A detailed Renaissance painting by Giovanni Bellini, 'St. Francis in the Desert'. The scene is set in a lush, mountainous landscape. In the foreground, a friar in a simple brown habit stands on a rocky ledge, his hands outstretched in a gesture of prayer or contemplation. To his right, a small, earthenware jug sits on the ground. The middle ground features a large, light-colored rock formation with a small stream or waterfall. In the background, a town with a prominent church and a castle on a hill are visible under a blue sky with scattered clouds. A donkey and a bird are also present in the landscape.

IN A NEW LIGHT

Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*



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Susannah Rutherglen and Charlotte Hale

Foreword by Keith Christiansen

Contributions by

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Michael F. Cusato, O.F.M.

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With the assistance of Katie Steiner

The Frick Collection, New York

in association with

D Giles Limited, London











To Patricia Fortini Brown and my family
— S.R.

To the memory of my father, John Rigby Hale
— C.H.

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Collection.

ISBN: 978-1-907804-39-7

Published by The Frick Collection

Michaelyn Mitchell, Editor in Chief
Hilary Becker, Assistant Editor

In association with D Giles Limited

For D Giles Limited
Designed by Anikst Design, London
Copy edited and proofread by Sarah Kane
Printed and bound in China

The Frick Collection
1 East 70th Street
New York, NY 10021
www.frick.org

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139 Upper Richmond Road
London SW15 2TN

Frontispiece:

Giovanni Bellini (c. 1424/35–1516), *St. Francis in the Desert*, c. 1476–78. Oil on panel, 124.6 × 142 cm (overall), 124.1 × 140.4 cm (painted surface).
The Frick Collection, New York (1915.1.03)

Front and back jacket illustrations: details from
Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*

Pages 4–5, 6–7, 10–11, 167: details from Giovanni
Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication
Data

In a new light : Giovanni Bellini's "St. Francis in the Desert" at the Frick Collection / Susannah Rutherglen and Charlotte Hale ; foreword by Keith Christiansen ; contributions by Denise Allen, Michael F. Cusato, O.F.M., Anne-Marie Eze, Joseph Godla ; with the assistance of Katie Steiner and Raymond Carlson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliography references and index.

ISBN 978-1-907804-39-7

1. Bellini, Giovanni, -1516. *St. Francis in ecstasy*. 2. Frick Collection. I. Rutherglen, Susannah. II. Hale, Charlotte, 1959-. III. Christiansen, Keith. IV. Allen, D. (Denise) V. Cusato, Michael F. VI. Eze, Anne-Marie. VII. Godla, Joseph. VIII. Steiner, Katie L. IX. Carlson, Raymond (Art historian) X. Frick Collection.

ND623.B39A73 2014

759.5--dc23

2014019507

. . . non per martirio corporale, ma per incendio mentale, egli doveva essere tutto trasformato nella espressa similitudine di Cristo crocifisso.

. . . he was to be utterly transformed into the direct likeness of Christ crucified, not by martyrdom of the body, but by enkindling of the mind.

—*Le Considerazioni sulle Stimate di San Francesco*, c. 1375–80



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ST. FRANCIS IN THE DESERT: TECHNIQUE AND MEANING

by Susannah Rutherglen and Charlotte Hale

Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* is a masterpiece of spiritual poetry that has inspired generations of visitors to The Frick Collection. Yet for all the consideration it has received, this vision of a solitary saint remains the artist's most enigmatic achievement. Consummate in its harmonies of form and color, miraculous in its texture of symbols and details, *St. Francis* is a richly confounding work that invites fundamental questions of intention and meaning. Has Bellini represented a particular event in the life of St. Francis? What might the monumental pose and rapt expression of the figure convey, and what is the significance of the surrounding landscape with its intricate variety of plant and animal life? Where does the painting stand in Bellini's development, and how has the work changed over time?

In 2010, *St. Francis* traveled to the Sherman Fairchild Paintings Conservation Center at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for a comprehensive technical examination, including infrared reflectography, X-radiography, microscopy, and paint analysis. The results of this investigation afford a glimpse over Bellini's shoulder as he conceived and realized his design and, together with a survey of related paintings, make it possible to approach longstanding questions about the picture's subject from the perspective of the working artist. Equally important, the analyses raise new problems and open further avenues of inquiry into this perennial monument of Christian art.

