

## LIGHT AND COLOUR

*Venice and northern Italy, early sixteenth century*

We must now turn to another great centre of Italian art, second in importance only to Florence itself – the proud and prosperous city of Venice. Venice, whose trade linked it closely with the East, had been slower than other Italian cities in accepting the style of the Renaissance, Brunelleschi's application of classical form to buildings. But when it did, the style there acquired a new gaiety, splendour and warmth which evoke, perhaps more closely than any other buildings in modern times, the grandeur of the great merchant cities of the Hellenistic period, of Alexandria or Antioch. One of the most characteristic buildings of this style is the Library of San Marco, *figure 207*. Its architect was a Florentine, Jacopo Sansovino (1486–1570), but he had completely adapted his style and manner to the genius of the place, the brilliant light of Venice, which is reflected by the lagoons, and dazzles the eye by its splendour. It may seem a little pedantic to anatomize such a festive and simple building, but to look at it carefully may help us to see how skilled these masters were in weaving a few simple elements into ever-new patterns. The lower storey, then, with its vigorous Doric order of columns, is in the most orthodox classical manner. Sansovino has closely followed the rules of building which the Colosseum, *page 118, figure 73*, exemplified. He adhered to the same tradition when he arranged the upper storey in the Ionic order, carrying a so-called 'attic' crowned with a balustrade and topped by a row of statues. But instead of letting the arched openings between the orders rest on pillars, as had been the case with the Colosseum, Sansovino supported them by another set of small Ionic columns, and thus achieved a rich effect of interlocked orders. With his balustrades, garlands and sculptures he gave the building something of the appearance of tracery such as had been used on the Gothic façades of Venice, *page 209, figure 138*.

This building is characteristic of the taste for which Venetian art in the *Cinquecento* became famous. The atmosphere of the lagoons, which seems to blur the sharp outlines of objects and to blend their colours in a radiant light, may have taught the painters of this city to use colour in a more deliberate and observant way than other painters in Italy had done so far. Maybe, also, the links with Constantinople and its craftsmen in mosaic had



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Jacopo Sansovino  
*Library of San Marco,*  
*Venice, 1536*

A building of the High  
Renaissance

something to do with this bias. It is difficult to talk or write about colours, and no illustration, much reduced in scale, gives an adequate idea of the real appearance of a masterpiece of colour. But so much seems to be clear: the painters of the Middle Ages were no more concerned about the 'real' colours of things than they were about their real shapes. In their miniatures, enamel work and panel paintings, they loved to spread out the purest and most precious colours they could get – with shining gold and flawless ultramarine blue as a favourite combination. The great reformers of Florence were less interested in colour than in drawing. That does not mean, of course, that their pictures were not exquisite in colour – the contrary is true – but few of them regarded colour as one of the principal means of welding the various figures and forms of a picture into one unified pattern. They preferred to do this by means of perspective and composition before they even dipped their brushes into paint. The Venetian painters, it seems, did not think of colour as an additional adornment for the picture after it had been drawn on the panel. When one enters the little church of San Zaccaria in Venice and stands before the picture, *figure 208*, which the great Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini (1431?–1516) painted over the altar there in 1505 – in his old age – one immediately notices that his approach to colour was very different. Not that the picture is particularly bright or shining. It is rather the mellowness and richness of the colours that impress one before one even begins to look at what the picture represents. I think that even the photograph conveys something of the warm and gilded atmosphere which fills the niche in which the Virgin sits enthroned, with the infant Jesus lifting His little hands to bless the worshippers before the altar. An angel at the foot of the altar softly plays the violin, while the saints stand quietly at either side of the throne: St Peter with his key and book, St Catherine with the palm of martyrdom and the broken wheel, St Lucy and St Jerome, the

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Giovanni Bellini  
*Madonna with saints,*  
*1505*

Altar-painting; oil on  
wood, transferred to  
canvas, 402 × 273 cm,  
158½ × 102½ in; church of  
S. Zaccaria, Venice

Masovino  
San Marco,  
of the High  
Bellini  
with saints,  
on  
to  
27 cm,  
church of  
since





scholar who translated the Bible into Latin, and whom Bellini therefore represented as reading a book. Many Madonnas with saints have been painted before and after, in Italy and elsewhere, but few were ever conceived with such dignity and repose. In the Byzantine tradition, the picture of the Virgin used to be rigidly flanked by images of the saints, *page 140, figure 89*. Bellini knew how to bring life into this simple

symmetrical arrangement without upsetting its order. He also knew how to turn the traditional figures of the Virgin and saints into real and living beings without divesting them of their holy character and dignity. He did not even sacrifice the variety and individuality of real life – as Perugino had done to some extent, *page 314, figure 202*. St Catherine with her dreamy smile, and St Jerome, the old scholar engrossed in his book, are real enough in their own ways, although they, too, no less than Perugino's figures, seem to belong to another more serene and beautiful world, a world transfused with that warm and supernatural light that fills the picture.

Giovanni Bellini belonged to the same generation as Verrocchio, Ghirlandaio and Perugino – the generation whose pupils and followers were the famous *Cinquecento* masters. He, too, was the head of an exceedingly busy workshop out of whose orbit there emerged the famous painters of the Venetian *Cinquecento*, Giorgione and Titian. If the classical painters of central Italy had achieved the new complete harmony within their pictures by means of perfect design and balanced arrangement, it was only natural that the painters of Venice should follow the lead of Giovanni Bellini, who had made such happy use of colour and light to unify his pictures. It was in this sphere that the painter Giorgione (1478?–1510) achieved the most revolutionary results. Very little is known of this artist; scarcely five paintings can be ascribed with absolute certainty to his hand. Yet these suffice to secure him a fame nearly as great as that of the great leaders of the new movement. Strangely enough, even these pictures contain something of a puzzle. We are not quite sure what the most accomplished one, 'The tempest', *figure 209*, represents; it may be a scene from some classical writer or an imitator of the classics. For Venetian artists of the period had awakened to the charm of the Greek poets and what they stood for. They liked to illustrate the idyllic stories of pastoral love and to portray the beauty of Venus and the nymphs. One day the episode here illustrated may be identified – the story, perhaps, of a mother of some future hero, who was cast out of the city into the wilderness with her child and was there discovered by a friendly young shepherd. For this, it seems, is what Giorgione wanted to represent. But it is not due to its content that the picture is one of the most wonderful things in art. That this is so may be difficult to see in a small-scale illustration, but even such an illustration conveys a shadow, at least, of his revolutionary achievement. Though the figures are not particularly carefully drawn, and though the composition is somewhat artless, the picture is clearly blended into a whole simply by the light and air that permeate it all. It is the weird light of a thunderstorm, and for the first time, it seems, the landscape before which the actors of the picture move is not just a background. It is there,

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Giorgione

*The tempest*, c. 1508Oil on canvas, 82 × 73 cm,  
32¼ × 28¾ in; Accademia,  
Venice



by its own right, as the real subject of the painting. We look from the figures to the scenery which fills the major part of the small panel, and then back again, and we feel somehow that, unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, Giorgione has not drawn things and persons to arrange them afterwards in space, but that he really thought of nature, the earth, the trees, the light, air and clouds and the human beings with their cities and bridges as one. In a way, this was almost as big a step forward into a new realm as the invention of perspective had been. From now on, painting was more than drawing plus colouring. It was an art with its own secret laws and devices.

Giorgione died too young to gather all the fruits of this great discovery. This was done by the most famous of all Venetian painters, Titian (c. 1485?–1576). Titian was born in Cadore, in the southern Alps, and was rumoured to be ninety-nine when he died of the plague. During his long life he rose to a fame which nearly matched that of Michelangelo. His early biographers tell us with awe that even the great Emperor Charles V had done him honour by picking up a brush he had dropped. We may not find this very remarkable, but if we consider the strict rules of the court of those times, we realize that the greatest embodiment of worldly power was believed to have humbled himself symbolically before the majesty of genius. Seen in this light, the little anecdote, whether true or not, represented to later ages a triumph for art. All the more so since Titian was neither such a universal scholar as Leonardo, nor such an outstanding personality as Michelangelo, nor such a versatile and attractive man as Raphael. He was principally a painter, but a painter whose handling of paint equalled Michelangelo's mastery of draughtsmanship. This supreme skill enabled him to disregard all the time-honoured rules of composition, and to rely on colour to restore the unity which he apparently broke up. We need but look at *figure 210* (which was begun only some fifteen years after Giovanni Bellini's 'Madonna with saints') to realize the effect which his art must have had on contemporaries. It was almost unheard of to move the Holy Virgin out of the centre of the picture, and to place the two administering saints – St Francis, who is recognizable by the Stigmata (the wounds of the Cross), and St Peter, who has deposited the key (emblem of his dignity) on the steps of the Virgin's throne – not symmetrically on each side, as Giovanni Bellini had done, but as active participants of a scene. In this altar-painting, Titian had to revive the tradition of donors' portraits, *pages 216–17, figure 143*, but did it in an entirely novel way. The picture was intended as a token of thanksgiving for a victory over the Turks by the Venetian nobleman Jacopo Pesaro, and Titian portrayed him kneeling before the Virgin while an armoured standard-bearer drags a Turkish

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Titian

*Madonna with saints  
and members of the  
Pesaro family, 1519–26*

Altar-painting; oil on  
canvas, 478 × 266 cm,  
188½ × 104¼ in; church  
of Sta Maria dei Frari,  
Venice



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Detail of figure 210

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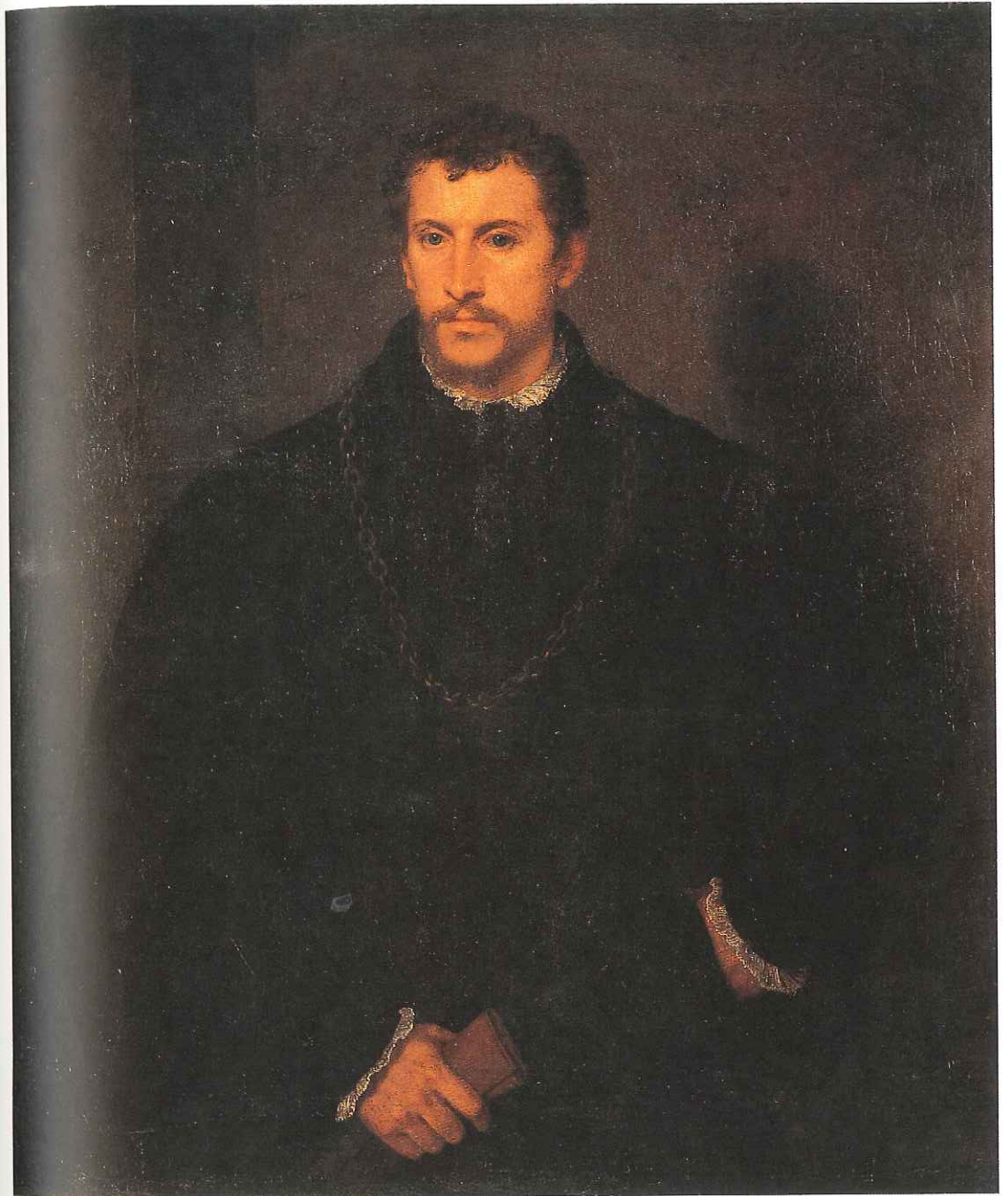
Titian  
 Portrait of a man,  
 the so-called 'Young  
 Englishman',  
 c. 1540–5

