

GIORGIO CORNARO AND THE CLOTH OF GOLD

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In his series of biographies, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) recalled seeing a portrait of the young Giorgio Cornaro (ca. 1454–1527) by Gentile Bellini (1429–1507)—however, it is either lost or resists identification.¹ The portrait may be synonymous with the so-called *Portrait of a Procurator and an Allegorical Figure* (ca. 1490; fig. 1), from the Emo Capodilista collection in the Musei Civici agli Eremitani, Padua. Previously, the Paduan painting has been assigned to Gentile Bellini by Van Marle in 1935; Girolamo da Santacroce by Berenson in 1936; the Venetian School by Moschetti in 1938; and Domenico Campagnola by Heinemann in 1962.² However,

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Figure 1. Unknown artist, *Portrait of a Procurator and an Allegorical Figure*, ca. 1490. Oil on panel, $12 \frac{1}{5} \times 12 \frac{3}{5}$ inches (31×32 cm). Musei Civici agli Eremitani, Padua.

the present author prefers the ascription of the painting to “Workshop of Giovanni Bellini.” The portrait on panel depicts a senator wearing a golden *vesta* with buttons, or *camparioni*, on the shoulder and a black squat biretta against a background containing mountains and a seascape. The portrait of the senator can be persuasively suggested as a likeness of Giorgio Cornaro, in terms of both style and iconography, as it corresponds with what might be expected of a portrait of Cornaro circa 1490.

The portrait is demarcated with sharp outlines, notable in the sitter’s costume. Brushstrokes are evident throughout, particularly in the sitter’s chemise, beard, and the sky. Dark paint is used to give the impression of depth, rather than subtle variations of dark to light, especially noticeable in the sitter’s eyelids and nose shape. The style of the portrait is similar to *Portrait of a Gentleman* (ca. 1490), which is attributed to the School of Bellini.³ The similarities include the composition, which incorporates the head and shoulders of the sitter, in three-quarter pose and a vacant stare, against a landscape. Both portraits display a similar handling of paint, whereby the sitters are tightly modeled and have harsh outlines.

The sitter in the Paduan portrait wears a similar costume to Giovanni Bellini’s *Portrait of Giovanni Emo* (ca. 1500) in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.⁴ Both figures sport a similar crimson-and-gold mantle, with golden buttons on the shoulder. Anne Markham Schulz identified the figure in the Washington portrait as Giovanni Emo (1425–1483), based on a corresponding sculptural likeness of him. With reference to Cesare Vecellio’s later famous book of costumes, *De gli habiti antichi et moderni*, of 1590, Markham Schulz noted a similarity between the attire depicted in the Washington portrait of Giovanni Emo and the costume of Vecellio’s *Venetian General in Time of War*. This is apparent in the inclusion of *camparioni* on the shoulder. Markham Schulz noted that the cloaks of such Venetian generals were fastened on the right (as opposed to ambassadors, who fastened their cloaks on the left) and that “cloaks of generals were explicitly described as

golden.” However, she observed that the hat in *Portrait of Giovanni Emo* was that of an ambassador, rather than a general, as generals wore hats with flat tops. During his political career, Giovanni Emo served as an ambassador, captain, and general in wartime.⁵ The Paduan portrait displays a figure wearing a hat with a flat top, as well as a golden mantle and camparioni on the right shoulder, and although the hat was a standard form of Venetian official dress, the golden mantle and the camparioni allude to the probability that the figure is a general of the Venetian forces—a position that Giorgio Cornaro held. The general’s costume in Vecellio’s book is contemporary to when it was created in 1590, which does not necessarily mean that it is the same costume as when Cornaro held this position. Instead, it is more likely to be what Vecellio refers to as the “old costume of the Venetian ambassador,” which displays the same hat and camparioni worn by the sitter in the Paduan portrait. Cornaro was a Venetian ambassador, and the costume that he wore during his time might have seemed old-fashioned by the time it was included in Vecellio’s book.

The sitter in the Paduan portrait wears the same black cap, golden robe with red details, and white chemise as that worn by the left-hand sitter in the double portrait in the National Gallery of Ireland (fig. 2), which has recently been identified as a *Portrait of Giorgio and Francesco Cornaro*.⁶ Both the sitter in the Paduan portrait and Cornaro’s likeness in Dublin have the same beard, hairline, eyelids, and cheekbones. The sitter in the Paduan portrait wears his hair at a medium length with a straight-cut fringe seen below the biretta. Stella Mary Newton claims that the Venetian hairstyle in 1495 incorporated a slight curl inward, framing the head with a straight-cut fringe across the forehead and above the eyebrows, in accordance with what we see here, a style that was outdated by the start of the sixteenth century.⁷ The nasolabial folds, as well as the eyebrow shape and color, are slightly different in both depictions. However, these could be age-related discrepancies.