By the time he came to paint *St. Francis* in the later 1470s, Bellini had reached the prime of his career and was enjoying renown as the author of altarpieces, devotional works, and portraits for varied clients from his native republic of Venice to the Marches of Italy. Giovanni's date of birth and parentage remain the subject of debate. He may have been born as early as 1424 and as late as 1440, with most recent scholars preferring a date in the mid-1430s.¹ Like many Venetian painters, he belonged to a family of artists, and his training took place in the workshop of his father, the early Renaissance master Jacopo Bellini (c. 1400–1470/71). A new study, however, suggests that Jacopo was not Giovanni's biological father but rather his much older half-brother; that Giovanni was born between 1424 and 1428; and that after their father Nicolò died, Jacopo took Giovanni into the family business as an informally adopted son. Another recent analysis reveals that Giovanni had a close family relationship to a widow named Samaritana and supports a birth date closer to the mid- to late 1430s.²

Whatever the precise circumstances of the artist's birth and childhood, it is clear that he was effectively the son of Jacopo Bellini and was described as such by contemporary sources.³ Gentile Bellini (c. 1429/35–1507), Jacopo's biological son, was also a painter (see fig. 12) and considered Giovanni his "dearest brother" and colleague.⁴ Giovanni had established his own household in Venice by 1459 but continued to collaborate after this

St. Francis in the Desert, detail



Fig. 40. Giovanni Bellini, *St. Jerome in the Desert*, c. 1450–60. Tempera on panel, 48 × 35.8 cm. Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham

date with both Jacopo and Gentile.⁵ His earliest known independent work was a finely wrought scene of *St. Jerome in the Desert* (fig. 40), and he may also have gained experience during the 1450s in the small-scale format of manuscript illumination.⁶

The young Giovanni received a standard education in the technique of egg tempera, the medium traditionally employed by Italian painters on panel. Because it dries quickly to form a thin, hard, and opaque film, tempera paint requires extensive forethought and confident application in tiny strokes with the point of a soft brush. The artist learned to plan his pictures carefully and use his materials economically, painting in few layers and rarely deviating from compositional plans established during a painstaking preparatory process.

The discipline demanded by egg tempera remained with Bellini throughout his life and informed his greatest works, even as he gradually adopted the newer and more forgiving medium of drying oil. Study of the picture surface of *St. Francis* suggests

that its essential binding medium is drying oil, which sets much more slowly than tempera and has a thicker, more bodied and fluent consistency. In his notes of 1525, the connoisseur Marcantonio Michiel, too, characterized the work as an oil painting (see fig. 21). This finding was confirmed by examination of selected samples of the picture's upper paint layers.⁷

Oil can be combined with a wide range of pigments to produce rich, saturated colors, which may be applied broadly and expressively or in minute touches to achieve astonishing levels of detail. On the picture surface, oil paints can be blended, layered, modulated with translucent glazes to produce effects of glowing depth, and manipulated with the brush or other tools to create three-dimensional texture. Oil further allows the artist to deliberate and revise directly on the panel or canvas, by covering selected areas with fresh layers of color.

As he conceived the idea of *St. Francis* and painted it in oil, Bellini largely maintained the meticulous approach of a tempera-trained artist, planning and realizing each element of the composition with methodical intelligence. Within the confines of his rigorous practice, however, the painter allowed himself moments of extraordinary freedom and invention. Most significantly, Bellini altered parts of the work's content as his thinking evolved. In addition, he employed novel color combinations, explored a range of modes from concentrated detail to brushy abbreviation, and used traditional tools to capture effects of particular interest to him—above all the diffusion of light. Such passages of technical innovation and subtle virtuosity exemplify the originality of *St. Francis*, a picture whose dramatic force and intellectual complexity are revealed in new aspects with each encounter.

Preparation and Painting

Before he began to paint, Bellini must have developed the composition of *St. Francis* with preparatory drawings on paper. No such studies survive—in fact, no definite preparatory sketches for any of the artist's works are known—yet the assured design of his finished paintings and the lack of major revisions imply a diligent process of preliminary drawing. In the workshop of Jacopo Bellini, albums of drawings and "drawn pictures," or *quadros dessignatos*, were employed.⁸ Giovanni certainly was aware of these materials, and circumstantial evidence points to the use of various types of drawings in his own studio.⁹ The artist's working studies for *St. Francis* probably focused on the figure of the saint, the donkey at middle ground, and features of the town and landscape; the drawings may also have included overall sketches of the composition and its lighting.

