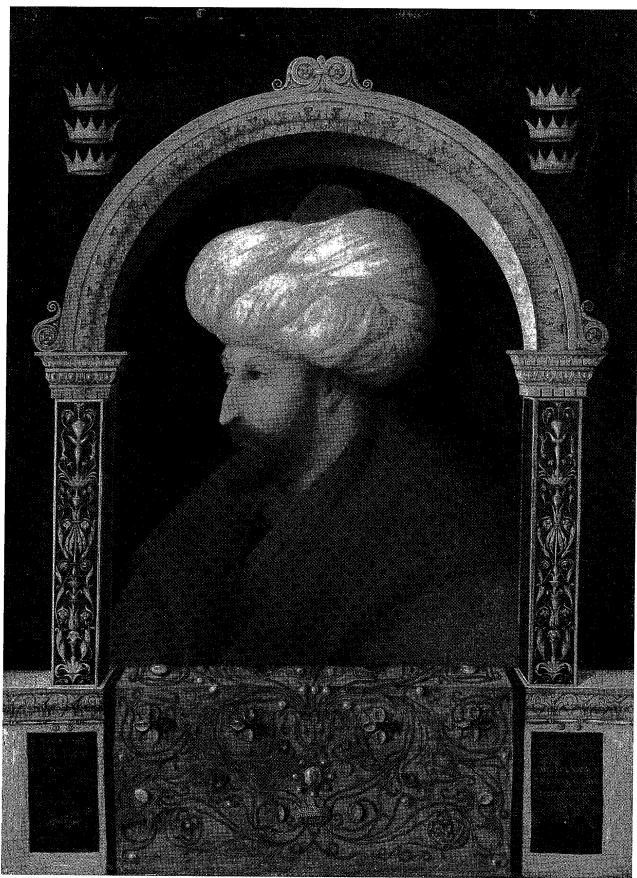


The sultan's true face? Gentile Bellini, Mehmet II, and the values of verisimilitude¹

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Art historians are often concerned with firsts, so it is not surprising that there have been a number of scholarly attempts to identify the first accurate representation of a non-Westerner by a European artist. Among the candidates for this achievement are works by Pisanello, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, and Benozzo Gozzoli.² When it comes to representations of the Turks, the honor of primacy generally goes to portraits made by Western artists working for the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II in Istanbul between about 1460 and 1480. The majority of these works are portrait medals, but the most unusual and striking, because it is nearly life-sized and painted in color, is the canvas now in the collection of the National Gallery, London, dated 1480 and attributed to the Venetian painter Gentile Bellini (Fig. 2.1).³ Most scholars have located the portrait of Sultan Mehmed II within a wider discussion of a general move from fantasy to naturalism in Western representations of the Turks, a move centered in Venice where contact with the Eastern Mediterranean and the lands beyond was particularly intense.⁴ Along with textiles, glass, ceramics, metalwork, and spices, Venetian travelers returned home from the East with the knowledge necessary, as Julian Raby put it, to produce and appreciate the "first factual images of the Muslim world."⁵ Bellini's portrait is widely considered an important participant in a resulting transition away from stereotype and toward more "authentic" images of the (Islamic) other.⁶

Scholars have also acknowledged the pictorial rhetoric of Bellini's portrait. Massimo Villa notes that, for all its apparent precision (including the sultan's arched brow and aquiline nose), the painting is a work of courtly flattery;⁷ Jürg Meyer zur Capellen links the pairing of portrait likeness and heraldic emblem (the six floating crowns) with the language of the medal, a genre favored by Mehmed;⁸ and a number of scholars have examined the intersection of Italian and Ottoman portrait traditions in Bellini's composition.⁹ But equally persistent,



2.1 Attributed to Gentile Bellini, *The Sultan Mehmet II*, 1480. Oil on canvas.
Photo © The National Gallery, London.

if not more so, are claims to the picture's truth, particularly those directed at making connections between the sultan's appearance in life and his appearance in paint. For instance, Mehmed's drawn face and sunken neck have been used to confirm the dating of the portrait to 1480, since the sultan died of an illness in the following year.¹⁰ Armenag Saskisian used a similar sort of logic to place the various portraits of Mehmed in chronological order, based on the apparent aging of the sultan from image to image.¹¹

And yet, like any claims regarding the reliability of a picture, these assertions rest on a shaky sort of truth. Paintings are highly effective vehicles of invention, often incorporating half-truths and even lies. A picture can just as easily convey a desired appearance as an actual one, and certainly many of those who sat for portraits appreciated this possibility of deception. Yet at the same time, a primary goal of many artists in the post-medieval Western tradition was to convince viewers that their imagery presented a faithful physical transcription of its subject, whether or not that was the case. That a picture *seems* true to life does not assure us that it actually is—a seemingly obvious stance but one not infrequently neglected in studies of exotica and otherness.¹² Finally and even more essentially, verisimilitude itself is an unstable notion, dependent upon the visual culture in which an individual operates and the expectations that are brought to imagery.¹³

Gentile Bellini's portrait of Sultan Mehmed offers a productive place to examine the complicated relationship between truth and painting, particularly with regard to the Western European imaging of "the Turk." One may begin by questioning the portrait's very reputation for verisimilitude and truthfulness. For despite the lifelike aspects of the tapestry, architecture, and costume, the painting is strikingly artificial in its construction and overall "feel" (how, for instance, is the odd, self-sustaining arch positioned in relation to the sultan; and do the crowns float or sit upon that black background?)¹⁴ This instability between material fact and pictorial transcription, between truth and fiction, is central to the story of the portrait, from the point of its production in Istanbul to its later reception in Venice and to its eventual "canonization" among the authentic and reliable images of the Other. The circulation of the painting, which passed from East to West, is also critical, because of the shifts in interpretation and significance that result from shifts in audience. Although scholars are unable to trace its itinerary with precision, the generally accepted account is that, at some point soon after its production in 1480 (and the sultan's death in 1481) the portrait was sold by Mehmed's son Bayezid II, a relatively orthodox figure who apparently disapproved of certain aspects of his father's artistic patronage.¹⁵ The painting passed to Venice, presumably in the hands of a merchant who had bought it to take home and hang in the private space of a Venetian palace. Carlo Ridolfi's mid-seventeenth-century *Maraviglie dell'arte*, which places the portrait in the possession of Pietro Zeno, claims that Bellini brought the painting back himself—a claim that, though unsubstantiated, indicates that by Ridolfi's day, it had already been in Venice for some time.¹⁶

The particular history of this portrait means that it does not fit easily into the conventional colonial or post-colonial paradigm of “West representing East,” in which the subject of the image is passively transcribed for purposes defined by the artist and his circle of compatriots. Julian Raby reminds us that Bellini’s visit to Istanbul was “not occasioned by a European spirit of enquiry but by the patronage of a Muslim potentate,” and that Mehmed was an informed patron with a lively interest in representation and pictorial verisimilitude.¹⁷ Yet these cautions are consistently ignored or undermined by the tendency of much scholarship towards proto-ethnographic notions of accurate transcription. Assuming “truth” to be a compelling point of interest in Bellini’s picture, this essay investigates the different forms and values that “truth” might have held for different viewers—for Mehmed, for Bellini, and for later Venetian audiences. It also makes a distinction between these truths and the truth sought, for example, by art historians looking for the first documentary image of an individual Turk.¹⁸

Despite some of the uncertainties surrounding it, the story of the portrait’s production stands at the center of this investigation. It was painted by Gentile Bellini in Istanbul, where the Venetian spent 16 months at the request of Sultan Mehmed. In his first-hand account of the activities of the Venetian Senate, Domenico Malipiero reports that an envoy came to Venice in 1479 expressly to deliver a letter from the sultan requesting the services of “un bon depentor che sapia retrazer” (“a good painter who knows how to make *retracti* [or *ritratti*]”).¹⁹ Even though the sultan’s criteria are filtered through Malipiero’s transcription (which inevitably reveals a Venetian interpretation of Mehmed’s wishes) the language of the request is worth noting. The sultan did not name Bellini in particular but was looking more broadly for an artist esteemed and recommended by the leaders of Venice. Giorgio Vasari claims that Mehmed sought Gentile’s brother Giovanni, whose portrait work, he says, had been seen in Istanbul. But the famously biased sixteenth-century biographer was likely to favor the more “modern” Giovanni; and Gentile’s success in his own day indicates he was no mere understudy. He was a favored portraitist of the doges, and sending him to Istanbul can thus be regarded as a diplomatic gift of no small consequence.²⁰ On a literal level, the selection of Gentile also fulfills the request for a painter skilled in the art of the *retracto*, a term typically understood to indicate a portrait, and one that will be examined in greater detail below.

Mehmed’s interest in Italian art is an important facet of this investigation, even if the precise language and details of his request to the senate are uncertain. Thanks to the groundbreaking work of Julian Raby, we know a good deal about Mehmed’s patronage patterns and his artistic interests. The innovative art produced on the Italian peninsula in the mid-fifteenth century intrigued him, and his varied holdings are said to have included a collection of Florentine engravings as well as a diverse array of objects produced for him by visiting artists and architects.²¹ He was particularly engaged with the art of portraiture.

Indeed it is possible that Mehmed’s introduction to European imagery came through the easily circulated medium of the portrait medal, and it is a fact that over the years he recruited a number of Italians to bring the art of portraiture to the Ottoman court.²² These included Matteo de’ Pasti, who was sent to Istanbul specifically to make portraits of the sultan (*ad te pingendum effingendumque*),²³ and Costanzo da Ferrara (Costanzo di Moysis), whose famous medal was a model for Gentile’s own work in this genre (Fig. 2.2).

By the end of the 1470s, stimulated by favorable political circumstances, Mehmed had concentrated his burgeoning patronage activity on Florence and Venice, two centers of prolific artistic production and significant innovation. The sultan was also a close follower of humanist intellectual tendencies. His tutor, long misidentified as Cyriacus of Ancona but apparently a colleague of that celebrated antiquarian, is reported to have met with Mehmed daily to study works of ancient and more recent history.²⁴ It seems likely, given his various interests, that the sultan had knowledge of contemporary artistic treatises as well, possibly including the writings of Filarete and Leon Battista Alberti.²⁵ Franz Babinger cautions us against reinventing Mehmed in the image of a Renaissance scholar-prince, yet at the same time underscores the sultan’s strong interest in learning from his Western visitors, particularly the Italians.²⁶ Certainly the latest innovations in architectural design, bronze casting, and pictorial perspective caught the attention of this engaged and informed patron.²⁷

Through exposure to imagery and theory, contact with artists and scholars, and his specialized interest in portraiture, Mehmed was undoubtedly attuned to one of the principal interests of his contemporaries in Italy, namely the possibility and potential of pictorial verisimilitude. In the rhetoric surrounding fifteenth-century Italian painting, particularly portraiture, the ability to make a faithful copy after nature was increasingly the benchmark of skill and accomplishment. One of the highest praises for an artist’s work was that it was “lifelike”—that it could deceive a viewer with its expert illusionism or, in the case of a portrait, appear even to be on the verge of speech. Alberti’s entire treatise *On Painting* is predicated on the notion of taking nature as a model and developing a rigorous system for painting that “aims to represent things



2.2 Gentile Bellini, *Mehmed II* (obverse), c.1480 (later casting). Bronze Medal. Samuel H. Kress Collection. Image © 2007 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

seen" (albeit in idealized form).²⁸ This idea lies at the root of the myth that Italian artists had saved painting from further decline and decay by returning it to its rightful source: nature. Giorgio Vasari, who canonized this myth in the middle of the sixteenth century, passed along classic tales of artists so skilled in the imitation of the world that they could fool and amaze viewers. Writing about the sultan's reaction to Bellini's portrait, Vasari fits it neatly into this very canon: "[Gentile] portrayed Sultan Mehmed from life so well," he wrote, "that it was considered a miracle."²⁹

Taken in this broader context, Mehmed's interest in Italian portraiture can reasonably be refined to a more specific interest in the representational project of mimesis. This observation has been made by Julian Raby, who incorporates it into his broader analysis of Mehmed's artistic and intellectual patronage.³⁰ But the point merits more focused consideration as well, particularly for how it can help position the "truthfulness" of Bellini's portrait at various historical and scholarly moments—beginning with the period of its production in Istanbul. As Raby notes, portrait sketches in a notebook attributed to the young Mehmed suggest that this was an early area of personal inquiry for the sultan. These heads, in various views and attitudes, are not idealized but emphasize instead physical peculiarities and eccentricities, indicating an interest in, if not mastery of, naturalistic portraiture.³¹ Likewise, the sultan's fascination with verisimilitude characterizes many of the surviving stories about Gentile Bellini's stay in Istanbul (beyond Vasari's). An early source for this theme is the *Historia Turchesca* written by Giovan Maria Angiolello, a native of Vicenza residing at the Ottoman court during Bellini's visit and generally held to be a reliable witness.³² Angiolello indicates that Mehmed valued the artist's renderings—of individuals renowned for their beauty, and of a mad, singing dervish—as trustworthy visual testimony. Mehmed apparently had the dervish painted in order to assess his character and, based on Bellini's representation of the man's "wild eyes" (*occhi sboridi*), concluded that it was quite unstable.³³

A similar connection between truth, painting, and Mehmed's approach to Bellini's work lived on in the lore surrounding the artist's travels and took dramatic form in Carlo Ridolfi's mid-seventeenth-century lives of the artists, the *Maraviglie dell'arte*.³⁴ Ridolfi reports that, upon viewing Bellini's image of the beheading of Saint John the Baptist, Mehmed expressed doubt about the painting's anatomical accuracy. In the presence of the artist, he summoned a slave and had him decapitated so that he could point out the flaws in the artist's representation. This story almost certainly says more about European fears of the Turks than it does about Mehmed's actual rhetorical practices.³⁵ And yet it stands as anecdotal reinforcement that what mattered for the sultan were the power and capabilities of artistic verisimilitude. The fact that Mehmed had Bellini depict not just himself but a range of court figures as well³⁶ suggests that the sultan's interest in portraiture was not limited to the familiar, propagandistic role of Italian Renaissance ruler imagery.

Certainly, the potential of Bellini's picture to concretize (and perhaps even promote) an authoritative imperial persona was important. But other factors, including his pattern of patronage and the circumstances of the portrait's production, suggest that the sultan was drawn to something more fundamental, namely the capacity of pictures to duplicate the visual world.

If we are to believe Vasari, it was a remarkably lifelike self-portrait that finally compelled the sultan to send Bellini away. The ruler was so amazed by the picture's verisimilitude, Vasari wrote, "that he could only imagine Gentile was possessed of some divine spirit; and if it were not the case, as they say, that this practice [*esercizio*] is forbidden among the Turks, the sultan would never have dismissed him."³⁷ Regardless of whether or not one considers Vasari historically reliable, he touches on a matter that must be addressed, namely the perception of Muslim attitudes toward pictorial representation in general and towards lifelike images of the human face in particular. Most outsiders, both in Vasari's day and in our own, believe that Islam strictly forbids such imagery. In fact, although there was a prevailing inhibition in the Muslim tradition toward the making of human likenesses, there are no explicit prescriptions against this in the Koran. Koranic language does, however, connect image-making to creation, an act that is limited to God. Despite regular reinforcement of this notion in the writings of theologians and jurists, a prohibitive attitude toward images was never codified into doctrine.³⁸

Furthermore, as the very magnificence of many historic Islamic courts confirms, the practices of rulers were not measured against ordinary standards of behavior and decorum, and attitudes toward representational imagery varied greatly from kingdom to kingdom and from ruler to ruler.³⁹ The Ottoman court in Mehmed's day, for instance, was not particularly driven by religious motives, yet Mehmed's son and successor Bayezid II is said to have disposed of his father's art collection out of a sense of offended orthodoxy. Individualized portraits were produced in significant numbers at the court of the Timurid dynasty, whose territory lay to the east of that controlled by the Ottomans, and whose reign (c.1370–1506) bracketed Mehmed's. The Timurids shared Mehmed's emphasis on artistic patronage⁴⁰ and were open to the aesthetic aims of verisimilitude as well.⁴¹ Most of the portraits produced under Mehmed, while revealing experiments in form and style, build directly on Timurid traditions. Produced by local artists at court, these works tend to be miniature in scale, to form a series of images that recount a historical narrative or reveal a dynastic chronology, and to sit alongside text in a relationship of description and expansion.

Bellini's portrait, nearly life-size and self-sufficient, stands dramatically outside this tradition. Perhaps Mehmed's choice was an expression of grandeur, of the power of the ruler to push against prescribed boundaries and expectations. But there is also a highly personal dimension to the painting that suggests a different, private role, one that placed it beyond common consideration.

Julian Raby notes that Mehmed generally put local artists to the task of public commissions, reserving Bellini and his fellow expatriates for more private undertakings. The objects they produced, including paintings, drawings, medals, *cose di lussuria* (typically interpreted as erotic images, but perhaps more accurately “works of opulence”⁴²), and even Christian devotional pieces, were not intended to have a broad audience. In fact, Mehmed’s approach to the patronage of Italian artists was so personal that it passed away with him when he died in 1481. It is therefore unclear just what role a portrait like that painted by Bellini would have played at the Ottoman court. It seems to sit at a rather unusual intersection of public and private, or shared and secluded, viewing. In the Italian categorization of images, the painting is a courtly work with a broadly pronounced message of majestic authority and bears all the marks of a portrait made to aggrandize and ennoble its sitter: impressive scale, dignified form and composition, and the pronounced use of symbols of power and of territorial dominion.⁴³ Certainly, when Mehmed contemplated this picture he was contemplating his own majesty, and the stately pictorial rhetoric of the image reinforced that message. Likewise, if he showed the painting to others or if he intended to share it in the form of a gift or copies,⁴⁴ its imperial voice would have spoken loud and clear.

And yet, although the portrait is apparently extroverted, concerned with public presentation and pronouncements, its importance for Mehmed may well have been focused inward, on the act of representation and the recognition of likeness. The elaborate arch or presentation window that frames the sultan aptly symbolizes this duality, as it renders the sitter both untouchably distant (a ruler) and indisputably present (a physical being). Though in form distinctly Venetian, in function the arch resonates with the palace compound built by Mehmed that came to be known in later centuries as the Topkapı Sarayı. As Maria Pia Pedani Fabris has argued, this architectural element is reminiscent of a gate or *kapi*, and in particular the gate to the third court of the palace complex,⁴⁵ where Mehmed increasingly isolated himself in an evolved ceremonial that turned on distance and reverence. Even if the sultan never framed himself precisely as Bellini frames him, the layout of his palace relied on a strict division between exterior (exclusion) and interior (inclusion) and on a spectrum of public and private spaces that the composition of the portrait sustains.⁴⁶

Bellini, we must believe, had access to the inner sanctum of the Topkapı’s third court: artists working in the court were part of the select group allowed in, and the painter of the sultan’s portrait would certainly have been among them. Angiolello gives specific hints as to the closeness of the interactions between the sultan and Bellini, as well as of those between the sultan and painting. He reports, in connection with Bellini’s portrait of the mad dervish, a remarkably intimate conversation between the two men as they examine Bellini’s picture. “Gentile,” the sultan prods, soliciting the painter’s opinion of his sitter’s character, “you know I’ve always told you that you can speak

to me, as long as you speak the truth, so tell me what you think.”⁴⁷ The site of this conversation is unnamed, but encounters like it took place in one of the spaces of the third court. There, in the Chamber of Petitions, ambassadors were received and gifts (possibly including portraits) were paraded before the sultan as he sat framed in a ceremonial window.⁴⁸ Bellini may also have had access to the Privy Chambers, Mehmed’s private quarters, where there was storage for valuables, or to the Inner Treasury, where the sultan kept his collections. No mere storage vault, the Inner Treasury was intended to function also as a display space, with large niches designed for the presentation of objects.⁴⁹ Mehmed apparently spent considerable time there contemplating his collections, both alone and in the company of others.

It is here that Bellini’s portrait should be situated. Although it appears, to the Western eye, a very public work, the circumstances of image-making at Mehmed’s court and our knowledge of the sultan as an involved, engaged collector suggest that it played a more intimate role. Following Gülru Necipoğlu’s description of the treasury complex as a place “for relaxation and intellectual contemplation,” one can readily imagine Mehmed in private meditation on the portrait, judging it less as a vehicle of monarchic self-promotion than as a place to wonder about Italian art and its reputation as a model of verisimilitude. Perhaps it occurred to the sultan that Bellini’s native Venice was famed for its reflective waters; perhaps he envisioned this image as a sort of reflection-in-paint, though one that, because it did not return his gaze, presented a neutral surface to be studied and evaluated.⁵⁰ Or perhaps, schooled as he was in classical texts and humanist scholarship, the sultan recalled Ovid’s Narcissus and the face of his watery double, gleaming off the surface of a pool (this story had been taken up a half-century earlier by Alberti as marking the moment of painting’s invention, and returns us, somewhat unwittingly, to the self-portrait that, according to Vasari, impelled Bellini’s dismissal). Whatever response one might imagine, it seems that one of Mehmed’s primary aesthetic interests was the range of possibilities offered by an Italian mode of picturing famed for its attempts to duplicate the visual world.

Two important understandings can be drawn from these observations. The first is that Bellini’s portrait is not merely an Ottoman adaptation of an Italian pictorial genre. It can be situated at Mehmed’s court in a more conceptual role, as a “test” for painting or even a testimony to what painting might accomplish. Beyond aggrandizing the ruler, Bellini’s canvas acted as a showpiece for the mimetic possibilities of painting, and as a place for the sultan to examine in close detail the successes and failures of that art. The second point to emerge is that, from Mehmed’s perspective, the portrait that Bellini painted was not an apparently truthful document of the foreign, as it generally has been interpreted in Western scholarship. Rather, at the moment of its production, this portrait constituted an exploration of the possibilities of pictorial documentation. This is a significantly different project, one that

recasts this supposedly “exotic” representation (of the other) in its original role as an image of the most closely familiar (the self).

Turning now from the visual engagement of the patron to that of the painter, one can observe a different sort of dynamic emerging from the portrait’s verisimilar surface. From this point of view, verisimilitude would have confirmed and perhaps even promoted Bellini’s pictorial skill. It would have satisfied his patron’s interest in naturalistic imagery, thus constituting a fulfillment of a professional obligation on the part of the artist. It is critical to remember that although his portrait eventually traveled west and gathered a reputation as a trustworthy transcription of an alien face, it was produced in the context of the Ottoman court, under the intensely interested eye of its Ottoman subject. For Bellini, working at that court, a “lifelike” transcription served as a mark of professional mastery and accomplishment (and a fulfillment of the expectations communicated in the sultan’s original invitation), rather than as a compilation of accurate ethnographic detail for viewers back home. Nor did the image originally serve as evidence that Bellini had actually seen the sultan (such evidence would have been unnecessary), though it came to have this significance for subsequent audiences in Venice. Indeed, only in a new, alien setting, away from Mehmed’s watchful eye, could the portrait begin to take on a value of documentation akin to that ascribed to it in modern scholarship. Only there could questions about its verisimilitude and reliability move away from concern with the theory and potential of painting and toward issues of painted imagery as witness to and testimony of an unknown or unseen subject.

