



PRESS RELEASE

from

THE FRICK COLLECTION

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RESULTS OF UNPRECEDENTED TECHNICAL STUDY ON AN ICONIC FRICK PAINTING TO BE PRESENTED THIS SPRING NEW MULTIMEDIA ROOM CREATED TO ACCOMPANY PROJECT

IN A NEW LIGHT: BELLINI'S *ST. FRANCIS IN THE DESERT*

May 22, 2011, through August 28, 2011

Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*, a hallmark of The Frick Collection and one of the most important Italian Renaissance paintings in America, is a moving, spiritual portrait of a central figure in western Christianity. It is also a profoundly mysterious work, whose beauty and depth of detail are matched only by the enigma of the artist's intentions. This spring, following a period of unprecedented study, the painting is the subject of a special exhibition, *In a New Light:*

Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert. Running from May 22 through August 28, the dossier presentation places the painting in the skylit Oval Room for a rare viewing opportunity outside of its traditional location in the mansion's Living Hall. The exhibition also marks the debut of a Multimedia Room at the Frick. This new educational space,

just steps away from the Oval Room, will allow visitors to learn about the technical examination through videos and interactive photography. Comments Director Anne Poulet, "We are privileged to have in our care Bellini's great depiction of St. Francis. An important aspect of our role is the study and interpretation of this masterpiece, and in the past year, we've reconsidered fundamental questions about the panel's subject and creation. For this purpose, we sent the painting to the Sherman Fairchild Paintings Conservation Center of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in the spring of 2010 for technical examination by Paintings Conservator Charlotte Hale. Her findings—combined with the input of art historians, conservators, scientists, and educators consulted during this study—have resulted in a better understanding of Bellini's



Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430/1435–1516), *St. Francis in the Desert*, c. 1475–78, oil on poplar panel, 49 x 55 7/8 inches, The Frick Collection, New York; photo: Michael Bodycomb

process from conception to realization. With this magnificent work on view again, and through our new Multimedia Room, we encourage the public to view *St. Francis in the Desert* in a new light.” This project is coordinated by the Frick’s Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow Susannah Rutherglen in conjunction with curators and conservators at the Frick and the Metropolitan Museum. The exhibition is made possible by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

RESULTS OF FIRST MULTI-FACETED TECHNICAL STUDY TO BE PRESENTED IN A NEWLY CREATED MULTIMEDIA ROOM



Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430/1435–1516), Infrared reflectogram detail of *St. Francis in the Desert*, c. 1475–78, oil on poplar panel, 49 x 55 7/8 inches, The Frick Collection, New York, Technical photography by Department of Paintings Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

In the spring of 2010, *St. Francis in the Desert* (c. 1480) was sent to the Sherman Fairchild Paintings Conservation Center of the Metropolitan Museum, its first departure from the Frick mansion since the painting entered the collection in 1915. Previously, X-radiographs were taken at the Frick in the 1950s, and an early form of analysis with infrared reflectography was conducted in the 1980s, but the 2010 examination included for the first time a comprehensive and much-updated series of synthetic technical studies, making this an unprecedented learning opportunity. Metropolitan Museum Paintings Conservator Charlotte Hale oversaw the survey, which incorporated a significantly more advanced, digital, and higher resolution form of infrared reflectography, as well as X-radiography, microscopy, surface examination, and paint analysis. The technical findings will be made available at the Frick in a newly developed

Multimedia Room, where visitors may use computer kiosks to examine at close range the infrared reflectogram, which reveals Bellini’s initial drawing hidden beneath the paint layers. Visitors may also view four thematic videos created by the Frick’s Mellon Fellow Susannah Rutherglen in conjunction with the Frick’s New Media Specialist Lisa Candage and Met Paintings Conservator Charlotte Hale. Therein specific elements of the panel—the sky, St. Francis, the flora, and the fauna—may be viewed and appreciated in relation to the results of the conservation study. These presentations will also be available on the museum’s website <http://www.frick.org/exhibitions/bellini/>.

