

Giovanni Bellini: Birth, Parentage, and Independence*

by DANIEL WALLACE MAZE

A number of longstanding questions have surrounded the early life of the fifteenth-century Venetian artist Giovanni Bellini (d. 1516), generally believed to have been the son of Jacopo Bellini (ca. 1400–70/71) and the younger brother of Gentile Bellini (1429/35–1507). The artist's year of birth and the legitimacy of his birth have been the subjects of debate for well over a century. By reevaluating Bellini-related legal documents under the relevant fifteenth-century Venetian civil laws, this article makes a case that Giovanni Bellini was not Jacopo Bellini's son, but rather his half-brother, and that they were both sons of Nicolò Bellini; that Giovanni was therefore Gentile Bellini's uncle rather than his brother; and that he was born legitimate between the late summer of 1424 and 13 September 1428, several years earlier than the birth year of ca. 1435 (or later) favored by many contemporary Bellini specialists. The ramifications of situating Bellini's birth year in the mid- to late 1420s are then considered.

1. INTRODUCTION

“We learned this morning of the death of Giovanni Bellini, the great painter,” wrote the Venetian diarist Marin Sanudo (1466–1536) on 29 November 1516, “who died at the age of . . .”¹ Sanudo left a blank space that historians for five centuries have attempted to fill. Other questions have been raised about the early life of the Venetian artist, generally believed to have been the son of Jacopo Bellini (ca. 1400–70/71) and the younger

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¹Sanudo, *I diarii*, 23:256 (29 November 1516): “Se intese, questa matina esser morto Zuan Belin optimo pytor, havia anni”

brother of Gentile Bellini (1429/35–1507).² Some scholars have sought to explain why Jacopo's wife, Anna, did not mention him in her will of 25 November 1471, since under Venetian law this omission means that Giovanni could not have been Anna and Jacopo's legitimate son.³ Others have wondered how the young Giovanni could afford to establish his own household in 1459, in the parish of San Lio, while his presumed brother Gentile stayed in his father Jacopo's house, in the parish of San Geminiano.⁴ The most consequential problem, one that Peter Humfrey has called "crucial for a proper understanding of his early career," remains Giovanni's date of birth, which some have argued was as early as ca. 1425 and others as late as 1440, with ca. 1435 or later being favored by most contemporary Bellini specialists.⁵

The following article answers these questions by reevaluating Bellini-related legal documents in light of the relevant fifteenth-century Venetian

²For recent critical summaries of Giovanni's life and career, see Lucco, 2008; Humfrey, 2004. Questions concerning Giovanni's early years are unlikely to be resolved by future discoveries of primary source materials; most known documents related to the artist's early career were published between 1868 and 1929. For dates of publication and transcriptions, see Barausse, 330–69.

³Venice, Archivio di Stato (cited hereafter as ASV), Notarile. Testamenti (cited hereafter as NT), b. 361, Francesco Elmis, carta sciolta, n. 2; copy in reg. "Testamentorum," c. 65^v, n. 163 (abbreviations: b. = *busta* (folder); reg. = register); Barausse, 338, doc. 31. A vast bibliography exists concerning Giovanni's possible illegitimacy (and possible birthdate). For instance, Lucco, 2008, 20–21, argues that Giovanni was illegitimate, the product of Jacopo's extramarital relationship with an unknown woman, because: Giovanni was omitted from Anna Rinversi's will of 1471; Vasari described Nicolosia, the daughter of Jacopo Bellini and wife of Mantegna, only as the "sister of Gentile" (*sorella di Gentile*) rather than as both Gentile's and Giovanni's sister; and by 1459 Giovanni lived in San Lio, apart from his father and perhaps with his biological mother. Goffen, 3–4, argues that Giovanni was legitimate, dismissing the significance of his omission from Anna's will, and observing, as a sign of his legitimate birth, that "he seems to have enjoyed all the benefits of the Bellini family's status as members of the *cittadinanza originaria*, the class second only to the patriciate. . . . [He] was always identified as 'our faithful citizen' in state documents, and his son, Alvise, served in the chancellery, where employment was restricted to the citizen class." Robertson, 11, leaning toward Giovanni's legitimacy, observes that if Giovanni had been illegitimate, such a "gossipy detail" likely would have been recorded by Vasari or Ridolfi; he speculates that Giovanni was omitted from Anna's last will because "he had already received his portion of the estate under Jacopo's will, which has not come to light." Also see, for example, Villa, 23–24; Christiansen, 52–54; Fletcher, 2004, 25; Humfrey, 2004, 5–6; Lucco, 1990, 411–13; Meyer zur Capellen, 10; Fiocco, 6; Longhi, 277–78; Paoletti, 1929, 70; Fry, 12.

⁴For Giovanni residing in San Lio in 1459, see ASV, NT, b. 727, Giuseppe Moisis, cc. 1^v–2^v, n. 32; Barausse, 334, doc. 16.

⁵Humfrey, 2004, 5. Lucco, 2008, 21, situates Giovanni's birth in 1438/40; Humfrey, 2004, 6, in 1435/38; Christiansen, 53, in ca. 1435 or later; Fiocco, 6; and Longhi, 277–78, both in ca. 1425.

civil laws.⁶ It can also serve as a case study demonstrating several ways that valuable biographical information might be extracted from primary source legal documents when they are interpreted according to the applicable civil statutes under which they were written. Hence this study may encourage worthwhile reanalysis of legal documents connected not only to Quattrocento Venetian artists, but also to any number of historical figures who lived in medieval or early modern Europe.

When the Bellini legal documents are evaluated under the relevant civil laws, a strong case can be made that Giovanni Bellini was not Jacopo Bellini's son, but rather his half-brother, both of them sons of Nicolò Bellini; that Giovanni was therefore Gentile Bellini's uncle rather than his brother; and that he was born legitimate between the late summer of 1424 and 13 September 1428. This range of dates for Giovanni's birth is much earlier than several recent estimates, but has two important precedents. First, it accords with the birth year indicated by Giorgio Vasari, who wrote that Giovanni died at age ninety (on 20 November 1516).⁷ Secondly, it concurs with a long-established theory, championed by a number of scholars, including Giuseppe Fiocco (1884–1971) and Roberto Longhi (1890–1970), that Giovanni was born in the mid- to late 1420s, a position supported by little documentary evidence until now.⁸

Giovanni Bellini's earlier birth date is strongly implied by a number of features of Venetian law that will be examined individually, including the fraternal partnership and its division, the legitimacy of sons, the minimum legal age for autonomously entering into contracts, rights of inheritance, and adoption or legal guardianship.

2. DIVISION OF A FRATERNAL PARTNERSHIP

On 13 September 1440 the Venetian notary Vittore Pomino recorded in his register (*protocollo*) an act separating the property of two brothers, Giovanni

⁶The argument presented by this article presumes that the Bellini family had complied, when necessary, with the civil laws of Venice. One must realize with caution that these laws might not have always been followed to the letter. This article's methodological approach has not previously been taken, perhaps in part because few studies have comprehensively elucidated the recondite civil code of Renaissance Venice. For a history of Venetian civil law through Tiepolo's *Statutum novum* of 1242 and Andrea Dandolo's addition of *Liber sextus* in 1346 (both in force until the end of the eighteenth century), see Zordan, 194–200. Tiepolo's statutes with glosses were published by Cessi; Dandolo's by Grifio and in numerous other editions. For an overview of Venetian civil law, see Crescenzi. Specific areas of Venetian civil legal practice have been examined in several studies, including the following: Pansolli, 129–35; Connell, 36–53; Chojnacki, 95–112; Ruggiero, 118n23.

⁷Vasari, 3:441.

⁸For other scholars in accord with Fiocco, see Gibbons, 54n4.

and Jacopo Bellini, both sons of the deceased Nicolò Bellini and both residing in the Venetian parish of San Geminiano (fig. 1).⁹ First published in 1929, this document has been interpreted to mean that the fifteenth-century Venetian painter Jacopo Bellini had an illegitimate half-brother, the so-called Giovanni Bellini il Vecchio, with whom he once shared an artist's workshop.¹⁰ A contextualized analysis of Pomino's 1440 notarial act, however, reveals that it almost certainly did not refer to a conjectured Giovanni Bellini il Vecchio — who in all probability never in fact existed — but rather to the boy Giovanni Bellini, later to become the famous painter, who was therefore Jacopo Bellini's half-brother.

Pomino's act of 1440 was a common notarial instrument, executed on behalf of legitimately born brothers, known as a division or charter of division (*divisio* or *carta divisionis*) as its first line states: "The division to occur between the brothers is declared lawful, et cetera."¹¹ Venetian civil law, which was codified in five books of statutes in 1242 during the dogate of Jacopo Tiepolo, decreed that when a father died, his legitimate, unemancipated sons were automatically thrust into a fraternal partnership (*fraterna compagna*) through which they would jointly own all the property inherited from their father: "*Chapter concerning the fraternal partnership. 4.* We decree that, once the father is dead, the brothers remain in a fraternal partnership . . . unless they themselves make a division. However, if a father or any ancestor has bequeathed to a son or any descendent some specific thing, it will not be included in the fraternal partnership."¹² In Venice,

⁹See Document 1 in the appendix: "Giovanni Bellini and Jacopo Bellini of the parish of San Geminiano, brothers and sons of the deceased ser Nicolò."

¹⁰Paoletti, 1929, 68. For the document's generally accepted interpretation, see, for instance, Eisler, 33.

¹¹See Document 1 in the appendix: "Licet divisio que sit inter fratres et cetera." Connell, 45, also considers the document an example of a *carta divisionis*. Other *divisiones* in Pomino's register begin similarly. Note that in a copy of the Bellini *divisio*, made by the notary Pomino and located in a different register within the same *busta*, the "et cetera" received full standard expression: ASV, Cancelleria inferiore. Notai. (cited hereafter as CIN), b. 149, Vittore Pomino, reg. 1439–44, c. 11^{r-v}; cited in Barausse, 332, but unpublished.

¹²Cessi, 3:4:124–25: "*Capitulum de fraterna compagna. IIII.* Volumus quod, mortuo patre, fratres maneant in fraterna compagna. . . nisi et ipsi divisionem fecerint. Sed si pater vel aliquis de ascendentibus aliqua specialiter dimiserit filio vel alicui de inferioribus, illud non erit in fraterna compagna." The members of a fraternal partnership not only communally shared the inheritance of their father's (or grandfather's) estate, but also all other property not specifically omitted from the partnership: Cessi, 3:4:124:19. Here Venetian law differed from Roman law, which required the brothers, after their father died, to enter voluntarily into a contract: Cessi, 3:4:124:20. For the fourteenth-century law eliminating the date of expiration of *fraterne compagne*, see Griphio, 6:9:90–91.