The chronological, stylistic, and technical distance between the two portraits (roughly thirty years) would also accord with what we would



Figure 2. Follower of Titian and follower of Bellini, *Portrait of Giorgio and Francesco Cornaro*, 1520s. Oil on panel, 37 $\frac{4}{5}$ $\times$ 24 $\frac{4}{5}$ inches (96 $\times$ 63 cm). National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

expect. Both portraits also correlate with the description of what we know Cornaro was buried in. At Cornaro's funeral, contemporary diarist Marin Sanudo records that Cornaro's "body was carried to the church of San Maurizio, dressed in . . . a golden mantle . . . on his head was a black velvet cap, round and flat."⁸ Similarly, Newton noted that ambassador Marco Dandolo wore ten gold buttons on his left shoulder, with a "sopra vesta of restagno d'oro" and straight sleeves and crimson silk under a crimson mantle. The *restagno d'oro*, or cloth of gold, was a patterned brocade, woven with a gold weft. The *riso-sopra-riso* was a type of weaving in which both the raised pattern and the ground were woven into a granular surface of tiny loops.⁹ This description aligns with Cornaro's costume in the Dublin double portrait and the Paduan painting. Cloth of gold was the most sumptuous of all the fabrics available to Venetians. It was exclusive to the doge and to those who had received the accolade of knighthood.¹⁰ Cornaro's fame stemmed from the intermediary role that he played on behalf of his sister, Queen Caterina, in the handover

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of the island of Cyprus to Doge Agostino Barbarigo in 1489. He subsequently became Knight of the Golden Stole.

Giorgio Cornaro was born in Venice to Marco Cornaro (1406–1479) and Fiorenza Crispo (1422–1501). Cornaro's career, which spanned a series of important political and military positions, began in 1479 when he became the *Savio agli Ordini* (senior magistrate of maritime affairs). This was also the year in which he became head of the Cornaro family after the death of his father. In 1489 Giorgio Cornaro was treated as a local hero after having convinced his sister, Caterina, to abdicate the throne of Cyprus. In 1496 Cornaro became Podestà of Brescia. The distant landscape in the Paduan portrait could be a reference to the sitter's political position in that area, and it is possible that the mountainous area with its waterfront is a reference to Lake Garda with a distant view of Brescia.¹¹

In 1508 Cornaro was general superintendent of the Terraferma during the War of the League of Cambrai (1508–16). He was elected head of the Council of Ten, going on to become procurator of San Marco.¹² In 1521 Cornaro received numerous endorsements for his election to the dogeship, although he never achieved this goal. Francesco Sansovino (1521–1586) wrote of Giorgio Cornaro that:

[he] deserves the highest praise of any age because, in addition to being the richest man in our fatherland (though this may well be through good fortune) and having a sister who was the Queen of Cyprus, he loved his fatherland so much that he avoided all the passions that can disturb a settled soul and took steps that the exceedingly rich island should come under the protection of our own Senate. And this is a fact all the more worthy of eternal remembrance because the gift which he gave the city was not frivolous or little moment, but rather a very weighty matter and of the highest importance, in that the island was a flourishing and powerful kingdom.¹³

Giorgio Cornaro died on July 31, 1527, and his funeral was one of the most lavish Venice had ever seen.¹⁴

The back of the Paduan portrait depicts an allegorical figure holding a coat of arms, which has since been deliberately scratched away (fig. 3). However, there are traces of paint still present. Following the present writer's discussion with both the conservator, Elisabetta Gastaldi, and the restorer, Antonella Daolio, at the Musei Civici agli Eremitani, it seems likely that the paint traces were blue on the right-hand side of the escutcheon, which would be compatible with the Cornaro coat of arms, before it was crossed with that of the Lusignan family after the marriage of Caterina to James Lusignan II of Cyprus. The curators at the Paduan museum also highlighted how the top layer of the frame has been removed, as is notable from intact evidence of woodworm tunneling activity within the wood, rather than the entry holes that one would ordinarily expect. It is possible that the frame was removed because it was originally part of a diptych that was dismembered and that the coat of arms was scratched out to conceal the identity of the sitter in the painting. In 1509 Giorgio Cornaro fled the front line of the disastrous Battle of Agnadello due to illness, without receiving permission, and was blamed for the defeat of the Venetian forces. He was dismissed from his position and temporarily threatened with state prosecution.¹⁵ It could be for this reason that the identity of the sitter was deliberately concealed, as a form of *damnatio memoriae*.

In 2009 Anne-Marie Eze proposed that Antonello da Messina's *The Condottiere* (ca. 1475), which was once part of the Mocenigo collection, depicted a youthful Cornaro. Eze suggested that the painting was once owned by the Cornaro family, solely because the Mocenigo family inherited the palace at San Polo from the Cornaro.¹⁶ However, even if this portrait was once part of the Cornaro collection, it could have been purchased at any point, or given as a gift, and does not necessarily mean it depicts a Cornaro family member. At the time Eze made this assumption, the portrait of Giorgio Cornaro in the Dublin double portrait was not yet acknowledged. It is now surely apparent that, with or without a beard, there are no facial similarities between the two figures and that this theory should be abandoned. Furthermore, if the aforementioned



Figure 3. Unknown artist, *Portrait of a Procurator and an Allegorical Figure* (reverse), ca. 1490. Oil on panel, $12 \frac{1}{5} \times 12 \frac{3}{5}$ inches (31×32 cm). Musei Civici agli Eremitani, Padua. Courtesy the Municipality of Padua, all rights reserved.