Oil on canvas, 111 × 93  
 cm, 43¼ × 36¾ in; Palazzo  
 Pitti, Florence

prisoner behind him. St Peter and the Virgin look down on him benignly while St Francis, on the other side, draws the attention of the Christ Child to the other members of the Pesaro family, who are kneeling in the corner of the picture, *figure 211*. The whole scene seems to take place in an open courtyard, with two giant columns which rise into the clouds where two little angels are playfully engaged in raising the Cross. Titian's contemporaries may well have been amazed at the audacity with which he had dared to upset the old-established rules of composition. They must have expected, at first, to find such a picture lopsided and unbalanced. Actually it is the opposite. The unexpected composition only serves to make it gay and lively without upsetting the harmony of it all. The main reason is the way in which Titian contrived to let light, air and colours unify the scene. The idea of making a mere flag counterbalance the figure of the Holy Virgin would probably have shocked an earlier generation, but this flag, in its rich, warm colour, is such a stupendous piece of painting that the venture was a complete success.

Titian's greatest fame with his contemporaries rested on portraits. We need only look at a head like *figure 212*, usually called a 'Young Englishman', to understand this fascination. We might try in vain to analyse wherein it consists. Compared with earlier portraits it all looks so simple and effortless.







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Detail of figure 212

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Titian

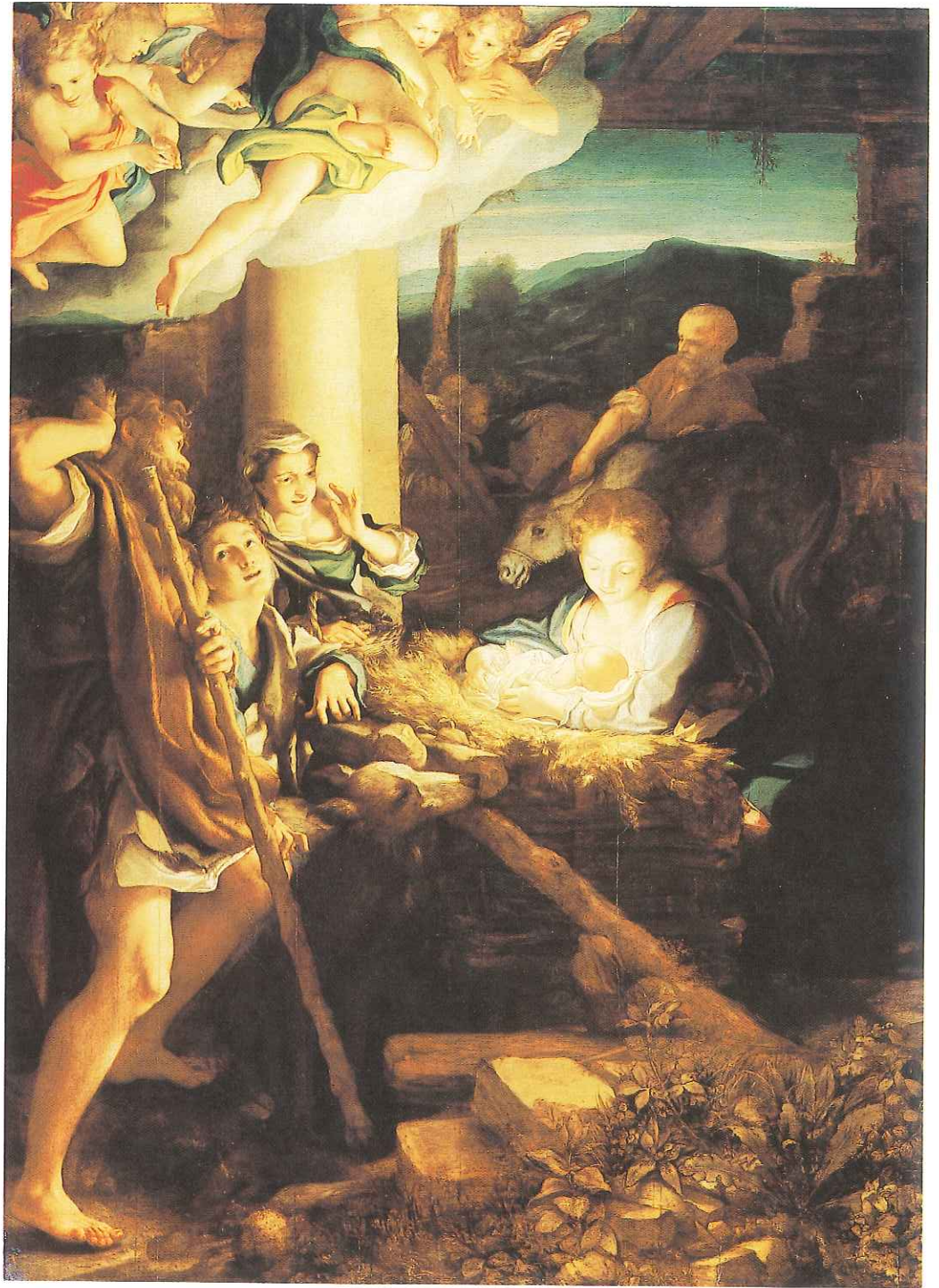
