


**Predella** journal of visual arts, n°47, 2020 [www.predella.it](http://www.predella.it) - Monografia / Monograph 

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**Predella** pubblica ogni anno due numeri online e due numeri monografici a stampa /

**Predella** publishes two online issues and two monographic print issues each year

*Tutti gli articoli sono sottoposti alla peer-review anonima / All articles are subject to anonymous peer-review*

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**Predella** journal of visual arts - ISSN 1827-8655

## In the Midst of a Cloud: Giovanni Bellini and the Optics of the *Resurrection*

*Giovanni Bellini's Resurrection of Christ (ca. 1475-1477) was commissioned by Marco Zorzi to decorate the altar of his newly constructed chapel in San Michele in Isola. Bellini shows Christ's Resurrection set within an amazingly naturalistic landscape of the Venetian terraferma. While scholars have long celebrated Bellini's landscapes as poetic extensions of the sacred themes, few have considered the deeper theological significance with which the artist invested his painted worlds. In this essay, I examine the potential meaning of Bellini's clouds – as portents of change and metaphors for Christ's Incarnation. In particular, I view Bellini's interpretation of the natural world paralleling the efforts made by natural philosophers who worked to blend a scientific understanding of nature with Christian faith.*

Scholars have long celebrated the *Resurrection of Christ* (ca. 1475-1477; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie) of Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1435-1516) for the artist's poetic portrayal of the natural world in landscape painting *avant la lettre*<sup>1</sup> (fig. 1). Indeed, Bellini's altarpiece belongs to a lineage of works completed in the late 1470s that best express the artist's mature style. Panels, such as the *Saint Francis* (ca. 1476-1478; original location unknown, but now in The Frick Collection, New York), the *Pesaro Altarpiece* (ca. 1471-1474; originally, Pesaro, San Francesco, but now in the Musei Civici di Palazzo Mosca), and the *Transfiguration* (ca. 1479; perhaps originally for the Cathedral of Vicenza, but now in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples), exhibit the painter's interest in extreme naturalism – perhaps resulting from his exposure to Flemish works – and devotion to landscape, which he places on equal footing with the paintings' sacred subjects.

A recent exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, investigated Bellini's landscapes as poetic extensions of the sacred themes they helped illustrate<sup>2</sup>. In it, we see how the artist used the bucolic setting of the *terraferma* to create an imaginative environment for the meditator to «wander at will in his paintings»<sup>3</sup>. Despite this accurate characterization of Bellini's art, few scholars have considered the deeper theological significance with which the artist invested his painted worlds. What distinguishes Bellini from his contemporaries is the subtlety with which he integrated religious iconography into coherent and lyrical representations of nature. His gift may even reveal a new *raison d'être*, whereby he valued the physical world as an extension of God's creation and therefore worthy of investigation and imitation. Rona Goffen suggested that Bellini made landscape an essential feature of his religious paintings and gave it prominence equal to the

holy figures in conveying mood and meaning<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the extreme naturalism of his art and careful layering of religious symbolism reveal the power of painting as a means for exploring and knowing the Divine.

Such is the case in Bellini's Berlin *Resurrection*, which originally adorned the Zorzi family chapel in the newly constructed church of San Michele in Isola. Following a devastating fire in 1453, the Camaldolese community called upon Mauro Codussi (1440-1504) to reconstruct their church in 1468<sup>5</sup>. On 5 June 1475, the monks granted the Venetian patrician, Marco Zorzi, the south chapel next to the altar to construct a private funerary chapel<sup>6</sup>. According to the original concession, the chapel was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which has led some scholars to speculate, without archival support, that Zorzi changed the dedication to the Resurrection<sup>7</sup>. The church's location on San Michele – the cemetery island of Venice – and its function as a burial site for members of the Zorzi family provide an appropriate setting for the subject of Christ's Resurrection. The painting's theme must have also resonated with the Camaldolese community of San Michele whose theology often analogized their religious life with Christ's Resurrection<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, the monk's hermetic life within the cells of their monastery was likened to the solitude found in Christ's tomb. In the painting, Bellini carefully renders the opening to Christ's tomb as a carved door jamb, perhaps alluding to the monk's cell, and inviting the viewer into the meditative space for reflection.

As a number of scholars have demonstrated, Bellini was ever mindful of the setting for his paintings and carefully integrated his images into the fabric of the built environment<sup>9</sup>. This is also true for the *Resurrection* which responds to the natural light conditions of Codussi's ethereal and luminous interior. The painting was originally set on the altar of the chapel between two round-arched windows that not only backlit the panel but provided a continuity between the landscape rendered in paint and that seen through the fenestrations (fig. 2). The principle source of light for the painting came from an oculus window located high on the south wall of the chapel. Removed from its original setting, the interdependence between the light of the painting and that of the architecture is difficult to fully grasp but necessary for understanding the painting and its subject.

