

FONDATION ETRILLARD GIFT FOR REFRAMING THREE RENAISSANCE PAINTINGS

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The British author, philosopher and art critic G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) once brazenly stated: “Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.”

While Chesterton’s claim may seem a bit dismissive, there is no denying the impact, conscious or not, of a great frame on a work of art. Equally, a poorly made, ill-fitting or inappropriate frame can dramatically decrease the appeal and appreciation of

a painting. This was the case, for example, for a small work on panel of Saint Jerome reading in a landscape that had been in the Ashmolean collection since 1899. The work, not considered of high enough quality to be painted by the Venetian Master Giovanni



↗ The new frame being constructed by Peter Schade in his studios. Photo: © Peter Schade



🔗 The Bellinis being reframed

Bellini (1430-1516) himself, was given to his "Circle" instead. The painting was framed in a relatively large, elaborately carved and detailed tabernacle frame of the type almost exclusively used during the Renaissance for images of the Madonna and Child. The frame was clearly not original to the work and much too large for it. Accordingly, the painted panel was given a wooden 'slip' frame to make it large enough to fit the tabernacle. The overall effect was less than appealing, with the slip frame taking away from the fine detail and charm of the painting and the elaborate carving on the tabernacle frame making it difficult for the eyes to focus on the meditative subject presented. When three specialist Bellini scholars requested to examine the panel out of its frame around 2018, they carried out a technical investigation together with the Museum's conservation team which revealed the

spontaneity and exceptionally high quality of the work. Based on their findings, the Bellini scholars reattributed to the panel to the artist himself in their monograph of 2020.

Arriving at the Museum in 2023, I found the panel in its uncomfortable slip and tabernacle frames and retaining its old attribution to the circle of Bellini. Convinced by the recent re-attribution however, I upgraded the work and set about trying to find a frame that would sensitively showcase this delicate and finely detailed work by the Renaissance Master. I was thrilled when the Fondation Etrillard agreed to fund this project, together with several other important framing projects, and immediately began discussing these with a framing specialist, Peter Schade. Together we began exploring options that would allow visitors to get much closer to the

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Bellini, to observe its minute details such as the tiny birds flying off in the sky, and which would enhance the composition rather than distract from it. We finally settled on a version that takes a late fifteenth/early sixteenth century Italian moulding frame from the National Gallery as its main point of reference. Adapted to accommodate both the panel and its glazing in an unobtrusive manner, the stepped profile of the frame now gently leads the eye into the composition, while its warm colouring and subtle gilding provide a nice complement and contrast to the sandy desert of the hermitic saint. Both the frame and its gilding have been subtly distressed to suggest age, ensuring it doesn't stand out as a twenty-first-century frame.

Fortuitously, the tabernacle frame has also been appropriately repurposed to house an image of the Virgin and Child also by Bellini. The frame is in fact a 'perfect fit' and further research has revealed why. Apparently, before the *Virgin and Child* entered the Museum's collection it was framed with precisely this frame, though curiously both entered the collection separately almost a century apart. Both works are now shown to their best advantage in the Museum's galleries and look so transformed that, as one frequent visitor commented, they could be mistaken for entirely new acquisitions!

This project was supported by Fondation Etrillard. ■



🔗 The Bellinis back on display. Photo: © Hannah Pye