

# *The Edgar Wind Journal*



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# *The Edgar Wind Journal*

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# Edgar Wind and Giovanni Bellini's 'Feast of the Gods': An Iconographic 'Enfant Terrible'<sup>1</sup>

Jaynie Anderson

(AM OSI FAHA, Professor Emeritus, University of Melbourne)

## Abstract

Since its creation, Giovanni Bellini's late masterpiece *The Feast of the Gods*, has never been an easy painting to understand. When Edgar Wind published his monograph in 1948, it received an uneven critical reception. Wind's interpretation of the painting will be re-evaluated in relation to past and present scholarship, with insights from Wind's papers at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, as well as other archives. Inevitably as an editor of two volumes of his writings it is partly autobiographical.

## Keywords

Giovanni Bellini; Titian; Alfonso D'Este; Kenneth Clark; National Gallery of Art, Washington

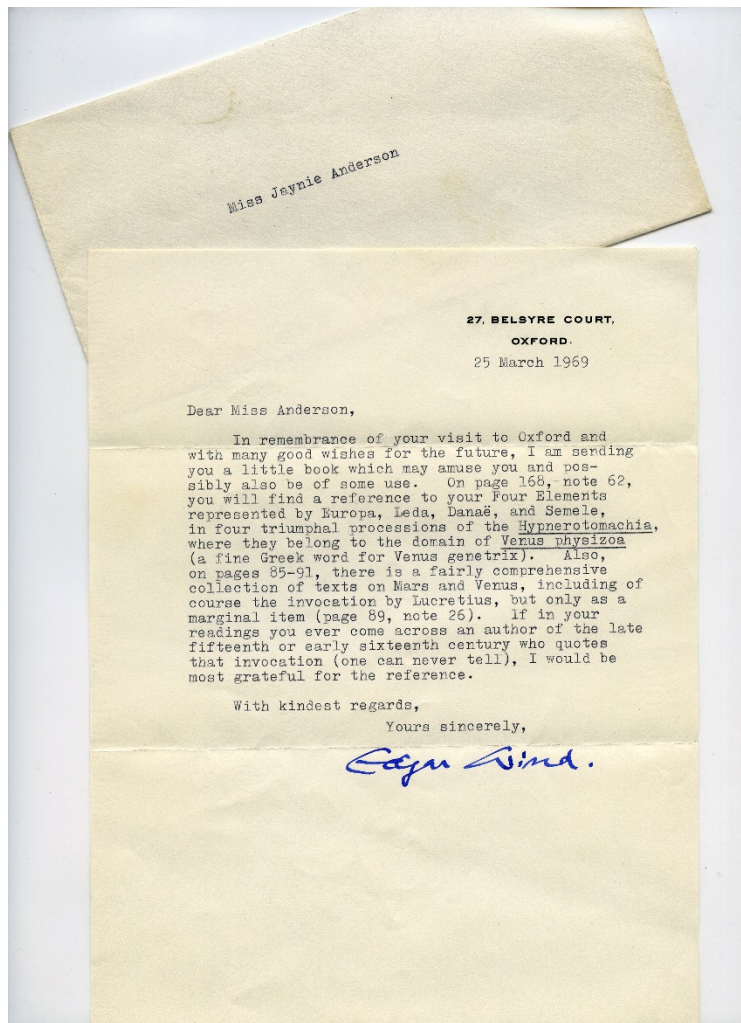
I met Edgar Wind in March 1969 when interviewed for a Junior Research Fellowship at Oxford. As part of the application, I submitted proofs of an article on a fresco cycle by Agostino Carracci, painted for Ranuccio Farnese I on his marriage to Margherita Aldobrandini, in the Palazzo del Giardino, at Parma. The College had sent it to Wind to assess.<sup>2</sup> Wind telephoned me to arrange an appointment. We met in his flat at Belsyre Court, North Oxford. Our conversation was about the iconography of marriage in his extraordinary library surrounded by prints by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael. Afterwards I received a letter from him enclosed in a copy of a paperback of the *Pagan*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an expanded version of a paper I gave at the conference, *Edgar Wind: Art and Embodiment*, 28 October 2021, Italian Cultural Institute, London.

<sup>2</sup> Jaynie Anderson, 'The "Sala di Agostino Carracci" in the Palazzo del Giardino', *Art Bulletin*, 52 (1970), pp. 41-48.

*Mysteries* (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1.** Letter from Edgar Wind to Jaynie Anderson, 25 March 1969. Archive of the Author, Melbourne, Australia.

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<sup>3</sup> From 27 Belsyre Court, Oxford, 25 March 1969

Dear Miss Anderson,

In remembrance of your visit to Oxford and with many good wishes for the future. I am sending you a little book which may amuse you and possibly also be of some use. On page 168. Note 62, you will find a reference to your Four Elements, represented by Europa, Leda, Danaë, and Semele, in four triumphal processions of the Hypnerotomachia, where they belong to the domain of Venus physioza (a fine Greek Word for Venus genetrix). Also on pages 85-91, there is a fairly comprehensive collection of texts on Mars and Venus, including of course the invocation by Lucretius, but only as a marginal item (page 89, note 26). If in your readings you ever come across an author of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century who quotes that invocation (one can never tell), I would be most grateful for the reference.

With kindest regards,

Yours sincerely,

Edgar Wind.

Archive of the author, Melbourne.



In the *Art Bulletin* I had proposed that the fresco cycle was a visual marriage poem which chimed with Wind's interest in marriage iconography in Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*. What was most memorable was that whenever Wind discussed an idea, he took a book down from the shelves and analyzed passages in detail before black and white photographs of works of art, often of details. In his copies of the French and Italian editions of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) we looked at the succession of triumphs of Europe, Leda, Danaë, and Semele, which were also the subjects of the surrounding stuccos in the corners of the vault between the Carracci frescoes in the Palazzo del Giardino. Our conversation lasted for several hours and ranged widely. He told me how he had studied the way art historians lectured. As a young man he had travelled to hear Heinrich Wölfflin lecture, who stood between two projectors at the back of the audience, so that he could see and relate to the imagery on both screens, hiding his presence from the theatre.

In 1974 Margaret Wind invited me to edit a collection of Edgar's articles. In our first conversation Margaret began by saying that she was distressed over the lack of a proper obituary. According to my notes, written at the time, Margaret considered Jean Seznec's attempt in *The Times* (18 September 1971) a failure. Colin Hardie, a classicist famous for his interpretations of Dante, had intended to write an obituary for Wind for the *Burlington Magazine*, but nothing came of it. Margaret said she knew how difficult Edgar could be, but that Hardie when he had written a eulogy for Sir Karl Parker, had hidden the darker sides of his character, why could he not have done that for Edgar? Margaret told me that she had quarreled bitterly with Edgar over inaccuracies in his book on Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*. She regarded the book as a failure and refused to give permission for translations.<sup>4</sup> In my paper I will examine Wind's contribution to our understanding of Bellini's late masterpiece

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<sup>4</sup> On 7 April 1987 Dr Andrea Grandese, director of the Arsenale Press, Venice, requested Margaret Wind's permission to publish an Italian translation of the *Feast of the Gods*, with a preface by Massimo Cacciari. She had earlier refused Roberto Calasso, Adelphi, Milan. Margaret's reply to Grandese reveals how she controlled Wind's legacy:

I have thought a great deal about it but there are, alas, some insurmountable obstacles which speak against our going forward. As you know, the book was published in 1948 and represented a new approach to the interpretation of Bellini's painting. In the intervening forty years important research has been done by other scholars, and in the 1960's my husband himself contemplated a revised and enlarged edition of the book. His interlaced copy contains much new material. In good conscience- and you will understand this – I could not allow the republication of the 1948 edition without incorporating the results of more recent scholarship, including my husband's own comments. Unfortunately, this could not be undertaken for a number of years, if at all. His Michelangelo and Raphael papers, which we are now preparing for publication, must take precedence over all other matters. MS Wind 72, folder 4.

