# Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*: Function, Influences, and Inspiration

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**INTRODUCTION**

The *Sleeping Venus* (Fig. 1), now located in Dresden at the Gemaldegalerie, was originally painted by Giorgione and completed by Titian after Giorgione's death in 1510. In the painting, a sleeping, nude young woman reclines in the countryside, her body creating a diagonal composition. Her torso leans against a pillow in the upper left corner, while the rest of her body continues down into the bottom right corner. Her eyes are closed, suggesting sleep, with one hand behind her head and one curled into her genitals. Overall, this nude woman radiates a no cares or worries as she exposes herself to her surroundings.

What is strange is that in Venetian art, there were very few pieces depicting nude women before the *Sleeping Venus.*[1] Yet, around 1500-1510 Venice became a major center for the production of nude female images. Giorgione is credited with establishing this now classic formula for the particular subject matter, transforming Venetian and European painting.[2] The *Sleeping Venus* was followed by a succession of similar works by Titian, Palma Vecchio, Giulio Romano, Peter Paul Rubens, Nicolas Poussin, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, and Édouard Manet, confirming its influence.[3] Scholars accept that Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* functioned as a marriage painting. By exploring the artist and the patron, the social practices surrounding the nuptial process, marriage furnishings, the iconography of Cupid and Venus, contemporaneous medical treatises, and the traditions of *epithalamium* and *poesia* will confirm this theory.

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[1] David Alan Brown, "Venetian Painting and the Invention of Art," in *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art Washington, 2006), 23.
[2] JoAnne Bernstein, "The Female Model and the Renaissance Nude: Durer, Giorgione, and Raphael," in *Artibus et Historiae* 13, no. 26 (1992), 55.
[3] Udo Kultermann, "Woman Asleep and the Artist," in *Artibus et Historiae* 11, no. 22 (1990), 137.

**THE ARTIST**

Giorgione was a pupil of Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini, and the influence of Giorgione's teacher is evident in pieces such as the *Castelfranco Madonna* (Fig. 2).[4] For the *Sleeping Venus*, Giorgione keeps Bellini's traditions in mind, but he puts a new emphasize on the landscape.[5] This is different from Bellini, who viewed landscape as anthropocentric.[6] For example, in his *Saint Francis* (Fig. 3) the human figure is surrounded by an extraordinarily realistic landscape, yet it focuses on man's agricultural and economic activities, seen by the many towns painted into the hills, as well as the herding of animals. By contrast, Giorgione concentrates on the rural poetry of the countryside.[7] This can be seen in the *Sleeping Venus* by the way the landscape is expansive, stretching far back into the distance, only showing man's touch by the farm house on the hill, playing with the idea of a rural countryside.

According to Filippo Pedrocco, Giorgione was specifically interested in presenting the human element in the same attitude as the landscape.[8] This interest most likely came from his connection with Venetian writers and philosophers, such as Italian humanist Aldus Manutius and Italian poet Pietro Bembo.[9] From notes taken by the Venetian noble, Marcantonio Michiel, scholars have deduced that instead of being immersed with his

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[4] Filippo Pedrocco, *The Art of Venice: From Its Origins to 1797* (New York: Riverside Book, 2002), 68.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Mauro Lucco, "Sacred Stories," in *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art Washington, 2006), 104.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Pedrocco, *The Art of Venice: From Its Origins to 1797*, 70.
[9] Terisio Pignatti, "The Life and Work of Giorgione," in *Giorgione* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 23.

paintings and tied to his workshop, like his master Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione was engaged with the Venetian cultural milieu, spending time with this tight circle of writers and philosophers.[10] From these connections, his works opened up a new vision that had no precedent in Venetian tradition,[11] a vision combining human elements with nature. This vision can be seen in the *Sleeping Venus* in the way the resting nude's curves mimic the landscape around her.

Yet, some of the credit of the *Sleeping Venus* is attributed to Titian, one of Giorgione's pupils and rivals.[12] Unfortunately, Giorgione died of the plague in 1510 and after his death Titian completed the *Sleeping Venus*.[13] Scholars believe that Titian contributed the right side of the landscape with the rustic building upon the hill because it recurs on the right side of his *Noli Me Tangere* (Fig. 4) and in other works by the later artist.[14] Because of the rivalry between Giorgione and Titian, the repetition of landscape in the *Toli Me Tangere* and the *Sleeping Venus* is thought to have been a way for Titian to claim responsibility for the *Sleeping Venus*.[15] Luckily, Titian was unsuccessful, and scholars have also credited him for the red drapery on which the sleeping nude rests, and a small cupid (Fig. 5) that was eliminated in a restoration in 1843 by Martin Schirmer.[16] This element in the painting would have made Titian's exact contributions more recognizable,[17] but it is very important to consider that Titian's work on the right side of the landscape, the

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Pedrocco, *The Art of Venice: From Its Origins to 1797*, 70.
[12] Brown, "Venetian Painting and the Invention of Art," in *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian*, 31.
[13] Pignatti, "The Life and Work of Giorgione," in *Giorgione*, 81.
[14] Brown, "Venetian Painting and the Invention of Art," in *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian*, 22.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Pignatti, "The Life and Work of Giorgione," in *Giorgione*, 75.
[17] Ibid.

drapery at the bottom, and the now missing cupid, did not weakened Giorgione's invention of representing the human form similarly to the landscape in which it is presented.[18]

**PATRON**

Giorgione's art was commissioned and supported by a restricted circle of patrons and collectors.[19] Michiel's observations on some of these private Italian collections are the only way scholars can attribute a few works to Giorgione, since he did not sign his paintings.[20] From Michiel's notes, scholars have determined that one of these patrons was Girolamo Marcello.[21] Marcello was born in 1476, and like Giorgione, had ties to the literary circle of Italian poet Pietro Bembo.[22] Michiel noted that Marcello owned three Giorgione paintings, including the *Sleeping Venus,* and the *Portrait of a Warrior with His Manservant* (Fig. 6).*[23]* The latter is thought to be a portrait of Marcello, which he most likely commissioned from Giorgione after he helped defend Padua against an assault by the imperial troops in 1509.[24] Scholars believe he is dressed as a Roman warrior, in commemoration of his family's ancient lineage.[25] From Michiel's comments scholars have also determined that the *Sleeping Venus* honored the marriage of Gerolamo Marcello and

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Peter Humfrey, "Masters and Pupils, Colleagues and Rivals," in *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art Washington, 2006), 42.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Pignatti, "The Life and Work of Giorgione," in *Giorgione*, 26.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Filippo Pedrocco, "Accepted Works," *Giorgione* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 186.
[25] Ibid.

Morosina Pisani on October 9, 1507.[26] By understanding the customs surrounding marriages and the decoration of marriage furnishings in the Renaissance, Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* can be further confirmed as a marriage painting.

**DOWRY/BETROTHALS**

According to Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, the nuptial process had four main steps.[27] Firstly, a marriage broker initiated the negotiations and preliminary agreements between male representatives of the bride and groom.[28] Then there was a first meeting between the fathers of the future spouses, where they sealed an "alliance."[29] After this agreement, the groom-to-be proceeded to the house of his betrothed, with a present of a ring or jewels.[30] Second, there would be a meeting between the two parties, accompanied by male family members and friends. The bride-to-be was not allowed to attend.[31] During this meeting, the individual with authority over the bride-to-be promised her future husband that she would be his bride, and that he would obtain her consent.[32] The future groom then pledged to take her as his wife according to the conditions that had been negotiated and agreed upon.[33] This was a formal and legally binding promise to marry, made by the fathers of both bride

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[26] Jaynie Anderson, "Giorgione, Titian and the Sleeping Venus," in *Tiziano e Venezia: Convegno Internazionale Di Studi, Venezia* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1980), 341.
[27] Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women*, *Family*, *and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 183.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 184.

and groom in front of family members, and witnessed by a notary.[34] After both promises were sworn, a notary would document information about the payments of the dowry and the date that the marriage festivities would take place.[35]

Third, the bride and groom's family and friends gathered together at the bride's home. The notary asked the questions prescribed by the Church. He then took the right hand of the woman and drew it towards the husband, who put the nuptial ring on her finger.[36] After this, the betrothed couple was considered man and wife. But, the marriage still had to be consummated and a public celebration had to be given.[37] During the festivity, which was the last step of the nuptial process, the bride was transported from her home, to her new husband's.[38] While beautifully dressed and riding a white horse, she was escorted by her spouse's friends through the streets.[39]

It was customary that the groom would use the bride's dowry to commission furnishings and works for art for the couple's new bedroom, as well as purchase clothing for his bride.[40] Marriage chests were an expected portion of these furnishings, and would be carved or painted with courtly, contemporary, historical, or didactic narratives and allegories.[41] The two families' coats of arms were also often included on the chests.[42] These chests would be carried to the bride's new home in a procession, exposing her dowry items

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[34] Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli. *Women in Italy, 1350-1650: Ideals and Realities: A Sourcebook* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 121-122.
[35] Klapisch-Zuber, *Women*, *Family*, *and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 184.
[36] Ibid., 185.
[37] Ibid., 186.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 187.
[40] Ibid., 222.
[41] Jacqueline M. Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 5.
[42] Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, "Marriage and Sexuality," in *At Home In Renaissance Italy,* edited by Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, (London: V & A, 2006), 112.

to the public. The procession and the chests had a psychological role, identifying the young woman as a wife to the larger community.[43] Marriage furnishings further advocated certain behavior for the bride and groom from their decorations.[44]

**MARRIAGE FURNITURE**

Marriage furnishings incorporated decorative messages that were intended to educate a bride and to promote fertility.[45] Particularly, the insides of *cassoni* lids were traditionally adorned with reclining nude figures to encouraged procreation.[46] *Cassoni*, or *cassa* were chests, and a basic form of Renaissance furniture since homes in the Renaissance did not contain closets.[47] During the fifteenth century the *cassa* was multipurpose, often placed below a built-in bed or lined against a wall, as seen in the background of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (Fig. 7).[48] Venice is not usually associated with the painted *cassoni,* which are more popularly associated with Florentine aristocratic homes in the fifteenth century. But there is evidence that *cassoni* were made in Venice as well, even after they fell out of fashion in Florence in the mid sixteenth century.[49] The Venetian aristocrat, Rocco della Carita's son, explains how his father paid the Venetian artist Andrea

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[43] Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace*, 124.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Lilian Zirpolo, "Botticelli's Primavera: A Lesson for the Bride," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 1st ed. (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), 107.
[46] Joseph Manca, *Titian 500* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art Washington, 1993), 105.
[47] Patricia Fortini Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture, and the Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 100.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 107.

