

The Manfrin Gallery

The collection formed in Venice at the end of the eighteenth century by Girolamo Manfrin provided the first systematic survey of Venetian painting. A new book by Linda Borean traces its formation, its establishment as a civic amenity in the first half of the nineteenth century and its dispersal in the second half, when, as an unintended consequence of British rapacity, a small but important portion of the collection was acquired for the Accademia Galleries in Venice.

by NICHOLAS PENNY

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF the Venetian art collection of Girolamo Manfrin (1742–1801) was first outlined by Francis Haskell in his book *Patrons and Painters* more than fifty years ago.¹ Not much about Manfrin has been discovered since then, although we do have a clearer picture of the Dalmatian tobacco monopoly that made him immensely wealthy. In 1788 he purchased the large and austere Palazzo Priuli-Venier beside the Cannaregio canal, refurbished the interiors and soon began to fill them with paintings, many brought from previous residences but most of them new acquisitions. A provisional inventory compiled in 1794 lists some 250 paintings. By the time of his sudden death in 1801 there were around 500. Linda Borean's new book, *La Galleria Manfrin a Venezia: l'ultima collezione d'arte della Serenissima*, supplies an admirable account of the rapid formation of this collection in the final decade of the eighteenth century, its fame in the first half of the nineteenth century and its dispersal in the second half, together with numerous illustrations, the crucial documents regarding its contents, and a list of all the paintings that have been traced (twenty-one in the Accademia, Venice, and sixteen in the National Gallery, London; the others are scattered in private and public collections from El Paso to Budapest).²

Borean has discovered in the Archivio di Stato di Zara information concerning Manfrin's 'very unfortunate marriage' (*troppo sfortunato matrimonio*) with Angela Difnicio Michete, but they had children and there must have been some dynastic ambition behind his purchase of a palace. We know nothing about his knowledge or love of art. It seems that he belonged to that important category of collector, the very rich man of around fifty years of age, with both ambition and modesty, who wants the best but knows his limitations and thus engages the most able available advisers and suppliers. The acquisitions of such collectors are

1. Detail of Fig.7.

too conspicuous for the suppliers to be tempted to offer works of dubious quality. An obvious example of such a collector is Henry Clay Frick and it is likely that Manfrin wanted his collection to serve as a public amenity for Venice, similar to what the Frick Collection became in New York. In any case, when inherited by his son, and later his daughter, the opulently furnished picture gallery – together with an impressive library and print collection and a room containing eight hundred specimens of natural history (divided into shells, crystals, fossils and so on) – was regularly open to the public and greatly admired by visitors to the city. For much of the early nineteenth century it was the equivalent of a major civic collection.

A comparable figure in London was John Julius Angerstein (1735–1823), whose collection was also being assembled in the 1790s. He was advised by Thomas Lawrence and Benjamin West, both notable as collectors as well as artists, and by William Seguir, the most trusted restorer and art adviser in London.³ They were prepared to help form this collection because it might be to the advantage of the public and posterity – which indeed turned out to be the case when Parliament purchased the chief portion of it to create the National Gallery in 1824. The experts to whom Manfrin turned were Pietro Edwards (1744–1821), appointed president of the Accademia in 1786 and long the official restorer of public art in Venice, equivalent in many ways to Seguir in London,⁴ Giambattista Mengardi (1738–96), a painter of note who was also Inspector (*ispettore*) of the republic's public paintings (*pubbliche pitture della Serenissima*), and Giovanni Maria Sasso (1743–1803). Of these three, it seems likely that Edwards was the chief adviser because it was to him that Manfrin's only surviving letter concerning the collection was addressed in 1793, and he was also the author of the 1794 inventory.⁵ In 1865, when many of the Manfrin Gallery's greatest treasures had been sold and

1 F. Haskell: *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations Between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque*, London 1963, pp.378–81 and 395 (appendix 7). See also M. Frank: entry for Girolamo Manfrin in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* LXVII, Rome 2007, pp.758–60.

2 *La Galleria Manfrin a Venezia:*

l'ultima collezione d'arte della Serenissima, by Linda Borean, 152 pp, incl. 49 ills. (Udine, 2018), €24, ISBN 978-8-83-283058-3. The documentary section is edited by Paola Benussi. It is noted that additional information on the Dalmatian tobacco monopoly is provided in R. Tolomeo: *Imprenditoria e Società in Dalmazia*, Venice 2013, pp.67–

71, see Borean p.12, note 15.

3 For the fullest account of Seguir, see J. Egerton: *National Gallery Catalogues: The British School*, London 1998, pp.388–98.

4 See S. Rinaldi: entry for Pietro Edwards, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* XLII, Rome 1993, pp.296–98. See also E. Darrow: 'The Art of

Conservation XI: Pietro Edwards: the restorer as "philosophe"', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 159 (2017), pp.308–17.

5 The letter is printed as an appendix in Haskell, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.395, and in Borean, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.90. In it Manfrin mentions 'Mingardi' [sic] but not Sasso.



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everything else was known to be for sale, Gian Jacopo Fontana described it in his guidebook to the city's palaces as 'an academy of masterpieces of art, mostly of the Venetian school, and of outstanding works by the most illustrious masters of all the foreign schools' ('un'accademia, pei capolavori d'arte, la maggior parte della scuola veneta, e di eccellenti opere de' più illustri maestri di tutte le scuole forestiere').⁶ The foreign works were not in fact very numerous but they included Rembrandt's portrait of Johannes Wtenbogaert (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) and *The alchemist* by Jan Steen now in the Accademia, and it is no doubt true that, had Manfrin not died in 1801, the pursuit of 'opere di tutt'i tempi e di tutte le scuole' would have continued.

The representation of the 'scuola veneta' in the Manfrin collection seems to have been systematically comprehensive, including works by unfashionable seventeenth-century artists and works of recent production about which his advisers were not always enthusiastic. Edwards, for example, gave a disparaging account of Francesco Guardi in reply to an enquiry sent by Antonio Canova, but a pair of Guardi's view-paintings were included.⁷ For Fontana a notable feature of the collection were the 'relics of early Italian painting' ('reliquie dell'antica pittura italiana') – a 'Cimabue' (now in the Museo Borgogna, Vercelli, and considered to be by Ambrogio

2. *Virgin and Child with donor*, by Nicolò di Pietro. c.1394. Panel, 107 by 65 cm. (Gallerie dell' Accademia, Venice; Bridgeman Images).

3. *Marco Barbarigo*, by a follower of Jan van Eyck. c.1449–50. Panel, 24.2 by 16 cm. (National Gallery, London).



di Baldese), a 'Giotto' (now in the Accademia as a work by Nicolò di Pietro; Fig.2), and a work by Andrea Mantegna (the beautiful *Sr George*, also in the Accademia) – the first 'rings of the chain' that would lead to Manfrin's paintings by Antonello da Messina and the Vivarini.⁸

A sort of prelude to this book is provided by an essay by Borean on the 'case of Manfrin' in the third volume, published in 2009, of *Il Collezionismo d'arte a Venezia?* Borean was co-editor with Stefania Mason of two of these three volumes and a contributor to all of them. Each contains valuable essays on relevant subjects (such as the market for antiquities, or major families such as the Grimani), followed by biographical notes on more than forty different collections together with appendices of previously unpublished documents. No other great European centre has been as well served as Venice by the historians of collecting and these volumes enable us to recognise the originality of the Manfrin collection. No earlier Venetian collection had done anything like as much to encourage a historical approach to art appreciation in the city. It is this aspect of the Manfrin collection which, together with the scale of the operation and the speed of acquisition, distinguishes it from the masterpiece collection formed by – or rather for – Angerstein. And it is here perhaps that the role of Sasso was probably most important, for he was more attentive to the early phases of Venetian art than any previous scholar and was then assembling the remarkable preparatory material for an illustrated history of Venetian painting that he never completed.⁹



Sasso enjoyed a very close, if largely epistolary, relationship with Sir Abraham Hume (1749–1838), a protégé of Joshua Reynolds, father-in-law of Charles Long (principal adviser to George IV) and one of the most discriminating British art collectors of this period.¹⁰ Sasso's letters to Hume (which had languished for years in the archive of the National Gallery), together with Hume's to Sasso (in the archive of the Seminario Patriarcale, Venice), were published by Borean in 2004, providing many insights into the higher levels of connoisseurship in late eighteenth-century Europe.¹¹ As a dealer, Sasso could not afford too many patriotic qualms. In 1791 he sold Hume a masterpiece by Canaletto, a view of the Pra' della Valle in Padua (private collection) that had belonged to Giambattista Tiepolo, even though he admitted that hardly any paintings by this great Venetian artist still remained in Venice.¹² In the same year he also sold Hume a beautiful *Adoration of the shepherds* by Vincenzo Catena (Fig.4),¹³ which he believed to be by Giovanni Bellini but in which – he shrewdly observed – one might suspect the hand of the juvenile Titian. This painting came from a great

4. *Adoration of the shepherds*, by Vincenzo Catena. After 1520. Canvas, 125.7 by 207.6 cm. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

patrician collection (that of the Giustiniani), which he might have wished to preserve in Venice. The correspondence concerning the 'Bellini' reveals Hume's aversion to paintings which were 'secco'.¹⁴ Sasso was therefore free to sell works by earlier artists to Manfrin, including a 'little portrait' ('ritrattino') of Marco Barbarigo, the Venetian ambassador in London, by a close follower of Jan van Eyck (Fig.3), that Hume had helped him to research.¹⁵

A remarkable feature of the Manfrin collection, and the chief reason that there is some awareness of it today among art historians, is the fact that it included Giorgione's *La Vecchia* and his *Tempesta* (both Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice). However, what was believed to be by Giorgione in this collection is a complicated subject. At least seven paintings were deemed to be by him either when they were part of the collection or after leaving it. Turning again to Sasso's correspondence with Hume, it is

6 G.J. Fontana: *Cento Palazzi fra i più celebri di Venezia* [...], Venice 1865, p.327. For the Rembrandt and the Steen, see Borean, *op. cit.* (note 2), figs.27 and 28.

7 F. Haskell: 'Su Francesco Guardi vedutista e alcuni suoi clienti', in A. Battagno: *wh. cat. Francesco Guardi: vedute, capricci, feste*, Venice (Fondazione Giorgio Cini) 1993, p.16. Living artists were also represented; perhaps the only aspect of the Galleria Manfrin not discussed by Borean is the fresco decoration of the rooms by several contemporaries including Mengardi, who seems to have been responsible for planning the decor generally in collaboration with Davide Rossi as 'ornatista'.

8 It is of course odd that Fontana classes Mantegna with Cimabue and Giotto. There were, in fact, a good many quattrocento paintings, of which perhaps the most notable were the 'Ruskin Madonna' by Verrocchio (National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh) and Marco Zoppo's painting of the Virgin and Child with eight angel musicians (Musée du Louvre, Paris). This aspect of the collection was underestimated in Haskell, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.380.

9 'Il caso Manfrin', in L. Borean and S. Mason, eds.: *Il Collezionismo d'arte a Venezia: il Settecento*, Venice 2009, pp.192–216. The other volumes are M. Hochmann, R. Lauber and S. Mason, eds.:

Il collezionismo d'arte a Venezia: Dalle origini al Cinquecento, Venice 2008, and L. Borean and S. Mason, eds.: *Il collezionismo d'arte a Venezia: il Settecento*, Venice 2007. Any student of the Manfrin collection must read Borean's essay as well as the more recent book because it supplies additional information, especially on the origin of the collection.

10 R. Callegari: *Scritti sull'arte Padovana del Rinascimento*, Udine 1998, pp.296–323.

11 For Hume's collection, see N. Penny: *The National Gallery Catalogues: The Sixteenth Century Venetian Paintings. II, Venice 1540–1600*, London 2008, pp.458–61.

12 L. Borean, ed.: *Lettere artistiche del Settecento Veneziano. II: il carteggio Giovanni Maria Sasso – Abraham Hume*, Venice 2004. It was reviewed by Michael Levey in this Magazine, 148 (2006), p.493.

13 *Ibid.*, esp. pp.88 and 207. Sasso noted: 'dal celebre pittore Tiepolo che lo teneva nella sua stanza come cosa preziosa'.

14 *Ibid.*, pp.84, 205 and 210, and fig.37.

15 In the 'descriptive catalogue' of his collection Hume wrote of 'Bellini's usual dry manner', see *ibid.*, p.82.

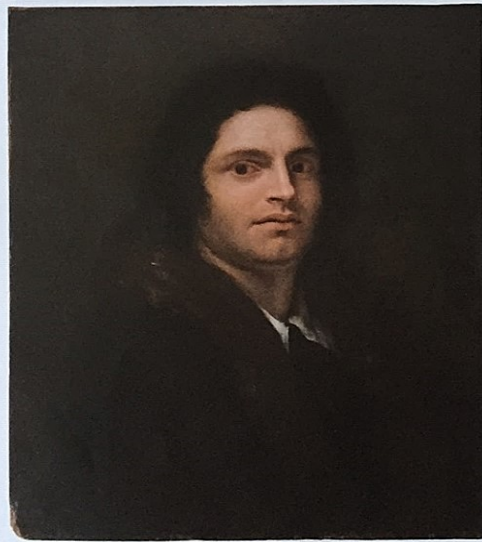
16 *Ibid.*, pp.12 and 218. See L. Campbell: *The National Gallery Catalogues: The Early Netherlandish Paintings*, London 1998, pp.224–27.

extraordinary how frequently and confidently works were thought to be by Giorgione that would never now be attributed to him. In those same years Canova, then enjoying huge success as a sculptor in Rome but in close contact with Venice and familiar with all the figures involved in forming the Manfrin Gallery, became increasingly interested in Giorgione. He based some of his own strange paintings on what he believed to be works by Giorgione and in 1792 fabricated a self-portrait by Giorgione on an old panel and gave it a false provenance (Fig. 5). When unpacked at a luncheon given by Prince Rezzonico, it deceived all the leading artists and experts in Rome.¹⁷ Even though it is clearly based on the engraving in Carlo Ridolfi's biography of the *David* in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig, its waxy handling is unlike anything we would today associate with Giorgione.

The painting reminds us that the most highly valued 'Giorgione' in the Manfrin collection was also supposed to be a self-portrait, with the artist's wife and son – neither of which Giorgione had (Figs. 1 and 7). By 1834 this triple portrait, described by Edwards in 1794 as a 'capriccio di three half-length figures' ('*capriccio di tre mezze figure*'), was valued at 2,200 Austrian lire – five times as much as the *Tempesta*, then called Giorgione's 'family with a landscape' ('*sua famiglia con paesaggio*') and referred to by Edwards as the 'painting said to be the artist's family' ('*quadro detto la famiglia dell'autore*').¹⁸ Nearly twenty years later, when the collection was visited by the English dealer William Woodburn in order that 122 pictures could be valued for possible purchase by the National Gallery, the triple portrait was deemed to be worth an astonishing £2,500 whereas the *Tempesta* was listed as £100.¹⁹ It is not that the *Tempesta* was entirely neglected; Sasso considered

5. *Self-portrait by Giorgione*, by Antonio Canova. 1792. Panel, 72.5 by 64 cm. (Private collection).

6. *A lady at her toilette*, by Natale Schiavoni. c.1840. Canvas. (Museo Bottacin, Palazzo Zuckermann, Musei Civici, Padua; Bridgeman Images).



it 'undoubtedly by Giorgione and beautiful' ('*veramente di Giorgione e bello*')²⁰ and both Charles Eastlake and Otto Mündler, the travelling agent for the National Gallery, found it charming, although the latter thought it might be by Girolamo Savoldo.²¹ However, its great reputation only followed the recognition that it was the painting that Marcantonio Michiel had described as by Giorgione not long after the artist's death.²²

A work of art can often achieve great fame through gratuitous and often spurious biographical interest. A painting by G.B. Moroni in the Manfrin collection was believed to be a portrait of Michelangelo, a copy of Titian's *Man with a quilted sleeve* was said to be a portrait of Ludovico Ariosto, *La Vecchia* was said to be Titian's mother (or sometimes Giorgione's) and, as mentioned above, a 'capriccio' became a portrait of Giorgione with his wife and son (perhaps a result of confusion with the *Tempesta*, in which Giorgione's family were believed to feature).²³ But additional glamour attached to the triple portrait on account of the enthusiasm of a modern celebrity, Lord Byron, who wrote about the painting in 'Manfrini's palace' (and about modern Venetian beauty and morality with cheerful cynicism) in *Beppo*, the Venetian tale he dashed off in October 1817 and which was published early in the following year by John Murray.²⁴ In his popular guidebook to Italy Murray not only referred to the poem but inserted an extract from a letter to him in which the poet describes the painting.²⁵ The woman was the sort that the poet saw – or hoped to see – in the windows of the city of intrigue ('Giorgione' he twice rhymes with 'balcony'). One of the leading Venetian painters in those years, Natale Schiavoni (1777–1858), painted just such beauties for the readers of Murray's book (Fig. 6). There had been nothing quite like the popularity of the Manfrin triple portrait since visitors to Paris a hundred years earlier had flocked to admire Charles Le Brun's *Magdalen* in the church of the Carmelites, in the belief that it depicted the penitence of Madame de la Vallière, the mistress of Louis XIV.²⁶

In 1856, five years after Manfrin's grandchildren had failed to broker a sale of a large portion of the collection to the National Gallery, a catalogue of the paintings was printed and offers were solicited. The chief buyer was the great cockney *marchand amateur* Alexander Barker (1797–1873), who secured a group of the most famous paintings, including the triple portrait and the *Lady with a guitar*, then also usually supposed to be by Giorgione (although some experts had already recognised it as by Palma il Vecchio). These two paintings belong to a group of four that he sold to the Duke of Northumberland; both are still at Alnwick Castle, Northumberland.²⁷ Borean reveals that Barker had to wait for the export licence until the following year. While he waited, the art historian, critic and architect Pietro Selvatico (1803–80) – the reforming president of the Accademia from 1849 to 1859 – urged the Austrian authorities to purchase a significant block of Manfrin pictures for the Accademia Galleries.²⁸ It seems likely that an additional incentive for the Austrians to agree to do so was the knowledge in Vienna that a secret agreement had been reached with the British Government guaranteeing an export licence for Veronese's *Family of Darius before Alexander* (National Gallery, London), which for more than a century had been the most admired of any painting in private possession in Venice, should it be purchased from Count Pisani – which it was soon afterwards.²⁹ Thus one consequence of British rapacity was the strengthening of an Italian public collection. Meanwhile, the National Gallery still watched and waited. Eastlake had wanted the *Mantegna*, which was among the twenty-one works acquired for the Accademia. Now his highest priority was the *St Jerome in his study* by Catena, then believed to be by Giovanni Bellini, a beautiful painting much more admired in the nineteenth century than it is today,³⁰ and this was finally purchased in 1861 together with the portrait of Marco Barbarigo mentioned above and Andrea Previtali's *Virgin and Child with a supplicant*, then considered to be by Cima da Conegliano.

An Italian context for the fate of the Manfrin collection would cover collections formed in Bologna (notably that of Filippo Hercolani, 1736–1810), which were especially devoted to the local school and included many altarpieces, absent for the most part from the Manfrin collection.³¹ It would describe the magnificent 'Bibliopincoteca' built by the Sommi-Piccenardi family in 1826, among the attractions of their English garden near Cremona, for the paintings (again including notable altarpieces) inherited from Giambattista Biffi, which were sold from 1869 onwards.³² Special attention would be given to the collections established by Giovanni Battista Costabili Containi (1756–1841) in Ferrara,³³ and by Guglielmo Lochis (1789–1859) in Bergamo,³⁴ which their founders had desperately hoped to keep intact. They were broken up, although a significant portion of both collections eventually enriched the museums of those cities.

17 This painting emerged in 2018 at the European Fine Art Fair, Maastricht, with the dealers Antonacci Lapicciarella. For a full account of the hoax, see F. Mazzuca: *L'Autoritratto di Giorgione. Un dipinto ritrovato*, Rome 2018 (a booklet written for Antonacci Lapicciarella).

18 For Edwards's descriptions of these pictures, see Borean, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.95 (no.83) and 99 (no.181); for the 1834 inventory see *ibid.*, pp.107 and 113.

19 For the 1851 valuation, see *ibid.*, pp.128 and 130.

20 *ibid.*, p.17.

21 C. Togneri Dowd, ed.: 'The travel diaries of Otto Mündler 1855–58 at the National Gallery London', *The Walpole Society* 51 (1985), pp.212–13.

22 For the painting's subsequent history, see Borean, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.18; when Wilhelm Bode expressed an interest in acquiring it for Berlin,

Giovanni Morelli persuaded Prince Giovannelli to purchase it. It later passed into the Accademia.

23 The painting was thought by William Hazlitt to represent the artist's 'mistress with a gay cavalier and a page', see W. Hazlitt: *Notes on a Journey through France and Italy*, London 1826, pp.353–55. Some later writers suggested that the woman was Palma il Vecchio's daughter.

24 Lord Byron: *Beppo: A Venetian Story*, London 1818, stanzas XI–XVI.

25 J. Murray: *Handbook for Travellers in North Italy*, London 1842, pp.365–69. The present author, together with Elena Greer, plans to publish a full account of this story, which will deal with the absurd idea that Byron was writing about the *Tempesta*. He is indebted to Elena Greer for sharing her research on Murray's guides.

26 See especially P. Thickett: *A Year's Journey through France and Parts of Spain*, London 1777, II, pp.155–59. Here too poetry was involved – the starting lines serving as a caption to the engraving by Gérard Edelinck. The connection with Madame de la Vallière was still being made in the late nineteenth century, see A. Jameson: *Sacred and Legendary Art*, London 1868, I, p.372.

27 A full account of Barker's transaction will be provided in the article referred to in note 25.

28 Borean, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.28–29.

29 For a full account of the acquisition of the Veronese, see Penny, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.371–74.

30 National Gallery, London, inv. no. NG 694. See C. Gould: *The National Gallery Catalogues. The Sixteenth-Century Italian Schools*, London 1975, pp.51–52.

31 N. Penny with G. Mancini: *The*



7. Triple portrait, by an imitator of Titian. Venetian, perhaps late sixteenth century. (Alnwick Castle, Northumberland; courtesy the Duke of Northumberland).

Many factors may be cited for this very imperfect record of preservation (from every one of which the National Gallery benefited). The depressed economic condition of north-east Italy after the rebellion against Austria must have made sales to the wealthy English more tempting: Manfrin's two grandchildren approached the National Gallery in 1851 when the situation in Venice was especially dire. The abolition of primogeniture under both Napoleonic and Austrian law ensured that collections were always threatened by division, which was certainly a factor in the case of the Manfrin family.³⁵ There was also the great cost to patriotic families of the struggle for independence (which applied in several of these cases, although not in the case of the Manfrin). The Austrians were, however, not neglectful. Their part in improving local collections in north-east Italy has, for understandable reasons, been hard for Italians to acknowledge. Now that Borean has traced the entire history of the Manfrin collection we can see that the hero, if there was one, was Selvatico, who, in very difficult circumstances, persuaded the Austrian authorities to ensure that a small but choice group of paintings enriched the Accademia galleries.

National Gallery Collection: The Sixteenth Century Italian Paintings. III, Bologna and Ferrara, London 2016, pp.466–72.

32 N. Penny: *The National Gallery Collection: The Sixteenth Century Italian Paintings. I, Bergamo, Brescia and Cremona*, London 2004, pp.361–62 and 393–94.

33 Penny and Mancini, *op. cit.* (note 31), pp.462–66. See also E. Mattalino: *La Collezione Costabili*, Venice 1998.

34 For the Lochis collection, see G. Brambilla Ranise: *La raccolta dimezzata. Storia della dispersione della pinacoteca di Guglielmo Lochis (1789–1859)*, Bergamo 2007.

35 A division of the collection was agreed upon in 1861 and one portion of the collection was physically removed from the gallery in 1863, see Borean, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.34.