

In a New Light: Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert.

Susannah Rutherglen and Charlotte Hale.

London: D Giles Limited, 2015, in association with The Frick Collection. 232 pp. \$55.

Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Francis in the Desert* is unarguably one of the greatest paintings of the Italian Renaissance. It is a work both inspired and inspiring. No wonder, therefore, that in the book under review we find some extraordinarily exalted prose. In the foreword to this superbly designed, superabundantly illustrated, uncommonly well-written, and surprisingly affordable volume (ever so reasonably priced), Keith Christiansen writes evocatively about Bellini's "rhapsodic vision of nature" and the painter's ability, for example, "to coax a grapevine to flourish over the beautifully carpentered desk" (12),

among many other arresting details. He quotes Kenneth Clark, who says of Bellini that he fell “in love with the full light of day, in which all things can expand and be completely themselves” (12). Clark, in turn, quotes a mystical writer of the sixteenth century who says, in words appropriate to Bellini’s *Saint Francis*, “As the air fills everything and is not confined to one place, as the light of the sun overflows the whole earth, is not on earth, and yet makes all things on earth verdant, so God dwells in everything and everything dwells in Him” (12).

Both Christiansen’s and Clark’s beautiful evocations of Bellini’s visionary representation of Francis’s transfiguration are preludes to one of the finest rhetorical appreciations of a work of art that I have encountered in the modern art historical literature. I speak of the exquisitely interpretive description of Bellini’s picture of Francis offered to us by one of the two principal authors of this book, Susannah Rutherglen. I present here only a small sample of this inspired description: “A lone figure meets the light. Eyes raised, mouth parted, and arms extended, he appears caught in a singular experience of mystical transport. We might mistake him for a nameless friar, if not for his astonishing attitude — humble receptiveness mingled with divine exaltation — and the red marks on his hands and foot” (23).

Rutherglen goes on not only to translate Bellini’s mute picture into limpid, graceful, and informative prose in a passage too lengthy to be quoted here in full; she also presents a useful and highly respectful summary of the modern scholarship on the picture, giving us also a sense of the painting’s various spiritual connotations of rapture, indeed joy, stigmata, and spiritual song as she discusses patronage and places the picture in the traditions of Franciscan art and literature. She does all this in two succinct chapters in which she captures the contemplative solitude of the humble ecstatic saint, set in a “desert,” not as a wasteland but as a place that is deserted but for a single humble shepherd and his flock, among such creatures as a donkey, a heron, and a rabbit — all lovingly painted. In a third chapter, she joins with coauthor Charlotte Hale to discuss the meaning of Bellini’s painting in relation to the artist’s luminous technique, which is abundantly illuminated in a large number of revelatory illustrations, many of these photomicrographs or infrared reflectograms. Hale’s impressive expertise and knowledge of Bellini’s technique enables us to almost look over the painter’s shoulder as he progresses from drawing to the perfected work — a work of almost unimaginable delicacy. As the authors insist, Bellini intended for his picture to be seen from close up.

The three core essays of Rutherglen’s and Hale’s book are supplemented by excellent, highly instructive essays. Anne-Marie Eze, with the assistance of Raymond Carlson, writes on provenance; Joseph Godla and Denise Allen discuss Bellini’s perspective; and Michael F. Cusato explores the Franciscan tradition that stimulated Bellini. All of this is followed by two appendixes: one is Hale’s crucial technical examination of the painting; the other presents Rutherglen’s reflections on a fascinating but puzzling detail in the picture. Finally, the comprehensive bibliography that brings the book to a close is excellent.

What makes this work so refreshing is the visual pressure that it exerts upon the reader. We are not buried here in texts. Nor do we encounter here theoretical posturing

or iconographical overkill. What we get is art history that, though very sensitive to the role of context, never loses sight of the art that is its principal subject. In this respect the book is exemplary. I believe it deserves a place on the library shelves of all scholars of Renaissance culture.

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