Schiavone for painted *cassoni* since they were hard to find at a good price.[50] The chests were expensive during the sixteenth century because they were greatly admired in Venice.[51]

Towards the later decades of the fifteenth century, *cassoni* images were sometimes cut from their chests and hung on the wall of the house, allowing for an easier viewing at eye height.[52] Some paintings were even situated immediately above particular pieces of furniture, belonging with them, but not physically part of them,[53] signaling a change of emphasis.[54] This movement upward is theorized by Ellen Callmann, who suggests that as the fifteenth century progressed, paintings moved off *cassoni* and were instead, painted onto the wall panel or *spalliere.*[55] This transfer may have occurred because the paintings low positions on chests made them difficult to see, making their instruction for marital obedience and procreation hard to view.[56] During the early sixteenth century, *spalliere* became the later fashion in Venice,[57] and were installed around the bedchamber showing the same stories often represented on the *cassoni* but in more extensive detail[58].

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 107-108.
[52] Graham Hughes, *Renaissance Cassoni: Masterpieces of Early Italian Art: Painted Marriage Chests 1400-1550* (Sussex U.K.: Starcity Publisher, 1997), 45.
[53] Anne B. Barriault, *Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany: Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 30.
[54] Peta Motture and Luke Syson. "Art in the Casa," in *At Home In Renaissance Italy* (London: V & A, 2006), 272.
[55] Hughes, *Renaissance Cassoni: Masterpieces of Early Italian Art: Painted Marriage Chests 1400-1550*, 46.
[56] Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace*, 156.
[57] Hughes, *Renaissance Cassoni: Masterpieces of Early Italian Art: Painted Marriage Chests 1400-1550*, 28.
[58] Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family in the Florentine Renaissance Palace*, 6.

*Spalliere* were meant to envelope the viewer, almost like a little window that led into an imaginative and instructive world.[59] Most would show harbors, seashores, rivers, mountains, or groves creating a landscape in the background, while figures of the gods or detailed mythological stories were featured in the foreground.[60] Husbands commissioned these paintings when they married and they contained both nuptial and civic meanings that would address both wives and husbands.[61] Even poems related to marriage were illustrated on *spalliere* to encourage the institute of marriage.[62] Anne Barriault notes many characteristics a painting must have to be considered a *spalliere*, such as dimensions, figures and spaces, and pictorial narratives.[63] Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* meets some of the requirements, but not all. Yet, Barriault states that whether a piece meets the requirements of a *spalliere* or not, the most important function of a *spalliere* is that they are seen at eye or shoulder level, drawing the viewer into a fictive world that seemed real,[64] which Giorgione's painting accomplishes.

An earlier artist that has been attributed to marriage imagery was Florentine artist, Sandro Botticelli. Botticelli was a Medici protégé, and had access to some of the most brilliant Florentine humanists, scholars, and poets.[65] The most important and famous of these paintings is his *Primavera* (Fig. 8), which was commissioned on the occasion of

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[59] Barriault, *Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany: Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes*, 4.
[60] Ibid., 5.
[61] Ibid., 5-7.
[62] Ibid., 101.
[63] Ibid., 56.
[64] Ibid., 61.
[65] Zirpolo, "Botticelli's Primavera: A Lesson for the Bride," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, 101.

Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici's marriage to Semiramide d'Appiani.[66] Originally located in the Medici house on the Via Larga in Florence, this painting was hung above a *lettuccio* in a room adjoining the nuptial chamber.[67] Scholars believe that the purpose of this adjoining room was to supply Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco's bride with lessons on appropriate behavior in her new role as a Medici wife.[68] The *Primavera* was a predominate source for this instruction, showing lessons of chastity, the importance of submission to one's husband, and that motherhood and procreation was the ultimate goal of marriage.

Another one of Botticelli's paintings, his *Birth of Venus* (Fig. 9),[69] is the earliest surviving, large-scale nude Venus of the Renaissance.[70] R. W. Lightbown suggests that the *Birth of Venus* could also be a marriage painting, possibly referencing a poem on the marriage of Stella and Violantilla, written by the Roman poet Statius.[71] If the *Birth of Venus* is a marriage painting, it shows that other nudes, while not reclining, were being painted before Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* that were possibly related to marriage furnishings.

There is a possibility Giorgione might have painted some marriage furnishings, for Italian art biographer, Carlo Ridolfi, connected Giorgione to the paintings of cupboards, headboards, and coffers in 1648.[72] Usually painted stories from Ovid decorated these pieces of furniture. There are a number of little wooden panels showing allegorical and mythological scenes that could be remnants of Giorgione's work. For instance, *Leda and the*

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[66] Ibid., 102.
[67] Ibid., 103.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Bruno Santi, *Botticelli* (Florence: Scala, 1991), 32.
[70] Jane C. Long, "Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus' as Wedding Painting," in *Aurora* 9 (2008), 5.
[71] R. W. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 162.
[72] Patricia Fortini Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture, and the Family*, 107.

