

An artistic master of the age of the Council of Florence

by Nora Hamerman

The Genius of Jacopo Bellini: The Complete Paintings and Drawings

by Colin Eisler

Harry N. Abrams, New York 1989

496 pages, 581 black and white and color illustrations, bibliography, appendices, index, notes, hardbound, \$195

If you are interested in knowing more in depth about the Western cultural heritage, you should buy this beautiful book—or if you can't afford such an investment, ask your local library to put it on their acquisitions list.

Jacopo Bellini was the greatest artist of the early Renaissance in Venice. He was the father of two famous painters, Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, and father-in-law of Andrea Mantegna, who was arguably by the mid-1470s the finest painter in the Italian peninsula and one of the world's pioneers in engraving. So Jacopo Bellini founded a dynasty which was to painting in 15th-century Venice, what the Bach family became to music in 18th-century Germany.

Today Jacopo is best known for his two drawing books, one of which is in the British Museum, and the other in the Louvre. They contain more than 300 drawings between them. These books provide a unique record of the artist's repertoire of animals, landscapes, plants, costumes, architecture, and models for the presentation of standard religious themes, in the first half of the 15th century. Bellini's notebooks were probably not unique in his own day, but the vicissitudes of survival have determined that they are unique today. For Professor Eisler's book, new photographs were made of the Paris notebook, and for the London one, a new set of infrared photographs were taken.

Colin Eisler presents the two sets of drawings, not as they appear in the original London and Paris notebooks, but side by side by subject category, so that we can compare the artist's differing approaches to the same themes in different media (leadpoint on paper for the London group, pen and ink

on vellum for Paris) and presumably at slightly different moments, or for different purposes.

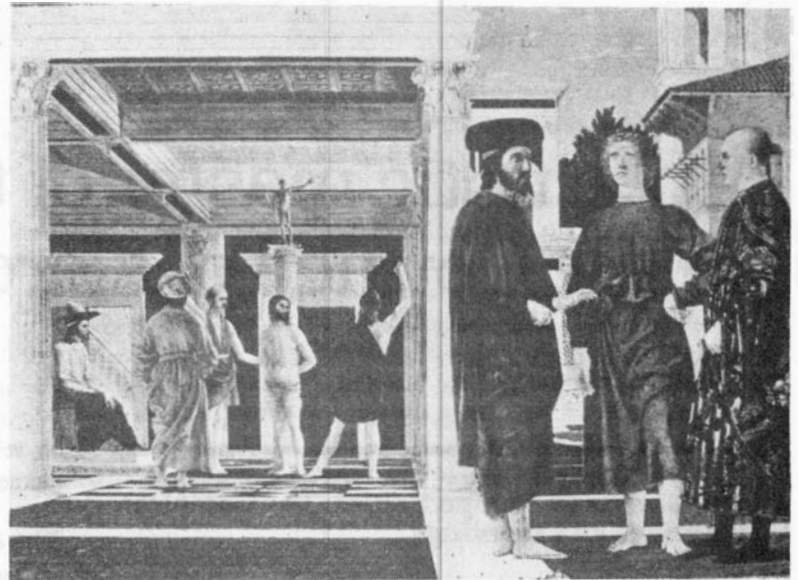
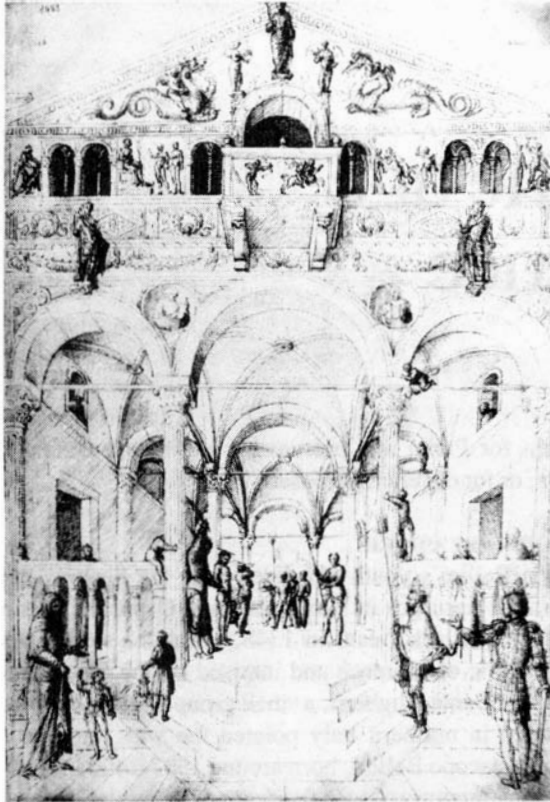
The Conciliar epoch

Jacopo Bellini's youth coincided with the birth of the great creative upsurges in human history. Overcoming the disaster of the Black Death in 1348, under the leadership of the Republic of Florence and inspired by the Florentine national poet Dante Alighieri, a small group of civic humanists centered in northern Italy pointed the way for a new civilization. Jacopo Bellini, born around 1397-1400 in Venice, was contemporary of such figures as Germany's Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa and the Florentine banker Cosimo de' Medici—protagonists of the drama that led to the 1438-41 Council of Ferrara and Florence, where the Renaissance was put on an international footing.

