

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco GIORGIONE (Castelfranco Veneto c.1473/74 - Venice 1510)

An Imaginary Townscape on a Riverbank

Brush and brown wash, with touches of white heightening, on paper washed a light brown.

Inscribed Tiziano in a 16th century hand at the lower right.

A triangular section at the upper right corner of the sheet previously torn and reattached.

Laid down.

264 x 228 mm. (10 3/8 x 9 in.)

Giorgione is almost completely unknown as a draughtsman. The Florentine biographer Giorgio Vasari asserts that the artist made very few drawings, and further claimed that he prepared his paintings without the aid of initial preparatory studies on paper. Indeed, only a tiny handful of drawings have ever been attributed to Giorgione. Of these, just one has been generally accepted as an autograph work by the artist; a landscape in red chalk, today in the collection of the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, that depicts a shepherd seated in front of the walls of the Castel San Zeno in the town of Montagnana in the Veneto.

This delicate landscape study was attributed to Giorgione in 2015 by the scholar Peter Dreyer, who noted in particular a series of stylistic and compositional analogies with two of the few documented paintings by the artist; the enigmatic *La Tempesta* in Venice, which has long been regarded as one of the very first landscape paintings in the history of Western art, and the *Three Philosophers* in a Landscape in Vienna. The present sheet, which bears an old attribution to Titian, is drawn in a technique – with the point of the brush used to apply brown ink and wash on prepared paper that has been tinted by hand – ‘common in Venetian art during the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth...the brush technique employed in the drawing comes close to painting.’

As Dreyer writes of this drawing of an Imaginary Townscape on a Riverbank, 'there are striking parallels with Giorgione's *La Tempesta*... The buildings in the drawing are painted with vertical brushstrokes, just like many of those in the painting, which are clearly visible between the structure with the dome at the left and the central twin towers. The subject matter and the "mood" of the drawing are redolent of the architectural background of *La Tempesta*. The relationship between the high riverbank, water, and townscape in the drawing corresponds to that in the painting between the horizontal bridge, its reflection in the dark blue river, and the architectural background. In this regard, the compositional principles are the same. The steeply foreshortened buildings, their separation by empty space, the varying proportions of the structures, and the resulting creation and embracing of space also find parallels. Both works depict structures on the border of a city or town without walls. The architectural typology is also the same, and towers without roofs and very slightly sloping roofs occur in both.'

Dreyer further identifies a number of specific architectural details that are found in both the present drawing and Giorgione's *La Tempesta*. As he writes, 'In both drawing and painting, we find narrow vertical windows rendered as small slits; and some windows and doorways are outlined in bright bands, with the openings sometimes rendered as dark spots without any indication of depth. In addition, there are amazingly similar oblique views into windows that display the inner faces of their openings, as, for example, in the tower of the drawing and in the house at the right margin of *La Tempesta*.'

The present sheet also finds parallels with Giorgione's painting of *Three Philosophers in a Landscape* in Vienna. As Dreyer notes, 'The buildings in the drawing correspond in size nearly exactly to the water mill in the middle ground of the Vienna painting', while many of the same stylistic and architectural elements shared by the drawing and *La Tempesta* are likewise found in the *Three Philosophers*. This is also true of the depiction of nature in the present sheet: 'The tree at the drawing's left margin with its thin trunk and transparent crown of thin foliage, corresponds to the tree in the left middle ground of *La Tempesta*, as well as to that between the rocky cliff and the mill in the *Three Philosophers*. There the upright trunk crosses that of a smaller tree bent to the right, similar to the depiction in the drawing. Some of the leaves before the silhouette of the rock in the left half of the painting resemble plants on the riverbank in the drawing...they do not imitate nature, but originate from the abstract way in which the artist conceived foliage and plants, a device used in both the painting and the drawing.'

