

Death and Devotion in Renaissance Venice: Giorgione's *Boy with an Arrow* and the Cult of Saint Sebastian

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The subject of Giorgione's *Boy with an Arrow* (Figure 1) has been an on-going mystery in the study of Venetian Renaissance art. The painting's simple black background and near-complete lack of material accouterments offer few clues to a definitive interpretation of this comely youth lost in wistful meditation. In the first half of the twentieth century, he was identified as Saint Sebastian by Heinrich Kretschmayr and Bernard Berenson.¹ However, since the 1960s, with few exceptions,² that characterization has been increasingly dismissed in favor of an identification of the subject as Eros, Apollo, or Paris;³ as an ambiguous conflation of Sebastian and various mythological figures;⁴ or as a metaphor for the paradoxical nature of love and pain.⁵ Perhaps it is time to re-think this trend. Examining compositional and iconographical relationships between *Boy with an Arrow* and contemporary devotional imagery may provide new evidence for identifying the figure as Saint Sebastian. Positioning the painting within the context of an early sixteenth-century Venice traumatized by plague, this paper will examine the connection of *Boy with an Arrow* to several types of devotional art associated in this period with Sebastian, the saint most frequently invoked for protection against pestilence. This examination attempts not only to offer clarity to the problem of the painting's subject, but also to offer insights into its function within Renaissance society.

There is little historical documentation on the painting

referred to today as *Boy with an Arrow*, now in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum. Most contemporary scholars attribute the picture to Giorgione and date it to the end of his career, between 1506 and 1508. Marcantonio Michiel recorded two versions of the painting: one in the Venice house of Spanish merchant Giovanni Ram in 1531, and one in the house of Antonio Pasqualigo in 1532. Michiel attributed both versions to Giorgione, but it is unclear which is the original. By the seventeenth century, the version we know today was acquired by the imperial collections in Vienna. Unfortunately, the biographical records of Ram and Pasqualigo do not suggest why either of these patrons commissioned *Boy with an Arrow* or what subject it was intended to depict.⁶

Who was Saint Sebastian? What role did he play in Renaissance art and in Venetian art in particular? Answering these questions gives additional insight into why Giorgione may have intended Saint Sebastian as the subject of *Boy with an Arrow* and provides clues as to what the painting's function may have been.

The story of Saint Sebastian's life and martyrdom is told in the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, which is based on Paul the Deacon's *De Gestis Longobardorum*. According to the Legend, in the third century Sebastian was the commander of Diocletian's Praetorian Guard, the emperor's bodyguard. As a Christian, Sebastian secretly sought to protect his fellow believers. When he con-

¹ Heinrich Kretschmayr, *Geschichte von Venedig III* (Gotha: F.A. Perthes, 1905-1934) 248, and Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: a List of the Principle Artists and their Works, with an Index of Places: Venetian School* (London: Phaidon Press, 1957) 84.

² In 1997 Jaynie Anderson pointed out iconographical similarities between *Boy with an Arrow* and late fifteenth-century Milanese portraits of young men in the guise of Saint Sebastian. See Anderson, *Giorgione: the Painter of Poetic Brevity* (New York: Flammarion, 1997) 26.

³ See George Martin Richter, *Giorgio da Castelfranco, Called Giorgione* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1937) 84; Friderike Klaunder and Günther Heinz, *Katalog der Gemäldegalerie Italiener* (Vienna, 1965) 64ff, no. 553; Johannes Wilde, *Venetian Art from Bellini to Titian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) 81ff; Terisio Pignatti, *Giorgione* (Milan: Alfieri, 1978) 112; A. Ballarin, "Una Nuova Prospettiva su Giorgione, la Ritrottistica degli Anni 1500-1503," *Giorgione: atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studio per il Quinto Centenario della Nascita*, 29-31 Maggio 1978 (Castelfranco Veneto: Comitato per la Celebrazione Giorgionesche, 1979) 229; Mauro Lucco, "Venezia fra Quattro e Cinquecento," *Storia dell'arte Italiana* 5, part 2 (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1983) 472; John Shearman, *The Early Italian Pictures in the Collection*

of her Majesty the Queen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 255; Paul Holberton, "Of Antique and Other Figures: Metaphor in Early Renaissance Art," *Word and Image* 1 (1985): 55; Enrico Guidoni, *Giorgione: Opere e Significati* (Rome: Editalia, 1999) 217; Terisio Pignatti and Filippo Pedrocchi, *Giorgione* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999) 132; Paul Joannides, *Titian to 1518: the Assumption of Genius* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001) 247.

⁴ In 1987 Christian Hornig posited that the boy in Giorgione's painting is a conflation of Sebastian, Apollo, and Eros and does not depict a specific iconographic subject. See Hornig, *Giorgiones Spätwerk* (Munich: W. Fink, 1987) 212. Later in this paper I will argue that while I find it likely that Giorgione's painting carries multiple levels of meaning, I do not share Hornig's conclusion that the subject itself is ambiguous.

⁵ Marianne Koos, *Giorgione: Myth and Enigma* (Milan: Skira, 2004) 184.

⁶ My sources for the specifics contained in this paragraph on the history and provenance of *Boy with an Arrow* are Anderson 300 and Koos 184.

fronted Diocletian about his sinful persecution of the faithful, the emperor ordered Sebastian's own archers to tie him to a stake and pierce his body with arrows. However, Sebastian miraculously recovered. When he confronted Diocletian a second time, he was beaten to death with rods.⁷

By the seventh century Sebastian had become associated with the role for which he is best known—a protector against plague. He was connected to plague because in the *Legend* he healed the convert Tranquillinus and the prefect Chromatius, and because the arrows of his first attempted martyrdom were associated with the metaphorical descriptions of plague in the Old Testament as the arrows of a wrathful God.⁸ Plagues were viewed as God's punishment for wickedness, and the intercession of saints was necessary for both temporal and spiritual salvation. In Italy, a number of saints were invoked for protection against plague, including Roch, Job, Christopher, Cosmas, Damian, Anthony the Hermit, and Nicholas of Tolentino, but Sebastian was the most popular, particularly in Florence.⁹ His cult flourished in Venice as well, where his fame as a protector against plague was rivaled only by that of Saint Roch.¹⁰ Saint Sebastian's cult gained momentum in the wake of the Black Death of 1348 through 1350, which decimated one-half of the population of Europe.¹¹

Appeals to Sebastian's intercession were achieved through the creation and veneration of religious imagery. In the late fourteenth century, this imagery usually took the form of narrative cycles on stained glass windows and altarpieces like Giovanni del Biondo's triptych *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian and Scenes from his Life*, now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence.

After the major pandemic of the late 1340s, the plague continued to devastate Europe periodically until the eighteenth century. The Veneto was especially hard hit.¹² Besides

the fact that Venice was a port city, which made it vulnerable to disease carried from abroad, its warm, humid climate provided ideal conditions for the black rat flea to flourish.¹³ In fact, it was Venice that established the first municipal plague hospital in Europe.¹⁴ Venice contains no fewer than four major "plague churches." These churches were built to demonstrate the piety of the faithful in hopes of protection from the plague, or were built by survivors in the aftermath of plague to give thanks for God's mercy.¹⁵ Among the plague churches in Venice is San Sebastiano, built in the second half of the fifteenth century and dedicated to Sebastian for sparing the inhabitants of the quarter from the devastating epidemic of 1464. A remodeling of this church began in 1506.¹⁶ Also in this period prayers to Sebastian were incorporated into the Venetian Mass. In 1504, for example, the "Giunta" or "Addition" to the liturgical text *Missale romanum* was issued in Venice with new prayers invoking Sebastian's protection from pestilence.¹⁷ Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, it was precisely in these middle years of the first decade of the sixteenth century that Giorgione painted *Boy with an Arrow*.

Sebastian's cult was firmly established by the end of the fifteenth century.¹⁸ His ever-increasing popularity was accompanied by a "tremendous upsurge" in artistic renderings of Sebastian in the form of isolated figures or as part of narrative scenes or *sacra conversazioni*.¹⁹ A new class of patron also emerged in this period. Trade guilds and lay confraternities, as well as private lay individuals, enjoyed increased participation in the commissioning of art in Italy.²⁰ Many of these groups adopted Sebastian as their patron saint. According to Louise Marshall, this "ubiquitous" saint, "was repeatedly and insistently displayed in churches and on street corners, in town halls and private dwellings."²¹

In Florence, for example, a cult of Saint Sebastian grew

⁷ *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press, 1941) 104-110.

⁸ Irving Zupnick, "Saint Sebastian in Art," diss., Columbia U, 1958, 5; Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47: 3 (1994): 493; Theodore Rousseau Jr., "The Saint Sebastian by Andrea del Castagno," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* VII: 5 (1949): 126; and Ellen Schiferl, "Iconography of Plague Saints in Fifteenth Century Italian Painting," *Fifteenth Century Studies* 6 (1983): 211.

