The Word made Visible in the Painted Image

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Perspective, Proportion, Witness and Threshold in Italian Renaissance Painting

By

Stephen Miller

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For Paula, Lucy and Eddie

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INTRODUCTION

This book explores the areas of *perspective, proportion, witness* and theological *threshold* in the devotional art of the Italian Renaissance, with particular reference to the painted image of Christ. While the Incarnation, in a very real way, legitimised the idea of the portrayal of God in human form (i.e. as Jesus Christ), problems remained as to how this might be achieved and whether such representation should be restricted to the second person of the Holy Trinity.

This book looks at the creation of pictorial space and the presentation of the image–paying special attention to schemes of perspective, as a way to better describe reality, as well as to considerations of proportion through such geometric methodology as the Golden Section and dynamic root-rectangles (based on certain 'perfect' or divine ratios) to balance and harmonise form.

The book also examines the theme of witness and the role of the figure of John the Baptist in this connection, as represented in Renaissance painting of various stages throughout the life of Christ, from his birth to (despite John's own intervening execution) Christ's crucifixion. Finally, we turn to a consideration of threshold and of liminal space. We consider how the themes of Incarnation and Revelation were represented and look at the symbolism employed in so doing. The study will show how such themes were captured, set in space, and communicated in the painted image.

A useful *Glossary* of the terms used throughout this study is included at the end.

This work is necessarily interdisciplinary, combining the subject areas of art history and theory, theology, biblical study, philosophy, aesthetics, physics, metaphysics, mathematics, geometry, optics, physiology, psychology and sociology, in greater and lesser degrees. It is perhaps audacious to set out to take on such a broad area of study and at the same time hope to penetrate to a level that makes a contribution to extant work, but after a lifetime of preparation I am making the attempt. If I rush in

where angels fear to tread that is at least thematically linked with my concluding section on theological threshold!

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CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE SCENE

The Rise of Humanism and the Italian Renaissance

Neoplatonic ideas (primarily derived from Plato and Plotinus) that ideal structure was built in to the fabric of the cosmos and that the idea of beauty was something more than subjective, influenced Christian thinkers such as Saint Augustine of Hippo (fourth/fifth centuries), the Italian philosopher Boethius (early sixth century) and the Franciscan theologian Saint Bonaventure (13th century). Through his theology Augustine had outlined many of the doctrines that would define scholastic philosophy and he was an important source for the Dominican friar Saint Thomas Aquinas (13th century). Thus, in its turn, Christian thought influenced the Neoplatonic philosophers of the 13th and 14th centuries. Such cross pollination of ideas helped to seed the bed from which the Renaissance thinkers and artists of the 14th and 15th centuries grew up.

In Italy, the emergence of Humanism drew from the spiritual values of nature inspired by the likes of Saint Francis of Assisi. Major figures such as Dante and Petrarch emerged amongst the intellectual vanguard of the 13th and 14th centuries, and in the late-13th century the Italian painter and architect Giotto broke from the stylisation of Byzantine art, paving the way for a new style of painting to emerge in the context of the Renaissance, or 'rebirth', of classical learning. As the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin phrased it, it was Giotto 'who loosened the tongue of art'.[1]

An array of theologians, philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, architects, sculptors, frame makers, craftsmen and, not least, painters sprang up initially in Florence, creating a focus for the revolutionary artistic events that took place there during the 1420s and 1430s, subsequently spreading throughout Italy and beyond in the years and decades to follow. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 many eastern scholars fled to Italy, also bringing with them a wealth of learning and

tradition. From this melting pot the spirit of the new age emerged. This spirit is most readily found in the painting of the time. Art was seen as a branch of knowledge, valuable in its own right and capable of providing images of God and nature and casting fresh insight into the order of the universe and our place in it. It is to this cast of innovators and collaborators and particularly painters that we turn as characterising and capturing the spirit of this 'rebirth'.

