



FIG. 45
 Jacopo Bellini,
Madonna and Child, c.1445–50,
 panel, 98 × 58 cm,
 Lovere, Galleria
 dell'Accademia Tadini

FIG. 46
 Filippo Lippi,
Madonna and Child, 1440s,
 panel, 79.1 × 51.1 cm,
 Washington, National
 Gallery of Art



FIG. 47
Giovanni Bellini,
*Madonna Adoring
the Sleeping Child*
(Davis Madonna),
c.1460–65, panel,
72.4 × 46.4 cm,
New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art



FIG. 48
Giovanni Bellini,
Madonna and Child
(Lehman Madonna),
c.1465–70, panel,
53.9 × 39.9 cm, New York,
Metropolitan Museum
of Art



All four paintings are united by their use of a parapet. The motif is by no means new: it appears very early, around 1300 already in the Stoclet Madonna by Duccio (fig. 51)³⁴ and in the fifteenth century was used several times by Florentine painters such as Filippo Lippi (fig. 46),³⁵ and also by Jacopo Bellini (fig. 45).³⁶ But in Bellini's variations of this motif, the latent ambivalence that makes it into a kind of threshold or pivotal point is particularly prominent. While the parapet creates closeness, since the front side appears to be flush with the picture plane and the figures are placed immediately behind it, it also marks an insurmountable boundary between two worlds and thus holds the viewer at a distance. The two poles of this ambivalence are accented with various degrees of intensity, depending on how the parapet is deployed. The



image of the Madonna in the Lehman Collection shows a narrow piece of the front edge of the parapet and allows no object to protrude out into the space of the viewer. In this way, the stone border tends to create distance. This is similar in the case of the Johnson Madonna, although the interruption of the parapet along the right border also implies its penetrability. The Trivulzio Madonna intensifies the connection to the space of the viewer by allowing the cushion and a part of the clothing to protrude beyond the parapet. And finally, the Davis Madonna dispenses with marking the front edge of the parapet at all, so that the Child even appears to be within grasp – were it not for the earnestness of expression and the austerity of the composition keeping the viewer at a reverent distance in a different but equally

FIG. 49
Giovanni Bellini (?),
Virgin and Child
(Johnson Madonna),
c.1460–65, panel, 64.4 × 44.1 cm,
Philadelphia Museum of Art

FIG. 50
Giovanni Bellini (?),
Madonna and Child
(Trivulzio Madonna),
c.1460–65, panel, 78 × 54 cm,
Milan, Castello Sforzesco



FIG. 51
Duccio di Buoninsegna,
Madonna and Child
(Stoclet Madonna), c.1290–1300,
panel, 27.9 × 21 cm,
New York, Metropolitan
Museum of Art

FIG. 52
Madonna Nicopeia,
11th/12th century, panel,
48 × 36 cm, Venice,
Basilica di San Marco

emphatical manner. The Lehman Madonna also makes clear that Bellini did not shy away even from spatial contradiction in his variations on the parapet motif: the garland hanging behind the haloed head of the Virgin seems most likely to be attached to the frame of picture. Together with the parapet, the original frame must have formed a window-like architectural element behind which the figures appeared. However, since these figures were shown behind the parapet and the frame but in front of the garland – which was presumably attached at the same spatial depth – a paradox arises, through which the viewer can experience that the presence of Mary and Christ eludes being situated in the here and now.

With his images of the Madonna, Bellini was able to draw from a rich pictorial tradition, which was considerably shaped by icons as well. Rona Goffen has emphasised how indebted Bellini remained in these pictures to Byzantine models.³⁷ The Accademia's austere, slightly archaising Madonna with blessing Child, delicately decorated with



gold (fig. 53), thus recalls icons like those kept and revered in Venice in San Marco, for example (fig. 52).³⁸ Based on these references to older pictorial traditions, Goffen suspected a wealth of possible connotations and levels of meaning in Bellini's images of the Madonna. In her opinion, the parapets also refer to the later grave of Christ, to the altar and thus to the Eucharistic sacrament, as well as to the stone of anointing, upon which the body of Christ was prepared for the entombment.³⁹ As long as the Child – as in the Davis Madonna – is represented naked, this again calls to mind the fact that God has truly become man in Christ.⁴⁰ Not all the implications pointed out by Goffen are entirely convincing. For example, in light of how widespread the parapet motif was, it is not plausible to see this pictorial element specifically as a loan from the genre of portraiture and to suspect therein a reference to the legend of Saint Luke, who is supposed to have painted a portrait of the Virgin.⁴¹ And unlike what Rona Goffen suggests, it will not



FIG. 53
Giovanni Bellini,
Madonna and Blessing Child
(Contarini Madonna),
c.1480, panel, 60 × 78 cm, Venice,
Gallerie dell'Accademia



FIG. 54
Giovanni Mansueti,
*The Miraculous Healing
of the Daughter of
Ser Nicolò Benvegnudo
of San Polo*, c.1506, canvas,
369 x 296 cm, Venice,
Gallerie dell'Accademia



generally be possible to determine precisely and authoritatively the connotations that the individual Madonna images sought to evoke for the viewer. But the layers of meaning she cites stake off a wide spectrum of possible associations whose concrete realisation was at the discretion of the individual viewer. Given the functions of such Madonna images, it would have been rather inappropriate and pointless to have based them on a very specific, complex conceptual programme. Instead, the numerous Madonna depictions had to stand out through the viewer's ability to make them into an object of devout contemplation time and again, without necessarily having to constantly follow the very same trains of thought. The vast majority of Giovanni Bellini's Madonnas were probably conceived for use as devotional images in a private domestic setting. It has been determined that more than ninety per cent of sixteenth-century Venetian households had

at their disposal at least one painting.⁴² The numbers in the fifteenth century would have been somewhat lower, yet there was obviously a large demand and thus a market for such images in Venice. Inventories, descriptions and even contemporary representation of interior rooms indicate that the frames of many of these images were supplied with candlesticks, lamps, holy water stoups and curtains to additionally promote devotion before the image.⁴³ Despite all the idealisation typical of the interiors of Giovanni Mansueti (fig. 54) and Vittore Carpaccio (fig. 55), their depictions do in fact give a vivid impression of the integration of devotional images into the Venetians' living environment. In Mansueti's painting, the impressive interior visible in the upper section of the picture shows – between two round-arched windows on the left wall – an image of the Madonna with a candlestick and holy water stoup; in Carpaccio's work, a devotional

FIG. 55
Vittore Carpaccio,
The Dream of Saint Ursula,
1495, canvas,
274 × 267 cm, Venice,
Gallerie dell'Accademia



FIG. 56
Roman Battle Sarcophagus,
2nd century AD,
marble, 86 × 152 cm, Rome,
Villa Doria Pamphili

OPPOSITE PAGE:
FIG. 58
Giovanni Bellini,
Lochis Madonna,
c.1470–75, oil on panel,
47.4 × 33.8 cm,
Bergamo, Accademia Carrara



FIG. 57
Giovanni Bellini,
Madonna dell'Orto,
c.1470–75, panel, 75 × 50 cm,
Venice, Chiesa della
Madonna dell'Orto (location
unknown after theft in 1993)

image with candlesticks and a small holy water basin is seen hanging on the left wall of the bedchamber, behind the bed.

And yet, especially in the case of Bellini's images of the Madonna, the boundaries between a devotional image and a collector's piece prized for aesthetic reasons must have been fluid. An example of this can be seen in the Lochis Madonna (fig. 58), which belongs to a later phase of work. As Hans Aurenhammer has shown,⁴⁴ the child's unusual leg position quotes a pose that was used in antique sculpture for representing fallen or injured warriors (fig. 56). This adaptation is undoubtedly connected to theological implications that in turn prefigure Christ's sacrificial death. Beyond this, the scholarly quotation could also have addressed the antiquarian interest of educated humanists, thus endowing the image with the status of a work of art.

The boundaries between a devotional image and an altarpiece were similarly permeable in Venice. Sources make it possible to reconstruct several cases in which devotional images were donated to a church or – through a provision in a testament – intended to be given over after death to function as altarpieces. The Venetian church of Madonna dell'Orto profited from at least two such donations. Three years before his death, Luca Navagero donated a painting, which was presumably a Madonna by Giovanni Bellini (fig. 57) and which remained in that church until a theft occurred in 1993.⁴⁵ The picture bequeathed to the same church in 1528 by Hieronimo Olivier, and which was to be used “instead of an altarpiece”,⁴⁶ can today no longer be identified reliably. Since Olivier explicitly mentions that the painting also depicted a portrait of his brother Marin, it has been variously identified as the Madonna in Harewood House (fig. 140),⁴⁷ a work in the Friedsam Library of Saint Bonaventure University⁴⁸ probably painted in Bellini's workshop, and as the



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Sacra conversazione in Birmingham (fig. 181).⁴⁹ A revealing piece of visual evidence has survived in a *pala* by Nicolò Rondinelli (fig. 59). Within the image, upon the altar on which John the Evangelist appears to Galla Placidia, a devotional painting is depicted with a type of Madonna typical for the production of the Bellini workshop (fig. 60).

FIG. 59
Nicolò Rondinelli,
*John the Evangelist Appears
to Galla Placidia*,
c.1490–1510, panel,
175 × 175 cm, Milan,
Pinacoteca di Brera

The fact that it was possible to subject Bellini's devotional images to such a change in function without any problem underscores again their comparatively high degree of versatility and interpretability. They did not articulate any

precise, predetermined, complex messages that viewers were able to appreciate only in a specific context. Rather, Bellini's images of the Madonna were open to forms of meditation and devotion that could follow various associations and remind the viewer of Christ's incarnation, his Passion, his Resurrection, even of Mary's position as intercessor. With his deliberate, at times almost systematic variations of motifs and compositions, Bellini did justice to the wealth of possible connotations that could be important in devotional contemplation.





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FIG. 60
Giovanni Bellini and
workshop, *Madonna and Child,
John the Baptist and
Saint Elizabeth*, 1490–1500,
panel, 72 × 90 cm,
Frankfurt am Main, Städel