



Giorgione, *Three Philosophers* (c. 1505-1509). 123 x 144 cms. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
File:Giorgione - Three Philosophers - Google Art Project.jpg

UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara*

Each time you look at this picture, it seems increasingly unclear. Even the title was suggested later by somebody else: the three men may indeed be philosophers, but perhaps they are not the artist's main focus? After all, a greater proportion of the canvas is devoted to trees and landscape, and originally included yet a further 17 cms of darkness on the left that has been cut off.

Giorgione – 'Big George' of Castelfranco – was a master of ambiguity, a Venetian artist who broke away from traditional artistic fashions. Instead of depicting familiar biblical or mythological scenes carrying a moral message, he created imaginary, allegorical

images suffused with a soft, shadowy gradation between darker and lighter tones (*sfumato*) that helped to generate an indefinable mood of enchantment. Looking down or away, these figures seem oblivious to us, the external observers, and occupy a luminous sacred space that is distinct from their secular surroundings. Recalling the unfathomability of God's creation, the full significance of Giorgione's enigmatic painting remains as obscure as the minds of its human characters

The *Three Philosophers* shows an event that never happened, and so has no moment in time. Yet paradoxically, it abounds in oblique if contradictory references to the passage of time. Most obviously, the three individuals represent different stages in life: Titian's famous *Three Ages of Man* was probably influenced by Giorgione's earlier

picture with the same title. This theme of temporal change is also portrayed by the natural setting, which is in dialogue with its human participants rather than simply providing a neutral background. The upright spring sapling on the left contrasts with the nearby bare, twisted trunks of winter and the lush summer foliage to the right. The orb of the setting sun lies at the horizon's centre, but the bright facades of the distant buildings imply that the light is coming far from the left, while the old man on the right seems about to meld into shadow.

Giorgione has placed the philosophers on shallowly descending steps, implying a decline in vitality as old age encroaches. On the other hand, their contrasting appearances signal that they hail from different cultures, so perhaps they represent an upwards progress from the vanished past towards modernity? The man on the right appears to be an ancient Greek, here resembling a saint in his elaborately draped glowing robes painted with the very latest Venetian mineral pigments. His parchment is tattered, as if knowledge had been lost, but it carries the word 'eclipsis' and some astronomical diagrams, including a quarter moon and a circular spiked disc numbered from 1 to 7. These could suggest a lunar eclipse, but might be a reference to 1503, the year when a solar eclipse and a close conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn were said to predict the future arrival of the Antichrist.

The turbaned man in luminous red could symbolize Islamic scholarship. Around the 8th century, the caliphs of Baghdad launched a project to translate ancient documents into Arabic. They had a double aim: to record the great thoughts of their predecessors, and to continue the research that had not yet been completed. In this way, Greek texts became incorporated into Muslim learning, but this combined knowledge was also developed further and then exerted an enormous influence on Renaissance Europe. Critics trying to pin down a specific identification have claimed that this central figure is Averroes or Avicenna (the Latinized names of two great Islamic polymaths) but that seems no more justified than specifying the Greek to be Aristotle or Plato.

On the highest step sits a young man, presumably a Renaissance scholar, clutching

mathematical instruments: even his body is shaped like the right-angled triangles of Pythagoras's theorem. Turning his back to inherited wisdom, he studies nature directly – but he is gazing into an overgrown cave, as if the very latest scientific techniques still do not yield absolute certainty. The world seems dark and threatening, like clouds of ignorance. Perhaps he has not noticed the fig and ivy leaves, both symbols of Christ?

Several other interpretations of this perplexing picture have been put forward. It was once held to represent a very specific moment just over 2000 years ago when three kings searched for the star of Bethlehem, but critics have now rejected that view. Turning instead to the Old Testament for inspiration, some claim that this is a hill outside Jerusalem: the cowed figure on the right is King Solomon, the one in the middle is King Hiram of Tyre, while the young man with a masonic set square and compasses is the craftsman Hiram Abi, who was commissioned to construct Solomon's Temple. In the plain below, the large building with a tower and a waterwheel could house the sawmills and furnaces required to construct the temple. But there are other possibilities. Perhaps Giorgione intended to depict the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity? Or the mythical Greek Evander and his son Pallas showing Aeneas the future site of Rome?

If some of these speculations sound rather far-fetched, then reflect that this painting was commissioned by Taddeo Contarini, a wealthy Venetian merchant fascinated by alchemy and the occult – and moreover, he chose an artist renowned for elliptical complexity.

Main Sources and Further Reading

Heredom | Giorgione's Painting The Three Philosophers (freemasons-freemasonry.com)

Tom Nichols, *Giorgione's Ambiguity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

*Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is number eighteen in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.