

A Matter of Attitude Bernardo Bellotto's *Altersstil*

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Abstract Is it possible to apply the concept of *Altersstil* to Bernardo Bellotto's career as a painter? Significant changes can be described in his work on the basis of three criteria: the expansion of the urban space, the role of the staffage figures and self-portrait. A comparison with paintings from the Dresden phase will be used to characterise Bellotto's *Altersstil* in the Warsaw vedute. As a case study, Bellotto's work is suitable for adding a facet to the concept of *Altersstil*, which on the one hand takes into account the personal experience of his own career, and on the other hand, includes the requirements of changing patrons in the interpretation of the *Alterswerk*.

Keywords Bellotto. Self-portrait. Altersstil. Dresden. Warsaw.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Starting Again: Bellotto's Late Years in Warsaw. – 3 Across the Boundaries of Genres: The Panoramic Cityscape. – 4 Giving a Face to the People. – 5 The Programme of the Self-Image. – 6 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

In the year 1767 the established and once highly esteemed painter Bernardo Bellotto, called 'Canaletto', set out from the city of Dresden to begin anew. After his return to Dresden in 1763 and under changed reign, he had not succeeded in returning economically to the time before the Seven Years' War in Saxony.¹ Neither his salary nor his reputation among those who now held important posts still corresponded to his social and economic standing of the pre-war period: Christian

Ludwig von Hagedorn, the director of the newly found Dresden Art Academy only had the position of teacher of perspective to offer Bellotto. In keeping with Saxony's policy of restoration after the war, the influential Art Director wanted to fill professorships merely with children of the state. And Bellotto was not one of them.²

This subordinate position and the associated pecuniary disadvantage could hardly meet the high standards Bellotto set for himself and his art.

¹ Regarding Bellotto's time in Dresden, Vienna and Munich see Wagner 2022.

² On the founding of the Royal Academy of Arts in the context of the *rétablissement* in Saxony, cf. Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden 1990, 27-8; on Bellotto's subordinated standing, cf. Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden 1990, 45-7.



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Figure 1 Bernardo Bellotto, *Dresden from the right bank of the Elbe below the Augustus Bridge*. 1748. Oil on canvas, 133 × 237 cm. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photo: Hans-Peter Klut/Elke Estel

Even his early Dresden works show how stringently he planned his career.³ Painting by painting, the young man integrated himself into the network of the Dresden court and thus quickly won the favour of the powerful Prime Minister Heinrich Graf von Brühl as well as that of the Saxon Elector and Polish King Friedrich August II (III). In the first Dresden veduta, *Dresden from the right bank of the Elbe above the Augustus Bridge*, he placed particular emphasis on putting the Prime Minister's recently built and spectacular edifices into the right light.⁴ This first veduta for the king also contains Bellotto's first self-portrait,⁵ which will be discussed later.

In the subsequent paintings, he concentrated particularly on the royal buildings. Thus, in the above-mentioned 'Canaletto View' in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden [fig. 1], Bellotto bathed the stone bridge crossing the river Elbe in a bright light and also highlighted the Catholic Court Church (*Hofkirche*) – then still under con-

struction – by depicting the Protestant Church of our Lady (*Frauenkirche*) much smaller than its actual size. As a municipal building project, the latter had far less significance than the church designed by the Italian architect Gaetano Chiaveri for the Catholic royal family in Saxony, whose population was otherwise mostly of Protestant faith. He also diminishes this church in a view of the Altmarkt, which underlines this interpretation.

Bellotto lived to the age of 58, which was a very old age by the standards of the time. He was distinguished – as will be shown – by a high degree of career awareness, coupled with a strong business sense and an extraordinary capacity for artistic reflection. This personal disposition, viewed in the context of the visible changes in the works of the Warsaw period compared to those of the Dresden period, makes his career an interesting case study when one attempts to approach the problem of *Altersstil*. Sometimes in the literature a continu-

³ See Wagner 2022, 22-4.

⁴ See Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Sachsen 2020.

