



Giorgione

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Giorgione

(c. 1475-1510)



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Giorgione



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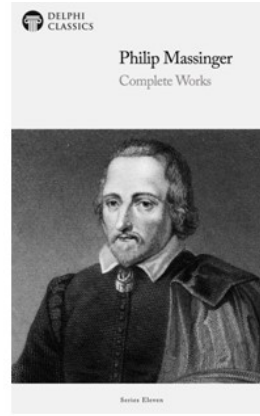
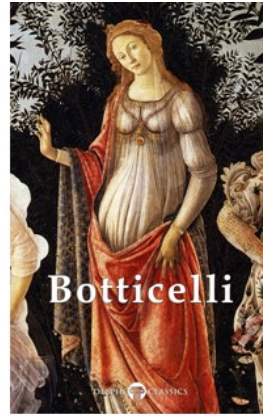
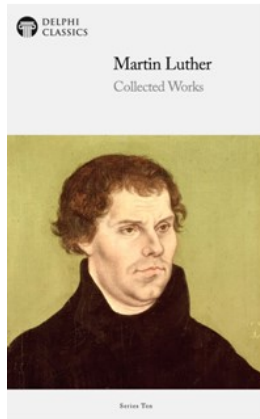
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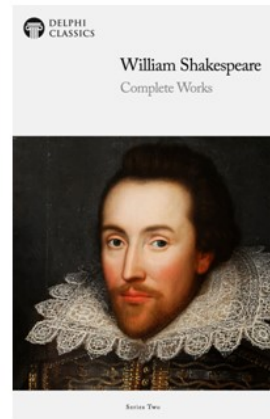
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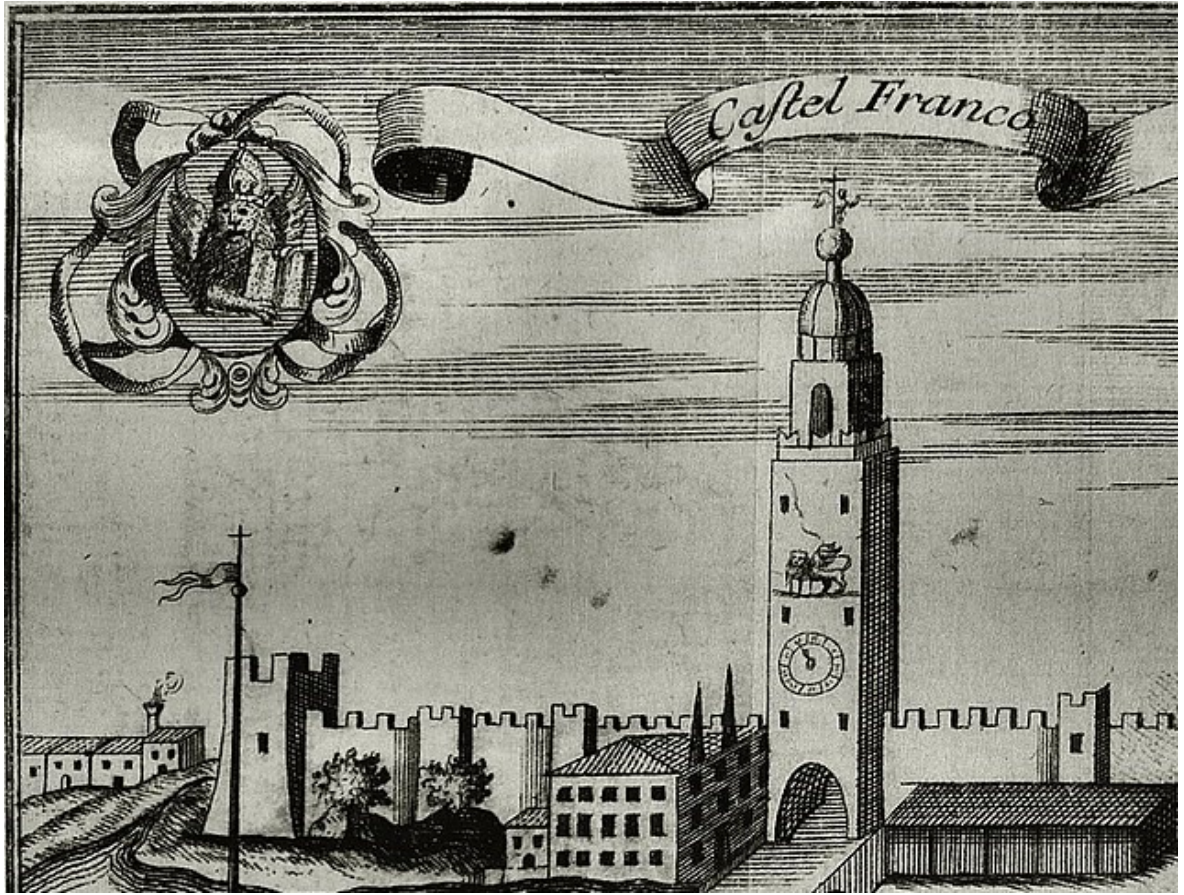


