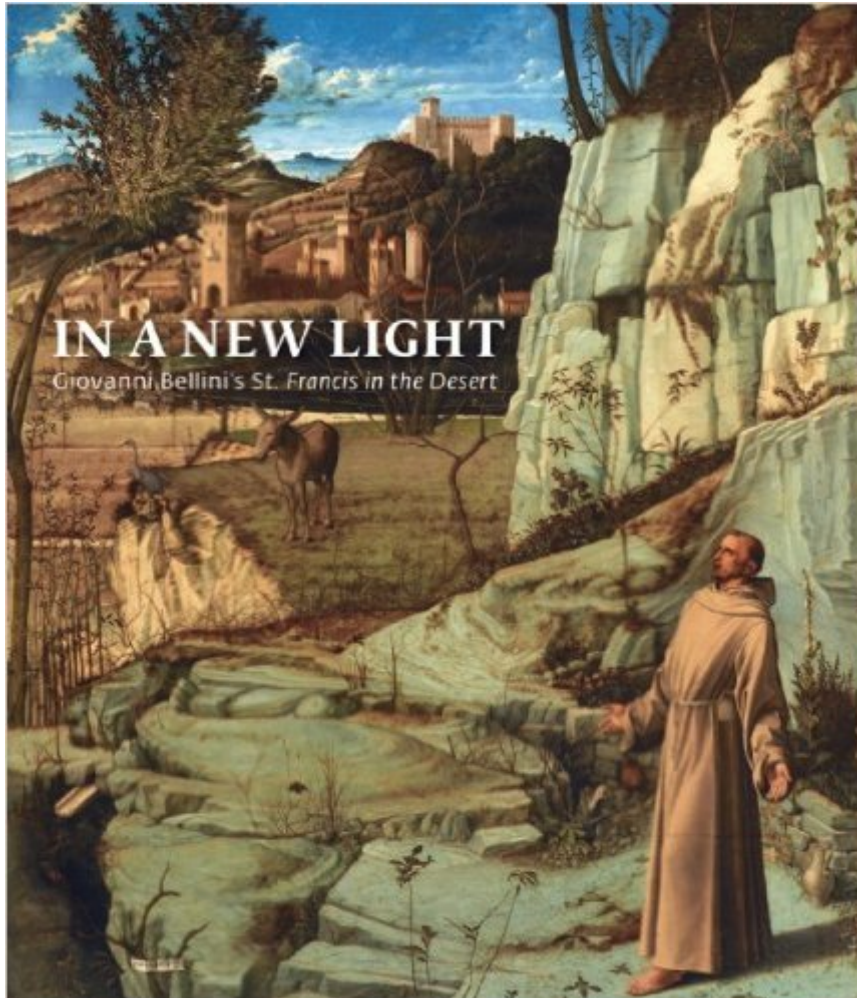


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In A New Light: Giovanni Bellini's "St. Francis In The Desert"



Synopsis

Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* (c. 1476-78) is a masterpiece of Venetian Renaissance art that has inspired generations of visitors to The Frick Collection. This monumental panel painting portrays the beloved Christian saint alone in a mountainous wilderness, stepping forward from his simple shelter into a golden light that seems to transfigure him spiritually. For centuries, viewers have puzzled over the work's meaning; until recently, however, the artist's practical conception and realization of this extraordinary vision have remained largely unexplored. *In a New Light* presents the collective findings of an unprecedented technical examination of *St. Francis in the Desert*. The recent discoveries provide a "glimpse over Bellini's shoulder" and open new avenues of research into Venetian Renaissance painting and its cultural and religious context. A richly illustrated monograph of a single picture, *In a New Light* comprises essays by leading experts in the fields of paintings conservation, Venetian art, the history of collecting, and Franciscan thought.

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Customer Reviews

Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* (c. 1476-78) is commonly thought to be one of the finest paintings by one of the greatest of the Italian Renaissance artists. It was bought by the industrialist Henry Clay Frick in 1915, after Joseph Duveen and Bernard Berenson overcame his initial reluctance and assured him that it was a good painting and worth his money. It has hung in New York's Frick Collection since that time, and in anticipation of the hundredth anniversary of its accession it was sent off in 2010 to the Department of Paintings Conservation of

the Metropolitan Museum and subjected to a complete technical examination and its first full course of conservation since 1942/43. This volume is a celebration of the painting, a comprehensive monographic investigation by a team of leading specialists in Venetian Renaissance art, the history of collections, paintings conservation, and Franciscan thought. Its chief contributors and editors are Susannah Rutherglen, an independent art historian and former Mellon Fellow at the Frick, and Charlotte Hale, Paintings Conservator at the Metropolitan Museum. Dr. Rutherglen's introductory essay sets the painting within the context of the tradition of Franciscan visual culture, which already had a considerable history by the time of Bellini's work and which, given the factional disputes within the order, was more fraught than one would have thought. Two essays deal with the painting's provenance, one with its very early years after commissioning and being hung with a very diverse group of paintings in private spaces, and another with its fortunes over the next 400 years or so. This second piece, by Anne-Marie Eze, a curator at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, is a meticulously researched and very detailed study of the panel's wanderings around Europe and various disappearances and re-emergences, and has much interesting information on the way changing tastes and the vagaries of the art market influence the fate of artworks. Dr. Eze has unearthed some documents, published here for the first time, that fill in many of the gaps in our knowledge of the painting's history, which is now complete except for the years 1796-1812. Even during his lifetime, Bellini was celebrated as a master of perspective; he was clearly aware of the traditional distance-point or bifocal perspective and also of the newer centric-point perspective of Leon Battista Alberti, both of which were used by Italian artists of the time, but neither of which was particularly helpful in the newly emerging concern to paint narrative landscapes. How Bellini negotiated this difficulty in *St. Francis* is the subject of a fascinating essay on linear perspective in the painting, which serves also as a good general introduction to these perspectival methods. It turns out that the artist combined aspects of both perspective systems, using one (to simplify somewhat) for the viewer of the painting, and another for the Saint's own privileged vision. Michael F. Cusato, O.F.M., Distinguished Professor of History at St. Bonaventure University, discusses the painting as it relates to the literature of the Franciscan movement in later medieval Italy; distinguishing that it is *an* painting *about* Francis rather than *of* Francis (159), he indicates that the literary basis or foundation for many of the key elements in the painting is a vernacular Italian text from 1375-80, the *Considerations on the Stigmata of Saint Francis*, an attempt to provide a full version of all the events surrounding the miracle. Charlotte Hale's twenty-page report on the results of the technical examination of the panel is replete with the kinds of information that can be gleaned

from the advanced technology now available to conservators like infrared reflectography, gas chromatography, etc. Her discussion is very detailed, including even the kinds of cameras and lenses, microscopes, filters and lasers used, and it should be quite fascinating to people interested in the finer points of conservation. She also has very interesting things to say about Bellini's techniques as indicators of the way he was transitioning from the use of tempera to the new medium of oil, especially with regard to his use of the reserve technique. And her examination settles some questions of previous scholarship: the overall consistency in features and handling points to Bellini having painted the entire picture himself, and although the panel was cut at the top (as we have known for some time), examination of the positions of the now missing battens on the back indicates that at most only a couple of centimeters have been removed, i.e., not enough to have contained the flying seraph seen in many of the stigmatization scenes, etc. The central essay by the two editors, "Technique and Meaning," is a thorough look at virtually every aspect of the painting, from planning to the preparation of the panel, the types of pigments used, the techniques of underpainting in various colors (which his workshop pioneered), the juxtaposition of town and landscape, the associations of some of the unusual iconography (the ass, heron, rabbit, kingfisher, etc.)—in short, pretty much everything one could think to ask about the work, and it is filled with information and cogent observation. About techniques one can be quite certain; but what meanings accrue from technical analysis are less sure, and the authors are too intelligent to force answers. Take that sheet of paper or fabric tucked under Francis's belt, for example: analysis shows that it has no traces of writing, nor can it be a patch on the saint's habit. Yet we know that Bellini planned it from the very beginning, as it is underdrawn, and he left it in reserve; so it was important to the artist's conception. But what does it mean? Indeed, what is it? Dr. Rutherglen deals with it in a separate appendix and concludes that the only thing we can say is that, since the habits of the mendicant orders had no pockets, the friars hung all sorts of objects from their belts, and in other paintings we can see knives, pouches, handkerchiefs, eyeglasses, etc. So it is something like that, and we can not and should not try to be more specific. Is St. Francis's mouth open because he is singing praise or because he is in some kind of ecstatic state? These are questions we cannot answer; we need only acknowledge that, no matter how thoroughgoing our explication of the painting, the fact that it remains finally inexplicable and ultimately enigmatic is the basis of its enduring charm and fascination. The book is wonderfully illustrated, with 122 mostly full-page or half-page reproductions, charts and diagrams; virtually all major parts of the image are presented in detail studies, and there a dozen or so full-bleed blowups acting as essay frontispieces. In other words, hardly a page is without an illustration of some sort, and some of the detail studies

have been real revelations to me, even though I know the painting well (or at least thought I did) from having been a frequent visitor to the Frick. Although it has been a few years since I last saw it, my memory tells me that the colors here are quite true to the original, and they are certainly truer than those in either the Goffen or the Bartschmann monographs or in Ronda Kasl's 2004 catalogue for the Indianapolis Museum's 2004 exhibition. There is a very extensive bibliography and a comprehensive index. This is very much a niche publication, certainly not the kind of thing that people only generally interested in Italian art are going to want to acquire, but if you have a particular interest in Giovanni Bellini or issues of painting conservation, or if you happen to be a real Venetian Renaissance aficionado, I think you will find it as informative and enjoyable as I did, and I can recommend it highly.

Great book on a great subject.

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