Bassano's development of the type, it probably remains true that such works also offered to traverse the urban/rural divide between the city and its productive hinterland. Given the patrician-funded projects to upgrade local farming in the area in accordance with the growing needs of the dominant metropolis, it may be that Bassano del Grappa region was seen as something of a showcase for the new possibilities of a modernized patrician agriculture: as fulfilling the writer and agriculturalist Alvise Cornaro's dream (1558) of a 'real and solid agriculture that cannot fail'.<sup>40</sup> However this may be, Venetian interests and aspirations regarding its subject town would have facilitated Bassano's successful development of a pleasing visual vocabulary of rural life,

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<sup>38</sup> For Zentani's high social profile and varied public and philanthropic interests in Venice see Aikema, *Jacopo Bassano and His Public*, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> See Filippo Pedrocco, Massimo Favilla, Ruggero Rugolo, *Frescoes of the Veneto: Venetian Palaces and Villas* (New York, The Vendome Press, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Alvise Cornaro, *Discorsi della vita sopra...* (Padua: Paolo Miglietti, 1558), p. 13

seen in a positive light as productive and successful, and as referring, in however a generic way, to the agricultural interests of its typically patrician patrons. When his works featuring suitably fulsome details of a thriving agrarian world arrived in the lagoon city, they might even have appeared like the painted equivalents of imported agricultural produce.

### *Mediations in Bassano's Rural Painting*

While Bassano gradually expanded the range of his works of this kind, visual analysis indicates that he also attenuated the depiction of the rural scene, even as he appeared to insist on its representation. It is only by paying careful attention to this seemingly paradoxical effort of description/delimitation that we can begin to glimpse the wider cultural process at work in such imagery. Bassano's visual repertoire of local life was, in fact, circumscribed and mediated, for example with reference to the predominant artistic styles favoured in contemporary Venice. Even in those paintings in which the rural scene is featured, a set of visual formulae is operated that gives only a broad sense of the specifics of the Bassano area. The painter often indicates that the wide rolling wooded landscape we view is in the environs of Bassano del Grappa by including a view of the town in the background and/or a distant view of the local landmark, Monte del Grappa, on the horizon. In a painting for the Venetian *podestà*, Piero Pizzamano, he included a distant view of Bassano de Grappa and the characteristic mountain beyond. But these local features are set in a hazy distance while the foreground is dominated by a wide expanse of water more reminiscent of the Venetian lagoon (Figs. 7 to 9). In this way, Bassano manipulated his painted landscape to acknowledge the scope of his patron's interests between country town and urban metropolis. If the inclusion of local landmarks memorializes Pizzamano's time in office at Bassano del Grappa its visual

reduction to a background feature accommodates his patron's metropolitan purview. The *Miraculous Draught* was, like Zentani's *Two Dogs*, quickly removed to the city, where it was displayed in its owner's palazzo.<sup>41</sup>

Sometimes, too, Bassano featured views of tumbledown rural houses that might be taken as the so-called *casoni* that littered the countryside of the Veneto region.<sup>42</sup> Like the distant town view or the towering mountain, these humble dwellings appear as moveable pictorial features, and there is no evidence that the painter was particularly concerned to produce accurate or precise views of specific places around Bassano del Grappa. Rather than making drawings on site, Bassano followed the approach of many other Venetian Renaissance painters, freely manipulating specific topographical elements from the comfort of his studio to provide suitable 'settings', and moving such apparently identifying features around in accordance with the particular demands or promptings of his subject-matter or composition.

Bassano's imagery of peasants is similarly generic and iterative in kind, these figures functioning as transferable markers of the rural scene. In earlier paintings featuring religious subjects such as the Adoration of the Shepherds, Bassano typically proceeded by juxtaposing naturalistically-handled peasants and animals with delicately stylized and abstracted depictions of the sacred figures, often based on prints or paintings by *maniera* artists such as Parmigianino and Andrea Schiavone, whose work had recently become fashionable in Venice (Figs. 1 and 2). The viewer is encouraged to make a knowing visual comparison or *paragone* between the contrasting treatments within the given painting. In these works, the dialogue between local and non-local meanings so

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<sup>41</sup> Jacopo Bassano c. 1510-1592, cat. no. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Paolo Tietzo, *I casoni veneti* (Padua: Noventa Padovana, 1979).

central to Bassano's artistic identity is played out in the arena of style. If the playful formal *contrapposti* displayed in the figures of the sacred protagonists demonstrate his cultural attachment to the tastes of the metropolitan centre, then the contrastingly naturalistic visual language deployed for peasants and animals indicates his difference as a painter of the rural periphery.