In order to adequately express this spirit of naturalism and rationality a new style of painting was required, one that would offer a convincing approximation of nature. It was through the architect Brunelleschi that the answer was found and developed by artists such as Donatello, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca and theorists such as Alberti. Linear perspective, a method of creating a systematic illusion of receding forms, made its entrance.[2]

We will explore the origins, development and achievement of *perspective* in Chapter Two of our study, before going on to look at the harmonisation of form and composition through *proportion* in Chapter Three. We look at the theme of *witness* in Chapter Four in the particular context of the role of John the Baptist. An underlying theological theme will run throughout binding the study together in an understanding of *threshold,* explored more fully in Chapter Five, before concluding in a final Chapter Six.

Before getting into the technical considerations of perspective and proportion we will first consider the evolving style and changes in attitudes to patronage in a devotional context in the period of this study.

*** * * ***

Changing Style and Attitudes of Patronage

In this initial section I set out to look at the function of the altarpiece set against developing artistic style in Italy in the 14th to early-16th centuries. I will illustrate this development with specific examples (see especially the colour plates section) and attempt to show transitional stages between the forms of the *polyptych* and *pala* (plural: *pale*). These are shown as a group of individual case studies later in this chapter. I also set out to show how the emerging 'Renaissance style' in the altarpiece was forged out of a complex and, at times, uneasy partnership of artistic

expression and innovation on the one hand and conformity to liturgical context and expectations (the requirements and expectations of patrons, clergy and confraternities that were responsible for commissioning these devotional objects) on the other. In so doing I will restrict myself to a handful of relevant examples.

The Emergence of the Altarpiece in Christian Worship

It is probable that the word 'altar' derives from the Latin *adolere* ('to burn'), while the Hebrew word *mizbe'ah*, translates to 'a place of slaughter, or sacrifice'. The Christian altar is typically made of stone (see 1 Peter 2:4 where Christ is called 'a living stone'), but also of wood, being a symbol of the table of the Last Supper, used for the celebration of the Eucharist.

An *altarpiece*, we might suppose, would have a straightforward association with the altar, but while the English word 'altarpiece' is defined in terms of its relationship to the object of the altar, this is not necessarily the case in Italian. *Pala d'altare* is generally used to specify a *type* of altarpiece, thus 'classifying the object in terms of its typology and form, rather than function'.[3]

Scott Nethersole explains that 'a degree of liturgical conformity'[4] was only achieved following the various edicts of the Council of Trent (between 1545 and 1563, convened by the Roman Catholic Church in response to the Reformation). Thus, while the altarpiece required an altar, the altar did not require an altarpiece. The altarpiece was a single part of an ensemble of decorative objects that furnished the altar and the space around it, which served the liturgy of public worship. But the altarpiece itself was not specifically prescribed by canon law.[5] Nethersole states:

> The comparatively late arrival of the altarpiece in churches in Rome is evidence enough that its adoption was localised and not centrally mandated: as the seat of the Papacy... Rome was unlikely to be slow in enforcing new ecclesiastical legislation in its churches.[6]

Earlier regulations of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 stated that the altar should be furnished with a crucifix and candles, the latter to facilitate easy reading of the missal (containing the prayers and responses used in the celebration of the Eucharist).

Canon law considered altarpieces to be *adiaphora* (inessential but not forbidden).[7] Yet while an altarpiece may not have been obligatory for an altar the symbolism contained within the altarpiece nonetheless served a function for its audience. That there were and are such a variety of terms describing differing forms of altarpieces indicates that they were adapted for a variety of specific functions. Since we cannot reduce the altarpiece to a single definition it cannot be seen in terms of a single context or function (indeed Paul Hills questions whether the altarpiece can easily be defined as a category or genre at all[8]).

While general practice held sway before the doctrine of transubstantiation, for example, was accepted by the Fourth Lateran Council, the spiritual significance of the altar was nevertheless undoubtedly enhanced in Christian worship following its acceptance. As Nethersole comments:

> The transubstantiation of the bread and wine remained (and is still) a difficult idea to comprehend, not least because a change in substance, but not species, meant that there was no visual basis for belief.[9]

The altarpiece thus had a major role to fill, one of interpretation. While the Fourth Lateran Council may not have invented new practice–elevation of the host, for example, existed before this date, as did celebration of the Mass facing toward the east (*versus orientem*)–the altarpiece presented an opportunity to fill this enhanced context for interpretation.