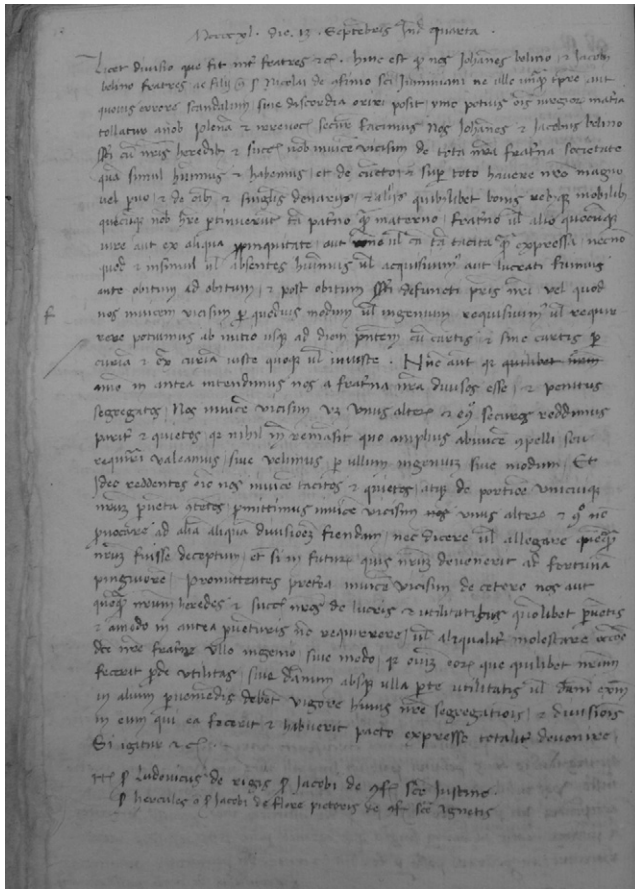


FIGURE 1. Charter of division between the brothers Giovanni and Jacopo Bellini, sons of the deceased Nicolò, 13 September 1440. Venice, State Archives, Cancelleria Inferiore, Notai, b. 149, Protocollum mei Victoris Pomino, c. 55^v. Photo rights: Archivio di Stato di Venezia su concessione del Ministero per I Beni e le Attività Culturali, atti nn. 49–50/2012, prott. 5247–48/28.13.07.

fraternal partnerships were the most prevalent form of business association among craftsmen and merchants: their members regularly remained in the family business, carrying on their partnership, until death.¹³ If the sons were not, however, in the same business, or if they did not wish to be bound legally to one another, or if they desired to enter into another type of business association, then Tiepolo's statutes described how it might be terminated:

¹³Lane, 178–80.

On dividing estates between brothers. 5. We decree that, although it has hitherto been customary in Venice that the older brother divided the father's estate and that the younger brother or brothers received shares assigned by the older brother, henceforth we decree that, when dividing their father's estate, all brothers are equal.

For those who have an undivided estate and one of them desires to divide it and know his share. 6. We decree that, if several persons together own an undivided estate, and they are all present in Venice, and any one of them who has been in Venice desires to divide this estate and know his share, then he should call the other or others who also have a share in this estate and announce to the other or others that he wishes to divide the estate; and by this act they should divide this estate among themselves: but if they refuse or have been unable to agree among themselves, the judges must divide this estate and cast lots.¹⁴

In other words, all brothers in a fraternal partnership, upon its dissolution, received an equal share of their father's estate, unless the father's will had assigned it otherwise. Any of the brothers could initiate a separation, and in amicable separations only a notary was required. The notary would employ a very common legal instrument, a division (*divisio*), to dissolve the fraternal partnership, and thus assign to each legitimate son an equal share of his father's estate and grant to each legal independence from his brothers.¹⁵

As its first line declared and as its standard form indicates, Pomino's notarial act of 13 September 1440 terminating Giovanni and Jacopo Bellini's fraternal partnership was such a charter of division. Eleven days later, on 24 September 1440, Jacopo Bellini engaged a different notary to draw up a contractual agreement between himself and the painter Donato

¹⁴Cessi, 3:5–6:125–6: “*De possessionibus dividendis inter fratres.* V. Decernimus quod, cum hactenus sit Veneciis consuetum quod maior frater possessionem patris dividebat et minor sive minores fratres partes a maiori fratre designatas accipiebant, de cetero volumus quod omnes fratres in dividendis paternis possessionibus sint equales, et sic de omnibus habentibus possessiones comunes undecumque. *Pro illis, qui possessionem indivisam habuerint, et aliquis eorum eam dividere voluerit et cognoscere partem suam.* VI. Dicimus quod, si plures fuerint, qui possessionem indivisam habuerint, et fuerint omnes presentes in Veneciis, et aliquis illorum, qui fuerit Veneciis, voluerit dividere possessionem ipsam et cognoscere partem suam, debeat vocare eum vel omnes illos, qui habent partem in ipsa possessione, et denunciare ei vel eis quod possessionem ipsam velit dividere, et hoc facto debeant inter se possessionem illam dividere: quod si facere recusaverint vel non potuerint concordare inter se, iudices debeant possessionem ipsam dividere et sortes ponere.”

¹⁵For the standard form of a *divisio*, with examples, see Connell, 45–46.

Bragadin, with whom he intended to enter into a five-year business partnership.¹⁶ The partnership itself might never have become a reality; the contract was not witnessed and was crossed out without a date in the register of the notary.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it provides a plausible reason for the existence of the *divisio* of eleven days earlier: Jacopo needed to end the fraternal partnership with his brother, Giovanni, before entering into a business partnership with another party.¹⁸

3. LEGITIMACY, MINIMUM AGE FOR ENTERING INTO CONTRACTS, AND RIGHTS OF INHERITANCE

The existence of the 1440 *divisio* between Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini informs us that both were legitimate sons of Nicolò. The Venetian civil statutes of 1242 followed the prevalent classical Roman and medieval legal concept of paternal power (*patria potestas*), which granted the father or grandfather as patriarch of the family (*paterfamilias*) rights over all his legitimate male descendants along the male line, including his sons, grandsons, and great grandsons.¹⁹ A gloss to the Venetian civil statute concerning intestate inheritance explained: “You should call those legitimate who are born of legitimate marriage and free parents, but there is no provision in Venetian statute regarding other sons.”²⁰ When the Venetian law employed the term *filius* without further qualification, as in the above statutes describing fraternal partnerships, a legitimate son was intended.

Neither Giovanni nor his half-brother Jacopo could have been born illegitimate, because illegitimates were legally not sons of the family (*filiifamilias*) and could not enter into fraternal partnerships.²¹ Illegitimate

¹⁶ASV, CIN, b. 74–75, Francesco Elmis, reg. XX, c. 216^r; Barausse, 332, doc. 9.

¹⁷The notary Francesco Elmis left a block of space directly after Jacopo and Donato’s partnership contract, presumably for the names of the witnesses, which were not subsequently entered. The other acts in the same register offer no such space: most were witnessed.

¹⁸Connell, 50, interprets both documents likewise. Furthermore, on the copy of the 1440 *divisio* (ASV, CIN, b. 149, Vittore Pomino, reg. 1439–44, c. 11^{r-v}), Pomino wrote in the margin that a duplicate had been made for Jacopo (“*exemplata una carta pro ser Jacobo*”), presumably to serve as proof for Donato Bragadin or for the notary Francesco Elmis, who drew up their contract.

¹⁹Kuehn, 1982, 11.

²⁰Cessi, 4:24:201:139: “Dic legitimis, qui nati sunt de legitimo matrimonio et parentibus liberis, sed de aliis filiis nichil cavetur in statuto Veneciarum.”

²¹In Roman legal practice, “[b]y the terms of civil law all illegitimate children were *sui iuris* — that is, not subject to *patria potestas*, which could issue only from marriage, or from judicial acts such as adoption and legitimation”: Kuehn, 2002, 34. In Renaissance Venice, however, adoption did not confer *patria potestas* to the adoptive father: Cessi, 4:24:201:139.

sons had no such rights of inheritance, as the following gloss to the Venetian statutes, describing various types of illegitimate sons, makes clear: “*Mançer*, properly speaking, is the name given to one born from a whore, that is, a public prostitute; *spurius* is one born from a concubine who is not retained in the home like a wife, or one born from a blood relative or a nun. *Nothus* is one born from adultery; just as we call a fever *nothus*, which afflicts like a *quartan* fever but is not a true *quartan*, so do we call a person *nothus*, who seems to be a son but is not. All such illegitimates are denied positions of honor and have no rights of succession; by no means should their parents even support them.”²² Jacopo and Giovanni succeeded as co-members of the fraternal partnership that collectively owned the inherited estate of their deceased father, Nicolò, only as legitimate male offspring legally had the right to do.²³

To agree independently to a charter of division, Giovanni Bellini, the son of Nicolò, was required to be over the age of twelve²⁴: “Since nobody is considered able to act in contracts or judgments unless he or she is of legal age, we decree that it is suitable to define something about the age of mind. Therefore, we state that any person, either male or female, after he or she has turned twelve, should be considered of proper

²²Cessi, 4:24:201:139: “*Mançer* proprie dicitur de scorto natus, idest publica meretrice; *spurius* de concubina, que non retinetur in domo tanquam uxor, vel de consanguinea vel monacha. *Nothus* est de adulterio natus, sicut dicitur notha febris, que affligit, sicut quartana, et tamen non est vera quartana, sicut nothus, qui videtur esse filius et non est. Et omnes tales illegittimi ab honoribus repelluntur et in nullo succedunt, immo nec pasci a parentibus debent.” Note that neither Jacopo nor Giovanni were natural sons (*naturales*), described in the same gloss as “born from concubines who are retained in the home in place of a wife; and these *naturales*, in terms of their father’s goods, succeed to two-twelfths of their father’s estate, if there are neither other sons nor a legitimate wife” (“*Naturales*, qui ex concubinis nascuntur, que retinentur in domo loco uxoris, et tales in bonis patris succedunt in duas uncias paterne substantie, si alii non existant filii nec uxor legitima”). For a discussion of types of illegitimates in medieval law, see Kuehn, 2002, 36, 44, who observes that in Florence, *naturales* received only one-twelfth of their father’s estate in the absence of legitimate sons.

²³In Nicolò’s will (ASV, NT, b. 545, Lorenzo Buscarino, c. 10^{r-v}, n. 63; Barausse, 330, doc. 3), his adopted daughter was described as “*filia mea adoptiva*,” and Jacopo was described as Nicolò’s son from his prior marriage to Giovannina (Zanina).

²⁴It is unclear whether Venetian law strictly defined an age of majority; from the age of twelve, Venetians began to receive various legal rights and responsibilities: Crescenzi, 414–18; see also Ruggiero, 118n23; Guzzetti, 1998, 50. In Roman law, the age of majority was twenty-five, the year when those previously emancipated by a *carta* or their father’s death were treated as full adults under the law. That age in Renaissance Florence was eighteen, in Pisa twenty, in Arezzo twenty-five, in Siena twenty-five, and in Pistoia nineteen: Kuehn, 1982, 36, 188n9.

age.”²⁵ Any contract entered into by Giovanni, if he was under twelve and his father deceased, required the undersignatures of two magistrates (*iudices examinatum*) from the Court of the Examiner (*curia del esaminador*) in order for it to be valid.²⁶ Since magistrates did not sign the division of 13 September 1440 between Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini, Giovanni must have already reached the age of twelve.²⁷ Thus Giovanni Bellini, Jacopo’s half-brother, must have been born before 13 September 1428, twelve years prior to 13 September 1440, the date of the division.

On 11 April 1424 Nicolò Bellini had a notary draw up a will on his behalf that designated Nicolò’s legitimate son Jacopo as an heir, but did not name Giovanni.²⁸ In his will Nicolò bequeathed portions of his estate to his second wife, Franceschina; to his two children by his previous, deceased wife, Giovannina, namely, his son, the painter Jacopo Bellini, and his daughter, Elena; to Elena’s daughter, Caterina; and, if Caterina died and Elena had no other daughters, to Alixeta, the daughter of Nicolò’s own adopted daughter, Menega.²⁹

²⁵Cessi, 2:1:102: “Quoniam nullus idoneus intelligitur in iudiciis vel contractibus, nisi legitimam etatem compleverit, optimum esse decrevimus de mentis etate aliquid diffinire. Ideoque sanctimus quod quicumque, sive masculus sive femina fuerit, post XII annos completos etatem congruam habere censeantur.” The age of twelve derived from Lombard, rather than Roman law: Crescenzi, 413–14.

²⁶When Nicolò died (prior to 23 July 1429), Giovanni’s condition would have been defined as that of an orphan; the 1242 statutes required orphans to be at least eighteen years of age to enter into contracts without the signatures of two magistrates from the *curia del esaminador*; that age was then reduced to twelve years, as clarified in a fourteenth-century gloss, which noted that this was different from Roman law, under which guardians could sign contracts on behalf of underaged orphans and be held accountable: Cessi, 1:38:70:210–212.

²⁷The contract was witnessed by “ser Ludovico di Rigis, son of ser Jacopo, of the parish of Santa Giustina; ser Ercole, son of the deceased ser Jacobello del Fiore, painter of the parish of Sant’Agnese”: see Document 1 in the appendix.