*Swan* (Fig. 10)[73] is attributed to Giorgione by a number of scholars. Pignatti confirms that *Leda and the Swan* belonged to a decorative scheme for a piece of furniture or jewelry box, one that based on themes from Ovid's *Metamorphosis.*[74] This image is important because it demonstrates that Giorgione was painting nude females on furniture pieces around the time the *Sleeping Venus* was commissioned. With this information, it would seem plausible that Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* could very well be one of the first marriage paintings show casing a nude sleeping Venus, having moved from the inside of the *cassoni* lid to the wall as a *spalliera.*

**EROS/CUPID AND APHRODITE/VENUS**

As seen in other marriage imagery, Venus is a common figure. From the missing Cupid, known from an x-ray image of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus,* scholars can conclude the central figure is Venus. Venus's son, Cupid, was originally referred to as Eros in Greek mythology and was connected with Aphrodite as her son and attendant.[75] Eros was known as the god of love, and the deity in control of the desires and attractions, which provoke love.[76] Specifically, he was thought to have the abilities to affect the mind and body by playing with the frenzies and confusions related to love.[77] Eros has two stories explaining his birth. He may have been an early cosmic deity who was self-born in creation myths, but

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[73] Ibid.
[74] Pedrocco, "Accepted Works," *Giorgione*, 92.
[75] George M.A. Hanfmann and John R.T. Pollard, "Eros," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 407.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 135-136.

the more commonly known story, is his birth from the coupling of Aphrodite and Ares.[78] In Rome, Eros evolved into Cupid, as a chubby, mischievous little boy with wings, who sports a bow and arrow that can inflict wounds that inspire serious passion.[79] This description of Cupid matches the missing figure in Giorgione's piece, especially since he was portrayed as baby-like, with wings.

Originally, the Greek goddess Aphrodite was the goddess of beauty, love, fertility, and generation, while the Roman goddess Venus was a fertility spirit and protectress of gardens.[80] In ancient Greek poetry Aphrodite is personified as sexual instinct and the power of love, and occasionally presides over marriage.[81] She was also widely worshipped as a goddess of the sea and seafaring, through her birth. As stated in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Cronus cut off Uranus's genitals with a "long and jagged-toothed" sickle, and threw them into the ocean.[82] Foam rose up around Uranus's genitals and Aphrodite grew from his seed.[83] Aphrodite received her name from this birth, which is derived from the Greek word for foam, *aphros.*[84]

Another version of Aphrodite's birth gives her parents as Zeus and Dione.[85] These dual births link with her dual natures: Aphrodite Urania and Aphrodite Pandemos. Aphrodite Urania, from the birth of Uranus, is the older, stronger, smarter, and of celestial

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[78] Ibid., 128-129.
[79] Ibid., 135-136.
[80] Ibid., 117.
[81] Francis R. Walton, "Aphrodite," in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 80.
[82] Hesiod, "Theogony," in *Hesiod*, Trans. Glenn W. Most, Vol. 1, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 175-195.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 116.
[85] Ibid.

nature.[86] She represents pure and spiritual love, while Aphrodite Pandemos corresponds to physical satisfaction and attraction, mainly the drive to procreate.[87] It was thought that when seeing the human body, the celestial version of Aphrodite within us feels love and reverence for such beauty as an image of the divine, while the physical Aphrodite within us wants to generate this beauty.[88]

During the fourth century, contact of the Roman Republic to the Greek world, led to the identification of Aphrodite with Venus.[89] Venus was a fertility deity and protectress of gardens on the Italian peninsula.[90] While this association continued, the rulings of both Aphrodite and Venus were combined to the point that the fertility of gardens was related to marriage and childbirth, especially through the imagery of the goddesses.[91] The way in which the hand of Giorgione's Venus brings attention to her genitals, is also a representation of the goddess,[92] commonly seen in the Venus *pudica* statue type (Fig. 11). Scholars believe that in the *Sleeping Venus* Giorgione uses the *pudica* gesture associated with the goddess Venus, which originated from Praxiteles statue of the *Aphrodite of Knidos.*[93] Giorgione used this pose in his fresco of the *Standing Female Nude* (Fig. 12), previously located on the Fondaco dei Tedeschi. Finished in 1508, around the time the *Sleeping Venus* was commissioned, this semi-nude figure has her legs veiled by a light color

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[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Rogers and Tinagli. *Women in Italy, 1350-1650: Ideals and Realities: A Sourcebook,* 75-76.
[89] Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 514.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Mary D. Garrard, *Brunelleschi's Egg: Nature, Art, and Gender in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 95.
[92] Paola Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 124.
[93] Rona Goffen, *Titian's Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 151.

cloth while holding a golden apple in her hand.[94] Both of these attributes are now faded, but they identify the figure as one of the nymphs of the Hesperides.[95]