Early forms of winged polyptych showed that altarpieces could be versatile in both the veiling and unveiling of liturgical message and the housing of relics. Donald Ehresmann cites the German work on altarpieces of Jesuit theologian and art historian Joseph Braun in his examination of moveable altarpiece wings as a liturgical device.[10] Ehresmann tells us that 'liturgically, moveable wings permitted a change of the physical appearance of the altar in broad relationship to phases of the church year'.[11] He states that, according to Braun, the winged altarpiece was kept closed for most of the time, with the wings being opened to mark important feast days. Some altarpieces are double hinged, allowing them to be opened in stages and show different formations on different days.

This might seem a rather obvious deduction to us, but according to Ehresmann, it is Braun (despite not being specific about how individual examples might operate) that laid the basis for the common assumption that a 'liturgical function animated the invention and development of the winged altarpiece'.[12]

We turn now to the development of artistic style in Italy.

From Gothic to Renaissance, from Polyptych to Pala

The *pala* was first developed in Florence in the second quarter of the 15th century and came to supersede the *polyptych* as the dominant type of altarpiece. However, the change from polyptych to pala was not an overnight, or clearly demarcated, phenomenon and transitional stages mark important stepping points between the two forms.

We should begin by saying what we mean by the term *pala.* It may be defined as a Renaissance single-field altarpiece with figures set in continuous and unified pictorial space, as opposed to the preceding multi-panelled polyptych in ornate Gothic setting that were typically made up of figures of differing scale set in inconsistent picture space.

A two-steps-forward and one-step-back progression characterises this development. Such a pattern should not necessarily be seen as hesitancy in applying new style on the part of the artist, but rather on the expectations of those responsible for commissioning the work in reigning back free artistic choice and innovation.

It may be missing the point to become too obsessed with trying to pin down a first documented instance of a true *pala* (although this won't stop art historians from continuing to argue the point[13]). It may be sufficient to note here that there are clear examples of *pala* and clear examples of *polyptych*, but there are also a range of transitional forms between the two and these are invariably transitional for a whole set of reasons separate from the artists' resolve to make them one or the other. An additional point to consider is that several artists were working in churches that had been built or redesigned by the architects Brunelleschi or Michelozzo, for example, and that much of the credit for the integral concept of altar, altarpiece and surrounding architecture may be attributed as much to the likes of these as to the painters they influenced.

Peter Humfrey cites Christa Gardner von Teuffel's emphasis of the degree to which the form and structure of the 14th century Tuscan polyptych was shaped by the pre-existing Gothic style of the church building that housed it.[14] In her account of the origins of the Renaissance *pala* (see *The Buttressed Altarpiece*) von Teuffel makes a case for supposing that the spatially unified Renaissance altarpiece was the

invention not of the painter Masaccio, but rather of the architect Brunelleschi.[15]

The *pala* often presented the Virgin and Child flanked by saints, but it might equally show a narrative arranged within a unified picture space. *Pale* would frequently also be enclosed by an '*all'antica* (classicising) frame, with pilasters at the sides that supported an entablature'.[16] Both polyptych and pala might also include a base section of panels running along the plinth, known as the 'predella', describing narrative scenes relating to the images in the main section of the painting above it.

The concept of the *pala,* emanating from Florence in the second quarter of the 15th century, was taken up in different places in Italy at different times throughout the remainder of the century. Perugia was quick to seize on the new form primarily through the mediation of Florentine artists such as Benozzo Gozzoli. In and around Siena the new form took longer to take hold, with the polyptych remaining popular, despite Siena's proximity to Florence. Venice also remained resistant until about 1470 when the Bellini workshop decisively broke from Gothic style (see the following case studies section).