According to the biblical accounts, three days after Christ's death on the cross, Mary Magdalene – perhaps accompanied by Joanna and Mary of Clopas – went to the tomb only to find it empty. An angel announced to them that Christ had already risen from the dead and instructed them to depart and share the news of the miraculous Resurrection. There were no witnesses to Christ's physical rising from the tomb. This posed a challenge for artists who attempted to depict this crucial event. From the end of the first millennium, they solved this problem by

inventing scenes that showed Christ exiting the tomb (fig. 3). The more traditional images that circulated throughout Europe in manuscripts and small devotional panels show Jesus stepping out from his sarcophagus. With one leg raised and firmly planted on the rim of the stone sepulcher, he rises from the tomb holding a banner of victory as he evades the Roman soldiers who slumber while on guard.

This iconic representation of the event remained the dominant mode for picturing the Resurrection until the fourteenth century, when Italian artists, such as Andrea da Firenze (1343-1377), shifted to a more visionary and supernatural experience that occurred in the heavens (fig. 4). They portrayed Christ hovering in the sky, often radiating a *mandorla* of light or suspended in a bank of clouds. Though scenes of the Resurrection appear frequently in the history of art (especially by the fifteenth century), unlike other Gospel stories that provide an “eye-witness” account of the biblical events, Christ’s Resurrection is attested by his visual absence. As a result, artists drew inspiration from several New Testament stories such as the Transfiguration, Descent into Limbo, and Ascension, which follow similar conventions of representation<sup>10</sup>. Bellini transformed the subject of the Resurrection, however, by using the landscape to intensify the drama and spiritual dimension of his art.

In Bellini’s *Resurrection*, it is Easter morning and the earth buds with new life as winter gives way to spring. Rabbits scurry along the hilltops, trees sprout new leaves, and a shepherd watches over his yearlings. This pregnant, animated world exists as a great visual encomium to the richness of God’s creation. Floating over the landscape, Christ’s radiant body eclipses the rising sun and blinds the soldiers who witness this otherworldly vision. An unseen light source illuminates his body from above, corresponding to the natural sunlight that enters the chapel. Interpreted as a spiritual light, this illumination stands in contrast to the earthly luminescence of the rising sun that penetrates the clouds.

Bellini often relies on two complementary sources of light to develop more complex pictorial ways of depicting nuanced shadows and highlights. By locating one light source outside the picture, he blurs the boundary between the fictive space of the painting and the real world of the observer. But Bellini is also making an important analogy between spiritual and corporeal light and, relatedly, spiritual and corporal vision. As Christ ascends from his tomb, he follows the celestial path of the morning sun. His alabaster body appears radiant and in stark contrast to the darker complexion of the earth-bound soldiers. Echoing the words of so many philosophers and theologians, Bellini visually correlates God with the sun. The painting, and more specifically the landscape, provides both allegory

and anagogy – presenting a theological argument about the Resurrection and Incarnation while gesturing to the deeper mysticism of the Catholic faith.

As Christ hovers in the sky, we struggle to locate his body in space. His body appears to transgress the picture plane and invade the real space of the observer. To assist the viewer, Bellini paints a prominent cumulous cloud from which we can see Christ's position in relation to the background (fig. 5). Unlike the surrounding sky, the darkened cloud appears dense and foreboding. The first rays of the morning sun capture and define its underside with ethereal light. While Bellini is a master composer who finds harmony between the disparate elements of his compositions, the longer we linger in his painted world, the more incongruous the cloud appears. This incompatibility is intentional. Bellini's cloud condenses many of the theological truths central to understanding the painting's subject.

### *From a Theophany to a Theology of Clouds*

Clouds portend change and revelation. Whether meteorological or mystical, we look to the clouds to reveal a coming storm or otherworldly vision. Clouds have also proved essential to an artist's creation of naturalistic art. Not only do they record the accurate appearance of the atmosphere, but, as has been shown, they counterbalance the regimented space imposed by Italian artists' wide adoption of linear perspective beginning in the fifteenth century<sup>11</sup>. Clouds also symbolize the heavenly sphere. Their formless foil to the well-ordered space of the picture may have encouraged artists to use them as natural bridges between the real space of the observer and the visionary space of the divine. It is in the clouds that divine and earthly realms meet, and artists, such as Giovanni Bellini, Andrea Mantegna (ca. 1431-1506), and later Raphael (1484-1520), experimented with the theological symbolism expressed in the upper atmosphere. Although scholars have deepened our understanding of clouds in European art, their studies have been more concerned with articulating the broad symbolism of these nebulous forms than with the specificity of theological interpretation<sup>12</sup>.