Looking closely at the present sheet, Dreyer pointed out that 'a characteristic feature of the draftsman responsible for the new drawing is the uncommon use of the brush. He did not outline the bushes on the far riverbank, but indicated them with isolated dots and depicted the foliage of the bush in front of the entrance to the first house, as well as that of the trees, as bright dabs. The same predilection for dots and dabs is found in Giorgione's paintings. He used them for the clumps of foliage in his trees, for single leaves, for the bright heightening within more compact masses of leaves, and finally for the characteristic gravel at the feet of the "gypsy" woman in the Venice painting and of the seated philosopher in the Vienna picture.'

In summary, as Dreyer has opined, this refined, atmospheric landscape drawing may be regarded as 'a potential preparatory study by Giorgione for an architectural background such as that featured in *La Tempesta*. Although it is neither documented as Giorgione, nor directly used in his painted oeuvre, its thematic and stylistic similarities with the two painted landscapes mentioned by Marcantonio Michiel [ie. *La Tempesta* and *Three Philosophers in a Landscape*] are obvious enough to allow for a plausible attribution to Giorgione...the composition, the details, and finally the microstructure can only be observed in Giorgione's paintings.'

Exhibitions

Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Venezia 500: The Gentle Revolution of Venetian Painting, 2023-2024, no.33 (as Giorgione).

Literature:

Peter Dreyer, An Unknown Drawing by Giorgione, Master Drawings, Summer 2015, pp.179-190, figs.3, 5 and 8 (as Giorgione); Julian Brooks, 'Function: An Introduction', in Maria Aresin and Thomas Dalla Costa, ed., Venetian Disegno: New Frontiers c.1420-1620, London, 2024, p.169, fig.3.

Artist description:

Nothing is known of the early training of the painter Giorgio da Castelfranco, known as Giorgione (or 'Zorzi' in the local Venetian dialect), who was of humble origins but became one of the most significant artists of the Renaissance in Venice. Indeed, what we know of the artist's career as a whole is limited; as Terisio Pignatti has noted, 'in spite of the great success and fame that accompanied Giorgione's short life, there is very little in the way of documents and reliable sources to enable us to write a biography that goes into any more detail than the very sketchy account that tradition has passed on.' Furthermore, Giorgione's modern fame, by contrast with any other artist of comparable stature, rests on just a handful of securely documented or attributed works. He appears to have joined the studio of Giovanni Bellini in Venice sometime in the late 1480s, and his first independent works are likely datable to the early 1490s.

One of his earliest known paintings is a large altarpiece of The Virgin and Child with Saints Francis and George, known as the Pala del Castelfranco, executed around 1504 and still today in the cathedral in the painter's native town of Castelfranco Veneto. In 1507-1508 Giorgione painted a canvas, now lost, for the audience chamber of the Doge's Palace in Venice, and in 1508 he worked alongside Titian on the fresco decoration of the exterior of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, near the Rialto bridge, of which only ghostly fragments survive today. These were among the very few public works that the artist painted, since, unlike many of his contemporaries, Giorgione seems to have had little interest in obtaining major civic or religious commissions in Venice; he did not, for example, work for any of the Scuole of the city. He did, however, paint a handful of façade decorations for Venetian palaces, all of which are now lost.

Most of Giorgione's output was in the form of small-scale easel pictures and portraits, the result of private commissions from Venetian collectors. The landscape backgrounds in his paintings seem to have played a particularly significant role in his artistic methodology; indeed, as the scholar Max J. Friedländer observed, 'no one can deny Giorgione, the Venetian master, the distinction of being the first great landscape painter.' The artist's contemporary biographer, the Venetian nobleman Marcantonio Michiel, noted in particular two paintings by Giorgione that he described as either a 'paese' or a 'paesetto'; the small canvas known as The Tempest or La Tempesta, painted between 1505 and 1508 and now in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice, and the larger Three Philosophers in a Landscape of c.1508-1509, today in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The fact that no signed and very few dated works by Giorgione have survived has led to much scholarly controversy over the extent of his painted oeuvre, as well as distinguishing his work from that of the young Titian, who was profoundly influenced by him. Titian was several years younger than Giorgione, for whom he seems to have worked as an assistant, but the two artists soon came to be seen as artistic rivals and the leaders of a new school of painting in Venice. Giorgione died of the plague in Venice in September 1510, at the age of thirty-six.