The first signs of a clear response by Venetian artists to the innovations of Florence are seen in the work of Jacopo Bellini and Antonio Vivarini in the early 1440s. Jacopo Bellini's *Annunciation* panel (painted for the church of S. Alessandro) shares a number of features with surviving Annunciations by Fra Angelico and his school. The general compositional layout (two panels set above a predella), the roundel in the centre with God the Father and motifs such as the Virgin's hands and coloured stripes on the angel's wings are features that according to Humfrey are 'rare or unprecedented in Venetian painting',[17] leading him to suppose that Jacopo was shown Fra Angelico's panel (now lost) as a 'desirable compositional prototype'.[18]

The innovatory format of Jacopo's *Gattamelata* altarpiece, painted in collaboration with his two sons in about 1459, is discussed in the following case studies section.

The decorative vocabulary of the pala–especially that of the tabernacle frame characteristic of the form–was inspired by antiquity and contrasts with the Gothic ornament of polyptych frames. Indeed, the typological development from polyptych to pala can be seen as inextricably linked to

the stylistic progression from Gothic to Renaissance.[19] The shift toward unified space has led some to associate iconic and narrative modes of representation with polyptych and pala respectively. It is argued that with the gradual disappearance of the *predella* that the narrative elements moved to the main panel. Altarpieces such as *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, by the Pollaiuolo brothers (completed in 1475), which never had a predella, support this hypothesis.

Humfrey emphasises in *Italian Altarpieces 1250-1550: Function and Design,* how the altarpiece was conceived not as a picture (or set of pictures) but together with its frame as an 'integrated unity of painting and carving', which in turn was related to its architectural setting.[20] He suggests that we have not paid sufficient attention to the character of the altarpiece as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (all-embracing, or total artwork) in consideration of the broader questions of stylistic innovation and stylistic interchange.

In Venice, one of the first works to show the essential features of the Renaissance pala–a unified field, convincing evocation of space and volume and the classicising frame–was Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Catherine of Siena* altarpiece of about 1470 (destroyed in 1867). (An engraving based on the painting exists in Venice.) It was painted for the Gothic church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo (i.e. before any Renaissance-style church or chapel had been built in the city). It would be well over a decade before a stylistic synthesis between the altarpiece and its architectural surrounding would be created again by Giovanni Bellini, in his *San Giobbe Altarpiece* of about 1487 (see case study 5).

The *Saint Catherine of Siena Altarpiece*, before it was destroyed, showed the saints gathered beneath a classicising *loggia* (as Mantegna had already done in his *San Zeno Triptych*) and enclosed in a stone frame, resembling a monumental archway. In other words, although no complete building in the Renaissance style had yet been built in the city, the frame in its scale, design and material resembles structural features that betray more than a token gesture of architectural decoration. Humfrey comments:

> It is difficult to imagine, in fact, how Bellini's *pala*... could have been created without the prior presence in the city of major architect-sculptors such as Pietro Lombardo and Antonio Rizzo. Even without going into the complicated question of the respective contributions of painter and frame-maker to the design of this true *Gesamtkunstwerk*, I think it is clear that the creation of the Renaissance *pala* in Venice, as elsewhere, was not, nor

> could have been, the achievement of any painter independent of his colleagues and collaborators in the sister arts of architecture and sculpture.[21]

Fra Angelico's *Linaiuoli* altarpiece of 1433 is a good example of such artistic collaboration. The marble frame was designed by Lorenzo Ghiberti and executed by two Florentine stonecutters. The wooden support was made by craftsman and Fra Angelico was responsible for the figures, including the predella scenes below. The altarpiece, now seen in a fixed open position in the Museo di San Marco in Florence, was normally only opened when the guild of linen-drapers, the Linaiuoli, met together in their hall.[22]

Patronage

The opening chapter of Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (see *Bibliography*) discusses the general expectations involved in the painter-client relationship in the 15th century, with reference to the types of contract and the stipulations that these entailed. Baxandall asserts that painting in the 15th century was a result of a social relationship: 'On one side there was a painter who made the picture, or at least supervised its making. On the other side there was somebody else who asked him to make it, provided funds for him to make it and, after he had made it, reckoned on using it in some way or other.'[23]

In Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Vincent Ferrer* polyptych of 1465-68 (which is likely to have been his first major independent commission[24]), we see an early example of Renaissance ornament replacing Gothic on the frame despite the altarpiece itself remaining a collection of separate panels. Patricia Rubin, in her chapter *Commission and Design in Central Italian Altarpieces,* draws our attention to a shift in attitude in relation to the extent the artist was expected (or allowed) to offer input to commissions through the examples of the *Pistoia Altarpiece* of 1455-60 (begun by Pesellino and finished by Fra Filippo Lippi) and Giorgio Vasari's 1549 altarpiece for the Martelli family chapel in San Lorenzo, Florence.[25]

By the mid-16th century Vasari was in a position to dictate the terms of his acceptance of contract, stating that he would undertake the commission on the condition that he was allowed to use his imagination *(capriccio)* to paint his subject.[26] Rubin describes this as 'art-historical poaching on what was originally ecclesiastical ground',[27] making the distinction that the

Pistoia Trinity (now in the National Gallery, London) was a 'commissioned product of artistry', but Vasari's altarpiece was one conceived (by the artist) as a work of art.[28]

This is a key point of departure. Rubin goes on to explore the practices of commission and design during a period in which the priorities of representation shifted, making it possible for the priorities of the altarpiece to be the 'fantasy' or invention of its author. Such an overtly and explicitly personal function challenged accepted definitions of the primarily institutional (that is liturgical, devotional and theological) purposes that traditionally constituted the suitability of an altarpiece to its site and setting. Rubin states: 'In 1450 judgement belonged to appraisal, to commercial valuation by members of the profession... and so remained as a contractual term'. She believes that it is significant that by 1550 it had also come to be a 'shared appreciation of the aesthetic value of their art'.[29]

Baxandall describes this same process as a gradual shift in emphasis during the course of the 15th century and that an 'inverse relationship' is contained in this shift: that while precious pigments such as ultramarine (made made from powdered lapis lazuli) and expensive materials (such as gold and silver) became less prominent, a demand for pictorial skill became more prominent. In other words, the 15th century 'client' progressively moved to becoming a 'conspicuous buyer of skill'.[30]

From here we are better placed to arrive at an understanding of the two terms applied to the manufacture of altarpieces during this period, *invention* and *beauty*. Rubin says that 'when invention came to play a decisive part in altarpiece design in the third quarter of the fifteenth century the initiative came from gentlemen and scholars'.[31]

We will now consider these factors in a sequence of case studies.

Study 1: Duccio, *Maestà*

Fig. 1-1 Duccio, *Maestà,* FRONT: (tempera on poplar) Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena, 1308-11

Fig. 1-2 Duccio, *Maestà,* BACK: Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena, 1308-11
See Colour Centrefold.

Duccio di Buoninsegna was the principal painter in Siena (Florence's major rival at the beginning of the 14th century). Duccio's work presents a significant alternative to the style of Giotto. It might be said that just as Giotto dominated the Florentine school for much of the 14th century that Duccio came to dominate Sienese painting.

The first of our case studies, Duccio's *Maestà*–a monumental double-sided altarpiece that John White refers to as the climax of Duccio's career[32]–was delivered to Siena Cathedral in June 1311 and placed on the high altar with great ceremony. At the time of its creation it was the richest and most complex altarpiece to emerge in Italy. Duccio's great work is the only surviving work signed by him.[33] (It suffered dismantling in 1771, and although most of it is in the cathedral museum in Siena, several of the predella panels and pinnacles are dispersed in collections throughout the world.)