This shift in interpretation was inevitable, as new audiences viewed the portrait according to experiences and expectations entirely different from those of Mehmed, its original patron/subject/viewer. Certainly very few, if any, of those who saw the portrait in Venice would have been able to attest to its mimetic veracity. Having never met the sultan, they could not compare the image to the model as they might have with other portraits or as Mehmed himself had done. (However, they might have undertaken this sort of visual exercise elsewhere on Bellini’s canvases: its illusionistic marble frame, considered against the contemporary portal of San Zaccaria in Venice, confirms Bellini’s skill in duplicating the natural world). In judging the “truth” of Mehmed’s appearance, Venetian viewers had to rely on cues more indirect and less precise than verifiable mimesis. One such cue was Bellini’s self-promoted reputation as a traveler to the Ottoman court. Upon his return from Istanbul, the artist transformed these experiences into a central element of his personal and professional iconography. The contemporary humanist Francesco Negro, for example, reported that Bellini arrived in Venice dressed *alla turca*, in a Turkish manner, with an exotic Phrygian cloak and a turban; he also wore a gold chain that he claimed had been given to him, along with a title of knighthood, by Sultan Mehmed.⁵¹

In addition, Bellini often appended his exotic experiences to his name. An inscription on the reverse of his medal of the sultan, for example, combines a reference to an earlier honor received from Emperor Frederick III (*comes palatinus*: count palatine) with his newly acquired Ottoman one (*equus auratus*: golden knight).⁵² And in 1481, just returned from Istanbul, he incorporated references to both his title and his Ottoman experiences into his signature on the *Departure of the Venetian Ambassadors to the Court of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa*, a prominently positioned picture (it hung in the Great Council Hall of the Ducal Palace until it was destroyed by fire in 1577) that resonated with Bellini’s own role as cultural ambassador.⁵³ In his *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria* this claim took visual form: the artist stands in the foreground wearing the gold chain given to him by Mehmed and, hanging from it, a medal emblazoned with the three crowns symbolic of the sultan’s territorial dominion.⁵⁴ The chain appears in other images of Bellini as well, including a portrait medal by Antonio Gambello of 1500,⁵⁵ and, from about 150 years later, the engraved frontispiece to Ridolfi’s *Maraviglie dell’arte*. Together, chain and medal stood as tangible signs of Bellini’s journeys, identifying him as a bona fide traveler to distant eastern lands.

The inscription on the portrait of Mehmed, because of its condition, cannot be fully transcribed or confidently translated: only the dating is clearly legible. Attempts have been made to recover its contents, however, and one partial interpretation reads: “... the true skill of Gentile Bellini, nature’s golden soldier, recalls the sultan’s [appearance], [and] represents all things in their particularities ... [Bellini] made this same image on the 25th day of the month of November 1480.”⁵⁶ The painter’s claim to witnessing, rooted most distinctly in the precision of the date, also comes across in the painting’s proclamation of verisimilitude.⁵⁷ One might wonder if the inscription was added for the benefit of the sultan, for Bellini, or for other, more distant, audiences. Like that of Mehmed’s image, its value shifts according to context and viewership. In Istanbul, in 1480, it might have been a statement of modernity and currency or an authorial flourish underscoring the work’s completion. In Venice, years later, it had other implications. Though this distant audience was probably unaware of the specifics of Bellini’s itinerary, the inscription insists on a precise moment of production, suggesting that the painter had sat across from the sitter and studied his countenance in person. Faith in such an encounter, according to Harry Berger, is the necessary “fiction” behind an authoritative work of Renaissance portraiture.⁵⁸

For an artist, a maker of images, legitimacy as a traveler suggested authority as a witness. Patricia Fortini Brown has written extensively and persuasively on the importance of testimonial accounts in fifteenth-century Venice, arguing that the descriptive language of Venetian chronicle and diary-writing found parallel expression in narrative paintings, where a wealth of contemporary, quotidian details echoes the first-person, vernacular accounts of the chronicles.⁵⁹ And in fact, Bellini’s oeuvre exemplifies the particular manner of



2.3 Gentile Bellini, *Procession of the Relic of the True Cross in Piazza San Marco*, 1496. Oil on canvas. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice; Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

the “painted witness.” Not only is it rich in descriptive detail, it has a neutral quality suggestive of a scanning eye and objective hand, and an approach to representing the visual world that seems more transcriptive than interpretative. His famous *Procession of the Relic of the True Cross in Piazza San Marco* (Fig. 2.3), for example, is a riot of visual information with no clear point of rest or focus: although the richly wrought church facade attracts the eye, for instance, it does not center the narrative.⁶⁰ Bellini’s portraits, while less elaborate, have a similar neutrality of treatment. Despite the damage to the surface of the picture of Mehmed, it is clear that the ornate tapestry and architecture were rendered in at least as lively a brush as that used to depict the sitter. Though the composition directs our attention to Mehmed, the labors of Bellini’s hand do not: our eye is as busy at the picture’s frame as it is at the center (indeed, it is tempting to interpret the picture as a portrait of a tapestry, so vital and present does this textile appear even today). John Pope-Hennessy criticized this aspect of Bellini’s portraiture as a “deadly evenness of emphasis” that reveals “the mind of a cartographer,” critiquing what he perceived to be Bellini’s lack of focus or of objective, beyond that of charting a physical surface.⁶¹

Despite the negativity of Pope-Hennessy’s remarks, they are helpful in considering how Bellini’s manner was valued (positively, in this case) by his contemporaries (including both his Italian patrons and the sultan), as well as how it was associated with verisimilitude and truthfulness. Indeed, by conjoining portraiture and cartography Pope-Hennessy indirectly and unwittingly returns us to the *retracto*, a category of imagery with which Gentile Bellini was closely associated. A full consideration of the meaning of this word provides

insight on the request that initiated Bellini’s journey: to repeat the words of Malipiero, the sultan asked the Venetians for a “good painter who knows how to make *retracti*.” In fifteenth-century parlance, “*retracto*” did not refer exclusively to portraiture as it does now (in its modern Italian form of *ritratto*), but to a broader category of imagery that included, notably, topographical views. Bellini excelled in this arena, so much so that Francesco Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, commissioned him to paint not only a portrait of the doge but also a set of cityscapes, including representations of Cairo and Venice. The word *retracto* was used interchangeably for these commissions.⁶² Sultan Mehmed, it should be noted, also had an interest in topography and the European tradition of map-making: in addition to portraits, Angiolello recounts, the sultan commissioned Bellini to paint a picture of Venice.⁶³

In its most literal, etymological sense, *retracto* means “re-tracing,” a process that both mapping and portraiture share. The term refers less to subject matter than to the relationship between the image and that which it claims to represent, a relationship rooted in an actual encounter (the Latin root *tractus* implies a direct, causal connection between a source and its “trace”⁶⁴). A *retracto* is, then, a mode of representation characterized by a precise transcription of visual appearances.⁶⁵ This understanding of the *retracto* is supported by Giuseppe Boerio’s dictionary of the Venetian dialect, first published in 1856: here the definition of the verb *retrar* refers not to the depiction of a face, as one might expect, but specifies the act of painting or sculpting “after nature.”⁶⁶ Another way of framing this notion, one particularly relevant to the present discussion of Bellini’s portrait and its reputation for truthfulness, is to refer back to Patricia Fortini Brown’s study of witnessing and to interpret the *retracto* as a sort of eyewitness report given in visual form.

In his own day, Venetian audiences recognized Bellini as a master of the *retracto*, or the painted eyewitness report. This is what his selection as visiting painter to the sultan suggests, and it is further confirmed in the language surrounding his commissions for Francesco Gonzaga. Bellini’s most famous *retracto*, the *Procession of the Relic of the True Cross in Piazza San Marco*, situated at the Venetian Scuola (or lay confraternity) of San Giovanni Evangelista, afforded further confirmation of his skill as a transcriber of the visual world (Fig. 2.3). Viewers could readily compare it to their knowledge of the piazza itself and have confidence in the painter’s ability to “re-trace.” His pictorial manner, that evenness of treatment so heartily disdained by Pope-Hennessy, can now be imagined as a guarantee of the authenticity of his imagery, with the small, closely observed details distributed across the surface of the image suggesting a tight, intimate relationship with the subject of the picture. Characteristic of a “re-tracing,” they are the stylistic mark of an image based on and respectful of visual appearances.

These meditations on Bellini’s manner and contemporary reactions to it shed new light on the question of Bellini’s reliability as a witness, on the purported

accuracy of the portrait of Mehmed, and on what such accuracy did or did not signify to early Venetian viewers. Their faith in the authority of this picture was grounded not in knowledge of the sultan's actual appearance but in Bellini's familiar, transcriptive style, as well as in the way his image stood out from other images of Mehmed known in Venice. The fact that his is a nearly life-size picture, painted in color, and incorporating illusionistic devices (the mock parapet, consistent shading to connote depth, and tactile surfaces suggesting jewels, embroidery, and fur) distinguished it from the other images of Mehmed that were in circulation in the early sixteenth century (Fig. 2.2). These were graphic (prints attributed to Antonio Pollaiuolo and copied after Dürer, for example) and glyptic (the various medals mentioned above), made of materials that could not convey an illusion of presence comparable to that of Bellini's painting. Especially in contrast with other depictions of the sultan, this portrait stood out as "real," and its illusionism may well have persuaded viewers of its truth. For those who knew of Bellini and his work, conviction in his skill as a maker of *retracti* and knowledge of his travels to Istanbul acted as further verification of the portrait's reliability. In short, for early modern Venetian viewers of Bellini's portrait, the "truth" of this picture was rooted not in a matching of image to model, but in a perception of truthfulness grounded in the rhetoric of the picture (medium, style, scale) and in a visual context defined by other, less persuasively mimetic images.⁶⁷

It is reasonable to wonder if "truth" mattered to this audience at all: were they looking at pictures of Turks to find out what Turks actually looked like? This is certainly how scholarship (if tacitly) frames the historical significance of Bellini's portrait, but the present exploration of its history indicates that there might have been other reasons for producing or appreciating a lifelike image. For Mehmed the interest in verisimilitude seems to have been centered on an exploration of painting and its mimetic possibilities; for Bellini, it constituted at least to some extent the fulfillment of a professional obligation. Early Venetian audiences may have been equipped to approach an image like this one as informational not because it was a truthful source, but rather because it *appeared* to them to be so. Similarly, modern viewers and scholars do well not to equate the semblance of truth with veracity, whether in representations of the strange or of the familiar.

There are several interesting codas to this investigation, incidents that underscore the malleability of "truth" as it characterizes Bellini's portrait of the sultan. In 1578, almost exactly one century after Bellini completed his picture, the Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha requested that Niccolò Barbarigo, the Venetian bailo (chief diplomat), assist him in bringing painted portraits of the Ottoman sultans from Venice to Istanbul.⁶⁸ Rather than documenting a geographically distant subject, these portraits were intended to bridge the temporal gap of history and serve as the basis of an authoritative dynastic series. Evidently, contemporary Ottoman collections featured portraits of Mehmed

and subsequent sultans that were not considered reliable or trustworthy, and the Grand Vizier's request suggests that visual authority and a claim to the true countenance of these figures now lay (somewhat ironically) to the west, in Italy.

Over four centuries later in 1999, three days before Turkey was accepted for candidacy in the European Union, an exhibition featuring a single work, Bellini's portrait of Mehmed II, opened in Istanbul. In remarks made to the Turkish press by visitors to the exhibition, it is clear that Bellini's picture still holds value as a definitive representation of the sultan, though the frame of reference for understanding this authority has shifted significantly. "We have seen this picture so many times," said one visitor, "in so many schoolbooks and on so many walls over so many years that it's really imprinted on our brains. Now it's finally here, the real thing."⁶⁹ From this viewer's perspective, the authority of Bellini's portrait lies less with its reputation as a "true" image than with its status as an "original" work of art, the authentic source of so many well-known reproductions. It is a sort of truth that Sultan Mehmed, with his interest in representation and mimesis, may well have appreciated.

Notes

1. In addition to the editor and contributors to this volume, I would like to thank Tom Cummins, Emlyn Eisenach, Anne F. Harris, Nicole Lissan, Linda Seidel, and Rebecca Zorach for their help with this essay, both in its earliest versions and in its later reworkings. Unintentionally, but productively, its title plays off Ubaldo Meroni's "Il Vero volto di Maometto II" (Meroni 1983).
2. These are, respectively, Pisanello's Tatar figure at San Zeno in Verona and his medal of the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaeologus (Raby 1991: 78); Lorenzetti's Mongol in his fresco of the *Martyrdom of the Franciscans* in Siena and Gozzoli's African archer in the *Procession of the Magi* in Florence (Olschki 1944: 104).
3. Because of its condition, the London portrait was once questioned as a possible replica of Bellini's original, but is now generally considered authentic. Technical studies have revealed significant fidelity to the painting's original appearance. See Campbell & Chong 2005: 78.
4. See, most recently, Carboni 2007.
5. Raby 1982: 17.
6. Sakisian 1939: 172–81; Meyer zur Capellen 1983: 212; Raby 1989: 41.
7. Villa 1985: 164.
8. Meyer zur Capellen 1983: 212.
9. Renda 1989: 225–31; Renda 1987: 39; Villa 1985: 163–6.
10. Meyer zur Capellen 1983: 212, and much earlier, Thuaene 1888: 58. Though an inscription dates the picture to 1480, the condition of the surface has encouraged scholars to seek outside confirmation of its claims.
11. Sakisian 1939. Contrast the brief but excellent comparison in Carboni, 2007: 331, of portrait medals by Costanzo da Ferrara and Bellini, which locates their differences not in the varying health of the sultan, but in distinct iconographic signs of majesty.
12. On the relationship between likeness and portraits, see Zerner 1995; Brilliant 1991: ch. 1; Campbell 1990: ch. 1 (in a Renaissance context).
13. See, fundamentally, Gombrich 1961.

14. It is possible that this quality of disjuncture may in part be a result of the painting's poor state of conservation.
15. This sale was suggested early on by the contemporary witness to Gentile's visit, Giovan Maria Angiolello (see below, n. 32). Funds raised from selling objects in Mehmed's collection were presumably directed toward Bayezid's great mosque project. An inventory of 1505 confirms the intent to sell objects considered "heathen"; see Rogers 2005: 92–6.
16. Ridolfi 1648/1914: 58. That Bellini's picture was the likely model for an early sixteenth-century Venetian portrait confirms this early arrival date (Carboni 2007: 303–4), as does its likely role as the prototype for the portrait of Mehmed in Paolo Giovio's series of famous men, for which, see Klinger 1991: 128.
17. Raby 1991: 79.
18. Anthony Pagden observes that "accuracy" has more to do with a coincidence of representational goals than it does with some fundamental quality of the work in question; see Pagden 1982: 4–5.
19. Malpiero 1479/1843: 122–3. For the sixteenth-century transcription of Malpiero's text, see Brown 1988: 243 n. 8 (all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated).
20. On Gentile's portraits, see Meyer zur Capellen 1983: ch. 3.
21. On the engravings, see Raby 1981; Hind 1933.
22. Raby 1980b: 2.
23. Matteo de' Pasti never arrived, having been arrested en route by the Venetians who (upon discovering that he was bearing maps) accused him of being a spy. A profound fear of Mehmed must be recognized behind all of these apparently cordial diplomatic exchanges, including Bellini's own relationship with the sultan. The letter cited in the text above, addressed to Mehmed by Matteo's patron Sigismondo Malatesta, is reproduced in Raby 1987: 187–8.
24. Raby 1980a.
25. Raby notes that Mehmed commissioned the world's first star-shaped fortress, "surely under the influence of Italian theorists such as Alberti and Filarete" (Raby 1987: 171; see also Restle 1981).
26. Babinger's book (Babinger 1978), framed as a military history, places cultural endeavors on the margins (they are literally the last chapter of his 500-page study).
27. A book of drawings in the hand of Jacopo Bellini now in the Louvre is said to have been a gift to the sultan from his son Gentile, and would have provided a useful guide to trends in Venetian art; many of the drawings explore the compositional and narrative possibilities of perspective; see Joost-Gaugier 1973: 11–12, 29 n. 41.
28. Alberti 1436/1991: 64.
29. "Ritrasse esso imperator Maumetto di naturale tanto bene che era tenuto un miracolo" (Vasari 1568/1846–70: 5:14).
30. Raby 1980b: 90; 1987: 172.
31. Raby 1987: 172, fig. 1.
32. Angiolello's text is reproduced (and the authorship misidentified) in da Lezze 1910. Alan Chong confirms Angiolello's reliability in Chong 2005: 110.
33. Da Lezze 1910: 119–20.
34. Ridolfi 1648/1914: 56–62.
35. Babinger links it to Seneca's tale of the Greek painter Parrhasios (Babinger 1978: 429).
36. See Chong 2005.
37. "Non poteva se non imaginarsi che egli avesse qualche divino spirito addosso: e se non fusse stato che, come si è detto, è per legge vietato fra' Turchi quell'esercizio, non averebbe quello imperator mai licenziato Gentile" (Vasari 1568/1846–70: 5:14). The *esercizio* to which Vasari refers could be portrait painting, or mimetic representation more generally.
38. Bosworth 1997: 889–92. Oleg Grabar examines the relevant Koranic passages in Grabar 1987: ch. 4.
39. Renda 1987.

40. Founded by Timur, or Tamurlane, the Timurids were a Turko-Mongol people who rapidly conquered a large expanse of territory in Central Asia (even defeating Ottoman forces at Ankara in 1400–1402). Like Mehmed, Timur (d. 1405) and the last Timurid ruler, Sultan Husayn Baiqara, sought artists from outside their own territory, though the Timurids focused on Persia and its great schools of miniature painting rather than on Italian art; see Lentz & Lowry 1989; Blair & Bloom 1994.
41. According to one contemporary source, members of the Timurid court during the reign of Sultan Hasayn Baiqara (r. 1470–1506) passed around painted portraits and debated their merits as likenesses. On the Timurid tradition and its relationship to Mehmed's patronage, see Necipoğlu 2000.
42. Chong 2005: 110.
43. Following medal iconography, the crowns are generally understood to represent lands under Ottoman control, but Maria Pia Pedani Fabris persuasively shows them to have dynastic significance; see Pedani Fabris 1999.
44. It is possible that the work was conceived as a gift for a foreign, probably European, monarch, a scenario that could explain the Latin inscription and even the overall, alien composition and type. Necipoğlu (2000: 30) suggests that all portraits produced by Westerners for Mehmed may have had such a purpose, though this assertion minimizes the evident fluidity and sophistication of Mehmed's patronage.
45. Pedani Fabris 1999: 555–6.
46. On various ceremonial occasions, Mehmed did appear under or behind windows and archways. See Necipoğlu 1991: 32, 40, 56, 89, 97–8.
47. "Gentile tu sai che sempre t'ho detto, che tu puoi parlar con me, pur che tu dica la verità, si che dimmi quello che ti pare" (da Lezze 1910: 121).
48. This is how in 1492 Alexis Becagut, Mantuan ambassador to Mehmed's successor Bayezid II, describes his 1492 presentation of a portrait of Francesco Gonzaga. However, the fixing of architectural and ceremonial forms under Mehmed suggests similar ceremonies were also carried out during his reign (Necipoğlu 1991: 97–8).
49. Necipoğlu 1991: 135.
50. Paul Hills writes suggestively about the role water and reflection played in Venetian ways of seeing and representing, and connects it with Venetian spectacle and self-representation; see Hills 1999: esp. 9–19, 130–31. I thank Carolyn Wilson for this reference.
51. On these titles, their meaning, and their verifiability, see Chong 2005: 114.
52. "Gentilis Belenus Venetus Eques Auratus Comesq. Palatinus F."
53. "Gentilis patriae dedit hauc monumenta belinus, othomano accitus, munere factus eques." Two canvases painted for the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista were signed "Gentilis Bellinus Eques," referring again to the Ottoman knighthood.
54. Because this canvas was finished by Gentile Bellini's brother Giovanni after Gentile's death in 1507, we cannot be absolutely sure of the authorship of this figure. Patricia Fortini Brown suggests that Giovanni's contribution was "a question more of completion than correction," and documents from the Scuola indicate that, in its own day, the work was given to Gentile (Brown 1988: 206, 295, pl. XLIII). Peter Humfrey, on the other hand, argues that the figures in the foreground were defined by Giovanni. If this was the case, then the depiction of the medal is more a memorial than a personal statement, but either way it is still central to the construction of Gentile's identity (Humfrey 1990: 88–94).
55. Reproduced in Campbell & Chong 2005: fig. 45.
56. In 1888, Thuanes claimed to be able to read a fuller, though still fragmentary, inscription upon which this translation is based: "Terrar. Marisq. Victor ac donator orbis ... Sultan ... inte ... Mahometi resultat ars vera Gentilis militis aurati Belini naturae ... qui cuncta reducti in propria ... jam proprio simul cre MCCCLXXX Die XXV mensis Novembris" (Thuanes 1888: 50 n. 2). More recently, Chong and Campbell transcribed the inscription as follows: Left: ...[illegible]...R / ...OR ORAS ... CUNCTARE; Right: MCCCLXXX / DIE XXV. ME / NSIS NOVEM / BRIS (Campbell & Chong 2005: 78). Despite heavy restoration, laboratory examinations suggest that the present inscription faithfully reproduces the original. I thank Hérica Valladares for her help translating this problematic passage.

57. Louisa Matthews discusses the role of signatures as marks of the painter's presence in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Venetian painting in Matthews 1998: 616–48.
58. In the words of Berger, "the basic plot ... of Early Modern portraiture ... is that sitter and painter were present to each other during the act of painting" (Berger 2000: 99).
59. See Brown 1988: esp. part II, "The Visual Culture."
60. Rodini 1998.
61. Pope-Hennessy 1966: 50–51.
62. See the letters of 1493 between Gonzaga and Antonio Salimbene, his ambassador in Venice, where, for example, a view of Venice is described as a "retracto de S.to Marcho, cum tutta la piazza et pallazo de Venetia"; ASMantua, Archivio Gonzaga, b. 1434, fo. 171; see also fos 111, 129, 169.
63. Da Lezze 1910: 120; see also n. 23, above.
64. In the schema of Charles Peirce, this physical, causal definition links the "trace" to the "index" (Peirce 1931: chs. 2, 3).
65. Lorne Campbell confirms this understanding when he notes that *ritrarre* could mean "to reproduce" in the specific context of copying a face in the presence of the sitter (Campbell 1990: 1–2).
66. Boerio 1856/1973: 571.
67. On the relationship between medium, likeness, and visual recognition in printed images of Turks, see Wilson 2003: 38–58.
68. Carboni 2007: 297, 308.
69. Kinzer 1999: 6. This sentiment echoes that expressed in the introduction to the exhibition's catalogue, Renda 1989, 5.

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