NEW FILM INTRODUCTION BY COLIN B. BAILEY

Additionally, in the nearby Music Room, visitors may view a new short film featuring Associate Director and Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator Colin B. Bailey introducing the painting. He walks us through the work and its meaningful qualities of illumination, highlights a number of meticulously painted details, and briefly places the panel into an art historical framework. This video was produced in conjunction with the recently launched Google Art Project, in which one masterpiece from each of seventeen museums worldwide—the Frick included—was selected for high-resolution gigapixel photography. The results are now viewable online through a Google-hosted Web site (<http://www.googleartproject.com/>) created for the general public as well as art educators. Comments Bailey, “The Frick’s project to study and exhibit its Bellini in 2011 was well underway in 2010 when Google first approached the museum. We are delighted that these two independent efforts can now come together in such a complementary way. Of course, in the end, our visitors have a choice. For many, *St. Francis in the Desert* is a profoundly spiritual painting that they may wish to view on its own in the contemplative setting of the skylit Oval Room, surrounded by other Old Master works—a manner of art appreciation very

much at the core of our mission. There is also the film, and for those who wish to view the panel in light of conservation, we offer the Multimedia Room. Education programs will complement the presentation, and include an intimate scholarly seminar, public lectures, gallery talks, and sketching events.”

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE SUBJECT OF THE PAINTING

The protagonist of Bellini’s large panel is Saint Francis of Assisi, who was born Francesco Bernardone in the late twelfth century. The son of a wealthy cloth merchant, Francis enjoyed a carefree youth; during his twenties, however, he renounced his privileged upbringing and embraced Lady Poverty. Donning his signature habit of brown fabric secured at the waist with a rough rope, he embarked on an exemplary life of humility, simplicity, and devotion to God. In 1224, near the end of a ministry that had taken him throughout Europe and the Holy Land and had attracted an enduring order of followers, Francis retreated to the Tuscan mountain of La Verna. There, he became the first person to receive the imprint of the five wounds of Christ’s Crucifixion. This miracle, known as the stigmatization, served as a divine acknowledgment of the saint’s empathetic faith. Francis was canonized in 1228, just two years after his death.

The Frick picture belongs to a rich tradition of biographies, legends, and works of art centering on the life of Francis, who was revered by Italians in the Renaissance. Yet the image is unlike any other representation of him, visual or written. Bellini’s figure appears to be in a state of mystical transport. He strides barefoot from his simple shelter into a rock-strewn wilderness; with hands extended and lips parted, he is transfigured by a supernatural radiance that emanates from the clouds at the upper left corner of the scene. A nearby donkey, gray heron, and rabbit, gifted with subtle registers of perception, seem instinctively to sense the extraordinary nature of the saint’s experience. Could this be the very moment of his stigmatization? If not, what has the artist depicted instead?

TECHNICAL APPROACH USED TO FIND ANSWERS

Students of Bellini’s painting have offered multiple, often conflicting answers to these questions and have invoked a variety of visual and textual sources to support their claims. The recent technical study, however, involved a different kind of evidence. In March of 2010, the picture was sent to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. A group of specialists, led by Paintings Conservator Charlotte Hale and including panel expert George Bisacca and scientists Julie Arslanoglu, Silvia Centeno, and Mark Wypyski, undertook a careful analysis of the work. They investigated Bellini’s masterpiece as a physical artifact, from the construction of its wooden support to the artist’s subsequent design and painting process. Conservators, curators, educators, and art historians from here and abroad then gathered to discuss the findings. By attending to clues within the painting itself, they sought to address longstanding uncertainties about its meaning.

First and foremost was the question of whether the Frick *St. Francis* depicts a stigmatization. In conventional images of this event, the saint appears in the act of accepting the wounds of the Crucifixion: he bends on one knee as five rays sent by a winged seraph on a cross penetrate his hands, feet, and side. Bellini’s Francis, by contrast, seems to bear only two stigmata, on his hands. He stands rather than kneels, and does not communicate with a divine messenger. The panel has

clearly been cut along its top edge, however, and scholars have long considered it possible that a small seraph once appeared in the now missing portion.

