LOT 26
PROPERTY FROM A EUROPEAN PRIVATE COLLECTION
WORKSHOP OF GENTILE BELLINI
VENICE 1429 (?) - 1507
PORTRAIT OF SULTAN MEHMED II WITH A YOUNG DIGNITARY
oil on pine panel
33 by 45.7 cm.; 13 by 18 in.

ESTIMATE £300,000-500,000 GBP
Lot Sold: 965,000 GBP

PROVENANCE
Christian von Mechel (1737–1817), Basel;
Acquired from the above by a forebear of the present owner in 1807;
Thence by family descent to the present owner.

LITERATURE
C. Marinesco, 'A propos de quieques portraits de Mohammed II et d'un dignitaire byzantin attribués à Gentile Bellini', in Bulletin de la Société nationale des antiquaires de France, 1962, pp. 126–34 (as not by Bellini);
H.F. Collins, Gentile Bellini: a monograph and catalogue of works, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1970, pp. 79, 138 (as possibly by Bellini);
F. Babinger, Mehmed the Conqueror and his Time, Princetown 1978, p. 379, reproduced plate XXIV (as possibly by Bellini);
J. Raby, El Gran Turco: Mehmed the Conqueror as a patron of the arts and Christendom, D. Phil thesis, Oxford University, 1980, pp. 90–92;
M. Andaloro, ‘Costanzo da Ferrara: gli anni a Constantinapoli alla corte di Maometto II’, in Storia dell’arte, vol. 38/40, 1980, pp. 185–212 (as attributed to Costanzo da Ferrara);
J. Meyer zur Capellen, Gentile Bellini, Stuttgart 1985, pp. 68, 129–30, no. A10a, reproduced plate 15, fig. 19 (as by Bellini);
F. Heinemann, Giovanni Bellini e i Belliniani, Zurich 1991, vol. III, p. 115, reproduced fig. 201; (as by Bellini);
O. Longo, ‘Una 'soasa' per il Conquistatore: Gentile Bellini e Maometto II’, in Atti dell'Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere e arti, 153, 1994–95, p. 511 (as by Bellini);
O. Pächt, ed. M. Vyoral-Tschapka and M. Pächt, Venetian Painting in the 15th Century: Jacopo, Gentile and Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna, London 2003, p. 143 (as by Bellini);

CATALOGUE NOTE
This panel is one of only three surviving contemporary or near-contemporary oil paintings depicting the great Sultan Mehmed II Fatih (1430–81), and the last to remain in private hands. It is the only known painting to depict the Sultan with another sitter. It has remained in the collection of the descendants of the family who first bought it back in the early nineteenth century, and appears here on the open market almost certainly for the first time in its history. Mehmed II was without question one of the most important of all the Ottoman Sultans. His nickname ‘The Conqueror’ reflects a lifelong campaign of successful expansion of the Ottoman Empire against its traditional foes in Eastern Christendom. To the Christian West he was a figure of fear and immense respect, best known as the ‘Grand Turk’, the man who had captured Constantinople from the Byzantine Empire in 1451, at the age of only twenty-one. Yet this was only the most spectacular achievement in an aggressive expansion of his Empire across all the former territories of Byzantium in Greece and the Balkans, even to Moldavia and Wallachia north of river Danube, while taking Trebizond and Caffa and other European colonies in the Crimea between 1461–75. His own dominions were also extended as far as the Euphrates in the East. His creation of a highly efficient and centralised regime, establishing the relations between the feudal military elite and the court and judiciary, with him at the epicentre, was to endure for over two centuries. His commercial and military policies saw the strengthening of his fleet to protect the Dardanelles and Bosphorus, and encouraged trade with Venice at the expense of her traditional rival in the eastern Mediterranean Genoa.

This portrait of Mehmed II is closely related to a famous original, painted by Gentile Bellini in 1480, and today in the National Gallery in London (fig. xxx). This is the only surviving image produced during Bellini’s visit to the Ottoman Court between 1479 and early 1481. Although trade with Istanbul – as Constantinople was now called after its fall – had resumed fairly quickly, it was not until January 1479 that a peace treaty brought to an end sixteen long years of war with Venice. On 1 August that same year the Venetian Senate had received a request from Mehmed for a painter – according to the diarist Marin Sanudo the request was for ‘un bon pytor’ (a good painter) – together with a sculptor and a bronze founder. ‘Zentil belin optimo pytor’ (‘Gentile Bellini, an excellent painter’) was chosen for this task, perhaps because his friend Giovanni Dario, the diplomat who had conducted the peace talks with Istanbul had
recommended him, or perhaps because the Turkish Ambassador had been impressed by Bellini’s current work in the Great Council Hall of the Doge’s Palace.²

Gentile Bellini left for Istanbul on 3 September 1479, accompanied by two of his assistants. His role was not simply that of painter, but also as cultural ambassador for Venice. The inscription on his surviving portrait of Mehmed II dates it to 25 November 1480. In the interim Bellini had been asked to ‘paint a great many marvellous and extraordinary paintings of himself and almost countless other subjects’.³ Bellini portrays his subject in three-quarter view, beneath a carefully shaded illusionistic arch, and behind a parapet covered with a bejewelled cloth of honour. The device of the three crowns above probably refers to the three conquered realms of Greece, Trebizond and Asia. The much damaged inscription lower left seems to have described him as Victor Orbis, or ‘Conqueror of the World’. So pleased was Mehmed with his likeness that Bellini was made ‘a member of his retinue and comes palatinus (palace companion) as well as a golden knight with his own insignia and chain’.⁴ This was not the only likeness, for Bellini also made a portrait medallion of the Sultan, or at the very least provided a drawing for one (fig. xxx).⁵ It is not certain where this medal was struck, but it is most likely made after Gentile’s return to Venice in 1481, and was doubtless intended for wider distribution. The reverse is inscribed GENTILIS BELLINUS VENETUS EQUES AURATUS COMES.Q. PALATINUS F (‘Gentile Bellini, Venetian, Golden Knight and palace companion made this’) and the reverse repeats the cipher of the three crowns used on the painted portrait. It is possible that a lost drawing rather than the 1480 painting may have served as the model for the medal.

There can be little doubt that the author of this remarkable double portrait was aware of Bellini’s prototype of 1480, and indeed it is quite possible that he may have been trained in Gentile’s large workshop. Mehmed himself is easily recognised, his bullish features perhaps more closely related to Bellini’s medal than the slimmer likeness of 1480.⁶ Certainly they accord well with other contemporary likenesses, notably the famous medallion struck by Constanzo di Moysis in 1478,⁷ and contemporary drawings and miniatures, notably the fascinating miniature of Mehmed II smelling a rose (the so-called ‘Sinan’ portrait) in which the Sultan is shown at full-length and seated (fig. xxx).⁸ The latter has been ascribed to both eastern court miniaturists and western artists such as Constanzo di Moysis, and bears elegant witness to the evident interchange between the two artistic traditions at this precise moment.

But much the most remarkable aspect of this portrait is the presence of the richly dressed young man, seemingly in his early twenties, who faces the Sultan. A handwritten label formerly on the reverse of the panel, recorded by Babinger, stated that these likenesses were ‘Ritratti di Maometto secondo e di suo figlio di Gentile Bellino’.⁹ Court etiquette would have made it unthinkable for anyone to be thus portrayed unless they were the son or perhaps a very close favourite of the Sultan. Mehmed’s eldest son Bayezid (1447–1512) would have been thirty-two in 1480 when his father’s likeness was taken, and so can be ruled out. Mehmed’s third son, Mustafa is similarly excluded by his early death in 1474. A more likely candidate would be Bayezid’s half brother Djem, born in 1459 and thus twenty years old at the time of Gentile’s sojourn. The problem with this identification is the absence of reliable likenesses of the young prince. In 1480 he was absent from court as Governor of Bursa, and thus would not have been seen by Gentile. Perhaps the most reliable likeness we have of him is that today in the Uffizi in Florence, a replica painted around 1580 by Cristoforo dell’Altissimo (c. 1525–1605) for Cosimo de’ Medici of the likeness of Djem that formed part of the famous series of portraits of famous men collected by the historian and biographer Paolo Giovio (1483–1552) for his museum in Borgo Vico near Como.¹⁰ But here the features of the prince, now bearded and including a distinctive nose like his father’s, are rather different. But if the young man is not Djem Sultan, then no other plausible alternative has yet been suggested. The sitter could, of course, represent a personal favourite of Mehmed, but it is much more likely that the double portrait has been composed at the instigation of the patron who commissioned the work, who may himself have been connected to the court at Istanbul, either through trading or diplomatic contacts.¹¹ This would certainly strengthen the supposition that the panel was painted in Venice rather than Istanbul, and at some date after Gentile’s visit.
Similarly the identity of the painter responsible for this double portrait remains unknown. The fact that the painting is painted on a pine panel, and that it employs the format of a double portrait strongly suggests that it was made in Venice, perhaps using patterns or drawings from Bellini’s workshop. Although initially supported by Heinemann, and Meyer zu Capellen, who regarded this as an authentic Gentile of the 1480s, Bellini’s own authorship of the panel was doubted by Babinger and has been discounted by modern scholars. Yet it seems mistaken to dismiss it, as Chong does, as a mere ‘pastiche’. As Antonio Mazzotta has recently observed, the simple flattened depiction of the two sitters, and the simple elliptical lines of their draperies is particularly close to the working practices of Bellini’s circle and implies that its author had been trained there. Raby places it close in date to Bellini’s return to Venice in 1481, while Caroline Campbell and Jennifer Fletcher see as the work of a follower or pupil working at the end of the fifteenth or very beginning of the sixteenth centuries. The distinctive red and gold textile worn by the young courtier is Italian rather than Islamic, and dates from the same period. If it were indeed produced by an artist in Bellini’s workshop, such a portrait would have been a very early example of its kind. In 1480 double portraits were still extremely rare in Italy, but by the end of the century they were beginning to become more established in Venetian art. Good early examples include Giovanni Bellini’s Double portrait of two men, formerly in the collection of Lord Kinnaird at Rossie Priory, and those in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Although the prototype likeness of Mehmed represented by the National Gallery portrait sits at the heart of a group of several closely related images, both Western and Eastern, apart from the present panel, only one other near-contemporary oil painting of Mehmet has survived. This is the smaller canvas (21 x 16 cm.) sold in these Rooms, 24 October 2007, lot 267 and today in the Islamic Art Museum, Doha. Although clearly indebted to Bellini’s model, the more realistic turned pose of Mehmed indicates that its author was familiar with more naturalistic innovations being introduced to Venetian art in the early sixteenth century by Giorgione and Titian, and it is most likely to date from around 1510–20.