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Confirmed Paintings



Castelfranco Veneto, a town of Veneto, northern Italy — Giorgione's birthplace



Vincenzo Coronelli's 1697 depiction of the town

The Paintings



In this section, all of Giorgione's confirmed paintings (i.e. generally accepted by the majority of art historians today) are provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

The Test of Fire of Moses (c. 1500)



The ambiguity surrounding the identity and meaning of the work of the Venetian master Giorgione has made him one of the most mysterious figures of European art. Together with his younger contemporary Titian, he founded the Venetian school of Italian Renaissance painting, characterised by its use of colour and mood. The school is traditionally contrasted with Florentine painting, which relied on a more linear *disegno*-led (drawing and design) style. In spite of his early death to plague, few artists, if any, have made such a lasting contribution to the history of art in such a short career.

The little that we know for certain about Giorgione is provided in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550). He was born Barbarelli da Castelfranco in the small commune of Castelfranco Veneto, about 25 miles inland from Venice, in c. 1477. The nickname 'Giorgione', which sometimes appears as the variant *Zorzo*, can be translated as "Big George". It is unclear how early he went to Venice, though stylistic evidence supports the statement of the Baroque-era art biographer Carlo Ridolfi (1594-1658) that Giorgione served his apprenticeship in the city under the Renaissance master Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430-1516). He settled in Venice, where he quickly rose to prominence as a painter of a phenomenal quality.

Extant documents reveal that his talent was recognised early. By 1500, when he was in his twenties, he was chosen to paint the portraits of the Doge Agostino Barbarigo and the condottiere Consalvo Ferrante. In 1504, he was commissioned to paint an altarpiece in memory of another condottiere, Matteo Costanzo, in the cathedral of his native town, Castelfranco. In 1507, Giorgione received, at the order of the Council of Ten, partial payment for a picture — the subject now unknown — for the Hall of the Audience in the Doge's Palace. From 1507 to 1508 he was employed, with other notable artists, to decorate with frescoes the exterior of the newly rebuilt Fondaco dei Tedeschi (German Merchants' Hall) at Venice, having already done similar work on the exterior of the Casa Soranzo, the Casa Grimani alli Servi and other Venetian palaces. Many of these works are now lost.

One of Giorgione's few early works to have survived, *The Test of Fire of Moses* is housed today in Florence's famous Galleria degli Uffizi. The panel is dimensionally and thematically similar to its pendant painting, *The Judgment of Solomon*, also in the Uffizi, dated to the years immediately after Giorgione's move to Venice.