⁹ Marshall, "Reading the Body of a Plague Saint: Narrative Altarpieces and Devotional Images of St Sebastian in Renaissance Art," *Reading Texts and Images: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Art and Patronage in Honour of Margaret M. Manion* (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2002) 238.

¹⁰ Louise Marshall, "'Waiting on the Will of the Lord': the Imagery of the Plague," diss., U of Pennsylvania, 1989, 110.

¹¹ John Aberth, *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005) 2-3.

¹² Schiferl 205 and Victor Kraehling, *Saint Sébastien dans l'Art* (Paris: Éditions Alsatia, 1938) 25.

¹³ Gary Willis, *Venice: Lion City, The Religion of Empire* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001) 263.

¹⁴ Raymond Crawford, *Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914) 162.

¹⁵ Antonio Niero, "Pietà Ufficiale e Pietà Popolare in Tempo di Peste," *Venezia e La Peste: 1348-1797* (Venice: Marsilio, 1980) 287-293.

¹⁶ Adriana Augusti Ruggeri and Simona Savini Branca, *Chiesa di San Sebastiano: Arte e Devozione* (Venice: Marsilio Editori s.p.a., 1994) 11.

¹⁷ *Venezia e La Peste* 289.

¹⁸ Zupnick 4.

¹⁹ Schiferl 207.

²⁰ Zupnick 22-24.

²¹ Marshall (2002) 237.

up around the church of SS. Annunziata, which contained an oratory dedicated to Sebastian with a relic of Sebastian's arm and an altarpiece by Pollaiuolo depicting the saint's martyrdom. Behind the church was the lay confraternity of Saint Sebastian, the Compagnia di San Sebastiano. In 1529 and 1530, during a severe outbreak of plague, the confraternity had its reliquary that held a fragment of the saint's head re-gilded and commissioned Andrea del Sarto to produce a votive painting of Sebastian (Figure 2), which became the altarpiece of its chapel.²²

Irving Zupnick, Louise Marshall, and Janet Cox-Rearick have demonstrated that in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, the popular Sebastian narrative cycles were increasingly replaced by votive images such as del Sarto's and private devotional paintings that contained a single scene of Sebastian's martyrdom.²³ In these scenes the archers are inactive or absent, placing the viewer's focus on the iconic image of the martyred saint. Often traditional iconographic elements like the tree or column are eliminated, and only a single arrow pierces the saint's breast. According to Zupnick, these iconic half-length devotional images of the martyred Sebastian emerged as the preferred type for individual and family commissions.²⁴ Such a format enhanced the intimacy and emotional appeal of the image. Thus they were likely to be hung in domestic settings. As explained by Louise Marshall, "In bust-, half- and three-quarter length paintings of the Martyred Sebastian, worshippers could come literally face to face with the object of their devotions and petitions."²⁵

Several examples of such devotional paintings exist in Venetian art. One is a half-length picture, now in Bergamo, of Saint Sebastian made by Pietro de Saliba (Figure 3). In this image the nude bust of Sebastian dominates the composition; the post to which he is tied has been reduced to an almost abstract rectangle projecting discreetly from behind him. The two arrows that pierce his body serve as symbolic attributes rather than as instruments of grisly torture. The figure's expression is melancholy and intimate, peering directly at the viewer to remind him or her of the suffering he bears on behalf of the plague-stricken. Closely similar elements can be seen in the Berlin half-length picture painted by Antonello de Saliba, nephew of Antonella da Messina (Figure 4). A third example by an unknown Venetian artist (Figure 5) is even more reductive. The background elements have been completely eliminated, and the viewer is compelled to focus on the monumental body of Sebastian and the single iconic arrow that pierces his breast.

The mood and iconography of Giorgione's *Boy with an Arrow* is strikingly evocative of these three images.

Background elements have been eliminated to highlight the monumental, idealized bust and visage of the solitary figure pushed up against the picture plane. The expression is somber and meditative, eliciting a feeling of pathos. The head is turned in three-quarter profile, and, as in Figures 3 and 4, is inclined at a 45 degree angle from the body. Almost identically to Figure 5, the image contains a single, iconic arrow projecting upward to the left, fondled gently by the fingers of the right hand which are splayed out in the shape of a V. *Boy with an Arrow* also resembles these devotional images in its diminutive size. Just 48 centimeters high by 42 centimeters wide, its dimensions are ideal for private domestic veneration.

There is another body of contemporary devotional images to which *Boy with an Arrow* can be compared. The painting may be related to the iconographic tradition of Christ as Man of Sorrows, a relationship that strengthens the connection between *Boy with an Arrow* and Saint Sebastian because of the salvific connections between Sebastian and Christ. Marshall and Zupnick have demonstrated that Sebastian's miraculous recovery after being shot with arrows was viewed as a type of resurrection. Sebastian was therefore likened to Christ in both the popular theology and art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.²⁶ Martyrdom scenes depicting Sebastian tied to a tree or post, in fact, derive from traditional iconography of the Crucifixion and the Flagellation.²⁷

To illustrate the relationship between Sebastian and Christ, Marshall compares Boticelli's *Martyred St Sebastian* in Berlin and Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini's *Man of Sorrows* in Milan. If this devotional and iconographic relationship is extended to Giorgione's *Boy with an Arrow*, compelling visual analogies emerge between it and Bellini's picture, as well as a *Man of Sorrows* by Marco Palmezzano and Titian's *Ecce Homo* in Dublin (Figure 6). In particular, if *Boy with an Arrow* is compared with Titian's *Ecce Homo*, marked similarities in the format, the three-quarter downcast gaze expressing a melancholic other-worldly detachment, and the inclination of the head are apparent, as is the fascinating parallel in the iconic instruments of torture—the arrow held by the young boy, and the rods held by Christ.

One may question, however, why, if *Boy with an Arrow* can be categorized with these devotional images of Saint Sebastian and the Man of Sorrows, the figured is clothed and lacks a halo. How should this ambiguity be resolved? What may the omission of these traditional iconographic elements in *Boy with an Arrow* suggest about the painting's function? There are several solutions to this problem. First, the nude representation of Sebastian is just one iconographic

²² Janet Cox-Rearick, "A 'Saint Sebastian' by Bronzino," *Burlington Magazine* 129 (1987): 160.

²³ Zupnick 128-130; Marshall (2002) 259-260; and Cox Rearick 159-160.

²⁴ Zupnick 126.

²⁵ Marshall (2002) 259.

²⁶ Marshall (2002) 256-257; Marshall (1994) 495; and Zupnick 77.

²⁷ Zupnick 77 and Schiferl 214-216.

tradition for depicting the saint and is relatively recent, only emerging in the late fourteenth century. An older tradition dating to the fifth century is the clothed Sebastian.²⁸ Some notable examples of this type of depiction are seen in the fifth-century Roman frescoes in the Catacomb of Calixtus and the church of St Sebastian on the Via Appia, as well as in the seventh-century mosaic icon in the Roman church of San Pietro in Vincoli. This tradition of the clothed Sebastian continued into Giorgione's time and is manifested in Raphael's 1503 half-length painting of Saint Sebastian now in Bergamo (Figure 7). Raphael's picture uses the same compositional format and many of the same iconographic elements as the other devotional images of Sebastian previously noted, but here Sebastian is clothed. It is worth adding that there are compelling similarities in the details of the costumes worn by Raphael's Saint Sebastian and the figure in *Boy with an Arrow*, such as the rich red drapery and the horizontal band of fine embroidery on the white shirt just below the throat of each figure.

Another factor that must be considered is the trend toward naturalism and classicization of religious subject matter in the late fifteenth century. Venetian artists increasingly humanized religious figures by dispensing with traditional medieval conventions like halos and other hagiographic attributes. This new humanizing style can be seen in many Venetian works such as Marco Basaiti's *Christ Blessing*, Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow*, and Titian's *Gypsy Madonna*.

Furthermore, it is possible that *Boy with an Arrow* had a dual function. The picture may have had a strictly religious function as a devotional icon, but that need not necessarily have been so for the picture to represent Sebastian. A look at Agnolo Bronzino's painting of Saint Sebastian in Madrid (Figure 8) may help explain how this works. Bronzino's figure, like Giorgione's, is missing the conventional halo and palm of martyrdom. He also exhibits a casual expression and an extraordinarily idealized, even eroticized, physique. Janet Cox-Rearick has persuasively argued that the painting is a portrait of a man as Saint Sebastian. She believes it belongs to

a series of portraits Bronzino painted of Florentine noblemen as mythological or religious figures.²⁹ However, she has also suggested that the picture may not have functioned only as a portrait, but that it may have had a dual nature, possibly commissioned as a votive offering in gratitude for the end of a plague outbreak in 1531. Cox-Rearick writes that the figure "is less an image of saintly intercessor (although that may well have been the primary function of the picture) than an image of secular, even erotic appeal."³⁰ She suggests that it "may have been intended to have an ambiguous meaning—an image, on the one hand, religious, and on the other, homoerotic."³¹

While this paper does not argue that *Boy with an Arrow* is a portrait of a man as Saint Sebastian (although that has been proposed³²), it does seek to demonstrate the possibility that like the Bronzino picture, *Boy with an Arrow* had a dual function as a devotional icon and an image of aesthetic or erotic appeal. This would explain the lack of hagiographic attributes, the extremely idealized features, the dreamy expression, and the classicizing costume. In fact, by the early sixteenth century, just such an amalgam of religious piety and classical sensuality had become normative in depictions of Saint Sebastian in Venice. One can cite numerous examples, including Giovanni Bellini's *San Giobbe Altarpiece*, Sebastiano del Piombo's *Sacre Conversazione*, and Titian's *Saint Mark Enthroned*.

Until more definitive historical documentation is revealed, the precise identity of Giorgione's *Boy with an Arrow* will likely continue to elude scholars, but by comparing the painting to a broader scope of imagery, art historians can construct new avenues for approaching the problem. Examining the relationship between *Boy with an Arrow* and contemporary Venetian devotional art provides one such avenue by avoiding the trend that obscures the relationship between the painting's subject and Saint Sebastian, and in doing so, opens up new interpretations of the painting's function within Renaissance society.

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²⁸ Zupnick 7-14.

²⁹ Cox-Rearick 155-162.

³⁰ Cox-Rearick 160.

³¹ Cox-Rearick 161.

³² See Anderson 36.