There can be little doubt that the author or patron of this double portrait was responding to intense western interest in Mehmed and the Ottoman dynasty, fuelled by numerous contemporary texts describing Ottoman customs and rule. Indeed to a large extent Gentile’s contemporary and indeed posthumous fame rested much upon his portraits of Mehmed, for the great Sultan died soon after his visit in 1481. Such images show clearly that even late in life, Mehmed II was well aware of the power of his own image, even if it was contrary to Islamic precepts, and why he had turned to Venice for his likeness. Nevertheless Ottoman society as a whole took a very different view. Far from sharing his father’s outlook in such matters, his son and successor Bayezid II, commissioned no further figural paintings. According to the Venetian historian Giovanni Maria Angiolello (c. 1451–1525), who served under Mehmed between 1474 and 1481, the Bellini portrait and Mehmed’s other paintings met with his disapproval, and he ‘had them all sold in the Bazaar, where our merchants bought many of them’.15

We are deeply grateful to Dr Julian Raby of the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, Dr Jennifer Montagu of the Courtauld Institute, Dr Caroline Campbell of the National Gallery, London, Antonio Mazzotta and Dr Peter Humfrey for their help with the cataloguing of this picture.

1 Inv. 3099. Canvas, 70 x 52 cm. M. Davies, National Gallery Catalogues. The earlier Italian Schools, London 1961, pp. 51–52. The canvas is now badly damaged and the victim of injudicious later restoration.
2 Indeed, so great was the reputation of these works that the Senate stipulated that Bellini must return to complete what he had begun there.
3 Jacopo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo, Supplementum chronicarum, 1490, fol. 258v.
4 Ibid.
6 This may be accounted for by the fact the Mehmed was unwell at the time of Bellini’s portrait, and indeed would die
soon after it was made. See Babinger, 1978, pp. 403–04.
7 National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection; exhibited London and Boston, 2005–06, no. 16. Constanzo was present at the Ottoman Court at the same time as Gentile, probably between 1478–79, probably at the behest of King Ferranti I of Naples.
8 Watercolour, 39 x 27 cm. Istanbul, Topkapi Palace, H2153, fol. 10r. Reproduced in London 2005–06, p. 91, fig. 35. 9 Babinger 1961, p. 12. The label is now lost.
10 Inv. no. 12. Panel, 59 x 45 cm. It is interesting to note that this image is clearly indebted to Pinturicchio’s fresco of The Disputation of Saint Catherine in the Sala dei Santi in the Borgia Apartments in the Vatican, executed between 1492 and 1494, in which the sitter appears as a mounted rider. Pinturicchio is known to have used Gentile Bellini’s drawings from his Istanbul trip for such likenesses, as witnessed by the standing turbaned figure in the same fresco, also once identified as Prince Djem. The original (?) drawing for this figure, now attributed to Bellini’s workshop, is preserved in the Paris, Musée du Louvre, Paris (inv. 4655, exhibited London and Boston, 2005–06, no. 27).
11 For perhaps the most complete discussion of this question see Babinger 1961, pp. 11–13. That the commission may be in some way linked to Djem is supported by the fact that he spent several years in exile in Italy after 1489.
12 We are very grateful to Lisa Monnas for this information.

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**Fig. 1**
Attributed to Gentile Bellini, The Sultan Mehmet II, 1480, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London, UK © Bridgeman Images

**Fig. 2**

**Fig. 3**
Turkish School, 15th century, Portrait of Sultan Mehmet II, Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Turkey © Bridgeman Images

**Fig. 4**
Cristofano dell'Altissimo, Zizzimo, Oil on panel © Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence