

Organizing connotations in works of visual art (through the example of works by Giovanni Bellini)

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Abstract

Connotations as part and parcel of human communication are found in the course of semiotic analysis of works of visual art. Developed connotative formations, deeply connected with semantics, are revealed during analysis of some masters and trends of this kind of art. The works by Bellini are characterized by developed connotative sign formations, which are included into intentional, identification, and organizing codes, and form the basis of the creative-emotional impact and the composition of the works. Connotative formations of Bellini's pictures contain basic visually active elements — massive contours, color configurations, moving directions of the basic denoted objects. Bellini's connotative approach was continued in the works of his great followers.

Keywords: codes; semiotics; sign systems; connotations; representamens; signals; Giovanni Bellini.

1. Introduction

Connotations play an important role in human communication. Similarly to other sign systems, they can be investigated empirically in the course of semiotic analysis of concrete communicative objects — speech fragments, texts, artwork (Danesi 1999). As the author aimed to show previously, connotations as necessary and important parts of human communication are found during semiotic analysis of works of visual art. Developed connotative formations, deeply connected with semantics, are revealed during analysis of some masters and tendencies of this kind of art (Somov 2006).

As in communication in general, connotations in visual art exist in various forms: as hidden hypertexts that accompany basic texts; as independent signs that color communication semantically; as non-verbal

metaphors and metonymies. Usually, they are sign systems formed by icons, indexes, and symbols that seem to be embedded independently into the general sign form of the works (Somov 2006, 2007). Connotations in visual art do not necessarily possess concrete denotations and interpretants or materialize in precise systems of representamens. They can be of an indefinite character. This could be easily illustrated by characteristic visual sign formations of art masterpieces.

Such are the rises, splashes, and eddies shown earlier in the portrait *Lady with an Ermine*, falling surfaces, floating waves (Somov 2008), sharp triangles in the works by Bruegel (Somov 2009), organic bodies, twisted by the elements, bending before the wind, creeping on the ground, in *War* by Rousseau; restless dynamic shadows that accompany the basic images in graphic sheets by Picasso. Due to such connotations, some blurred visual meanings (semantic fields) are created, a specific layer of non-verbal impacts of the works of visual art on a human is formed (Panofsky 1983 [1955]). Such indefinite connotations exist due to connotative codes (Danesi 1999). First, connotations are manifested through natural codes (Somjen 1972; Somov 2006). Powerful motions, connected with danger, abrupt breaks, sharp obstacles, heavy falling bodies, surfaces that are at different angles towards each other form structures, distinctive features, and relations that, in their turn, foster the formation of connotations of danger, anxiety, unsteadiness, dynamics of environment. Contrariwise, aspiration for peace and comfort, softness of the environment are connected with codes of a positive emotional tinge. They are manifested in structures, distinctive features, and relations of an opposite nature. Such are calm lines, surfaces and their relationships without breaks, calm, smoothly flowing, covering forms, configurations and contours, light bodies, soft surfaces. Realizing intentional codes, the structures, features, and relations of the groups of elements of this kind form the basis of various emotive connotations — connotations of anxiety, danger or peace and comfort, estrangement or sympathy, painful negative feelings or positive feelings of comfort. Due to various structures, features, and groups of relationships, the identification and organization of natural codes are also manifested (Somov 2005). A typical contour of a silhouette, its breaks in active points, axial, mirror-symmetrical building of the silhouette, and its typological peculiarities are important structural features, according to which identification of the silhouette (of the perceived object) with a certain class of objects is conducted. Identification codes seem to rely upon structures, features, and relationships of visual representamens. Such semiotic description corresponds to theoretical models of description of identification in the field of perceptron modeling (Rosefeld 1969).

As connotations are implemented due to the work of codes, it is structures that play the key role in their formation and realization. In previous works, the author aimed to demonstrate the central role of structures in the formation of sign systems in the works of visual art (Somov 2008). Here, it is appropriate merely to point out the way structures participate in connotations. In particular, identification of vague lines and configurations with some objects (plants, rivers, mountains, animals, people, things) is conducted primarily on the basis of active structural features. Structures allow these hidden icons to be read.

Due to connections of various types of elements and relations, codes of organizing character are also actualized. Correspondingly, diversified formations of organizing character appear in sign systems of works of visual art. In these formations, structures connect groups of elements: lines, dots, configurations, color elements, etc. Therefore, organizing rhythms, symmetries, lines, numbers, and other structures that unite groups of elements are present in the works of visual art (Somov 2009). Structures, features, and relations included in organizational codes form the third side of connotations. Prevalence of any side of connotations (intentional, identification or organizing) generates, respectively, *three types of connotative formations: intentional, identificational, and organizational*. Connotations become more active in visual information when they structurally connected with other sign formations. They are intensified, first, by metaphors in paradigmatics and syntagmatics. Therefore, connotations in works of visual art often develop on the basis of repetition of features, basic denotations in the visual field of an image (repetition of human contours: figures, heads, faces, hands). The structures that organize the scale of relations allow the activation of certain features. Therefore, structural features that are the foundation of signs at the same time serve as organizing structures, features, and relations of groups of elements. In other words, what organizes relations in an image is at the same time an important connotation. And, on the contrary, semantically meaningful sign formation tends to turn into an organizational formation (Somov 2008).

In artwork, connotations of various types are connected to each other. Connotations that render emotive meanings and that are included into intentional codes at the level of representamens are connected by general structures to connotations of identification and organizing types. Because of this, *connotations of integrative character* appear. Orientation-emotional, representative, and organizational meanings are linked in these connotations (Lemke 1983). In terms of traditional art studies, expressive, depictive, and decorative principles of visual art correspond to these meanings. Thus, semiotic analysis of works may entail finding connotative sign formations that link the connotations with these various

meanings. The features that have an emotional impact are combined with reference to famous objects and form active organizational elements and relationships. Such connotations are significant sign means of creative-emotional impact in the works of visual art (color configurations, silhouettes, active lines, hidden geometrical figures, etc., which organize the picture). Vague connotations of integrative character are the basis of artwork. Research of sign systems of works allows the recognition such connotations, establishment of their interconnection with each other and other sign formations, and an understanding of their role in non-verbal communication. This is revealed by investigations of sign systems in the works by the greatest masters of visual art. Further, the results of semi-otic analysis of great Venetian artist Giovanni Bellini's (Giambellino) works are presented. Developed connotations of indefinite character are found in the sign systems of his works. These connotations play a primary role in his art.

2. Peculiarities of sign systems in the works by Bellini

The peculiarities of Bellini's talent revealed themselves in lyricism and a fine feeling for the spirituality of the surrounding world. The lines and forms of his paintings conveyed subtle feelings, emotions, moods that meet the plots of the pictures and the author's peculiar inner states. These features of the artist's works were not formed at once, but appeared gradually in the course of overcoming some influences. It was Mantegna, who married Giambellino's elder sister that markedly influenced him in the earlier period. Mantegna inherited typical peculiarities of an image from his teacher — Florentine sculptor, Donatello. They consisted in a sculptural approach to form and were found in the form of strong and generalized character of lines, use of active treatment of light and shade, coarse drawing of human figures, poses, gestures, creases of clothes. As far as art is concerned, Mantegna followed the generalized, sharp, strong forms of Donatello's reliefs. Following Mantegna, Giambellino aimed, first of all, at this sureness of drawing, strong contrasts, clarity and distinctness of forms (Goffen 1989). However, he later deviated from Mantegna's approach and started moving towards greater softness, lyricism, and understatement. This is indicated by the differences in two painting by the two artists at the beginning of 1460s — with one plot and one prototype. The composition of *The Agony in the Garden* was coined by both artists from the drawing in the album of Giambellino's father — Jacopo Bellini. These two pictures with one prototype were supposedly painted by them for a competition (Goffen 1989). They differed in the character of draw-