This period was marked by an uneasy tactical alliance between Florence and the oligarchist-ruled Venice, where the two peninsular powers collaborated to prevent the Visconti tyranny of Milan from conquering the whole peninsula. It was during his residence in Florence in the middle 1430s that the Venetian-born Eugenio Condulmero, Pope Eugene IV, was convinced by the Florentine Platonists to convene a great ecumenical Council that could reunite, after nearly four centuries of mutual excommunication, the two major churches of Christendom, the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

It is timely to recall today how the unity celebrated in Florence in July 1439 was no pragmatic compromise between Eastern and Western positions, but rather based on the highest standard of truth. Although a wide latitude of "pluralistic" preferences was permitted to national churches on secondary issues, such as the forms of rites, the triumph of the Council of Florence was that the Eastern Church came to accept the *Filioque* doctrine developed in the West: the teaching on the Trinity that emphasized the need for scientific and technological progress as crucial in the ongoing process of divine creation.

For the Venetian side, Jacopo Bellini is the artist of that brief Venetian-Florentine alliance *par excellence*.



Left: Jacopo Bellini, *Flagellation of Christ*, Paris, Louvre, ca. 1450. Roman cruelty, symbolized as a lavish Venetian palace of justice, is the protagonist. The poet Quevedo later called Venice itself, "Pontius Pilate." Right: Piero della Francesca, *Flagellation of Christ*, ca. 1470, Urbino, Galleria Nazionale. Piero, too, modulates the religious story into the "subdominant" of his composition, but here the protagonists are individuals, apparently conspiring to bring good out of the greatest injustice.

History of perspective

Jacopo Bellini's art, as recorded in the Paris and London notebooks, helps to reconstruct the history of pictorial perspective, i.e., the application of mathematical-physical principles to the problem of representing a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional plane surface. Jacopo was a forerunner of Leonardo da Vinci in what is called "aerial perspective."

The discovery, during the early decades of the 1400s, of how to apply projective geometry to picture-making, was considered the key to uplifting the painter's profession from a mere mechanical craft to the level of a liberal art on a par with music, which was always, since antiquity, considered to be ruled by rigorous geometric principles. Invention of the "machines" for carrying out perspective construction was ascribed to the Florentine architectural genius Filippo Brunelleschi (b. 1377), while it was another Florentine, the universally gifted intellectual Leon Battista Alberti, who first put this knowledge into written form, in a treatise published in 1435 and intended for use by practicing artists.

Professor Eisler's monograph lifts a veil on the historical relationship between perspective and hydraulic engineering, a relation one might have guessed began with Leonardo in the second half of the 15th century. One meeting ground between Florentine and Venetian artists and scientists was Padua, seat of one of the oldest universities in Italy, near

Venice, where in the early 1420s the young German canon Nicolaus of Cusa—later to become the century's foremost scientist—was studying at the same time as the above-mentioned Leon Battista Alberti, and Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, a Florentine physician who reportedly instructed his countryman Brunelleschi in mathematics.

To quote Eisler: "Brunelleschi made several journeys to Ferrara, Mantua, and Rimini in North Italy, courts where Bellini too had strong associations. The artists might well have met on one of these occasions, if not before, or on a later, undocumented visit to Florence. Expressive space construction was enriched in North Italian art by the presence of [Florentine artists] Castagno and Donatello, the latter in Padua from 1443 to 1453; with his drawings, statuary, and reliefs the university city became Italy's leading art center.

"Venice, built upon water, had special need of hydraulic skills. Possibly hydraulics also linked Venetian and Florentine artists, since this area was often under their direction. Two clues—one internal, the other documentary—point to Bellini's knowledge: the first suggested by the elaborate and inventive fountains in his Books, the second from the fact that one of his weirder admirers, Giovanni della Fontana, was an expert in hydraulics." (Even the name "della Fontana" had been acquired because of his expertise in building fountains.) Eisler continues, "Fontana's admiration for Bellini is . . . documented by his lost treatise, *De arte pictoria*, . . . proba-

bly written . . . for Bellini in the 1430s. . . . Concerned with aerial perspective and the perception of color and space, its text is Leonardo-like: 'If there are clouds between us and the sun, the thinner part of them through which the rays come down to us will seem brighter, being imbued with the light of the rays. . . .'; after making optical observations and drawing his own conclusions, Fontana wrote, 'From this experience with nature the art of painting has derived excellent rules, as I explained with definite rules in a little book dedicated to the outstanding Venetian painter Jacopo Bellini, showing in what ways . . . to apply bright and dark colors, with a system such that not only the parts of a single image painted on a surface should seem in relief, but also . . . they should be believed to be putting a hand or foot outward, or . . . seem miles away from the men and animals and mountains also placed on the same surface. Indeed the art of painting teaches that near things should be colored with bright colors, the far with dark, and the middle with mixed ones.' "