In the case of Bellini's *Resurrection*, I would like to move beyond the standard equations that liken clouds with visionary events or theophanies to suggest that artists were investing this neglected detail with theological meaning. A growing number of studies over the past decade have reinterpreted Bellini's landscapes and noted how the artist invests his naturalized views of the world with mystical signification<sup>13</sup>. Here, I want to consider the deeper theology Bellini expresses in his landscapes. While focusing on his representation of clouds in the *Resurrection*, I want to reveal the more specific paschal metaphors and eschatological theology incorporated in Bellini's depiction. I will focus on two interpretations of clouds

that seem to resonate with Bellini's painting. First, I will examine the clouds' association with ideas of spiritual vision and how we see God. Second, I will examine the metaphoric connection between clouds, Christ's body, and belief in the Incarnation, which was a requisite for Christ's Resurrection.

Whether carrying figures aloft, broadcasting divine messages, or expressing the wrath of God, clouds appear frequently throughout the Bible, which made them a popular subject of theological discourse. For instance, in a striking passage from the Book of Job (35:5), Elihu, the prophet's companion, relies on an analogy of a storm to express the immensity of God. Elihu instructs Job: «Look to the heavens and see; gaze at the clouds high above». It is through the clouds that God gathers the waters of the earth before showering them down on man, or speaks in thunderous claps. Elihu invests the natural world with providential meaning. Pope Gregory I (r. 590-604) later elucidated such meaning in his commentary, the *Moralia of Job*. Gregory reiterates Elihu's symbolism in his reflections on the passage, writing:

When clouds fill the upper air, if we lift up our eyes to the sky we see not the sky but the clouds. Our sense of sight does not penetrate the mist covering the sky; its very weakness hides it from us. When the sun reddens in the sky, our eyes are first filled with the air spread out in the middle, so that they may later contemplate the sun's rays in the sky. Because therefore we are humans covered with flesh, when we desire heaven, we lift our eyes up, as it were, to the sky; we turn our gaze to the sky, because we are forced to do so by familiarity with the ways of our body, we try to learn spirituality. But our understanding is not allowed to pass over to the divine, unless it is first informed by the example of the saints who preceded us, so our eye already looks at the sky but beholds the clouds. [...] So it is said elsewhere, *You are more wonderful and bright than the eternal mountains*. The one who cannot gaze upon the sun in the east sees the mountains lit up and realized that the sun has risen. So God enlightens us from the eternal mountains [...] he enlightens us with a ray of his glory. Behold, we are aroused by study of the Lord's devotion and love, but in this devotion and love we are better informed by contemplation of these clouds<sup>14</sup>.

Gregory echoes the metaphor of corporal, intellectual, and spiritual vision established by Saint Augustine that many theologians and natural philosophers later repeated. Medieval theories of vision closely linked corporal sight with a deeper form of spiritual vision. Stemming from the Apostle Paul's observation that «now we see through a glass, darkly; but [in glory] face to face» (1 Cor. 13:12), medieval theologians described one's spiritual awakening to the correcting and perfecting of one's spiritual eye, which would be healed during the Second Coming. Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), the father of Franciscan theology, composed his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (*Journey into the Mind of God*) as a similar means of perfecting one's vision in order to achieve ecstatic union with God. Not surprisingly, Bonaventure reiterates and builds upon Gregory's understanding of clouds.

In his *Commentaries on the Gospel of Luke*, he provides his most succinct metaphor:

Now according to the mystical sense, the cloud can be understood to be the flesh of Christ. First, because it tempers the light of the divinity for our eyes, so that we can see. Exodus 19:9 has: «Now I will come to you in the darkness of a cloud, that the people may hear me speaking with you». – Second, because it is the vehicle of divine light upon a dark earth, according to what Isaiah 19:1 has: «The Lord will ascend upon a slight cloud and will enter into Egypt». – Third, because it has its origin in bitter human nature which is worthy of punishment, with the Virgin Mary as mediatrix. This was prefigured in 1 Kings 18:44: «Behold, a little cloud like a human foot arose out of the sea». Fourth, because it pours forth the water of salvific grace which it has drawn from its source, when it is moved by the wind of prayer. Thus, the Sirach 43:24 says: «A remedy for all is the speedy coming of a cloud». – From this, contemplatives learn that they not only lift their eyes to the radiant light of the deity, but also to the dark cloud of humanity<sup>15</sup>.

While it is uncertain whether Bellini had Gregory or Bonaventure's commentary in mind when painting the *Resurrection*, their language evokes the sun, clouds, and mountains that compose the artist's landscapes. And similar ideas for using clouds as metaphors for Christ likely lay at the heart of his compositional design. Yet Bellini often resists fixed symbolism in his painting, preferring instead a polysemic understanding of the elements that comprise his image. His Frick *Saint Francis* testifies to this fluidity of forms and meanings, as every decade seems to bring a new interpretation of the donkey, birds, and flora. Bellini uses landscape expressively to make visible the words of the Gospels<sup>16</sup>.