Paduan portrait does depict Cornaro in his youth, *The Condottiere* cannot also be Cornaro, as they are close in date. The latter does not portray the hawk-like nose or droopy nasal tip seen in the Paduan work.

The Paduan portrait's provenance further supports the identification: it was donated to Padua's Musei Civici by the Emo Capodilista family, who resided at Villa Cornaro in Piombino Dese between 1919 and 1921. Significantly, this villa, designed by Andrea Palladio in 1552, was commissioned by Giorgio Cornaro's grandson and namesake, Giorgio Cornaro (1517–1570), also known as Zorzone, and the Cornaro family resided there until 1807.¹⁷ It is reasonably possible that the portrait was passed down through generations in the Villa Cornaro. The distinctive facial features of Giorgio Cornaro, including his pronounced nasolabial folds, under-eye circles, and his medium-length hair and beard, are clearly evident in both portraits. Cornaro's beard in the Padua portrait is darker and fuller than the one in Dublin, which is thinner and more gray, a variation that may be attributed to the sitter's advanced age in the latter. Given that Cornaro wears the golden mantle, an honor associated with his knighthood in 1489, the Paduan portrait must date from after that year. It would thus represent the earliest known image of Giorgio Cornaro, predating and complementing the later double portrait in Dublin, and very likely corresponds to the portrait mentioned by Vasari. This not only fills a major gap in the visual record of one of Venice's most politically influential figures but also provides rare insight into Venetian portraiture practices for high-ranking officials. The evidence of the scratched-out coat of arms is an example of how a political downfall may have led to intentional acts of *damnatio memoriae* through the alteration of portraiture.

NOTES

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1. Anne-Marie Eze, “Abbé Celotti and the Provenance of Antonello da Messina’s *The Condottiere* and Antonio de Solario’s *Virgin and Child with St. John*,” in “Art in Italy,” special issue, *Burlington Magazine* 151, no. 1279 (2009): 673–77, at 676n40. Vasari mistakenly claims that Giorgio was painted by Jacopo Bellini. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, III (Florence, 1881), 151. However, this cannot be the case, as Bellini died in 1470.
2. David Banzato, *La Quaderia Emo Capodilista: 543 dipinti dal '400 al '700* (A. Mondadori, 1988), 56.
3. School of Giovanni Bellini, *Portrait of a Gentleman*, ca. 1490. Oil on panel, 21.5 × 16.8 inches (54.6 × 42.9 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, cat. 251.
4. Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa, cat. 148, in Giovanni Bellini, *Catalogo ragionato*, ed. Mauro Lucco (Zel Edizioni, 2019), 517–19.
5. Anne Markham Schulz, “A Portrait of Giovanni Emo in the National Gallery of Art,” *Studies in the History of Art* 9 (1980): 7, 9–10.
6. Rachel Healy, “A Portrait of Two Venetian Gentlemen in the National Gallery of Ireland: A Question of Identity,” *Artefact*, no. 8 (2016): 35–43.
7. Stella Mary Newton, *The Dress of the Venetians, 1495–1525* (Scholar Press, 1988), 33, 42.
8. “El corpo era in chiesa di San Morizio, vestido . . . con manto d’oro di sopra . . . et in testa bareta in taier di veludo negro.” David Chambers and Alan Pullan, eds., *Venice, A Documentary History: 1450–1630* (Blackwell, 1993), 252.
9. Newton, *The Dress of the Venetians*, 16, 79.
10. Banzato, *La Quaderia Emo Capodilista*, 16–21.
11. However, the earliest Bellini portrait with a landscape is Giovanni Bellini’s *Portrait of a Young Man* (ca. 1505). Oil on panel. Royal Collection, UK, accn. #RCIN 405761.
12. Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia Cita Nobilissima et singolare* (Leading Edizioni, 2002), 33. The procurator was one of the highest magistracies of Venice. There were nine procurators, who were responsible for the upkeep of the Basilica of San Marco. Monique O’Connell, *Rulers of Venice, 1332–1524: Interpretations, Methods, Database* (ACLS Humanities, 2009).
13. Vaughan Hart, *Sansovino’s Venice* (Yale University Press, 2017), 225.

14. Douglas Lewis, "Titian's Portraits of the Corner Family" (unpublished manuscript), 1972, registrar files, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 28. Marin Sanudo, *Diarii*, vol. 45, 572–73.
15. Linda L. Carroll, ed., *Angelo Beolco (il Ruzante): La Prima Oratione*, vol. 16, Critical Texts (MHRA, 2009), 19.
16. Eze, "Abbé Celotti," 676.
17. Carl Gable and Douglas Lewis, *Villa Cornaro ora Gable*, leaflet, 1992.