There was also a request from a French publisher, Pierre Javet, for a translation which was accepted by Edgar Wind in 1961, a contract signed, and a translation made, but nothing ever appeared. When the book was out of copyright, it was published in Italian in 2017, without permission from his estate.

*The Feast of the Gods*, in relation to past and present scholarship.<sup>5</sup> It has never been an easy painting to understand even for Alfonso d'Este who commissioned it, and who allowed Titian to rework the background in a way that was unsympathetic to Bellini's composition.



**Figure 2.** *John Walker III in front of Giovanni Bellini's 'Feast of the Gods'.* Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gallery Archives.

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to the Special Collections of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and to the archivists of the National Gallery of Art, Washington for access to their collections. All quotations from the published and unpublished writings of Edgar Wind are by kind permission of the Literary Executors of the estate of Edgar Wind. My own acquaintance with the *Feast of the Gods* was deepened, in the discussion at a colloquy I attended from 30 May – 3 June 1988 at the National Gallery of Washington while the painting was in conservation. Joyce Plesters and David Bull presented their research for discussion before publication. It was one of the most fascinating seminars I have ever attended.

In the early 1940's at Washington, two art historians proposed a collaboration to publish a monograph on Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*, the most famous Old Master painting in the United States, attributed then as now, to the two fathers of Venetian art, Giovanni Bellini, and Titian, in the newly created National Gallery of Art at Washington. These art historians were very different in formation. John Walker III (Fig. 2)<sup>6</sup> was the first curator of paintings, who then became the second Director of the Gallery. He was a patrician American, a charismatic Harvard graduate, and a disciple of Bernard Berenson, while Edgar Wind<sup>7</sup> was a German Jewish refugee, an art historian teaching at Smith College, a philosopher and Warburgian, who specialized in iconology and the interpretation of difficult, sometimes insoluble Renaissance allegories. Hanns Swarzenski, the urbane German curator of sculpture in Washington, christened the *Feast of the Gods*, the 'Iconographic Enfant Terrible'<sup>8</sup> and proposed Wind as the best qualified to unravel the subject.<sup>9</sup>

Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* came to the gallery as part of the Joseph Widener collection in August 1942, a year after the new building opened. The initial installation of the *Feast of the Gods* lasted for decades (Fig. 3). The painting had never previously been on public exhibition, having spent the nineteenth century in the collection of the Dukes of Northumberland at Alnwick Castle. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it had been turned down as an acquisition by the National Gallery of London so poorly was it regarded. Before the *Feast* came to Washington there had been little written about it nor much about Venetian art in the English-speaking world. Following the publication of Wind's monograph the painting became a destination picture for distinguished visitors, such as the Indian delegation who visited on 14 October 1949 (Fig. 4), Indira Gandhi with her parents, Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru, together with Huntington Cairns, who warned Wind he would not allow a National Gallery publication to have the name Priapus in it, and Harry McBride.

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<sup>6</sup> See the biographical entry by Lee Sorenson in a *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/walkerj.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> See the equivalent biography: <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/winde.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Hanns Swarzenski to Edgar Wind, 20 February 1944. MS Wind 72, folder 1.

<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Wind, 20 February 1944. MS Wind 72, folder 1.



**Figure 3.** Installation of Giovanni Bellini's 'Feast of the Gods' in the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Photograph 5 August 1944. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gallery Archives.





**Figure 4.** An Indian visit to the 'Feast of the Gods', 14 October 1949, left to right, Indira Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Huntington Cairns (first Secretary-Treasurer and General Counsel of the National Gallery of Art), and Harry McBride (first Administrator of the National Gallery of Art). Photograph. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Archives.

There is extensive documentation about the birth of Wind's book and its critical reception in his papers at Oxford.<sup>10</sup> Wind's lecture on Bellini's unknown masterpiece, on 26 March 1944, was deemed 'brilliant'.<sup>11</sup> Everyone wanted to see it in print. But on 29 May 1944 Walker wrote to Wind to say Fern Rusk Shapley,<sup>12</sup> then his research assistant (later the author of the first catalogues of the Washington collection), had claimed that Louis Hourticq, in his book on the youthful Titian, 'had come across the source of the painting' before Wind, thus pre-empting him.<sup>13</sup> As will be shown this was hardly true. Walker's letters reveal a busy curator, travelling, arranging exhibitions and important bequests, as well as being involved in pioneering conservation work, but he was ill-informed about classical scholarship.<sup>14</sup> By 24 October 1945 an X-ray of the entire painting was complete, consisting of some 25 plates, an unparalleled achievement for the period, which appeared never to have interested Wind.<sup>15</sup>

On 11 April 1946 Walker wrote to say he was receiving 'very valuable assistance from Dr. and Mrs. Tietze'.<sup>16</sup> The Tietzes were from the Vienna school of art history, and were passionately involved in contemporary art, as well as the Venetian Renaissance. They had commissioned a marriage portrait in 1909 from the twenty-three-year-old Oskar Kokoschka which the artist described as representing 'closed personalities'; indeed, it is full of tension, a portrait of a couple who passionately believed in scholarship. Hans and Erica Tietze were the reigning sovereigns of Venetian art history, famous for their Titian catalogues, including *The Drawings of Venetian Painters in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (1944), still unsurpassed for the breadth of the authors' knowledge. They arrived in the United States, in 1938, fleeing Nazi persecution, and although they received temporary posts in different distinguished institutions, they never succeeded in obtaining permanent employment, unlike Wind who went from one prestigious American institution to another.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> MS Wind 72, Bodleian Library, Oxford. This documentary material has been previously interpreted differently by Ben Thomas, *Edgar Wind and Modern Art. In Defence of Marginal Anarchy* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> See for example the letter to Wind from James Macgill, the Deputy Director of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, 8 April 1944. MS Wind 72, folder 1.

<sup>12</sup> Lee Sorensen, ed., 'Shapley, Fern Rusk', in *Dictionary of Art Historians*, 12 Oct 2021, <https://arthistorians.info/shapleyf>.

<sup>13</sup> Walker to Wind, 29 May 1944, MS Wind 72, folder 1.

<sup>14</sup> See the confused description of the sources of the painting in *Masterpieces of Painting from the National Gallery of Art*, ed. Huntington Cairns and John Walker (New York: Random House, 1945), pp. 62-63.

<sup>15</sup> Walker to Wind, 24 October 1945, MS Wind 72, folder 1.

<sup>16</sup> Erika Tietze-Conrat's published diaries do not include the American years, see Erika Tietze-Conrat, *Tagebücher*, ed. Alexandra Caruso, introduction by Edward Timms and David Rosand (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2015). See Madlyn Millner Kahr, 'Erica Tietze-Conrat (1883-1958): Productive Scholar in Renaissance and Baroque Art', in *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts 1820-1979*, ed. Claire Richter Sherman (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981) pp. 301-326. For an overview of their careers, see Lee Sorensen, ed., 'Tietze, Hans', in *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <https://arthistorians.info/tietzeh>.

<sup>17</sup> A very impressive list of their publications is included in *Essays in Honor of Hans Tietze 1880-1954 Directed by Ernst Gombrich, Julius S. Held, Otto Kurr* (Paris: Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1958), pp. 439-459.