As Bassano further developed this kind of painting, internal visual dialogue gave way to a more unified imagery of peasants, in which the rural figures are integrated into the scene, or remodelled in accordance with the figural conventions of Renaissance classicism. Bassano concentrated on a relatively small number of peasant types, postures and actions, freely repeated them in his various compositions. The reclining, kneeling or bending man with back partially turned; the crouching boy or milkmaid, and the seated mother with one or more child, all soon become familiar. To briefly trace just one example of Bassano's figural recycling: the reclining foreground peasant in the *Annunciation* draws on a near-contemporary *St John the Baptist* (Figs. 10 and 11) but also on foreground figures in earlier paintings of the *Good Samaritan* (ca. 1545-50, London, Royal Collection) and *Dives and Lazarus* (ca. 1550-3, Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art). The selective and repetitious character of this imagery indicates that the adaptability of these figures is ultimately more significant than their close relevance to any one subject matter or narrative context. And this interchangeable quality reflects their wider function as visual synecdoche who 'stand in for', or are representative of, Bassano's invented visual category of rural life. He reconfirmed this approach by often modelling the forms of his peasants on well-known figures by leading Renaissance masters in Venice and elsewhere. For example, the powerful peasant at the lower right of the *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1544-5, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland) recalls one in a monumental fresco in the Duomo at Treviso by Pordenone, the

Michelangelo-like painter who had won special renown in Venice during the 1530s. The painter's favoured reclining shepherd type (Fig. 10), who first appears in the Borghese version of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* of ca. 1550, draws on the muscular nudes reclining in the foreground of recent religious works by Tintoretto in Venice, who had himself derived such figures from studies after Michelangelo's sculptures in Florence and Rome (Figs. 12 and 13).

Bassano further allied his rural imagery with the familiar tradition of Renaissance classicism by suggesting its broad connection with pastoral poetry: a literary genre that had had a particularly powerful impact on painting in Venice and the Veneto in the work of Giorgione and his followers from the early sixteenth century onwards.<sup>43</sup> It is very likely that Bassano's sophisticated patrons among the Venetian patriciate, at least, understood his rural imagery as a visual extension of this fashionable poetic tradition, in which the lives and loves of refined shepherds who inhabit a soft Arcadian landscape, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, take centre stage. So much is suggested by Rocco Benedetti's casual description of Bassano's works displayed in Venice as 'pastorali' in 1571. It may be that this imagery had a still closer relationship with examples of Christianized pastoral poetry, given that many such paintings have sacred subjects.<sup>44</sup> The pastoral poet, Jacopo Sannazaro (1458-1530), for example, included a lengthy description of the Adoration of the Shepherds, one of Bassano's most favoured

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<sup>43</sup>David Rosand, 'Giorgione, Venice and the Pastoral Vision' in *Places of Delight: The Pastoral Landscape*, Robert C. Cafritz (ed.) (Washington D.C.: Phillips Collection, 1988), pp. 20-81. For the Renaissance revival of pastoral poetry see Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>44</sup> For the idea that Bassano's works are 'religious pastorals' see Luba Freedman, *The Classical Pastoral in the Visual Arts* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1989) p. 13.

rural subjects, in his *De Partu virginis* (1526), ascribing his rustics Virgilian names (Lycidas and Aegon) and making them sing a near verbatim version of Virgil's fourth Eclogue to the Christ Child.<sup>45</sup> However, no close dependence on Sannazaro or Virgil himself is evident in Bassano's many versions of this subject.<sup>46</sup> In keeping with his typical approach in rural painting, Bassano admitted only a generic relationship to literary pastoral, indicating its influence in visual rather than textual terms by the 'poetic' looseness of his pictorial handling and the use of a selective and dignifying chiaroscuro to cloak the realities of country life in picturesque mystery.

Bassano was, however, responsive to the modulation away from the dreamy sensual or erotic rendition of pastoral typical of Giorgione that had already appeared in the work of Titian, whose depiction of the countryside sometimes appears closer to Virgil's robustly agrarian *Georgics* than to the elegiac *Eclogues*. In a well-known woodcut after a Titian design, an altogether more practical and economic version of the landscape is featured engaging the idea of manual work (*labor*) rather than the ennobling poetic leisure (*otium*) of the *Eclogues* (Fig. 14).<sup>47</sup> Bassano drew directly on Titian's design in key rural paintings from his mature period, including the *Annunciation of the Shepherds* (Fig. 20), and it is true that an ideal of agricultural productivity is more generally

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<sup>45</sup> William J. Kennedy, *Jacopo Sannazaro and the Uses of Pastoral* (London and Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 212-13.

