

Giorgione

Giorgione born **Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco**; c. 1477/8–1510) was an Italian painter of the Venetian School in the High Renaissance from Venice, whose career was cut off by his death at a little over 30. He died, probably of the plague, in October, 1510



Possible *Self Portrait as David* c1477-78

Giorgione is known for the elusive poetic quality of his work, though only about six surviving paintings are acknowledged for certain to be his work. The resulting uncertainty about the identity and meaning of his art has made Giorgione one of the most mysterious figures in European painting.

Together with Titian, who was slightly younger, he is the founder of the distinctive Venetian school of Italian Renaissance painting, which achieves much of its effect through colour and mood, and is traditionally contrasted with the reliance on the more linear disegno-led style of florentine painting.

He served his apprenticeship with Giovanni Bellini.

Vasari mentions an important event in Giorgione's life, which had influence on his work was his meeting with Leonardo da Vinci in 1500. All accounts agree in representing Giorgione as a person of distinguished and romantic charm, a great lover and a musician, given to express in his art the sensuous and imaginative grace, touched with poetic melancholy. They represent him further as having made in Venetian painting an advance analogous to that made in Tuscan painting by Leonardo more than twenty years before; that is, as having released the art from the last shackles of archaic rigidity and placed it in possession of full freedom and the full mastery of its means.

He also introduced a new range of subjects. Besides altarpieces and portraits he painted pictures that told no story, whether biblical or classical, or if they professed to

tell a story, neglected the action and simply embodied in form and color moods of lyrical or romantic feeling, much as a musician might embody them in sounds. Innovating with the courage and felicity of genius, he had for a time an overwhelming influence on his contemporaries and immediate successors in the Venetian school, including Titian.



Castelfranco Madonna c.1503

An altarpiece in *sacra conversazione* form — Madonna enthroned, with saints on either side forming an equilateral triangle. This gave the landscape background an importance which marks an innovation in Venetian art, and was quickly followed by his master Giovanni Bellini and others.

St. Francis to the right and St. Nicasius to the left. The armored figure has formerly been identified as the fighting saint St. George or St. Liberalis, patron of Castelfranco.

The technique of painting is an example of what Vasari called *pittura senza disegno* (painting without drawing). This was a new approach to painting which revolutionised the Venetian school and is famously used in *The Tempest*. Titian, a pupil of Giorgione, later became one of the most important exponents of this style.



Adoration of the Shepherds 1505

Giorgione portrayed the main scene on the right, in front of a dark grotto, while on the

left is bright landscape crowned by trees. A sincere dramatic tension is obtained by the choice to place the kneeling shepherd pilgrims in the centre of the painting. The entire group of parents, child, and pilgrim form an anchored rectangle that forms a counterpoised focal point to the receding landscape on the left.



Judith c1504

The account of the beheading of Holofernes by Judith is given in the Book of Judith, and is the subject of many paintings and sculptures from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. In the story, Judith, a beautiful widow, is able to enter the tent of Holofernes because of his desire for her. Holofernes was an Assyrian general who was about to destroy Judith's home, the city of Bethulia. Overcome with drink, he passes out and is decapitated by Judith; his head is taken away in a basket (often depicted as carried by an elderly female servant).

The concept of idealized beauty is evoked in a virginally pensive *Judith*, a large painting which exhibits Giorgione's special qualities of color richness and landscape romance, while demonstrating that life and death are each other's companions rather than foes.



Laura 1506

The portrait depicts a young woman as a bride; most probably her name was Laura. Behind the young woman is a branch of laurel (*Laurus*), symbol of chastity, and carrying the nuptial veil. The gesture of opening the fur mantle uncovers the bosom. This may indicate fecundity (and, therefore, maternity) as an offer of love and a marriage blessed with children. As the laurel symbolized virtue, so the visible breast could symbolize the bride's conjugal fidelity. It is only from the prudish perspective of the 19th or early 20th century that the baring of a breast would be viewed as meretricious. In the 16th century, nudity did not provoke disapproval, but was shown publicly and uninhibitedly.

The “Laura” could very well be Mary Magdalen. In Giorgione’s painting the young woman wears a courtesan’s robe but it has parted to reveal her breast. However, her white rolled up veil is a symbol of a virtuous woman and the laurel leaves behind her are a symbol of marital fidelity.



