

## Giovanni Bellini's *San Francesco nel deserto*

Oskar Bätschmann

Both Giovanni Bellini and his father Jacopo made important contributions to the representation of spiritual elevation in the solitude of the desert, Jacopo with his drawings of St. Jerome and St. Francis and Giovanni with his paintings of these two saints. The most beautiful among these is the large panel of *St. Francis in the Desert* that Marcantonio Michiel (1484–1552) saw in Venice in 1525 [Fig. 9.1]. He listed a series of extraordinary paintings in the house of the rich and erudite collector Taddeo Contarini, including Giorgione da Castelfranco's (1478–1510) *Three Philosophers in a Landscape* and two other works by the same artist, two by Jacopo Palma il Vecchio (1480–1528), three by Giovanni Bellini (1437–1516), and two anonymous works, one from Milan and the other from Brescia. One of the Bellini paintings was a portrait of a woman, now lost, another was a representation of Christ and the third was the panel *St. Francis in the Desert* [Fig. 9.1], that entered the Frick Collection in New York in 1915:

La tauola del San Francesco nel deserto a oglio fu opera die Zuan Bellino, cominciata da lui a M. Zuan Michiel et ha un paese propinquo finito e ricearto mirabilmente.<sup>1</sup>

The panel of *St. Francis in the Desert*, in oil, was the work of Giovanni Bellini, begun by him for Messer Zuan Michiel, and has a landscape nearby, marvelously finished and thought-out.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Michiel M.A., *Notizia d'opere del disegni: Edizione critica a cura di Theodor Frimmel*, Vienna 1896 (Florence: 2000) 53. See for the text also: *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. P. Barocchi, 3 vols. (Milan–Naples: 1971–1977), vol. 3, 2867–2891, esp. 2882–2883; Rutherglen S., “The Desert and the City: Marcantonio Michiel and the Early History of *St. Francis*”, in Rutherglen S. – Hale C. (eds.), *In a New Light: Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert* (New York, NY – London: 2015) 46–57. To avoid misunderstandings: ‘paese’ is to be understood in Michiel’s text as ‘landscape’, not as ‘village’.

<sup>2</sup> See for the translation Aronberg Lavin M., “The Joy of St. Francis: Bellini’s Panel in the Frick Collection”, *Artibus et Historiae* 56, 27 (2007) 231–256, 252, n.2.



FIGURE 9.1 *Giovanni Bellini, St. Francis in the Desert (ca. 1475–1480). Tempera and oil on poplar panel, 124.4 × 141.9 cm. New York, NY, The Frick Collection (inv. no. 1915.1.03).*

IMAGE © THE FRICK COLLECTION, NEW YORK, NY.

In his 1537 treatise on architecture Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554) described the patrician Marcantonio Michiel as a profound connoisseur of architecture, and some years later the writer Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) praised him for his learned judgement not only in architecture, but in painting and sculpture as well.<sup>3</sup> Michiel's *Notizia*, his notes on the art collections of noblemen in Venice, Padua, Milan, and other cities in North Italy, give ample evidence of the dense social networks of learned men to which he had access, as Jennifer Fletcher has shown.<sup>4</sup>

3 See Michiel, *Notizia d'opere del disegni* 9.

4 Fletcher J.M., "Marcantonio Michiel: His Friends and Collection", *The Burlington Magazine* 123 (1981) 453–467; Fletcher J.M., "Marcantonio Michiel, 'che ha veduto assai'", *The Burlington Magazine* 123 (1981) 602–608.



Within our context of particular interest is Michiel's 1525 note about Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*: apparently, the work was initially commissioned by Zuan Michiel, but the final client, for reasons yet to be ascertained, was Taddeo Contarini.<sup>5</sup> The Venetian patrician Taddeo Contarini, who owned no precious objects other than paintings, could justifiably be numbered with Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) among the *artis studiosi*, the committed connoisseurs of art.<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Fletcher has pointed out the importance of the Scuola Grande di San Marco confraternity for both the painter and the patrons.<sup>7</sup> Zuan Michiel, like Giovanni Bellini a member of the Scuola Grande di San Marco, served twice as Guardian Grande and was also secretary to the Council of Ten, one of the governing bodies of the Republic which enjoyed almost unlimited authority in the second half of the fifteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Marcantonio's remark 'begun by him [Giovanni Bellini] for Messer Zuan Michiel' has naturally stimulated art historians' eagerness to speculate about the patron, the authenticity of the painting, its subject, and its dating.<sup>9</sup>

### Iconographic Puzzles

Equally noteworthy is Marcantonio Michiel's designation of the subject, *San Francesco nel deserto* (*St. Francis in the Desert*). Marilyn Aronberg Lavin has pointed out that the Italian 'deserto' as 'any deserted wilderness or countryside', and suggested that it 'provides the key to the painting's meaning by signaling the most unusual aspect'.<sup>10</sup> Recently Susannah Rutherglen has again discussed the meaning of Michiel's word 'paese', hesitating between 'landscape' and 'small town'.<sup>11</sup> In the *Vocabolario della Crusca*, first published in

5 For the provenance of the Frick Bellini see Fletcher J.M., "The Provenance of Bellini's Frick 'St. Francis'", *The Burlington Magazine* 114 (1972) 206–209; Eze A.-M., "From the Grand Canal to Fifth Avenue: The Provenance of Bellini's St. Francis from 1525 to 1915", in Rutherglen – Hale, *In a New Light* 59–79. This Zuan Michiel was no relative to Marcantonio Michiel.

6 See Brown D.A. – Ferino-Pagden S. – Anderson J. (eds.), *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC: 2006).

7 Fletcher J.M., "Bellini's Social World", in Humfrey P. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini* (Cambridge: 2004) 13–47, esp. 21–24.

8 *Ibidem* 23.

9 See "Paintings: French, Italian and Spanish", in *The Frick Collection: An Illustrated Catalogue* (New York, NY: 1968), vol. 2, 203–209.

10 Aronberg Lavin, "The Joy of St. Francis" 233.

11 Rutherglen – Hale, *In a New Light* 47–48.

Venice in 1612, 'deserto' was not included as an entry, but it was mentioned under the head word 'Idioto, e idiota' with a quotation from St. Augustine.<sup>12</sup> We may understand 'deserto' as an uninhabited site or landscape. Michiel used the expression *paese* to refer to the marvellous landscape in Bellini's painting, while in around 1500 Isabella d'Este (1474–1539), for example, employed the evocative term *luntani*, meaning 'view into the distance'. The word *paese* occurs quite frequently in Michiel's descriptions of paintings in Venetian collections. In 1521, for example, he noted the presence of 'molte tavolette de paesi' in the house of Cardinal Grimani (1489–1546), and in 1530, in the home of Gabriel Vendramin (1484–1552), he referred to Giorgione's *Tempest* as 'A small landscape, on canvas, with a thunderstorm, a gypsy, and a soldier, by the hand of Giorgio of Castelfranco'; in 1525 he called Giorgione's *Philosophers* '3 phylosophi in paese'.<sup>13</sup> It seems that Marilyn Aronberg Lavin is correct in suggesting that 'paese' should be understood as 'landscape'.

The connoisseur Michiel notwithstanding, the determination of the subject of Bellini's painting *St. Francis in the Desert* encountered unexpected difficulties among art historians in modern times.<sup>14</sup> The obvious reason for this lay in the painting's deviation from both the long established and the more recent usual Franciscan iconography. In his 1964 *Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Frick Collection*, Millard Meiss summarised his research into the painting as follows: 'As an ecstatic St. Francis in an extended landscape, Bellini's painting would thus seem to be both unprecedented and unique until a much later time'.<sup>15</sup> Meiss referred to the former high altarpiece in the church of San Francesco in Borgo Sansepolcro, commissioned from Sassetta (Stefano di Giovanni 1400–1450) in 1437, painted in Siena and installed by the artist in its intended setting in June 1444.<sup>16</sup> One side of the central panel of this altarpiece shows an enthroned Virgin and Child surrounded by music-making angels; the other shows St. Francis within a mandorla of angels, as he triumphs over the Vices with outstretched arms. The three subjugated Vices of Lasciviousness, Ire, and Miserliness are complemented by three angels personifying Chastity,

12 *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* (Venice, Giovanni Alberti: 1612) available from <http://vocabolario.sns.it/html/index.html> (accessed: 04.II.2016).