²⁸ASV, NT, b. 545, Lorenzo Buscarino, c. 10^{r-v}, n. 63; Barausse, 330, doc. 3.

²⁹Had Nicolò died intestate in 1424, his estate would have been left to Jacopo, his only legitimate son at that time, and neither to his wife, Franceschina, who would have retained rights to her own dowry, nor to his married daughter, Elena, who had already received a dowry as her portion of her father’s estate: Cessi, 4:24:205. Hence one may speculate that part of Nicolò’s purpose in drawing up his will was to shift his legacy from Jacopo to other members of his family, most specifically, to his wife, Franceschina, Jacopo’s stepmother, who was “to receive the major share.” Also noteworthy is that, when the will was written, Nicolò and Franceschina did not have biological children together. Since the prospect of offspring and the receipt of a dowry often motivated fifteenth-century Venetian men to marry, that Nicolò’s second (and perhaps young) wife, Franceschina, gave birth not long after the date of Nicolò’s will is rather unsurprising.

If Nicolò had had a living, legitimate son named Giovanni when his will was drawn up, Giovanni's omission would have been not only surprising, but also unlawful.³⁰ In Renaissance Venice fathers were required to identify their legitimate sons in their wills, even if their intent was to disinherit them. Otherwise, the will could be overturned.³¹ As an officer of the court, a fifteenth-century Venetian notary would not have allowed a will to have been drawn up that omitted a legitimate son.³² Therefore, Nicolò's legitimate son Giovanni Bellini must not yet have been born when Nicolò composed his will of 1424.

Thus Giovanni Bellini, son of Nicolò, was born at least several months after 11 April 1424, the date of Nicolò's will (in which Franceschina was understood as not being pregnant), and sometime before 13 September 1428, twelve years prior to the date of the division of 1440.³³ That Giovanni was an adolescent between the ages of twelve and sixteen when he entered into the 1440 *divisio* is confirmed by the document itself: it was written entirely in standardized, unspecific language as if a formality. It neither describes the profession of the two Bellini brothers, nor stipulates which would receive ownership of the workshop, or other property, nor does it

³⁰Tiepolo's law of book 4, rubric 35 (Cessi, 4:35:213) is titled, "No one can disinherit his or her son." Disinheritance was rare, aberrant, and predicated on the child committing at least one of fourteen grave transgressions, such as plotting against the life of his or her parents, enumerated in *ibid.*, 4:35:213:207. Kuehn, 2002, 20–21, describes the disinheritance of legitimate sons under medieval law: "Yet the *pater* was not free to act with regard to *dos* and *patrimonium*. . . . He was bound by social expectations, intestacy rules, rights of legitim, and fideicommissary stipulations handed down from preceding generations. Only with the greatest difficulty could he disinherit a child, if he so chose." Of course, such social expectations informed Venice as well. See also Kirshner.

³¹In Venice, "for the disinheritance to be valid, a legitimate reason must be included in the testament": Kirshner, 135. Kuehn, 2002, 26, notes that, according to medieval law, a legitimate son could only be disinherited by an included statement of cause in a father's testament: "like any direct heir (*suus heres*), he had to be expressly disinherited." Numerous jurists have commented on the legal difficulties of disinheriting a legitimate son: Kirshner.

³²On the legal obligations of Venetian notaries, see Cassandro, 1936, 112–44; Pedani Fabris, 3–16, 101–03.

³³Nicolò's 1424 will (ASV, NT, b. 545, Lorenzo Buscarino, c. 10^{r-v}, n. 63; Barausse, 330, doc. 3): "Asked about posthumous children, he responded that it is not necessary." No child was expected and hence Franceschina was not considered pregnant at the time. (This statement appears beside a caret at the very end of the text, the other caret locating its position within the text itself: thus it might have been a later addition by the notary.) The unlikely scenario that Giovanni Bellini, the son of Nicolò, might have been born illegitimate — and hence went unnamed in Nicolò's will of 1424, yet at some later date (but prior to 23 July 1429 when Nicolò was recorded as being deceased) became legitimized by Nicolò — should also be mentioned.

enumerate any particulars whatsoever, such as whether the wives' dowries had been included in, or excluded from, the partnership. Such details were invariably itemized in divisions between adult brothers, such as that between Luca and Vito Bono, drawn up by the same notary Vittore Pomino a few months before the division of Giovanni and Jacopo.³⁴ In the Bono brothers' *divisio*, Luca and Vito were described as furriers (*varotarij*), who had employed their wives' dowries in their business, and who agreed to separate so that Luca would retain the shop on the street of furriers near the Rialto, while Vito would receive thirty-nine ducats in exchange.³⁵ Unlike the *divisio* between Giovanni and Jacopo, that between Luca and Vito Bono methodically separated real property that had been shared between adults.³⁶

4. LEGAL GUARDIANSHIP AND ADOPTION

The will of 11 April 1424 is the last-known record of Giovanni Bellini's father, Nicolò, as living. He was dead by the summer of 1429, for on 23 July of that year Jacopo Bellini engaged a notary to draw up a standard legal instrument (*carta securitatis et manifestacionis repromisse*) in which he acknowledged receiving his wife Anna's dowry of 250 ducats and was described as "Jacopo Bellini, a painter residing in the parish of San Geminiano and son of the deceased ser Nicoletto Bellini (fig. 2)."³⁷ Thus Giovanni was no older than four, and he might have not yet been born, when his and Jacopo's father, Nicolò, died.

In Renaissance Venice, legal guardians were appointed to those under twelve years old whose fathers were deceased.³⁸ Guardians had fiduciary

³⁴ ASV, CIN, b. 149, Vittore Pomino, reg. 1439–1444, cc. 3^v–4^r. Also cf. any *divisio* from ASV, Cancelleria inferiore. Miscellanea, notai diversi, bb. 32–33.

³⁵ ASV, CIN, b. 149, Vittore Pomino, reg. 1439–1444, cc. 3^v–4^r.

³⁶ The unspecific text of the Bellini *divisio* may also be compared with the detailed terms separating the painters Ludovico and Francesco, sons of Mantegna, in their *divisio* of 27 January 1507: Signorini, 105n20.

³⁷ See Document 2 in the appendix: "Jacobus Belino pictor filius quondam ser Nicoleti Belino de confinio Sancti Geminiani." Jacopo was married sometime before 6 February 1429, the date of Anna's will, in which she was described as Jacopo's wife and pregnant: ASV, NT, b. 946/c, Enrico Salomon, n. 313; Barausse, 330–31, doc. 4. Jacopo's *carta securitatis* of 23 July 1429 was drawn up several months later, which was not unusual: Guzzetti, 2002, 444–45.

³⁸ Cessi, 2:2:103: "Qualiter tutores creari debeant minoribus duodecim annorum." Minors after reaching the age of fourteen could terminate guardianships: Griphio, 6:24:98; Crescenzi, 415. Giovanni might have been legally required to be at least age fourteen prior to signing the 1440 *divisio* with Jacopo: if such was the case, then Giovanni would have been born between late summer 1424 and 13 September 1426 (rather than 13 September 1428).

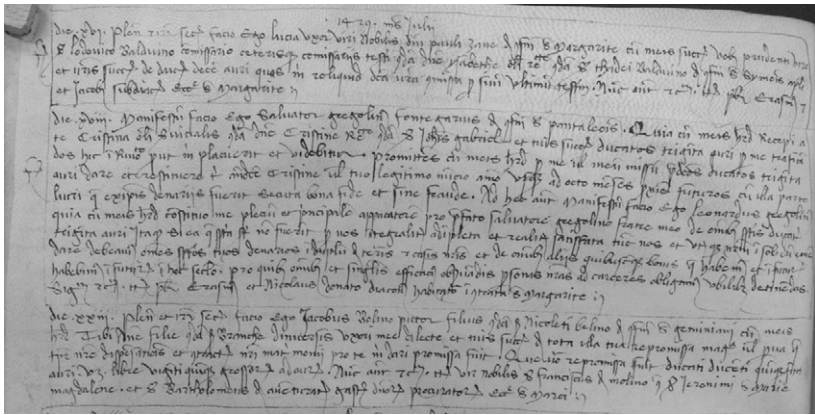


FIGURE 2. Jacopo Bellini acknowledges receipt of his wife Anna's dowry, 23 July 1429. Venice, State Archives, Cancelleria Inferiore, Notai, b. 212, fasc. notaio T. de Tomei. Documento 1429, luglio 23. Photo rights: Archivio di Stato di Venezia su concessione del Ministero per I Beni e le Attività Culturali, atti nn. 49–50/2012, prott. 5247–48/28.13.07. The abbreviated “quondam” signifies that Nicolò was deceased.

powers to negotiate for the minor and were entitled to one-fourth of monies gained, the remainder belonging to the minor.³⁹ A Venetian civil court called the *curia di petizion* would have assigned a guardian.⁴⁰ Given the legal role of the father in Venetian law, Giovanni Bellini would have needed a legal guardian even if his mother had survived.⁴¹

Nothing is known about Franceschina apart from her husband's will of 1424. It is probable, however, that Franceschina had either died during or soon after Giovanni's birth — in any event before 1440 — or else had surrendered Giovanni to be raised by the patriarchal side of his family, a not-uncommon occurrence in Renaissance Venice.⁴² First, no known documents apart from Nicolò's will name Franceschina, and death may explain her absence from recorded history. Secondly, in the 1440 Bellini *divisio*, both Giovanni and Jacopo were described as residing in San Geminiano,

³⁹Cessi, 2:2:103. In Roman law, guardians who were negligent in overseeing the affairs or the estate of their wards were liable: Kuehn, 1982, 22, 181–82nn75–76.

⁴⁰The procedure to appoint a guardian in Venice is outlined in Cessi, 2:2:103–04. For the role of the *curia di petizion*, see da Mosto, 1:92; Cassandro, 1936 and 1937; Bellavitis, 81–85. In Florence the magistrate was called the *Ufficio dei pupilli*: Morandini.

⁴¹Bellavitis, 81–85.

⁴²See *ibid.* for sixteenth-century Venetian examples of elder brothers being instated as guardians of their younger siblings.

presumably in the same household, and not in the parish of San Salvatore, where Nicolò and Franceschina's home had been, according to Nicolò's will of 1424.⁴³ (Jacopo had lived in San Geminiano since at least 6 February 1429, the date his wife, Anna, drew up her first will, and continued to live in the parish for the rest of his life.)⁴⁴ Finally, if the Giovanni Bellini named in the 1440 Bellini *divisio* is indeed the famous painter, then the fact that the later recorded relationship between Jacopo and Giovanni was nearly indistinguishable from that between a father and son further suggests that Franceschina had died or departed soon after Giovanni's birth.

It is therefore likely that Jacopo acted as his half-brother's legal guardian (*tutor*).⁴⁵ It is possible that Jacopo adopted his young half-brother. Legal adoption in Renaissance Venice is neither well studied nor well understood.⁴⁶ Adoption of a male might occur in instances where the patriarch (*paterfamilias*) was aging and had no legitimate son for an heir, such as when the painter Jacobello del Fiore adopted Ercole (who was one of the witnesses to the 1440 Bellini *divisio*).⁴⁷ In some cases the adopted child might have been treated like a servant, as when a woman named Lucia, in an early Quattrocento legal document, was described as the "servant or adopted daughter" of her adoptive father Bartolomeo.⁴⁸ In some adoptive relationships, such as that of Lucia or the artist Mantegna when adopted by Squarcione, the adopted individual was expected to provide labor, but, according to Venetian law, an adopted son remained outside the paternal authority of the adoptive father, and therefore could depart from the

⁴³See Document 1 in the Appendix: "Iohannes Belino et Iacobus Belino fratres ac filii quondam ser Nicolai de confinio Sancti Iuminiani." Both Giovanni and Jacopo resided in the parish of San Geminiano, otherwise the parish of each would have been specified. ASV, NT, b. 545, Lorenzo Buscarino, n. 10^{r-v}; Barausse, 330, doc. 3: "Nicoletus Belin batistagno de confinio Sancti Salvatoris." According to Chojnacki, 100, "most widows remained in their marital residence for many years"; but cf. Guzzetti, 2002, 441, 461, who notes that only widows who swore not to remarry could remain in the homes of their deceased husbands.

⁴⁴ASV, NT, b. 946/c, Enrico Salomon, n. 313; Barausse, 330–31, doc. 4: "I, Anna, wife of Jacopo Bellini, painter in the parish of San Geminiano."

⁴⁵Tiepolo's book 2 statutes delineating guardianships were applicable to Jacopo and Giovanni's circumstances. It is also possible, but less likely, that Franceschina, rather than Jacopo, became Giovanni's guardian upon Nicolò's death: see Bellavitis, 81–85.

⁴⁶For brief discussions of adoption in Renaissance Venice, see Romano, 99–101; Bellavitis 42–44.

⁴⁷See Fogolari.

⁴⁸Romano, 99. For similar examples, see *ibid.*, 99–101. For the case of Anna Girardi — taken into Lucrezia Bernardi Righi's home at age four (evidently as a servant), and later becoming Lucrezia's heir — see Ambrosini, 451n97.

adoptive family in accordance with the terms of any legal contract that he might have signed pertaining to the adoption.⁴⁹ In still other cases the adopted child could be treated like a biological one.⁵⁰ Whether Jacopo was Giovanni's adoptive father or simply his legal guardian, Giovanni was certainly raised as if he were Jacopo's child.

5. EMANCIPATION

In 1459 Giovanni resided in the Venetian parish of San Lio rather than in Jacopo's household in San Geminiano, implying that he had previously been emancipated.⁵¹ In fifteenth-century Venice and elsewhere, the legal concept of emancipation broadly defined an individual's entitlements and his relationship to the family workshop, and thus requires some explanation.⁵² Emancipation derived from the classical Roman principle of sovereign paternal power (*patria potestas*), which, as mentioned earlier, granted the patriarch of the family rights over all his legitimate male descendants along the male line. Legitimately born children were legal dependents of their fathers until the children were emancipated, which did not occur when they reached a given age or were married, but rather only through a legal act of emancipation or by the death of the father (or in rare cases by adoption).⁵³

In theory a father had the right to his unemancipated son's movable property, to the usufruct from his son's inherited immovable property, and to the income from his son's labor.⁵⁴ To make a binding contract in

⁴⁹In Venice, paternal power over the adopted son did not pass to the adoptive father: Cessi, 4:24:201:139. The painter Squarcione, capitalizing on what, arguably, were loopholes in labor laws, adopted apprentices — Mantegna prior to 1445, Marco Zoppo in 1455, Giovanni Vendramini in 1466, and perhaps others — presumably because it was less expensive to adopt one than to pay one. For a discussion, see Shaw and Boccia-Shaw, 53n66. For Zoppo, see Armstrong, 3–6. In Venetian law such sons, adopted with their own consent, were termed *arrogati* and had rights of succession without being under the paternal authority of the adoptive father: Cessi, 4:24:201:139.

⁵⁰Cessi, 4:24:201:139.

⁵¹For San Lio in 1459, see ASV, NT, b. 727, Giuseppe Moisis, cc. 1^v–2^v, n. 32; Barausse, 334, doc. 16.

⁵²Emancipation in Renaissance Venice has not yet received an in-depth study as it has for Florence in Kuehn, 1982.

⁵³Sons might remain unemancipated for the majority of their lives, and, as stated in the *Glossa ordinaria*, a man in his sixties could still very well be under the authority of his father: "etiam sexagenarius . . . in potestate est": *ibid.*, 177n8.

⁵⁴Cessi, 4:8:184–86. Although the earnings of an unemancipated son were the property of his father, many jurists allowed general exceptions to be made, and often the unemancipated son was allowed to keep payment for his labor: Kuehn, 1982, 20.

Renaissance Venice, an unemancipated son needed either power of attorney from his father or the permission and signatures of two magistrates from the Court of the Examiner.⁵⁵ When writing a contract, Venetian notaries were careful to record whether the person's father was dead (*quondam*), whether the person was emancipated (*emancipatus a patre meo*), or whether he had his father's permission (*de licentia dicti patris mei*).⁵⁶

A legal act of emancipation, or the death of the father, liberated the son, making him a *homo sui iuris*, possessed with full legal rights, and a *paterfamilias* (patriarch of his own family) under the law.⁵⁷ In Venice, the contractual act of emancipation required a legal instrument called a charter of emancipation (*carta emancipationis*), consented to by the father, signed by witnesses, recorded by a notary or magistrate, and subsequently registered in the *Cancelleria inferiore* as a public record because it involved the ownership of property.⁵⁸ Fathers had little incentive, however, to emancipate sons who labored in the family workshop: the father as patriarch signed the contracts, the sons were bound to the father, and the sons' labor did not require payment. Instead, the legitimate sons would eventually inherit the workshop and other property that the father owned, as was their legal right.⁵⁹

Some historians have wondered how Giovanni Bellini was able to depart from Jacopo's household by 1459.⁶⁰ If Giovanni was indeed Nicolò's legitimate son, however, then he legally had the right to do so, that is, to establish his own household and become patriarch of his own family,

⁵⁵Cessi, 1:37:69, as discussed in Connell, 37–38, who notes that the rights of unemancipated sons were not uniform throughout Italy, and in certain areas and under certain conditions might include the authority to make contracts.

⁵⁶Connell, 41.

⁵⁷Kuehn, 1982, 12.

⁵⁸Connell, 38; cf. Kuehn, 1982, 15. When fathers did emancipate their sons in fifteenth-century Venice, the sons typically (but not always) were expected to make up the loss of income to their father. Otherwise the father might not consent to a charter of emancipation. Examples are found in Connell, 41–42.

⁵⁹Connell, 39: "Sons who remained in business with their fathers were unlikely to be emancipated from them."

⁶⁰Lucco, 2008, 21, hypothesizes that Giovanni was living in San Lio in 1459 with his biological mother. Bättschmann, 19–22, writes that "[w]e are missing an important document related to Giovanni's early independence, namely the notarial deed of emancipation that would have released him from his father's custody" and that the San Lio residence "must have been part of a strategy developed by Jacopo Bellini . . . to establish a second workshop in order to compete successfully with their rivals," i.e., the Vivarini. Fletcher, 2004, 25, speculates that Giovanni was illegitimate, which "must have precipitated his departure from home." Both Goffen, 262, and Robertson, 11–12, view Giovanni's living in San Lio, apart from Jacopo, as suggesting that he was already married by 1459.

because he would have been emancipated when his father, Nicolò, died. (It is doubtful whether a charter of emancipation ever existed for either Giovanni or Gentile, and none has been found.)⁶¹ In contrast, Jacopo's biological son Gentile continued to reside with his father, in all likelihood under paternal authority (*in patris potestate*) until Jacopo's death in 1470/71, at which point Gentile became emancipated. Gentile then continued to live in San Geminiano, apparently in his father's home workshop, for the duration of his life.⁶²

Establishing a household was a major expense in Renaissance Venice, and was typically funded by a wife's dowry.⁶³ Yet according to extant documents, it is uncertain whether Giovanni Bellini was married prior to relocating to San Lio.⁶⁴ As Nicolò's legitimate son, however, he would have

⁶¹No *carta emancipationis* for either Giovanni or Gentile Bellini exists where one might expect to find it, that is, in ASV, Cancelleria inferiore. Miscellanea, notai diversi, bb. 32–33. The absence of a document from the Venetian archives, however, particularly one from the Quattrocento, should rarely, if ever, be employed as negative proof.

⁶²In 1464 Gentile, perhaps while painting the organ doors for the Church of San Marco in Venice, lived for a period of time in an apartment in the *Procuratie Vecchie*, adjacent to the church and in his home parish of San Geminiano: ASV, NT, b. 46, Niccolò [de] Avanzo, n. 116, 29 February 1463 [*m.v.*]; published in Bode, Gronau, and Hadeln, 89. It should not be inferred, however, that the procuratorial apartment was either Jacopo's or Gentile's permanent place of residence. Cf. Bättschmann, 19; Fletcher, 2004, 15, perhaps from an ambitious reading of Schulz, 91, who relies on the aforementioned testament of 29 February 1463 [*m.v.*], witnessed by Gentile, for his conclusions.

⁶³Renaissance Venice was home to a superabundance of young men without adequate capital to establish independent households, a collective social problem ameliorated in part by the Scuole Grandi, Venice's wealthiest social institutions, which dispensed as much as 30–35 percent of their charity, and sometimes even more, to maidens in the form of dowry trusts in order to “make marriage economically possible for persons who could not otherwise have afforded to set up house on their own”: Pullan, 183–84.

⁶⁴Lucco, 2008, 21, hypothesizes that he was living with his biological mother. Bättschmann, 20–22, writes that to establish a “workshop in San Lio around 1459, Giovanni required paternal support, that is, the paying out of his inheritance.” Goffen, 262, and Robertson, 11–12, suggest that Giovanni was married by 1459 and thus already had received a dowry. Giovanni might have married more than once, but extant documents record exactly one wife, Ginevra Bocheta (d. 1489?): on 30 July 1485 Giovanni's *securitatis carta* acknowledged that he had received at some unspecified date Ginevra's dowry for 500 ducats (ASV, NT, b. 877, Lorenzo Stella, protocollo, c. 28; Barausse, 341, doc. 42), and on 23 September 1489 Ginevra, gravely ill, drew up a will and presumably died soon after: *ibid.*, 341, doc. 45. In her testament Ginevra bequeaths much of her estate to her and Giovanni's one child, Alvise, presumably already over the age of twenty given that she also left a bequest to her nephew, Sebastiano, which he was to receive upon reaching age twenty, a condition not stipulated for Alvise. In 1486 Alvise (d. December 1498/99) became a carrier of second ballots in the Venetian Chancellery; in 1487 his annual salary was increased from ten to twenty ducats to help support his studies; and the typical age for such a position was between twelve and twenty-two: Neff, 35, 42–43, 370. Thus Alvise was likely born 1464–69. Hence it is possible

inherited half of his father's estate, which was rather large, as indicated by Nicolò's will of 1424 — and more sizeable still had the estate been successfully invested in the years since Nicolò's death.⁶⁵ Giovanni might also have succeeded to his mother's dowry, had she died young.⁶⁶ Thus his inheritance alone, whether or not he received a wife's dowry, likely provided Giovanni with more than sufficient funds to establish a residence.

Several historians have questioned why, in her will of 1471, Jacopo Bellini's wife, Anna Rinversi bequeathed her estate to her sons Gentile and Nicolò without naming Giovanni. Since the discourse until now has assumed that Giovanni was the son of Jacopo, some have understood his absence from Anna's will as demonstrating that he was not her son and thus illegitimate; others have argued that the omission alone does not prove illegitimacy.⁶⁷ Instead, Giovanni as Nicolò's son would have been Anna Rinversi's brother-in-law, and not her son. Thus, she was not legally required to bequeath a legacy to Giovanni and, in her will, in fact named none of her affinal relatives, neither her sister-in-law, Elena, nor her nephew-by-marriage

that Giovanni was married to Ginevra prior to 1459, as some scholars have suggested: Goffen, 282; Robertson, 11–12. Goffen, 262n5, proposes that Giovanni might have had a first wife named Marieta, who was married to a "Joannes pictor" living in San Geminiano in 1482, but Giovanni at this time was apparently already married to Ginevra; moreover he was documented as a resident of Santa Marina in 1481, 1484, and 1485: Barausse, 339–40, doc. 38, 341, doc. 42; Agosti, 2009, 102, 169n9.

⁶⁵Giovanni's birth annulled Nicolò's will of 1424 (Griphio, "Rubriche delli decreti civili," *M.Cons.*1418.29.Marzo, r. XII, 6), and hence Nicolò probably died intestate; if such was the case, then his two legitimate sons, Giovanni and Jacopo, would presumably have divided equally Nicolò's estate, after taking into consideration Jacopo's monetary debt to his father, mentioned in the 1424 will: Cessi, 3:5–6:125–6, 4:14:200–205. Joost-Gaugier, 37n51, notes that "Nicolò Bellini's will shows that he must have been a man of considerable substance," and analyzes the will in some depth. Had Jacopo as Giovanni's legal guardian invested Giovanni's inheritance as prudently as he had run his own workshop, Giovanni might have succeeded to a sizeable amount of capital.

⁶⁶The process of an underage son applying for his mother's dowry is described in Guzzetti, 2002, 430, 457. See also Kuehn, 1982, 107.

⁶⁷Lucco, 2008, 30, interpreted Giovanni's omission as evidence that he was not Anna's son, and thus illegitimate; Humfrey, 2004, 5, does not believe the omission proves illegitimacy; Eisler, 532, writes that his "name is omitted for either his illegitimacy, or the unlikely possibility of his being the issue of an earlier, unknown marriage of Jacopo's"; Robertson, 11, argues that the omission does not prove that Giovanni was not Anna's son, and suggests that Giovanni "had already received his portion of the estate under Jacopo's will, which has not come to light." Goffen, 3, describes his absence merely as a "sin of omission" that does not necessarily mean that he was not her son; Fiocco, 6, implies that the omission meant that he was not Anna's son, and, since Fiocco also believes that Giovanni was legitimate, he theorizes that Giovanni was the son of a previous wife of Jacopo's, or a legitimated son from a previous liaison.

Leonardo (ca. 1424–ca. 1490), whom she and Jacopo had helped raise from when he was about six or eight years old.⁶⁸

6. GIOVANNI BELLINI IL VECCHIO

Since its publication in 1929, the Bellini notarial document of 13 September 1440 has generally been interpreted as a legal act dissolving a business co-owned by two adult brothers, Jacopo and Giovanni, sons of Nicolò Bellini, rather than as a *divisio* separating a *fraterna compagna* as it is interpreted here.⁶⁹ This brother, the so-called Giovanni Bellini il Vecchio, would have been Jacopo's business associate, as well as half-brother, and born illegitimate because the 1424 will of their father, Nicolò, does not mention a son named Giovanni.⁷⁰ As has been demonstrated here, however, the Giovanni Bellini named in the *divisio* must have been born legitimate between 1424 and 1428,

⁶⁸ According to a contract dated 23 August 1443, some twelve years earlier in 1431 Jacopo Bellini had taken his nephew Leonardo (born ca. 1424) into his home and raised him: ASV, CIN, b. 74–75, Francesco Elmis, reg. XXIII, c. 20^r; Barausse, 332–33, doc. 11. Unlike Giovanni, however, Leonardo was never described or known as Jacopo's son, presumably for several reasons, including that Leonardo's mother Elena, Jacopo's sister, was alive in 1443 when Leonardo reached adulthood: *ibid.* Jacopo's wife, Anna, was not unusual in omitting affines from her will: Chojnacki, 298n40, notes in a study of fifty married Venetian women's wills from 1305 to 1450 that only 5.6 percent of the 215 total bequests to relatives went to affines. The percentage would likely have been even lower in widows' wills. Intriguingly, Anna in her will did not mention her own daughter, Nicolosia. Had Anna died intestate, Nicolosia, although married, would have been entitled to an equal share of her mother's property. Emancipated and unemancipated sons also succeeded to their intestate mothers' property: Cessi, 4:27:207–208, with glosses. Thus Nicolosia, Mantegna's wife, might have died prior to Anna's will of 25 November 1471, yet certainly after, or during, the birth of her son Ludovico in ca. 1470: Signorini, 103n3. For Nicolosia, see Iotta; Lightbown, 244, 248. It is most unlikely, though not entirely impossible, that Nicolosia was the daughter of Jacopo's father, Nicolò, rather than of Jacopo and Anna; such would provide an alternative explanation for her absence from Anna's will.

⁶⁹ See Eisler, 33, for an example of the accepted interpretation.

⁷⁰ The extant documentary evidence for the fifteenth-century painter referred to as Giovanni Bellini il Vecchio is meager, highly speculative, and open to interpretation: but cf. Billanovich, 359–60. Complicating matters is the documented existence of a Quattrocento painter working in the Veneto named Giovanni Pietro Bellini, the son of a Venetian named Stefano: Varanini, 7. It is unclear whether this is the same painter that, in 1621, Guarini, 359, called "Giovanni Bellino Ferrarese" and described as buried in S. Nicolò in Ferrara, or whether he is responsible for a painting of the *Coronation of the Virgin* (Osano), now in Ferrara (Pinacoteca Nazionale di Ferrara), which is signed, "Giovanni Bellini made me," a signature that appears to be original: see Bentini, cat. 45, 40–41. In Venice there seems to have been a Giovanni Bellini, priest of San Giovanni in Bragora, documented in the early 1440s: see Bode, Gronau, and Hadeln, 81. Bertoni, 101n2, notes that a "Zohan Bellini" transported wine from Ferrarese territory to Venice in 1436, but this cannot be the Giovanni Bellini named in the 1440 Bellini *divisio*, who would have been between the ages of eight and twelve at that time.

and in 1440 was almost certainly living in Jacopo Bellini's household. This Giovanni was not illegitimate, nor at that time could he have been a mature artist. The painter Giovanni Bellini il Vecchio, conjectured by some historians to account for the *divisio* of 1440, is a fiction.

It is still possible that there were two Giovanni Bellinis, and that the son of Nicolò named in the *divisio* is not the same as the famous painter, who was otherwise first documented in 1459.⁷¹ But if they were not the same, then there were two boys named Giovanni Bellini, both under the age of sixteen in 1440, both living in the Venetian parish of San Geminiano, both lineal descendants of Nicolò Bellini and both closely connected to, and likely residing in, Jacopo Bellini's household, one becoming a renowned painter, and the other, Jacopo's half-brother, leaving not a single conclusive trace of his existence except for the *divisio* of 1440. It is far more likely that these two were one and the same.

7. RELATIVE AGES OF GIOVANNI AND GENTILE

If the hypothesis presented here is correct, then Giovanni was older than Gentile, who was born no earlier than 1429. In his 1550 edition of the *Vite*, Giorgio Vasari describes Gentile Bellini as younger than Giovanni.⁷² In both the 1550 and 1568 editions, Vasari writes that the Venetian Senate decided to send Gentile to the Ottoman court in Constantinople because Giovanni was too old.⁷³ During the course of the nineteenth century, amid general questioning of Vasari as a reliable source, art historians both adduced Francesco Negro's account that Gentile was born first and began to reverse the order of their birth.⁷⁴ Gentile's art seemed more archaic.⁷⁵ Moreover, it was Gentile who inherited Jacopo's drawings and control of Jacopo's workshop in San Geminiano.⁷⁶ Thus many scholars began to doubt and then

⁷¹ASV, NT, b. 727, Giuseppe Moisis, cc. 1^v–2^v, n. 32; Barausse, 334–35, doc. 16.

⁷²Vasari, 3:435: "Onde egli vi lavorò molte storie in compagnia di Gentile più di lui giovane."

⁷³Ibid., 436: "Onde considerando il Senato che per essere Giovanni in età che male poteva sopportare disagi . . . si risolverono di mandarvi Gentile suo fratello."

⁷⁴Note that in 1648, Ridolfi, 1:39, reversed their birth order by claiming that Gentile was born in 1421, following an apparent typographical error made by Vasari, 3:438, who stated that Gentile was near eighty when he died in 1501 rather than in 1507. Nineteenth-century scholars producing Negro's statement that Giovanni was younger than Gentile include Morelli, 98–99n7; Mündler, 36–37; and Crowe and Cavalcaselle, 1:117n1.

⁷⁵Crowe and Cavalcaselle, 117–18, 139–94, might also have believed that a revised birth order better reflected the chronology for Giovanni's extant paintings that they were attempting to establish.

⁷⁶ASV, NT, b. 361, Notaio Francesco Elmis, carta sciolta, n. 2; Barausse, 338, doc. 31.

discard Vasari's claim, and suggested instead that Giovanni was younger than Gentile, a proposal that became widely accepted in the twentieth century.

The scholars who have argued that Giovanni was younger than Gentile Bellini (b. 1429 or later) have used a number of reasons to justify their proposals.⁷⁷ First, as mentioned, a contemporary Venetian source, the humanist Francesco Negro, referred to Gentile as "maior natu," or born first, when both Giovanni and Gentile were still alive.⁷⁸ Second, Jacopo Bellini, in his Gattamelata altarpiece of 1460, signed the work with his own name followed by that of Gentile and finally Giovanni, who as a consequence has been presumed the younger.⁷⁹ And third, in what has been identified by some scholars as a group portrait of the extended Bellini family of painters by Gentile Bellini, it has been suggested that the kneeling figures were depicted in order of descending age: Jacopo Bellini, Leonardo Bellini, Andrea Mantegna, Gentile Bellini, and finally Giovanni, presumably the youngest of the group (fig. 3).⁸⁰

Much of the above evidence for supposing that Gentile was older, however, may be interpreted otherwise or should be considered alongside contradictory evidence. First, Francesco Negro's description of Gentile as

⁷⁷Gentile Bellini was born after 6 February 1429, the date his then-childless mother, Anna, drew up her will: ASV, NT, b. 946/c, Enrico Salomon, n. 313; Barausse, 330–31, doc. 4. For a summary of arguments for and against Giovanni having been the elder, see Gibbons.

⁷⁸Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Francesco Negro, *Peri archon*, MS. Lat. VI, 6 (=2753), 109^r: "And something far more wonderful is that, with of course [the Venetian city fathers'] authorization, the elder Gentile, at the behest of the Turkish Sultan Mehmet, was dispatched all the way to Byzantium." Fletcher, 1981, 453n1, notes that Negro apparently completed his manuscript before 1498; according to Agosti, 2007, 97n37, he completed it in 1493–94.

⁷⁹Humfrey, 2004, 4.

⁸⁰Gibbons, 55–58, refers to two inscribed late fifteenth-century medals by Vittore Gambello as the "most firmly identified portraits of the Bellini brothers" upon which "[o]ther portraits of the painted brothers must depend for their identification." Gibbons identifies the kneeling figure on the far right of Gentile's *Miracle of the Cross at San Lorenzo* (1500) as Giovanni Bellini, and the figure kneeling in front of him as Gentile Bellini on the basis of the Gambello portrait medals; a drawing probably depicting Gentile in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin; a full-length image of Gentile in his and Giovanni's painting, *Preaching of St. Mark* (1507), in the Brera, Milan; a 1505 inscribed portrait of Giovanni by Vittore Belliniano in the Musée Condé at Chantilly; the presumed portrait likenesses of both Gentile and Giovanni in Gentile's *Procession in Piazza San Marco* (ca. 1496) in the Accademia, Venice; and a few other possible likenesses. Gibbons then identifies the likenesses of the other three kneeling men as, from the left, Jacopo Bellini, Leonardo Bellini, and Mantegna, the latter image of whom Gibbons compares to the bronze portrait bust of Mantegna in the Mantegna chapel in Sant'Andrea, Mantua. Finally, Gibbons suggests that since Jacopo was the eldest, Leonardo the second eldest, Mantegna perhaps the third eldest, and Gentile probably the fourth eldest, it then stood to reason that Giovanni, the last in line, was the youngest.