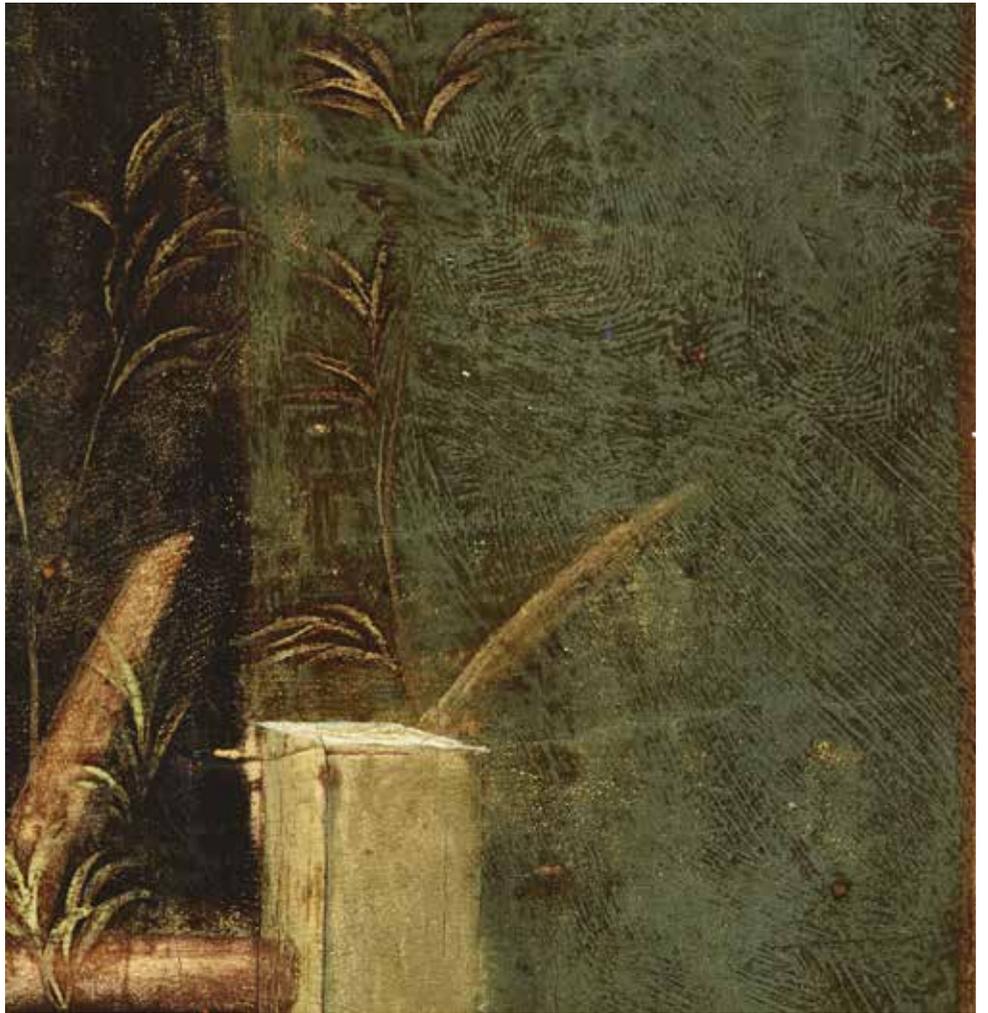


Fig. 41. *St. Francis*, detail of the shepherd and landscape, showing handprints in the underlying priming layer

Fig. 42. *St. Francis*, detail of the background of the saint's rustic cell. At upper right, two fingerprints in the underlying priming layer are visible.

After this exploratory stage, Bellini turned to the preparation and execution of the picture itself. The large poplar panel of *St. Francis* was covered first with layers of white gesso, composed of gypsum and animal glue, the typical ground for Italian pictures of this period.¹⁰ On the smoothed gesso, the artist applied his underdrawing, a detailed design in fine lines of fluid black paint. The underdrawing was the cornerstone of Bellini's practice in his early and middle years: a definitive rendering of the entire composition comprising contours, details, and hatched lines for areas of shadow. These would guide his hand as he filled the forms with color.¹¹ Subsequently concealed by the paint layers, underdrawings can be detected today with infrared reflectography, a noninvasive analytical technique that makes it possible to see through a picture's visible surface and produce an image of underlying strata.