Figure 1. Giovanni Bellini, "Agony in the Garden" (c. 1465, tempera on wood, 81 × 127 cm, National Gallery, London)

ing and the use of color. Unlike Mantegna, Bellini uses soft contours; the warm subshine of daybreak is felt (figure 1). Instead of an assembly of angels, only one, translucent, is depicted. The dawn embraces the sky with fair lines. As these lines of the dawn encircle Christ's head, they may be interpreted as a nimbus. The cup, as the key sign of the work, becomes its basic connotation. A symbol of the biblical text is transformed into an organizing connotative formation and seems to be invisibly present in the picture. The connotation of the cup is developed in the features of the scenery. The ground and the rocks are organized by round flat forms. Their contours remind one of cups, while the inner bow lines — of the circuit of energies in volcanic craters that look like cups. Bow configurations and lines that mark the cups are in different surfaces towards each other. Their complicated mutual relationships fill the whole picture with dynamics and resemble those ways of destiny from which the Cup of sacrifice passes. All of the objects depicted in the picture are similar to connotations and create a single, holistic connotative formation.

The peculiarities of such a connotative approach are thereafter developed in Bellini's artwork. Connotations are rendered in the compositions of his work in the character of the drawing, color, and light. Powerful movements of lines and color configurations created a feeling of the energy of nature and the strength of mind. The features of connotations develop in the soil faults, tense human figures, angels' dynamic wings,

and penetrate into these denotations. The pointed above peculiarities of the master's works in the 1460s were connected with his attitude towards depicting space.

The artist's works of the 1450s–1470s are amid flat and three-dimensional painting. The signs in them are icons of three-dimensional space and active representaments of signs, the objects on which the surfaces of an image lay. At the same time, the denoted dimensions are modeled plastically, while the color becomes less conventional. This is explained by the use of tempera for which flatness, activity of lines, large color configurations and rare use of light-and-shade and midtones are characteristic. The artist learned oil painting from da Messina, who visited Venice from 1475–1476 (Goffen 1989). Oil painting by Bellini in the 1470s–1480s largely retains the peculiarities of the composition, but the use of color sees some changes. Therefore, referring to master's works of 1460s–1470s, one should note their coloristic peculiarities connected with tempera painting. The relations of color configurations in Bellini paintings are characterized by a clearly defined structure. Similar to the entire Venetian painting of the period, Bellini's works were connected with the mutual influence of Byzantine and Gothic traditions. The mosaics of Saint Mark's Cathedral continued in the mosaic structure of the Venetian artists' pictures. Typical color relations of brownish, bluish, ochre, golden colors, as well as longish color configurations, fluid and pulsating lines, typical for Byzantine visual art, were developed in sign formations of Bellini's paintings. At the same time, they maintain characteristic features of Gothic architectural motifs and Gothic icon painting. This is rendered first of all in the independent activity of lines in the composition. Line formations in the compositions of Bellini's works create their own connotative form and denotations. Flat color configurations form their own denotations and connotations in these compositions. As a rule, color contrasts form two dimensions in his works: monochromatic (white-grey-black) and color (reddish-blue-ochre). These differential features allowed the creation of ornamental color motifs. Complicated relationships are established between monochromatic color tints due to approximation of bright and soft colors (mixed and reduced ones). Bellini usually makes bluish colors closer to cobalt. This allows drawing them closer to grey, white, and black. Red colors are made closer to brownish tints. This allows reading red configurations as parts of brownish configurations. The use of white, grey, and black gain the role of an independent system. Such monochromatic colors allow for the connection of the entire variety of polychromy, i.e., they bring together cold and warm color tints. As a result, the color scale of the works varies from warm to cold colors due to prevailing color configurations. In particular, while creating cold color-

ing, tints of blue dominate. To create warm coloring, brownish colors dominate. Structures of color relationships sometimes acquire a clear symbolic character as, for example, in the painting “Purgatory,” where contrasts of light, reddish and black geometrical figures, and human figures form symbolic codes of the righteous and sinful souls (Lindermann 2006)

Unlike other masters of Renaissance, Bellini in the 1450s–1470s didn’t strive for brightness of color, regularity, and conformity to the laws of linear painting. He deviated from plausible representation of people, sceneries, and objects, as well as from well-ordered, geometrical configurations, direct lines, conformable to these law. The dotted character and the blurriness of the lines, the implicitness of the breaks in the contour create indefiniteness of representamens of denotations. This is represented first in the indistinctness of contours of human figures and faces. Their drawing in Bellini’s paintings is subordinated to the movements of hidden substances: glimmers of light and shade, rain drops, water flow, and round motions that remind one of epicentres of hurricanes and volcanoes. First, these connotative peculiarities of his paintings are conditioned by the visual expression of basic human emotions, movement actions and feelings. In terms of semiotics, it would be most precise to define this phenomenon as the development of connotations on the basis of sign-symptoms (signatures). Typically, it is poses, gestures, and mimicry of the people depicted in Bellini’s works that are such important symptoms for bearing emotive meanings. Semiotic analysis of his painting “Saint Jerome and the Lion” is the evidence of the importance of poses and gestures.

Saint Jerome in the Desert (figure 2) is a painting that depicts the pacification of an animal’s strength, its submission to the calmness of the mind. This general meaning of the work is developed in the organization of denotations and connotations, in the way the basic elements and relations of the work are organized. To express this meaning, symbolic poses and gestures of the saint and the lion are essential. The saint teaches obedience and humility, introduces tranquil contentment into surrounding world. This meaning is formed on the basis of complicated connotative formation of the picture. The rational basis, firmness, and strength of mind are concentrated in the structural properties of the gesture. St. Jerome’s raised hand, which indicates the will of the God and subordination of the animal’s strength to the spirit, becomes the key connotation of the picture (figures 3–6). The lion seems to answer St. Jerome with a response gesture, raising its paw. Correspondingly, connotations of the motion, poses, and gestures of St. Jerome and the lion occupy the central place in the entire sign system of the painting. Some general structural properties



Figure 2. Giovanni Bellini, "St. Jerome in the Desert" (c. 1450, egg tempera on wood, 44 × 23 cm, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham)