Giorgione's goddess is most likely pleasuring herself, which was believed to be a necessary action for conception during the Renaissance. According to contemporaneous gynecological treatises, female masturbation made a woman more fertile because Renaissance physicians believed that female orgasms were required for conception.[96] Medical treatises explained that female orgasms were similar to men's ejaculations, and that both parties needed to release "seeds of life" preferably at the same time to successfully conceive a child.[97] Michele Savonarola, the court physician to the Ferrara court in 1440, gives advice and explains conception in detail,

> "A woman cannot get pregnant without feeling great pleasure in the sexual act, as she then emits her seed, and the womb is constricted as it is written… Before they begin to copulate, they must talk together about conceiving, and image the conception… After talking like this, they must touch each other, and especially the man must touch the woman, touching and rubbing with his fingers the place between her sex and the vagina…As soon as the man has poured his seed, the wife must immediately lift her thighs, he must get up, and at once she must hold her thighs, legs and feet together, and keep them lifted for a sixth of an hour, so that the sperm can more easily enter the womb and be retained there, and also because the air must not penetrate and spoil the seed."[98]

While female masturbation is not included in this description, the importance of bringing a woman to orgasm is evident. In descriptions like these, it was not uncommon for physicians to evoked Venus in their obstetrical texts. Even poets echoed the advice of

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[94] Pedrocco, "Accepted Works," *Giorgione*, 155.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Goffen, *Titian's Women*, 152.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy, 1350-1650: Ideals and Realities: A Sourcebook*, 169.

female masturbation in their invocations of the goddess.[99] Thus, this was an appropriate representation of the goddess. Especially since, she rules over fertility, marriage, and conception. Yet, the question of Giorgione's inspiration is still a mystery.

**NYMPHS**

Venus' reclining position in Giorgione's painting may have been inspired by contemporaneous nymph imagery and ancient sculptures of the sleeping Ariadne. Nymphs held a popular interest in the Renaissance, particularly sleeping nymphs. By presenting Venus asleep in a landscape, Giorgione connects the goddess with this popular contemporary figure.[100] The nymph in the woodcut, seen in the *Hypnerothomachia Poliphili* (Fig. 13),[101] was written by Francesco Colonnoa, and published by Aldus Manutius in Venice in 1499,[102] may have inspired Giorgione and served as his model. This print shows a reclining nymph on an outspread drapery, part of which is bundled to create a pillow, an arrangement very similar to Giorgione's presentation of his sleeping Venus. Implying, that he might have understood the nymph fountain figure to be the goddess Venus[103].

Imagery of the sleeping nymph was extremely common in the Renaissance, with the most famous being the antique statue of *Ariadne* (Fig. 14)[104] at the Vatican Museum. A Roman copy of a Hellenstic Pergamene original, the sculptor captures Ariadne asleep on a rocky support, exhausted and abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos, before

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[99] Goffen, *Titian's Women,* 153.
[100] Garrard, *Brunelleschi's Egg: Nature, Art, and Gender in Renaissance Italy*, 168.
[101] Anderson, "Giorgione, Titian and the Sleeping Venus," in *Tiziano e Venezia: Convegno Internazionale Di Studi, Venezia,* 337.
[102] Brown, "Venetian Painting and the Invention of Art," in *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian*, 23.
[103] Garrard, *Brunelleschi's Egg: Nature, Art, and Gender in Renaissance Italy*, 168.
[104] Ibid., 169.

Dionysus awakens her and falls in love with her.[105] There was an understanding that nymphs such as Ariadne represented an aspect of Venus as Mother Nature. Mary Garrard argues that this can be seen by the way Venus is referred to as the Divine Mother, Mother Goddess, or Goddess of Nature throughout the *Hypnerothomachia.*[106] Leading Garrard to believe that Giorgione visually joined his sleeping nude with Ariadne and Venus as the all-nurturing parent.[107]

**POESIA AND EPITHALAMIUM**

The subject matter of a sleeping Venus can be traced back to ancient Greek poetry, which was adopted by the Romans, and then was revived in the Renaissance.[108] The way in which Giorgione and other foremost painters revived these classical poems was known as *poesia*, or a painting that was meant to operate in the indirect manner of poetry.[109] The *Sleeping Venus* in particular was inspired by a late Roman poem by Claudianus in 399, specifically the *Epithalamium of Palladius and Celerina,* where "bare breasted" Venus is found asleep in an Italian landscape:

> "It chanced that Venus had one day retired into the bosom of a cave overgrown with vine to woo sleep mid its alluring cool, and had laid her goddess limbs on the thick grass, her head upon a heap of flowers. The vine branches stir gently in the breeze and sway the full-veined grapes. Slumber befits the disorder of her brow, the midday heat will none the coverings, and the leaves show through them the gleam of her bare breast."[110]

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[105] Phyllis P. Bober, Ruth Rubinstein, and Susan Woodford, *Renaissance Artists & Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources* (London, England: H. Miller, 1986), 125.
[106] Garrard, *Brunelleschi's Egg: Nature, Art, and Gender in Renaissance Italy*, 169.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Andrea Bayer, "From Cassone to Poesia: Paintings of Love and Marriage," In *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 231.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Claudius Claudianus, "Epithalamium of Palladius and Celerina," in *Claudian*, trans. Maurice Platnauer, vol. 2 (London: William Heinemann), 1922, 5-10.

Originally, *epithalamia* were songs sung by young men and women before the bridal chamber in antiquity.[111] During the Renaissance, the use of *epithalamium* in art ranged from Florence to Ferrara, Mantua, and Venice, during the fifteenth and sixteen century.[112] In the ancient poems, Venus would found at rest in her sacred landscape, like the one above, when she is roused by Cupid to prepare herself for a mortal's wedding where she will act as *pronuba*, or a matron of the bride.[113] This description further matches the *Sleeping Venus* by the way Cupid sits at sleeping Venus's feet, as if he is about to awake her.

It is plausible that Giorgione expanded upon the nymph in the *Hypnerothomachia* to show the goddess herself.[114] Giorgione might have been requested to produce a painting of epithalamium, but he presents Venus alone in her sacred realm, showing her procreative powers with her hand at her genitals.[115] By doing this, Giorgione illustrates Venus's capability to self-fertilize and produce the world of nature that Giorgione has surrounded her with, and which she personifies.[116] According to the Marcello family, Venus was their tutelary goddess, as mother of Aeneas, connecting the main figure of the *Sleeping Venus* to his family.[117] Therefore, by commissioning the *Sleeping Venus* for Marcello's marriage to Morosina Pisani, the representation of Venus in relation to *epithalamium* could have been

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[111] Anderson, "Giorgione, Titian and the Sleeping Venus," in *Tiziano e Venezia: Convegno Internazionale Di Studi, Venezia*, 338.
[112] Barriault, *Spalliera Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany: Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes*, 105.
[113] David Rosand, "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch," *Titian's Venus of Urbino,* edited by Rona Goffen, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43.
[114] Garrard, *Brunelleschi's Egg: Nature, Art, and Gender in Renaissance Italy*, 169.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., 168.

used as a model of female acceptance of reproduction for Marcello's bride as a demonstration of the lineage of the family Pisani was now a part.[118]

**CONCLUSION**

From understanding the artist and the patron, the social practices surrounding the nuptial process, marriage furnishings and paintings, the iconography of Cupid and Venus, and the traditions of *epithalamium* and *poesia*, this painting was certainly intended for the marriage of Marcello and Morosina Pisani on October 9, 1507. Venus and Cupid ruled over love, fertility, and marriage, and this association was greatly incorporated into *epithalamia,* which were revived during the Renaissance, especially through *poesia.* This revitalization can be found on marriage furnishings, which encouraged and educated the bride, since conception was a great necessity, after the devastation of the Black Death and the continued return of the plague. Therefore, with Gerolamo Marcello's connection to Giorgione, according to Michiel's annotations, his family relation to Venus, and the marriage to Morosina Pisani, it is assured that the *Sleeping Venus* was commissioned in celebration of their marriage.

At first glance, the *Sleeping Venus* seems very strange, since it is one of the first paintings showcasing a sleeping nude, but based on the great interest of revitalizing ancient *epithalamium* as *poesia,* and the movement of this subject matter from *cassoni* and onto the wall, this painting seems more reasonable. What makes it so different is Giorgione's interest of combining the human element with nature. He expands on the idea of Venus resting in her sacred landscape, giving the painting a deeper interpretation of the

[118] Ibid.

theme.[119] Overall, Giorgione follows the tradition of *epithalamium*, but created a beautiful marriage painting, with vision that was unique to Venetian art, that inspired artists years to come.

[119] Brown, "Venetian Painting and the Invention of Art," in *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian*, 29.

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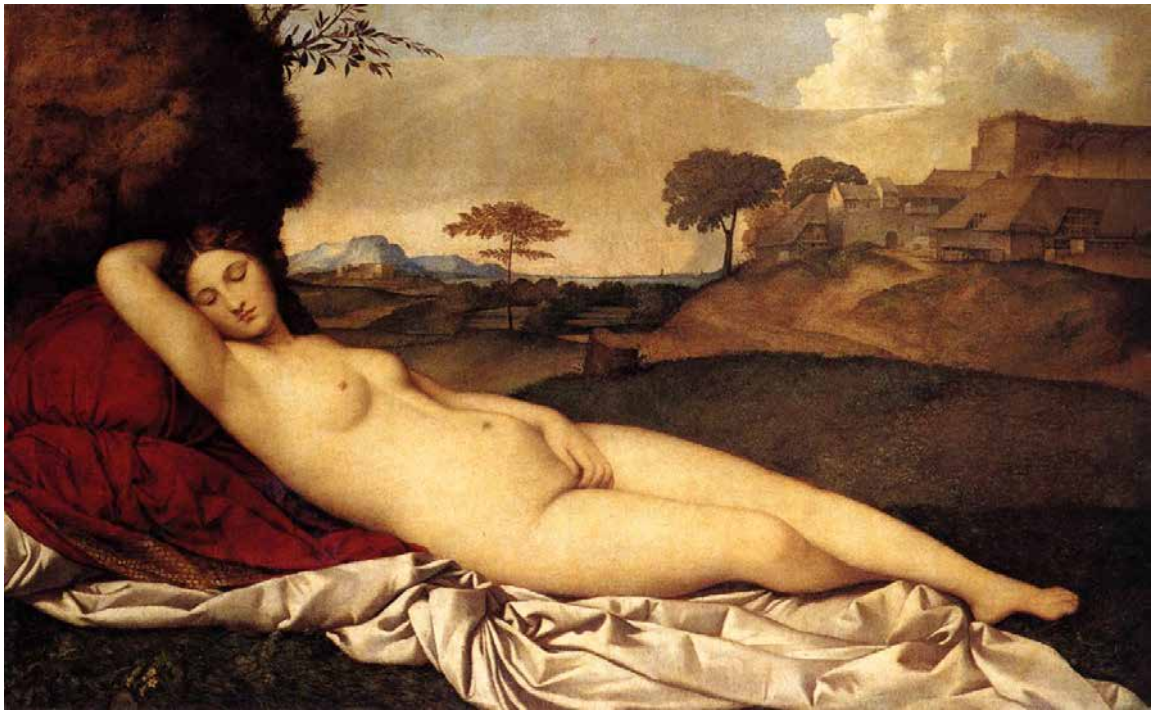

