

E.H. Gombrich, 'A note on Giorgione's "Three philosophers"', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 128, No. 1000, Jul., 1986, p. 488



19 *The three philosophers*, by Giorgione. 123.8 by 144.5 cm. (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria)

Among the many interpretations of Giorgione's *Three Philosophers in Vienna* which have been put forward to date,¹ only the three earliest ones need be cited in this note. The first is of course the entry by Marcantonio Michiel: 'In the house of Taddeo Contarino, 1525, the canvas in oil of the three philosophers in a landscape, two standing, and one sitting who contemplates the solar rays, with that rock which is so marvellously rendered; it was begun by Zorzo del Castelfranco, and completed by Sebastiano Veneziano'. The second is the entry of 1659 in the inventory of the collection of Leopold William where the painting is called 'the three mathematicians (= astrologers)'. The third is the entry of 1783 which reads 'The three magi who wait for the appearances of the star'.

Since Johannes Wilde published the X-rays of the painting in 1932 I believe that the last one has the best claim to be correct. But if it is right, why should one of the magi contemplate the *solar* rays (*li raggi solari*), as Michiel wrote? Should he no rather look for the rays of the star? I believe that this is indeed what he does, and that he is aided in this endeavour by that '*saxo finite cusi mirabilmente*' which must evidently be of relevance to the scene. If he is looking into an opening of the rock and across it at the sky his action can be explained, because Aristotle remarked (correctly I believe) that 'people in pits and well sometimes see the stars',² that is in daylight. This observation would have helped the artist to represent the subject described in the 1783 inventory: he could not have painted the magi in pitch dark searching the starry heavens, but he could paint one of them selecting a point of vantage from which he could see the stars even in daylight.

Whether or not the thought of this possibility came to Giorgione via Aristotle, or whether it was common knowledge, I believe that is what the sitting magus is doing, while the other two are awaiting his result. Maybe the left-hand side of the painting was really trimmed too much to explain the situation fully, but once it is pointed out, it seems a plausible reading of that wonderful composition.

¹ For this and following see P. Zampetti and V. Lilli, *Opera completa di Giorgione*, Milan [1968].

² Aristotle: *De Generatione animalium*, V. (780 b 21).