<sup>46</sup> See Roger W. Rearick, 'From Arcady to the Barnyard' in John Dixon Hunt (ed), *The Pastoral Landscape: Selected Papers* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), pp. 137-59. And the telling critique offered by Paolo Berdini, 'Jacopo Bassano: A Case for Painting as Visual Exegesis' in Heidi J. Hornik and Mikal C. Parsons (eds.), *Interpreting Christian Art: Reflections on Christian Art* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2008) p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> For Renaissance *otium* see Brian Vickers, 'Leisure and idleness in the Renaissance: The ambivalence of *otium*', *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 4 no. 1, March, 1990, pp. 1-37.

relevant to his paintings of this kind. The *otium* enjoyed by the reclining or seated figures in the foreground of these works is apparently sanctioned by the on-going labours that continue nearby. Bassano abandoned the Giorgionesque habit of decorously concealing rustic figures within the enfolding landscape, preferring to feature enlarged figures of peasants, farmyard animals and working utensils in the foreground space of his compositions. In Bassano's 'hard pastoral' there is little room for the delicacies of erotic love or music (its euphemistic sign).<sup>48</sup> Although a ruminative peasant holds the reed pipe beloved of Arcadian shepherds in the Borghese *Adoration*, it is characteristic of Bassano to attenuate this kind of poetic association in a later work (Fig. 10), so that the identity of the object has become equivocal (is it simply a stick that he toys with?). Bassano's types are ever more firmly defined by their relation to a rural world presented as real and contemporary. Male shepherds predominate, but working women and children are equally important, often shown busy about their work. Such demands, and conformity to family values, generally downplay the possibility of desire or sex in Jacopo's rural world, and there is noticeably little close interaction between men and women.

Such imagery would no doubt have appealed to contemporary writers with an interest in the supposed dignity of the peasantry, such as Alvise Cornaro and the reforming bishop of Verona, Agostino Valier, both of whom saw the work of the rural people of the Veneto as honourable, pleasurable and profitable. Cornaro advocated a new intimacy between Venetian landowners and their rural workers, while Valier argued that the peasant's work should no longer be understood as 'slave labour, but as a kind of

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<sup>48</sup> Rosand, 'Giorgione, Venice and the Pastoral Vision', p. 62.

honourable and pleasurable occupation'.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps inevitably, however, given that the dutiful world represented by Bassano seems always to be presented to satisfy the view of the distanced and privileged outsider, equivocations creep in. Even as Bassano seeks to develop a coherent image of the countryside as the site of on-going agrarian production and labour, elisions and inconsistencies emerge.<sup>50</sup> A fraught or contradictory quality is discernible in Bassano's depictions of 'ugly' bending peasants, whose bodies are turned away from the Holy figures, distracted by some trivial occupation, or who stare blindly towards the earth as if wholly unaware of the significance of the sacred narrative enacted nearby.<sup>51</sup> Others take up awkward kneeling postures, which emphasize their outsized backsides and filthy mud-caked feet to the viewer. In the Corsini *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Fig. 15) this kind of visual equivocation is especially evident, with the inclusion of a squatting boy with bared backside at the far right, who blows on an ember with his back turned on the sacred figures. Whether we take this oblivious figure as a sign of evil-doing, given the common association of fire with the lust of the devil; or as an early version of the ambivalent *cacone* or *pastore che caca* ('shepherd who shits') figure often featured in Spanish and Neapolitan Nativity scenes, his inclusion certainly disturbs the idealization of Bassano's

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<sup>49</sup>Valier described peasant work not as 'labore servili, sed honesta omini voluptate': Agostino Valier, *Rhetorica ecclesiastica* (Venice: Andrea Bocchino e fratelli, 1570), p.116. For Cornaro's advocacy of peasants see Muraro and Marton, *Venetian Villas*, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> For an equivalent process in the ambiguous depiction of staffage in English painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries see John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>51</sup> Aikema, *Jacopo Bassano and His Public*, correctly identifies these negative aspects, but probably overestimates Bassano's deliberate use of them for moralistic or satirical purposes.



‘positive’ rural mode.<sup>52</sup> Further ambiguity haunts Bassano’s depiction of attractive milkmaids or younger female peasants, who thrust their backsides towards us provocatively as they bend to milk a cow’s udders or to tend an animal, and whose bare shoulders are invitingly revealed (Fig. 16). Such details mark fissures in the elite ideology of Bassano’s high-ranking clientele: viewers whose acceptance and enjoyment of such low-life imagery was dependent on the way in which it allowed them to envisage both a putative connection with the earthy and sensual rural world depicted, as also their distanced superiority to it.

### *Courtly Fascination with Bassano’s Rural Paintings*

There is no record of Jacopo Bassano being commissioned directly by foreign courtly patrons in the manner of Titian, for example, the perceived leader of painting in Venice. But he nonetheless seems to have been aware of a potential market for his rural works amongst the very highest ranking courtly aristocratic and royal patrons beyond the confines of the Venetian Republic from a relatively early point in his career. Given the rapprochement of the patriciate with the values of the established landed aristocracies of Italy and Europe noted above, the further success of Bassano’s works with non-Venetian nobilities across Italy and Europe need not surprise or confuse us. The overlap between Venetian and courtly aristocratic identities may not always have been evident in patrician agricultural practice on the Veneto; but it was well enough advanced within the city, especially during the period of the so-called *Renovatio Urbis*, when leading families sought to demonstrate their connection with the aristocratic values of Rome.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jordi Arruga and Josep Mañá, *El Caganer*, (Madrid: Alta Fulla, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> For the wide cultural influence of these *papalisti* families in mid sixteenth-century Venice see Manfredo Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, trans. Jessica Levine (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985).