**Figure 1:** Giorgione (completed by Titian), *Sleeping Venus*, oil on canvas, 1510, Gemaldegalerie, Dresden

**Figure 2**: Giorgione, *Castelfranco Madonna*, oil on panel, 1503, Cathedral of Castelfranco Veneto

**Figure 3:** Giovanni Bellini, *Saint Francis*, oil on panel, 1480, Frick Collection, New York

**Figure 4:** Titian, *Noli Me Tangere*, oil on canvas, 1511-1512, National Gallery, London

**Figure 5:** X-ray reconstruction of *Sleeping Venus,* 1510, Gemaldegalerie, Dresden

**Figure 6:** Giorgione, *Portrait of a Warrior with His Manservant (Gerolamo Marcello)*, oil on canvas, 1509, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

**Figure 7:** Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, oil on canvas, 1538, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence


**Figure 8**: Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, tempera on panel, 1482, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

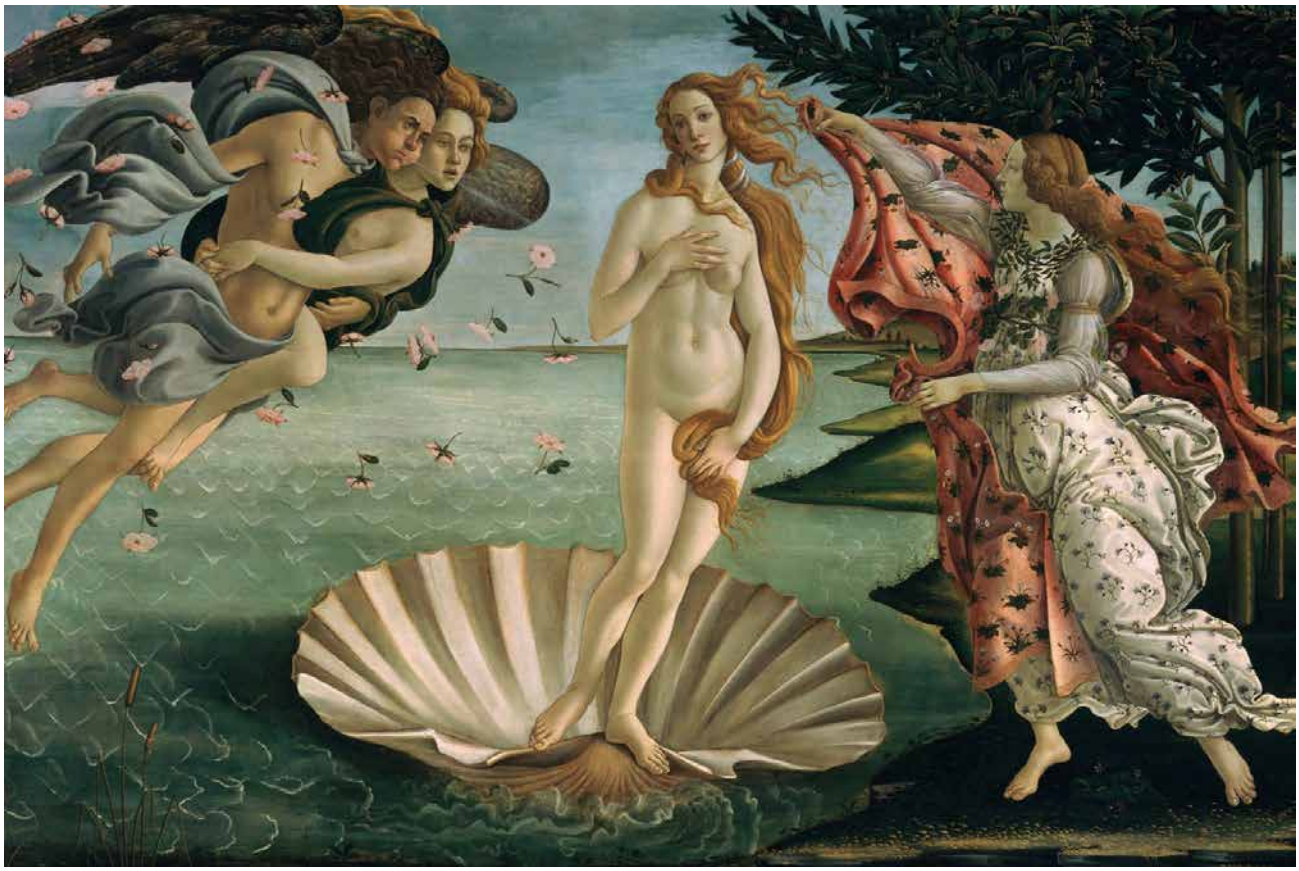

**Figure 9**: Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, tempera on canvas, 1486, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

**Figure 10:** Giorgione, *Leda and the Swan*, oil on panel, 1490-1510, Museo Civico, Padua

**Figure 11**: *Venus Pudica*, marble, 1st century B.C. Copy, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

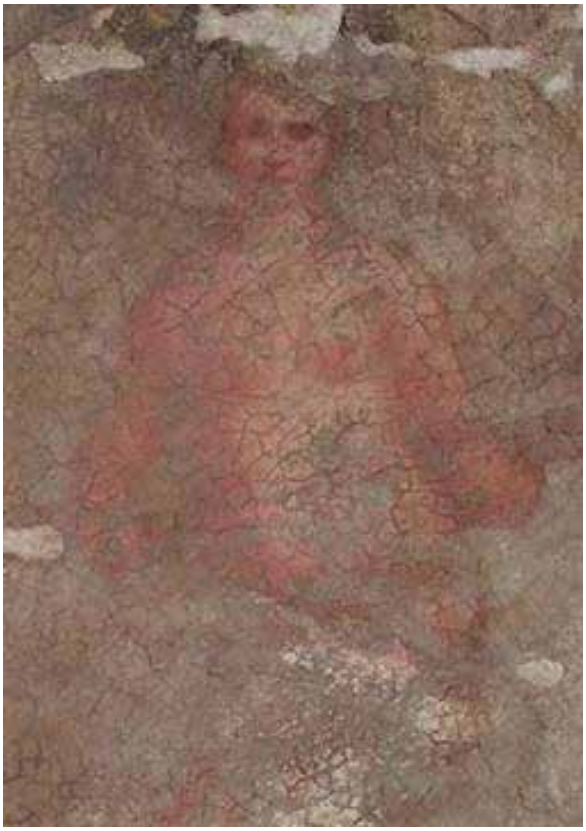

**Figure 12**: Giorgione, *Standing Female Nude*, fresco, 1508, Ca' d'Oro, Venice

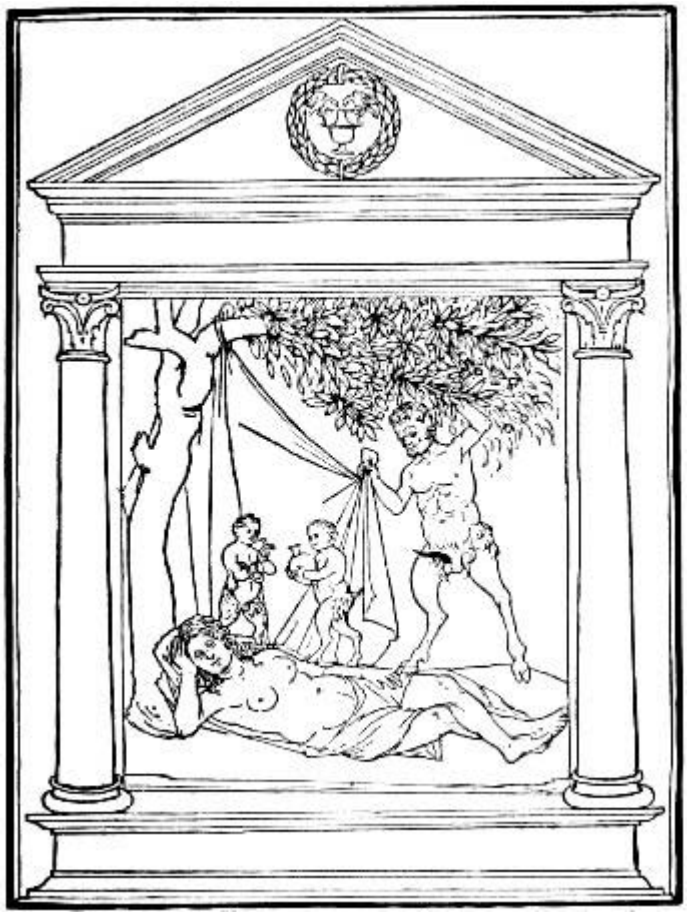

**Figure 13**: Francesco Colonna, published by Aldus Manutius, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, print, 1499, Italy

**Figure 14**: Hadrianic Copy, *Sleeping Ariadne*, marble, 2nd century BCE, Vatican Museum, Rome