As the air thickens behind Christ, the cloud imitates earth-bound matter, and Bellini encourages the viewer to find visual parallels between the natural apparition of the cloud and the spiritual apparition of Christ. Like the cloud, Jesus appears to possess physical form, but we question the validity of our sight. Indeed, this is the moment when the laws of physics no longer bind Christ's corporeal flesh as it ascends to heaven. The cloud accentuates the bodily nature of the Resurrection – the moment Christ's body and soul rejoined after death – which was predicated on the belief in Christ's Incarnation. For Christians, Christ's Resurrection provides hope for the resurrection of all believers during the Last Judgment. Bellini's scene, therefore, calls to mind Christ's Second Coming as foretold in the Book of Revelation. Not surprisingly, descriptions of the Second Coming are rife with mention of clouds. Daniel prophesized in his book how «with the clouds of heaven there came on like a son of Man» (Dan. 7:13). In Revelation, John confirms what Daniel prefigured: «Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him» (Rev. 1:7).

As Christ looms overhead, two of the Roman soldiers stand transfixed by the visionary event. The soldier on the right is overwhelmed by Christ's radiance and shields his eyes with his right hand. As they witness with their eyes the coming of Christ, they hold in their hands a lance – the instrument of war used to pierce Christ's flesh. Bellini collapses the narrative to create a multivalent reading of the painting. While this is a painting of the Resurrection, it also references the Second Coming when Christ will descend on a bank of clouds.

### *The Optics of Clouds*

Bellini's clouds are distinct in their extreme naturalism, which was based on careful observation and a fascination with meteorological phenomena. His clouds appear light and ethereal as they move across the sky. This unprecedented depth of observation in Italian art of the Renaissance precedes the atmospheric studies of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) by a decade. While other artists such as Andrea Mantegna painted convincing clouds, they do not express the same interest in the interplay of light and color witnessed in the works of Bellini. I would like to suggest that the artist's handling of clouds in the *Resurrection* or the earlier *Agony in the Garden* (ca. 1460; fig. 6) indicates his awareness and application of emergent scientific writings on perspective and optics.

In the dedication of his *Summa de arithmetica* (Venice, 1494), the Franciscan polymath Luca Pacioli (ca. 1445-1514) includes the brothers Gentile (ca. 1429-1507) and Giovanni Bellini among his list of celebrated artists who worked on the scientific foundations of *perspectiva*<sup>17</sup>. The members of Pacioli's illustrious circle discussed at length the scientific aspects of painting and were distinguished for their ability to use this knowledge to create «divine rather than human» images<sup>18</sup>. Pacioli also mentions the elusive Hieronimo Malatini who, according to Daniele Barbaro (1514-1570), taught both Vittore Carpaccio (ca. 1465-1526) and Giovanni Bellini the science of perspective<sup>19</sup>. These allusions indicate that Bellini was considered a master of the new science of *perspectiva artificialis*. Scholars have already noted the possible influence of the writings of Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) on his *Pesaro Altarpiece*, which appears to be as much a celebration of Alberti's "window" as it is a critique<sup>20</sup>. Rather than relying on pronounced orthogonals to define the illusionistic space, Bellini also depends on a suffusion light and rhythm of color to create a sense of depth.

Perhaps even more important than Alberti to Bellini's understanding of optics was the work of the Venetian physician and engineer Giovanni Fontana (ca. 1395-1455), who dedicated his now lost treatise *De arte pictoria (On the Art of Painting)* – which contained a theoretical section on perspective – to Bellini's father, Jacopo<sup>21</sup>.



In his *Liber de omnibus rebus naturalibus* (*The Book of All Things in Nature*, written by 1450, though published later in Venice, 1544), Fontana writes that from an investigation of the natural world, «the art of painting has derived excellent precepts, as I have shown in a work written for the great Venetian painter Jacopo Bellini». He explains that the purpose of his treatise was to show Jacopo how to «place dark and light colors so that the different parts of an image depicted on a flat surface would seem to stand out in relief»<sup>22</sup>.

It is highly probable that Giovanni would have read Fontana's text, perhaps while working in his father's studio. We can gather from secondary references to Fontana's *Treatise* that it dealt heavily with atmospheric and luminous phenomena – both of which are defining features of Bellini's art<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, Bellini's handling of clouds suggests the artist's awareness and application of such theoretical and scientific writings. They seem to be visual narrations of Fontana's *Liber de omnibus*, wherein Fontana expressed his fascination with the optical effects of clouds. He observes that «[i]f there are clouds between us and the sun, that [the] thinner part of them through which the rays come down to us will seem brighter, being imbued with the light to rays». Fontana continues: «The thicker part will seem darker, both because of the density and because of the mixture with smoke. [...] Sometimes in such a cloud there seems to be a gap or cleft, and a dark depth, which [at first sight seem] perforations like caves»<sup>24</sup>.

The scattering of light seen in Bellini's painting resulted from sunlight reflecting off and refracting through the clouds to produce the spectrum of color we see. His interest in the optical effects of light and translucent clouds also mirrors the prevailing interest of medieval and contemporary intellectuals who investigated both the physical and metaphysical properties of light. Throughout the early modern period, theologians turned natural philosophers relied on optical analogies to align an understanding of corporeal sight with a deeper form of spiritual vision. The scientific study of optics (known as *perspectiva naturalis* in Western Europe) was pioneered by Franciscan friars at Oxford University, Bologna, and Padua, who sought to settle theological arguments with this new empirical science<sup>25</sup>. Roger Bacon, O.F.M. (1214-1294), for example, wrote extensively about clouds and the principle of refraction, and considered its "spiritual sense" an analogy for the emanation of Divine Grace. Like the Franciscan friars who turned their attention to the natural world to better understand their creator, Bellini's painting expresses the idea that God is invested in the natural world and through the exploration of creation humans are able to learn the attributes of God.

Both artist and theologian are therefore united in their efforts to harness the metaphoric potential of the landscape. Bonaventure sees in the cloud a symbol of Christ's body that both refracts and reflects the Divine Light of God. In his

*Commentaries on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Bonaventure uses metaphors of transparent crystal to explain the Incarnation wherein Divine Light forms a union with the crystal without breaking it. In a similar manner, the cloud captures and refracts the divine radiance and in turn makes the Divine Light visible to human sight. The optical metaphors found throughout Bonaventure's writings show the far reach of medieval optical science. Of central concern to the perspectivists was the distinction between the source of light (*lux*) and its radiance (*lumen*). *Lux*, which was equated with the Divine Light of God, was considered too powerful for human eyes, while *lumen*, which was equated with Christ, radiated out into the world and was perceptible to human sense.

The cloud in Bellini's painting acts as an optical metaphor for Christ's Incarnation. Just as the cloud mediates and tempers the intensity of the sun, so too Christ tempers God's divinity, allowing it to be perceived by human sight. In a sermon delivered on the third Sunday of Advent, Bonaventure repeated this analogy of Christ and clouds. Speaking of Jesus' miraculous nature that in the Incarnation «unified two extremes, the first, divinity, and the last, humanity. [...] In the humanity he assumed, he is like the morning star in the midst of a cloud. [...] Just as the morning star is between the day and night, and works to drive away the darkness, so Christ was the medium between the day of divinity and the night of humanity»<sup>26</sup>.

Set against the early morning sky, Christ's incandescent body is transformed by Bellini into the morning star mentioned by Bonaventure. Bellini intended the viewers of his painting to identify Christ with the celestial appearance of Venus – the morning star<sup>27</sup>. Not only does Christ assume the stellar position in the firmament, but the weapon held by the soldier on the right has been identified as a *stella mattina* (morning star) – a spear with a spiked ball<sup>28</sup>. Pushing Bonaventure's analogy further, Bellini shows Christ literally «in the midst of a cloud» which mediates between day and night, and Christ's divinity and humanity. The Virgin Mary was also popularly referred to as the morning star, so Bellini's reference to the celestial body connects the painting with the chapel's dedicatee. Bellini's potential reference to the Virgin also highlights her critical role in Christ's Incarnation as the body from which the Word became flesh. The artist seems to fixate on this aspect of Christ's hypostatic nature.

While at first seemingly incongruous with the surrounding atmosphere, without the cloud's darkened hue and strategic placement, Christ's body would completely blend with the colors of the sky. By using Photoshop, such dematerialization is possible and one can observe especially how Christ's right leg is barely discernable (fig. 7). The cloud forms an essential component of the

painting distinguishing Christ's body from the surrounding sky and acting as a metaphor for the body itself. Just as the cloud reveals the visionary appearance to the Roman soldiers in the painting, it also helps reveal the body to us. Echoing the words of Saint Augustine, we are asked not to «despise the clouds of the flesh [because] he is covered with a cloud not that he may be darkened, but that [his brightness] may be rendered enduring»<sup>29</sup>.