FIGURE 3. Gentile Bellini. *Miracle at the Bridge of San Lorenzo*, detail, 1500. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia. Photo credit: Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.

maior natu must be weighed against that of Jacopo Filippo Foresti (1434–1520), who, in his regularly updated *Supplementum chronicarum*, described Gentile in 1503 as the younger brother (*Gentilis minimus frater*), also when both Giovanni and Gentile were still alive.⁸¹ Second, in signing

⁸¹Liber XVI, 427. Note that in 1503 Foresti's book was retitled *Novissime hystoriarum omnium repercussiones . . . Mccciii*. According to Worthen, Foresti published in Venice four variant texts on the Bellini family during Giovanni's lifetime, each subsequent version updated from the last with corrections and the addition of new material, some of which might have been supplied by Gentile Bellini himself. When assessing the testimony either of Francesco Negro or Jacopo Filippo Foresti, it is important to keep in mind that contemporary Renaissance accounts could be disconcertingly inaccurate. For example, the Venetian Franciscan friar Francesco Suriano (1450–1529) wrote that Giovanni Bellini, rather than Gentile, had been sent by the Signoria to the Ottoman court and that Giovanni himself, after returning to Venice, had told the friar about his trip: Golubovich, 95; Chong, 107, 111, 133n32, with bibliography. Fra Bartolomeo da Foligno also reported in ca. 1482, approximately two years after Gentile had returned from Constantinople, that it had been Giovanni who had undertaken the journey: see Golubovich, 95nA; Chong, 133n32. And in a book published in Rome in ca. 1507, Raffaele Maffei likewise reported that the sojourn had been Giovanni's: see Agosti, 2009, 15, 55–56n18.

Gentile's name directly after his own in the Gattamelata altarpiece, Jacopo might have been displaying a natural familial preference for his son-by-blood and the future inheritor of his workshop, or perhaps was merely recording Gentile's possibly more sizeable contribution to the altarpiece. And third, the argument that Gentile depicted the Bellini family — if that is who they are, which is hardly certain — according to birth order presupposes that Giovanni was the youngest, when the arrangement more likely defies a simple algorithmic explanation.⁸² In short, there is no conclusive evidence that Gentile was the elder.

8. GIOVANNI'S FAMILY RELATIONS IN THE SOURCES

The most significant challenges to the conclusions of this article would come from the many primary sources that described Giovanni Bellini as Jacopo's son or Gentile's brother or Mantegna's brother-in-law. For instance, Giovanni Bellini witnessed a testament in 1459, "Giovanni, son of master Jacopo Bellini"; he was named in his *securitatis carta* of 1485, in which he acknowledged receipt of his wife's dowry, as "Giovanni, son of the deceased Jacopo"; and he witnessed a contract in 1487 as "Giovanni Bellini, painter, son of the deceased master Jacopo."⁸³ Jacopo Bellini signed the Gattamelata

⁸²The figure second from left has also been identified as Nicolò Bellini, Gentile's brother: see Brown, 372n1. While Lucco, 2008, 21, writes that these portraits are "almost always identified as members of the Bellini family," some have disagreed. Fortini Brown, 252, 285, considers the portraits unlikely to have represented the Bellini family because only Jacopo had been a member of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, and he had died about thirty years prior to the painting's execution. Instead, she suggests that Gentile might have depicted himself with the four top officers of the Scuola's *banca*, two of whom were chancery officials who would normally wear red togas, as are depicted. Meyer zur Capellen, 78–79, argues that the kneeling men were members of the Cornaro family, who had enjoyed a long relationship with the Scuola. The kneeling figures have also been identified as members of the Vendramin family: see Fortini Brown, 285.

⁸³The 1459 testament (ASV, NT, b. 727, Giuseppe Moisis, cc. 1^v–2^v, n. 32; Barausse, 334–35, doc. 16): "ser Iohannes filius magistri Iacobi Bellini Sancti Leonis." The 1485 *securitatis carta* (ASV, NT, b. 877, Lorenzo Stella, protocollo, c. 28; Barausse, 341, doc. 42): "Ioannes Bellino quondam domini Iacobi." The 1487 contract (*ibid.*, doc. 44): "Iohanne Bellino pictore quondam domini Iacobi." In the 1459 testament, Giovanni's name and that of his co-witness were crossed off and replaced with the names of two other witnesses; Barausse, 334, plausibly proposes that Giovanni had testified to a first version of the will drawn up on 30 January 1459, and to which several clauses were subsequently added on 2 April 1459, thus requiring the document to be witnessed a second time by attestors who happened not to have been the original two.

altarpiece of 1460 as a work by him and his sons Gentile and Giovanni.⁸⁴ In his will of 18 February 1507, Gentile described Giovanni as “my dearest brother.”⁸⁵ And several contemporary and later observers, including the aforementioned Foresti, Negro, and Vasari, as well as Sanudo and Isabella d’Este, among others, described Giovanni as either Gentile’s brother or Jacopo’s son or Mantegna’s brother-in-law.⁸⁶

There are at least two reasons why Giovanni might have been considered Jacopo’s son and Gentile’s brother. First, as has been suggested, Jacopo Bellini might have adopted Giovanni. In legal documents in Renaissance Venice, notaries often referred to adopted sons simply as sons, and hence it is sometimes impossible to determine from them whether a child was adopted or biological. For instance, the 1440 Bellini *divisio* was witnessed by “Ercole, son of the deceased Jacobello de Fiore.”⁸⁷ In another legal document Ercole likewise was described as “son of master Jacobello de Fiore.”⁸⁸ Ercole was referred to as Jacobello’s “adopted son,” however, in Jacobello’s last will of 2 October 1439.⁸⁹ When Ercole’s adopted status was integral to the legal document, it needed to be mentioned. Theoretically, adopted sons were always identified as such in their adoptive fathers’ testaments because, under the law, their inheritance rights differed from those of legitimate sons.⁹⁰ Jacopo Bellini’s will would undoubtedly clarify his biological relationship to Giovanni and whether he had, in fact, adopted him, but unfortunately no will of Jacopo’s has been found.

The alternate, and perhaps more likely possibility — because if Jacopo had indeed been instated as Giovanni’s legal guardian, there might have been no compelling reason to adopt him — is that Jacopo had raised Giovanni as his son from a very young age, perhaps infancy, and in such a manner that Giovanni was accepted by family and community as Jacopo’s

⁸⁴ Although the altarpiece signature is lost, it was recorded in 1590 by Fra Valerio Polidoro: see Callegari, 30: “Jacobi Bellini Veneti patris ac Gentilis et Joannis natorum opus.”

⁸⁵ ASV, NT, b. 271, Bernardo Cavagnis, n. 307; Barausse, 354, doc. 105: “Iohannes frater meus carissimus.”

⁸⁶ When Gentile Bellini was buried on 23 February 1507, Sanudo, *I diarii*, 6:552, wrote, “He is survived by his brother Giovanni Bellini”; when Giovanni died, Sanudo (*ibid.*, 23:256) referred on 29 November 1516 to “Gentile Bellini his brother” (“Zentil Belin suo fradelo”); and on two other occasions, Sanudo, *De origine*, 34, 146, referred to Gentile and Giovanni as “brothers” (“fratelli”). Isabella d’Este’s letter of 18 October 1505 (Barausse, 351, doc. 94) to Giovanni: “Mantegna, your brother in law.”

⁸⁷ See Document 1 in the Appendix: “ser Hercules quondam ser Iacobi de Flore.”

⁸⁸ Fogolari, 49–50: “Herculi filio magistri Jacobelli de Flore.”

⁸⁹ de Mas-Latrie, 199: “Herculi filio meo adoptivo.”

⁹⁰ Unless, perhaps, if the adopted son had been legitimated.

son without the formality of legal adoption. As demonstrated in the case of Jacobello's adopted son Ercole, written or inscribed personal names in fifteenth-century Northern Italy, as elsewhere in Western Europe during the Renaissance, did not always convey biological fact. They might also project how a person was known, or desired to be known, by his community.⁹¹ For instance, a Renaissance Venetian painter named Vittore, son of Matteo, who had worked with Giovanni Bellini for a number of years, decided to call himself Vittore Belliniano, and was referred to as such, rather than as Matteo's son, in legal documents that included his own will and even that of his mother.⁹² In the early fifteenth century, when most Venetians did not have surnames and when most births were not officially recorded, Renaissance Venetian notaries evidently were given a degree of latitude when identifying individuals in legal documents, when doing so did not conflict with the expressed purposes of the document itself.

After his father Nicolò's death, Giovanni must have been taken into the household of his much older half-brother, Jacopo, where he was trained by him to be a painter, and in all probability was treated by the Bellini family and local community as Jacopo's own son and Gentile's brother. Decades later, when Giovanni witnessed a will, acknowledged receipt of his wife's dowry, and witnessed a contract, the notaries described him as Jacopo's son, apparently recording his communal rather than biological identity, which in these cases (unlike the 1440 *divisio*) had no direct bearing on the legal function of the documents.

Jacopo's inscription on the Gattamelata altarpiece naming Giovanni as his son does not prove that they were biologically father and son; rather, it registers that Jacopo had accepted Giovanni as his son, whether legally adopted or not. Contemporary or later observers, including Foresti, Negro, Sanudo, Isabella d'Este, Vasari, and others, were presumably only aware of Giovanni's communal identity as Jacopo's son, which of course meant that he was Gentile's brother and Mantegna's brother-in-law. Most of these observers surely imagined him to be Jacopo's legitimate son. They never suggested that Giovanni was adopted or illegitimate (or not Jacopo's son); yet Giovanni was almost certainly one of these because legitimate sons

⁹¹The bibliography on Renaissance communal and civic identity is large. For a recent consideration, see Martin, 1–20, 161–76. Examples of altering one's name in Renaissance Venice are numerous, even among painters, and include Jacopo Bellini's nephew, Leonardo di Paolo Remarius, who called himself Leonardo Bellini, and Girolamo Dente, who was attached to Titian's workshop and called himself Girolamo di Tiziano, although he was not Titian's son. For Leonardo Bellini, see Bauer-Eberhardt; for Girolamo di Tiziano, see Tagliaferro et al., 102–06.

⁹²Paoletti, 1894, 19–20. For Vittore Belliniano, see Rearick.

had to be mentioned in wills, and Anna's last will omitted him. The aforementioned and other contemporary and near-contemporary observers accepted, or at least chose to record, Giovanni's well-established communal identity.

In Gentile's last testament (he was reported buried five days later on 23 February 1507), he referred affectionately to Giovanni as "dearest brother," an appellation that would not have conflicted with the function of the document. The two had grown up as brothers, had considered each other brothers, and had been known throughout their lives, in and outside of Venice, as brothers — which represented a shared experience in excess of seventy-five years that Gentile could hardly be expected to set aside in order to privilege on his deathbed their strict biological relationship, and thus refer to Giovanni as "my dearest uncle."⁹³

9. RAMIFICATIONS

Keith Christiansen has written, "The problem with opting for an early birth date — and to my mind it is an insurmountable one — is that it leaves a full decade of activity in the 1450s with hardly any works."⁹⁴ The problem of situating Giovanni's birth year in 1424/28, however, is not insurmountable. Because of the nature of Venetian family workshops, a number of artists worked in relative obscurity during the first decade of their professional life. In 1916 Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), who dated Gentile's birth to 1429 and Giovanni's to ca. 1430, proposed that the artists' "delayed maturity" and the "exceeding scarcity of their earlier works, were in each case due to the same cause, namely that *they had had no independent career till they were middle-aged men, because they remained until then in their father's employ as his assistants*."⁹⁵ From the 1440s to the 1460s Jacopo completed a number of major commissions that required assistants: Giovanni and Gentile probably assisted him on a now-lost narrative cycle of seventeen scenes from the New Testament that had decorated the Sala Capitolare in the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista;⁹⁶ sometime after 1444 Jacopo executed a series of paintings, now destroyed, for the Albergo of the Scuola Grande di San

⁹³ Another possibility is that the notary, in rendering Gentile's (presumably voiced) last wishes into the legal language of a testament, appended to Giovanni's name without outside prompting, "my dearest brother," a formulaic apposition that occurs frequently in Renaissance Venetian wills.

⁹⁴ Christiansen, 53.

⁹⁵ Berenson, 1916, 62 (italics in original). For Gentile's and Giovanni's dates of birth, see Berenson, 1901, 89–90.

⁹⁶ According to Ridolfi, 1:35–36. See Fortini Brown, 269–70.

