

The Divine as Seen by Man

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Art/Art History

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Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in Ecstasy* (c. 1475-80), Frick Collection, New York, shows St. Francis receiving the stigmata in the middle of the wilderness where a large cityscape lies in the distance. St. Francis makes up a small portion of the painting in comparison to the vast landscape in which he stands, barefoot in the lower right corner, with an expression of awe and openness. His eyes lift up into the upper left corner, his mouth lies open as do the palms of his hands thus revealing the stigmata. He stands relaxed with the leg nearest the viewer slightly bent, and this line extends into his back. Light floods from the upper left corner where there is a small break in the clouds forming a subtle diagonal that is continued by three wooden beams that hold up the wooden lattice, over which grapevines grow. The light's rays illuminate an oddly contorted laurel tree that stands to the far left on the opposite pole of St. Francis. The implied diagonal also extends to St. Francis, illuminating him in warm golds, in contrast to the cavernous rocks he is standing on that remain enveloped in cool shadows. Deeper into the rocky ledge and behind the lattice stands St. Francis's desk with a skull and Bible, his shoes lie on the ground below next to where he would sit. Adjacent to the rocky cliff where St. Francis stands is a landscape that makes up the middle ground. A distant shepherd herding a multitude of sheep divides the flat middle ground from an extensive and hilly townscape. A donkey stands beside the rock face, on a grass-covered ledge looking into the distance where he is kept company by a crane. Both the wild and the cultivated vegetation are delicately articulated and rendered with clarity. Bellini's signature is posted on branches at the edge of the rock face.

In his essay, "Between Form and Representation: The Frick St. Francis," art historian Emanuele Lugli examines Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in Ecstasy* in order to address the problem of the strangely tense and contorted laurel tree in the foreground of a vastly calm composition. He sets out to explain the subject matter of the Frick St. Francis. From the

painting's conception, scholars commonly try to interpret the Frick St. Francis either solely as an event picture or solely as a picture depicting being; in other words, previous scholars had attempted interpretation primarily through representational values, such as event or being, not analyzing the painting at the formal level. Lugli argues that the Frick St. Francis is an intermediary between both event picture and being picture, not just one, or the other¹. He suggests that Bellini was not concerned with staying within either of these modes of representation, but was rather concerned with maintaining meaning through new, original means of expression in representing the divine². Lugli suggests that the laurel tree and its formal characteristics, such as its mandorla shape and position, replace the traditional motif of the seraph to convey that the divine can only be suggested and not fully represented through artistic means alone. Consequently, the tree serves as an intermediary between the two modes of representations³. He supports this thesis by pointing to the historical context, both of the reform in the Franciscan doctrine and the progressive changes in paintings depicting the stigmatization, in which Bellini constructed the work and how the context around him influenced his decision to leave out traditional iconography and replace it with new forms of representation, and in doing so, is a representation of the changing attitudes of the time⁴.

Lugli's argument is merited in that he shows the progressive loss of elements and modifications within the pictorial tradition of the stigmatization of St. Francis that ultimately lead Bellini to replace the traditional iconography of stigmatizations, specifically the seraph, with forms that evoke, rather than explicitly show, a divine presence. Furthermore, Lugli addresses the critical revision in the 15th century of the Franciscan doctrine, in which the illogical and

¹ Lugli, Emanuele. "Between Form and Representation." *Art History* 32, Issue 1(2009): 28.

² *Ibid.*, 51.

³ *Ibid.*, 28, 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-44.

supernatural conception of the stigmatization, as seen in earlier pictorial representations of the stigmatization, was reconceptualized as a psychological rather than a physical event⁵. On the other hand, Lugli merely acknowledges the absences of other motifs that were traditionally used in depicting the stigmatization and does not thoroughly examine their absence as he had done with the absence and replacement of the traditional seraph iconography within the Frick St. Francis. Specifically, Lugli does not discuss Bellini's decision to leave out Brother Leo from the stigmatization, if the Frick St. Francis is in fact a stigmatization. Given the lack of explanation of Brother Leo's absence from the Frick St. Francis, Lugli cannot fully support that the painting is a representation of the stigmatization and, consequently, cannot support that the laurel tree serves as a break between event picture and being picture. With further explanation of why Bellini may have also left out Brother Leo and even the rays of light traditionally used to represent St. Francis physically receiving the stigmata, this essay will attempt to resolve, or reinforce, the Frick St. Francis as a stigmatization where the viewer would have been invited to be an active participant, acting as the missing Brother Leo, outside of the pictorial representation. This essay will consider both, as it will reinforce the painting as a stigmatization and show how art could inspire the viewer to follow St. Francis's example.

Despite having put himself in the isolation of the cave, the compositional elements suggests that St. Francis has not been able to completely remove himself from society, or at least the little city that lies in the distance. St. Francis's cave dwelling and the city contain some distinct commonalities that suggest there is a connection between the two. The diagonal created by the edge of the cave dwelling is echoed in the hillside that envelops the small cityscape in the distance. The diagonal of the hillside is paralleled in the pooling rocks that separate St. Francis from the agriculture in the middle ground. The main cave formation extends vertically from the

⁵ Ibid., 36-37.

diagonal, as does the large building that sits atop the hill in the background. Moreover, the top of this rocky extension is covered in moss that closely mimics the roof of one of the citadels in both color and shape. The cave has a level of domestication that seems to detract from the isolation that St. Francis would have tried to place himself in. Multiplicity is also common between the two spaces. The numerable towers seen in the town are repeated in the rectangular formations of the rock face. These commonalities suggest the limitations of St. Francis in his inability to remove himself from the urban life. Despite placing himself in the wilderness, he remains connected to the town, unable to remove himself.

Yet, even with the similarities between the two settings, there are elements that differentiate the two dwellings, as would be expected between a cave in the wilderness and a populated city. Firstly, Bellini uses a slightly different color palette in the rendering of the town in the hillside and the cavernous rocks that St. Francis stands on. The city is bathed in warm yellowish and reddish brown, but the rocks behind St. Francis are cast in bluish-gray shadows that ultimately contribute to an austere atmosphere of solitude and isolation. However, the disparities between the two spaces are overshadowed by the similarities between St. Francis and the city. Like the city, St. Francis is illuminated in golden browns. If this light source was logical, both St. Francis and the cave would be bathed in a warm color palette. Instead, the two are juxtaposed in Bellini's peculiar choice of lighting. Moreover, the shadows are also not completely natural. St. Francis's outstretched arms do not cast a shadow on the rock face as his body does. The irrational lighting suggests that the source of this light is supernatural, even divine. This choice in lighting distinguishes St. Francis from his isolative cave dwelling and further connects him to the distant city. However, as Lugli noted quite convincingly, St. Francis is connected to another part of the painting. This illogical play with illumination is mirrored

again in the laurel tree that seems to bend toward St. Francis at the opposite pole of the composition.

Lugli convincingly shows that the laurel tree in the Frick St. Francis is an important element of the painting: the laurel tree shares a relationship with the saint as evidenced by their positioning at opposite poles and that they are both illuminated by the unnatural light source. Lugli addresses how the tree is seemingly drawn towards St. Francis at the opposite pole with “an animation at odds with the still, placid landscape”⁶. He, too, recognizes that the lighting is “not realistic” and serves more as a “pictorial solution”⁷. The tree seems to disrupt the flow of light from the sky despite not existing on the same plane⁸. In doing so, the tree not only becomes unnaturally illuminated, but diffuses the light onto St. Francis and the cityscape. If this unnatural light serves as a representation of a divine presence, its illumination, and that of St. Francis suggests that St. Francis is in the midst of a vision. This, however, leaves out an explanation of why Bellini would have chosen to illuminate the city as well. As both the tree and St. Francis are illuminated and suggested to share a relationship, the city also seems to share some part in the relationship.

Lugli does not explain the relationship between St. Francis and the cityscape that lies in the distant hills. Failing to acknowledge this relation inhibits one from understanding Bellini’s true intention in creating the enigmatic work that may or may not represent the stigmatization. Lugli does provide a context in which Bellini would have been inspired to adopt a more naturalistic means of representing the divine over the traditional and supernatural iconography. If the viewer replaces Brother Leo outside of the picture frame, the absence of other more illogical elements usually present in stigmatizations may have been employed by Bellini to further

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁸ Ibid., 29.

suggest the stigmatization as a psychological phenomenon because the more illogical elements of the stigmatization would not have been seen by Brother Leo since he was not in St. Francis's meditative state. If this painting is of the psychological interpretation of the stigmatization it is suggested that Bellini would have been focused on representing the psychological aspects of the event to the viewer. Therefore, St. Francis's connection to the city is vital in the portrayal of St. Francis's psychological experience.

Elements of the city's architecture are seemingly personified in St. Francis. Like the hillside mounted with extensions of citadels, St. Francis stands on the base of a sloping rock formation with his body extended vertically in rapture, rather than on his knees in more traditional stigmatizations. Also, the folds of his robes take on architectural qualities of the city buildings, which are adorned with arches that extend down the length of each building with buttresses. Not choosing to place St. Francis on his knees, Bellini was able to closer tie him to the city. At the base of the city hillside is a small body of water that closely resembles the pooling rocks that St. Francis himself stands on. The same undertones of blue and green exist in both spaces and further suggest a connection between the two. Like the water in the background, the stony formation has a reflective quality. Choosing to closely link the city with St. Francis and not just the mandorla shaped laurel tree suggests that Bellini may not have aimed for this to be of the stigmatization alone but to illustrate even the saint's limitations in achieving solitude.

St. Francis appears to be consumed in an ecstatic vision, but it is unclear whether this is the immediate cause of the stigmatization or it was achieved through intense meditation alone. The saint looks as though he is in a state of complete rapture and resignation. His chest is drawn up as if pulled by a string connected to the laurel tree and his hands lie open at his sides. His left leg is drawn toward the tree as it bends forward underneath the saint's robes while his right leg is

suggested to be firmly planted on the ground. In combination with the slight bend in his left knee, St. Francis's visible foot arches subtly as if is levitating off the ground. This semi-contrapposto pose demonstrates how despite fully devoting himself to God, he remains tied to the world he has tried to isolate himself from. Thus, establishing the connection between the two places, this painting may not be fully about St. Francis's model isolation, but even how he could not totally remove himself from the city and its social influences. Moreover, the painting suggests how an ecstatic vision such as this is still grounded in the real world that one inhabits. A vision may bring St. Francis closer to proximity with God, but this vision will not be able to bring him into the actual heavenly realm of Christ.

Furthermore, the divine is not representable by pictorial means⁹, so by grounding St. Francis and his ecstatic vision in a more worldly landscape, Bellini was able to place this otherworldly experience into a worldly realm of which divinity's divine presence must be muted into terms that humans can comprehend. I believe Bellini was aware that he would not be able to adequately portray St. Francis's spiritual experience and, furthermore, that St. Francis would not have seen God as he truly exists but only as what he could understand in the context of human fallibility. Despite Lugli thoroughly explaining the relationship between St. Francis and the laurel tree, he did not explain the connection between St. Francis and city that sits in the hill. By not confronting this relationship, Lugli negates an integral piece of information that would help interpret Bellini's motives for creating this work. Not only would I argue, as did Lugli, that Bellini recognized that the divine could not be represented by pictorial means, but I would suggest that Bellini understood that St. Francis's vision, whether it be a part of the stigmatization or not, was not a true representation of Christ to St. Francis himself. Bellini's connection of the devout saint and the city serve as a means of tying St. Francis to the worldly rather than heavenly

⁹ Ibid., 46.

realm. His isolation does not remove him from worldly influences and consequentially it did not enable St. Francis to see the divine in non-human means.

Works Cited

Lugli, Emanuele. "Between Form and Representation." *Art History* 32, Issue 1(2009): 21-51.