The front of the altarpiece shows the Virgin and Child enthroned with saints and apostles, the predella depicts Christ's childhood, and the pinnacles, the last days of the Virgin. On the reverse, the narrative runs from Christ's earthly ministry, through the Passion, to his final appearances among the disciples. The remainder of the combined cycle of the Life of the Virgin also features here. Some 46 separate panels survive in Siena, of a surviving total of 54 (or possibly 58[34]).

It is speculated that the use of flanking supports may have been introduced with the installation.[35] Such supports rarely survive, but Nethersole insists that their importance should not be underestimated as they 'allowed for a new verticality which came to dominate altarpiece design and marks a decisive shift from the horizontal emphasis of earlier single-tier polyptychs'.[36]

Candles were kept burning at the front and back of the altarpiece, as an expression of devotion and practical necessity. A document of 1339 records payments for:

> Wax candles to be kept and to be burnt on the altar of the Virgin Glorious mother... out of reverence for the aforementioned Virgin Mary and for the greater honesty of devout people who pray at the back of the said [altar] in the presence of the figure of the aforementioned glorious Virgin and the saints depicted at the said side of the above mentioned altarpiece.[37]

The practicalities of public worship were paramount.

This major work played an integral role in the life of the city. It represented a fusion of the spiritual and civic. The Virgin herself is intercessor and patron saint of Siena and consequently the centre of the civic and religious life of the city. In 1260 the Sienese successfully prayed to the Virgin before battle with the Florentines at Montaperti, where against the odds they were victorious, notwithstanding the military might of Florence. The significance of Siena's veneration of the Virgin is thus tied to Mary's role as saviour of the city. Before the 10th century, the area where the Cathedral now stands was dedicated to 'Our Lady' and identified in medieval documents as the 'Piano Sancte Marie' (*the plain of Saint Mary*).

Kneeling beside the throne of the Virgin are the other patron saints of Siena: Ansanus, Sabinus, Crescentius and Victor. The order of the altarpiece and the privileged position given to these saints would have been clearly understood to reflect the ideal order of the city of Siena. The original inscription[38] underlined the civic and spiritual implications: *Holy Mother of God, be thou the cause of peace on Siena, and, because he painted thee thus, of life for Duccio.*

The *Maestà* was removed from the high altar in 1506, on the orders of Pandolfo Petrucci, and transferred to a side chapel to make way for a new altar. It was sawn into several pieces in 1771. Partial restoration took place in 1956. The National Gallery in London is in possession of three predella panels: *The Transfiguration, The Annunciation* and *The Healing of the Man born Blind*.

Although it took a generation for its effect to be truly felt, Duccio's *Maestà* set Italian painting on a course leading away from the hieratic representations of Byzantine art toward more direct presentations of reality.

Study 2: Fra Filippo Lippi, Madonna and Child with St. Frediano and St. Augustine (*Pala Barbadori*)

Fig. 1-3 Fra Filippo Lippi, *Pala Barbadori* (central panel of polyptych), Louvre, 1438
See Colour Centrefold.

A century or more after Duccio's death (in about 1318/19) the Carmelite friar Filippo Lippi (c. 1406-69) was active in and around Florence in the Italian *Quattrocento*.

Gherardo di Bartolomeo Barbadori, who died childless in 1429, bequeathed his estate for the realisation of a chapel dedicated to Saint Frediano, in the church of Santo Spirito. The chapel was built in the old sacristy of the church and in 1433 it was decided to place an altarpiece there. Filippo Lippi was commissioned for the work in about 1437.

Patricia Rubin writes, in *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (see *Bibliography*), that by the early 1440s 'Lippi had defined his idiom in altarpiece design'.[39] He had already produced this altarpiece for the chapel at Santo Spirito, an Annunciation for San Lorenzo, and was engaged on the *Coronation of the Virgin* for the nuns at S. Ambrogio.[40]

The Santo Spirito altarpiece, like these others, follows the traditional polyptych pattern in the upper part, which employs arcades and columns. However, the traditional gold background, seen in Gothic-style polyptychs, is replaced by an architectural space with a window opening to a hilly landscape. In the central panel (now in the Louvre) the Virgin is standing and consequently dominates the centre of the composition. The kneeling saints are Augustine and Frediano.

