

Blood of the Redeemer: Devoutly Franciscan and Strangely Pagan?



Sirah Bah

Early Italian Renaissance 410

Dr. Butler

12/4/2017

Blood of the Redeemer completed by Giovanni Bellini in 1465 is a work well known and heavily studied by art historians. This work, which can now be found in the National Gallery of Art in London has puzzled many by the clash of pagan symbolism with devout Franciscan ideals. Bellini revolutionized painting in Venice, and made this tempera on poplar painting a true paragon of early Italian renaissance art. With his heavy focus on capturing of the human form in its naturalism to the reawakening of Greco-Roman ideals, Bellini truly was an innovator in Quattrocento Italian art. Giovanni Bellini's innovative style and complex subject matter in *Blood of the Redeemer* greatly reflect the discourse put forth by Alberti, and the artist's task to further advance art. Even though this painting on first glance appears to be greatly enriched by not only the preaching of the Bible and also the Franciscan order, but with closer attention one would notice the not so subtle markings of pagan teachings as well. Bellini's *Blood of the Redeemer* showcased the codependence from the Catholic Church on antiquity and secular themes in order to create a work to represent Quattrocento Franciscan Christianity in its totality. Giovanni Bellini was successful in doing this by cloaking the secular in the overt coverings of the Franciscan order. In order to back up this claim, this paper will touch on the blood debates within the Franciscan order, the power of the blood within cult culture, and the pagan imagery and its influence in the secularization of Christ's body.

In order to critically analyze and discuss the importance of the painting at hand, it is crucial to understand the painter. Giovanni Bellini was born in Venice in 1430 to the well renowned artist Jacopo Bellini.¹ He was believed to have been one of the three sons of Jacopo Bellini's wife, Anna Rinversi, but documents published to the public at the time of her death suggest otherwise. When Giovanni Bellini's assumed mother passed away in 1471 he was the

¹ Goffen. "Bellini, Giovanni." *Artist Info*, www.nga.gov/Collection/artist-info.936.html.

only one of her assumed three sons to not be mentioned in the will.² Scholars have long since been intrigued in the matter of his legitimacy, and even Vasari contributed to the controversy. The argument of his legitimacy was something that could have potentially influenced the life and style of Giovanni's works. With Jacopo Bellini being one of the founding fathers of renaissance art in Venice, and with his brothers' aid in carrying the torch and legacy of their father came a great burden. The strain of living up to the expectations of not only his father but in the realm of other Italian artists is one of the reasons in which Giovanni Bellini was successful in designing an innovative and novel narrative style in his works that pushed the viewer to expand their perceptions and thought processes.

Not much is known of Giovanni Bellini's early years, until he joined an apprenticeship with his brother Gentile in their father's workshop.³ From his times as a young apprentice to when Giovanni Bellini finally began to make a name for himself, he primarily focused on creating religious subject matters. His religious compositions were created with a keen focus on the styles inherited by his father and by the influence of the Paduan school. The merger of these two trains of thought created a Giovanni Bellini style that added great depth for religious feeling, human pathos, and a more sensuous representation of human nature than previously depicted in nature.⁴ Bellini's beginnings in depicting religious scenes bordered traditional, and one would notice the efforts of a young painter trying to just make a living in this trade. However, by the time Bellini began to work on *Blood of the Redeemer*, he had grown exponentially in elevating the "standard" of religious paintings to an innovative level. One way in how Bellini's style was

² Goffen. "Bellini, Giovanni." *Artist Info*, www.nga.gov/Collection/artist-info.936.html.

³ Ibid

⁴ Henty, P. (2017, March 26). Giovanni Bellini. Retrieved November 29, 2017, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giovanni-Bellini-Italian-painter>

revolutionized was through the enrichment of the scenery encompassing the narrative at hand. By enhancing the physical setting of the work, Bellini cemented himself as a great landscape painter with careful attention to the minute details of nature. It has been documented that with Bellini's analysis of natural lighting individuals could "...deduce not only the season depicted but almost the hour of the day."⁵ The stylistic innovations put forth by Giovanni was what lead to high renaissance giants such as Giorgione, Titian, and Tintoretto.⁶

Blood of the Redeemer is whole heartedly a representation of Franciscan ideology and beliefs. The patron of this work is still unknown; However, Bellini's earlier works were greatly commissioned by Franciscan orders. Due to this assumed patron's background, Bellini worked closely with a Franciscan theological advisor. At this point in Italian history, the Pope was from the Franciscan order. This order and ideology greatly differed from the Dominicans, and created a great schism in the catholic church from the transition of power from the Dominican Pope to the Francisca Pope Sixtus IV. This shift in leadership in the catholic church also presented itself in art, and more specifically in the compositions and symbology that artists decided to incorporate into their work. One of the most dramatic shifts that occurred when Pope Sixtus IV took power was with the presence or lack thereof of blood in religious art. Franciscans had very vehemently denied the divinity of Christ's blood, and this contrasts heavily with one of the central tenants of the Dominican order.⁷ The central tenant on the idea of Christ's blood shared by Franciscans is that mankind had not been saved by the blood of the Redeemer but that they

⁵ Hendy, P. (2017, March 26). Giovanni Bellini. Retrieved November 29, 2017, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giovanni-Bellini-Italian-painter>

⁶ Goffen. "Bellini, Giovanni." *Artist Info*, www.nga.gov/Collection/artist-info.936.html.

⁷ Braham, Allan, Martin Wyld, and Joyce Plesters. "Bellini's 'The Blood of the Redeemer'." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 2 (1978): 11-24. *JSTOR*.

were saved by his death. This is why many Franciscans commissioned paintings portraying relatively little to no blood, and instead focusing on the vague presence of it all. This schism between the Franciscans and the Dominicans has largely been researched and known amongst historians as the debate surrounding the “Holy Blood”.⁸ The concept and interplay of the Holy Blood is something that Bellini executed in true Franciscan ideal for *Blood of the Redeemer*.

The Holy Blood debate took place on December 25th to the 28th of 1462.⁹ Dominicans believed that the blood remained holy throughout the three days post crucifixion, however, Franciscans believed that during those three days the blood lost union with the Word. The debate between these two orders officially ceased in 1463 with the signing of the De sanguine Christi decree. This decree was written by a Venetian Bishop, and undoubtedly shaped the training and execution of works proceeded to be done by Giovanni Bellini. Venice was a central niche for the Franciscan order, and they had a prominent hand in how religious works were completed in this city-state.

Giovanni Bellini’s 1465 creation of *Blood of the Redeemer* has puzzled scholars on its conflicting secular and religious imagery. Bellini created this work by using egg tempera on poplar, and it was believed to have been placed on the door of a tabernacle where the wine and bread for the mass were stored.¹⁰ This work was believed to have been placed in a small monastic setting in a city associated with a blood-relic.¹¹ The image shows an imitatio Christ after

⁸ Braham, Allan, Martin Wyld, and Joyce Plesters. "Bellini's 'The Blood of the Redeemer'." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 2 (1978): 11-24. *JSTOR*.

⁹ Coffey, Rosemary A., Ph.D. *The "Man of Sorrows" of Giovanni Bellini: Sources and Significance*. Diss. The U Wisconsin - Madison, 1987. N.p.: ProQuest Dissertations, 1987. 1-636. *Dissertation Abstracts International*. Web.

¹⁰ "The Blood of the Redeemer." *The National Gallery*. N.p., n.d. Web.

¹¹ Coffey, Rosemary A., Ph.D. *The "Man of Sorrows" of Giovanni Bellini: Sources and Significance*. Diss. The U Wisconsin - Madison, 1987. N.p.: ProQuest Dissertations, 1987. 1-636. *Dissertation Abstracts International*. Web.

his crucifixion as the Man of Sorrows. Christ is holding the cross and the crown of thorns, and an angel is collecting the blood dripping from Christ's body into a chalice. The cross and crown of thorns were added as a visual reminder for the passion of Christ, and the blood flowing into the chalice is representative of the Eucharist. Also gathered at Christ's feet were clouds that were originally adorned with more angels around them. However, through cleaning and restoration of this image over the years these clouds have been greatly damaged to the point where they now are completely damaged. After a recent restoration of this image, it was discovered that these clouds that were placed around Christ's feet originally had seraphim and cherubim.

Christ is placed in the center of the image in a courtyard space bordered with parapet reliefs. The reliefs are ornamented with antique and pagan ideology which many different scholars have attempted to theorize as to why they are so prominent in a blatantly Christianized image. More questionable juxtaposition of secular imagery with Christian cult culture is observed with the elaborate landscape that Bellini had constructed. Bellini shows homage to his testament of skill in creating naturalistic landscapes as life behind Christ in *Blood of the Redeemer*. In this landscape is a castle, small countryside town, and two Franciscan monks. The monks were able to be identified as Venetian Franciscans, because of the dark blue color of their garb.¹²

Bellini constructed a work argued to be a true testament to Christianity, however, in order to do this, he created an interplay between cult culture and Franciscan ideals. The most prominent example of such in *Blood of the Redeemer* is Bellini's peculiar representation of Christ. Christ is undoubtedly the central figure of the portrait, and his dimensions are much

¹² Braham, Allan, Martin Wyld, and Joyce Plesters. "Bellini's 'The Blood of the Redeemer'." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 2 (1978): 11-24. *JSTOR*.

larger than anything else represented in the painting. This is important as it hints to the triumph of Christianity over pagan religions, and the power of the Christian faith. In this image Christ is shown in a soft contrapposto, with his left hand covering one of his holy wounds while holding onto the cross and his right arm gesturing outwards from his body pointing towards the angel below him. The body of Christ is religious in his representation as the stigmata are present to remind the viewer of the passion of the Christ, and also to illicit feelings of reflection when meditating on the body of Christ. Another religious aspect of the creation of the Christ imagery is the cross that Christ is holding. Its primary function is to evoke the remembrance of the crucifixion, however, in the representation of the cross, Bellini is also giving homage to the Franciscan order. The kind of cross that Christ is holding is known as a San Damiano Cross.¹³ The San Damiano Cross is the cross that St. Francis was praying too when he received the word of God to “go repair my house which as you see is falling into ruin.”¹⁴ Because of St. Francis’ tasked mission from God to bring renewal to the Church, the cross of San Damiano is often portrayed in Franciscan art. Bellini’s rendition of the cross is similar to the original in that the top part of the cross is short and more stout than the bottom part below the transect.

Bellini’s portrayal of Christ also reinforces Christian incarnationist theology while adhering to the blood debate put forth by Franciscans. The stigmata of Christ are present in the painting, and these serve as reminders of the flesh of Christ and his overarching humanity. Since this is a Franciscan painting the blood is very minimal, however, the illusion to his flesh and blood being the matter of transubstantiation is still very poignantly getting across to the viewer.

¹³ Niemier, R., O.F.M., Feister, J., & McCloskey, P., O.F.M. (2006, 10). The challenge of the san damiano cross. *St. Anthony Messenger*, 114, 18-22. Retrieved from <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/1721698258?accountid=8285>

¹⁴ *Ibid*

The realistic pale flesh tones of Christ's body, and the blood dripping from his right hand into the mass chalice are all themes enhancing the incarnationalist theology. Not only is the imagery of Christ's body being able to bleed is important as mankind can, but also by the blood being preserved in the chalice aids to the Church's belief in wine becoming the blood of Christ. Another stylistic approach Bellini made to strengthen the idea of Christ's human body is in Christ himself touching his torso. The heightened tactility of his body is rarely seen in painting, and again the idea of Christ's tactile flesh that once was present on Earth is another main point in incarnationalist theology in the harping of his humanity. The minimal presence of the blood that was once glaringly present in Dominican works, is another example of the shift to a Franciscan Pope and how Franciscan ideals began to shape art in the 1460s.

However, with the religious context of the representation of Christ still kept in mind, Bellini stylistically imposed cult culture in his Christ. Scholars believe that Bellini constructed his Christ as such in order to connect on another level with the viewer.¹⁵ One Scholar, Braham, made an argument that Bellini represents Christ stylistically in a secular manner in order to supplement Christ's heroism. The pose and body of Christ were modeled after a Greco-Roman influence; however, Bellini had added a veneer of religious ideals in order to keep it in decorum with the times. Bellini is successful in doing such by presenting Christ in a confident pose of a Greco-Roman sculpture, but by also hinting to the miracles of Christ.¹⁶ The Greco-Roman sculpture that influenced the depiction of Christ was a sculpture completed of the Roman figure Aurelius. Scholars are unsure as to which Aurelius that Bellini is referencing in this painting. Bellini could have been referencing Aurelianus or Marcus Aurelius. Aurelianus was a figure in