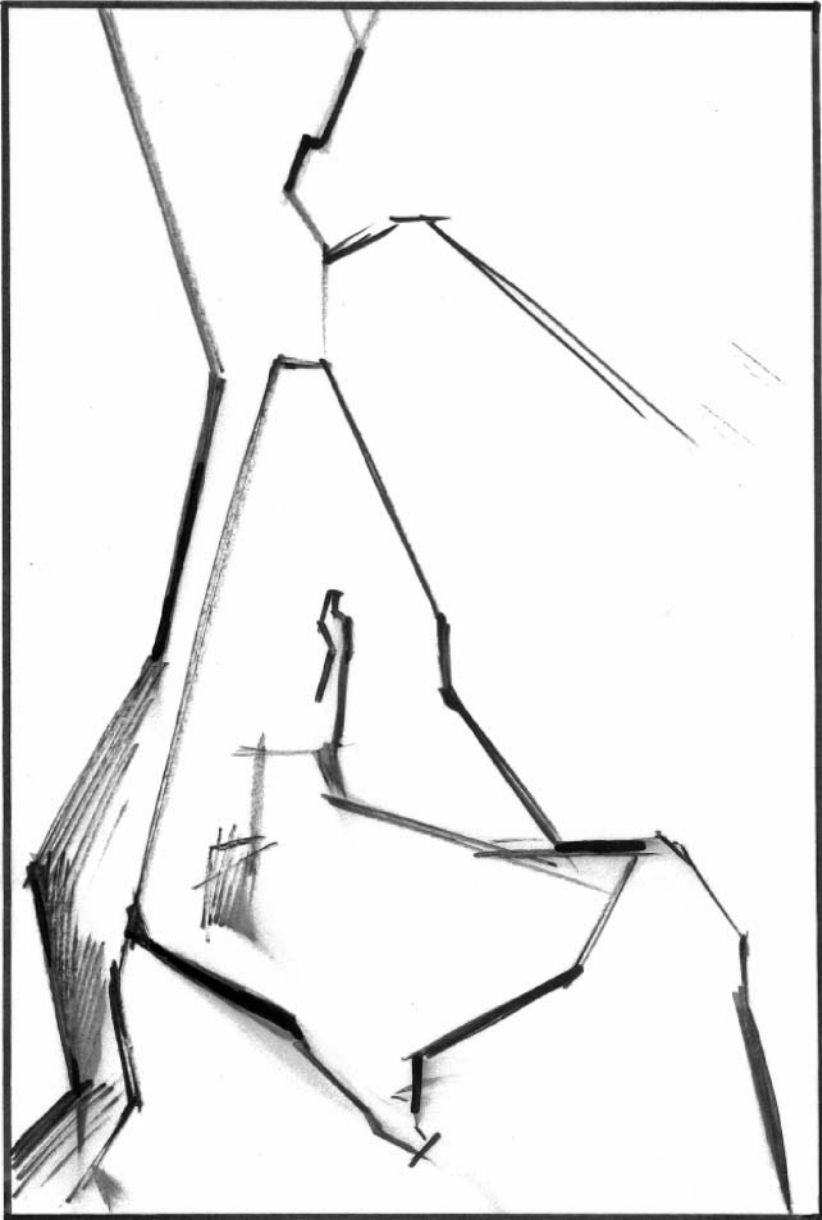


Figure 3. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotation: sign of christening. Main outlines of rocks and figures, directions of outlines repeat the configuration of gesture of christening

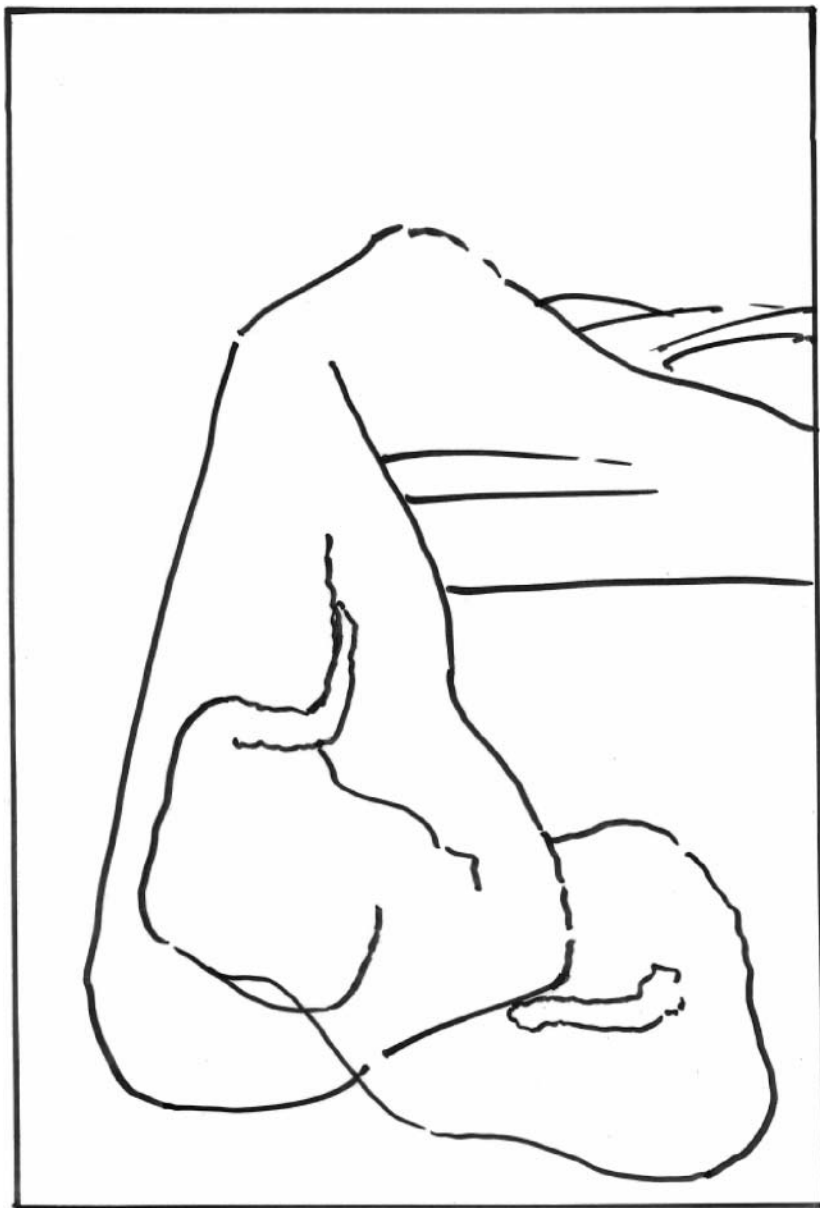


Figure 4. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotation: raised arm of St. Jerome. The bent arm is a main memorable sign of the picture. Angular arm's configuration is developed in large connotative formations. The configuration of St. Jerome's bent arm is repeated in configurations, contours, and active lines of foreground's rock and distant hills. Force and tension are implied in these forms