The overall infrared reflectogram of *St. Francis* reveals a characteristically extensive and beautiful underdrawing, executed fully by the artist without the help of workshop assistants or obvious use of transfer methods such as tracing and pouncing. With the point of a brush, Bellini set down dark lines of varying width and control to lay in the boundaries of forms and to establish patterns of lighting (see fig. 43). Differences between this preparatory design and the final composition disclose alterations made by the artist as he worked. Infrared reflectography registers not only underdrawing



but also some of the overlying paint layers (see fig. 48) and can be used to study later stages of execution.

Once complete, the underdrawing was covered with a translucent layer of *imprimitura*, or priming, consisting of a small quantity of lead white pigment bound in oil.¹² The *imprimitura* served two main purposes: to seal the underdrawing, protecting it from damage during the painting process; and to isolate the upper paint layers from the gesso, which was highly absorbent and would otherwise leach oil from the paint above. The priming was spread evenly over the entire picture surface by hand, leaving behind whorled impressions of fingerprints and palm prints. Some of these have gradually become visible owing to increased transparency of the overlying paint through time and, in some cases, to abrasion (figs. 41, 42). This effect was unintended: fingerprints and palm prints derived from application of the *imprimitura* now appear in many of Bellini's pictures, but, almost without exception, their texture was originally completely obscured by the paint layers.¹³

Only after the laborious application of gesso, underdrawing, and priming did the process of painting begin. The quality of handling throughout the picture reveals an autograph composition. Starting with the sky at the top of the panel and working down to the foreground, Bellini brushed color within the lines of the underdrawing. For the