¹⁵ Braham, Allan, Martin Wyld, and Joyce Plesters. "Bellini's 'The Blood of the Redeemer'." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 2 (1978): 11-24. *JSTOR*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*

antique literature who has been legacized in pagan cult culture for imposing the worship of the Sun as a state religion.¹⁷ This would be even more interesting in the discussion of the interplay of cult culture and Christian ideals to create a true Franciscan work as it would be paying homage to a leader who called for the worship of something other than God. However, it is also theorized that Bellini intended to represent the pose of the pioneer of the stoicism movement, Marcus Aurelius.¹⁸ This argument seems to be more accepted as Marcus Aurelius' works discussed and emphasized; fate, reason, and self-restraint. The ideals that Marcus Aurelius became known for, stoicism, ties greatly to the foundations of Christianity for it reflects strong moral values for the Christian believers. Scholar Anna James Kristiansen saw this secularization of Christ as a method for Bellini to represent an *Imitatio Christi* that could truly resonate with its audience. Again, the patronage of this work is still unknown so scholars do not really know who would have had access to view this work. So, the *Imitatio Christi* put forth by Bellini was influenced by cult culture in order to present Christ in a non-intellectual manner so that the lay people and not only the aristocrats could interpret this painting.¹⁹

Giovanni Bellini juxtaposed secular imagery with religious in *Blood of the Redeemer* in order to accomplish a true quattrocento religious work. The juxtaposition of Christ imagery with the reliefs behind him is also a case of interests.²⁰ The reliefs behind Christ are of secular/pagan themes and ideals. Bynum discusses in her text that the functionality of the reliefs was to enclose

¹⁷ Braham, Allan, Martin Wyld, and Joyce Plesters. "Bellini's 'The Blood of the Redeemer'." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 2 (1978): 11-24. *JSTOR*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Kristiansen, A.J. (1979). *Giovanni Bellini's "The Blood of the Redeemer": a public image for a private patron* (Master of Arts). Retrieved from UBC These and Dissertations Database.

²⁰ Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Wonderful blood: theology and practice in late medieval northern Germany and beyond*. Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

the holy space from the terrestrial landscape.²¹ This separation creates a hierarchy between the holy space and the Earth. However, the scenes depicted on the reliefs in the holy space are of antique figures. Although, Bellini showed his intellectual prowess in that he is able to unite pagan cult culture with Christian ideals to have the reliefs show their interrelatedness. The reliefs on the left have figures gilded in gold against a deep red, marble-speckled background. This is the side of the painting in which Christ's blood is flowing into the chalice, and therefore supposed to be representative of his blood in that relief. However, the deep red was not placed in order to resemble the blood sacrifice in antiquity, but to allude to the pagan burial rituals. The stylistic choice to present less of an emphasis on the blood of Christ, and instead relay redemption as a consequence for the shedding of the Holy Blood was another way in which Bellini was successful in employing the interplay of cult culture and religious ideals to create a Quattrocento religious work.²² Although, Bellini painted Christ's hand in the center of the right relief, to be a symbol of how Christ's blood is able to extend the possibility of redemption to all and even into the pagan world.²³

The relief to the right depicts pagan gods, Mercury and Pan. In Greco-Roman mythology, these two Gods were represented in escorting the souls of the dead to Hades. The functionality of incorporating these two figures into this work is to provide a contrast of the afterlife in pagan culture and in Christianity. The Christ that is depicted in *Blood of the Redeemer* is Christ after his crucifixion, and when he had died. The relief to the right is portraying the pagan beliefs of the afterlife, which is being directly juxtaposed with the Christian beliefs of the afterlife as well.

²¹ Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Wonderful blood: theology and practice in late medieval northern Germany and beyond*. Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

²² Braham, Allan, Martin Wyld, and Joyce Plesters. "Bellini's 'The Blood of the Redeemer'." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 2 (1978): 11-24. *JSTOR*.

²³ *Ibid*

Bellini's decision to incorporate the pagan doctrine of the afterlife into this work is also a way to show the triumph of Christianity over pagan beliefs. The Christian functionality of this work outshines the pagan in; the dimensions of the Christian figures, and the enlivenment of Christian figures as they are represented in flesh whereas the pagan figures are permanently subdued to remain in the cement of marble sculpture.

Another example of how the stress of the secular plays to fit into the religious is with the medieval landscape that Giovanni Bellini created. This landscape is timeless and serves to construct a parallel between the images of pagan and Christian sacrifice. There are two cityscapes shown on opposite sides of Christ. To the side to the right of Christ is an antique city in ruins, and out of the ruins comes out a Priest and his acolyte. This city is dark and barren with rundown buildings, and leafless trees. The ruins are meant to represent pagan theology and the crumbling of their domain in Italian society. This cityscape is contrasted with the opposing city that has a pathway that leads directly to the holy space holding Christ. This cityscape is supposed to be of Jerusalem, and is the promised land.²⁴ This land is fertile, and is flooded with the light of dawn to resemble God's blessings. The landscape serves as the visual representation of the central thesis in that the interplay of pagan ideals with Christianize symbols serves to create a work truly narrative of Christianity.

Giovanni Bellini was a painter ahead of his time in his intellectual ability, and in how he could compose truly complex narrative works. As an heir to the great Venetian artist, Jacopo Bellini, Giovanni Bellini had great expectations for the legacy he would leave for future Venetian artists

²⁴ Brown, Beverly L. "As Time Goes By: Temporal Plurality and the Antique in Andrea Mantegna's Saint Sebastian and Giovanni Bellini's Blood of the Redeemer." *Artibus Et Historiae*, vol. 67, 2013, pp. 21–312. *Proquest Central*.

to come. Giovanni Bellini's early works stayed in the format of traditional religious works in that he followed the formula, and added little to no innovation. However, when Bellini composed *Blood of the Redeemer* he began to grasp his role as an artist and the responsibility of artists to contribute something to this trade that future generations could grow on. Hence, with this sort of innate responsibility of the artist, Bellini enhanced his narrative works to encourage his audience to push the boundaries of their knowledge. In *Blood of the Redeemer* Bellini imposed an interplay of secular and religious imagery to still convey a Christian narrative, however, in a way in that the audience could not look at this work without remembering their antique past. This was revolutionary in this time, because he created a work of decorum but all the while calling attention to the pagan past. Giovanni Bellini was successful in doing such through his representation of Christ, addition of pagan figures in reliefs behind Christ, and in the narrative conveyed from the cityscapes of the background.

Works Cited

- Braham, Allan, Martin Wyld, and Joyce Plesters. "Bellini's 'The Blood of the Redeemer'." *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 2 (1978): 11-24. *JSTOR*.
- Brown, Beverly L. "As Time Goes By: Temporal Plurality and the Antique in Andrea Mantegna's Saint Sebastian and Giovanni Bellini's Blood of the Redeemer." *Artibus Et Historiae*, vol. 67, 2013, pp. 21–312. *Proquest Central*.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Wonderful blood: theology and practice in late medieval northern Germany and beyond*. Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.
- Coffey, Rosemary A., Ph.D. *The "Man of Sorrows" of Giovanni Bellini: Sources and Significance*. Diss. The U Wisconsin - Madison, 1987. N.p.: ProQuest Dissertations, 1987. 1-636. *Dissertation Abstracts International*. Web.
- Goffen. "Bellini, Giovanni." *Artist Info*, www.nga.gov/Collection/artist-info.936.html.
- Hendy, P. (2017, March 26). Giovanni Bellini. Retrieved November 29, 2017, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giovanni-Bellini-Italian-painter>
- Kristiansen, A.J. (1979). *Giovanni Bellini's "The Blood of the Redeemer": a public image for a private patron* (Master of Arts). Retrieved from UBC These and Dissertations Database.
- Niemier, R., O.F.M., Feister, J., & McCloskey, P., O.F.M. (2006, 10). The challenge of the san damiano cross. *St. Anthony Messenger*, 114, 18-22. Retrieved from <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/1721698258?accountid=8285>
- "The Blood of the Redeemer." *The National Gallery*. N.p., n.d. Web.