It presents an episode from the Talmud, a post-Christian Jewish codex. This choice of subject suggests a cultured patron that did not align himself with the Roman Church. An infant Moses is presented to Pharaoh to determine if he intends to overthrow the ruler, after the child had previously trampled his crown. Moses is offered two dishes — one with coals (fire) and one with cherries. Guided by an angel, the child selects the coals and places them in his mouth, burning himself. This act demonstrates innocence of treasonable intent rather than malice. The painting embodies a calm, regal setting with Moses being tested before the enthroned Pharaoh, surrounded by servants, signifying his future adoption. A nearby woman, interpreted as Pharaoh's daughter, advocates for Moses to the king. The surrounding courtiers

appear relatively calm, highlighting the relieving moment, where tension shifts from a potential death sentence to the child's adoption into the royal family.

Giorgione's early panel is notable for its precocious sense of detail, hinting at the influences of Northern Europe painting, especially Albrecht Dürer. It employs a horizontal setting that has drawn comparisons with Bellini's *Holy Allegory*, also in the Uffizi, which lays stress on the importance of landscape.

The Test of Fire of Moses and its pendant panel arrived at the Uffizi from the villa of Poggio Imperiale in 1795, at which time they were attributed to Bellini. They were originally registered among the assets of Grand Duchess Vittoria Della Rovere. Some art historians have suggested that they were originally held in Urbino among the Della Rovere estates, brought to Florence by Vittoria herself. Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle was the first critic to attribute both panels to Giorgione in 1861. Like most of Giorgione's works, there have been many disagreements between scholars in attribution and dating. While some question his hand in the creation of the figures, the landscapes are almost certainly by Giorgione. According to more recent studies, the stylistic discrepancies are more likely to be attributed to restoration work over the centuries.





Detail



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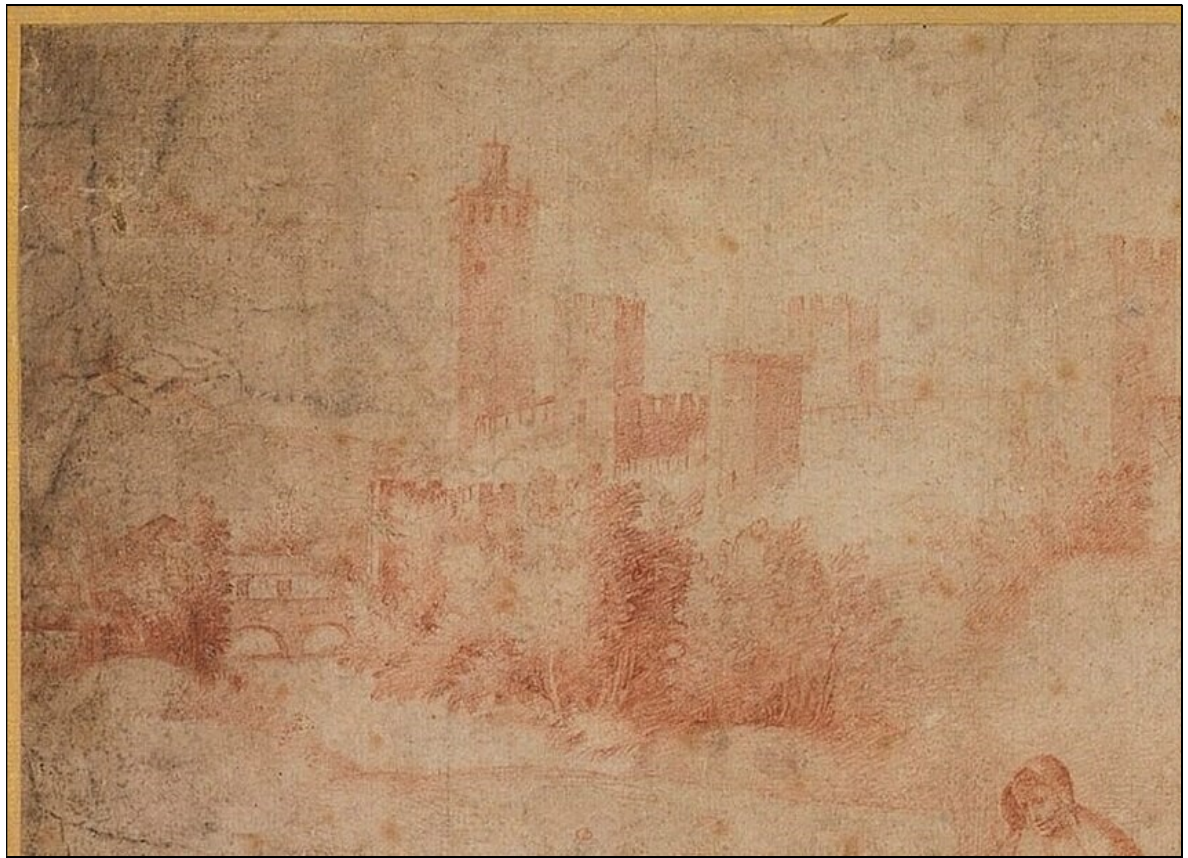
Presumed self portrait of Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione's master, Musei Capitolini, Rome, c. 1500