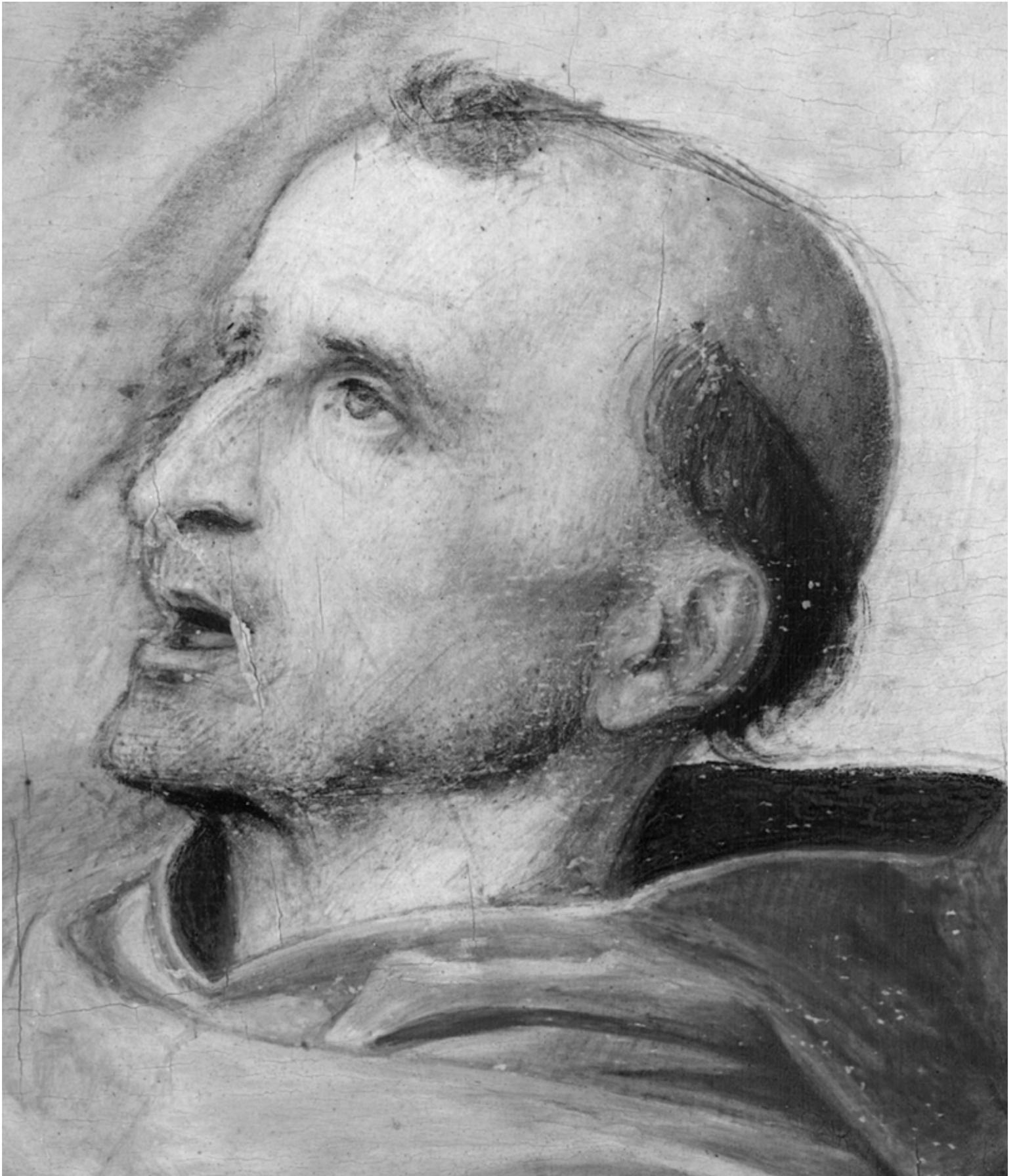




Fig. 43. *St. Francis*, infrared reflectogram detail, showing underdrawing of the head and cowl

Fig. 44. Donatello (c. 1386–1466), *St. Francis* (detail), c. 1447–50. Bronze, 147 cm high. Basilica del Santo, Padua

most part, he obeyed the dictates of this preliminary design, filling in each form or zone with just two or three layers of paint. Thus, Francis is painted directly on the white preparation rather than over a pre-existing landscape background, and the saint's surroundings are painted just up to the contour of his figure. This method, known as reserve technique, promotes efficient use of materials, and the application of minimal paint layers has the additional benefit of allowing the brilliantly reflective white preparation to illuminate the picture from within.¹⁴ Bellini's use of careful underdrawing and reserve technique results in a precisely delineated composition with the graphic clarity and balanced structure characteristic of more traditional works in egg tempera.¹⁵

In certain passages, however, the artist abandoned this conservative approach, instead painting thickly to achieve texture or inflecting his chosen color with an underpaint of different hue. In other sections, he changed his mind after following the premeditated design and canceled it by adding dense layers of paint on top. The work's overall luminous depth of color, together with areas of texturing, layering, and overpainting, demonstrates his engagement with the possibilities of the oil medium.

Saint and Stigmata

The most detailed and highly calibrated element of Bellini's composition is the figure of Francis. At the underdrawing stage, the artist outlined the profile of the saint's face and tested the outer boundary of the skull with delicate, overlapping strokes (fig. 43). He used fine lines of underdrawing to indicate the furrows between Francis's brows, the fold of skin beneath his left eye, the inner contour of his opened mouth, and the border of his tonsure.

In addition to planning the structure and attributes of the saint's head in the underdrawing, Bellini considered effects of light. He modeled shadows and curved surfaces with short parallel lines of hatching in the underdrawing. An established technique among Netherlandish, Paduan, and Venetian painters, parallel hatched underdrawing appears in many works of Bellini's early and middle periods.¹⁶ Zones of hatching define the shadows on Francis's forehead, below his cheekbone, and at the outer perimeter of his eye. To mark the border of the shadow on the side of the saint's nose, the artist applied a single, extended stroke of underdrawing.

Overall, the delicacy of underdrawing in the head appears unprecedented in works of the artist that have been analyzed.¹⁷ As he began to describe Francis on the unpainted ground, Bellini was already attending to the figure's aquiline profile, the wrinkles of his skin and the shadows of his cheeks, and the sense of awe conveyed by his parted mouth and upraised eyes. Some of these traits are indebted to Donatello's bronze statue of Francis on the high altar of the Basilica del Santo in nearby Padua



(fig. 44).¹⁸ Yet the animation of the face is highly specific: perhaps the painter portrayed a contemporary individual in the guise of the illustrious saint, a not uncommon practice in Venice.¹⁹ More generally, Bellini brought the conventions of portraiture to bear on the historical Francis and, in the spirit of the holy man's early biographers, rendered him with compelling presence.²⁰

The underdrawing in this area is in fact akin to a portrait sketch, and shows affinities with a surviving black chalk portrait drawing from the artist's hand (fig. 45).²¹ In this likeness of his brother, Gentile, Giovanni worked out the fall of illumination with minute strokes of shading and adjusted the contours of the head and neck with tapering lines. His searching design imbues Gentile with an air of dignified reserve that reflects the honor of the Bellini family's shared profession. Likewise, the underdrawing of Francis's head and face endows him with the qualities of humility, sagacity, and spiritual elevation befitting the founder of the Friars Minor. Bellini gave final form to these attributes with very thin applications of color, laying in first the shadows and then the lighter tones of the face, with a final touch of white for the glint of the eye (p. 80). The vivid immediacy of this painted portrait mitigates the physical absence of the saint, whose body was from an early date hidden and inaccessible to the faithful.²²

While the countenance of Francis leaves no doubt as to his devotion and the intensity of his experience, the nature of that experience is less certain. The most commonly illuminated episode from the saint's life is his stigmatization, the miracle



Fig. 45. Giovanni Bellini, *Portrait Study of Gentile Bellini*, c. 1496. Black chalk on paper (pounced for transfer), 23.2 × 19.4 cm. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Fig. 46. Giotto di Bondone and assistants (?), *Stigmatization of St. Francis*, c. 1291–96. Fresco, 350 × 329 cm. Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi

that occurred in September of 1224 during a retreat on the mountain of La Verna in the Tuscan Apennines. As Francis prayed, a vision of Christ in the form of a six-winged seraph affixed to a cross appeared from the heavens, and the five wounds of the Crucifixion began to emerge on his body. Traditional images of this event—going back as far as the late thirteenth-century fresco in the nave of the Upper Church of the basilica of San Francesco at Assisi (fig. 46)—depict the saint bending on one knee and raising his arms to receive the sacred marks on his hands, feet, and side via five connecting rays transmitted by an angelic apparition. Bellini's Francis, by contrast, stands rather than kneels; he seems to bear only two of the five stigmata, on his downward-extended hands; and he does not evidently communicate with a seraph or other divine agent (fig. 47). These incongruities have led some scholars to argue that the painting does not represent a stigmatization at all; others, however, have maintained that the picture refers unmistakably, if unconventionally, to the miracle.²³

Bellini's novel and enigmatic conception of the saint and his action is rooted in the underdrawing, which reveals an intensely thoughtful design executed outside the comfortable templates of pictorial tradition. The artist accentuated the upright figure with outstretched arms, the elevation of the left foot from the ground, and the movement of the left leg (fig. 48). The bottom hem of Francis's habit is emphasized with broad strokes of secondary underdrawing: these curves define the vertical pleats of drapery, which lend the figure columnar stability even as he moves. The saint's



Fig. 47. *St. Francis*, detail of the figure and surroundings



Fig. 48. *St. Francis*, detail of infrared reflectogram showing the figure and surroundings. The artist initially painted a concave niche in the rock face behind Francis. The niche appears as a zone of dark gray beginning at the level of the saint's chin and the top of his cowl and extending downward on either side.

monumental posture rhymes with the upright towers in the background townscape, evoking in formal terms his role as a builder and living pillar of the Church.²⁴ The figure and its associations are manifold, ambiguous, and divergent from the recent conventions of Franciscan iconography. Instead, the design evokes very early images of the standing, stigmatized Francis in thirteenth-century Italian painting, although Bellini has invested this iconic type with extraordinary dynamism.²⁵ This vision of Francis was to inspire representations of the saint by painters including Cristoforo Caselli and Titian (fig. 49).²⁶

Bellini's thorough planning of the figure allowed him to paint the flesh tones and habit with assurance and expressiveness. The tunic is a rich, golden brown, applied in a blended but brushy manner to capture the tactile effect of the deeply folded and shadowed cloth (fig. 50). To depict the saint's rough rope belt, the artist laid down thick, flowing strokes of pale yellow and then used an implement, possibly the reverse end of his brush, to score short diagonal lines into the wet paint (fig. 51).²⁷



Fig. 49. Titian, *Madonna di Ca' Pesaro*, 1519–26. Oil on canvas, 478 × 266.5 cm. Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice

Fig. 50. *St. Francis*, photomicrograph (3.5× magnification) of the saint's left sleeve

Fig. 51. *St. Francis*, photomicrograph (5× magnification) in raking light of the saint's rope belt

Bellini also departed from custom in the representation of Francis's stigmatic wounds. Examination with a microscope revealed that the two small red blots on the saint's hands are certainly original: the paint in these areas is aged, cracked, and integral with that of the palms beneath (figs. 52, 53).²⁸ Despite his exacting and consistent technique, however, the artist realized the stigmata with deliberate understatement. He placed the wound on the proper left hand entirely in shadow (see fig. 52) and enlarged the proper right sleeve during the painting process to form a bright, bell-like shape that draws attention away from the palm above (fig. 54).