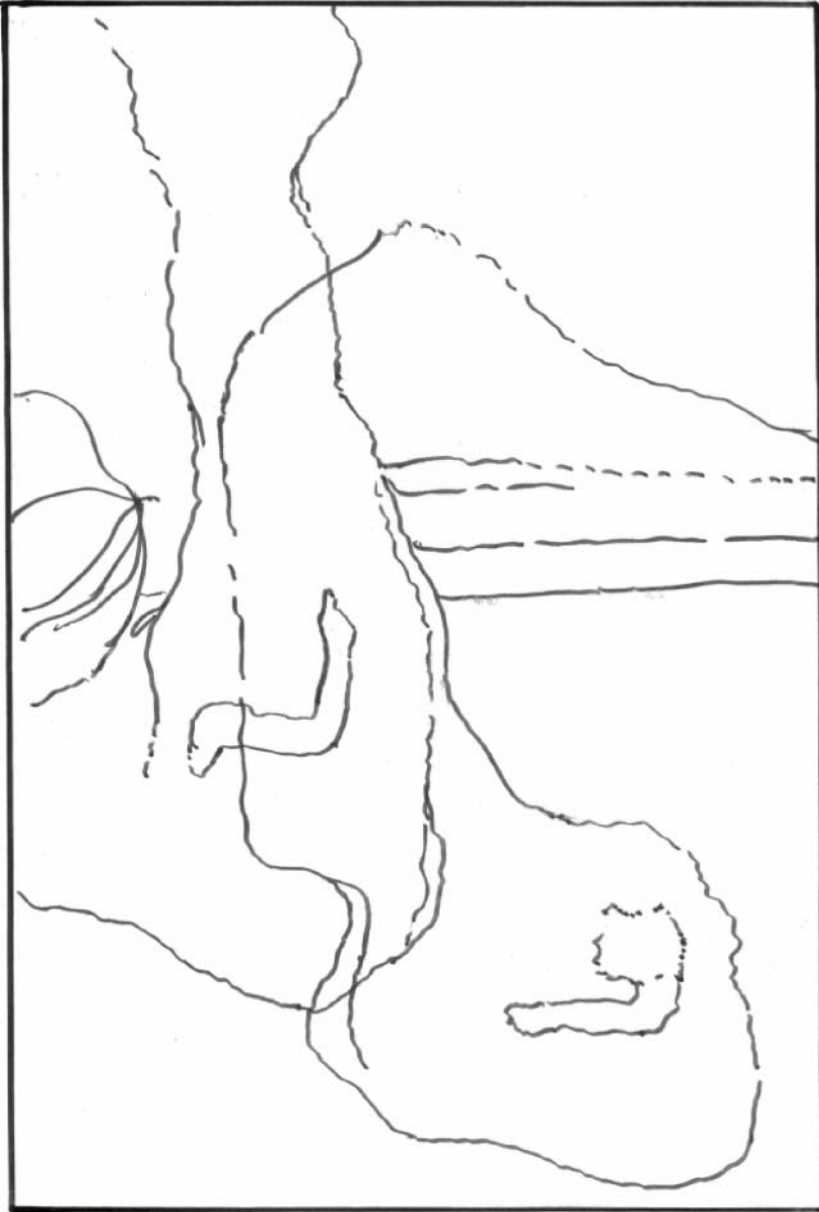


Figure 5. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotation: an arm and lion's forepaw. Muscular arm of a giant of rock is the basis of the organization of St. Jerome's figure and the lion's body. The arm's form becomes like the lion's paw at the top of the rock. The movements of the human arm and the lion's paw are repeated in outlines of the rock and hills. The arms and lion's paws of rocks are directed to the sky



Figure 6. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotation: dynamic movements. The dynamic chiaroscuro of St. Jerome's arm become similar to the dynamic lines of the rock. The directions of the shadows' lines have an angular character. The dynamic of the rock developed in the painting attaches a dynamic and dramatic sounding to the painting in its entirety

of the connotation, which continue the signs of motion, gestures, poses, are materialized in the contours of the rocks, the elements of the scenery, the drawing of St. Jerome's figure, and the configurations of the lion's figure (figure 7). Active configurations and lines of the painting create this connotative metaphorical formation.

The painting *Saint Jerome and the Lion* demonstrates the alignment of semantically meaningful connotations in the general connotative formation and subordination of separate denotations to this connotative formation, which is most typical for Bellini. In his works, the basic denotative elements (human figures, heads, faces, body parts, folds of clothes, pieces of land, elements of the landscape) submit to large organizing connotations — configurations, lines, structural features that have strong emotional coloring (figures 8–12). It is particularly typical for the compositions of Bellini's paintings that such emotionally colored connotations are symptoms — gestures, expressions of faces, which express a person's inner emotional state. These peculiarities of Bellini's sign systems reveal themselves in the course of analysis of other famous works of the great artist. Without going into detail, we would like to point at the main system-generating connotations of his two paintings of the 1460s–1470s.

3. Eyes, lips, folds

Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John (Pietà) (figure 13) depicting John is also an example of the development of unclear connotations. Here their basis is formed by the signs of gestures, motions, expressions of faces that generally represent sorrow and suffering. These meanings and vague connotations connected with them are directed by the communicative situation of the image — the interrelation of the depicted figures with the beholder. The three figures behind the parapet seem to be close to the surface of the picture. The colors of the drapery are obscure and similar to ashen faces. The figures frozen in deep sorrow in the painting are polysemantic due to the peculiar complexity of their gestures and the expressions on their faces. Researchers usually pay attention to the semantic side of these gestures and expressions — a complicated combination of emotions and feelings of grief. At the same time, these meanings, gradations of feelings, typical features of the image of suffering Christ expand to the basic elements of the painting. They are rendered by a complex connotative formation.

The connotations of Christ's eye are key in the picture on a semantic level and on the level of visually active elements. The face is depicted partly in half face. The eye is therefore attracting attention, being the

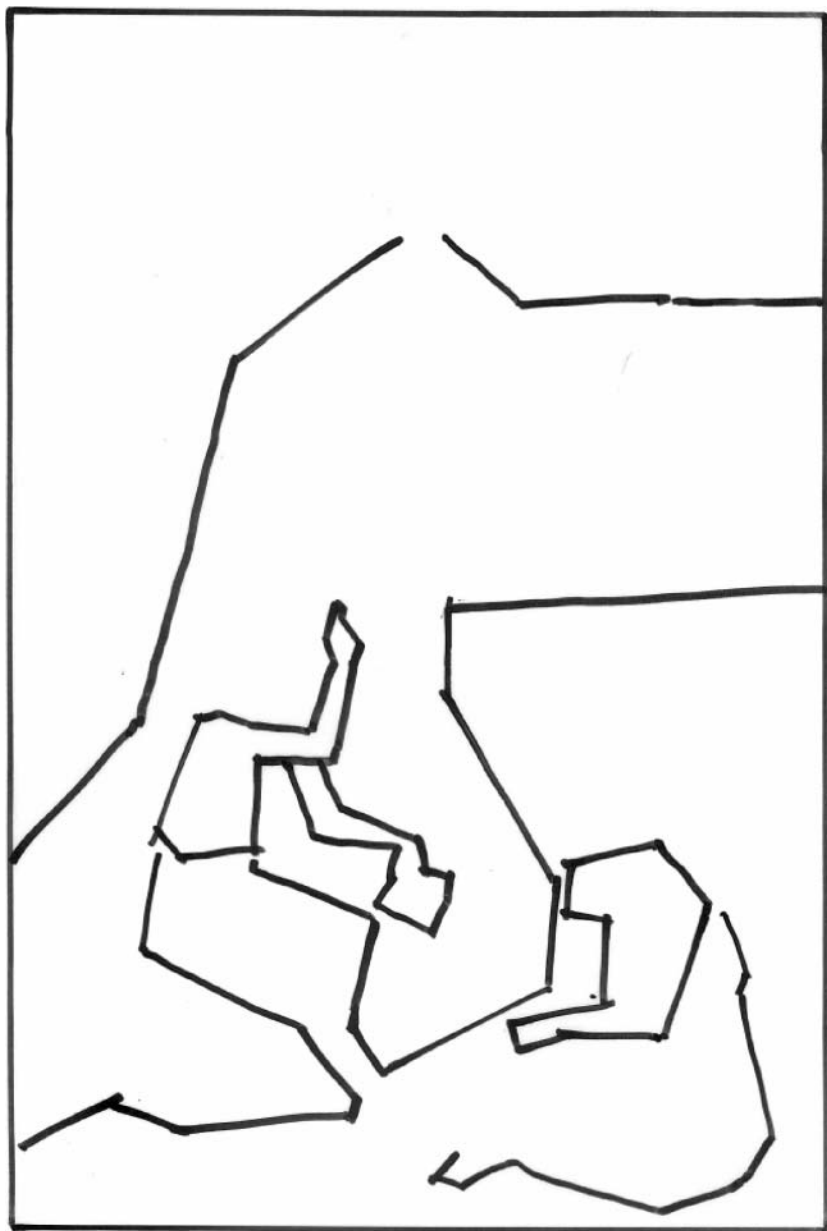


Figure 7. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotations: angles and rotations. The s-shaped configurations of the figures' outlines are repeated as elements of rotation. A unified organizing rhythmical structure is formed. This structure strengthens the poses and gestures of St. Jerome and the lion

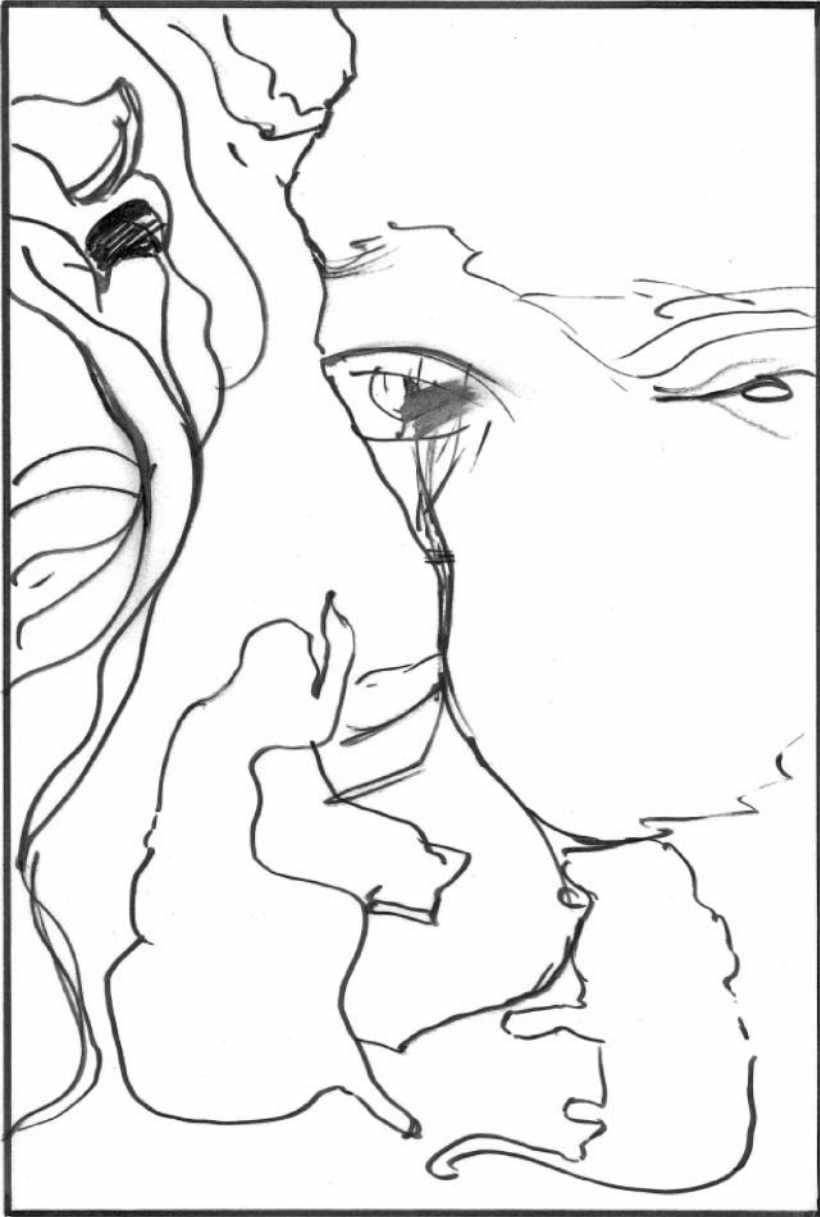


Figure 8. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotation: faces. The head of a giant reminiscent of a lion's snout appears through the rocks. The face of a spirit is hidden in the hilly landscape



Figure 9. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotation: faces. Hidden in the rock at the left, a semi-face appears in the mass of stones. Rocks' wrinkles outline the eye-socket of the giant. Volcanic rocks make for softness of the crags' outlines. The ledges of rocks above remind one of locks of hair. On the right, the strange face in the hills' outlines with big eyes forms a connotation similar to the faces of rocks. Invisible faces add to the mystical character of the painting



Figure 10. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotation: a dumb creature. On the left, rounded forms of the rock make rounded lines. They remind one of a wrinkled snout without a mouth. The image of a dumb creature is created — half-beast, half-man — which quite corresponds to basic semantics of the painting

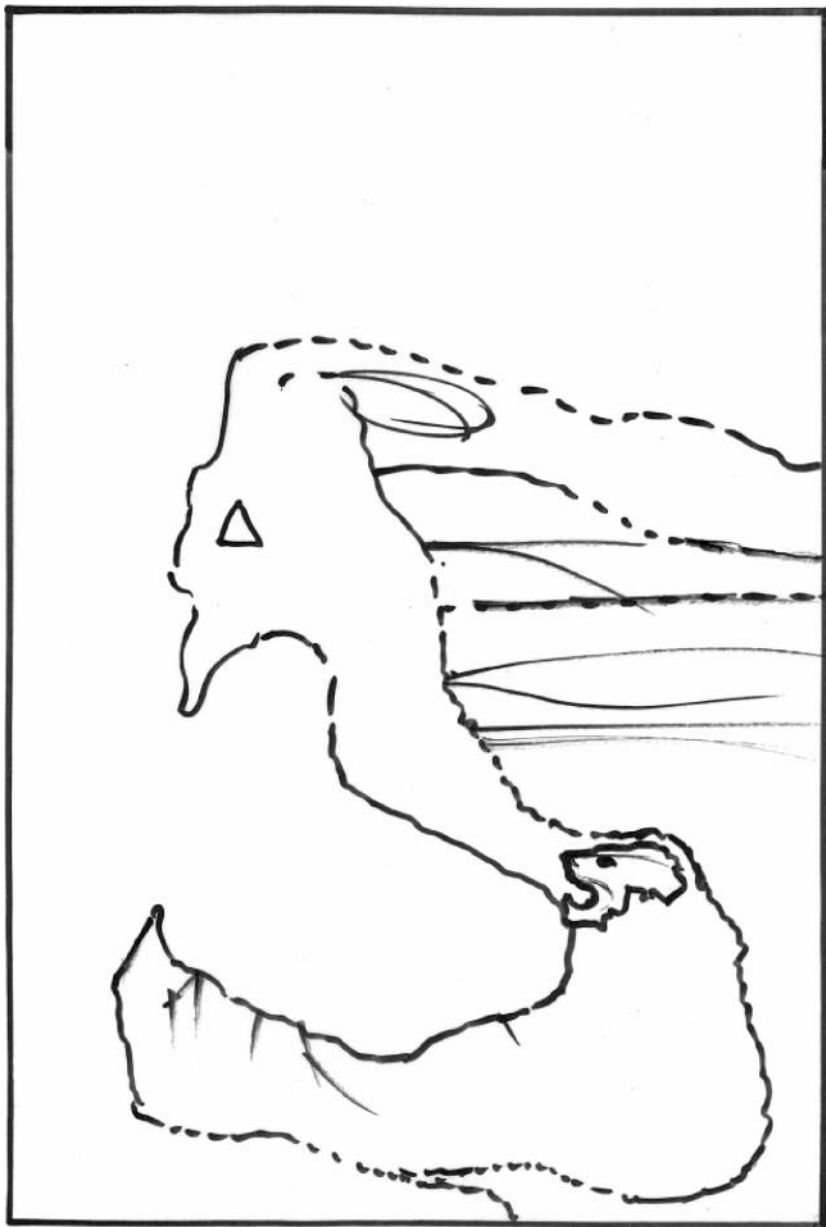


Figure 11. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotation: a lion. The lion's roar is denoted by his opened mouth. This mouth is made huge in the picture and entered into the outlines of the rock and hills

