

2 Masterpieces Reveal the Big Bang Moment of Our Art Universe

The Frick, with these not-to-miss treasures by Bellini and Giorgione, manages to get at the origins of our art-watching obsession.



By Blake Gopnik

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On May 20, 1964, on a hilltop in New Jersey, an unlikely little structure called the Holmdel Horn revealed telltale signs of the Big Bang, and the birth of the universe we live in. The Horn has been much in the news this fall, as it survived a threat of demolition.

Right now, at the Frick Collection's temporary home on Madison Avenue in New York, an unlikely two-painting show called "Bellini and Giorgione in the House of Taddeo Contarini" has been revealing telltale signs of the Big Bang of Western fine art, and the birth of the artistic universe we now live in. It should be in the news right through this season, as one of the most revelatory exhibitions to hit New York in years.

One of the exhibition's paintings is the Frick's own "St. Francis in the Desert," a treasure created by the Venetian master Giovanni Bellini sometime around 1475. Francis was known for his communion with nature, and Bellini paints a landscape and a saint joined in one holy light.

The other work was conceived around 1509 by Giorgio da Castelfranco, known as Giorgione, a follower of Bellini's who ended up with even more influence on later art. Titled "The Three Philosophers," it's on loan from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. It also puts humanity in contact with nature, but the light that unites them seems less about its divine creator than about the genius who captured it in paint.

In Bellini, we can admire the last traces of a great medieval past; with Giorgione, the future of fine art is looming.

These paintings are together for the first time in at least 400 years, thanks to the Frick's chief curator, Xavier Salomon. It's impossible not to marvel at their exquisite realism, to ponder the density of meaning they offer, to soak in their light and color, to revel in their artistic complexity — to take endless pleasure in their presence.

But paired at the Frick, these two treasures offer up something more: They let us witness the peculiar moment, in Northern Italy in the decades around 1500, when

marveling, pondering, soaking and reveling — taking pleasure, of one kind or another — became the most natural things to do in front of certain objects. Those are the kinds of objects — of *art* objects — we now keep and contemplate in museums.



“St. Francis in the Desert, ca. 1475–80,” oil panel. Could anyone resist the redheaded kingfisher minding its own business at bottom left, or the fig and grape, the laurel, juniper, bindweed and spleenwort, that Bellini took such pains to get right? The Frick Collection, New York

We know that, by 1525, the paintings were hanging together in the home of Taddeo Contarini, a prosperous Venetian who seems to be one of the earliest Europeans to collect art. He bought and commissioned and gathered together paintings that had one vital thing in common: how much he enjoyed them.

One room in Contarini’s home displayed the lovely “St. Francis” he’d bought: 50 years on, it still ranked as one of the great portrayals of the holy man. But for all the spiritual heft of that picture, Contarini doesn’t seem to have used it for any prayerful purpose, the way its first owner must have. The collector added it to walls hung with other

paintings that could hardly have had less to do with the sacred: Neighboring the “St. Francis” was a Giorgione that illustrated the classical tale of Paris, the Trojan prince, being abandoned in the wilderness as a babe. (We now know that work through copies.) It seems likely that Contarini paired the two paintings because they were about the same size and because both could be admired for their wild landscapes, and for the rivalry they set up between mentor and mentee.

In a room nearby, Contarini placed another Bellini, of Christ carrying the cross, and again the collector paired sacred with secular: That Christ hung near two portraits of contemporary women that Contarini almost certainly bought for their art appeal, not because he cared much about their sitters, as earlier owners of portraits would have done. Even more surprising, Bellini’s Christ kept company with three of Venice’s famous courtesans, portrayed in another recent painting. Contarini used this room to compare the latest in people-pictures — even if one of these people was the son of God.

And then there was a final space in Contarini’s collection that had a more miscellaneous grouping: a painting of horses, another Trojan scene, and finally “The Three Philosophers” that has settled this fall at the Frick.

At first glance, that canvas might have come across as yet another sacred picture. Giorgione’s “Philosophers” has hallmarks of earlier Nativity scenes: Three “wise” men, dressed in what was considered exotic “Eastern” clothing and holding astronomers’ tools and diagrams, stand near the kind of cave that had played manger in some earlier pictures of Christ’s birth. But Mary and the Christ Child are nowhere in sight, and in their absence no one has been able to pin down who the painting’s three figures are supposed to be — wise art historians have suggested possibilities ranging from the prophet Abraham to Pythagoras, by way of a Turkish sultan and Giorgione himself. But the puzzle itself may be a crucial clue to what’s going on.

Even an art-loving contemporary of Giorgione’s couldn’t hit on the painting’s subject when he took some notes on Contarini’s collection in 1525. Leading us to our current title, he described the scene as “three philosophers out in nature, two of them standing and one, seated, who is considering the sun’s rays.” (A setting or maybe rising sun glows gorgeous on the horizon.) And it could be that *not* fully revealing his subject was the painter’s goal — that he was aiming for precisely the puzzlement and pondering that are hallmarks of the way fine art went on to work in Western culture.

That note taker was a minor Venetian nobleman named Marcantonio Michiel, and he lets us know that “The Three Philosophers” was only begun by Giorgione — he died of the plague in 1510, in his 30s — to then be finished by his follower Sebastiano del Piombo. As the art historian Charles Hope has pointed out, it’s possible to spot Sebastiano’s stylings on the surface we see today. And sure enough, X-rays hint that the painting started out with more legible, explicitly wise-man-ish gear on its figures,

only to see that detail toned down to yield the puzzling ambiguity we're left with now. It's as though, in finishing the painting, the younger man was bringing it even more fully in line with that new thing we call "art" that was just then coming to be.

It's a notion of art that cares as much about a glorious sunrise or a realistic rock face — Michiel praises Giorgione's as "brilliantly mimicked" — as about the frictionless transmission of a painting's subject.



At the Frick Madison, left, Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert" — a landscape and a saint joined in one holy light. Right, on temporary loan, "The Three Philosophers" by Giorgione. "In Bellini, we can admire the last traces of a great medieval past; with Giorgione, the future of fine art is looming." Joseph Coscia Jr./The Frick Collection

Michiel's notes on the "Philosophers," and on all of the other Contarini paintings mentioned above, take up a few of the 100 pages he filled with an accounting of the best art in Venice and towns nearby, the way any collector or critic might fill a notebook today.

Michiel noticed the latest innovations in art. In Contarini's portrait room, he took care to spot paintings that showed their subjects at life-size, a vastly influential norm just then taking hold among painters, according to new research by Alexander Nagel of the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. (I lent a hand in that research.)

And of course Michiel opined on which pictures were good, and why. His notes on Bellini's "Francis" praise the foreground landscape as "brilliantly completed and

conceived.” Could anyone resist the redheaded kingfisher minding its own business at bottom left, or the fig and grape, the laurel, juniper, bindweed and spleenwort, that Bellini took such pains to get right?

Thanks to Contarini, Michiel and a few of their like-minded peers, we’ve had 500 years to learn to give in to such pleasures.

Bellini and Giorgione in the House of Taddeo Contarini

Through Feb. 4, 2024, Frick Madison, 945 Madison Ave., Manhattan, (212) 288-0700; frick.org.