

Talk 2 – Three High Renaissance Altarpieces in Venice

The Sacra Conversazione

The altarpiece of the late Medieval period is typified by the wooden polyptych, consisting of more than three leaves or panels joined by hinges or folds. Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* is a prime example of said phenomenon. Multiple painted panels could be opened and closed in accordance with the Liturgical Calendar for didactic purposes. Whilst this sacred visual *aide-memoire* served to educate a largely illiterate populace, it meant for a somewhat fragmented ecclesiastical dialogue. Subsequently, artists such as Masaccio (Tommaso Giovanni di Simone Guidi) and his pupil Fra Filippo Lippi pioneered in Florence during the fifteenth-century a more cohesive form of altarpiece, known as the *sacra conversazione*.

Giovanni Bellini in Venice was to build upon the foundations established by his antecedents, developing a more homogenous figurative ensemble in his seminal *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*.



This set a precedent for his pupil Giorgione - a composition showing saints, angels and sometimes even the painting's donors in the same pictorial space with the enthroned Virgin and Child. Despite the name, no conversation or other interaction between the figures takes place in a literal sense. Instead, the individuals portrayed are joined in a mystical communion occurring outside of time, in which the viewer is invited to share.

Giorgione's beautiful **Castelfranco Altarpiece** represents the assimilation of the lessons learnt from his master, Bellini.



Titian, in turn, was tutored by Giorgione, and his **Pesaro Altarpiece** in the Santa Mari Frari is a festival of chromatic intensity coupled with a divine composition.