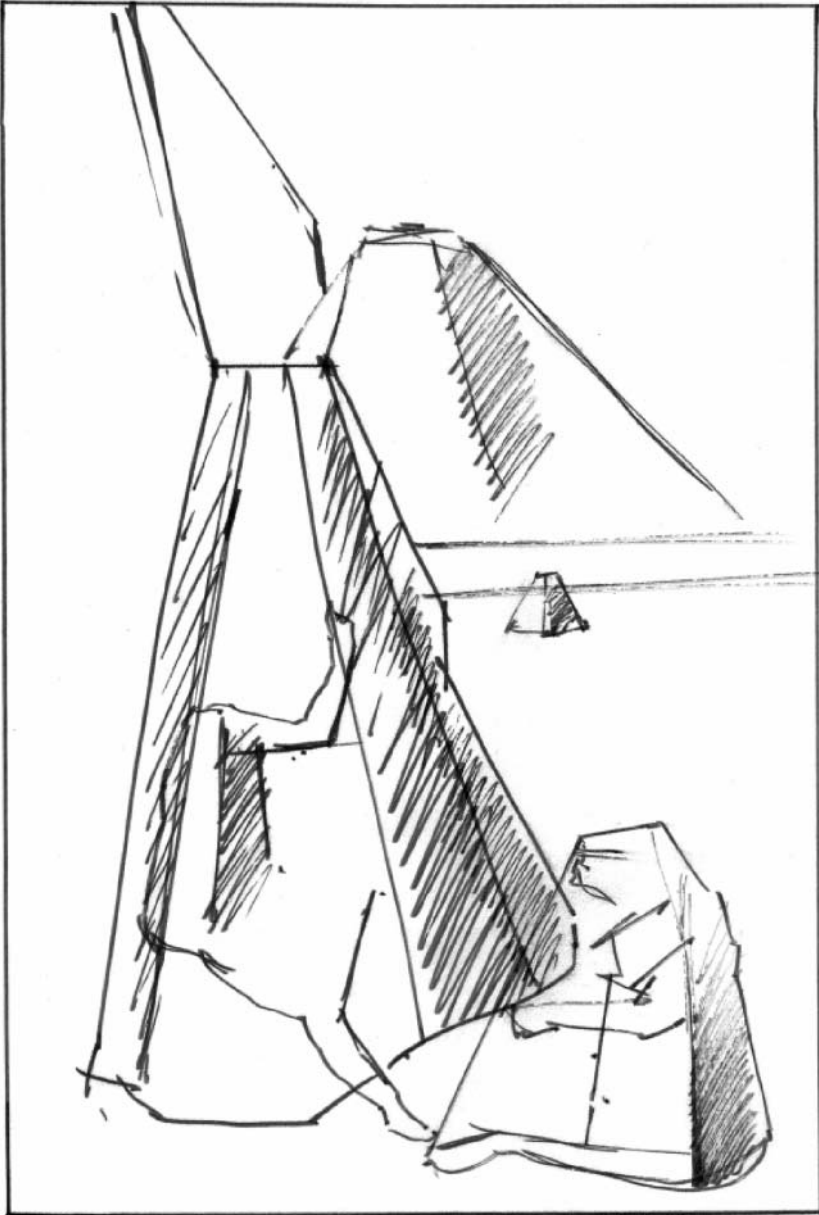


Figure 12. "St. Jerome in the Desert." Connotative geometrical bodies. Cone-shaped geometrical bodies envelop the figures of St. Jerome and the lion. This promotes the expression of fundamental nature and the force of their figures



Figure 13.

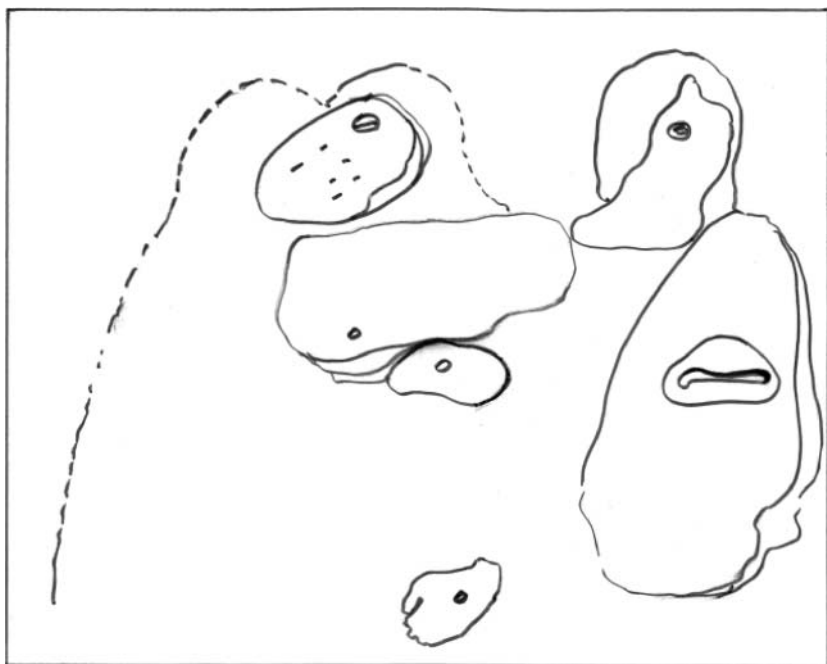


Figure 14.

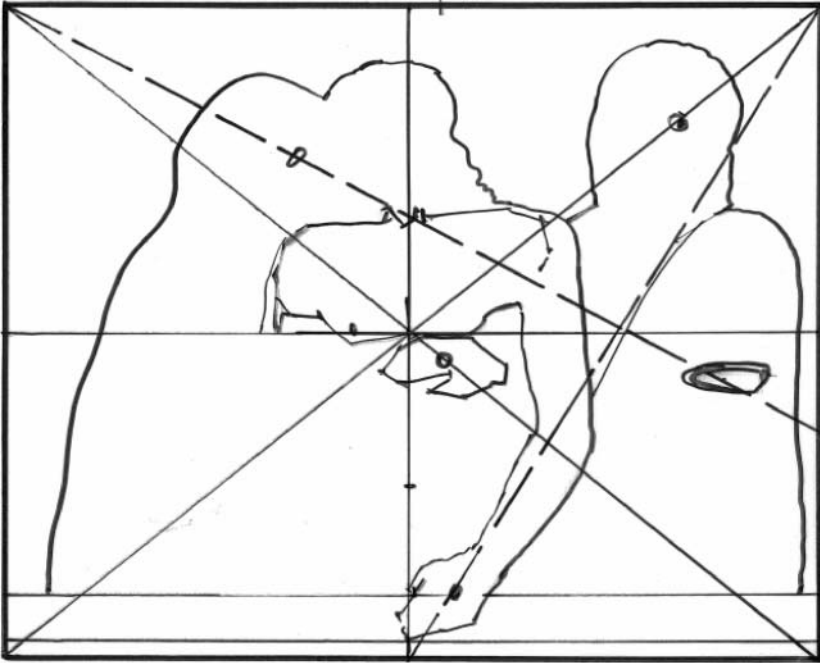


Figure 15. “*Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John.*” Connotation: an arm and an interlocking system are the main elements of the picture. Connotations are included into sign systems of denotations. The painful center of the picture interconnects with the general graphic field and the geometrical center. Also, other important signs subordinate to axes and diagonals of the composition

center of Christ’s face. This eye is half-open. There is a well-defined gap, highlighted by a shadow between the upper and the lower eyelids left. The gap of Christ’s eye, emphasized by shadows and flares, his upper eyelid are developed into integral connotative formation (figures 14 and 15). Thus, a non-verbal creative-emotional impact on the spectator is produced. The connotation of lips gains an independent role in the painting.