⁵ In one of the Turin vedute, Bellotto showed a painter in 1745, which Rottermund (2021, 229) interprets as a self-portrait. In my opinion it cannot be decided on the basis of the depiction whether this is a self-portrait. It is interesting, however, that the Turin composition with the two flanking persons is taken up again in the first Dresden veduta.

ity between the Dresden and Warsaw productions is claimed. This refers in particular to the painting technique and certain compositional principles.⁶ The courtly context of the work's origin also certainly entails a certain structural continuity, especially in relation to associated dependency relationships and the respective political demands of the ruler.⁷ By concentrating on certain aspects of Bellotto's art, this essay attempts to make clear the

changes in the artist's work and to evaluate them in relation to the question of an *Altersstil*. Therefore the following considerations will try to relate Bellotto's works of the Dresden period to those of his late years in Warsaw and to outline the characteristics of a so-called *Alterswerk* or *Altersstil*. Then the case study of Bellotto, in conjunction with other contributions in this issue, can possibly contribute to further profiling the concept of *Altersstil*.

2 Starting Again: Bellotto's Late Years in Warsaw

But back to Bellotto and back to Warsaw. There, at the age of 45, after the economic and personal loss that the Seven Years' War had brought him, he had once again embarked on an extremely productive creative phase. For Stanislaus August Poniatowski he took over the decoration of several of the latter's castles with series of vedute. On the one hand, he appropriated the topography of the city on the Vistula, but on the other hand he also drew on prints when he created a series of views of the city of Rome for Ujazdów Castle.⁸ Although he had travelled to Rome in 1742, the Warsaw views of Rome were not based on his drawings or memories, but on the etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, which were already wide-

ly known at the time. Since, as Alberto Rizzi noted, they "bear least of all his signature",⁹ the views of Rome cannot be the major subject here. Rather, it is the numerous views of the city of Warsaw and its surroundings that should be the focus of consideration.

Three aspects of Bellotto's work lend themselves to sharpening the view of the *Alterswerk* and will be analysed in more detail below: 1) the representation of the city and Bellotto's increasing cross-genre conception of the cityscape, 2) his painterly conception and re-evaluation of the staffage figures, and finally 3) the change in the artist's self-portraits.

3 Across the Boundaries of Genres: The Panoramic Cityscape

Starting from the early views of Venice and Italy, the major changes in Bellotto's conception of the theme of the 'city' occur with the beginning of his work for Stanislaus August Poniatowski. As a result of the tasks he was given by the king, the cityscape became mixed with the history painting in several respects and took on an increasingly panoramic character. The boundaries between genres became more and more blurred in Bellotto's paintings. Whether this was ultimately a result of the vilification of his core competence of veduta painting by the Saxon Director of the Arts Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn must, however, remain

a matter of speculation. Nevertheless, the Warsaw vedute show a corresponding tendency in that, on the one hand, they widen the view considerably compared to the Dresden vedute and, on the other hand, they increasingly integrate scenic elements.

This tendency had already been indicated in the views of the Sonnenstein Fortress in Pirna, a small town near Dresden. Thus Bellotto, in his early thirties, in his largest known painting of the *The Fortress of Sonnenstein and Pirna from the 'Hohes Werk'*, shows in the foreground a scene with several card players at a table, which a little girl has just approached [fig. 2].¹⁰ A little boy has sat down

⁶ See Kowalczyk 2016, 251, 259.

⁷ See Rottermund 2001, 36-7. He emphasised the influence of the king and the legitimacy and ideologically influenced character of many of Bellotto's paintings in the context of the political situation in Poland at the time. Reference must also be made to Peter Kerber's research. In his catalogue *Eyewitness Views*, he has shown how, over the course of time, paintings originally conceived as event paintings with political, religious or other social backgrounds ('reportorial' views) were transformed into works mainly perceived as vedute through the loss of knowledge of the respective context. See Kerber 2017, 5, 6, concerning Bellotto: 149.

⁸ See Rizzi 1991, 22-9.

⁹ Rizzi 1991, 22.

¹⁰ The figure of the girl bears a striking resemblance to *The Chocolate Girl* by Jean-Etienne Liotard, which could be viewed in the newly established Royal Gallery in the Stallhof from 1747. On Bellotto's reception of the works in the royal painting collection cf. also Peinelt-Schmidt 2022.



Figure 2 Bernardo Bellotto, *The Fortress of Sonnenstein and Pirna from the 'Hohes Werk'*. 1754/56. Oil on canvas, 204 × 331 cm. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photo: Hans-Peter Klut/Elke Estel

on the parapet and tells the viewer with lively gesture not to miss the view of the roofs of the town. Next to him is a man in civilian clothes, leaning on the wheel of a cannon and putting his hand to his cap to protect himself from the sun coming from the left. Along with the staffage, which Bellotto now delineates more clearly and individually, in the same painting the relationship between foreground and background changes. The difference in size becomes more noticeable – Bellotto tends to dispense with smooth transitions in the proportions. This is particularly evident in the last painting he created before leaving Dresden, *The Elbe Valley between Pillnitz and Pirna* [fig. 3]. There he depicts a large farmstead in the foreground on

the left and shepherds resting on the right in such a way that they intensify the pull and expanse of the landscape behind them through the difference in size. In the background he spreads out the Elbe valley between the royal pleasure palace of Pillnitz, the town of Pirna with the Sonnenstein fortress and the peaks of the Hills of the Saxon Switzerland in a way that can only be described as panoramic.¹¹ None of his Dresden vedute has such a composition – they always form a self-contained continuum of representation, the illusion of a unified pictorial space that can be accessed by the viewer from one location.¹²

¹¹ The history of the panorama is closely linked to the history of land surveying, which, as we know, played a recurring role in Bellotto's paintings. Cf. Dolz 2022.

¹² Bellotto already made use of the trick of contracting wide distances in the veduta *Dresden from the left bank of the Elbe above the Altstädter Brückenkopf*. The view stretches from the end of the Brühl Terrace across to the Japanese (Dutch) Palace, and – compared to reality – Bellotto clearly contracted it in favour of his pictorial idea.



Figure 3 Bernardo Bellotto, *The Elbe Valley between Pillnitz and Pirna*. Ca. 1766. Oil on canvas, 105 × 136.5 cm. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photo: Elke Estel

By emphasising the distance between the scenic foreground and the expanse of the background, Bellotto tapped into a completely new compositional principle in his middle years, which he also increasingly used in his later Warsaw works.

What is striking when looking at the late pictures is that towards the end of his creative period Bellotto evidently felt less and less bound by the boundaries of genres. It is true that with the smaller pictures for the wall decorations of the royal palaces he also created quite conventional vedute – counterparts that are still very close to the Dresden city views. But he also produced large-format paintings that are neither vedute in the original sense of the genre nor history paintings in the classical sense.¹³

This tendency can already be seen in the large painting depicting Stanislaus August's election as king [fig. 4]. The depiction of the historical moment from 1764, subsequently painted in 1776 (and once again in 1778), is embedded in a broad landscape of the kind Bellotto had already produced at the end of his Dresden period and in Vienna. The landscape in which this election takes place is not only seen by Bellotto as the sideline setting of the event, as is usual in a history painting, but at the same time it bears veduta-like features in that windmills and isolated identifiable buildings are shown in the wide plain before Warsaw.¹⁴ The same applies to the painting of the *Entry of the Polish Envoy Count Jerzy Ossoliński into Rome* – a his-

¹³ This phenomenon was also observed by Kerber using other examples. Cf. Kerber 2017, 6.

¹⁴ In doing so, he was perhaps also following on from a depiction of the coronation of Augustus the Strong, which has a similarly panoramic character and also shows the events from a bird's-eye view: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sachsen-Polen#/media/Datei:Jean-Pierre_Norblin_de_La_Gourdain_001.jpg.



Figure 4 Bernardo Bellotto, *The Election of Stanislaus August as King of Poland*. 1778. Oil on canvas, 177 × 250 cm. Warsaw, The Royal Castle Warsaw Museum. © Zamek Królewski w Warszawie – Muzeum. Photo: Andrzej Ring, Lech Sandzewicz

torical event that took place in 1633.¹⁵ On the basis of an etching by Piranesi and detailed descriptions of the entry, Bellotto has created an architectural fantasy in which the actual event that makes the picture a history painting is barely discernible due to the myriad of people. The two inscription panels and the ahistorical insertion of the churches of Santa Maria del Monte Santo and Santa Maria dei Miracoli contribute to this impression, as does the fact that Bellotto (or Marcello Bacciarelli) inserts a portrait of himself into the composition, thus making himself a historical person depicted

in relief.¹⁶ Furthermore, he provided the picture with an inscription in which he refers to his artistic freedom – as he had done before in a self-portrait, which will be discussed later: “on a cru pouvoir se permettre cette seule liberté contre | la stricte vérité de l’Histoire, en figurant le Site, tel qu’ | il est aujourd’hui”.¹⁷ The sea of people surges over and over, reminiscent of the veduta *Der Altmart in Dresden von der Seegasse aus*. However, compared to this earlier picture, he is now not content with merely creating the impression of a mass of people by means of a sea of pinheads, but gives