A likely source of influence: 'The Holy Allegory' by Giovanni Bellini, Uffizi, c. 1495



The Uffizi, Florence — one of the largest and best-known galleries in the world, it holds a collection of priceless works, particularly from the period of the Italian Renaissance.



Completed around the same time, Giorgione's only extant drawing: 'View of Castel San Zeno, Montagnana, with a Seated Figure in the Foreground', Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, c. 1501

The Judgment of Solomon (1501)



The pendant piece to the previous plate, this panel concerns a subject from *The Book of Kings*, in which the wise King Solomon rules between two women, who both claim to be the mother of the same child. *1 Kings 3:16-28* recounts that Solomon orders the baby to be cut in half, with each woman to receive one half. The first woman accepts the compromise as fair, but the second begs Solomon to give the baby to her rival, preferring the baby to live, even without her. Solomon orders the baby to be given to the second woman, as her love was selfless, as opposed to the first woman's selfish disregard for the baby's actual well-being. This ancient approach to justice serves as an archetypal example of an impartial judge displaying wisdom in making a ruling.

The dramatic scene was, of course, a popular choice for artists throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Like most of Giorgione's works, there have been many discrepancies in the attribution and dating of this panel. While some question his hand in the creation of the figures, the landscapes are likely by him. On a high throne to the right, Solomon orders a soldier to sever in half a child being fought over by two women. One of the women renounces the order, kneeling and looking down at the child with fear, while the other appears to make a gesture of disinterested selfishness. The composition features various figures in exotic clothing, typical of Venetian art, which is often flavoured with foreign peoples and customs, indicative of the assorted travellers visiting the trade-rich city. The figures' heads are presented with *isocephalism*, an artistic convention where the heads appear aligned at the same height, despite different poses. This technique was frequently employed in Classical Greek sculpture, vase painting and later in Roman bas-reliefs. The convention prioritises symmetry and aesthetic unity over naturalistic proportions, creating a balanced visual line. Only the kneeling true mother and the towering head of the wise Solomon are differentiated from the rest of the figures.

Behind the view of the city, a vast landscape unfolds, with a tall oak and cypress trees in the centre, creating a natural border between two halves, with a rocky spur on the right and an open section in the distance to the left, overlooking the landscape, where castles and mountains disappear into the horizon. Once again, the influence of Bellini can be detected in the use of landscape to contrast with the human drama in the foreground.





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An earlier example of isocephalism, which may have influenced Giorgione – Masaccio's 'The Tribute Money', from the 'Scenes from the Life of Peter' fresco cycle in the Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, 1428

The Three Ages of Man (c. 1501)



Now displayed at the Galleria Palatina within Florence's Palazzo Pitti, this painting reportedly presents the three ages of man, from young adulthood, through to middle age and old age. It is assumed that the same man is portrayed in all three figures, representing three moments of his life, all set against a dark background. The youth in the centre reads from a folio upon which are drawn two rules of a musical staff. The man to his left points to the music sheet, offering guidance, while the old man turns his head over his shoulder to look back at the viewer with a questioning, perhaps challenging expression. We are, it seems, being asked to consider the spiritual expression of man and the harmony of existence. The allegorical title the painting bears now is from a seventeenth century catalogue, but other critics have suggested that the scene is in fact a singing lesson or the education of a young Marcus Aurelius. The figure to the right has also been identified as a portrait of the musician Philippe Verdelot.