Figure 13. Giovanni Bellini, “*Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John (Pietà)*” (c. 1460, tempera on panel, 86 × 107 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

Figure 14. “*Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John (Pietà).*” The connotation of Christ’s arm with a wound from the nail resembles a bloody stigma and causes a sickly feeling. The main painful center of the picture represents a bright-elongated oval configuration with an active central group. This active configuration is also organized in other elements of the picture



Figure 16. “*Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John.*” Connotation: lips. Lips of Christ and Mother of God signify spiritual confluence and form a unified configuration. Like this, larger configurations organize the picture. Dynamic and hunched by suffering, lips embrace the image’s field and give meanings of sorrow and pain to entire painting. The uplifted edge of the lips is a stark smile on the face of Christ. This smile expresses joyful calming and a foretaste of Resurrection. Therefore, the continuation of signs in the uplifted edge of Christ’s lips in the larger elements of the picture is very important in this connotation

Madonna and Christ’s lips form an organic whole. This is achieved by common contours of lips, similarity of this configuration (figure 16). Bellini sharply highlights right upper endings of the configurations of the lips by color contrasts. This allows the creation of other active groups and configurations that remind one of Madonna and Christ’s lips. The lips become an organizing connotation, extending the meaning of sorrow to all basic visual elements and relations of the painting.

The connotation of Christ’s hand with a wound from a nail is materialized through various configurations and lines of the picture (figures 17 and 18). The arrangement of figures and the drawing of the Madonna and John’s clothes stress the hand, pierced in the center. This powerful artistic device later became the basis of the composition of the painting Pieta by Veronese (c. 1581, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg). In this paint-

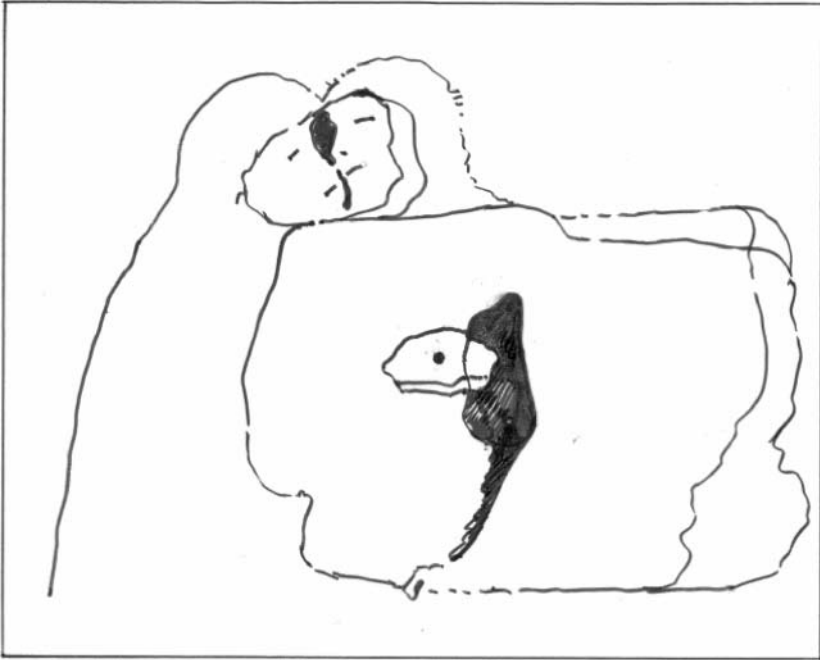


Figure 17. “*Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John.*” Connotation of main elements. General denotations: faces of Christ and Mother of God, the arm with a wound and basic color configuration of the center of the picture. The wound on the Christ’s arm is a basis for this connotative formation. Signs of this connotation are formed in the configuration of the arm’s outlines and dark lacerated wound: the round dark circle on the arm, vertical rupture on the faces, and ragged configuration of shades are reminiscent of the lacerated wound in the large color configuration of the painting’s center

ing, Veronese created a common connotation, having turned the entire visual form of the painting into the light form of Christ’s right hand with a dark configuration — the wound in the center. Here, the entire composition of the painting indicates a bleeding stigma. Later, Goya combined the image of Christ’s pierced hands with the sign of his crucifixion in the painting *The Third of May 1808: Shooting at Montana del Principe Pio* (1814, Museo del Prado, Madrid). The hands of the main character, which are oriented diagonally, also marked the typical X-formed sign — the key organizing formation of this composition. Following this tradition, Picasso used configurations of fingers spread apart and stars striped by crossing lines in place of pierced “palms” in *Guernica* (1937, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid). As can be seen from these examples, the depiction of wounds made by nails in Christ’s hands was of major importance. This

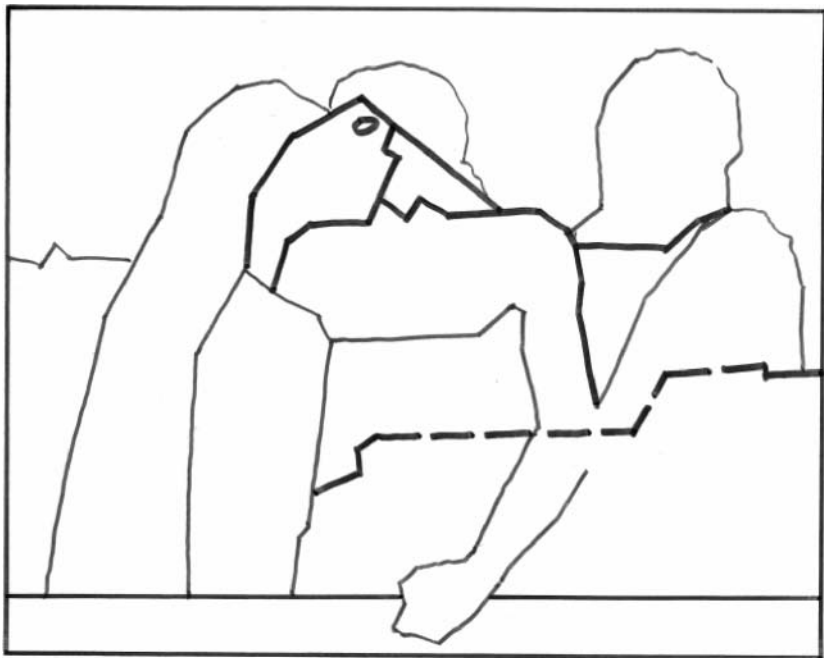


Figure 18.

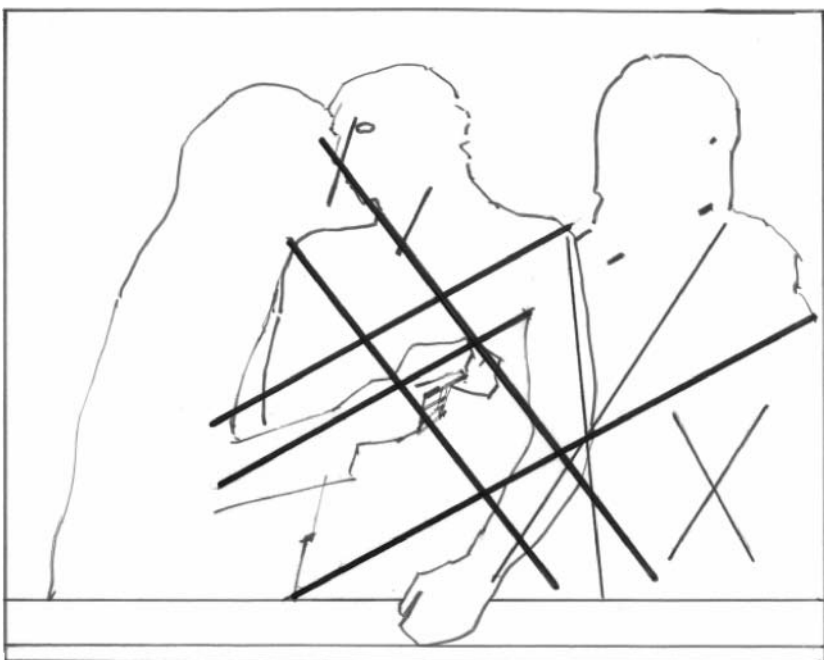


Figure 19.

can be attributed to two reasons. The depiction of characteristic wounds from nails were emotional symptoms of pain. In addition, in the tradition of the Catholic church, these wounds were of special importance because of the stigmatization of Francis of Assisi. This phenomenon, recognized as a miracle, was widely known in the following centuries. For that reason, active depiction of wounds on Christ's hands became the basis of the connotative sign system in Bellini's painting. The entire image area represents Christ's body with bleeding wounds. This connotation is formed by several structural features and groups of elements and relations (figures 15 and 17).