To determine how much wood had been removed from the upper edge and whether there would have been enough space for a seraph, conservators conducted an X-ray examination. This determined that the picture's support consists of three horizontally joined boards of different sizes. The topmost horizontal edge has definitely been cropped, as evidenced by the absence of an unpainted margin along this surface and by the chipping of original paint. But the nearly symmetrical patterns of original nails, applied from the front of the panel through to supporting cross-pieces that were later removed, suggest that only a minimal amount of wood has been cut off: perhaps a few centimeters at the most.

The lost area probably included a narrow band of trees, sky, and cliff; nothing more. It now seems far less likely that a seraph originally appeared there.

Related questions concern the two stigmata, the wounds on Francis's hands. Are they definitely Bellini's work, or did a later restorer add them? Conversely, were all five of the canonical stigmata—on the hands, feet, and chest—originally present, only to be altered or erased during subsequent interventions? Analysis with a microscope revealed that the two understated red blots on the saint's hands are certainly original. The artist created these marks by applying a translucent red glaze over a base of opaque scarlet. A similar technique is seen for the representation of Christ's wounds in another work by Bellini and in the paintings of other Renaissance artists, indicating that this was a familiar method of composing stigmata during his time. Moreover, in the Frick picture, patterns of cracks over the hands show that the red paint is very aged and is not a later retouching. The microscopic examination yielded another important finding about the stigmata. Under high magnification, traces of red paint are visible on the saint's left foot, evidence that Bellini also painted a wound in this location. Today, however, the stigma on the foot is invisible to the naked eye. This area of red was not removed intentionally, but was abraded during later cleanings. No sign of a wound was found on the chest, indicating that the artist planned only the subtle marks on the hands and foot.

Overall, the technical evidence confirms what the picture itself already suggests: the Frick *St. Francis* was never a traditional depiction of a stigmatization. No seraph was present, nor did the saint bear all five of Christ's mortal wounds. Throughout the scene, Bellini alluded to this theme in obvious ways, as would be only fitting in a monumental image celebrating the life and character of Francis. But the artist was not so literal-minded as to make this the sole or overt subject of his painting. Rather, in the spirit of early Franciscan writings, he sought to convey the saint's likeness to Christ "not by martyrdom of the body but by ardor of the mind."

INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUE BETTER UNDERSTOOD AS INFRARED REFLECTOGRAPHY REVEALS THE UNDERDRAWING

Indeed, Bellini's work is permeated by a sense of mental and spiritual agitation, the intensity of the saint's experience rendered visible in his figure, in the tectonic movement of the rocks around him, and in the rays of light coursing through the sky in the upper-left corner of the panel. To give pictorial form to Francis's interior emotions, Bellini employed highly innovative painting techniques. He executed the picture entirely in oil, a relatively novel medium at the time that was

prized for both its expressive qualities and its precision. In certain areas, the artist adopted a loose, free style, running a brush loaded with paint quickly and fluently over the surface. In this way, he achieved the melting and aqueous quality of the azurite-tinted rocks behind Francis, as well as the effulgence of golden light in the sky. In other sections, he exercised extraordinary control over details on a nearly microscopic scale, as in the delicate shaping of the saint's face. Before he began painting, Bellini planned the figure of Francis in detail by creating a preliminary "drawing" in black fluid paint on a white gesso ground. This composition, known as the underdrawing, can be seen today with the help of infrared reflectography, which penetrates overlying paint layers to provide a black-and-white image of the underlying design.

Bellini's underdrawing of Francis's head is akin to an exquisite portrait sketch. The upper outlines of his skull are drawn with fine, overlapping strokes; minuscule elements such as the furrows in his brow and the folds beneath his eye are drawn, as are the line of shadow running across his nose and the inner contour of his opened mouth. Short, evenly spaced strokes of parallel hatching denote darker areas of his neck and cowl, while a web of intersecting lines runs across his chin. As he sketched Francis on the unpainted ground, Bellini was already attending to the fall of light, to the figure's aquiline features and monastic tonsure, and to the sense of awe expressed in his parted mouth and glinting eyes. The artist also sought to evoke the saint's age and exposure to the elements in the wrinkles around his eyes and the shadows of his cheeks.



Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430/1435–1516), Infrared reflectogram detail of *St. Francis in the Desert*, c. 1475–78, oil on poplar panel, 49 x 55 7/8 inches, The Frick Collection, New York, Technical photography by Department of Paintings Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Similarly detailed underdrawing appears throughout Francis's figure (see image on page 2): Bellini described the deep, shadowed folds of the saint's sleeves with dense areas of parallel hatched lines, and made subtle adjustments to the positions of the hands, fingers, and foot. The artist located the figure in space with a shower of faint, loosely spaced diagonal strokes, cascading outwards and downwards from Francis's head and shoulders to define the bright and dark surfaces of rock on either side. In this way, the artist deliberately used the underdrawing to model the saint in strong light, focusing and calibrating the powerful source of illumination from the sky to create the gently glowing, otherworldly quality of his person in the finished painting.



Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430/1435–1516), *St. Francis in the Desert* (left, detail of painting; right, detail of infrared reflectogram), c. 1475–78, oil on poplar panel, 49 x 55 7/8 inches, The Frick Collection, New York; technical photography by Department of Paintings Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

To plan the warm landscape of town, water, and cultivated hills in the distance at left, Bellini laid down a comparatively simple, linear underdrawing. He made a substantial change to the composition in this area, visible in the infrared reflectogram: at first he planned the footbridge over the water as a post-and-lintel design ending on the near bank, then altered it to an arched, partially ruined construction terminating on the far bank. Perhaps this change was

meant to bring the edifice into harmony with the rolling geometries of the surrounding landscape.

Another substantial alteration to Bellini's composition involves the lectern in the hut at right, part of which was overpainted as the artist changed his mind about several aspects of the structure. Originally, the desk terminated at the top of the slanted reading surface on which the saint's book rests. The flat shelf at the back of the desk, the skull resting on it, and the slender cross behind were all added at a later stage, and painted rather thickly to conceal the pre-existing dark background. Bellini also adjusted the position and dimensions of the desk as a whole to make way for the new elements. Why did he add these seemingly crucial components of the picture—the skull and cross—after painting had begun? Perhaps the artist sought to evoke the symbolism of Saint Jerome, the early Christian hermit and scholar who was often depicted at work in a study containing a skull, a symbol of mortality and vanity. The reed cross further recalls the attribute of Saint John the Baptist, the ascetic and wilderness-dweller who heralded Christ. More broadly, the artist may have wished to hint at the subject or occasion of the saint's intense meditation as he exits his cave-study and enters the light. The passion of Christ, represented by the cross with its delicate crown of thorns, and the transience of all human things, manifest in the skull, are perhaps visual renditions of Francis's interior spiritual musings.

Thus, while the technical investigation revealed the meticulousness of Bellini's planning process, it also showed his willingness to make thoughtful improvisations as the composition developed. Whatever the artist's motivations for these changes, they are surely significant, considering that Bellini rarely deviated to this degree from his preconceived ideas for pictures. By contrast, his successors in Venice, Giorgione and Titian, permitted themselves a greater degree of license and habitually revised and repainted their compositions.

BEAUTY, PRECISION, AND FACILITY OF THE ARTIST SEEN IN A NEW MANNER AS WELL

In addition to presenting new insights into Bellini's working process, the technical study established in detail what has long been perceived by devoted viewers of *St. Francis*: the consummate beauty, precision, and facility of the artist's manipulation of paint, from the rich and brushy application of ultramarine in the sky to the intricate representation of twining grapevine tendrils at the top of the saint's hut. The hair-thin consistency of these elements recalls a well-known anecdote, recounted by the classical author Pliny the Elder, in which the Greek artists Protogenes and Apelles competed with each other to compose fine lines in varying colors. Apelles arrived at the studio of Protogenes when the master was away, and in lieu of a note left an impossibly thin line painted on a panel, thus deploying his superlative technique as a calling card—and as a provocation to his rival. Upon returning, Protogenes instantly recognized who had visited in his absence, and thus was spurred to paint an even finer line. In *St. Francis*, too, minute details signify the artist's presence, reminding the viewer that behind this deeply communicative work of religious devotion stands an unsurpassed painter. Indeed, despite the wealth of fresh information uncovered by the recent technical study, each encounter with this masterpiece remains ripe with the possibility of new appreciations and novel interpretations of the compelling genius of Giovanni Bellini's art.