The dark background contrasts with the incisive chromatic choices applied to the figures. Their clothes and features emerge from the background gradually, employing *sfumato* learnt from Leonardo. Even Giorgione's drafting application of thin glazes is inspired by the Florentine, with meticulous attention to naturalistic details like the hair, rendered with subtle brushstrokes.

The canvas was first identified in a description by Marcantonio Michiel of the antique dressing room of Gabriele Vendramin, cited in a 1569 inventory. In 1657, the painting passed into the collection of the painter Nicolas Régnier and from there it was bought by the Medici family between 1666 and 1675, where it entered the collection of Ferdinando de' Medici. The triple portrait panel was initially attributed to Jacopo Palma il Vecchio and then to a "Lombardic style." In 1880, Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891), an Italian art critic and political figure, was the first to re-attribute to work to Giorgione, a theory mostly shared by art historians today.





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Ferdinando I de' Medici (1549-1609) — one of the prestigious owners of the painting. He served as Grand Duke of Tuscany from 1587 to 1609, having succeeded his older brother Francesco I. Ferdinando helped expand the culture of Tuscany.

Judith (c. 1504)



All accounts agree in representing Giorgione as an artist of distinguished and romantic charm, as well as a musician, who liked to express in his art the sensuous grace and poetic melancholy of Venetian life at the time. Surviving accounts represent the young Giorgione as having made in Venetian painting an advance similar to that made in Tuscan painting by his great contemporary Leonardo da Vinci more than twenty years before. Vasari tells us that Leonardo actually met Giorgione while he was visiting Venice in 1500. Also, Giorgione was closely associated with Titian; Vasari claims that Titian was Giorgione's disciple, though Ridolfi tells us that they were pupils of Bellini and both lived in his home. They worked together on the Fondaco dei Tedeschi frescoes and Titian finished at least some of Giorgione's paintings after his sudden death, although which ones precisely remains controversial.

A landmark work of the Venetian High Renaissance, *Judith* was executed around 1504 and is on display at present in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. Originally attributed to Raphael, it came to the Hermitage in 1772 from Paris. Like many paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, it refers to the beheading of Holofernes by Judith, as recounted in the deuterocanonical *Book of Judith*. In the story, Judith, a beautiful Jewish widow, enters the tent of Assyrian general Holofernes under the guise of seduction, when he was preparing to destroy her home, the city of Bethulia. He passes out intoxicated and is decapitated by Judith; his head is taken away in a basket (often depicted as being carried away by an elderly female servant). Over the years, artists have chiefly chosen one of two possible scenes: the decapitation, with Holofernes supine on the bed, or Judith the heroine holding or carrying the head. In this case Giorgione has opted for the latter.

The canvas (later transferred from panel) serves as a pivotal shift in how biblical heroines were portrayed in the Renaissance era. Created during a period when Venice was flourishing as a centre of atmospheric painting, the image reflects Giorgione's mastery of *sfumato* — the delicate blending of colours and tones to create a misty, dreamlike quality — a technique perfected by his Tuscan counterpart Leonardo.

The painting portrays Judith after she has decapitated the tyrannical Holofernes. Unlike earlier Renaissance versions by artists like Donatello and Botticelli, which often emphasised the violence of the act or Judith's triumph as a civic symbol of virtue, Giorgione presents the heroine as startlingly serene. She stands calmly, her left leg resting atop the severed head of Holofernes. She holds a heavy sword, yet her expression is one of melancholic contemplation rather than aggression. The scene is set against a verdant, atmospheric landscape, with a large oak tree framing Judith's figure and distant blue hills fading into the horizon. The composition's overall impression is one of poetic ambiguity — a hallmark of many of Giorgione's extant paintings. There is a jarring contrast between the horrific trophy beneath Judith's foot and her ethereal, almost fragile beauty. This disparate juxtaposition adds a hint of cold sensuality — note her bared leg emerging from a slit in her shimmering pink drapery, giving the painting a mild erotic element.