Perhaps with this in mind, Titian promoted his identity as both Venetian *and* courtly/aristocratic.<sup>54</sup> It is no accident that Bassano modelled two important rural paintings showing the 'Adoration of the Shepherds' directly on a Titian painting for a leading courtly patron, Francesco della Rovere, the Duke of Urbino (Figs. 1, 2, 17).<sup>55</sup>

Bassano certainly could not match Titian's close links to such high-ranking patrons. But he was apparently precocious in his exploitation of the new opportunities opening up for the export of 'Venetian' works to court patrons through the network of middlemen active in Venice. Towards the outset of his career, in 1541, Bassano apparently sent paintings 'on spec' to Alessandro Spiera, a painter-art dealer in Venice, although it is not clear whether Spiera was selling Bassano's paintings to Venetians or to patrons abroad.<sup>56</sup> The presence in the city of agents acting for foreign art collectors among Europe's social elites had certainly increased by the 1560s and 1570s, and they soon sought to buy up Bassano's rural works. Zentani's *Two Dogs*, for example, had apparently been sold on to the princely collector Cardinal Carlo Emanuele Pio of Savoy as early as 1567.<sup>57</sup> The exhibition of Bassano works on the Rialto in 1571 might then have caught the eye of the Spanish ambassador to Venice, Guzmán de Silva, who wrote to his master, king Philip II of Spain, a few years later informing him that the painter excelled in paintings made 'from nature, animals and other things'. Guzmán had

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<sup>54</sup> Tom Nichols, *Titian and the End of the Venetian Renaissance* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), especially pp. 157-73.

<sup>55</sup> For Titian's badly damaged painting of 1532-3 see Peter Humfrey, *Titian* (Ghent: Ludion, 2007), cat. no. 104.

<sup>56</sup> See *Il Libro secondo*, p. 216 c. 95v; p. 217 c. 96r; p. 222 c. 98v; p. 233 c. 99r.

<sup>57</sup> Alessandro Ballarin and Giuliana Ericani (eds.), *Jacopo Bassano e lo stupendo inganno dell'occhio* (Milan: Electa, 2010), pp. 86-7.

purchased *Abraham's Departure for Canaan* (ca. 1574-5, Madrid, Museo del Prado) for Philip, a work featuring a melee of peasants and animals moving through a darkening landscape, which the ambassador considered one of 'the best things he [Bassano] has made'. The king quickly wrote back expressing his satisfaction with the work following its arrival at court in Madrid.<sup>58</sup>

Guzmán's purchase appears to have opened the way to an on-going pattern of export of such works to Spain. In 1576, for example, the minor Venetian painter Parrasio Michele acted as an agent for the export of a collection of 28 paintings previously owned by a Venetian collector to Spain, including 8 'paintings of animals' probably by Bassano and his workshop and featuring rural imagery, perhaps including the *Israelites Drinking the Water* now in the Prado.<sup>59</sup> Bassano's rural paintings became so popular at the foreign courts that a temporary shortage in supply developed. Despite this, Bishop Annibale Rucellai, the agent of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinand I, was able to purchase a set of the Seasons from Francesco Bassano, works which were then included as part of a diplomatic gift from the Florentine court to king Philip III some years later.<sup>60</sup>

### *Marketing the Rural: Site of Production and Consumption*

With the help of his sons and followers, Bassano produced a high volume of rural paintings at speed, and probably at fairly low cost. Rapid production of works made 'on

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<sup>58</sup> See Miguel Falomir, 'Titian, Jacopo Bassano and the Purification of the Temple', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 34, no. 67, 2013, p. 280.

<sup>59</sup> Philip Cottrell and Rosemary Mulcahy, 'Succeeding Titian: Parrasio Micheli and Venetian painting at the court of Philip II', *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 149, April 2007, p. 242, note 52.

<sup>60</sup> E. Goldberg, 'Artistic Relations Between the Medici and the Spanish Courts' 1587-1621, Part II', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 138, 1996, p. 536.

spec', rather than for a specific patron, often as copies or variants of the master's own designs, and held as stock in the workshops in Bassano and Venice, seems to have been integral to the type, at least from the mid-1570s onwards. These market-orientated qualities appear to have quickly supplanted the more usual conditions for the creation of a painting in the sixteenth century, in which the painter fulfilled a bespoke commission for a specific patron, generating site-specific meanings. Semantic slippages between one rural subject-matter and another were part and parcel of the Bassano's newly market-orientated imagery. It may be no accident that when purchasing Philip's painting in 1575, Guzmán made a casual error regarding its subject-matter, misinterpreting it as a depiction of 'Jacob's Journey'.<sup>61</sup> The ambassador's mistake is wholly understandable, given the overall similarity of Bassano's repeated depictions of the journeys of Abraham and Jacob, works dominated by a seemingly chaotic spill of peasants and animals across a darkening landscape rather than any very precise indicators of subject. In a slightly later painting that *does* feature *Jacob's Journey* (ca. 1580, Venice, Ducal Palace), the unruly tide of anonymous rural actors washes in random fashion across the shadowy foreground, making it difficult to recognise the precise narrative or even to pick out the biblical protagonist.