13 Michiel, *Notizia d'opere del disegni* 53.

14 Janson A.F. "The Meaning of the Landscape in Bellini's St Francis in Ecstasy", *Artibus et Historiae* 30 (1994) 41–54.

15 Meiss M., *Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Frick Collection* (New York, NY: 1964) 21. See also Tintori L. – Meiss M., *The Painting of the Life of St. Francis in Assisi* (New York, NY: 1962).

16 The polyptych was sold and subdivided in 1810. See Carli E., "Sassetta's Borgo San Sepolcro Altarpiece", *The Burlington Magazine* 93 (1951) 145–152.



Obedience, and Poverty hovering above the saint. The representation of St. Francis by Sassetta was described in Italian by Enzo Carli as 'San Francesco in exstasi' ('St. Francis in ecstasy').<sup>17</sup> The Catalogue of the Frick Collection, published in 1968, referred to Meiss's book of 1964 and gives "St. Francis in Ecstasy" as the title of Bellini's painting.<sup>18</sup> Today, following Christian Hecht's definition of representations 'in gloria', we recognise that Sassetta's painting must be regarded iconographically as a representation of "St. Francis in Glory".<sup>19</sup>

Kenneth Clark used the title *St. Francis in the Wilderness* for Bellini's painting, but he did not explicitly say that the saint is shown in the act of composing the Canticle to the Sun. Clark was more precise when he showed how, as he grew older, the painter 'became more in love with the full light of day', and described the painting as 'a true illustration of St. Francis' hymn to the sun'.<sup>20</sup> Meiss assumed that Bellini's painting depicts an episode from the saint's life and tried to identify it, without success. The idea proposed by Clark in 1949 was rejected by Meiss on the grounds that St. Francis's pose seemed to him receptive rather than creative, and that the setting should be a hut in the vicinity of the convent of San Damiano outside Assisi.<sup>21</sup>

Bellini did not follow the prevailing representation of the stigmatisation—although earlier, in the predella of the high altarpiece for the church of San Francesco in Pesaro, he had adhered to the standard iconography, according to which Francis is shown kneeling before a hovering crucified seraph from which he receives the wounds in his hands. Brother Leo, conceived as an eyewitness, conventionally makes his status known through a gesture expressing his astonishment. But here, instead of this, Bellini shows Leo reading, paying no attention to the miracle.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in both of the drawings in the two books now in Paris and London, Giovanni's father Jacopo shows Brother Leo reading, but otherwise adheres to the traditional iconography [Fig. 9.2].<sup>23</sup> Meiss attempted to salvage the thesis that Bellini's *St. Francis* in the Frick collection represents a stigmatisation: '[Bellini] took the bold step of symbolizing a supernatural power in a stigmatization not by a seraph but by a partly natural, partly

17 Carli E., *Sassetta et le maître de l'osservanza* (Milan: 1958), illust. 47, 54–84.

18 "Paintings: French, Italian and Spanish" 203–209; Bailey C.B., *The Frick Collection* (New York, NY: 2011) 32–33 gives the title *St. Francis in the Desert*.

19 Hecht C., *Die Glorie: Begriff, Thema, Bildelement in der europäischen Sakralkunst vom Mittelalter bis zum Ausgang des Barock* (Regensburg: 2003) 127–138.