Marco, presumably another multi-year project involving assistants;⁹⁷ in 1460, as noted earlier, Jacopo signed the Gattamelata altarpiece with his own name followed by that of Gentile and Giovanni;⁹⁸ and Giovanni and Jacopo, perhaps with Gentile, executed four triptychs for Santa Maria della Carità from 1460 to 1464, Giovanni himself completing much or all of the polyptych depicting Saint Sebastian on the central panel.⁹⁹

Other Venetian artists similarly worked for a long time in family workshops. Alvise Vivarini (ca. 1442/53–1503/05) was probably about thirty when he commenced his independent career in ca. 1476. He either spent his early years as his father Antonio's assistant or else began his vocation late.¹⁰⁰ The sculptor Antonio Lombardo (ca. 1458–ca. 1516), who had moved to Venice as a boy, executed his first documented independent commission in 1500–04, apparently in his forties. "His earlier career," wrote Sarah Blake McHam, "which probably spanned about fifteen years, had been spent in the family workshop collaborating on commissions awarded his father, Pietro."¹⁰¹ Gentile Bellini (1429/35–1507) has no extant works securely datable to the 1450s. He probably began his independent career in the early to mid-1460s at age thirty or slightly older.¹⁰² Indeed, the birthdate of most Venetian artists in this period is unknown.¹⁰³ Hence the normative age at which a typical Venetian Quattrocento artist who was raised in his family's workshop would commence an autonomous career remains unclear. Giovanni's apparent "delayed maturity" would seem to have been unexceptional in the Quattrocento Venetian workshop.

Despite Christiansen's statement, a number of scholars have argued that Giovanni's independent career had, in fact, commenced by the early 1450s. In 1949 Giuseppe Fiocco, recognizing the conflict between Giovanni's omission from Anna Rinversi's last testament and the artist's apparent legitimate status, argued that he must therefore have been Jacopo's offspring from a previous, unknown marriage (or a legitimated son from a previous

⁹⁷Fortini Brown, 268.

⁹⁸Humfrey 2004, 4; Humfrey, 1993, 341.

⁹⁹Humfrey, 1993, 341. Lucco, 2008, 37n20 gives the triptych of *San Sebastiano* (1462–64) entirely to Giovanni; Christiansen, 67, does likewise, except for its "weakly painted lunette."

¹⁰⁰Steer, 3–4.

¹⁰¹McHam, 39, 159n72. For the argument that Antonio was born in the late 1460s, see Maek-Gérard, 122–23.

¹⁰²Meyer zur Capellen, 11–12, 140.

¹⁰³Evidence provided by extant documents, even when integrated with other primary sources, remains insufficient to calculate exact years of birth for most Venetian Quattrocento artists, and instead often delimits a range that spans several years or even a decade or more.

liaison), and hence born ca. 1425 but certainly “before 1429, when Jacopo’s wife [Anna] was already pregnant with her first son, Gentile.”¹⁰⁴ Roberto Longhi, accepting that birthdate, proceeded to date many of Giovanni’s early known works to the 1450s. Thus he placed the Amsterdam *Madonna* (fig. 4) between 1450 and 1455, a work that had been previously dated to ca. 1460 or slightly later.¹⁰⁵

Longhi’s proposed chronology was informed by an ulterior motive: to reverse the lines of artistic influence that ran from Mantegna to Bellini, because, he declared, “today, for all of us, Giovanni Bellini stands higher as an example of independence of spirit than Mantegna and, *a fortiori*, than every other Venetian or Paduan contemporary.”¹⁰⁶ Since most Bellini specialists believe that Mantegna was the leading participant in his early artistic duologue with Bellini, Longhi’s ideological stance may have made it easier to reject his proposed chronology. In any event, from the 1950s to the 1990s, most scholars assumed that Bellini was born later, in the early to mid-1430s.¹⁰⁷ Rona Goffen (1944–2004), for instance, argued for a birth year of 1433/36, yet maintained that Giovanni’s independent career had commenced by the early 1450s, or even the late 1440s, but that his early works still had been strongly influenced by Mantegna.¹⁰⁸

In 1990, Mauro Lucco argued that Giovanni was born toward ca. 1440 and commenced his independent career in ca. 1459.¹⁰⁹ He dated

¹⁰⁴Fiocco, 6: “La nascita del pittore doveva quindi cadere intorno al 1425, e certamente prima del 1429, quando la moglie di Jacopo era già gravida del primo figlio Gentile.” Lucco, 2008, 21; and Christiansen, 53, interpret Fiocco’s argument as suggesting that Jacopo, on moral grounds, would not have engaged in an extramarital relationship. More probably, Fiocco was responding to the question of how Giovanni could have been Jacopo’s legitimate son but not Anna’s.

¹⁰⁵Longhi, 278–79, places in ca. 1450 the Barber Institute *Saint Jerome* (dated ca. 1459 by Lucco, 2008, 136–38, cat. 2); between 1450–55 the Amsterdam *Madonna* and the Davis *Madonna* (both dated ca. 1460 by Lucco, 2008, 140–42, cat. 3; 146, cat. 5), the Correr *Crucifixion* (dated ca. 1471 by Lucco, 2008, 182–84, cat. 15), and other works; and between 1455–60 the Correr *Transfiguration* (ca. 1464 by Lucco, 2008, 148–50, cat. 6), the National Gallery *Blood of the Redeemer* (ca. 1467–68 by Lucco, 2008, 152–54, cat. 7), the Louvre *Sign of the Redeemer*, the London National Gallery *Agony in the Garden*, and the Brera *Pietà*, among other works. For the *Agony in the Garden*, see Bätschmann, 43–47, who dated it to ca. 1460–65; and for the Brera *Pietà*, see Bätschmann, 96–100, who dated it to ca. 1465–70.

¹⁰⁶Longhi, 278.

¹⁰⁷Pallucchini, 9–10; Robertson, 11; Meyer zur Capellen, 10; Tempestini, 305. In 1953 Coletti, lviii and n82, still favored Fiocco’s proposed date of ca. 1425.

¹⁰⁸Goffen, 3–4, 281.

¹⁰⁹Lucco, 1990, 410–13.



FIGURE 4. Giovanni Bellini. *Madonna with Child*, ca. 1455. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

the Amsterdam *Madonna*, which Longi contended was executed in the early 1450s, to 1460 or soon thereafter.¹¹⁰ In the past decade many leading scholars have come to believe that such a chronology, or one similar, not only reflects the available visual and documentary evidence, but also provides the framework for a more plausible development of the artist's style from the late 1450s into the 1460s. Lucco's proposed chronology seemed more and more to be achieving consensus.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰Lucco, 2008, 140–42, cat. 3.

¹¹¹Christiansen, 52–54; Humfrey, 2004, 5–7; Bätschmann, 18.

Thus it probably came as quite a surprise to these and likeminded scholars when the eminent art historian Luciano Bellosi (1936–2011), in an essay on the young Giovanni Bellini for the catalogue of the 2008 Mantegna exhibition at the Louvre, resituated many of Bellini's works from the 1460s or later back to the 1450s. Bellosi argued that four miniatures in the Marcello manuscript of the life of St. Maurice (figs. 5–8), firmly dated to 1453, were early works by Giovanni, an attribution that had been proposed in 1968 by Giles Robertson, affirmed to some extent by Lightbown in 1986 and Eisler in 1989, but which in recent years had become less plausible as Bellini's generally accepted birth year moved toward 1440.¹¹² With the Marcello illuminations as his point of departure, Bellosi reconstructed Giovanni's early stylistic development, dating the Amsterdam *Madonna* to ca. 1456–57 and situating Bellini's birth year in ca. 1430.¹¹³ In contrast to Longhi, however, Bellosi emphatically affirmed Mantegna's influence over much of Giovanni's production in the 1450s, while at the same time suggesting that Mantegna might also have benefited from a cross-fertilization of artistic ideas in his more Bellinesque works, such as the figure of Santa Giustina in his *San Luca Altarpiece*.¹¹⁴

If the present article's proposed birth range of 1424/28 comes to be accepted, then specialists who have supported a later date for Bellini's birth will need to reconsider, at least in some combination, whether Giovanni might have remained an assistant in Jacopo's workshop for longer than they had imagined, his autonomous career perhaps commencing when the artist was in his mid- to late twenties or even early thirties (and thus conceivably in ca. 1458/59, as Lucco has maintained); and whether scholars such as Longhi, Goffen, and Bellosi were correct to date a number of Giovanni's independent paintings to the 1450s, especially, of course, if one accepts the Marcello illuminations (1453) as autograph. It seems unlikely, however, that Longhi's endeavor to exalt Giovanni to the

¹¹²Robertson, 17–20; Lightbown, 495; Eisler, 535. For other possible attributions, see Humfrey, 2011, 383n11.

¹¹³Bellosi, 105, 120–21. Among the redatings in *ibid.*, 104–05, are: the *History of Drusiana* to 1453–55; the Johnson *Madonna* and the Bergamo *Pietà* to about the same time; the Correr *Transfiguration* slightly later; the drawing of the *Crucifixion* in the British Museum, the Poldi-Pezzoli *Pietà*, and the London National Gallery *Agony in the Garden* to ca. 1456–57; the Louvre *Sign of the Redeemer* and the Davis *Madonna* soon after; the two miniatures in the *Geographia* to a firmly dated 1459; the Brera *Pietà* to about the same time; and so on with works into the 1460s.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 103 (cat. 25).

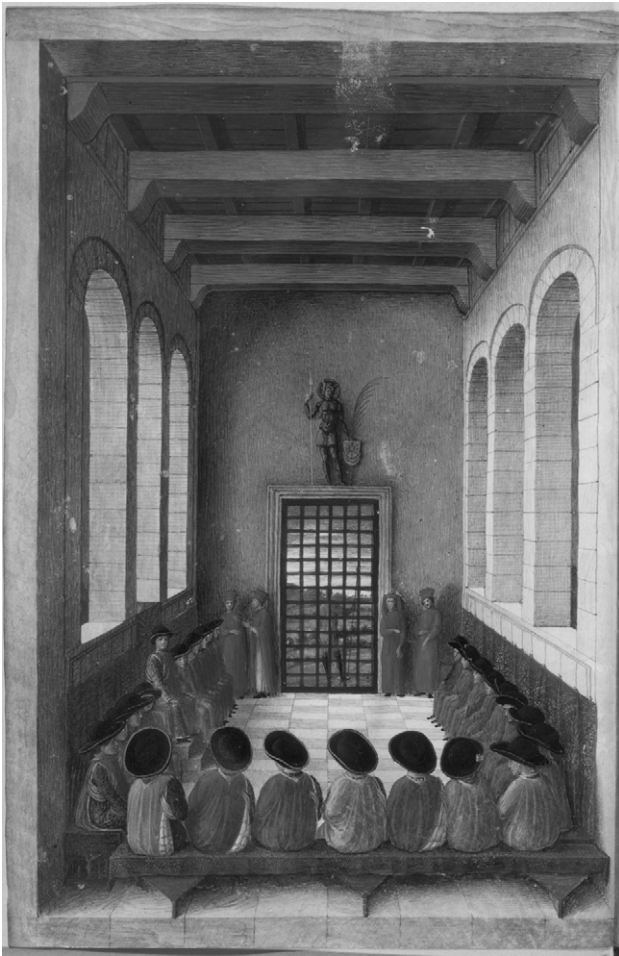


FIGURE 5. Giovanni Bellini (?). *Chapter of the Order of the Crescent*, 1453. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 940, fol. C^v. Photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

position of primary determinant in his artistic association with Mantegna will ever be widely accepted, and Goffen and Bellosi have arguably demonstrated that, even by placing a number of Giovanni's works a decade or so earlier, it need not be.