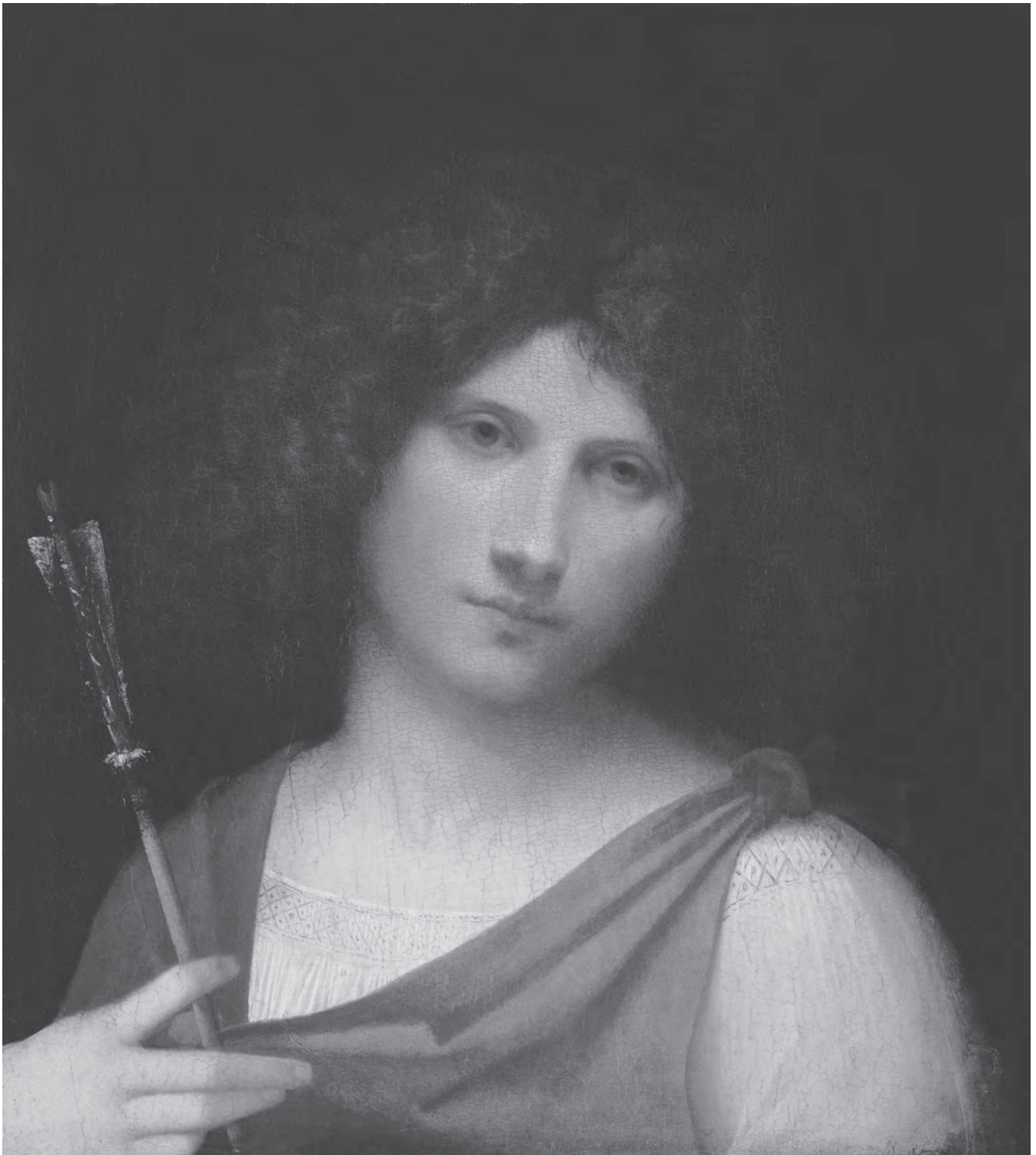
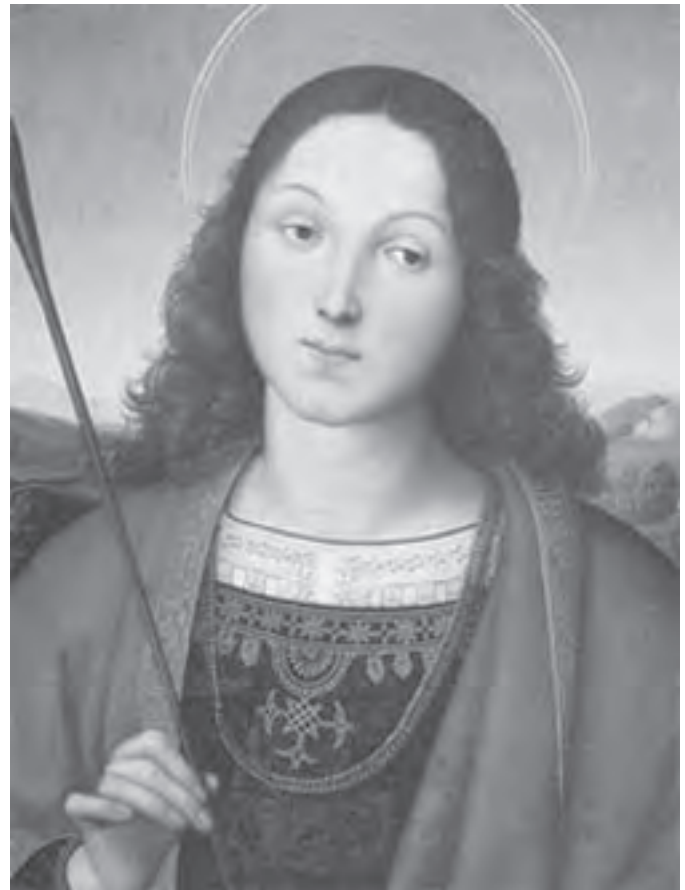


Figure 1. Giorgione, *Boy with an Arrow*, c. 1506–1508, oil on wood, 48 x 42 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.





[facing page, upper left] Figure 2. Andrea Del Sarto, *St. Sebastian Holding Two Arrows and the Palm of Martyrdom*, oil on wood, 84 x 68 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen. Photo courtesy of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen. Photo credit: Martine Seyve.



[facing page, upper right] Figure 3. Pietro de Saliba, *Saint Sebastian*, 1490, oil on wood, 50 x 40 cm, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, catalog #726. Photo courtesy of the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo.

[facing page, lower left] Figure 4. Antonello de Saliba, *Saint Sebastian*, late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, oil on wood, 46 x 35 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Gemäldegalerie. Photo courtesy of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Gemäldegalerie. Photo credit: Jörg Peter Anders.

[facing page, lower right] Figure 5. Unknown Venetian artist, *Saint Sebastian*, oil on wood, Private Collection. Photo courtesy of Simon C. Dickinson, Ltd.

[above left] Figure 6. Titian, *Ecce Homo*, 1558–1560, oil on canvas, 72 x 55 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland.

[above right] Figure 7. Raphael, *Saint Sebastian*, 1503, oil on wood, 45 x 36 cm, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, catalog #647. Photo courtesy of the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo.

[right] Figure 8. Bronzino, *Portrait of a Young Man as Saint Sebastian*, c. 1525–1528, oil on wood, 85 x 70 cm. Photo courtesy of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