It may be no surprise that such imagery quickly became especially well represented in courtly collections across Italy and Europe, for example in the collections of the Medici in Florence; the Borghese in Rome; King Charles 1 in London (Figs. 1 and 3); and of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in Brussels. By 1678-80 a set of Bassano 'Seasons' had even

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<sup>61</sup> Falomir, *Los Bassanos en la España del Siglo de Oro*, pp. 20-1, pp. 62-3.

reached the New World.<sup>62</sup> There is no doubt that a certain aesthetic downgrading of Jacopo's originality is evident in the routine and derivative workshop productions that followed. But the spread of Bassano rural imagery to collectors across Italy and Europe was less a falsification of the master's original intentions than a fulfilment of them. The precocious appeal to the burgeoning European interest in 'fine art' always played a significant -perhaps even defining- role in his conception of such works. While certain paintings were commissioned by Venetian patrician collectors the involvement of middle-men such as Spiera and Parrasio suggests Jacopo's readiness to market his new kind of painting more widely, as does his bold display of *pastorali* on the Rialto bridge at the mercantile heart of the Venetian metropolis in 1571.

Paintings of markets themselves, crammed with fresh produce quickly appeared, especially in series featuring the Elements. In one such work, illustrating 'Water', a teeming fish market is featured: a theme of particular relevance, given the impressive water improvement schemes around Bassano del Grappa (Fig. 18). It was suggested above that Bassano's rural paintings of the 1540s, 50s and 60s shade into, rather than contradict, the multiple depictions of markets, kitchens and shops that feature in the serial paintings from the mid-1570s onwards. These later scenes of everyday life are undoubtedly somewhat different as they show secondary scenes of selling and consumption rather than primary ones of farm labour and production. Yet this imagery admits of greater overlap than might at first be apparent, especially insofar as in all cases the scene depicted is implied as having a context in a successful 'rural' society or economy. Even when the setting might more logically have been a town or city, or

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<sup>62</sup> The set entered Peru between 1678-80 under the auspices of the archbishop of Lima and now hangs in the Museo de Arte Religioso in Lima Cathedral: see Guillermo Lohmann Villena (ed.), *La basilica catedral de Lima* (Lima: Banco de Credito de Peru, 2004), pp. 253-63.

indoors (as in the kitchen scenes), the painter includes a slice of Bassenese landscape. In the *Element of Water*, country-style buildings lead on to a river with two towers still evident on the skyline of Bassano del Grappa today, with the familiar shape of Monte Grappa looming beyond.

The equivocations about the precise locale noted in many other such works are, however, apparent once more in this work. The kinds of fish on sale include saltwater varieties favoured in seaports such as Venice, alongside the freshwater types sold in a small upstream town such as Bassano del Grappa.<sup>63</sup> Many of these later market scenes gained their appeal precisely by their admission of non-specific elements that suggest their relevance to much wider and more diverse geographical and cultural contexts. In the *Forge of Vulcan*, Jacopo brilliantly compressed his archetypal rural scene by showing production and consumption together in a realistic view of a blacksmith's shop (Fig. 19). In this painting, Bassano features powerful men at work, forging iron, presumably with the aid of water-driven bellows (worked by the figure in lime-green at the centre). Later stages of the manufacturing process are also included with tool-making, surface-detailing and copper beating featured. At the same time, the painter provides a catalogue-like description of the final products for sale, as if his work were itself a shop window for the advertisement of country goods. Armour, a plethora of ladles, spoons, kettles, plates, pots, pans and even tell-tale *coins*, are temptingly arranged along the bottom edge of the painting in a manner that suggests the viewer's role as a prospective customer.

Yet at the same time this viewer is also granted a comforting distance from the 'vulgar' immediacies of the shop, above all through Bassano's sophisticated pictorial realisation.

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<sup>63</sup>For further discussion of this issue see *Jacopo Bassano c. 1510-1592*, cat. no. 70.

