

## Introduction Extract 'Sacre Conversazioni'

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This is the Accepted Manuscript version of the first section of the Introduction to *John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Religious Imagination: Sacre Conversazioni* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), edited by Sheona Beaumont and Madeleine Emerald Thiele (pp.1-4).

The full text of the Introduction (pp.1-48), is available for download [at SpringerLink](#).

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### From the book jacket

This volume presents a collection of essays by leading experts which examine nineteenth century ideas about Christian theology, art, architecture, restoration, and curatorial practice. The volume unveils the importance of John Ruskin's writing for today's audience, and allies it with the dynamism of the Pre-Raphaelite religious imagination. Ruskin's drawings and daguerreotypes, as well as Pre-Raphaelite paintings, stained glass, and engravings, are shown to be alive with visual theology: artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, Edward Burne-Jones, and Evelyn de Morgan illuminate aspects of faith and aesthetics.

The interdisciplinary nature of this volume encourages reflection upon praise, truth, and beauty. The aesthetic conversations between Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites themselves become a form of 'sacra conversazione'.

The nineteenth century writer, philosopher and social critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) named Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints* (1505) one of the 'best pictures in the world' (xxii.84).<sup>1</sup> The altarpiece is still housed in the fifteenth century Church of San Zaccaria in Venice and can be found a mere two-minute walk from the Hotel Danieli, which was Ruskin's favourite place to stay when in Venice. He would often visit the church to study and revel in Bellini's colour, arrangement, and pictorial innovation, and to meditate on the 'solemn spirit of religious faith' which he thought animated the work to the last (ix.31).

Bellini's altarpiece is an exceptional example of a *sacra conversazione*, a specific Renaissance term used to describe a genre of Italian (first Florentine, then later, Venetian) paintings. Typically, such a scene depicts the Virgin and Child with a group of others (perhaps saints, or even donor portraits) either alongside or below, holding a 'sacred conversation' (or conversations – *sacre conversazioni*). This genre was more informal than previous artistic conventions had been, and it was done in order to create a less remote vision of biblical figures.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruskin cites two paintings, the second is Bellini's *Madonna of the Frari* (1488, Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice).

All references within this volume use the Library Edition, referencing John Ruskin, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12). Future references will be given by volume and page number in the text, e.g. (xviii.492-493).



Giovanni Bellini,  
*Madonna Enthroned  
with Child and  
Saints*, 1505 (oil on  
panel).

[THIS IMAGE IS  
NOT INCLUDED IN  
THE BOOK]

A *sacra conversazione* creates a shared intimate conversation between the holy figures, in particular, those of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. This most holy relationship is key to the *sacra conversazione*. However, we (the editors), in turn, suggest that the conversation extends out beyond the altarpiece itself, to include the congregant viewing the image. The congregant is, therefore, enabled to participate in the conversation most sacred.

Pictorially, the intimacy of the scene is achieved by bringing together the different spheres of narrative action into one pyramidal shape (rather than maintaining different scenes within one picture plane, or even separating the narratives into different panels, such as in a triptych for example). The Madonna and Child are enthroned, bonding the entire scene together through their own unique and holy relationship. Beneath them, an almost melancholic angel kneels poised to play the viola, and there are four standing saints; St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Lucy stand nearest to the Madonna, but on either side of her, and St. Peter the Apostle and St. Jerome are nearest to the viewer, facing out from their opposing outer edges. Bellini uses the figures to create balance through symmetry, rendering the scene quiet and graceful as a result.

This arrangement is typical of a *sacra conversazione*: quiet, close, and meditative in tone. Rather than depicting highly-animated figures, the atmosphere seeks to convey a ‘rapt stillness of mood, in which the Saints, scarcely looking at one another, seem to communicate at a spiritual rather than a material level’.<sup>2</sup> It is something of a distillation of a shared sacred moment: a pictorial space where the sacred, the spiritual, and even the psychological, commune together. Bellini’s work is a pinnacle of Renaissance artistry. Its Giotto-esque colour and symmetry, combined with, as Ruskin says, its spirit of solemnity makes it almost motionless, otherworldly. Bellini’s ambitious design seems intent on bringing humankind nearer to the divine, or at the very least in conversation with the divine, or musing upon it. The devotional intensity of Bellini’s altarpiece is not, therefore, to be underestimated. It invites active engagement and prayer from those who stand witness to the sacred conversation pictured.

While the term *sacra conversazione* pertains to religious images such as Bellini’s, we, the founders of Visual Theology, use this volume as a space to carefully extend the metaphor beyond its original and particular Renaissance usage. Just as Ruskin sought to find the grace of God through contemplation of Bellini’s aesthetic achievements, we too seek to find a way of enlightening your, and our, understanding about the complexity of the religious imagination, and our collective cultural, historical, and theological relationship with religious imagery. In keeping with this, the theology we are defending art historically / academically is predominantly that of New Testament Christianity, where Christ is understood to bring humanity closer to God.

As you read on, we invite you to consider yourselves to be the congregant: included, observant, engaged, and perhaps part of the religious community. You do not have to be committed to faith, Christian or otherwise, but committed to the idea of conversations about religious imagery and theology. Perhaps you may even be a strenuous and undecided believer, to paraphrase Mark Twain. Either way, this volume intends to further conversations about such sacred matters and to do so, not cynically, but joyfully through engagement with the deeply spiritual and sensitive attention given by great thinkers like Ruskin in the nineteenth century. Our book’s tone follows in the footsteps of Richard Gibson, whose *Charitable Writing* calls ‘you, reader, to take up your inheritance: the inexhaustible wealth of the Christian tradition’.<sup>3</sup>

We include the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates, alongside Ruskin, for they, too, keenly reflected on matters of the spirit and, as Bellini did in his time, created a wealth of innovative religious imagery. Art born from the religious imagination had, as Hunt noted, the ability to aid transformative experiences: ‘[w]hen language [alone] was not transcendental enough’<sup>4</sup>, biblical images and scriptural references could illuminate deeper truths and, as Ruskin saw it, make the invisible visible (v.273). Art, aesthetics, and the religious imagination fuse together a sense of connectedness, creating what Ruskin called a ‘continuous chain’ (x.83) of meaning. This chain is created via conversations about what is meant by the word sacred and is something that has been done continually through the ages via the arts and literature. The title of this book is designed to reflect examples of these imaginative artistic innovations, showing how important Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates considered Christian imagery to be.

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<sup>2</sup> John Steer, *A Concise History of Venetian Painting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p.62.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hughes Gibson and James Edward Beitler III, *Charitable Writing: Cultivating Virtue Through Our Words* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.260-261.

Here, then, we present the literary, philosophical, poetic, and religious ideas as imagined by Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, as a form of *sacra conversazione*. The combination of their voices can be heard in their earnest observations, the soft tones of their leaf studies, the sadness of their social realist paintings, and their jewel-toned calls to charity. These *sacre conversazioni* unveil the imaginative ways in which these artists express their ideas about theology, ecology, and beauty. They offer, in the end, a threshold, beyond which we hope more conversations about matters sacred will arise. After all, neither the Christian tradition nor its corresponding visual tradition is static.