The general point that Rubin makes about this category of altarpiece painting holds true here that the assembled figures do not really act in relation to each other, but that each performs a role of 'sacred mediation' acting as 'both a subject and an object of contemplation'.[41] In this the altarpiece still conforms to the tradition of subdivision of cult images into separate units for focused devotion.

Study 3: Antonio and Bartolomeo Vivarini, *Certosa Polyptych*

Fig. 1-4 Antonio and Bartolomeo Vivarini, 1450, *Certosa Polyptych*, Bologna
See Colour Centrefold.

Antonio Vivarini's workshop flourished in Venice in this early-Italian Renaissance/late-Gothic period. Antonio was the elder brother of Bartolomeo and father of Alvise and his earliest works are heavily influenced by Gentile da Fabriano and Pisanello. His works of the 1440s were produced in collaboration with his brother-in-law, Giovanni d'Alemagna. After Giovanni's death in 1449, Antonio tended to paint either alone or in collaboration with his younger brother Bartolomeo, in Padua (although he also worked with Mantegna on the Ovetari Chapel in 1450-51).

The *Certosa polyptych* of 1450 was a work that Antonio completed with his brother and is a prime example of a Venetian Gothic altarpiece in its original (albeit largely replaced) frame (the frame itself is signed by Cristoforo da Ferrara). The polyptych was made for the high altar of the Carthusian monastic church of S. Gerolamo alla Certosa, outside Bologna and commissioned by Pope Nicholas V.

Humfrey describes this polyptych as both a summary of the Gothic tradition that went before and a starting point for what was to come,[42] 'irresistibly' focussing attention on the high altar as the most sacred focal point of the church. The overall effect of the Certosa polyptych is, as Humfrey tells us, 'overwhelmingly Gothic', on account of the architectural and ornate forms of the frame, of the lavish use of gold leaf on the panels, and of the 'slim decoratively rendered figures'.[43] And yet we also see Antonio Vivarini's emerging interest in the Renaissance style of Florence evident in the Madonna's throne with 'its strongly plastic form seeming to thrust both forwards out of the picture plane, and backwards well beyond it'.[44]

Despite such experiments with volume and space, we may view this as a transitional phase that was to culminate in a new stylistic synthesis in Venice by the end of the third quarter of the century. The 1460s were to see the emergence of Giovanni Bellini as the leading player in Venetian painting. And by the time of Antonello da Messina's visit to Venice in 1475/76 the Gothic had become the province of 'a rapidly dwindling

number' of painters and sculptors and associated craftsmen, such as frame-makers and carvers.[45]

It is to Giovanni's father Jacopo that we will turn next.

Study 4: Jacopo Bellini, *Gattamelata Altarpiece*

Jacopo Bellini (c. 1400-70) was a founder of a Renaissance style of painting in northern Italy that valued the naturalistic. His sons Gentile and Giovanni and his son-in-law Andrea Mantegna were collaborators that became major practitioners in their own right. Jacopo studied in Tuscany and brought Tuscan-inspired visual perspective techniques to Venice and instructed his workshop in their execution. He became a principal exponent of mid-15th century altarpiece painting and a key stylistic innovator. He nevertheless represents a transitional phase of altarpiece painting, which drew on the Gothic traditions of his master Gentile da Fabriano but also paved the way for the mature style of his son Giovanni.

Jacopo, with assistance from Giovanni, undertook the commission of the altarpiece for the newly completed Gattamelata chapel in Padua in the late 1450s. The innovatory design of the *Gattamelata Altarpiece*, which broke from the standard type of Gothic altarpiece produced in Venice at that time, is due not only to its destination, but to Jacopo himself, who Humfrey tells us 'deserves credit as the *only* Venetian painter of his generation capable of realising such an innovation'. And further that Jacopo also deserves credit for 'introducing the new type into Venice itself, in the form of the four triptychs painted for the church of Carita between 1460 and 1464'.[46]

This groundbreaking altarpiece is now in a fragmentary state. But from two of the predella panels, depictions of the *Crucifixion* and of *Christ in Limbo,* both painted in 1459-60 that can be seen in the Santo in Padua, the emerging true concerns for naturalism in a unified landscape, breaking from Gothic-style tradition, are evident.