Eisler goes on to point out that Fontana was a cartographer and designer of fortifications, ballistics, rockets, and explosives, and that Jacopo Bellini probably also engaged in such activities. It could be dangerous: Giovanni della Fontana was ordered beheaded by the dread Venetian Council of Ten because he had been the emissary of the Doge Foscari to the Republic's *condottiere* Carmagnola, who turned traitor. A similar fate later befell a close associate of Leonardo da Vinci, also an engineer—for similar political reasons.

Jacopo Bellini was the likely teacher of a great French artist, Jean Fouquet, who anticipated Leonardo da Vinci in the 1450s (while Leonardo was in his infancy) by developing a spherical projective system for perspective construction. All three Bellinis were listed by Luca Pacioli, Leonardo's mathematician-collaborator, as excelling in perspective, in his book *Summa mathematicae*.

Florence vs. Venice

The chief difference between the Florentine invention, and the advances made in the Venetian orbit and northern Europe in general, centers on the Florentines' unique grasp of the role of the Great Man (or Great Woman). Artists trained primarily in Florence never lost sight of the fact that the individual has a unique responsibility for carrying out God's work. Thus the individual, starting with the heroic image of Christ the incarnate deity, became the prime subject matter of Florentine art, and space was created around and by the actions of these individuals.

There is much to be learned in this regard by studying the large group of drawings Jacopo made as compositional models for the "Flagellation of Christ," illustrated together I believe for the first time by Professor Eisler (see illustration). Most of these studies "reverse" the usual compositional ordering, in which the religious theme would have dominated the stage. Instead, the flagellation episode is deep in the background—like a key modulation or thematic inversion in

a musical piece. What does this do?

Colin Eisler points out that the architecture in several of Jacopo's renditions is a "magnificent Venetian palace of justice," and in two cases, "Christ is placed at an angle . . . is if the artist were deliberately interposing the architectural fabric of Roman oppression between the savior and the viewer. The building . . . is embellished with reliefs, statues, and possibly with frescoes, like renaissance Venice's most lavish buildings." I can't help suspecting that Jacopo Bellini has thus found a way to express his opinion of the notoriously cruel operations of injustice by the Venetian oligarchy, however cloaked as a "republic," as the 15th-century heirs of Roman oppression.

Jacopo Bellini's drawings would have been made in the 1440s and 1450s, thus at least a decade earlier than scholars generally date the celebrated version (illustrated on p. 56) of this subject by Piero della Francesca, the painter and perspective theorist whose career was launched in Florence at the time of the Council of Florence in 1439-40.

Piero, like Jacopo who may have given him the idea, depicted Christ's actual flagellation before Pontius Pilate as a tiny episode in the background. Unlike Jacopo, he added three figures who loom in the very front of his picture, speaking together as if they are either plotting to bring about the crime, or, more likely, seeking remedies for it in a solemn dialogue. The composition by the Florentine-trained Piero della Francesca has a much greater poetic impact. This is because, even if we don't know the identities of the three men in the foreground, it is clear that *they*, as individuals—and not an abstract system symbolized by a palace—are determining events.

In conclusion

I know Colin Eisler as a scholar with an almost incredible ability to assimilate and distinguish detail, one could say to a fault, particularly in this complicated era of the age of the great Church Councils and the early Renaissance. He has brought his vast knowledge more into focus than ever in the present book, yet shrinks from asking the most important questions—questions it has never been popular to ask in academia, and much less so in today's cultural dark age.

The real reason to study the Italian Renaissance is to gain insight into the problem of how we may today, in the face of a strategic crisis comparable to that which Europe faced after the Black Death, bring about a new cultural renaissance and lift mankind again out of the mire. The 15th-century Renaissance was not the exclusive product of a single city (Florence), much less of a single individual, but was always an international "conspiracy" aimed at propagating and nurturing geniuses, even in environments that harbored as much antagonism to humanistic ideals as did Venice. Jacopo Bellini was one of many geniuses who lit the way for even greater minds, and the beauty of his work, as reproduced and elucidated in this book, can still light our path today.