

Gianfrancesco Sagredo

'Gianfrancesco Sagredo', 1619
by Gerolamo Bassano (1566-1621)

oil on canvas, 113.9 x 101 cm

A zoomable image of this painting is available on our website to use in the classroom with an interactive whiteboard or projector.

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Background information

The painting

The sitter has recently been identified as the Venetian nobleman Gianfrancesco Sagredo (1571-1620). He is shown wearing the official robes of a Procurator of San Marco but these were also worn by noblemen holding other offices of state. The Procurators worked closely with architects and engineers to ensure the historic preservation of St. Mark's Basilica. Appointment as a Procurator of San Marco was one of the highest honours the Republic of Venice could bestow on its citizen as a reward for a life of service to the Republic.

Although painted in 1619 the style of the portrait is very traditional. The costume and the style of the hair and beard suggest a date in the later 1590s. It is intended to recall portraits by Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese.

The impressively bound book that Sagredo is holding is a reference to the three years (1608-1611) that he spent as the Venetian consul in Aleppo; his official title was Consul of Syria. He is also indicating the carpet on the table which is a rare silk-pile kilim produced in Persia during the time of Shah Abbas the Great.

The historical context

Gianfrancesco Sagredo was a wealthy nobleman and diplomat who had a palace (Palazzo Sagredo) on the Grand Canal. He was also a very keen amateur scientist and one of his close friends was Galileo Galilei who invented the telescope.

Sagredo shared Galileo's scientific enthusiasms and Galileo used to frequently visit Sagredo in Venice. Sagredo was well connected to the rulers of the Venetian state, and had friends in high places which gave Galileo an opportunity to impress people who were in a position to further his career.

The artist

Until recently this portrait was thought to have been painted by Leandro Bassano (1557–1622) also known as Leandro del Ponte, but recently it has been attributed to his brother Gerolamo Bassano (1566-1621).

Gerolamo and Leandro came from a family of artists who took their name from the small town of Bassano, about 65 km from Venice. Their father Jacopo was a successful artist and had a workshop there and both Gerolamo and Leandro became artists and continued the family tradition as did their brothers Francesco the Younger and Giovanni.

Their work was strongly based on drawing but after moving to Venice their work became more intuitive and creative under the influence of Venetian painters such as Tintoretto. They continued to work on religious and historical paintings but both Leandro and Gerolamo also became known as portrait painters.



After his return from Syria Gianfrancesco Sagredo ordered this portrait for his friend Galileo by which time Galileo had invented the telescope and become one of the most famous men in the world.

Later Galileo made Gianfrancesco Sagredo one of the characters in 'Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems' in discussion as to whether the Sun rather than the Earth was at the centre of the universe – a very controversial view at this time.