On the other end of Bellini's life, it may be difficult for some to believe that the artist could have executed late works such as the National Gallery's *Feast of the Gods* (1514) when he was well into his eighties, but thus it seems to be. After all, Titian (ca. 1485/90–1576) continued to execute masterpieces such as his final *Pietà* (ca. 1570–76) well into his eighties,



FIGURE 6. Giovanni Bellini (?). *Saint Maurice*, 1453. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 940, fol. 34^v. Photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

and the numerous productive octogenarians in the history of the visual arts include Picasso, who was famously prolific during his last years until his death at ninety-one.¹¹⁵

10. CONCLUSION

Raised in Jacopo's household, perhaps even from infancy, Giovanni grew up as Jacopo's own son and Gentile's brother. If the Bellini themselves, from

¹¹⁵For Titian's late career, see Ferino-Pagden and Scirè; Humfrey, 2007, 196–217. For Picasso's late career, see Gallwitz.

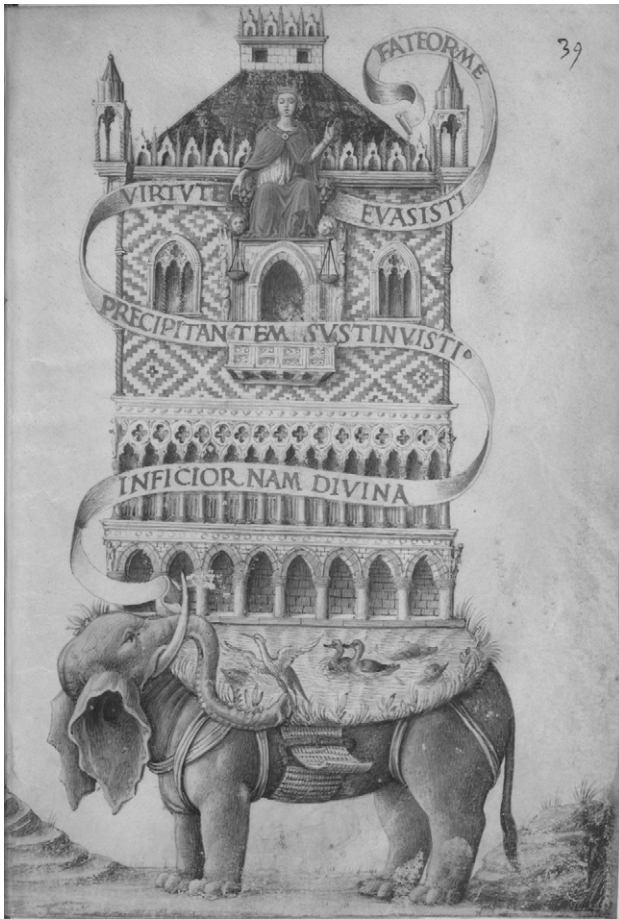


FIGURE 7. Giovanni Bellini (?). *Allegory of Venice*, 1453. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 940, fol. 39. Photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Giovanni's childhood, referred to Giovanni as a son or a brother, then there is no reason to imagine that anyone outside their family would have known otherwise. Inasmuch as their own contemporaries believed Giovanni and Gentile to be brothers, wrote of them in letters as brothers, described them in chronicles and extolled them in poetry as brothers, they have entered the history books incontrovertibly as brothers and as sons of Jacopo Bellini.

Nevertheless, Giovanni lived neither like Jacopo's son nor like Gentile's brother. While Jacopo was alive, Gentile remained in Jacopo's home in the parish of San Geminiano, as expected from an unemancipated son, while Giovanni, as has been argued, was emancipated when his biological father, Nicolò, died, and thus was able to move out of the Bellini household by



FIGURE 8. Giovanni Bellini (?). *Jacopo Antonio Marcello*, 1453. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 940, fol. 38^v. Photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

1459 to establish his own residence while continuing ties with Jacopo's workshop. Nor when Jacopo died was Giovanni treated as a biological son. Rather, it was Gentile who took over Jacopo's workshop and inherited Jacopo's notebooks and all his paintings, drawings, marbles, reliefs, and plaster casts, as well as all the tools and instruments pertaining to the workshop.¹¹⁶ Had Giovanni been Jacopo's legitimate son, the law would have provided him with a share of Jacopo's estate, but no evidence

¹¹⁶ASV, NT, Francesco Elmis, b. 361, reg. "Testamentorum," c. 65^v, n. 163; Barausse, 338, doc. 31.

suggests that Giovanni inherited either such a share, or offsetting funds, or anything whatsoever from Jacopo. Only through the analysis of legal documents — and not through how the Bellini described each other or were described by their community — are their blood relationships able to be traced.

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Appendix: Two Legal Documents Concerning the Bellini Family

Document 1 (fig. 1). 13 September 1440. Charter of division between the brothers Giovanni and Jacopo Bellini, sons of the deceased Nicolò, both residing in the parish of San Geminiano: ASV, CIN, b. 149, Vittore Pomino, reg. "Protocollum mei Victoris Pomino notarii de 1439," c. 55^v.¹

MCCCCXL, die 13 septembris, indicione quarta.

Licet divisio que fit inter fratres et cetera. Hinc est quod nos Iohannes Belino et Iacobus Belino fratres ac filii quondam ser Nicolai de confinio Sancti Iuminiani ne ullo umquam tempore aut quovis errore scandalum sive discordia oriri posit, ymo potius omnis iurgiorum materia tollatur a nobis plenam et irrevocabilem securitatem facimus nos Iohannes et Iacobus Belino suprascripti cum nostris heredibus et successoribus nobis invicem vicisim, de tota nostra fraterna societate quam simul habuimus et habemus, et de cuncto et super toto havere nostro magno vel parvo et de omnibus et singulis denariis et aliis quibuslibet bonis rebusque mobilibus quecumque nobis habere pertinuerunt tam paterno quam materno, fraterno vel alio quocumque iure aut ex aliqua propinquitate aut ratione vel causa tam tacita quam expressa, necnon quod et insimul vel absentes habuimus vel acquisivimus aut lucrati fuimus ante obitum, ad obitum et post obitum suprascripti defuncti patris nostri, vel quod nos invicem vicisim per quodvis modum vel ingenium requisivimus vel requirere potuimus ab initio usque ad diem presentem cum cartis et sine cartis, per curiam et extra curiam iuste quoque vel iniuste. Nunc autem quia ammodo in antea intendimus nos a fraterna nostra divisos esse et penitus segregatos, nos invicem vicisim videlicet unus alterum et e converso securos reddimus pariter et quietos quia nihil modo remansit quo amplius ab invicem compelli seu requiriri valeamus sive velimus per ullum ingenium sive modum et ideo reddentes omnino nos invicem tacitos et quietos atque de portione unicuique nostrum perventa contentos promittimus invicem vicisim unus alterum et e converso non provocare ad aliquam aliam divisionem fiendam nec dicere vel allegare quemque nostrum fuisse deceptum. Etiam si in futurum quis nostrum devenirit ad fortunam pinguorem, promittentes preterea invicem vicisim de cetero nos aut quoscumque nostrum heredes et successores nostros de lucris et utilitatibus quomodolibet perventis et ammodo in antea perventuris non requirere vel aliququaliter molestare occasione dicte nostre fraterne ullo ingenio sive modo, quia omnium eorum que quilibet nostrum fecerit prode utilitas sive damnum, absque ulla parte utilitatis vel damni exinde in alium perveniendis, debent vigore huius nostre segregationis et divisionis in eum qui ea fecerit et habuerit pacto expresso totaliter devenire. Si igitur et cetera.

Testes ser Ludovicus de Rigris ser Iacobi de confinio Sancte Iustine; ser Hercules quondam ser Iacobi de Flore pictoris de confinio Sancte Agnetis.

¹Pomino made a copy of this document in a different register: ASV, CIN, b. 149, Vittore Pomino, reg. 1439–44, c. 11^{r-v}.

1440, 13 September, fourth indiction.

The division that is to occur between the brothers is lawful, etc. Henceforth it is that we Giovanni Bellini and Jacopo Bellini of the parish of San Geminiano, brothers and sons of the deceased ser Nicolò, in order that no quarrel or disagreement may arise at any time or from some error, or indeed that every matter of dispute may be removed from us, we the abovementioned Giovanni and Jacopo Bellini make a full and irrevocable settlement, along with our heirs and successors, to each of us mutually in turn concerning our entire fraternal partnership that together we had and have, and concerning the whole and over every part of our assets large or small, and concerning all and each piece of money, and any other property and moveable goods, and whatever happened to belong to us, by right of paternal, maternal, fraternal, or any other relationship, or for any reason or cause, whether tacit or expressed, and whatever either jointly or separately we possessed, acquired, or gained, either before, or at, or after the death of our deceased father mentioned above, or that we mutually in turn by whatever manner or means claimed or could claim from the beginning to the present day, with or without documents, by or without judicial action, justly and also unjustly. Now, therefore, because from this moment forward we intend to be divided and entirely separated from our fraternal partnership, we mutually in turn, that is to say, each to the other, and the converse, together render each other secure and satisfied because nothing now remains by which we can or could be further compelled or required by any means or manner. And therefore declaring ourselves mutually and completely calm and satisfied, we promise mutually in turn, each to the other, and the converse, to be satisfied with the portion that each of us has received and not to undertake to initiate any other division, nor to state or claim that either of us has been deceived. And if in the future either of us may come into or will have come into richer fortune, we mutually in turn, as well as each of our heirs and our successors, promise in the future not to claim or in any way dispute anything from the profits and advantages howsoever attained or to be attained henceforth, by reason of our aforementioned fraternal partnership, by any means or manner. Because any profit, advantage, or loss from everything that either of us has made, with no part of the profit or loss therefrom going to the other, must by force of our separation and division entirely turn to the one who has made and received them according to the terms of this agreement. If in this case etc.

Witnesses: ser Ludovico di Risis, son of ser Jacopo, of the parish of Santa Giustina; ser Ercole, son of the deceased ser Jacobello del Fiore, painter of the parish of Sant'Agnese.²

²I thank Lorenzo Calvelli and Stanley Chojnacki for checking my translation.

Document 2 (fig. 2). 23 July 1429. Jacopo Bellini acknowledges receipt of his wife Anna's dowry of 250 gold ducats, or twenty-five *lire di grossi a oro*: ASV, CIN, b. 212, T. de Tomei, 23 luglio 1429.³

1429 mensis iulii . . .

die XXIII. Plenam et irrevocabilem securitatem facio ego Iacobus Belino pictor filius quondam ser Nicoleti Belino de confinio Sancti Geminiani cum meis heredibus tibi Anne filie quondam ser Branche Dinversis uxori mee dilecte et tuis successoribus de tota illa tua repromissa magna vel parva que tempore nostre dispensationis et contractationis nostri matrimonii pro te mihi dari promissa fuit. Que vero repromissa fuit ducati ducenti quinquaginta auri videlicet libre viginti quinque grossorum ad aurum. Nunc autem et cetera.

Testes vir nobilis ser Franciscus de Molino quondam ser Ieronimi Sancte Marie Magdalene et ser Bartholomeus de Aventuratis, gastaldus dominorum procuratorum ecclesie Sancti Marci.

1429 July 23

I, Jacopo Bellini, a painter residing in the parish of San Geminiano and son of the deceased ser Nicoletto Bellini, make a full and irrevocable acquittance along with my heirs, to you my beloved wife Anna, daughter of the deceased ser Branca Rinversi, and to your successors, concerning your full dowry, great or small, which at the time of our betrothal and contracting of our marriage was promised to be given to me on your behalf. Indeed that dowry was 250 gold ducats, that is to say, twenty-five *lire di grossi* of gold. Now also etc.

Witnesses: the nobleman ser Francesco da Molin, son of the deceased ser Girolamo, of Santa Maria Maddalena; and ser Bartolomeo Aventurati, steward of the lord procurators of the Church of San Marco.⁴

³The 1429 document, first cited by Molà, 188n145, is contained in a register that, although collected along with other registers in an envelope labeled "Tomei (De) Tomeo," is itself marked with the name "Nicolaus de Griffonibus [Nicolò Griffoni]," who was a notary active in Venice from 1421 to 1430: see da Mosto, 1:231. The 1429 document appears to be in Griffoni's hand: cf. ASV, NT, b. 917, Nicolò Griffoni, reg. 41–A.

⁴I thank Lorenzo Calvelli for checking my translation.

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