**Figure 5.** Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *Feast of the Gods*, after conservation in 1986, 170.2 x 188 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Widener Collection. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

At the beginning of 1947, Wind and Walker, met in New York, to discuss the publication of the *Feast of the Gods* (Fig. 5), after which Wind, somewhat upset by the meeting, demanded a contract, an initial down payment, and royalties. He wrote: 'I confess I was a little taken aback by your suggestion that it would be "unfortunate" if the book were criticized. I have never spoken or written anything which wasn't, and I do not believe



in books that “fall still born from the press”<sup>18</sup> Walker and Wind then politely agreed to publish separately.

Let us focus on Shapley’s objection to Wind’s discovery (which must have influenced Walker), by examining what Hourticq wrote in *La Jeunesse de Titien* (1919).

Judging from the mediocre reproductions, the *Feast of the Gods*, that Bellini made for the Duke of Ferrara, now in Northumberland, was poorly imagined. The gods are bourgeois, seated in a circle as at a picnic; their goblets within reach, their divine attributes laid down to drink and eat. Bacchus’ horse carries a barrel they intend to empty. A goddess has already fallen asleep, and devious Pan takes advantage of her. Who then translated Ovid’s story for Bellini? According to tradition Titian executed the landscape. One could only agree that he painted the landscape on the right, the dense foliage with light tree trunks. It is unbelievable that he created the rock in the background of the painting. He is too good a painter of mountains to have drawn that artificial rock.<sup>19</sup>

For a critic who perpetually congratulated himself on being able to distinguish Titian’s brush stroke from Giorgione’s, when he consistently dismissed Giorgione as the little one (*le petit Giorgione*) and from Bellini, whom he pejoratively called the old man (*le vieux*), Hourticq made the gross error of mis-identifying the landscape on the left-hand side of the picture as being by Bellini, whereas it has always been thought Titian was responsible for reworking this part of the painting.

Hourticq again refers to Bellini in relation to Titian’s *Pardo Venus* and claims Titian would not have had to read Ovid (*Fasti*, VI, 393-440) to know the story as he had learnt about it from Bellini’s picture: ‘In the corner of the composition of the *Feast of the Gods*, a goddess sleeps, while an unbalanced Silenus attempts to profit. The painting of that old man [Bellini] is lifeless and without grace.’<sup>20</sup> Curators at the Louvre, now consider the

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<sup>18</sup> 4 February 1947, Wind to Walker, MS Wind 72, folder 1.

<sup>19</sup> The text in English is my own translation. Louis Hourticq, *La Jeunesse de Titien. Peinture et Poésie. La Nature, L’Amour, La Foi* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1919), p. 158: ‘A en juger par les reproductions il est vrai médiocres, le Festin des Dieux qu’il a composé pour le duc de Ferrare (aujourd’hui dans la collection du duc de Northumberland) a été bien pauvrement imaginé. Les dieux sont bourgeoisement assise en cercle, comme en pique-nique; leur gobelet est à portée de leur main et ils ont posé à terre leurs attributs divins, pour manger et pour boire. Le roussin de Bacchus charrie une barrique qu’ils comptent bien vider. Une déesse, déjà, s’est endormie lourdement et un Pan sournois en profite avec grossièreté. Qui donc a traduit pour Giovanni Bellini cette histoire, racontée par Ovide? La tradition dit que Titien a exécuté le paysage; mais se on peut admettre qu’il peignit les arbres de droite, au feuillage dense, au troncs légers, il n’est pas croyable qu’il ait taillé la roche qui se dresse au fond du tableau. Il est un trop beau peintre de la montagne pour avoir jamais pu dessiner ce gros roc artificiel, comme il n’y en a que dans les enluminures de primitifs et dans certains parcs exagérément rustiques’. See the brilliant review of Hourticq by Lionello Venturi, ‘Chroniques: Le Problème de Giorgione’, *Revue de l’art*, 35.2 (1931), pp. 169-178.

<sup>20</sup> Hourticq, p. 257: ‘Dans un angle de la composition dite du *Festin du Dieux*, une déesse s’est endormie, de quoi profite grossièrement un silène balourd. La peinture du vieux maître est sans esprit et sans grâce’.



subject of the Pardo Venus unknown and the conservation history complex and lengthy.<sup>21</sup> How anyone could have thought Hourticq, the eager controversialist, pre-empted Wind is hard to understand. Hourticq hated the aged Bellini, makes muddled references to Ovid, or to put it bluntly fails to realize that Priapus is the rapist, in one passage describing the figure as Pan, or in another as Silenus. Wind, who had never read Hourticq before his lecture, was understandably irritated.<sup>22</sup> To this day the claim that Hourticq had discovered

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<sup>21</sup> Vincent Delieuvin, in his catalogue entry argues that the painting has a complex restoration history to conclude the subject has proven impossible to identify: 'Jupiter et Antiope, dite aussi La Vénus de Pardo' in the online catalogue of the Louvre, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010062278>.

<sup>22</sup> Wind's letter to Walker of 27 February 1947 (MS Wind 72, folder 1), written from 35 Woodlawn Avenue, Massachusetts, gives a detailed account of their disagreement, summarising previous correspondence, and was sent 'By registered mail':

Dear John:

I am no longer very much interested in all this business about Hourticq. But since your letter of February 25, was written as you say, "for the record", I should like to make it perfectly clear what that record is:

1) Neither you nor your staff knew the theme of Bellini's painting until I revealed it to you in my lecture in March, 1944.

2) This is acknowledged in print by you and Mr Cairns in your book, "Masterpieces of Painting from the National Gallery", page 62.

3) The reference in Hourticq was found well after my lecture and was interpreted by you too optimistically. The fact that Hourticq calls the main figure in Bellini's painting "a Pan" or "a Silenus" proves that he did not recognize him for what he is, namely Priapus: and while Hourticq should be given credit for having been the first to associate Ovid's text with the picture, he did not know how to interpret the picture on the light of this text, and hence he did not know specifically what the picture represents.

4) Hourticq's book was published twenty-eight years ago. In the twenty-eight years since its publication, quite a large number of books and articles concerned with Bellini have appeared, and not one of their authors (as far as I am aware) knew what the picture represents. The picture was regarded – to quote the words written to me as an "iconographical *enfant terrible*".

5) The content of my lecture at the National Gallery in March, 1944, was regarded as novel by the scholars present and by all the members of your staff who heard it. I have since spoken to many scholars from both here and abroad who have, themselves, worked on Bellini, and they declared themselves both convinced and surprised. You yourself were apparently impressed with the reports since you urged publication by the National Gallery and expressed a desire to join in the publication by adding stylistic observations.

6) The statement in your letter of February 25 "that it was only because the picture has not been catalogued since arriving at the Gallery that we did not know this source", is a little difficult to understand, in view of the fact that you yourself published the picture with catalogue notes in "Masterpieces from the National Gallery", p. 62.

7) As for the remark, again in your letter of February 25<sup>th</sup>, the files in which you found the reference to Hourticq "are steadily being consulted by members of the staff, visiting scholars and others" I do not imagine that you give access to your files to people indiscriminately. I myself was never offered that courtesy, though I must admit that I never asked for it. I must also admit that my method of working is a little unusual. When I suspect a picture of having its source in Ovid, I look it up in Ovid, not in Hourticq.

I regret that you force me to be so explicit, and I confess that I find it a little ungracious that you should be so very anxious to deprive me of a claim to which I am clearly entitled – "a small thing but my own". And I think that you are making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

But as long as you insist on writing letters, "for the record", I must insist that the record be kept clear; and hence I should like to remind you of an incident which is perhaps important in this context. When I permitted you to quote my observations in your and Mr Cairn's book, I was astonished to find, when the book was published, that you had bowdlerized the quotation from Ovid, omitting the very incident that explains the picture. Perhaps I should have foreseen that such a thing might happen; remembering that Mr. Cairns had said (though I never thought he was serious) that he could not allow a National Gallery book to contain verbal references to Priapus. From this experience I have learned to be cautious, and this will explain to you two facts: (1.) that I will not renew my permission for you to publish my observations before I have published them myself, and (2.) that I felt I could not publish with the National Gallery unless assurances were given that there would be no censorship. As you know, these assurances were refused.

I hope the record is now perfectly clear,

Yours sincerely

Edgar Wind

the source of Bellini's masterpiece has become an endlessly repeated cliché, one without foundation.<sup>23</sup>

Wind published his short book on Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* with Harvard University Press in 1948, helped by Philip Hofer, at the Houghton Library. The Hofer correspondence reveals Wind to be a demanding author, who wished to have a best seller, and to receive considerable royalties. All of us may understand these sentiments. When Wind and Walker first met, the painting was dumbed down under an obscuring veil of thick discolored varnish, the gradual accretion of centuries, contributing to Walker's negative view of Bellini whom he described as a 'pious octogenarian'.

The gist of Wind's argument was that Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* which Alfonso d'Este paid for in 1514, was initially conceived as the 'pagan fantasy' earlier imagined or commissioned by his sister, Isabella d'Este. It is unclear what progress may have been made on the painting if any for Isabella, for as Wind wrote: 'there is a strong probability that the final painting was not begun until after Alfonso assumed the patronage'.<sup>24</sup> More recently, Joyce Plesters confirmed Wind's view, when she revealed that the canvas used for the *Feast of the Gods* was very similar to Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, in London, demonstrating that both canvasses were supplied by Alfonso.<sup>25</sup> Alfonso's character as a great soldier, a devotee of Bacchus and an amateur artist made less impression on Wind than that of his sister Isabella. Although brother and sister conceived their studios in a spirit of sibling rivalry, many scholars consider Wind was wrong in arguing that the *Feast of the Gods* was begun for Isabella, although it is unclear from his text what he meant. The subject Wind argued was the story of Priapus, as Ovid recounts it in the *Fasti* (I, 391-440; VI, 319-348):

the gods are drowsily in attendance as Priapus approaches Vesta, but the ass, wide-eyed and with distended nostrils is about to sneeze; while Silenus, with his hand on its back, restrains the poor animal in vain. An atmosphere of repose mixed with anticipation pervades the scene as the four chief characters (Priapus and Vesta, Silenus and the ass), are about to enact their ludicrous parts.<sup>26</sup>

Wind recognized that Bellini had treated a classical subject with irony and humor, the gods were represented as: 'half-elegant, half-boorish, and decidedly un-Olympian. Were it not for some unmistakable attributes – such as the staff of Mercury, the trident of Neptune, the wreath of wheat in Ceres' hair, or the ass attended by Silenus – one might take this to be a

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<sup>23</sup> See David Alan Brown, *Giovanni Bellini. The Last Works* (Milan: Skira, 2019), p. 207; Thomas, *Edgar Wind and Modern Art*, p. 92; Giovanni Villa, catalogue entry, in *Giovanni Bellini, Catalogo ragionato*, ed. Mauro Lucco, Peter Humfrey and Giovanni Villa (Foligno: ZeL Edizioni, 2020), pp. 582-5.

<sup>24</sup> Wind, pp. 54-55.

<sup>25</sup> Joyce Plesters observed that the unusually light weight and tabby weave of the canvas in the *Feast of the Gods* was identical to the canvas used by Titian for his *Bacchus and Ariadne* in the National Gallery of London, see Plesters, 'Examination of Giovanni Bellini's 'Feast of the Gods': A Summary and Interpretation of the Results', in *Titian '500*, ed. Joseph Manca (Maryland: National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1993), p. 379.

<sup>26</sup> Wind, pp. 30-33

company of rustics, drowsily enjoying a *fête champêtre*.<sup>27</sup> As Wind remarked Ovid describes the scene twice, the first time with the nymph Lotis, and the second with Vesta, the goddess of Virgins. Lotis seems to have won in the identification contest. Wind argued further that Mantegna created the *Parnassus* for Isabella in a similar mock-heroic manner.

As an enrichment to his interpretation Wind saw the *Feast* as a marriage picture with Alfonso d'Este and his bride Lucrezia represented as Neptune and Gaea, with other members of the family seen as portraits in other gods, for example: Ippolito d'Este is featured as Neptune.<sup>28</sup> But as Wind himself admitted to Kenneth Clark this was the most debatable of his arguments and very few have believed in his identifications of the portraits.<sup>29</sup> Hourticq's muddled view of Ovid was dismissed in a footnote.<sup>30</sup>

As is well known, the idea that Alfonso d'Este commissioned the *Feast of the Gods* depends on its provenance and a payment to Bellini on 14 November 1514 for an unspecified picture.<sup>31</sup> As many have commented, and most recently Salvatore Settis in his Linbury lecture, the correspondence between Alfonso's sister Isabella with Bellini, was lengthy, demanding, and intense, about the creation of an original history painting, in part conducted by one of the most fascinating humanists of the Venetian Renaissance, Pietro Bembo.<sup>32</sup> Suffice to say that although Bellini may not have fulfilled the commission for Isabella, the experience must have influenced his artistic practice and his conception of the *Feast of the Gods*.<sup>33</sup> It was Bembo who made the famous remark to Isabella, that Bellini would not be constrained by any sharply defined terms, 'che molti signati termini non si dian al suo stile, uso come dice di sempre vagare a sua voglia nelle pitture'.<sup>34</sup> Often interpreted as signifying Bellini's inability to understand classical subjects, it could also literally be said to report Bellini's own view that he liked to add his own experience to any invention given to him.

Rereading the reviews that Wind's monograph provoked, many comments were expressed in a condescending manner as if Wind were an interloper in the field of Venetian art. Many were unfounded. To highlight a few rather than engage with every

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<sup>27</sup> Wind, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Wind, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ugo Sorani and Luisa Servadei, *Il Festino degli Dei di Giovanni Bellini: Mitologia e paganesimorinascimentali da Alessandro VI a Leone X* (Rome: Kappa, 2007), follow Wind's identifications of the portraits to claim that this is a veiled criticism of the pontificates of Alexander VI and Leo X.

<sup>30</sup> Wind, pp. 29-20, footnote 8.

<sup>31</sup> Giuseppe Campori, 'Tiziano e gli Estensi', *Nuova Antologia*, 27 (1874), p. 582.

<sup>32</sup> Salvatore Settis, *Deeper Thoughts. Beyond the Allegory of Bellini, Giorgione and Titian* (London: National Gallery Company, 2021), pp. 20-21.

<sup>33</sup> As suggested by Caroline Campbell and Sarah Vowles, 'Mantegna, Bellini and Antiquity', in *Mantegna and Bellini* (London: National Gallery London Publications, 2018), pp. 232-236.

<sup>34</sup> Edgar Wind, *Bellini's Feast of the Gods: A Study in Venetian Humanism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), pp 22-23.

criticism. Carlo Dionisotti<sup>35</sup> accused Wind of reading only a secondary source, Julia Cartwright's biography of Isabella d'Este, oblivious to the fact that Wind refers in his bibliography to the classic articles by the archivists who published Isabella's correspondence with her agents and friends, Alessandro Luzio, Rodolfo Renier, and Wilhelmo Braghirolli.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Wind questions Cartwright's translation of the key documents.<sup>37</sup> Giles Robertson the most perceptive of all,<sup>38</sup> was receptive to many of Wind's ideas, but considered that the overly certain presentation of these hypotheses as certain facts detracted from the value of the book.



**Figure 6.** Andrea Mantegna, *Parnassus*, about 1496–1497, canvas (159 x 192 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris. Copyright C2RMF Laurence Clivet.

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<sup>35</sup> For Dionisotti's review, see *Art Bulletin*, 32 (1950), pp. 237-39; and exchange of letters, *The Art Bulletin*, 33 (1951), pp. 70-72.

<sup>36</sup> Listed by Wind, on p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Wind, pp. 22-23, notes 5-8.

<sup>38</sup> Giles Robertson, *The Burlington Magazine*, 91 (1949), pp. 295-96.





**Figure 7.** Andrea Mantegna, detail of the *Parnassus*, Vulcan in his cave showing the golden line.  
Copyright C2RMF Elsa Lambert.

The most strident review came from Erica Tietze-Conrat, who took exception to Wind's interpretation of Mantegna's *Parnassus* (Figs. 6-7).<sup>39</sup> Many may know her highly critical article in the *Art Bulletin*, but the unpublished version in which she accused Wind of being a pornographer, was very unpleasant. On 30 September 1938 the editor of the *Art Bulletin*, Charles Kuhn wrote to say Wind may wish to reply to a short article by Mrs Tietze on Mantegna that was about to appear in the next issue of the *Art Bulletin*.<sup>40</sup> Wind immediately telegraphed Kuhn: 'Received Mrs Tietze's article and am sorry to find that it verges on slander. Should be grateful if you would compare for example passages about Vulcan and Hermes with text in my book and decide whether these silly and mistaken imputations of obscenity should be printed and discussed under auspices of the College Art Association'.<sup>41</sup> In consultation with the President of Smith College, and libel lawyers in New York, Wind believed that Mrs Tietze willfully and falsely imputed pornographic intentions to his text that would be professionally damaging. He managed to have eight offensive passages removed. The copy of the original Tietze text exists with the parts that Wind took exception to, marked in red. Suffice to mention an example of what Mrs Tietze objected to the section on Mantegna's *Parnassus*.

Wind, however, enriches Vulcan's comicality, which is based on old tradition and has deep human roots, with further traits: 'Near Vulcan's cave is an ominous decoration...a cluster of sour grapes.....and the wild rock formation above the cave suggests an arrested volcanic eruption'. Wind calls these details 'mocking' and connects them with Cupid's song in ridicule of the cuckold Vulcan. This cannot mean anything else but an interpretation of the mentioned details as sex symbols....

Though Mantegna did not provide his Muses with attributes, Wind endeavors to identify them by the help of the verses of Ausonius. In doing, he interprets some of these verses as if they contained the obscene meaning which he is so eager to discover in the gesture of the girls.... These witty ambiguities mean that in the decoration intended for a princess and cultivated lady, Polyhymnia and Erato by their mimicry indicate coition, and that Terpsichore and Thalis clarify this intention by their fingers. As if this were not enough, the Muses at the other end of the row, Clio and Calliope, join in this mimicry, which the better class of streetwalkers of the Renaissance and of today would avoid in public... The Introduction of pornography into a painting executed for Isabella d'Este seems unthinkable.<sup>42</sup>

These sections were eliminated in the published version. Wind's formal reply was old fashioned, courteous, but devastating, as he revealed many inaccuracies.<sup>43</sup> Towards the end

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<sup>39</sup> Erica Tietze-Conrat, 'Mantegna's *Parnassus*. A Discussion of a Recent Interpretation', *The Art Bulletin*, 31 (1949), pp. 126-130. See Wind's reply, 'Mantegna's *Parnassus*. A Reply to some recent Reflections', *The Art Bulletin*, 31 (1949), pp. 224-232.

<sup>40</sup> Wind 72, Folder 4.

<sup>41</sup> Wind 72, Folder 4.

<sup>42</sup> Wind 72, Folder 4.

<sup>43</sup> Edgar Wind, 'Mantegna's *Parnassus*: A Reply to some Recent Reflections', *The Art Bulletin*, 31 (1949), pp. 224-232.

of the reply Wind writes seriously of his method and the high value of constructing hypotheses:

...hypotheses are the most vital part in the logic of exploration, and no scientific discovery can be made without them. The historian who thinks he can say *hypotheses non fingo* is either deceived or he is barren. As [Henri] Poincaré observed, the only vicious hypotheses are those which have hardened into customs and commonplaces and are hence mistaken for safe arguments.<sup>44</sup>

Later, even after Wind's reply, there was disagreement about the symbolism of attributes, the quince for example, for Wind it was a symbol of marriage, whereas for Mrs Tietze it was an antidote to drunkenness, but in the *Feast of the Gods* it could also have a sexual meaning in the way it is positioned in the painting. In later notes Wind refers to Plutarch's discussion of the quince as a fruit the bride should nibble before going to the bridal chamber to sweeten her breath (*Life of Solon*). Mrs Tietze's comments are revealing about the state of art history in this period, and the unwillingness of art historians to acknowledge or discuss sexual content in a Renaissance work of art. Throughout the literature there is a belief that it is either one text or another has informed Bellini or Mantegna, but given the sophistication of Quattrocento humanists' knowledge of the classics, is this not pedantic? Salvatore Settis,<sup>45</sup> like Wind before him in his rejected preface to *Pagan Mysteries*,<sup>46</sup> has suggested that multiple sources may be at play and indeed multiple interpretations in ways that Renaissance historians have not always recognized.

Wind saved not only his reputation but also Mrs Tietze's posthumous standing. In the National Gallery there was a stuffy prudish reaction to Wind's interpretation, the deputy director Huntington Cairns, said to Wind that he would not allow the name 'Priapus' to be mentioned in a National Gallery publication. There are few Renaissance paintings that could have provoked such a response. If we look today at the website of the National Gallery of Washington, Wind's explanation of this painting is upheld.<sup>47</sup> The most recent scholarly research on Isabella's court would also endorse Wind's interpretation of Mantegna's *Parnassus*. Suffice to mention Guido Rebecchini's compelling article in the September Burlington, where he discusses Gian Marco Cavalli's recently discovered roundel, probably made for Isabella, that represents a scene of cuckoldry, Venus, Mars and Vulcan, most likely taken from a fictive sculptural relief described in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, and comparable to Mantegna's Parnassus.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Also quoted by Thomas, 'Freedom and Exile: Edgar Wind and the Congress for Cultural Freedom', *The Edgar Wind Journal*, 1 (2021), p. 84.

<sup>45</sup> Settis, *Deeper thoughts*, passim.

<sup>46</sup> Published by the Einstein Forum, in a booklet to accompany the conference convened by Horst Bredekamp, *Edgar Wind. Kunsthistoriker und Philosoph*, 22-24 February 1996, Berlin: Einstein Forum, pp. 11-16.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1138.html> [accessed 20 September 2021].

<sup>48</sup> Guido Rebecchini, 'A Bronze Roundel for the Mantuan Court: Towards an Oeuvre of Gian Marco Cavalli', *Burlington Magazine*, 163 (2021), pp. 798-805.

The most perceptive review of Wind's book came from Kenneth Clark, who had known Wind from 1933. Wind admired Kenneth Clark, but the admiration was not fully returned, although Clark was deeply interested in what Wind wrote. Here is Clark's reaction to the *Feast of the Gods* book:

I am sure you are right in your demonstration that it was originally the picture which Bembo commissioned on behalf of Isabella d'Este. If I have any doubts, they are over some of the portraits. I am not convinced that Silenus is a portrait of Bembo; still less that Silvanus is Bellini. All the part about Mantegna's *Parnassus*, and the other decorations of Isabella d'Este's grotto, is also most absorbing. I wonder if you have seen these pictures since they have been slightly cleaned. They make a very much more vivid effect and reveal the curious fact that the cupid beside Mars and Venus is not blowing a trumpet but squirting water through a pipe. At least there is a jet of water visible, but whether or not it is added later I cannot tell, because, as you know one is not allowed to use a magnifying glass in the Louvre. The whole book is so rich and amusing and written with such grace, that I wish you would write dozens more, only, of course, I realise the immense amount of labour that lies behind it.<sup>49</sup>

Cupid's gesture or perhaps Anteros, depending on what interpretation you believe, had been analyzed by many, including Tietze-Conrat who disapproved of Wind's interpretation. There was an attempt to de-eroticize the relationship between Vulcan and Cupid, shortly after Wind's publication both by Tietze-Conrat and Ernst Gombrich, who considered that someone had later scratched a line, from Cupid's trumpet to Vulcan, either as an afterthought by Mantegna or someone else.<sup>50</sup> In the considerable literature on Mantegna's *Parnassus* there has been little discussion of its condition.<sup>51</sup> In 2010 in an unpublished examination of the painting by Dominique Thiébaud and Bruno Mottin, they concluded:

The figure of Anteros (also known as Cupid) has not been changed; his outlines are defined by a border which isolates him from the background. His wings are transparent under infrared and have a false-colored red color which is typical of lapis blue. The thread of gold [made from gold dust] coming out of the blowpipe is directed at Vulcan's sex.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The following section is based on the correspondence between Edgar Wind and Kenneth Clark in the Tate Archive, Tate Britain, London.

<sup>50</sup> Ernst Gombrich, 'An Interpretation of Mantegna's *Parnassus*, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 26 (1963), p. 197, footnote 9, following Tietze-Conrat, *Mantegna Paintings, Drawings and Engravings* (London: Phaidon Press, 1955), plate 138.

<sup>51</sup> With the exception of Alessandro Conti's attribution to Lorenzo Leonbruno of some modifications to the landscape, the faces of the muses and the contours of the body of Venus, see Alessandro Conti, 'Sfortuna di Lorenzo Leonbruno', *Prospettiva*, 77 (1995), pp. 36-50. Later Michel Laclotte considered these modifications were made by Lorenzo Costa, 'Mantegna et Crivelli', *L'Oeil*, 1962, p. 92.

<sup>52</sup> Unpublished report by Bruno Mottin, 28 February 2010, *Compte-Rendu d'Étude*, cited with the permission of Mottin, where the condition of the figure of Anteros or Cupid, is described in the following way: 'La figure d'Anteros (dite aussi de Cupidon) n'a pas été modifiée; ses contours sont bordés par un liseré qui l'isole du fond. Ses ailes sont transparentes sous infrarouge et ont une couleur rouge en fausses-couleurs qui est typique du bleu lapis. Le filet d'or sortant de la sarbacane est dirigé sur le sexe de Vulcain'.



There can be no doubt that this line is by Mantegna and intended in the original conception of the work in a particularly well-preserved part of the picture. It is a golden burlesque joke at Vulcan's expense, Cupid or Anteros mocking the virility of Vulcan, to which Mantegna responded by drawing the line in gold dust. Wind understood Mantegna more than his contemporaries.

Returning to the correspondence between Wind and Clark, Wind replied to Clark's discussion of his book, with an intriguing discovery about Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow* (National Gallery, London), that he later published in the *Burlington Magazine* as an article entitled 'The Eloquence of Symbols'.<sup>53</sup>

April 28, 1950

My dear Clark I just finished reading your magical book on Landscape and feel that I must send you a note of gratitude. The word "magical", I know, will not offend you: for I mean it in the sense in which you apply it to Giorgione – without any overtones of obscurantism. Perhaps it is due to a personal failing that I liked the chapter on Ideal Landscape best. You recaptured the Vergilian mood so perfectly that I could not resist the temptation of reading the *Georgics* for an evening's pleasure. And there I came across a passage (II, 319ff.) which I feel almost certainly was in Bellini's mind when he painted the *Madonna of the Meadow*. Vergil explains that the best season for planting vines is either a cold day of early spring "when the white bird, the foe of long snakes, is come", or a day "close on autumn's first cold, before the fiery sun touches winter, and summer is waning". There are also flocks mentioned in this passage, and an altar prepared for a goat, and this occasions a remark about the origins of tragedy (II, 381). But what chiefly persuades me to believe in the relevance of these verses is that "the white bird, the foe of long snakes" is in the picture.<sup>54</sup>

With his enviable ability Clark summed up the importance of Wind's approach to Bellini in his next letter:

How interesting about the reference to the bird and the snake. I think it most probable that Bellini had that passage in mind. Everything goes to prove that he was not at all the simple, inarticulate, unintellectual artist whom historians had pictured, partly, I suppose, as a foil to Mantegna.<sup>55</sup>

The disagreements in Washington had a negative impact on Wind's career as shown in the references that Clark was asked to write for Wind for fellowships in Cambridge and Oxford. On 4 April 1951, Sir Noel Annan, then a fellow at King's College, Cambridge, wrote to Clark to ask him for a reference for two special research fellowships to be held by men of proved distinction. Isaiah Berlin had suggested Wind 'in his opinion Wind was extremely clever, able and a first-class critic; and while he held a job at Smith University he

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<sup>53</sup> Edgar Wind, 'The Eloquence of Symbols', *Burlington Magazine*, 92 (1950), pp. 349-350.

<sup>54</sup> Wind to Clark, 28 April 1950, Tate Gallery Archive.

<sup>55</sup> Clark to Wind, 4 May 1950, Tate Gallery Archive.

wanted to return to Europe. I gather that he is at present studying in Rome'. Clark replied on 6 April 1951:

Dear Mr Annan,

Your enquiry about Edgar Wind is unusually difficult to answer. He is undoubtedly a very learned man and uses his knowledge with great ingenuity. He is perhaps the most brilliant lecturer on art alive and, while he is talking, one is persuaded to accept the most fantastic hypotheses. I think that many of his ideas are also true and enlightening, but he is the kind of scholar to whom the epithet 'brilliant' rather than 'sound' is usually applied.

As to his personality there is something which I cannot understand. He has always been most friendly to me and generous with his ideas. On the other hand, he has the reputation, both in the Warburg Institute and still more in various American Universities, of being a bad colleague. You know how hard it is to get concrete evidence for this sort of statement, but it would be unfair to you were I not to tell you that several quite calm and respectable people in America foam at the mouth at the mention of Wind's name. Maybe this is entirely the fault of the competitive life in American Universities, and that as a research fellow at King's College, Wind would settle down perfectly calmly.

As I say, I have always found him a most helpful and friendly colleague and personally, I think him a charming human being, although, of course, he has the eager and insinuating manner of the East, which does not please everybody. He is a brilliant talker and from this point of view, would be an addition to any common room.

The last sentence may have killed Wind's chances. But then on 2 November 1953 the Warden of All Souls Oxford, John Sparrow wrote to Clark for another reference:

Can you help us with a testimonial in regard to an election to a Senior Research Fellowship that we think of making? Various fields are represented, and that which attracts us most – an exclusion of his field usually cultivated by the clique – is the History of Art. The candidate before us is Edgar Wind – unknown to me personally, but very, very strongly praised by Isaiah [Berlin] and Jean Seznec among my colleagues here. It is plain that he is brilliant; plain also that he is difficile, but I myself would swallow the difficile-ness for the sake of brilliance, if genuine, would you give me your opinions, for communication in confidence, to the College? Acting on College instructions, I have approached Tom Boase, who has promised me a 'testimonial' which (between ourselves), to judge from his tone on the telephone may I fear be dictated more by personal hostility than by a cool judgment of his merits. What you say, if you feel able to say anything, can carry more weight in College, than anybody else's views. Could you send me something by Saturday?

Clark replied on 4 November 1953:

My dear John,

Two years ago, I had some correspondence with King's College, Cambridge, when Wind was applying for a research fellowship here, and I think I ought to send you copies of the

letters I then wrote. On the other hand, I would rather you did not read these letters at a meeting as I don't wish it to seem as if I was continually preventing the wretched Wind from achieving his deserts. I dare say you are right and that one should pay no attention to the people who found him touchy and quarrelsome, although one might remember that they include such honourable men as Anthony Blunt and John Walker.

The real question concerns the quality of the work which Wind may still be expected to produce and there I must say I simply do not know. He is a most brilliant talker and lecturer, he is also impulsive, wrong-headed and optimistic and his later work has been much less good. On the other hand, in the atmosphere of All Souls he might recover his scholarly balance and produce something really first class.

In 1955 Wind took up the first Chair of Art History at Oxford, and in the next year, where he was extremely popular at Trinity College. John Walker finally published *Bellini and Titian at Ferrara: A Study of Styles and Taste*. A decade earlier, on 9 May 1947, Walker had explained to Wind that:

studying the new X-rays and the picture again, I think I have conclusive evidence that the alterations in the figures were made by Titian. What you find "comical" in the picture may be due to these alterations. I wanted to tell you this so you would know that my line of thought diverges from yours on an essential thought.<sup>56</sup>

For the first time in 450 years Bellini's original composition for the *Feast of the Gods* was partially revealed as a row of trees across the background. The X-rays published by Walker, showed, for the first time, three interventions on the pictorial surface, the first by Bellini, then reworking by an intermediary artist usually identified as Dosso Dossi, and Titian.

Walker's book was immediately accepted in contemporary reviews, especially the section, which presented new radiographic evidence about the collaboration between Titian and Bellini. It was 'scientific', uncontestable. Reviewed by Sir Martin Davies at the National Gallery, London, Walker's study was pronounced to be a 'careful, clear and sensible book' on what Davis judged to be **the least attractive of the paintings** in the Camerino.<sup>57</sup> Among other reviewers Walker's study found favor with Philip Fehl, who intrigued by Walker's discovery that the gods had no attributes in Bellini's first version, provoked him to ask: 'What effect did Bellini have in mind when he painted the gods hidden as it were?'<sup>58</sup> Walker, assumed Bellini to be a deeply religious artist, who had painted the *Feast of the Gods*, when he was an old man, unable to understand the erotic or antiquarian significance of the subject, accepting the famous passage in Vasari, when he wrote that Bellini had been unable to carry through this picture, because he was too old, and Titian was summoned to finish it. As the attributes of the gods were not visible in the X-rays, Walker argued that

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<sup>56</sup> Walker to Wind, 9 May 1947, MS Wind 72, folder 1.

<sup>57</sup> Martin Davies, review of Walker, 'Bellini and Titian at Ferrara: A Study of Styles and Taste', *Burlington Magazine*, 90 (1957), pp. 352-353.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Fehl, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 17 (1958), pp. 125-126.

Bellini had not depicted them, Titian adding the attributes later, as well as adding eroticizing details to the figures. Walker's thesis was disproved by the restoration of the late 1980's. When Walker later wrote his autobiography his publication on Bellini was of so little importance that he mentioned, neither Wind nor Bellini.<sup>59</sup>

An interleaved copy of Wind's *Feast of the Gods* exists among his papers, showing that he considered an updated edition. His notes, written after the publication of Walker's book, in impeccable English, reveal he was unrepentant in his witty interpretation of the painting. Several times he refers to the early copies after the *Feast of the Gods*, especially the one attributed to Poussin in Edinburgh, in which he says that the scythe of Priapus is more visible, and the likeness of Neptune more closely resembles Alfonso d'Este. Wind's reading was before the restoration of the *Feast of the Gods* which he did not live to see.

In these annotations to the original text Wind muses over the close relationship he sees between the *Dream of Poliphilo* and Bellini's invention. He wrote:

Even some of the more extravagant bizarreries seem to come from the same style of humorous draughtsman ship. The queer way for example in which Bellini's *Jupiter* covers the lower half of his face, with his tumbler should be compared with the image of Queen Artemisia gulping down her husband's ashes in a wine-cup; the reinforced outlines of her stomacher (*il ventre dilatate in forma di tetrappila*) leaves little doubt that this is not quite serious: the unesteemed Mausoleum says the Greek inscription.<sup>60</sup>

These observations make the reader regret that Wind never wrote the book on the *Hypnerotomachia*, which was to accompany the publication of the *Feast of the Gods*.

In the 1980's three discoveries were made that transformed our knowledge of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*, beginning with the restoration by David Bull in collaboration with Joyce Plesters, that took place from 1985–1990; Secondly, John Shearman's resurrection of a document that had been well known for over a century, in which the humanist Mario Equicola, secretary to Isabella, said he had devised six ingenious inventions for paintings

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<sup>59</sup> John Walker, *Self-Portrait with Donors. Confessions of a Collector* (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1969).

<sup>60</sup> Annotations to page 33. MS Wind, 73, folder 1.

for Alfonso in 1511.<sup>61</sup> Thirdly, Jennifer Fletcher's publication of a poem about Bellini by Bartolomeo Fusco, in a manuscript in the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice, that changed Bellini's reputation forever.<sup>62</sup> In this poem Bellini is praised as someone who admires the beauty of a young man, his apprentice, with whom he lay all night. Leaving aside how you may interpret this poem Bellini unexpectedly acquired a libido worthy of the twentieth century. From that point, no one wrote about Bellini as an old man incapable of understanding eroticism.

After the decision was made in 1985 to clean the painting Plesters discovered that the attributes of the gods were laid in the earliest layers by Bellini, including erotic details, such as the breasts of the nymphs, as we see them today on the surface of the painting. The pigments were the most lavish and expensive she had examined in her long career at the National Gallery of London, and the condition was excellent. No preliminary under drawing was found at that time, nor more recently, though there must have been one, such is the complexity of the large canvas.<sup>63</sup> Plesters and Bull found Walker's study deeply flawed as he misinterpreted scientific evidence according to conventional art historical opinion.

There has been much discussion about whether the painting is finished. Plesters concluded that Bellini finished the painting, given the conspicuous presence of Bellini's signature on the wine vat and the payment of 85 golden ducats made to Bellini by Alfonso. One area looks unfinished, as if one of the nymphs should have held something in her hand. Ironically Walker recognized that Bellini was capable of painting a very sensual breast, even more so than Titian, as the following passage reveals:

The breast of the nymph with outstretched hand was very little altered and therefore shows Bellini's style of modelling, whereas the breast of the nymph with a jar on her head was repainted by Titian after the neckline of her dress was lowered.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> John Shearman threw into the critical limelight a letter from Isabella's tutor and secretary, Mario Equicola, dated 9 October 1511, written from Ferrara to say he had been detained there: 'The Lord Duke [Alfonso] wants me to stay eight days: the reason is the painting of a room in which will go six fables or histories; I have already found them and written them down'. John Shearman, 'Alfonso d'Este's Camerino', *Il se rendit en Italie. Études offertes à André Chastel* (Paris: Flammarion: 1987), p. 115. As Shearman noted there were problems with his thesis, that is the chronology of the room would have been very drawn out, and when the Bacchanales were taken away from Ferrara by Cardinal Aldobrandini there were five rather than six. The Italian text is given in Alessandro Luzio and Rodolfo Renieri, 'La coltura e le relazioni letterarie di Isabella d'Este Gonzaga', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 33 (1899), p. 22: 'Al Si.r. Duca [Alfonso] piace che reste qui octo di: la causa è la pictura di una camera nella quale vanno sei fabule overo historie. Già le ho trovate et datele in scritto'.