*Pope Paul III with  
Alessandro and Ottavio  
Farnese, 1546*

Oil on canvas, 200 × 173  
cm, 78¾ × 68½ in;  
Museo di Capodimonte,  
Naples

There is nothing of the minute modelling of Leonardo's 'Mona Lisa' in it – and yet this unknown young man seems as mysteriously alive as she does. He seems to gaze at us with such an intense and soulful look that it is almost impossible to believe that these dreamy eyes are only a bit of coloured earth spread on a rough piece of canvas, *figure 213*.

No wonder that the mighty of this world competed with each other for the honour of being painted by this master. Not that Titian was inclined to produce a specially flattering likeness, but he gave them the conviction that through his art they would go on living. They did, or so we feel when we stand in front of his portrait of Pope Paul III in Naples, *figure 214*. It shows the aged ruler of the Church turning towards a young relative, Alessandro Farnese, who is about to pay homage while his brother, Ottavio, calmly looks at us. Clearly Titian knew and admired Raphael's portrait of Pope Leo X with his cardinals painted some twenty-eight years earlier, *page 322, figure 206*, but he must also have aimed at surpassing it in lively characterization. The encounter of these personalities is so convincing and so dramatic that we cannot help speculating about their thoughts and emotions. Are the cardinals plotting? Does the Pope see through their schemes? These are probably idle questions, but they may also have obtruded themselves on contemporaries. The painting remained unfinished when the master left Rome to obey a summons to Germany to paint the Emperor Charles V.





