

In The Age Of Giorgione: An interview with Charles Saumarez Smith

Venetian painter, Giorgione is highly regarded as one of the masters of the Italian Renaissance. This month The Royal Academy of Arts opened “In the Age of Giorgione,” an exhibition dedicated to Venetian artists during the first decade of the 16th century. To celebrate the exhibition we interview Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy of Arts - Charles Saumarez Smith.

Name: Charles Saumarez Smith

Job: Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy of Arts

Tell us about yourself

I am deeply interested in design, architecture and fashion, did a Ph.D. in the late 1970s on Castle Howard, worked at the V&A in the 1980s teaching a postgraduate course in the History of Design, and was Director of the National Portrait Gallery at the time of the planning and building of its Ondaatje Wing.

What is your job?

I have been Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy for nearly ten years. As is implied by the title, the role is a hybrid, answerable to the Royal Academicians for the effective running of the place — raising money, appointing staff, sitting on committees, oiling the wheels of the organisation and planning its future.

How did In the Age of Giorgione come about?

We recruited a very talented curator called Arturo Galansino, who had worked at the National Gallery and did a very successful exhibition for us on the work of Giovanni Moroni. He then suggested that he would like to do a follow-up exhibition on the work of Giovanni Cariani, a relatively minor contemporary and possibly pupil of Giorgione. We all said there was no way we would get an audience for an exhibition on Cariani. He came back and said that he would like to do one on Giorgione. We all felt this was a terrific idea, never done in this country before because of the difficulty of getting loans.

What should we expect from the exhibition?

We've managed to borrow a remarkable range of pictures by different artists, all painted in the first decade of the sixteenth century in Venice, when there was a move towards a softer way of painting, more poetic, with a much better sense of psychology and an interest in landscape. It's very unusual to see so many pictures of this period together, including La Vecchia which is an exceptionally moving depiction of old age.

Why is Giorgione so important to Italian art?

Giorgio Vasari, who wrote the first history of art in the Lives of the Painters, described him as key to the development of the so-called maniera moderna — the modern style — which involved a deeper understanding of character and personality in portraiture, the evocation of mood in landscape, the idea that painting could be about literature and poetry and sex and ideas.

When did you first encounter the work of Giorgione?

I have always been interested in Giorgione, ever since I was invited by my uncle to stay in Asolo in the foothills of the Dolomites as a teenager. I remember very vividly stopping en route on the main road in to Venice to see the Castelfranco altarpiece and then driving on to Venice where we saw two of Giorgione's greatest works in the Accademia, La Vecchia and La Tempesta.

What inspires you about Venice?

I have visited Venice intermittently ever since I was first allowed to stay on my own to explore it with Hugh Honour's brilliant Companion Guide to Venice. Every time I go, I discover different aspects to it, most recently the back streets of Cannareggio, the poor working district in the north of the city where I was taken to see Orsini, a manufacturer of mosaics, and the workshop of Luigi Bevilacqua, where rich velvets, damasks and brocades are still handwoven on traditional looms. It's relatively easy to imagine the city as it was in Giorgione's time — immensely wealthy, with good contacts to the east through Constantinople, a trading city, with a hinterland of farms and villas in the valley of the Po where Giorgione was born.

Charles Saumarez Smith, *Vivienne Westwood Blog*, 13 April 2016