¹⁵ See Kozakiewicz 1972, 2: 379-87, no. 430.

¹⁶ The most recent research results on the painting were recently provided by Magdalena Królikiewicz. She also reopens the question of authorship for Bellotto’s portrait medallion, which older research attributed to Bacciarelli. See Królikiewicz, forthcoming.

¹⁷ Królikiewicz, forthcoming.



Figure 5 Bernardo Bellotto, *Sigismund's Column from the Lowlands of the Vistula*. 1767-70. Oil on canvas, 114.5 × 170.5 cm. Warsaw, The Royal Castle Warsaw Museum. © Zamek Królewski w Warszawie – Muzeum. Photo: Andrzej Ring, Lech Sandzewicz

the people present faces right to the back rows. Thus, the *Entry* is a mixture of architectural fantasy, veduta and history painting, which also contains a self-portrait. The panoramic character is created by manipulating Piazza del Popolo, which the artist widens in width by moving the churches apart. He also expands the square in depth due to the vast number of people who populate it by making the streets leading from it visible far into the distance.

In addition to these examples of the transgression of genre boundaries, Bellotto created the almost eerily deserted picture *Sigismund's Column from the Lowlands of the Vistula* [fig. 5]. Hints suffice to represent the presence of the townspeople: the wagon tracks in the dust of the path leading to the column; smoke emanating from a chimney;

the presence of man in his things – calashes, building tools. The deliberate omission of the incidentals that are otherwise characteristic of Bellotto's work – flower boxes, hanging laundry, the striped awnings on the windows – gives us a glimpse of the true greatness of this picture, which was already interpreted by Pallucchini as surreal and by Rizzi as prophetic of the fate of the city of Warsaw.¹⁸ This painting also represents a transgression of genre boundaries, if one assumes that staffage is a central element of veduta painting. In the case of this picture, the moment of transgression does not lie in the mixing of different genres but in the extreme concentration on a specific theme: urban space. Therefore, it could be described as an architectural still life.

¹⁸ See Pallucchini 1961, 22: “[in this painting] il Bellotto ha ritrovato l'intima profondità della sua ispirazione”. Cf. Rizzi 1991, 46. The depiction has a counterpart: *The Sigismund Column from the Lowland of the Vistula with King Stanislaus August visiting the wing of the royal castle that burnt down in 1767*. The painter takes a few more steps back here and shows the view expanded to include the historical event. The veduta, which has been lost since the Second World War, was already described by Rizzi as a “hybrid form between veduta and history painting” (1991, 48) and was also inventoried at the time of its creation under the corresponding (somewhat unwieldy descriptive) picture title. The building activity commissioned by the king, which is the focus here, was already a recurring pictorial motif for Bellotto in the Dresden vedute.

4 Giving a Face to the People

What is also striking is the changing importance Bellotto attaches to people in his paintings. Reference has already been made to the change in the size of the staffage in one of the views of Pirna. In none of his previous vedute did the people reach such a size in relation to the picture surface as in the vedute *The Fortress of Sonnenstein and Pirna from the 'Hohes Werk'*. Although all the earlier pictures also contain scenic or anecdotal elements, one has to discover their tiny stories first when immersing oneself into the urban space. This applies not only to the so-called common people but even to the king, who first has to be discovered in his richly decorated carriage on the *Neumarkt* [fig. 6]. In the Pirna painting Bellotto places the picture's staff in front of the massive balustrade within the viewer's range and makes them his immediate companions. He subsequently applied the same principle to several vedute he created in Vienna. In the case of the painting for Prince Wenzel Anton Kaunitz-Rietberg and the two paintings done in 1759/60 for the Prince of Liechtenstein, Joseph Wenzel I, however, the people depicted in the foreground are no longer enlarged staffage that has begun to take on a life of its own. Instead, they are portraits that the artist inserted at the request of the respective client.¹⁹