<sup>62</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, 'Harpies, Venus and Giovanni Bellini's Classical Mirror. Some Fifteenth Century Painters' Responses to the Antique', in *Venezia e l'Archeologia: Un importante capitolo nella storia del gusto dell'antico nella cultura artistica veneziana*, Congresso internazionale, Venezia, 25–29 Maggio 1988, ed. Gustavo Traversi and Irene Favoretto, *Rivista di Archeologia*, Supplemento 7 (Rome: Brestschneider, 1990), pp. 170-176.

<sup>63</sup> Their conclusions are published in David Bull and Joyce Plesters, *The Feast of the Gods. Conservation, examination and interpretation* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1990).

<sup>64</sup> Walker, op. cit p. 60.

In 1990 an early guidebook to Pietro and Vincenzo Camuccini's collection, was rediscovered in the archives of Alnwick Castle.<sup>65</sup> This guidebook was used by all visitors to the collection, including Jacob Burckhardt and Stendahl and contains the first use of the title by which we know the painting: 'Gli dei venuti a gustare i frutti della terra' or the 'Gods who came to taste the fruits of the earth'. The interpretation is by the antiquarian Giovanni Gherardo De Rossi, who wittily emphasizes the drunkenness of the gods, defining their individual behavior, one by one. He proposes that the figures on the right-hand side of the painting are Bacchus and Venus, to conclude that the overall theme is the ancient proverb: *Sine Cerere et Baccho friget Venus* or *Venus is chilly without Ceres and Bacchus*, implying that love is cold without good food and wine. Even though no one would agree with the identification of Bacchus and Venus, though it might fit Titian's cycle better, de Rossi reveals that there is an overall subject to the picture.

In 1991 Anthony Colantuono, building on the research of the previous decades, interpreted Bellini's painting as a representation of the *Feast of Bacchus*, a celebration at which Priapus raped Lotis.<sup>66</sup> The feast took place during the Halcyon days, the winter solstice. Colantuono endorses and develops Wind's research. Key to his understanding of the picture is his identification of the infant Bacchus, for Bacchus assumed the guise of an infant during the winter solstice, as discussed by Macrobius and repeated by sixteenth-century writers like Vincenzo Cartari. The solstice is further identified by the presence of the kingfisher in the foreground of the painting, who breeds only during this week. Though not accepting Wind's identification of the marriage portraits in the painting, Colantuono argues that marriage is in the air for Alfonso married Lucrezia Borgia on 30 December a date very close to the solstice, and marriage is celebrated in Titian's cycle. Colantuono assumes hypotheses as facts, but his construction is convincing, though many problems remain with the identification of individual gods and goddesses.

It was not until the twenty-first century that Giovanni Agosti argued that Giovanni Bellini was written about by more humanists than any other Italian Quattrocento artist and that Bellini's works have more classical inscriptions on them than paintings by his contemporaries.<sup>67</sup> To take one example the altarpiece of San Giovanni Crisostomo, signed and dated, 1513, the year before the *Feast of the Gods*. The composition is extraordinarily innovative and there are numerous inscriptions in Greek on the vault. As David Alan Brown,<sup>68</sup> following Carlo Ridolfi, has argued Giovanni Bellini was a member of the

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<sup>65</sup> Jaynie Anderson, 'The Provenance of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* and a New/Old Interpretation', in *Titian '500*, ed. Joseph Manca, *Studies in the History of Art*, 45, National Gallery Washington, (1994), pp. 265-288. See also the discussion of the guidebook in Susan Nalezty, 'Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* and Banquets of the Ancient Ritual Calendar', *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 40 (2009), pp. 745-768.

<sup>66</sup> Anthony Colantuono, 'Dies Alcyoniae: The Invention of Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*', *The Art Bulletin*, 73 (1991), pp. 237-256. See also Colantuono's later monograph, *Titian, Colonna and the Renaissance Science of Procreation: Equicola's Seasons of Desire (Visual Culture in Early Modernity)* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Giacomo Agosti, *Un amore di Giovanni Bellini* (Milan: Officina Libraria, 2009), pp. 10-14.

<sup>68</sup> David Alan Brown and Anna Pizzati, 'Meum amatissimum nepotem', *The Burlington Magazine*, 156 (2014), pp. 148-152.



*Cittadini originari*, a class of society, who would have received a classical education as their graduates were equipped with skills for the chancellery, implying a knowledge of Latin. However erudite Bellini may have been, Agosti has shown he was the artist to whom patrons went to commission classical subjects, whether religious or sacred.

In conclusion. Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* was always a provocative painting and has continued to be an *enfant terrible*. There are still many perplexing parts of the painting despite the extensive analysis it has undergone. Even Alfonso d'Este must have misunderstood it as shown by David Alan Brown's reconstruction of its original appearance.<sup>69</sup> Representations of strong sexual subjects, rape and adultery – even at a historical distance across many centuries – can stimulate strong personal emotions, as shown by Erica Tietze-Conrat and Huntington Cairns, who reflect the prudish mood in Washington in the 1940's. Art historians of that generation who wrote about Renaissance art rarely discussed sexuality in relation to Renaissance paintings, but Edgar Wind was an exception.

Wind was a refugee in multiple ways, having been born in 1900 as a stateless person at Berlin to an Argentinian father of Russian origin. According to German law Edgar had his father's nationality, but according to Argentinian law the nationality of his birthplace. The problem of his nationality was never resolved until he was thirty years old at a time when fascism was prominent in Germany.<sup>70</sup> By 1933 he had lost his university position and was displaced when he accompanied the Warburg archive to England. Wind's father had died when he was aged nine; his Rumanian mother disapproved of his vocation. A psychological explanation for Wind's arrogant brilliance, that irritated many, was that it was something he adopted as a protective shield, a defense as he tried to assume different scholarly identities in England and the United States.

Wind was deeply disappointed with the way in which his research was received at Washington and this poor reception had a negative impact on the development of his career. Even his devoted wife did not understand the book. As Bernardino Branca has shown in his biography, Wind came late to the Italian Renaissance, visiting Italy only for the first time in 1935.<sup>71</sup> *The Feast of the Gods* was the first book that Wind published in English on an Italian subject, and it was in the style of a Warburg article, a style that confused many, despite its brilliance. The enduring value of his monograph on the *Feast of the Gods*, is that Wind both understood Bellini as a profound interpreter of the classical tradition, well before anyone else, and characterized the burlesque eroticizing mood of

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<sup>69</sup> Kathryn A. Dooley, Barbara Berrie, and John K. Delaney, 'Technical Reexamination of the *Feast of the Gods*', in David Alan Brown, *Giovanni Bellini. The Last Works* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2019), pp. 333-347.

<sup>70</sup> Ben Thomas analyses Wind's reflections on his loss of freedom when he left Germany, in 'Freedom and Exile: Edgar Wind and the Congress for Cultural Freedom', in *The Edgar Wind Journal*, 1 (2021), pp. 74-94.

<sup>71</sup> Bernardino Branca, *Edgar Wind filosofo delle Immagini. La biografia intellettuale di un Discepolo di Aby Warburg* (Milan and Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2019), pp. 115-116.

Bellini's attitude to antiquity for perpetuity with wit and dignity. A question awaiting resolution is to what extent Wind's own iconographical approach to Bellini is marked by a possible quest for identity, one that has been persistently misunderstood.

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