It was not only in the great centres like Venice that artists advanced to the discovery of new possibilities and new methods. The painter who was looked upon by later generations as the most 'progressive' and most daring innovator of the whole period led a lonely life in the small northern Italian town of Parma. He was Antonio Allegri, called Correggio (1489?–1534). Leonardo and Raphael had died and Titian had already risen to fame when Correggio painted his more important works, but we do not know how much he knew of the art of his time. He probably had an opportunity in the neighbouring cities of northern Italy to study the works of some of Leonardo's pupils and to learn about his treatment of light and shade. It was in this field that he worked out entirely new effects which greatly influenced later schools of painters.

Figure 215 shows one of his most famous paintings – 'The Holy Night'. The tall shepherd has just had the vision of the open heavens in which the angels sing their 'Glory to God on High'; we see them whirling gaily about in the cloud and looking down on the scene to which the shepherd has rushed with his long staff. In the dark ruins of the stable he sees the miracle – the new-born Child that radiates light all round, lighting up the beautiful face of the happy mother. The shepherd arrests his movement and fumbles for his cap, ready to kneel down and worship. There are two servant girls – one is dazzled by the light from the manger, one looks happily at the shepherd. St Joseph in the murky dark outside busies himself with the ass.

At first sight the arrangement looks quite artless and casual. The crowded scene on the left does not seem to be balanced by any corresponding group on the right. It is only balanced through the emphasis which the light

gives to the group of the Virgin and the Child. Correggio even more than Titian exploited the discovery that colour and light can be used to balance forms and to direct our eyes along certain lines. It is we who rush to the scene with the shepherd and who are made to see what he sees – the miracle of the Light that shone in darkness of which the Gospel of St John speaks.

There is one feature of Correggio's works which was imitated throughout the subsequent centuries; it is the

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Correggio  
*The Holy Night*,  
c. 1530

Oil on wood, 256 ×  
188 cm, 100¾ × 74 in;  
Gemäldegalerie Alte  
Meister, Dresden

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Correggio  
*The Assumption of the  
Virgin: study for the  
cupola of Parma  
Cathedral*, c. 1526

Red chalk on paper,  
27.8 × 23.8 cm, 12 × 7¾ in;  
British Museum, London





way in which he painted the ceilings and cupolas of churches. He tried to give the worshippers in the nave below the illusion that the ceiling had opened and that they were looking straight into the glory of Heaven. His mastery of light effects enabled him to fill the ceiling with sunlit clouds between which the heavenly hosts seem to hover with their legs dangling downwards. This may not sound very dignified and actually there were people at the time who objected, but when you stand in the dark and gloomy medieval cathedral of Parma and look up towards its dome the impression is nevertheless very great, *figure 217*. Unfortunately this type of effect cannot easily be reproduced in an illustration. It is fortunate, therefore, that we still have some of his drawings which he made in preparation. *Figure 216* shows his first idea for the figure of the Virgin ascending on a cloud and gazing towards the radiance of heaven that awaits her. The drawing is certainly easier to make out than the figure in the fresco, which is even more contorted. Moreover, we are able to see with what simple means Correggio could suggest such a flood of light with a few strokes of his chalk.

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Correggio  
*The Assumption of  
 the Virgin*  
 Fresco; cupola of Parma  
 Cathedral

An orchestra of  
 Venetian painters:  
 detail from Paolo  
 Veronese's 'The  
 Wedding Feast at  
 Cana', 1562-3

Oil on canvas; from left  
 to right, Paolo Veronese  
 (with tenor viol), Jacopo  
 Bassano (with treble  
 cornett), Tintoretto (with  
 lira da braccio or violin),  
 and Titian (with bass viol);  
 Louvre, Paris