Portrait of an Old Woman

The subject choice of an old commoner is perhaps due to what we may read on the small scrap of paper (the banner) that she holds in her hand: the words, “With Time.” The figure shows us the words, but points to herself, her gaze admonishing us that we too will become old with time. Thus, the painting represents an allegory for the passage of time, a Vanitas. To render the warning more immediate, Giorgione succeeds brilliantly in painting her anatomy directly onto the canvas, without preparatory drawing: the wrinkles of her skin, her gray, disheveled hair, her toothless mouth, and, above all, her expression of tired resignation under the weight of old age



***The Three Philosophers* c1505-09**

The three figures portrayed are allegorical: an old bearded man, possibly a Greek philosopher; an Arab philosopher; and a sitting young man, enclosed within a natural landscape. In the background is a village with some mountains, the latter marked by a blue area whose meaning is unknown. The young man is observing a cave on the left of the scene, and apparently measuring it with some instruments.

The Three Philosophers, the old man, the Arab figure and the young man, could be a depiction of transmission of knowledge, the Transmission of the Classics from the ancient Greeks philosophy through the Arab translations, that became actual again around the Italian Renaissance. The old man is representing a Greek philosopher, such as Plato or Aristotle, whose writings have been copied and transmitted through the Arab philosophers to the Italian Renaissance. The Arab philosopher is possibly representing the polyhistor Avicenna or Averroes, both Arab philosophers and Arab scientists from the Islamic Golden Age.

The young man could be seen as the new Renaissance science with roots in the past, looking into the empty darkness of the cave, symbolizing the yet undiscovered secrets. The cave might also symbolize the philosophic concept of Plato's Cave.



***The Tempest* c1508**

“one of the most enigmatic and famous paintings in the world,”

This was Lord Byron's favorite painting because the ambiguity of both its subject matter and symbolism allowed viewers to make up their own story.

Jan Morris wrote that the picture changed the way she looked at painting. She was fascinated with the subject and "its sense of permanently suspended enigma", and calls it a "haunted picture", inhabited by the actual presence of the artist.

On the right a woman sits, suckling a baby. She could be a gypsy, or to some people's eyes a prostitute. Her pose is unusual - normally the baby would be held on the mother's lap; but in this case the baby is positioned at the side of the mother, so as to expose her pubic area. A man, possibly a soldier, holding a long staff or pike, stands in contrapposto on the left. He smiles and glances to the left, but does not appear to be looking at the woman. Art historians have identified the man alternatively as a soldier, a shepherd, a gypsy, or a member of a club of unmarried men. X-rays of the painting have revealed that in the place of the man, Giorgione originally painted another female nude. One may also note the stork on the rooftop on the right. Storks sometimes represent the love of parents for their children.

There is no contemporary textual explanation for *The Tempest*, and ultimately, no definitive reading or interpretation. To some it represents the flight into Egypt; to others, a scene from classical mythology (possibly Paris and Oenone; or Iasion and Demeter) or from an ancient Greek pastoral novel. According to the Italian scholar Salvatore Settis, the desert city would represent the Paradise, the two characters being Adam and Eve with their son Cain: the lightning, as in ancient Greek and Hebrew times, would represent God who has just ousted them from Eden. Others have proposed

a moral allegorical reading, or concluded that Giorgione had no particular subject in mind.



Pastoral Concert c1509

Probably started by Giorgione and completed by Titian

universally recognized as one of the world's great masterpieces. Usually dated around 1510-1511 it is surrounded, like other famous products of the Venetian Renaissance, by an aura of mystery and enigma. Not only has scholarly opinion been divided about whether to attribute the painting to Giorgione or Titian, but also no one has been able to come up with a plausible explanation of the subject or meaning of the painting.

The painting was originally attributed to Giorgione, but modern critics assign it more likely to his pupil Titian, due to the figures' robustness which was typical of his style. It is also likely that Giorgione (whose works included elements such as music, the pastoral idleness and simultaneous representation of the visible and invisible) began the work, and then, after his death in 1510, it was finished by Titian.

The painting portrays three young people on a lawn, playing music with each other, while next to them a standing woman is pouring water from a marble basin (naked obviously). Both the women are naked, aside from two light vests; the two men are dressed in contemporary costumes. In the wide background is a shepherd and, among the vegetation, a far landscape.

The subject was perhaps the allegory of poetry and music: the two women would be an imaginary apparition representing the ideal beauty, stemming from the two men's fantasy and inspiration. The woman with the glass vase would be the muse of tragic poetry, while the other one would be that of the pastoral poetry. Of the two playing men, the one with the lute would represent the exalted lyric poetry, the other being an ordinary lyricist, according to the distinction made by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Another interpretation suggests that the painting is an evocation of the four elements of the natural world (water, fire, earth and air) and their harmonic relationship.

Dr. Francis P. DeStefano argues that Titian used the famous Biblical story of Jonathan and David to provide a framework for a personal homage to Giorgione, his recently deceased mentor and friend.