ART IN AMERICA

Venetian paintings in United States. (4)
by B Berenson.

MANTEGNA : SACRA CONVERSAZIONE
COLLECTION OF MRS. JOHN LOWELL GARDNER, BOSTON

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VENETIAN PAINTINGS IN THE UNITED STATES: PART FOUR · BY BERNHARD BERENSON

THE BELLINI

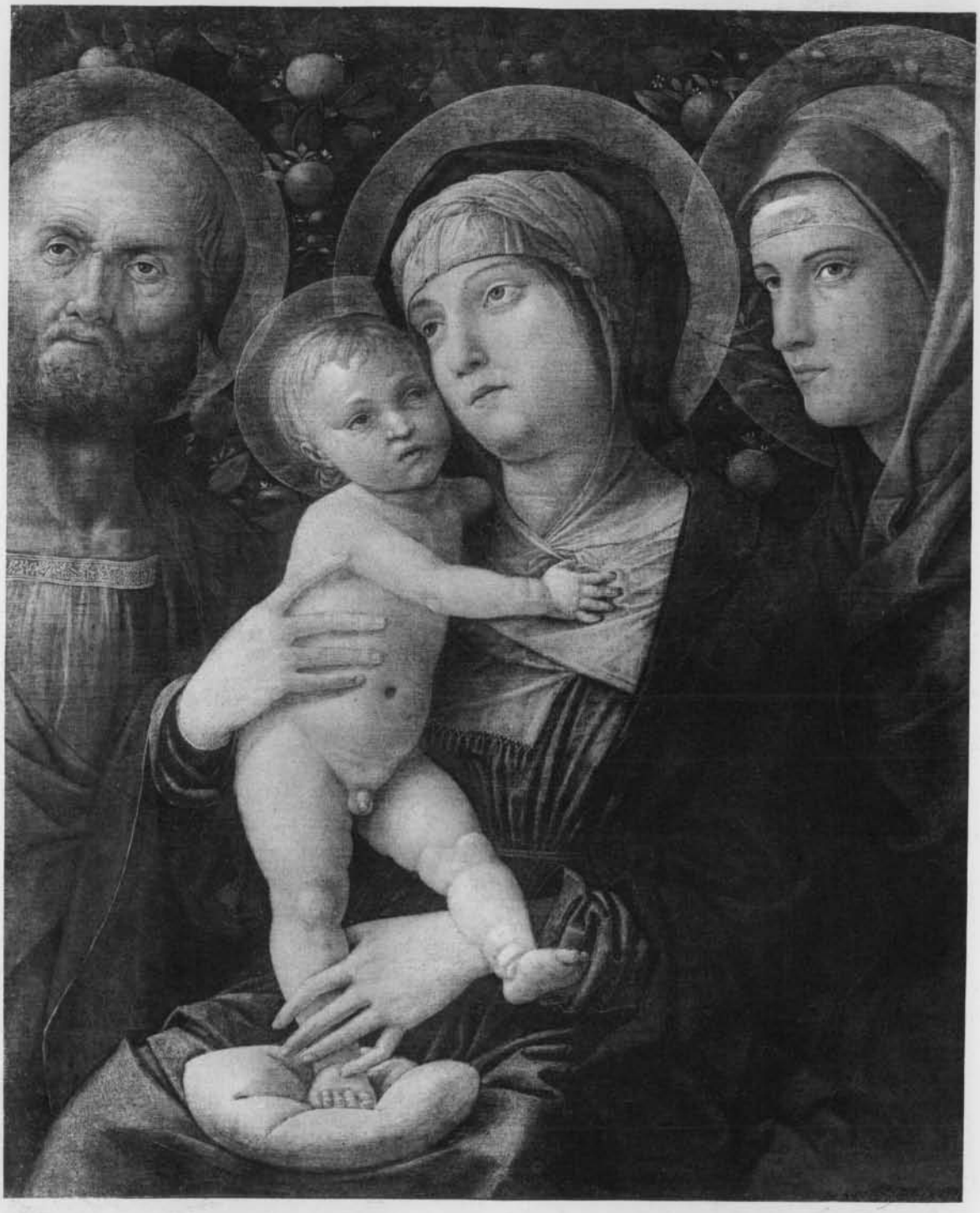
AFTER plodding over hot stubble or cold tundra, as we did through much of the last chapter, it will be a relief and a joy to encounter the splendours of the earth once more. For which reason I shall not linger over such vestiges of Squarcionesque painting in its cruder phases as we may discover in America, but hasten to Mantegna, the genius of the Paduan School. His influence on the Bellini was enormous: to understand their evolution, while ignoring him, is impossible. Happily our collection includes two of his works, one belonging to Mrs. J. L. Gardner of Boston, and the other in the Altman bequest to the Metropolitan Museum. These we shall proceed to study. They will by no means suffice to give an adequate idea of his career or his quality. Europe alone can give that. But at least they will give no false idea of the artist.

I.

The earlier of the two is a smallish panel (Frontispiece) in Mrs. Gardner's collection, dating from Mantegna's later middle years, say from towards 1485. It is a singular, elaborate, rather puzzling work, highly finished—over finished, even—touched up in the high lights with silver. One is tempted to fancy that the painter contrived it deliberately as an epitome of his entire career up to that point for his Gonzaga patrons; and doubtless it pleased them, for it remained with them until it was acquired by that exquisite dilettante, Charles I. Yet if this unusual work has a fault, it is just that, with all the qualities of a most admirable manual, it has something of its dryness.

On a level space, overshadowed by two cliffs which frame in a hillside with a town nestling under the sky line, the Blessed Virgin is seen in the midst of six other holy women, all sitting low or on

the ground. The Holy Child, resembling an infant Apollo, stands against His Mother's right knee and addresses Himself to the Infant Baptist. The elderly woman next to Our Lady is probably St. Elizabeth, but I have no clue to the identity of the others, or to their function in the symbolical or allegorical economy of the picture. Nor is it our concern. It can not be too firmly maintained that a work of art can pretend, as a work of art, to no meaning, broadly human or narrowly artistic, beyond what is spontaneously suggested to the cultivated mind. Theologians and gossips innumerable may attach any meaning they please to the parts or the whole of a picture. Professors Peano and Forti have taken our dear familiar old alphabet and numerals and attached all sorts of harrowing significations to them, intended only for students of symbolic logic. We who use the alphabet and numerals for homely human purposes are not called upon to be conversant with all possible abuses to which they may be subjected, and no more is it our business as humanists, aestheticians or dilettanti, to know what theological subtleties, what scholastic symbols, or what neo-mystico-nonsensical cobwebs may be made to adhere to a picture. In the one before us it is enough to see what Venetian art lovers, at the highest moment of Venetian art, called a *"Sacra Conversazione,"* that is to say, a social gathering of holy persons. These ladies have come together to adore, to worship, to meditate and to pray. To my recollection, this is the first instance of a motive destined to acquire so wide a vogue a generation or two later. Did Mantegna mean to invent a new type of composition? If he did, he surely would have followed it up with others, which he failed to do. It is possible that in a court, whose first lady, when Mantegna arrived there, was a Brandenburg Princess, such a favourite subject of German art as "Die Heilige Sippe"—the Holy Family in the most comprehensive sense—was known and liked, and that Andrea took his cue from a German painting of this theme, simplifying and classicizing it according to the dictates of his genius. Quite likely, too, he was ordered to include just so many figures and so many episodes in the panel. On no other ground can one understand the Christopher crossing the stream, the George fighting the dragon, and the Jerome beating his breast, which we descry in the middle distance. They are treated conventionally and perfunctorily, not at all as a genius like Mantegna would have dealt with them had they been of his own choosing and of interest to him.



MANTEGNA : THE HOLY FAMILY
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK. ALTMAN COLLECTION.

Mantegna's art meets our eye from its first beginning, like Minerva, all armed. In a duration of nearly sixty years it suffered singularly little change, so little in form, contour or even type, that it requires careful and cautious scrutiny to perceive progressive change, although there was, it is true, a development in colour to warmer and warmer, ending rather hot. Mrs. Gardner's panel, coming, as we shall see presently, toward the end of his middle years, contains elements harking back to the beginnings and pointing forward to the end of the artist's career, as we shall perceive for ourselves if we attempt to settle the date of this *"Sacra Conversazione."*

The landscape gives us no too precise indication of time. It reminds one, it is true, of no works preceding the Mantuan period, but, on the other hand, it might have been painted at almost any time during Mantegna's middle years. It recalls at once the frescoes in the Camera degli Sposi and the Uffizi Triptych, but even more closely the Uffizi "Madonna of the Quarries" and the Copenhagen *"Pietà."* The "Madonna of the Quarries" is recalled again by the hands and the folds and even the pose of the Virgin here, but the oval and expression of her face are singularly like the "Madonna with Cherubs" of the Brera. The curls of the female Saint looking down upon the Infant Baptist are found in Mantegna's works from the Verona Polyptych to nearly the end of his career, but her elegance and her draperies point forward to his "Parnassus" and other late works. The other Saints recall the "Madonna" in the Simon Collection at Berlin and the women in the Hampton Court "Triumphs." The crumpled sharp folds, as in the Verona "Madonna," mark the beginning of his later years. The evidence, intelligently weighed, thus points to the end of Mantegna's middle period. One of the pictures with which Mrs. Gardner's has most in common is the Brera "Madonna with Cherubs," and there is good reason for assuming that this is the panel referred to in a document as having been painted in 1485. We shall not be far out if we assign something like this date to the painting at Fenway Court.

I leave the picture with a feeling that I should like to say a good deal more about it, but not before it had been submitted to a scrupulously honest and adequately competent cleaning away of perhaps quite recent restoration. What remained would necessarily be convincing, and might cease to be so perplexing.

II.

There is nothing perplexing about the Altman canvas (Plate). It is what it is; not at all one of Mantegna's greatest achievements, but a typical work of his last few years, when his hand was beginning to fail slightly and his colour to grow hot. In other respects he is seen as his Roman, pagan, imperial self.

The picture in question represents the Empress of Heaven seated a little sideways against an arbor of golden fruit, while the Infant clings to her. On one side a male bust of Roman aspect represents St. Joseph, and on the other, a most fascinating, even alarming, female face, answering better to the visual images evoked by Catullus than by the Gospels, is perhaps intended by Mantegna for the Magdalen.

The drawing of the Child's head is a little out, the contour of His shoulder rather functionless, the hands are a trifle wooden. These defects are due to the slackness of old age. Nevertheless the work, as a whole, could scarcely be more characteristic. Its feeling we have already indicated. Its colouring is the typically warm—over warm—of his last years. Its drawing, despite slight slackness, is no less quintessentially his.

Maturer, more Cinquecento in amplitude than any other "Holy Family" of Mantegna's, it yet clings close to precedents, and in details varies but slightly from similar works of his last fifteen years. Thus, as composition, it is closest of all to the Verona "Holy Family," one of the earlier of his latest paintings. The *motif* of the cushion takes us back to a much earlier work still, the "Madonna with two Saints" of the André Collection. On the other hand, the Virgin in the Altman canvas goes with his last work of all, the Northampton "Adoration" [1] and the "Holy Family" in the Mantegna Chapel at Mantua, only that in our picture she is at once haughty and disconsolate.

Thus, here as everywhere, Mantegna remains true to a style formed in his youth which suffered but little alteration. There are few works, however, in which change is more visible than here. It was, in the measure that it was progressive, change above all to a warmer colouring and to a more pagan, more imperially Roman vision of the world.

[1] A studio copy of this masterpiece may be seen at Mr. J. G. Johnson's in Philadelphia.

III.

THE AUTOGRAPH PAINTINGS OF GIOVANNI BELLINI

No two artists near enough to each other in their environment to be brothers-in-law were so separated in their art as Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini. Where the former was all dogma, the latter was all faith; where the one worked on a programme, the other relied on spontaneity; where the Paduan had a schematic outline that the figure had to fill, the Venetian had a contour that was the vibrating exteriorization of an indwelling energy. Mantegna was professionally intellectual; Bellini may never have harboured an abstract thought. The Paduan was a bigoted Roman, the Venetian was not deliberately and intentionally of any time or place. Hence the growth of the former was necessarily limited, while that of the latter never stopped. The history of Art knows almost no great master whose end was so close to his beginning as Mantegna's, or so far away as Bellini's. For fifty years Giovanni Bellini led Venetian painting from victory to victory. He found it crawling out of its Byzantine shell, threatened by petrifaction from the drip of pedagogic precept, and left it in the hands of Giorgione and Titian, an art more completely humanized than any that the Western world had known since the decline of Greco-Roman culture.

The two works by Mantegna that we can see without crossing the Atlantic suffice to give a fairly adequate idea of his character and even of his career. The seven autograph paintings by Bellini, on the other hand, even when supplemented by several important studio pictures, do not even begin to represent his manifold phases or convey an adequate sense of his quality.

Two of the seven autograph works belong to Bellini's first period. I wrote "earlier years," and then cancelled and replaced the words with "first period," because it fringes on the absurd to designate pictures painted toward the fortieth year of an artist's life as youthful achievements. For it is probable that Mr. J. G. Johnson's panel was painted toward 1470. Nevertheless this "Madonna" is so tentative, so immature in some respects, that serious and able students have regarded it as the earliest of all Bellini's Madonnas that have come down to us.

The truth is that the first part of Giambellino's career is a blank. All the extant works which may plausibly be placed before 1470

could easily have been painted after 1465, and in point of style they resemble each other sufficiently to admit of being thus crowded together. Even if we grant that some of these panels, the Correr "Crucifixion," for instance, were done earlier, they are at once too few to stand for twenty years of activity, even allowing for normal losses through time and chance, and too close to each other to be, if spread over so long a time, more than a confession of slow and feeble development. For myself, I find it easier, in view of what we know of his rate of advance during his middle and later periods —a time when, as a rule, growth is apt to slow down and stop—to believe that not many years elapsed between any of the paintings of this group, than to assume that Giovanni Bellini was something of a dullard in his early life.

It certainly is not easy to account for his youth, yet a possible clue may lie in the fact that Gentile Bellini's earlier career is at least as hard to explain. His first dated work, the "Lorenzo Giustiniani" of 1465, is still awkward and even uncouth, despite extraordinary observation and vigorous line, and the Mond "Madonna," painted probably when Gentile was about fifty years of age, is chiefly interesting for its fidelity to his father's teaching. It would seem likely, therefore, that the delayed maturity of both brothers, as well as the exceeding scarcity of their earlier works, were in each case due to their having had no independent career till they were middle-aged men, because they remained until then in their father's employ as his assistants. As late as 1460 both were certainly with Jacopo, for in that year all three signed the now lost altarpiece for the Gattamelata Chapel at Padua. It was after this that the sons started out for themselves, and it really would seem as if only then did they cut themselves loose from their father and begin to develop their own artistic personalities. Such an hypothesis, further, might help to account for the curious borrowings, sometimes quite petty, from Mantegna, at the very moment when Giovanni Bellini was creating such sublime masterpieces as the Brera *"Pietà."* It looks as if he had already developed a great intensity of feeling and an adequate mastery over his instruments, but—somewhat like Cézanne so recently—still lacked those current fashionable stage-properties of the new painting which perhaps his father, Jacopo, true to his own transitional style and all its charm, severely avoided.

Fig. 1. Giovanni Bellini: Madonna.
Collection of the late Theodore M. Davis, Newport.

IV.

The "Madonna" in the collection of the late Mr. Theodore M. Davis (Fig. 1), which I believe to be the earliest of Giovanni Bellini's Madonnas now extant, is also one of the best. One may go further and say that she is the best of the first period. She rises like a pyramid, filling nearly the entire space framed in by the arch, thus securing an effect of monumental grandeur worthy of the invincible concept of a superhuman Great Mother, while, at the same time, the watchfully tender adoration of her own Child communicates a sweet sense of homelike humanity. The slight deviation from frontality, the gentle inclination of the head, in such a massive figure, are principal factors in the impression. The featureless landscape, with its simple arabesque of light and shade under the open sky, furnishes the visual equivalent of a bass accompaniment to a solemn melody. The quiet pearly colour, singularly free from oppositions and contrasts, enriches and harmonizes the whole.

It is a work worthy of the Brera *"Pietà,"* than which there is perhaps nothing more sublime in art. It has the same greatness of soul and beauty of substance. There is a continuity in mood and mode between these two masterpieces which makes it probable that they were conceived almost simultaneously and executed successively, the "Madonna" first, the *"Pietà"* afterwards. How strikingly alike, for instance, is the sweep of the folds in both paintings, combining, as it does, flow and rhythm with the most magnifying results.

The Davis "Madonna" is as free from Mantegna's influence as the *"Pietà"* itself. There is no trace of it, save perhaps in the ruins on the right. On the contrary, the whole pattern—the frontal Madonna adoring the Child fast asleep—is traditionally Venetian, and not of infrequent occurrence in the early works of the Vivarini and their kin. The Child is rather ugly and sprawling, and not properly relaxed, but is modelled with praiseworthy contour instead of facile chiaroscuro—and all so sincerely!

It is a work which seems to have impressed contemporaries and followers, for I recall several versions of it, or possibly of variants, as, for instance, Quirizio da Murano's in the Venice Academy, another belonging to Mr. Henry White Cannon at Fiesole, which I would ascribe to Andrea da Murano, and still another in the Sac-

risty of the Redentore at Venice, which I would, more tentatively, ascribe to the same author.

Finally, I may be permitted to record that when I first knew this masterpiece, it passed for an Alvise Vivarini, and the fact that it, along with the Bagatti "S. Giustina" at Milan, also passing for an Alvise, was chiefly responsible for the very high estimate I formed, half unconsciously, of this painter and his place in Venice. Dr. J. P. Richter, who then owned the picture, first recognized that it was by Bellini, and his attribution has long since found general acceptance. The "S. Giustina" I myself attempted to restore to Bellini a couple of years ago (*Gazette des Beaux Arts;* June, 1913).

V.

It would seem as if it were only after painting this Madonna and the even greater Brera *"Pietà,"* [1] that Giovanni Bellini fell under the spell of Mantegna. Of course he must have known him and his art years and years before, for they had been brothers-in-law since 1453. But if Giovanni remained with his father till well after '60, it is likely that Jacopo, having nothing to say to the too definite, too rigid, too masterful style of his overbearing son-in-law, prevented his sons from following it. Then when Giovanni became his own master, his instinctive eagerness to be in the foremost ranks of his close contemporaries drew him into the orbit of Mantegna. And there he remained for ten or perhaps fifteen years—till towards 1480—but happily quite unaffected by it as to essentials, keeping his soul his own, his form unschematized, his touch uncontaminated. Mantegna was for him not so much a dynamic influence as a purveyor of novelties. And that is the natural, perhaps inevitable relation between conscious and less conscious genius.

So Giovanni Bellini borrowed not a little from Mantegna, turning it to his own purposes—using episodes and figures with only slight changes, and entire arrangements with all the alterations required to render them suitable to his own character.

Among the earliest of Giovanni's paintings to betray contact with Mantegna is Mr. Johnson's signed "Madonna" (Fig. 2). It is an appealing and sensitive creation, but in its present condition

[1] Most of the pictures referred to in this chapter are reproduced in Adolfo Venturi's "Storia dell' Arte Italiana," Vol. VII, Parts III and IV. The reproductions alone render this work indispensable to students. Dr. Gronau's monograph on the Bellini is equally indispensable.

Fig. 2. Giovanni Bellini: Madonna.
Collection of Mr. John G. Johnson, Philadelphia.

this ghost of a picture seems a little meagre and even scraggly. Less monumental than the Davis panel, less convincing than the slightly earlier Potenziani "Madonna," it lacks the breadth of the somewhat later Trivulzio "Virgin and Child."

Mr. Johnson's "Madonna" is seen from the waist up supporting the Child between her hands. He stands on a parapet on which lies a fruit like a quince. He wears a tunic open at the sides, and has very little hair on His head. His attitude, with His finger in His mouth and something like a squirm of His body, is unexplained. It would almost seem as if, like a shy baby, He were turning away from a stranger. The Blessed Virgin, on the contrary, although rather dolorous and vague now, may have had a limpid but not simpletonish countenance in her time. The silhouette of her all-enfolding mantle is impressive, and the prominence of the hands, unfortunately too spidery, is singular, perhaps novel. The opinion may be hazarded that few artists made so much of hands as Bellini did. My first impression is that even among Italians no other insisted more on making them *dramatis personæ*. They are, in representations of the Madonna especially, scarcely less important for the expression, and perhaps even more important for the design, than the face. Their play was evidently a matter of the greatest solicitude, and their relation to the pose and action of the Holy Child determined the entire composition. To Mr. Johnson's "Madonna," now before us, all this applies so well that it is easier to think the head away than the hands. It is they that determine the movement of the arms, and thus the whole pattern. At the same time they vie in eloquence with the face itself. To few pictures more than to this could be better applied the title of "Madonna of the Hands."

Bellini's father, Jacopo, did not neglect the hands, and Donatello made as much of them as anyone. Their example may have sufficed, but I suspect that Giovanni got his stimulus not from them directly but from their follower, Mantegna, who in his earlier life and middle years rivalled Donatello himself in the attention he gave to hands. If that be so, it was by far the greatest debt that Giambellino owed to his brother-in-law. It is even possible that Mr. Johnson's panel and its sister works, the Potenziani and Trivulzio "Madonnas," were inspired by pictures of Andrea Mantegna now lost, like the one, for instance, of which we have two free copies, one in the Berlin Museum (No. 27), and another far better version

in the former Butler Collection. But while this suggestion must be left to its chances, Mr. Johnson's painting bears witness to Giovanni's pettier borrowings from Andrea in a way that cannot be disputed. It will be remembered that we found the action and the expression of the Child unexplained. Nothing certainly in the picture before us accounts for His peevish squirm. It is intelligible enough in Mantegna's original, the standing child frightened by the sight of the High Priest's knife and nestling up against his mother's knees, in the "Circumcision" of the Uffizi Triptych (Fig. 4). Bellini reversed the silhouette and, naturally, adapted it in other respects to his needs, but changed the motive as little as possible.

It will be admitted that a picture containing an imitation of another must be of later date than that other. It would follow that if we knew when Mantegna painted the Triptych now in the Uffizi we could tell when at earliest Giambellino designed the Johnson panel. Its date is a question of importance, for, as we have seen, it has been supposed to be a labour of his earliest years, while I feel called upon to assign it to a time when its author was perhaps approaching his fortieth year.

Unfortunately, we do not know the exact date of Mantegna's Uffizi Triptych. There is a fair probability, however, that it is the work referred to in April, 1464, as just finished. Internal evidence is hard to obtain because of the relative fixity of Mantegna's style. I note that in my "North Italian Painters," published in 1907, I placed it after 1470. Since then, further research in connection with contemporary Venetian painting has inclined me to favour an earlier date for some of his works, including the Triptych, and I should now find no difficulty in conceding that it was painted in 1464. To a still earlier date no one would think of assigning it.

Mr. Johnson's Bellini would then necessarily be no earlier than the same date, that is to say 1464, when Giovanni Bellini was thirty-three or thirty-four years old. But I believe, in fact, that we have reasons for assuming that it was painted three or four years later. In our endeavour to justify this later dating, which, within the field of our interests, is of serious importance, we must have recourse to a study of minutiæ which, if no longer subject to the contemptuous hilarity of the dilettante, is still boring to ourselves.

To begin with, the pattern as a whole, based, as it is, upon the extension of the arm to one side, connects Mr. Johnson's picture

Fig. 3. Studio of Giovanni Bellini: Arch in Honor of Doge Tron.
Academy of Fine Arts, Venice.

Fig. 4. Mantegna: The Circumcision.
Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

with the next group of Bellini's Madonnas, the earliest of which is Dr. Frizzoni's at Milan, and the most typical, the one in the Verona Gallery. As I hope to demonstrate elsewhere, they range in point of time from after 1470 to about 1476. Mr. Johnson's was perhaps originally nearer to the Frizzoni or Verona "Madonna." What remains of her nose recalls St. Dominic's in the Correr "Trinity," a studio work painted in 1471,[1] or the nose of the Baptist now in the Venice Academy but of the same series. The nearest parallel to her rather spidery hands may be found in those of St. Joseph in a "Nativity" at the Venice Academy—a picture, once more, of the same series. The Child was the prototype of the imps holding shields in a neglected but delightful picture of a "Triumphal Arch" (Fig. 3) commemorating the principate of Doge Tron (Venice Academy, No. 53, Photo. Alinari 32238). As his reign began in 1471, this panel painted in Bellini's studio cannot be earlier, and if the children are so reminiscent of the one in the Johnson picture, we may safely assume that no great interval could have intervened between the two works. It would be easy to adduce further points of close resemblance in Mantegna, as, for instance, in his Andrè or in his somewhat later Bergamo "Madonna," but as their chronology is disputable, I will end this tedious paragraph with a reference to two dated works painted in Venice in 1469 and 1471. The earlier one is a Bellinesque "Saviour Enthroned between Sts. Augustine and Francis" (Venice Academy, No. 614, Photo. Naya 182). Here the pleating of the tunic under the throat of the Saviour is of the kind in our "Madonna," but of slightly simpler and earlier fashion, nearer, in fact, to the Davis "Madonna." The work of 1471 was designed by Bartolommeo Vivarini and painted with the aid of assistants (Rome, Colonna Palace, Photo. Anderson 4596). It is singularly Bellinesque, and looks like a close imitation of an original of the time by Giovanni. The resemblances to our "Madonna" are manifold, in big and in little, even to the pleated folds of the tunic and the garment under it.

If this kind of evidence may be allowed to count—and archæological pursuits could not exist without it—then Mr. Johnson's "Madonna" is scarcely earlier than 1470. And if we may assume that date to be fairly well established, it follows that at about forty years of age Giovanni Bellini was painting what we used to regard as his adolescent efforts.

[1] See my "Quatre Triptyches Bellinesques à Venise" in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts* for September, 1913, where most of the panels are reproduced.