The restoration conducted on the canvas in the late 1960's, removing centuries of yellowed varnish, revealed the original cool, silvery tones that enhance this tranquil yet unsettling scene. The overall impact of Giorgione's *Judith* lies in its psychological

depth. Unprecedented for its time in Venetian art, it moved the subject away from rigid religious moralising, aiming instead for a more complex, humanistic interpretation. By integrating the figure seamlessly into a naturalistic landscape, Giorgione helped establish the “Venetian style” — where mood and light are as essential to the story as the characters themselves. By all accounts, *Judith* remains a definitive example of how Renaissance art could transform a violent narrative into a moment of profound, quiet and inner beauty.

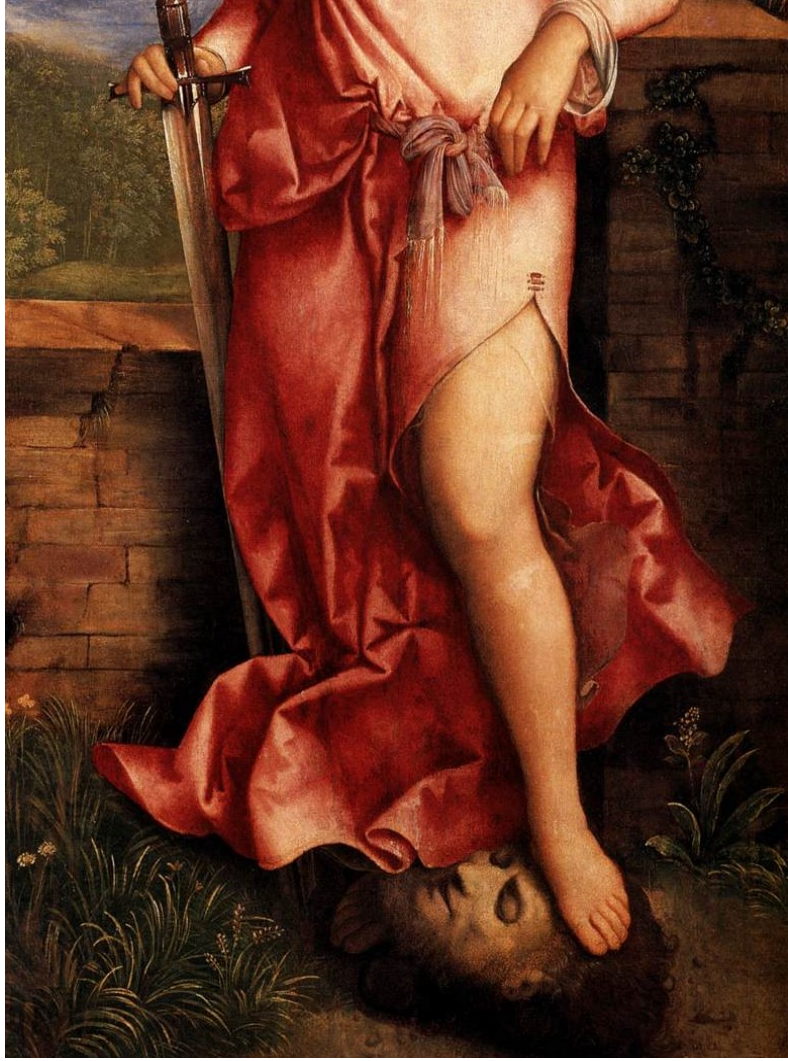




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Donatello's bronze sculpture of "Judith and Holofernes", created towards the end of his life, Hall of Lilies (Sala dei Gigli), Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 1464

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