RELATED EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Special Exhibition Lectures

Lectures are free, and no reservations are necessary.

Date: Wednesday, May 25, 6:00 p.m.; doors open at 5:45 p.m.
Speaker: Keith Christiansen, John Pope-Hennessy Chairman of European Paintings,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Title: *Finding Our Way into Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert*

In Bellini's great masterpiece, the traditional relationship of figure to setting has been reversed, thus engaging us in a way that transforms our experience of the picture and our understanding of the artist's creative genius. Keith Christiansen will discuss the impetus behind this transformation and its implications for interpreting the picture's much-discussed subject. *This lecture is made possible by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

Date: Wednesday, June 8, 6:00 p.m.; doors open at 5:45 p.m.
Speaker: Charlotte Hale, Conservator, Department of Paintings Conservation,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Title: *Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert: New Discoveries*

In the spring of 2010 Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* underwent an unprecedented technical study at The Metropolitan Museum of Art that incorporated infrared reflectography, X-radiography, surface examination, and paint analysis. The results, which will be presented in this lecture, expand our understanding of the evolution and history of this spectacular, enigmatic painting. *This lecture is made possible by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

Date: Wednesday, June 29, 6:00 p.m.; doors open at 5:45 p.m.
Speaker: Susannah Rutherglen, Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow, The Frick Collection
Title: *Bellini to Veronese: Ornamental Paintings of the Venetian Renaissance*

Painters of the Venetian Renaissance are best known for their monumental altarpieces, narrative and mythological canvases, and intimate works for private devotion. Many of the same masters engaged in the ornamental arts as well, painting panels for integration into beds, chests, musical instruments, and doors. Susannah Rutherglen will describe this less familiar genre, trace the fortunes of surviving artifacts, and discuss their themes, styles, and relevance to the history of Italian Renaissance art.

Seminar *This small-capacity session is designed to foster an appreciation for and knowledge of Bellini's masterpiece. The Frick Collection's 2010–11 seminar program is made possible through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Walter A. Eberstadt. Seminars are limited to twenty participants. Register online or by calling 212.547.0704.*

Date: Wednesday, July 13, 6:00 to 7:30 p.m.
Speaker: Susannah Rutherglen, Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow, The Frick Collection
Title: *From Panel to Painting: the Frick's St. Francis*

Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*, a hallmark of The Frick Collection and one of the most important Italian Renaissance paintings in America, is a moving, spiritual portrait of a central figure in western Christianity. This seminar will investigate the conception and realization of Bellini's great masterpiece. *\$100 (\$90 for Members)*

Gallery Talks

Join curators and museum educators for an overview of the special exhibition. *Talks are free with museum admission, but reservations are required (unless otherwise noted). To register, please visit our Web site or call 212.547.0704.*

Introduction to *In a New Light: Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert*
Saturdays, June 25, July 16 & 30, and August 13, 12:00 noon to 1:00 p.m.

Summer Night at the Frick

Friday, July 22, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.

Join us for a free after-hours viewing of the Frick's two summer exhibitions, *In a New Light: Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert* and *Turkish Taste in the Court of Marie-Antoinette*. This free public evening will provide a special opportunity to meet the curators, hear

gallery lectures and talks, sketch in the Garden Court, and listen to live music. *Visitors of all ages over ten are welcome; no reservations are necessary. For more information, please e-mail education@frick.org.*

Sunday Sketch: Bellini and Botany

Sundays, June 12 & 26, July 10 & 24, and August 14, anytime between 1:00 and 3:00 p.m.

Explore Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* with a focus on drawing the plants seen in this iconic picture. Materials will be provided, and a teaching artist will be available for instruction as needed. *Visitors of all ages over ten are welcome; no reservations are necessary. This program is free with museum admission.*

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: 212.288.0700

Web site: www.frick.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

Hours: open six days a week: 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

Admission: \$18; senior citizens \$12; students \$5; "pay as you wish" on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Visits: Please call 212.288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

#171, April 8, 2011

For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Head of Media Relations & Marketing, or Alexis Light, Manager of Media Relations & Marketing; Media Relations Phone: 212.547.6844 and E-mail address: mediarelations@frick.org