The inclusion of the mythological winged Cupid (who appears to wait for Vulcan to forge him an arrow) serves as a visual marker of this viewer's refined *all'antica* culture, as do the mobile forms of the shop-workers, which acknowledge a late Renaissance aesthetic taste for formal complexity. The softness of Bassano's pictorial handling, like the mysterious flickering of the furnace-like chiaroscuro, takes all this a step further, suggesting pictorial continuity with the late paintings of the recently deceased Titian in Venice.<sup>64</sup> Bassano's insistence on the grimy details of the forge may mark his difference from such an elevated and exclusive courtly figure. In this painting, he once again presents himself as the painter of the 'ordinary' people of the countryside, shown in the midst of their humdrum working lives. But many other aspects promote Bassano as the valid heir to Titian's famous tradition of painting in the Venetian metropolis. Despite its polemic of lowliness, the *Forge of Vulcan* is a self-consciously masterly painting of *colorito* that seems to anticipate its future success alongside Titian and the other leading Venetian painters of the Renaissance in a great princely collection. Within thirty years of its creation, the *Forge* had already found a suitable home of this kind. Exported to Spain alongside many other Bassano depictions of rural life, it was purchased by the Duke of Lerma from the Duke of Peñeranda in 1607, later entering the Habsburg collection, where it hung in the Hall of Mirrors in the royal palace of the Alcázar in Seville.<sup>65</sup>

### *The Art of Elsewhere*

Bassano's rural paintings may always have been intended to satisfy the anxious demands of culturally distanced viewers newly hungry for information about an already half-forgotten rural world, who were also keen for conformation of its on-going

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<sup>64</sup>Falomir, *Los Bassanos en la España del Sigolo de Oro*, pp. 138-9 has rightly stressed Jacopo's debt to the late Titian in this painting.

<sup>65</sup>Falomir, *Los Bassanos en la España del Sigolo de Oro*, p. 138.

economic productivity and the reliability of its working inhabitants. Envisioning heartening scenes of production and consumption in the countryside, the rapid success of such works comes as no surprise. Bassano's emphasis on realistic depictions of rural life suggest a broad parallel with the peasant imagery that had a much longer history in Flemish and German art, and that was also beginning to emerge as a recognisable artistic type in other parts of northern Italy by ca. 1580.<sup>66</sup> In this period, Vincenzo Campi depicted fish markets in Cremona, while Bartolomeo Passarotti and Annibale Carracci made kitchen scenes in Bologna, probably based on their knowledge of recent Flemish works of this kind by Pieter Aertsen and Joachim Beuckelaer. But evidence of the precise formal influence of these early Italian and Flemish genre painters on Bassano, or vice versa, is very hard to find. And the same is true of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's peasant paintings, which may have been known to Bassano through reproductive prints from ca. 1570 onwards, but had a relatively small formal impact on his developing pictorial vocabulary of rural life.<sup>67</sup> It is the way in which Bassano's depiction of the everyday lives of peasants appeared simultaneously with these Flemish and north Italian examples, in a geographically and culturally distinct region of Italy,

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<sup>66</sup> See Barry Wind, 'Pitture Ridicole: Some Late Cinquecento Comic Genre Paintings', *Storia dell'Arte*, Vol. 20, 1974, pp. 25-35; Francesco Porzio (ed.), *Da Caravaggio a Ceruti: la scena di genere e l'immagine dei pitocchi nella pittura italiana* (Milan: Electa, 1998). For the long satirical tradition of peasant imagery in German and Netherlandish art see H-J Raupp, *Bauernsatiren: Entehung und Entwicklung des bäuerliche Genres in der deutschen und niederländischen Kunst ca. 1470-1570* (Niederzier, 1986).

<sup>67</sup> For some putative connections between Bassano paintings and certain Flemish prints circulated after Bruegel's death in 1569 see Stefania Mason, 'Animali, masserizie e paesi: 'minor pictura' a Venezia nel tardo Cinquecento' in Bernard Aikema and Beverley Louise Brown (eds.), *Il Rinascimento a Venezia e la pittura del Nord ai tempi di Bellini, Dürer, Tiziano* (Venice: Bompani, 1999), pp. 558-67.



and seemingly without significant reference to their contemporary example, that is most striking and significant.

In the work of Campi and Passarotti peasant bodies are satirically equated with the food they sell or eat in the construction of a didactic imagery of the 'low-life' world for the benefit of higher-ranking, often urbanized, viewers who needed to see themselves as different.<sup>68</sup> In Bassano's paintings, it is much more difficult to identify a clear moralizing position against the rural types represented, though it may be that the painter makes a similar kind of point by equating his peasants with the animals they tend, rather than the food they eat. Bassano's productive animals could, by extension suggest their conversion or processing into food, drink, clothing and other agriculturally based products. The way in which the pressing myriad of healthy and mobile animal bodies are shown in the closest possible proximity to those who tend them, partially occluding their forms, suggests as much. But Bassano's works are distinguished from the aggressively secularized early genre paintings of Campi, Passarotti and Carracci by the potential they allow for the rural scene to appear as a sacred domain: as an especially suitable setting for the original Christian narratives of poverty, humility and sacrifice.<sup>69</sup> While the argument above has largely emphasized the non-religious aspects of Bassano's paintings, it is clear enough that he sometimes used rural imagery to deepen

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<sup>68</sup> Sheila McTighe, 'Foods and the Body in Italian Genre Paintings, about 1580: Campi, Passarotti, Carracci', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 86 no. 2, June, 2004, pp. 301-23.