Bellini's *Resurrection of Christ* is a veritable feast for the eyes. As we travel deeper into his imagined world, we become lost in the details of his scenery moving about between human and divine actors. Through his manipulation of crushed minerals mixed with oil, Bellini celebrates the richness of God's creation and deems it worthy of investigation. Saint Bonaventure outlines in his *Journey into the Mind of God* the process by which we spiritually ascend to fuller knowledge of the Divine. During the first two stages of contemplation he asks the meditator to consider God *through* and *in* the vestiges of nature that are perceptible to our senses. The emphasis placed on the body and its dual nature of flesh and soul spoke directly to the Camaldolese community. Known for their practice of bodily mortification, by the fifteenth century Camaldolese theologians had developed a more nuanced appreciation for the body. Rather than attempting to debase and move beyond the body, self-mortification was practiced to keep this important tool in check<sup>30</sup>. In keeping with Aristotelian philosophy, the body was understood to be a necessary instrument in helping the mind communicate with God. Unfortunately, unlike the Franciscans, the Camaldolese lack a rich written theological tradition; however, in reading hagiography, parallels can be found with Franciscan mysticism and their celebration of corporality. Furthermore, the prior of San Michele, Pietro Donà, was considered to be extremely erudite and associated with other humanists in Venice<sup>31</sup>. His assistant and eventual successor, Pietro Dolfín, oversaw much of the construction of San Michele while Donà was away from Venice. He, too, is acknowledged as an intellectual luminary and maintained a lively correspondence with many of Venice's leading humanists<sup>32</sup>. Discussions of light and optics were a popular topic amongst fifteenth century humanists<sup>33</sup>. In Venice, early drafts of Marsilio Ficino's (1433-1499) short treatise on light, *Quid sit lumen in corpore mundi, in angelo, in Deo* (*What is Light in the World, Angels, and God*, 1479), circulated among the local humanist community<sup>34</sup>. Ficino's dedication to Febo Capella (ca. 1420-1482) evinces his exchange with the humanists of Venice<sup>35</sup>.

The painting helps initiate one's spiritual ascent as symbolic value may be found in the attributes of creation. Bellini presents the trees, the animals, and the clouds as a meditative microcosm of God's universe. He encourages the viewer to

ascend beyond the world of signs and symbols to contemplate Christ himself in his glory during the Resurrection. The artist's motivation would have been even more pronounced when the altarpiece was installed in its original location in the Zorzi Chapel. As our eye ascends with Christ's body, we are directed out of the picture and follow the light of illumination to the windows of the chapel, through which we presumably find a blue sky interspersed with clouds. Painting, chapel, and atmosphere are locked in an intimate dance – one that I only recently had the pleasure of experiencing.

The Gemäldegalerie, like the Zorzi chapel, relies on natural skylights and windows to help illuminate its space. During a recent visit to Berlin, as I stood marveling at the *Resurrection* a serendipitous event occurred. While gazing on Bellini's painting, a cloud that was preventing the fullness of the sun's brilliance from entering the gallery moved past, so the room and the painting were flooded with an almost divine radiance. The light's transient effects added a performative element to viewing the work and seemed to complete Bellini's painted narrative. The melancholic mood of the Passion, echoed by the previously darkened hall, had dissipated as I looked in wonder – like the Roman soldiers – at a vision of Christ's rebirth. While at the time, this spoke more to my interest in the light of the painting, in hindsight, it speaks to the importance of the cloud that is necessary for revealing the light. I stood there for several minutes watching as the light dimmed and brightened with each passing cloud – each time commencing a new act as if a stage curtain were drawn back. In these brief moments, I became an actor in the play between art and life.

A similar amalgamation of art and life likely occurred in the fifteenth century when this painting stood on the altar of Marco Zorzi's chapel. As the Camaldolese monks prayed for the family's salvation, they viewed a painting of Christ's bodily Resurrection. The painting spoke to the Order's understanding of the Resurrection as a metaphor for their spiritual life. Christ's body set against the darkened clouds figures prominently in the painting, and stresses the belief in the Incarnation and Christ's corporeal reality. But it also highlights the human body that the monks would routinely mortify to reach an ecstatic union with God – a union which Bellini illustrates before our eyes. The artist melds a representation of material reality with a view of the visionary and imbues the physical world with mystical symbolism. Like the great *sacre rappresentazioni* recounted in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives*, where cloud machines and elaborate chandeliers transformed the interior of Florentine churches into visionary tableaux of Paradise, here Bellini harnesses the full potential of devotional pictures as he transforms the natural world of his painting into a new *paradiso* found on earth<sup>36</sup>.

- 1 For a thorough bibliography on the painting to 2005, see C. Schmidt Arcangeli, *Giovanni Bellini e la pittura veneta a Berlino. Le collezioni di James Simon e Edward Solly alla Gemäldegalerie*, Verona, 2015, pp. 140-141.
- 2 See D. Gasparotto, *Giovanni Bellini: Landscapes of Faith in Renaissance Venice*, exh. cat., Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum 2017-2018, ed. by D. Gasparotto, Los Angeles, 2017.
- 3 M. Barausse, *Giovanni Bellini. I documenti*, in *Giovanni Bellini*, exh. cat., Roma, Palazzo del Quirinale, Scuderie Papali 2008-2009, ed. by M. Lucco, G.C.F. Villa, Cinisello Balsamo, 2008, p. 352, doc. 99: Pietro Bembo to Isabella d'Este, 11 January 1506: «di sempre vagare a sua voglia nelle pitture».
- 4 R. Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, New Haven-London, 1989, p. 138.
- 5 For the history of San Michele in Isola, see V. Meneghin, *S. Michele in Isola di Venezia*, Venezia, 1962, 2 vols.
- 6 The chapel measures approximately 9 x 21 ft. (3 x 7 m). See R. Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, cit., p. 310, note 35.
- 7 Venezia, Archivio di Stato, Convento S. Michele in Isola, b. 2, reg. I, c. 184r-v; transcribed in Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 310, note 37. Goffen suggests that Zorzi changed the dedication despite acknowledging a transcription error by G. Ludwig, W. von Bode, *Die Altarbilder der Kirche S. Michele di Murano und das Auferstehungsbild des Giovanni Bellini in der Berliner Galerie*, in «Jahrbuch der Königlich-Preußischen Kunstsammlungen», 24, 1903, p. 133, which erroneously referred to the chapel «della ressuretione».
- 8 For more recent considerations of the painting's iconography in relation to Camaldolese theology, see S. Rutherglen, 'Resplendent Brushes': *Giovanni Bellini's Resurrection Altarpiece for San Michele di Murano, Venice*, in «Artibus et Historiae», 38, 2017, pp. 12, 29, note 10; P. Liccoardello, *Il corpo nella tradizione camaldolese medievale: della mortificazione ascetica al superamento mistico*, in «Revue Bénédictine», 132, 2013, pp. 317-318.
- 9 See B. Blass-Simmen, 'Qualche lontani': *Distance and Transcendence in the Art of Giovanni Bellini*, in *Examining Giovanni Bellini: An Art 'More Human and More Divine'*, ed. by C.C. Wilson, Turnhout, 2015, pp. 77-92; C.C. Wilson, *Bellini's Pesaro Altarpiece: A Study in Context and Meaning*, Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1977, *passim*.
- 10 The iconography of the Resurrection and its development have been discussed at length. For the canonical sources, see H. Schrade, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst, die Sinngehalte und Gestaltungsformen*, Berlin, 1932, and the discussion by M. Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death: The Arts, Religion and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century*, Princeton, 1951, pp. 38-44. More recently, the Italian origin of the floating Christ has been questioned as scholars have identified possible earlier representations in German manuscripts from the twelfth century; see E. Cassee, K. Berserik, *The Iconography of the Resurrection: A Re-Examination of the Risen Christ Hovering Above the Tomb*, in «The Burlington Magazine», 126, 1984, pp. 20-24.
- 11 H. Damisch, *A Theory of Cloud: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. by J. Lloyd, Palo Alto, Ca., 2002.
- 12 J.K.G. Shearman, *Raphael's Clouds, and Correggio's*, in *Studi su Raffaello*, ed. by M. Sambucco Hamoud, M.L. Strocchi, conf. proc., Urbino-Firenze 6-14 aprile 1984, Urbino, 1987, pp. 657-668.
- 13 For an illuminating discussion of the soldier's weapon and reference to the morning star (*stella della mattina*), see Rutherglen, 'Resplendent Brushes', cit.

- 14 Gregory the Great, *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job, Volume 5: Books 23-27*, trans. by B. Kerns, Collegeville, Minn., 2019, pp. 256-257. It is important to note that Gregory is using the metaphor of clouds to explicate the relationship humans have with saints and holy figures. The clouds that rain down the message of God are likened to prophets and preachers who spread the word of God. The use of analogy is important here.
- 15 Bonaventure, *St. Bonaventure's Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, ed. and trans. by R.J. Karris, O.F.M., St. Bonaventure, N.Y., 2003, pp. 870-871. Bonaventure wrote an exhaustive multi-part commentary on the Gospel of Luke throughout which he references and interprets clouds. The aforementioned quotation is Bonaventure's most synoptic consideration of clouds in the *Commentary*.
- 16 Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, cit., p. 138.
- 17 L. Pacioli, *Su[m]ma de arithmetica geometria proportioni [et] proportionalita*, Venezia, 1494, f. 2r; quoted by O. Bätschmann, *Giovanni Bellini*, London, 2008, pp. 36-37.
- 18 From the sonnet by Andrea Michiel, quoted by Wilson, *Examining Giovanni Bellini*, cit., p. 18, note 7.
- 19 See Daniele Barbaro, Marciana, MS It. IV, 39, f. 2r; quoted by M.D. Davis, *Carpaccio and the Perspective of Regular Bodies*, in *La Prospettiva Rinascimentale: codificazioni e trasgressioni*, ed. by M. Dalai Emiliani, conf. proc., Milano, Castello Sforzesco, Civiche Raccolte 11-15 ottobre 1977, Firenze, 1980, p. 184, note 4.
- 20 Johannes Graves provides the most critical assessment of Alberti's treatise on Bellini's painting of the *Pesaro Altarpiece*. He notes, however, that the painting does not completely comply with Alberti's rules; see J. Graves, *Reframing the 'finestra aperta': Venetian Variations on the Comparison of Picture and Window*, in «Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte», 72, 2009, pp. 49-68.
- 21 For the most detailed account of Giovanni Fontana's biography and works, see M. Clagett, *The Life and Works of Giovanni Fontana*, in «Annali dell'Istituto di storia della scienza di Firenze», 1, 1976, pp. 5-28. There is debate about the relationship between Giovanni and Jacopo. D.W. Maze proposes that Giovanni was actually the younger brother of Jacopo, though this opinion has not been widely accepted; see D.W. Maze, *Giovanni Bellini: Birth, Parentage, and Independence*, in «Renaissance Quarterly», 66, 2013, pp. 783-823. In the recent exhibition of Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna, the curator Caroline Campbell recognizes Jacopo Bellini as the legal father of Giovanni; see C. Campbell et al., *Mantegna & Bellini*, exh. cat., London-Berlin 2018-2019, München, 2018, p. 23.
- 22 Quoted in E. Reeves, *Painting the Heavens: Art and Science in the Age of Galileo*, Princeton, 1997, p. 155.
- 23 Fontana references the lost treatise in his *Liber de omnibus rebus naturalibus*; see R. Klein, *Pomponius Gauricus on Perspective*, in «The Art Bulletin», 43, 1961, p. 211, note 5.
- 24 Quoted in Reeves, *Painting the Heavens*, cit., p. 155.
- 25 There is some debate about the degree to which optical science was empirical in the thirteenth century. Nonetheless, the emergent discipline was given greater authority as it was based in mathematical measurement – considered the sacred language of God.
- 26 Bonaventure, *Sunday Sermons of St. Bonaventure*, trans. by T. Johnson, St. Bonaventure, N.Y., 2008, p. 93.
- 27 Rutherglen, *'Resplendent Brushes'*, cit., pp. 23-28.

- 28 *Ivi*, p. 25; see above note 13.
- 29 Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 28-54*, trans. by J.W. Rettig, Washington, D.C., 1993, vol. 3, *The Fathers of the Church*, 88, p. 64.
- 30 For an overview of Camaldolese views of the body, see P. Licciardello, *Il corpo nella tradizione camaldolese medievale: dalla mortificazione ascetica al superamento mistico*, in «Revue Benedictine», 123, 2013, pp. 291-318.
- 31 Schmidt Arcangeli, *Giovanni Bellini*, cit., p. 137.
- 32 For a biographical overview of Dolfin and his epistolary record, see M. King, *Venetian Humanism in an Age of Patrician Dominance*, Princeton, 1986, pp. 362-363.
- 33 For a discussion of Bellini's relationship with Venetian humanists interested in optics and light metaphysics, see H. Wohl, *The Subject of Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Frick Collection*, in *Mosaics of Friendship: Studies in Art and History for Eve Borsook*, ed. by O. Francisci Osti, Firenze, 1999, pp. 187-198.
- 34 *Ivi*, p. 194; Wohl also suggests that early drafts of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, which discusses light metaphysics, circulated in Venice as early as 1468 and 1476.
- 35 King, *Venetian Humanism*, cit., pp. 348-349.
- 36 G. Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. by G.C. de Vere, New York, 1996, vol. 1, pp. 355-358; A. Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds. 1439-1650*, Farnham, Surrey-Burlington, Vt., 2014, pp. 13-27, 39-40.



Fig. 1: Giovanni Bellini, *Resurrection of Christ*, 1475-1479, oil on canvas, transferred from panel, 148 x 128 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, inv. no. 1177a. Photo: Jörg P. Anders.





Fig. 2: Bellini's *Resurrection* placed above the altar of the South Chapel (formerly Zorzi Chapel) in San Michele in Isola. Author's photomontage based on the reconstruction proposed by Brigit Blass-Simmen.



Fig. 3: Anonymous, Manuscript leaf with the *Resurrection*,  
from a Psalter, mid-13th century,  
tempera, ink, gold, and silver on parchment, 16.2 x 13.7 cm.  
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1925, inv. no. 25.204.3.  
Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 4: Andrea da Firenze, *Resurrection*, 1366-1367, fresco.  
Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Spanish Chapel.  
Photo: Zvonimir Atletić / Alamy Stock Photo.



Fig. 5: Detail of the cloud, from Giovanni Bellini, *Resurrection of Christ*, 1475-1479, oil on canvas, transferred from panel, 148 x 128 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, inv. no. 1177a. Photo: Jörg P. Anders.



Fig. 6: Giovanni Bellini, *Agony in the Garden*, ca. 1460, tempera on panel, 81.3 x 127 cm. London, The National Gallery, inv. no. NG762. Photo: The National Gallery, London.



Fig. 7: Author's Photoshopped image of Giovanni Bellini's *Resurrection of Christ* with the cloud removed.