20 Clark K., *Landscape into Art* (2nd ed. London: 1950) 24.

21 Meiss, *Giovanni Bellini's St Francis in the Frick Collection* 21.

22 See Bättschmann O., *Giovanni Bellini* (London: 2008), illust. 97, 112.

23 Eisler C., *The Genius of Jacopo Bellini: The Complete Paintings and Drawings* (New York, NY: 1989) 255–257, 292–293.

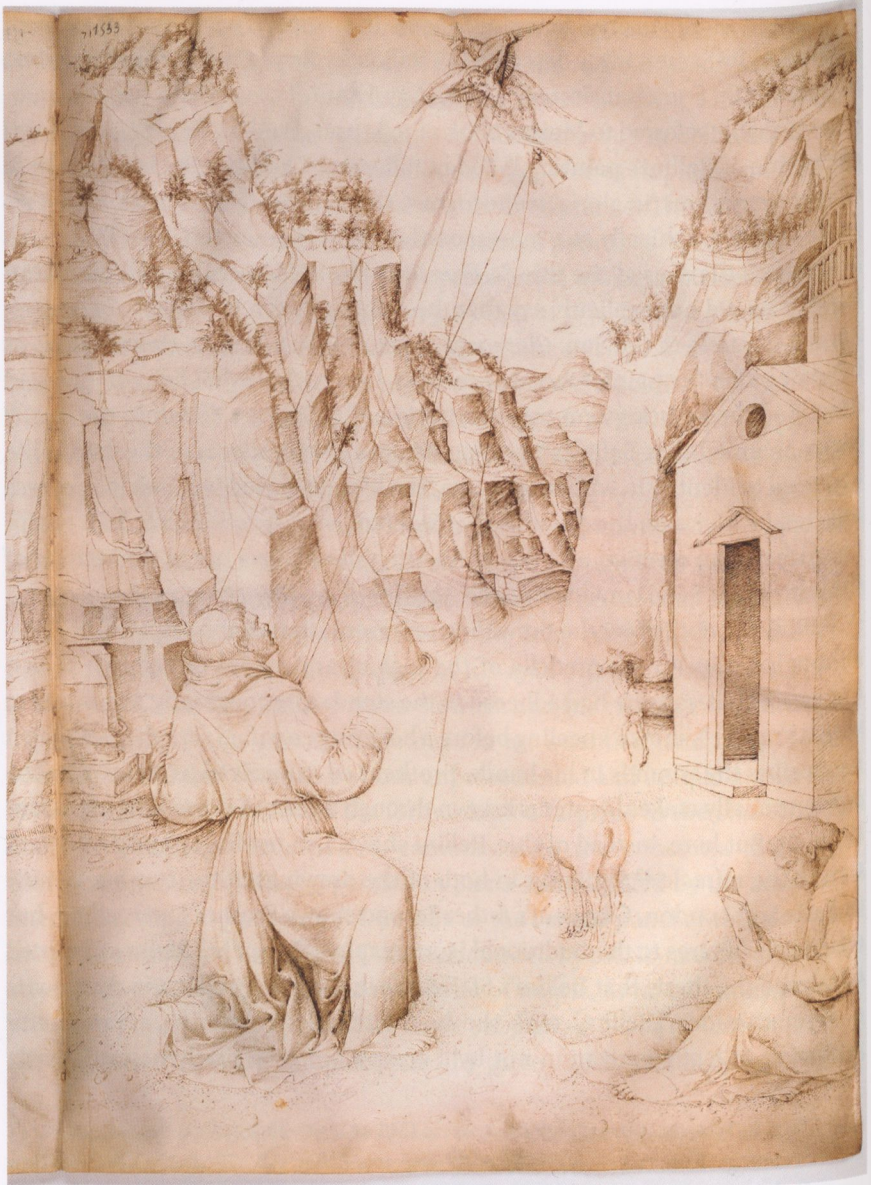


FIGURE 9.2 *Jacopo Bellini, Stigmatization of St. Francis (ca. 1430–1455). Brown ink on paper, 38 × 26 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre D.A.G. (inv. no. 83-001093/RF1533-81-folio65). IMAGE © RMN-GRAND PALAIS (MUSÉE DU LOUVRE)/GÉRARD BLOT.*



unnatural radiation in the sky'.<sup>24</sup> Despite the fact that both the radiance and three stigmata are missing, other scholars have attempted to support the thesis of a stigmatisation by assuming that the seraph was present in a now apparently lost upper section of the picture.<sup>25</sup> In 2007 Marilyn Aronberg Lavin put forward the following arguments against the interpretation as a stigmatisation:

- 1) Francis has only two of the canonical five wounds; 2) *Stigmatization* scenes almost never show St. Francis in a standing position; 3) there are representations of the stigmatization from which Francis's companion Brother Leo is absent; and 4) while many *stigmatizations* are set in a rocky surroundings, there are none in which the landscape is so prominent and so conspicuously filled with specific details of nature.<sup>26</sup>

In the large Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857 Bellini's painting was listed in the catalogue as No. 116 "St. Francis in the Desert" with a brief description: "The saint stands in front of his cell in the attitude of receiving the stigmata".<sup>27</sup> Following Millard Meiss's analysis of the painting, Bellini's *St. Francis* is given the new title "St. Francis in Ecstasy" in the catalogue of the Frick Collection published in 1968.<sup>28</sup> Among the publications that accepted the new title was the volume *Giovanni Bellini* in the series *Classici dell'Arte*, published by Rizzoli Editore in 1969: "San Francesco in estasi" ("Le Stimmate di San Francesco").<sup>29</sup> In her monograph on Giovanni Bellini first published in 1989, Rona Goffen retained the title given by the Frick Collection catalogue adding a puzzling remark: 'Whether or not the composition represents the stigmatization, Francis singing his hymn of the sun, or his blessing of Brother Leo, the question seems peripheral to the forceful characterization of the saint himself'.<sup>30</sup> Anchise Tempestini did not attempt to revise the Italian interpretation and in 2000 repeated the title "San Francesco in estasi"<sup>31</sup> for the Frick painting.

<sup>24</sup> Meiss, *Giovanni Bellini's St Francis in the Frick Collection* 31.

<sup>25</sup> See the report on the work's condition in: "Paintings: French, Italian and Spanish" 203–209.

<sup>26</sup> Aronberg Lavin, "The Joy of St. Francis" 233.

<sup>27</sup> Peck J., *Catalogue of the Art Treasures of the United Kingdom: Collected at Manchester in 1857* (Manchester: 1857), vol. 1, 21, available from: <https://archive.org/details/catalogueofarttrooartt> (accessed: 04.11.2016).

<sup>28</sup> "Paintings: French, Italian and Spanish" 203.

<sup>29</sup> Ghiotto R. – Pignatti T., *L'opera completa di Giovanni Bellini* (Milan: 1969), no. 98, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Goffen R., *Giovanni Bellini* (New Haven, CT – London: 1989) 108.

<sup>31</sup> Tempestini A., *Giovanni Bellini* (Milan: 2000) 83.

As long ago as 1966 Almon Richard Turner took up Clarke's suggestion that Bellini's *St. Francis* should be interpreted as a representation of the saint singing his hymn *Cantico delle creature*: 'Like the painting, it is a hymn of praise, addressed first of all to the sun. And like the painting, it celebrates even the smallest grasses and flowers of creation'.<sup>32</sup> Turner described the saint in Bellini's painting as follows: 'Francis stands with firmly planted feet, his head drawn back and chest swelled outward. His mouth is open, and his arms hang loosely, hands cupped in silent expressiveness'. He concluded: 'It would seem to me that this is the stance of a singer [...]'.<sup>33</sup> In 1982 John V. Fleming, then professor of literature at Princeton University, wrote after having read Meiss's book: 'From the Franciscan texts with which I was familiar I could summon no immediate clue to the picture's narrative subject. Certainly it seemed to me, that subject was *not* the stigmatization'.<sup>34</sup> Fleming returned to the title "San Francesco nel deserto".<sup>35</sup>

The most recent publication on the subject, the excellent book edited by Susannah Rutherglen and Charlotte Hale and published by the Frick Collection New York, restored the title "St. Francis in the Desert". Rutherglen listed some eight different titles that have been given to Bellini's painting since Marcantonio Michiel.<sup>36</sup>

Numerous subsequent proposals have purported to identify a reference text for this scene from the wide-ranging literature on St. Francis.<sup>37</sup> Such endeavours overlook the fundamental question of whether or not this image can be traced back to textual sources at all, whether one or several. As a rule, iconographical analyses—especially of paintings of the Renaissance—do not pose this crucial question. The reason is that with few exceptions specific texts have traditionally been associated with particular religious and mythological subjects and their iconographic traditions. The textual tradition of St. Francis and his iconography are especially rich.<sup>38</sup> Is it conceivable that a painting such as *St. Francis in the Desert* was not produced on the basis of textual sources? Or could it be instead that texts played only a subsidiary role here, and that in

32 Turner A.R., *The Vision of Landscape in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton, NJ: 1966) 65.

33 Ibidem 63.

34 Fleming J.V., *From Bonaventura to Bellini: An Essay in Franciscan Exegesis* (Princeton, NJ: 1982) 4.

35 Ibidem 158–163.

36 Rutherglen, "The Desert and the City" 24; Bättschmann, *Giovanni Bellini* 110–115.

37 Johannes Grave, *Landschaften der Meditation: Giovanni Bellinis Assoziationsräume* (Freiburg im Breisgau: 2004) 29–42.

38 Fleming, *From Bonaventura to Bellini*; Cook W.R., *Images of St. Francis of Assisi in Painting, Stone and Glass, from the Earliest Images to ca. 1320: A Catalogue* (Florence: 1999).



this instance the primacy of the text assumed by iconography was reversed by Bellini? Can we concede the possibility that Bellini composed his St. Francis on the basis of visual rather than textual precedents? What is the difference between Bellini's St. Francis and earlier representations of the saint? And what reasons might Bellini have had to neglect the tradition and to create a new scheme for the representation of St. Francis?

### Bellini's Invention

Never before Bellini had the saint been shown in the attitude that he strikes in the Frick painting. How can we define the pose of Francis that was created by Bellini? Marilyn Aronberg Levin described it as follows: 'In a moment of rapture St. Francis steps back and extends his arms low at his sides. With his hands turned forward, he shows tiny red marks of the Stigmata on each palm. Facing toward the left, he raises his eyes heavenward and opens his mouth; he is bareheaded and has no halo.'<sup>39</sup> Is he really stepping back or is he stepping forward while leaning backwards? A depiction of Francis in this pose was unprecedented: moving forwards with one foot in front and the arms slightly spread, the upper body arched backwards, the gaze directed upwards. This is a pose of reverence and pious surrender rather than of rapture or ecstasy. A similar pose—if not in all respects identical—is seen in Andrea Mantegna's *Man of Sorrows* in his *St. Luke* altarpiece, which was erected in Santa Giustina in Padua in 1454/55. Francis's attitude corresponds to that of the dead Christ in Michele Giambono's *Pietà* in New York, which dates from ca. 1430.<sup>40</sup> Christ, crowned with thorns, stands in a sarcophagus that is covered with a cloth, in front of the beams of the cross and against a gold ground. His arms fall downwards in front of the sarcophagus, the palms turned outward. The crown of thorns and the blood from the wounds are rendered in plaster in three dimensions and painted. Flowing from the stigmata are thin threads of blood that are drawn towards the small figure of Francis, who kneels behind the sarcophagus. This is an unusual depiction of the stigmatisation.<sup>41</sup>

Bellini shows St. Francis in the attitude of such an *Imago pietatis*, thereby pointing out the similarity between Christ and the saint, who is depicted elsewhere displaying the stigmata. Both the *Imago pietatis* and the figurative

39 Aronberg Lavin, "The Joy of St. Francis" 231.

40 See Bättschmann, *Giovanni Bellini*, illust. 99, 114.

41 Wolf G., *Schleier und Spiegel: Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance* (Munich: 2002) 162–163.



FIGURE 9.3 Valentin Lefebvre after Titian Vecellio, *Madonna of the Pesaro Family* (1682). Engraving, 53.9 × 29 cm. London, British Museum (inv. no. Nn,7.30.1).

IMAGE © THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM.



Practica musicae vtriusq; cātus excellētis Frā-  
 chini gaffori laudēsis. Quattuor libris modula-  
 tissima: Sūmaq; diligētia nouissime ipressa.



FIGURE 9.4 Anon. artist, "Singing Monks", in Franchino Gaffori, *Practica Musicae* (Venice, Agostino Zani: 1512). Woodcut, 2°. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (2 Mus. th 196).

IMAGE © BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK, MUNICH.

representations of the stigmatisation are confirmations of St. Francis's *imitatio Christi*—the imitation of Christ. Titian, who cites Bellini's St. Francis in his *Madonna of the Pesaro Family* [Fig. 9.3] painted in 1519–1526 for the Franciscan church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, has the saint assume the same pose in order to commend the family of Benedetto Pesaro to the infant Jesus.<sup>42</sup> Titian reinterpreted Francis's pose in the context of an act of intercession, a speech act directed at the Madonna and/or at Christ.

In an effort to interpret Francis's attitude, Jaynie Anderson cites a woodcut in Franchinus Gaffurius's *Practica musicae* of 1512, which contains a figure with slightly open arms among the singers [Fig. 9.4].<sup>43</sup> This image demonstrates that a pose similar to the one assumed by St. Francis could be used to depict someone who is singing. Since Bellini's St. Francis has his mouth slightly open, the suggestion that he is singing seems plausible, even if it is impossible to verify the claim that the song is the Canticle of the Sun.

Francis faces into the light of the sun, and Bellini depicts the presence of sunlight in this image: originating from a source located outside the picture on the upper left, the sunlight falls on a laurel tree that bends inwards into the picture, onto the town and fortress in the background, and onto the field with the herd of sheep in the middle ground, while also illuminating the cliffs that tower above one another. The light falls without interruption onto the figure of the saint, clad in the habit of his order, onto the lectern with its book, and onto the death's head, while also singling out the little pergola with its grapevines. The light falls in a similar way in all three versions of *St. Jerome in the Desert* [Fig. 9.5], the large version of which in Florence may have been executed during the same period as the Frick *St. Francis in the Desert*, between 1475 and 1480. The layout of both pictures—the piled-up and layered cliffs on the right, the open landscape, the town, the mountain surmounted by a castle—are closely related. But Jerome sits with his back to the light in a way that suitably illuminates the book he is reading, while St. Francis faces the light in a broad landscape.

In 2015 Susannah Rutherglen re-analysed the title given to Bellini's painting *San Francesco nel deserto* by Marcantonio Michiel in 1525. She interpreted 'deserto' not as an 'arid wasteland' but rather in the sense of 'a wilderness or deserted place located at the margins of civilization. From the early Christian period, holy men such as St. Jerome had retreated to such "deserts" in order

42 Wetthey H., *The Paintings of Titian: Complete Edition*, 3 vols. (London: 1969–1975), vol. 1, no. 55, 101–103.

43 Anderson J., *Giorgione peintre de la brièveté poétique: catalogue raisonné* (Paris: 1996) 158–159.





FIGURE 9.5 *Giovanni Bellini, St. Jerome in the Desert (ca. 1475–1480). Oil on wood, 151 × 113 cm. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (inv. no. C.B. 25).*

IMAGE © AKG-IMAGES/RABATTI & DOMINGIE.

to live as hermits'.<sup>44</sup> Thanks to Marilyn Aronberg Lavin's work, it is clear that Michiel's name for the work had a connection with the island of San Francesco del Deserto, some six kilometres north-east of Venice near the island of Sant'Erasmus.<sup>45</sup> But it is not certain that this connection, suggested by the title Michiel gave to Bellini's painting, had existed for the painter, the patron, and the painting itself, despite the restoration of the neglected buildings from 1460 onwards and the fact that the subsequent popularity of the church was such that Pope Paul II changed its name to *S. Francisci de Stigmatibus*.<sup>46</sup>

The theme of the Frick painting is ascetic withdrawal in a deserted wasteland. With St. Francis and St. Jerome Bellini created images of saints in solitude, and their different behaviour in that solitude.<sup>47</sup> St. Jerome is shown meditating on the Bible, whereas St. Francis is depicted singing in the light of the sun in a state of spiritual elevation. St. Francis has left the Bible in his shelter and has gone barefoot into the light. In both paintings the solitude is indicated by the distance between the saints among the limestone cliffs in the foreground and the town with its castle in the background. Bellini emphasised St. Francis's solitude further by omitting his usual companion Brother Leo, who was with him in 1224 when he retired to Mount Alverna (or La Verna) north of Arezzo in the centre of the Tuscan Apennines to receive the stigmata. Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* is surrounded by animals, but the only other human being—the shepherd with his flock of sheep—is in the far distance. It is not impossible that the rocky surroundings are indeed an allusion to Mount Alverna.<sup>48</sup> This topographical identification could confirm that the subject of Bellini's painting was the saint's spiritual elevation in a place of solitude.

In his presentation of St. Francis, Bellini brought to the fore a variety of problems. One of these is the under-researched relationship between the optical and the acoustic, between light and sound, through which both the painting and the beholder are carried to the limits of art and of perception. The problem was discovered by Bellini in the *Pietà* in Milan and named in an inscription. From then on this question never left him. The other problem is the relationship between natural and transcendental light. This problem of conversion preoccupied Bellini subsequently in his *Transfiguration* and *Annunciation*. The third problem is the transcendence of the landscape, which

44 Rutherglen, "The Desert and the City" 47–48.

45 Aronberg Lavin, "The Joy of St. Francis"; Rutherglen "The Desert and the City" 48–49.

46 Aronberg Lavin, "The Joy of St. Francis" 236–238.

47 See the chapter "The Desert, Moses, Elijah" in Fleming, *From Bonaventura to Bellini* 32–74.

48 Meiss, *Giovanni Bellini's St Francis in the Frick Collection* 22; Fleming, *From Bonaventura to Bellini* 32.



is raised insistently in *St. Francis in the Desert*. Plants, animals, the desert, the town, the castle: the objects contained in the picture are interwoven into a symbolic text about humility (the donkey), sinfulness (the grey heron), the Eucharist (the grapevines), redemption (the fig tree), the Lord's providence (the water that the bird drinks), and divine inspiration (the light), to the promise of the hereafter (in the form of the Heavenly Jerusalem). The view of the world offered by Bellini's singing St. Francis bathed in light is permeated by signs that have been understood as religious symbols distributed throughout the landscape.<sup>49</sup>

This interpretation of animals and plants as religious symbols is not undisputed. In 2006 David Allan Brown discussed the problem of a symbolic reading of Bellini's *St. Jerome* in the National Gallery in Washington, DC. Of the rabbits in this painting he writes: 'If practically identical rabbits appear in completely different contexts in three other works by Bellini, we must wonder whether any real hermeneutical significance can be attributed to compositional elements and motifs that can represent one thing or its opposite according to the context'.<sup>50</sup> Brown suggests that the animals and plants in the painting should be interpreted as 'attributes' of the landscape like the attributes of a saint. On the other side, discussing *St. Francis in the Desert* in 2004, Augusto Gentili insisted on the symbolic function:

Every single element has been predetermined in accordance with its symbolic function: The desert that imposes the ultimate test; the ass and heron of solitude; the radiant laurel, the shepherd with his flock, the rabbit in its burrow, the abandoned sandals, the spring issuing from the rock, all of which refer to Moses; the earthenware jug and the little garden, which refer rather to Elijah; the cave and the tabernacle-like cell, covered with eucharistic vines; the withered newly sprouting and newly grafted trees; the city of this world and that of heaven.<sup>51</sup>

I propose that we should consider the multiple functions of all parts of *St. Francis in the Desert* as we do in other paintings by Giovanni Bellini, and interpret them in relationship to the saint's state of spiritual elevation in the solitude of the desert heights.

49 See Fleming, *From Bonaventura to Bellini* 32–74.

50 Brown – Ferino-Pagden – Anderson, *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting*, no. 22, 132–135.

51 Gentili A., "Bellini and Landscape", in Humfrey, *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini* 167–181, esp. 173.

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