<sup>69</sup> For the possibility that Bassano's works engage the viewer in a complex game of visual exegesis in the tricking out of Christian meanings: see Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). See also Beverley L. Brown, 'Travellers on the Rocky Road to Paradise: Jacopo Bassano's "Flight into Egypt"', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 32 no. 64, 2011, pp. 193-219.

religious content. Secular and sacred meanings typically combine and overlap in such works rather than opposing one another. Both serve to endorse the countryside as a site of economic productivity *and* spiritual significance.<sup>70</sup> If certain of Bassano's paintings appear to indicate the rural as an enclave of sacred innocence, half-suggesting that we view scenes from the long-distant biblical past, the catalogues of visual description describing peasant types, postures, dress and activities; farmyard animals; agricultural implements; and household objects and furnishings ('masserizie della casa') bring the scene forward into the sixteenth-century present.<sup>71</sup> Like the work of the early genre painters, Bassano's rural imagery reflects a concern to bring the contemporary realities of peasant life into the purview of visual art. Despite the role of such imagery in the process of social definition and class formation, it may also reflect the emergence of a more inclusive and totalizing approach to everyday life within early modern society. Representing peasants was, to this extent, one component within a wider cultural project that sought to interpret the realities of the current world through extending the traditional field of visual representation, and perhaps thereby to establish a new sense of a shared -if also carefully differentiated- 'European' cultural identity and heritage.<sup>72</sup>

The regionalism of Bassano's rural painting may parallel the kind of chorographic, taxonomic and encyclopedic interests that resulted in the publication of maps, printed

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<sup>70</sup> For the way in which apparently secular rural works owned by one Venetian collector were understood as devotional paintings and transferred to the sacred space of a local church see Corsato, 'La devozione di Simone Lando', pp. 1139-78

<sup>71</sup> For the perception of such 'enclaves of innocence' as the defining trope of dislocated modernity: see Hans Blumenberg, *Liebenzeit und Weltzeit* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Surhkamp, 1986), pp. 48-69.

<sup>72</sup> For a now classic account of this process see John Hale, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), especially pp. 3-50

books and illustrations recording the geographies (both physical and social) of regional life in the later sixteenth century. Such material included topographical landscape and city views, detailed descriptions of physical characteristics and customs, occupations, dress, social manners, as well as records of the styles and uses of the everyday functional objects of material culture. From costume books to the urban workers found in street *cris*, a rapidly developing interest in the specifics of 'the local' from the perspective of the increasing number of people beyond its immediate parameters is evident enough.<sup>73</sup> Just as the patricians of a great metropolis such as Venice exploited this information-obsessed culture to promote their city's identity to a potentially world-wide clientele, so too Bassano successfully marketed the specifics of life in his local town to satisfy this same kind of broadening public interest. Print culture may have 'opened up possibilities for exchanges between the city and the world' with the production of 'local images that were themselves responses to how Venice and Venetians were imagined by foreigners'.<sup>74</sup> The same may also have been true of Bassano's rural paintings. When packed off to collectors in foreign climes, such works became part of the wider pattern of cultural dissemination from a renowned centre of Italian artistic production to the world beyond. In the process, their original meanings as a regional art produced in the service of the particular economic interests and

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<sup>73</sup> For the paradoxical way in which the very concept of 'local knowledge' necessarily indicates its 'non-local' perspective see Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 16. For urban street *cris* See Sheila McTighe, 'Perfect Deformity, Ideal Beauty and the "Imaginaire" of Work: The Reception of Annibale Carracci's "Arti di Bologna" in 1646', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 16 No. 1, 1993, pp. 75-91.

<sup>74</sup> Bronwen Wilson, *The World in Venice: Print, the City and Early Modern Identity* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2005) p. 6.

aesthetic tastes of the Venetian patriciate became less significant than their high status as prized contributions to the European artistic heritage.

But even prior to this secondary process of internationalizing cultural absorption, Bassano's imagery mediated, generalized and translated the local scene it described. Like the early genre painters, Bassano seems always constrained to represent the life of the people indirectly, undermining or eliding the specifics even as he appears to describe them. The re-assertion of the sense of place in his work was to this extent always more apparent than actual.<sup>75</sup> We must take it that his rural paintings are symptomatic of a wider cultural process that sought to make the culture of one locality or region appear equivalent, compatible, or at least comprehensible, in terms of another. Like the other scopic materials from the period, Bassano's works offer a 'version' of the common life of the people. For all its apparent realism and authenticity, his rural world was always a matter of imagery and artistry. To this extent it offers itself as a mnemonic or remembrance of the thing itself that is partially lost or obscured in the very process of its depiction. The status of a painting such as the *Forge of Vulcan* as a made object is partially acknowledged by the painterly freedom of the brushwork: it gives notice of the facture of the work and thus of the controlling and compromising authority of the artist himself. And it may be no accident that 'dis-location', insofar as we take this as a movement away, departure from, or translation out of immediate environs, was often featured as an underlying sub-plot: Jacob or Abraham must make a journey; the animals enter the Ark; the Holy Family flees into Egypt.

