

Giorgione

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



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. In this possible **Self Portrait as David** (c.1477-78) he gazes out across the void of centuries with a youthful arrogance, confident of his tremendous talent to entrance his patrons and us, his viewers, with a new and staggeringly realistic view of the world.

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 style of florentine painting.

He served his apprenticeship with Giovanni Bellini.

Vasari mentions that 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 colour 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.

The **Castelfranco Madonna** (c.1503) is an altarpiece in sacra conversazione (sacred conversation) 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 is to the right and St. Nicasius to the left. The armoured 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.





In the *Adoration of the Shepherds* of 1505 Giorgione very unusually chose to portray the main scene on the right, in front of a dark grotto, while on the left there is a bright landscape crowned by trees. The kneeling shepherd pilgrims are placed in the centre of the painting, creating a dramatic tension with the Holy Family pushed near to the edge of the picture-space. The entire group of parents, child, and pilgrims form an anchored rectangle that forms a counterpoised focal point to the receding landscape on the left. The landscape, although probably made up from known elements of local scenery, with farms, a castellated tower, a lake and people going about their daily business it is totally convincing as a real location, unlike the imaginary backgrounds of Leonardo and his predecessors.

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 besieged 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 (c. 1504) which exhibits Giorgione's special qualities of colour richness and landscape romance, while demonstrating that life and death are each other's companions rather than foes.



The portrait of 1506 depicts a young woman as a bride. Her identity is unknown but she has come to be known as *Laura*. It has been speculated that she represents Mary Magdalen wearing a courtesan's robe which 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.

Behind the young woman is a branch of laurel (*Laurus*), symbol of chastity, and which carries 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 choice of an old commoner as a subject for **Portrait of an Old Woman** 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 grey, disheveled hair, her toothless mouth, and, above all, her expression of tired resignation under the weight of old age.

The three figures portrayed in **The Three Philosophers** (c.1505-09) 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 (c.1508) has been referred to as "one of the most enigmatic and famous paintings in the world".

This was Lord Byron's favourite 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* or *Le Concert Champêtre

was traditionally attributed to Giorgione, but modern critics assign it more likely to Titian, who worked for a time as his assistant, due to the figures' robustness which was typical of his style. It is most 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 it was completed by Titian after his death.



Universally recognized as one of the world's great masterpieces, and usually dated around 1510-11, it is surrounded, like other famous works 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 devise a plausible explanation of the subject or meaning of the painting.

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. Both the women are naked, aside from two light vestments; 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.

Another theory is that this painting's subject is an allegorical interpretation of Theocritus's poem about the shepherd Daphnis, thought to be the founder of pastoral poetry. Philipp Fehl references this poem in his theory on the identity of the women in the paintings.

Theocritus describes Arcadia as the land originated by the Greek god Pan. It is suggested that the nymphs create Arcadia around them, making Arcadia a spiritual state of existence that one establishes. Philipp Fehl also proposes that this painting symbolizes Ludovico Aristo's *Orlando Furioso*, a popular epic poem in the early 16th century.

A leading theory on the women's identities in the painting was put forth by Philipp Fehl in 1957, postulating that the women are Nymphs, minor ancient Greek goddesses, and not human. He stipulates that the nymphs have been lured out of the woods toward the music being created by the men in the pastoral. Fehl also maintains that these nymph women are invisible to the men in the painting but are visible to us, the viewer.

Julia Marianne Koos's theory suggests that the painting is an allegory for the discourse of love. In the Italian Renaissance, it was believed that nature was a "mirror of the lover's soul and an idyllic place of refuge".



The ***Sleeping Venus***, also known as the ***Dresden Venus***, is traditionally attributed to Giorgione, although it has long been usually thought that Titian completed it after Giorgione's death in 1510. The landscape and sky are generally accepted to be mainly by him. In the 21st century, much scholarly opinion has shifted further, to see the nude figure of Venus as also painted by Titian, leaving Giorgione's contribution uncertain.

The painting portrays a nude woman whose profile seems to echo the rolling contours of the hills in the background. It is the first

known reclining nude in Western painting, and together with the *Pastoral Concert* it established "the genre of erotic mythological pastoral", with female nudes in a landscape, accompanied in that case by clothed males. A single nude woman in any position was an unusual subject for a large painting at this date, although it was to become popular for centuries afterwards, as "the reclining female nude became a distinctive feature of Venetian painting".

There was originally a sitting figure of Cupid beside Venus's feet, which was over-painted in the 19th century. In the course of painting, the landscape has also been changed at both sides, as has the colouring of the drapery, and the head of Venus was originally seen in profile, making it very similar to Titian's later *Pardo Venus*. Through a series of x-rays that were completed in the 20th century, researchers were able to conclusively tell that this painting had contained different elements that were painted over. The reasoning behind these later changes are still unknown, although it could have been suggested by the commissioner of the work.

According to Sydney Freedberg, underlying erotic implications are made by Venus's raised arm and the placement of her left hand on her groin. The sheets are painted in silver, being a cold colour rather than the more commonly used warm tones for linens, and they are rigid looking in comparison to those depicted in similar paintings by Titian or Velazquez. The landscape mimics the curves of the woman's body and this, in turn, relates the human body back to being a natural, organic object. Freedberg writes:

The shape of being is the visual demonstration of a state of being in which idealized existence is suspended in immutable slow-breathing harmony. All the sensuality has been distilled off from this sensuous presence, and all incitement; Venus denotes not the act of love but the recollection of it. The perfect embodiment of Giorgione's dream, she dreams his dream herself.

The art historian Michael Paraskos suggests that the painting may be an allegory of Cyprus, which was ceded to Venice in 1489, as the body of Venus is posed to resemble the shape of the island.

The composition of this painting was highly influential, despite very public display of such images often being restricted for some centuries. The influence of this painting can be traced in a number of later reclining nudes such as the *Pardo Venus* and *Venus of Urbino* of Titian the *Rockby Venus* of Velasquez, Goya's *La Maja Desnuda* and *Olympia* by Manet and other works by Ingres and Rubens, amongst others.

Giorgione died of the plague then raging, in 1510. An archival document published in 2011 places his death on the island of Lazzareto Nuovo; which was used as a place of quarantine in times of plague.

His name and work continue to exercise a spell on posterity. But to identify and define, among the relics of his age and school, precisely what that work is, and to distinguish it from the similar work of other men whom his influence inspired, is a very difficult matter. Though there are no longer any supporters of the "Pan Giorgionismus" which a century ago claimed for Giorgione nearly every painting of the time that at all resembles his manner, there are still, as then, exclusive critics who reduce to half a dozen the list of extant pictures which they will admit to be actually by this painter.