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Venetian Master Finally Gets His Own Show

By **RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS** MAY 14, 2015

BERGAMO, Italy — In their magisterial survey in 1871 of paintings of northern Italy, G.B. Cavalcaselle and J.A. Crowe declared that Palma il Vecchio shared with Giorgione and Titian “the honor of modernizing and regenerating Venetian art.”

Other critics down the centuries have heaped praise on this exceptional painter, and both during his lifetime and after his death in Venice in 1528, collectors vied with one another to acquire his pictures.

Over the last decade, monographic exhibitions have been staged in Italy of all the major artists of the golden age of Venetian art in the late 15th and 16th centuries: Antonello da Messina, Giovanni Bellini, Vittore Carpaccio, Cima da Conegliano, Lorenzo Lotto, Tintoretto, Titian and Veronese.

Palma il Vecchio at last joins their company in what is the first ever exhibition entirely devoted to his work, at the Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art in Bergamo. The show is curated by Giovanni C.F. Villa and contains 33 altarpieces, panels and canvases, representing about a third of his surviving autograph works, which are now scattered in museums and private collections. The show runs through June 21.

Jacopo Negretti, later nicknamed Jacopo Palma in Venice, was born in Serina near Bergamo in about 1480. Palma was not referred to as Il Vecchio (the Elder) until half a century later, to distinguish him from his great-nephew, Palma il Giovane (the Younger) — a prolific and successful artist who cannily adopted his forerunner’s title but never achieved the artistic heights of his namesake.

The older artist appears to have had some initial training in Bergamo and to have spent time in the Venice studios of Giovanni Bellini and possibly Cima. Despite his fame in his adopted city, few written records relating to him have survived, with the exception of the posthumous inventory of the contents of his house. This detailed document, printed in full in the exhibition's catalog, gives a vivid picture of the possessions of a prosperous artist of the times. It also itemizes 47 paintings, finished and in progress, that remained in his studio, some of which are possible to identify in collections today.

Palma's 17th-century biographer Carlo Ridolfi noted how few pictures the artist painted before his untimely death, on account of his meticulous workmanship, still clearly visible in the exquisite brushwork and finish of the paintings on display in this show 500 years later. Ridolfi also observed that most of his works were commissioned by private patrons and that, by the time of his writing, many had been sold on to foreign buyers.

The opening room, "The Beginning," contains Palma's first signed work, a Madonna and Child of about 1504, from the Stätliche Museen in Berlin, clearly influenced by the likes of Carpaccio and Cima, while a pair of portraits of a young man and woman from Budapest reveal Palma's interest in the contemporary works of Giorgione.

"Christ and the Adulteress," of around 1512, from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, demonstrates that the eclectic young artist was familiar not only with other local artists, such as Sebastiano del Piombo, but also with Mantegna and Leonardo da Vinci.

An early pair of nudes, "Two Nymphs in a Landscape," dating from 1513-14, from the Städelsches Müzeum in Frankfurt, draw on the lovely reclining nudes of Giulio Campagnola and Giorgione and the sculptures of Tullio Lombardo. But they also suggest a knowledge of Francesco Colonna's recently published erudite, erotic novel "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili" (Polifilo's Strife With Love in a Dream), a cult classic among Venice's aristocratic, educated, literary and artistic elite, whose members were becoming Palma's most dedicated patrons.

The next section, "Altarpieces and Sacred Stories," presents an artist who has firmly established a distinctive and unmistakable style, as well as achieving technical mastery. In his "Madonna and Child with Saints and Donor," of around 1515, from the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the slight stiffness of his earliest religious pictures had disappeared, to be replaced by an animated and rhythmic, undulating compositional structure, breathtaking command of color

and the sculptural molding of figures through light and shade — characteristics of all his finest subsequent works.

Palma maintained contacts with family and friends in his home region throughout his life, providing altarpieces for a number of churches. One of the grandest was for his native Serina. Having fallen into a desperate state of neglect, the piece's panels have now been painstakingly restored (and provided with a new, beautifully carved and gilded wooden frame). It is an important legacy of this show, where the altar is on display until it is returned to the Santa Maria Annunciata Church in Serina.

During the second decade of the 16th century Palma produced a series of captivating images of sumptuously dressed, beautiful young women, upon which much of his enduring fame was to rest. It is now generally agreed that these are not conventional portraits but idealized visions of female beauty, as much based on poetic and philosophical ideas as on any particular models.

A probably unrepeatable gathering of these is displayed in sections titled “The Ideal Portrait” and “Depicting the Body,” along with additional examples of similarly inspired male “portraits,” from collections in Madrid, St. Petersburg, Vienna, London and Northumberland, England.

The last rooms of the exhibition, featuring works from the final decade of Palma's life, reveal an artist continuing to develop and broaden his horizons, and give rise to thoughts about what might have been had he lived as long as some of his contemporary artists in Venice.

From early on his religious works contained delightful landscape and mountain backdrops, and what seems to have been an increasing passion for landscape and for the depiction of rustic life is illustrated in the penultimate section by three charmingly atmospheric works with landscape settings: “The Adoration of the Shepherds” from Paris, a “Madonna and Saints” from Bangor in North Wales, and “The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel” from Dresden in Germany.

The show concludes with its most spectacular single loan, the panels of the monumental “St. Barbara Altarpiece” from the Santa Maria Formosa church in Venice, the central figure of which remains one of the most majestic and admired of all Palma's female figures.



“Portrait of a Woman,” known as La Bella, by Palma il Vecchio, around 1518. The Venetian painter’s fame rests on his portraits of sumptuously dressed young women, but his range of subjects was much broader, as the exhibition demonstrates. Credit Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid



“Madonna and Child with Saints and Donor,” around 1515, shows how the relative stiffness of his earliest religious pictures had been replaced by an undulating compositional structure. Credit Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid



“Nymphs Bathing,” 1519-1520. Palma il Vecchio’s nudes showed the influence of Giorgione and other painters. Credit Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna