Had David Speiser had not opted for the natural sciences, he might have become an excellent art historian. Growing up, the wonderful collection in Basel’s nearby art museum captured his wholehearted interest. During my years as the curator in the Old Masters section in Basel, we would engage in intensive—and sometimes controversial—discussions about art as we strolled through the museum together. In several publications, David Speiser has discussed aspects of fine art, such as the sixteen-edged building in the background Raphael’s *Sposalizio* in the Brera Gallery in Milan, for example. Speiser is fascinated by the boundaries between art and science and, in particular, by the diverse views on works of fine art held by different groups of scientists.

It is appropriate, therefore, to celebrate David Speiser with a contribution focusing on a work of Italian Renaissance art and, in particular, on the following aspects: Does a change in perspective (literally) provide new insights into one of the mysteries of art history? If so, was this possible change of perspective the incentive for the artist to create his composition the way he did?

Giovanni Bellini’s painting in the Milan Brera (fig. 1), typically referred to as the *Allegoria sacra*, does not fit into any precise category. Its landscape format means that it was obviously not an altar painting, and because of its size (73 x 119 cm) it cannot have been used as an *Andachtsbild* (devotional image). The foreground shows a horizontal terrace. To the left and at the back, this terrace is enclosed by a retaining wall, whereas on the right it is cut from the frame. Beyond the terrace there is a landscape with a body of water partially surrounded by steep mountains. The landscape is sprinkled with constructions and figures and below, in the right third, we can see both a shepherd with his sheep and a centaur at the shoreline. This detail is reminiscent of the story of the famous hermits, St Anthony and St Paul, in which Anthony, in his quest for the missing Paul, was shown the way by a centaur.

The terrace, which is flush with the edge of the painting, is made of paving stones arranged in a striking and sumptuous pattern. Four children and five adults are lingering on it and two more male figures stand behind the balustrade at the back, while another figure at the shoreline faces the left edge of the painting.

A first glance reveals that the figures do not tell a story. They are very widely-spaced, and are not engaged in any significant activity. Nevertheless, they are arranged in the painting according to strict criteria: the group of children is distributed approximately along the middle axis, whereas the adults are positioned more towards the edges of the painting. Moreover, the figures occupy only a small layer of space, as though they were lined up from left to right: her hands folded, Mary sits on a throne atop four steps. She is shielded by a baldachin mounted on an elaborately curved support, and flanked by two further female figures whose identity is far from clear: they may be personifications (*vita activa* and *vita
contemplativa), allegories of virtues (justice, belief or hope), or saints (Mary Magdalene, Saint Catherine or Saint Lucia).\(^1\)

Less ambiguous is the identity of the two male figures on the right: the martyr Saint Sebastian and the Old Testament figure Job, who is venerated as a saint in Venice. The child seated on the cushion with the apple in his hands, beside other boys in the middle of a constellation of figures gathered around a small apple tree in a pot, might represent the Christ child. Whether the remaining boys really symbolise the innocent children murdered by King Herod in Bethlehem remains unclear.\(^2\)

Beyond the balustrade stand the saints Peter and Paul. The identity of the figure at the left edge of the painting is, however, uncertain. He wears a turban-like head covering and appears to be walking away from the scene—an allusion, perhaps, to the Orient turning its back on the Christian doctrine of salvation?\(^3\)

The light illuminates the composition from the left; although it is diffused, its direction is easy to identify along the shadow of the stairs to Mary’s throne. This light is unusual in that it falls precisely at a right angle to the observer’s visual axis; normally one would expect to see a strong source of light creating shadows reaching into the centre of the painting. This unusual technique must be taken into consideration in any analysis of this painting.

There have been numerous attempts to give Bellini’s painting a plausible title or to fathom its complex meanings. Many of these approaches focus on the extremely diverse identities of the figures. In most cases, it is unclear whether the authors have genuinely tried to interpret the figures or if they have simply decided on a particular interpretation in advance and then named their figures accordingly. Many different titles have been given to this composition; one such title derives from an illustration of the first half of the fourteenth century poem Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine of Guillaume de Deguileville,\(^4\) while other suggestions include Meditation on the Passion,\(^5\) Allegories on Mercy and Justice, Meditations on Human Origins, Hortus Conclusus, Meditation on Fall and Redemption,\(^6\) Allegories of the Redemption and, simply, The Holy Family.

Apart from the difficulties inherent in attributing meaningful titles to older paintings, there is the problem alluded to by Umberto Eco: “A title, unfortunately, is in itself a key to interpretation” (quote from the “Postscript to the Name of the Rose”). A title predetermines how we receive a work of art; we feel compelled to see the work as its title suggests.\(^7\)

Facing page: Fig. 1. Giovanni Bellini, Sacra conversazione

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3 Goffen 1989 (see note 1), p. 117.

4 A summary of these suggestions can be found at Tempestini 1997 (see note 1), p. 152-153.

5 Goffen 1989 (see note 1), p. 117.