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<sup>75</sup> For the equivalent erosion of 'place' in Renaissance philosophy see Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 103-29. See also Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 4-20.

The limits or transience of representation are most subtly acknowledged in the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* (Fig.20), in which the pointing hands of the angel and the 'difficult' twisting movement of the leftmost shepherd combine to initiate a new and quite other direction of travel for the protagonists. The sense that we view only a subsection of a now un-representable whole is the key to such scenes. The bodies of peasants and animals are cut by the frame to suggest their contingency, as also the continuity of common life beyond what can be presently seen or shown. Just as a newly extended demotic throng of contemporary actors finally arrives in the reserved and hieratic space of Renaissance painting, so too these anonymous and mobile populations are also about to depart once again, partaking in some unexpected movement or migration beyond the space of depiction. Even as the settled rural life of the peasantry is acknowledged for the first time in Italian painting, so too it is shown in the process of being disturbed or displaced. Bassano's new kind of attention to regional life is simultaneous with an insistently modern sense of the determining power of elsewhere.

## Captions List

Fig. 1. Jacopo Bassano, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, ca. 1545, oil on canvas, 139 x 219 cm. The Royal Collection/HM Queen Elizabeth II, London (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018)

Fig. 2. Jacopo Bassano, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, ca. 1545-6, oil on canvas, 95 x 40 cm. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice (Photo: ©Cameraphoto Arte, Venezia)

Fig. 3. Jacopo Bassano, *The Journey of Jacob*, ca. 1561, oil on canvas, 129.4 x 184.2 cm, The Royal Collection/HM Queen Elizabeth II, London (Photo: Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018)

Fig. 4. Jacopo Bassano, *The Sleeping Shepherd*, ca. 1568, oil on canvas, 99.5 x 137.5 cm. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts©Dénes Józsa)

Fig. 5. Jacopo Bassano, *Two Hunting Dogs*, 1548, oil on canvas, 61 x 80 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (Photo: akg-images / Erich Lessing)

Fig. 6. Jacopo Bassano, *The Summer*, ca. 1574-5, oil on canvas, 78.5 x 110.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Photo: KHM-Museumsverband)

Fig. 7. Jacopo Bassano, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1545, oil on canvas, 144 x 244 cm. Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art (Photo: Patrons' Permanent Fund)

Fig. 8. Detail of background right of Fig. 7

Fig. 9. View of Bassano del Grappa (Photo: akg-images/Hedda Eid)

Fig. 10. Jacopo Bassano, detail of foreground peasant in Fig. 20

Fig. 11. Jacopo Bassano, *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, 1558, oil on canvas, 114 x 151 cm. Museo Civico, Bassano del Grappa (Photo: ©Cameraphoto Arte, Venezia)

Fig. 12. Jacopo Tintoretto, detail of right side of *St Roch Healing the Plague Stricken*, 1549, oil on canvas, 307 x 673 cm. S Rocco, Venice (Photo: ©Cameraphoto Arte, Venezia)

Fig. 13. Michelangelo, *Dusk*, ca. 1524-34, marble, Medici Chapel, S Lorenzo, Florence (Photo: akg-images/Andrea Jemolo)

Fig. 14. Nicolò Boldrini after Titian, *Landscape with a Milkmaid*, ca. 1535-40, woodcut, 37 x 53 cm. Metropolitan Museum of New York (Photo: Bequest of Phyllis Massar, 2011)

Fig. 15. Jacopo Bassano, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, ca. 1562, oil on canvas, 105 x 157cm. Galleria Nazionale, Rome (Photo: akg-images/ De Agostini Picture Lib. / V. Pirozzi)

Fig. 16. Jacopo Bassano, detail of female peasant from *The Journey of Jacob*, Fig. 3

Fig. 17. Giovanni Britto after Titian, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, ca. 1532-3, woodcut, 41 x 52 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C. (Photo: Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund)

Fig. 18. Jacopo Bassano and workshop, *The Element of Water*, ca. 1584-5, oil on canvas, 140 x 182 cm. The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota (Photo: Bequest of John Ringling, Collection of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Museum of Florida, Florida State University)

Fig. 19. Jacopo Bassano, *The Forge of Vulcan*, ca. 1577, oil on canvas, 250 x 407cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid (Photo: akg-images/Album)

Fig. 20. Jacopo Bassano, *The Annunciation to the Shepherds*, ca. 1559-60, oil on canvas, 106 x 83 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (Photo: Samuel H. Kress Collection)