As he measured the effect of these two stigmata, Bellini also concentrated on the hands on which they appear. In the underdrawing, he outlined each hand, noted the joints of the fingers with short arcs, and applied dense hatching in regions of shadow (see fig. 54). He then continued to adjust the position and dimensions of both hands as he added the flesh colors in thin layers. The hands were thus conceived as dramatic vehicles, comparable to the face in their content of action and emotion. Eloquent hands are a hallmark of Bellini's



Fig. 52 (opposite, above). *St. Francis*, detail of left sleeve and hand. The sleeve casts a shadow on the wound in the center of the palm. Over time, some of the hatched and contour underdrawing of the hand has become visible through the paint.

Fig. 53 (opposite, below). *St. Francis*, detail of right hand

Fig. 54 (right). *St. Francis*, details of infrared reflectogram showing underdrawing of the saint's arms and hands. The artist enlarged the right sleeve during painting and made numerous additional adjustments. He altered the size and shape of both thumbs and reinforced the contour of the right thumb with a heavy black line during painting.



art (see fig. 14) and have been associated with his power to fix the beholder's attention and guide pious contemplation.²⁹ Indeed, the painter attended with diligence to the hands and arms of all his figures, making many fine changes to palms, fingers, and sleeves.

Microscopic examination of the Frick picture yielded additional findings about the stigmata. Under high magnification, islands of translucent red paint are visible on the saint's left foot, evidence that Bellini also included a wound in this location (fig. 55). This area of red was not removed intentionally but became abraded over time and is now invisible to the naked eye.³⁰ The technical study found no trace of the fifth wound, the horizontal gash of the lance on the chest, usually exposed through a tear in the saint's garment. The habit is clean, the chest unmarked.³¹

Bellini's muted treatment of the stigmata is consistent with Francis's own modest behavior toward these signs of his perfect conformity to Christ. According to early accounts, the saint went to great lengths to conceal his holy injuries from his fellow friars.³² Francis did not trumpet his tortured body; though afflicted with chronic ailments and pains, he never systematically mortified himself.³³ In his minimal presentation of the stigmata, therefore, the painter depicts Francis as he would have wished to be seen. By excluding the gaping cut in the chest, Bellini reinforces the figure's robust, statuesque pose, so carefully studied in the underdrawing. This proudly vertical stance demonstrates the miraculous infusion of fortitude into a man plagued throughout his life by physical infirmities.³⁴ The puncture marks on the hands and foot, too, have been painted so as to disappear when viewed from a distance. The artist hints at the ineffable and unknowable nature of these sacred wounds, capturing the essence of Francis both in his corporeal martyrdom and spiritual wholeness.

The technique of St. Francis's stigmata suggests that they were intended as discreet identifying attributes and symbols of his wondrous workings in the world rather than the crux of the painted narrative. And indeed, the picture seems to lack another standard element of stigmatization scenes: the apparition of a seraph or Christ on a cross who impresses the marks of the Crucifixion on Francis's body, as in the predella of Bellini's own Pesaro altarpiece (see fig. 16). The earliest surviving notice of the Frick painting, penned in 1525 by Michiel, likewise fails to mention a seraph and does not identify the subject as a stigmatization (see fig. 21). The panel's top horizontal edge has been cut, however, and scholars have long considered it possible that a small seraph once appeared in the now missing section.³⁵ This alternate theory is substantiated by another early record of the painting, published in 1660 by the connoisseur Marco Boschini. His poetic description of Bellini's *St. Francis* suggests that the saint is being wounded by the apparition of Christ in the form of a fiery seraph, although the account is imprecise and allusive.³⁶

Fig. 55. *St. Francis*, detail and photomicrograph (40x magnification) of the left foot, showing traces of translucent red paint in the area of the original wound, now abraded