Perhaps it was this new task that ultimately awakened the artist's interest in the image of man, its physiognomy and its habitus. This had hardly played a role during his training and in the context of the Dresden vedute. The portrait played no role in Canaletto's workshop and for some of the few small-format figures in the Dresden vedute that actually bear portrait-like features, there is evidence of graphic sources. For example, in his first Dresden veduta, *Dresden from the right bank of the Elbe above the Augustus Bridge*, he depicted several people from the Dresden court [fig. 7]. On closer inspection, the rest of his staffage reveals itself to be a painterly-illusionist masterpiece, for the faces of the small figures dissolve into individual patches of colour as the eye gets closer [fig. 8]. Bellotto had adopted this stylistic peculiarity from his uncle. In this way, however, the characters are not given an individual characterisation – it is mostly more a matter of schematic faces developed purely from the colour.

This is different in Warsaw. Stylistically – and based on the Pirna and Vienna paintings – Bellotto's understanding of physiognomy and its painterly execution changes here more than any other aspect of his work. Even a small figure now takes on characterful features. As Andrzej Rottermund has aptly put it: "The streets and inhabitants of Warsaw spring to life in these scenes".²⁰ And Rizzi has rightly singled out the "two Jews in silent conversation" in the veduta with the *Midowa Street* [fig. 9]. According to him, they "rightly belong to the most remarkable scenes [...] from Bellotto's entire oeuvre".²¹ Numerous examples can be added to this. In the same painting, for instance, the scene around the engravings attached to a wall is particularly vivid in terms of the different characterisations of the individual physiognomies. It is striking that Bellotto also seems to have discovered a weakness for depicting the rich clothing of the ladies of the court during this period. He also attached particular importance to the realistic rendering of the different uniforms during this period – which was certainly not least due to his respective royal commission.

At the same time, one must admit that sometimes there are weaknesses in the execution of these individualisations – faces seem distorted, proportions shifted, the figures are too large for their position in the picture, facial expressions and gestures sometimes seem somewhat stiff.²² Nevertheless, the change in style that can be observed in Bellotto's work in this area represents a great achievement, for Bellotto appropriates something here that had previously played only a subordinate role in his oeuvre. Above all, however, it is an aspect of artistic activity that had apparently played no role whatsoever in his training with his uncle. We can only speculate about the reasons for this increased interest in the personalities who populate his city views: is it the allure of the new surroundings? Was it part of the requirements of the new client?

¹⁹ On the commissioning cf. Schütz 2005, 101-2. The Pirna veduta, as a precursor, has not yet been related to the paintings.

²⁰ Rottermund 2001, 38.

²¹ Rizzi 1991, 87; transl. by the Author.

²² An example of this is the group of three women and the rider in the foreground of the veduta *The Blue Palace* from 1779, whose heads appear too large. The figures in the *View of the Ruin of Theben on the river March*, created in Vienna, also appear less than harmonious in their adaptation of size to the rest of the picture.



Figure 6 Bernardo Bellotto, *The New Market in Dresden seen from the Jüdenhof*. Ca. 1748/49. Oil on canvas, 133 × 235 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photo: Hans-Peter Klut/Elke Estel

Figure 7 Bernardo Bellotto, *Dresden from the right bank of the Elbe above the Augustus Bridge*. 1747. Oil on canvas, 132 × 236 cm. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Photo: Elke Estel

Figure 8 Bernardo Bellotto, *The Neustädter Markt in Dresden* (detail).
1750/51. Oil on canvas, 134 × 135 cm.
Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister.
© Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.
Photo: Herbert Boswank



Figure 9 Bernardo Bellotto, *The Midowa Street*. 1777. Oil on canvas, 84 × 107 cm.
Warsaw, The Royal Castle Warsaw Museum. © Zamek Królewski w Warszawie – Muzeum. Photo: Andrzej Ring, Lech Sandzewicz

5 The Programme of the Self-Image

First of all, it must be said that there are none of the beautiful engraved or etched portraits or self-portraits by Bellotto – unlike those of his uncle – which attest to the authenticity of the portrait by means of a corresponding inscription. Nevertheless, there are some depictions that can be interpreted as self-portraits for various reasons.

As mentioned above, Bellotto already portrayed himself in a prominent position in his first Dresden veduta. The group of three men in the immediate vicinity of the viewer is traditionally and plausibly interpreted as follows: with his drawing pad on his knees, his drawing pencil in his right hand, Bernardo Bellotto sits on a stone between the two Saxon court painters Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich and Johann Alexander Thiele [fig. 10]. Thiele – the landscape painter in the green skirt – points out the vastness of the Elbe valley to the newcomer. Dietrich, on the other hand, does not make eye contact with Bellotto, but looks out of the painting in the direction of the viewer, in a self-confident pose. He seems to take little interest in the new artist. Whether this expresses Bellotto's perception upon his arrival is a matter of speculation.²³ The hitherto uninterpreted eye relationships – or rather their absence – are quite interesting, for Bellotto does not look at Thiele either, who seems to want to instruct him. His gaze is rather directed inwards, indicating the state of mental reflection and thus referring to the artist's creative power from within himself. In general, the figure of the drawing youth is part of a long iconographic tradition that the artist takes up here.²⁴

However, the fact that Bellotto presents himself somewhat submissive and seated, i.e., subordinate, between the two established painters may confidently be interpreted as a strategic understatement. In the context of the painting in which we find the three of them here, it becomes clear that Bellotto is by no means a beginner to whom the old hands have to give wise advice. On the contrary – even the first veduta, which he proudly and conspicuously signed and dated – is an unmistakable masterpiece that adds a significant facet to contemporary art in Dresden. Because – what do Thiele and Dietrich stand for? Thiele, who had depicted numerous Saxon castles and palaces in

their scenic surroundings and who had already immortalised Saxon Switzerland in paintings long before the Romantics, stands for a conception of landscape that was strongly oriented towards the older Dutch.²⁵ His palette is dark, his depiction of the distance is dominated by aerial perspective, which makes the Elbe valley disappear in hazy air. And Dietrich? The painter, who was highly esteemed in his day and whose works were in great demand, can aptly be described as an eclectic. His style was that of the most famous painters before him – above all Rembrandt, “in whose taste” he worked.²⁶ What unites the two is the exact opposite of what Bellotto's art brought to the Elbe from Venice: clarity, light, precision – without appearing sterile. Thus, this self-portrait is only seemingly a submissive gesture by a clueless newcomer who wants to modestly blend in with the locals. By ignoring the instructions of the one and leaving the other standing there without a relationship, Bellotto reveals his self-confidence at a second glance.

It is interesting that in the version for Count Heinrich von Brühl, who had requested a replica of each painting in the same format, he omits the self-portrait. Thus he makes a clear difference between the work for the king and the second version for the second man in the state. This difference is also manifested in the painting's signature, which is placed much less prominently. Now it is Dietrich whom Thiele addresses with a grand gesture, as if Bellotto wanted to say: ‘Lasciateli parlare, io preferisco dipingere’ (let them talk, I prefer to paint).

This brilliant prelude, in which Bellotto also seems to express his artistic and social aspirations in the first Dresden veduta, is followed by a long period without pictorial self-portrayals. Although there are sometimes attempts to discover the artist in one or the other staffage figure, these are mostly devoid of any argumentative basis. The man on the stairs of the paintings of the Stallhof building does hold an elongated object in his hand, but whether it is a brush is questionable, especially since Bellotto's paintings were not created plein-air.

One picture is of outstanding importance in the context of artistic self-portrayal: *The Self-Portrait*

²³ The scene may not be read as a “‘photograph’ of social reality” as Rottermund (2021, 248) has named it, but rather as an expression of a certain artistic and social aspiration.

²⁴ See Grollemund 2017, 44-82.

²⁵ For an overview on Thieles work see Marx 2022.

²⁶ For an overview on Dietrichs work see Schniewind Michel 2012.

Figure 10
Bernardo Bellotto,
*Dresden from the right
bank of the Elbe above
the Augustus Bridge*
(detail). 1747. Oil on
canvas, 132 × 236 cm.
Dresden, Staatliche
Kunstsammlungen
Dresden, Gemäldegalerie
Alte Meister. ©
Gemäldegalerie Alte
Meister, Staatliche
Kunstsammlungen
Dresden, Photo: Hans-
Peter Klut/Elke Estel



as a Venetian Nobleman [fig. 11]. In this painting, which has survived in three versions, Bellotto depicts himself as a Venetian knight from the Order of the Golden Stole (*Cavaliere della Stola d'Oro*). Only a few high dignitaries belonged to this exclusive society in Venice.²⁷ If one assumes that the depiction is a self-portrait, this means for the artist a self-aggrandisement that is not to be underestimated – indeed, presumption, if one wants to put it negatively. Peter Kerber rejects the interpretation as a self-portrait on the grounds that Bellotto would have blocked his way back to his home town.²⁸ However, there are also arguments in favour of an interpretation as a self-portrait: first and foremost we have the mentioning of the painting as a self-portrait in an early inventory by Marcello Bacciarelli, who knew Bellotto well and who could assess the resemblance of the painting to his person.²⁹ Secondly the quotation from Horace in the immediate vicinity of the painter in the picture: “Pictoribus atque Poetis Quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas” (Horace, *Ars Poet.* 9-10). Bellotto had already prominently displayed this postulate of artistic freedom on a composite

print of his earliest landscape etchings.³⁰ Painters have the same right to artistic freedom as poets. Bellotto painted the first version while still in Dresden, where it was on display at the exhibition of the newly founded Art Academy. Here he had every reason to recall his former position at court with such a brilliant history painting.³¹ In doing so, he ventured into a genre that had not previously been in his repertoire. Thus the self-portrait – as which it is to be seen here – represents an important step on the path to consummate artistic and personal self-awareness.

This is almost somewhat exaggerated in the *Entry* already mentioned above. The figures he depicts sitting on the walls with the four portrait medallions, not only lend the picture a folk-like component that already existed in Bellotto's Dresden pictures. Especially with the fantastic architectural elements of Bellotto's composition, they serve as a scale and indicate that the portrait of Bellotto in the right-hand medallion is a larger-than-life one – in proportion, therefore, his head is depicted larger than that of the painting's protagonist. Together with the count's crown above

²⁷ See Berry 1828, o.p.: “Conferred by the Senate of the Republic of Venice upon persons descended from the oldest nobility of the state, or those who have filled with honour the important post of ambassador on some extraordinary occasion”.

²⁸ Kerber 2022, 140.

²⁹ See Rottermund 2021, 226-7.

³⁰ See Metze 2022, 47 and fn. 7.

³¹ Rottermund has already particularly emphasised this aspect of the interpretation of the self-image against the background of Bellotto's loss of prestige in Dresden (cf. Rottermund 2021, 228).



Figure 11 Bernardo Bellotto, *Architectural Fantasy with self-portrait of Bellotto dressed as a Venetian Nobleman*. Ca. 1765. Oil on canvas. Warsaw, The Royal Castle Warsaw Museum. © Wilczyński Krzysztof/Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie



Figure 12 Bernardo Bellotto, *Warsaw from the suburbs of Praga*. 1770. Oil on canvas, 172,5 × 261 cm. Warsaw, The Royal Castle Warsaw Museum. © Zamek Królewski w Warszawie – Muzeum. Photo: Andrzej Ring, Lech Sandzewicz

it, one can certainly think of a certain *hubris* in the artist's self-perception.³²

At the end of his life, Bellotto completed his artistic work with an impressive self-portrait. In the large-format veduta *Warsaw from the suburbs of Praga* [fig. 12], he reverts to a representation he had used several years earlier in his first Dresden veduta. He paints a young man – not drawing but painting – and an older man showing him something with a grand gesture: Bellotto himself points out to his son Lorenzo the magnificent landscape that he, Bellotto himself, has created. How differ-

ent are the visual relationships here, in contrast to the early veduta, in which the young Bellotto shows so little interest in Thiele's grand gesture? Bellotto himself is now the one who is presenting something to somebody and his son is the one who gratefully accepts the instruction. Together with the first Dresden veduta, this can be interpreted as the closing bracket around Bellotto's life. The artist has arrived at the peak of his career and at the same time at the point in his biography where he is passing on the baton. Tragically, Lorenzo died in the same year.

³² The unauthorised adoption of count titles does not seem to have been an isolated incident during this period. Johann Friedrich Böttger – the inventor of the first European hard porcelain – also apparently arrogated himself a count's title. There is no evidence of elevation to the peerage for him either (cf. Peinelt-Schmidt, forthcoming). Concerning Bellotto's count title see Rotermund 2021, 243 and fnn. 87, 88.

6 Conclusion

The development of Bernardo Bellotto's artistic self-representation allows us to trace the evolution towards a fully formed artistic self-awareness. But is this also linked to a concept of 'old age'? Certainly less to a concept of physically growing old than to a generational concept of age. In Bellotto's *Alterswerk*, therefore, it is more a matter of equating age with the consciousness of having something to bequeath. The state of artistic maturity that Bellotto reached in his late works is linked for him to the awareness of passing something on to his professional successor, paving the way for his own career. Thus, 'work of old age' is not necessarily linked to a certain period of life, but rather to the awareness of one's own generation and its connection with the previous ones - Canaletto - and the ones still to come - Lorenzo.

The cityscape is transformed into a 'panorama', the staffage takes on portrait-like features and the self-portrait reflects Bellotto's growing self-confidence. The development of the three aspects described goes in the direction of a dissolution of boundaries, a transgression of genre boundaries and - in relation to the staffage - in the direction of an enhancement of the characteristic, individual. In terms of style, his ageing style can be seen above all in the panoramic expansion of his vedute and in the portrait-like elaboration of his staffage figures. His self-confidence, on the other hand, which was even greater than in his earlier works, can be clearly seen in his artistic self-portrayal. The self-portraits, however, are primarily a phenomenon rather than an independent feature of Bellotto's art. The renunciation of being bound by genre boundaries seems to me to be the clearest sign of Bernardo Bellotto's *Altersstil*. The more he saw himself safely in the tow of power - so to see also in the painting with the *Election of Stanislaus August* - the less he was interested in the barriers of an academic art system. The fact that Bellotto rejected this academicism is most likely due to his negative experience at the newly founded Dresden Art Academy. At the same time, his loss of significance at the place that had led him to artistic maturity had an almost catalytic effect. Bellotto took flight and tried his luck elsewhere. His second de-

parture from Dresden led him into the shelter of a court that once again appreciated his art. Within the confines of commissions for the Polish king, he found opportunities for development. Thus it was probably ultimately the external, socio-economic circumstances that allowed Bellotto to unfold his so characteristic work of old age. Yet Bellotto's *Altersstil* is not really a style in the painterly sense, but rather a mental attitude - 'style' in the sense of a social habitus. One could perhaps say that in his case economic security conditioned intellectual and artistic freedom, and this manifests itself visibly in Bellotto's late works.

What does this mean for the concept of *Altersstil*? As is well known, Werner Busch already questioned the concept of the *Spätstil* in general because he seemed to him to be too much "bound to the concept of the genius artist".³³ Instead, Busch describes *Spätstil* as a mode "consciously chosen" by the artist.³⁴ For Bellotto, I would say, this is especially true in relation to his conception of the people in his paintings. Here, Bellotto's painterly execution shows a conscious choice of a certain mode - a mode that aims more at individualisation. His painterly conception of the human face, his staffage, in particular, clearly shows that he consciously departed from the style of painting he had learned in his youth and later practised for a long time. At the same time, however, he also produced paintings that are still very close to his Dresden creations - such as the smaller Warsaw views. But altogether, I would rather argue, that *Altersstil* is the style of the artist whose search for the form of expression appropriate to him has come to an end. Entry into this creative phase is less tied to a specific physical age than to a developmental psychological phase. It is the same with Bellotto. His late works clearly reveal the development towards a painterly style that evolved from the requirements of the respective commissions. Within the confines of these commissions, Bellotto achieved a great painterly freedom of expression and a very individual conception of art - a conception of art that has made itself independent of art theoretical and academical barriers.

³³ Busch 2014.

³⁴ Busch 2014, 216. He describes these 'modi' using the examples of Rembrandt and Titian.

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