Study 5: Giovanni Bellini, *Pala di San Giobbe*

Fig. 1-5 Giovanni Bellini, c. 1487, *Pala di San Giobbe*, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice
See Colour Centrefold.

The San Giobbe Altarpiece (or *Pala di San Giobbe*) is an early Venetian oil painting and true *pala* (rather than transitional), now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice.

By the time of Giovanni Bellini's *Transfiguration* (of c. 1464), he had acquired a 'compositional control and sensitivity of handling that are characteristic of his mature style'.[47] This mature style was to reach its height in Giovanni's work immediately following the visit (in 1475-76) of Antonello da Messina (a master of the new oil medium), in such works as his *San Giobbe Altarpiece*. Giovanni Bellini had introduced two elements during this period that were to be decisive for the future of Venetian altarpieces: the unified picture field and a frame that assumed the scale, form and material of true architecture. Rounded images in continuous picture space initiated the *pala* as a separate form from the segregated panelled altarpiece.

The transitional painters of the early Venetian Renaissance were at last able to dispense with the Gothic tradition in which they were rooted. It is with Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini that this shift is most pronounced. The Bellini legacy is that they were able to pave the way for the likes of Giorgione and ultimately Titian to take this true Renaissance style to its full height and expression.

Study 6: Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin*

It would be no exaggeration to describe Titian as the culmination of Renaissance-style painting in Venice. Recognised by his contemporaries as 'the sun amidst small stars' (recalling the final line of Dante's *Paradiso*[48]), he was one of the most versatile of Italian painters, particularly noted for his 'painterly' style and use of colour.

The commission for the altarpiece came from the Franciscan clergy of the largest church in Venice, the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, in accordance with the dedication to the 'Glorious Saint Mary'. Titian's painting measures almost seven metres in height and, together with its

original classicising frame, towers above the altar table by some twelve metres.

Humfrey likens the group of apostles in the foreground to the 'race of supermen and superwomen'[49] recently created by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and by Raphael in the Vatican Stanze. The spatial achievement of Titian's altarpiece, full of physically robust and dynamic energy, is in its integration with the architecture of the frame and of the building itself. Titian's *Assumption* had become (as Humfrey asserts) 'a positive affirmation of Christian faith rather than merely a passive reflection of it'.[50] The painting is innovative not just in style and composition, but in the way it changes the concept of the image at the centre of liturgical worship.

Fig. 1-6 Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin,* Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice, 1515-18
See Colour Centrefold.

Titian's *Assumption* is a masterpiece of early 16th century painting, exemplifying all that we might expect of a high Renaissance *pala.* Indeed, it became a prototype for subsequent representations of the subject, from Tintoretto to Veronese in the later 16th century, to Rubens and the baroque painters of the 17th and 18th centuries and is a fitting object to bring this section on Italian altarpieces to a close.

I have attempted to explain in the foregoing brief and selective survey that the development of the altarpiece as a devotional object in Christian worship, in its transition from Gothic-style *polyptych* to Renaissance-style *pala,* was not a straightforward or clearly defined progression. The transition came about over many decades, with architectural style influencing artistic innovation in a collaborative association with sister arts and crafts, subject to the direction of those responsible for commissioning the work with their precise liturgical agenda. The development of a 'Renaissance style' in devotional art was forged out of this complex relationship of innovation on the one hand and conformity to liturgical context on the other. The single-field altarpiece, set in continuous and unified pictorial space, broke free of and finally replaced the segmentation of Gothic-style ornamentation, changing the concept of the function of the image in liturgical worship.

The change in concept was a change to naturalism and humanism as a context for expressing the divine. In the next chapter we will examine the