The connotation of the symbol of crucifixion is materialized in the diagonal composition of the painting. This sign, which is an indication of the crucified Christ's hands, is a symbol of early Christianity. To enforce the structural features of the diagonal crucifixion, Bellini highlighted the active elements (figure 19). These are the lines of Christ's and John's hands in the lower part of the painting. The spread fingers of John's hand emphasize the diagonal compositions of larger elements. The entire composition is built as a connotation of the crucifixion, with Christ's hands spread-eagled on the cross. Christ's weak hand, descending on the board, is developed in similar elements — configurations and lines (figure 20). This movement is strengthened by the meaning of weakness and is included in the organizational sign formation of the surface of the painting (figures 15, 16, 17, and 20).

Christ's face is the key element of the picture and is therefore emphasized by connotations. The features of Christ's face become more active in configurations and in their characteristic features. Intensification of this memorable image is achieved through the development of the features of the face in other larger elements of the picture (figure 22).

Christ's bent right hand with a wound on it forms an essential sign of the painting, as being some kind of pain center. Therefore, this center gains development in the denotations and connotations of the painting. Madonna supports this hand, embracing it with her right hand. The joining of hands strengthens the joining of faces and marks the confluence of spiritual movements. This symbolic meaning and the role of Christ's bent

Figure 18. "Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John." Systems of configurations and directions of angular character. These systems develop signs of crucifixion and acute-angled connotations. The polyline is the basic representamen of this group

Figure 19. "Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John." Connotation of crucifixion. The interlocking of the basic mass of the composition forms a connotation of arms on the cross. This is generalized sign of the crucifixion



Figure 20.

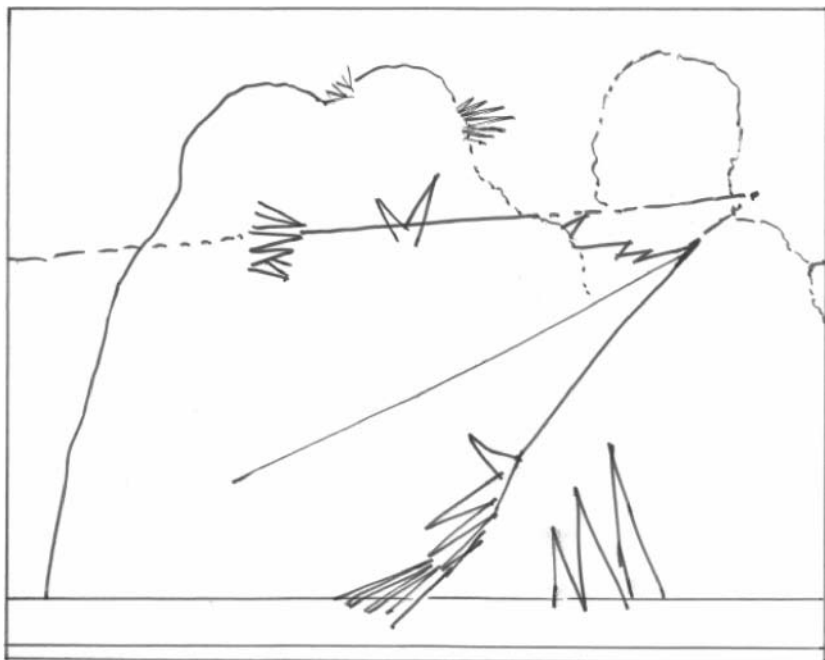


Figure 21.

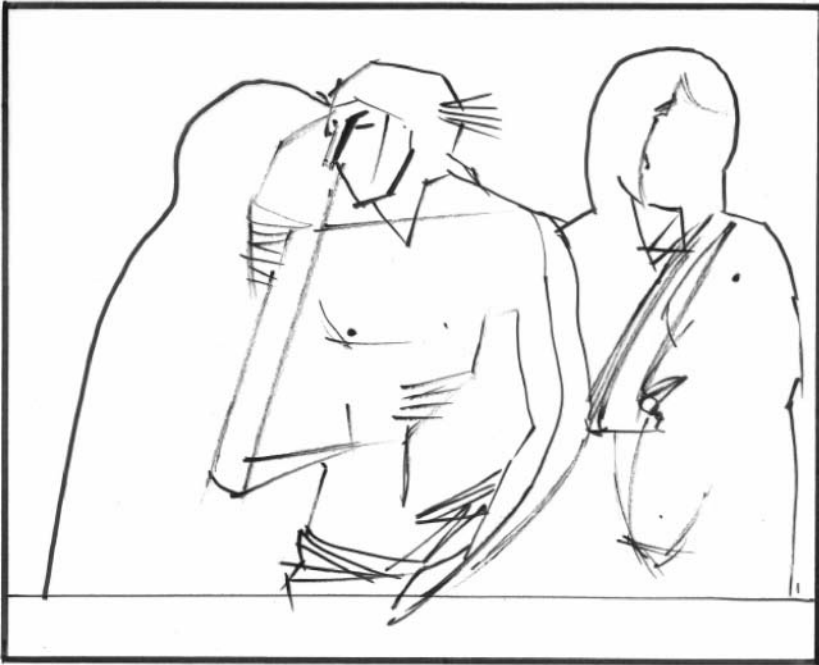


Figure 22. *“Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John.”* Repetition of Christ’s face in the center of the painting

right hand in the sign system of the work is reinforced by elements of an identical character in other parts of the painting. Signs of sorrow are reflected in the folds of clothes and the details of the scenery. Christ’s eye, rolled-back, is repeated in the outlines of the large folds of John’s clothes. A grey-blue coat reinforces the depiction of the eye and the cheek and — combined with the hand — of the whole Christ’s face. The organization of the layer of signals of the picture forms additional connotations. These are, first of all, large stripes that organize the image area. White and dark green stripes at the bottom serve to enhance other horizontals of the

Figure 20. *“Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John.”* Connotation of St. John’s arm and a crown of thorns. The arm of St. John with bristling fingers supports the arm of Christ. Its configuration is developed in the picture

Figure 21. *“Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John.”* Connotation: a crown of thorns, ragged sharp outlines of arms and clothes. Meanings of cutting, thrusting objects, and a sense of pain are created

painting. The artist creates systems of horizontals while depicting figures in the drawing of the scenery and the clouds. Different levels are singled out: an upper level consisting of the head and the sky; a middle level consisting of the figure and the land; and a lower level consisting of the horizontals of the pediment with Christ's hand. On the whole, levels of the universe are connoted somewhat. The stratification of the painting into earthly and heavenly levels creates some symbolic reality. The distribution of dark tones, close to black, fosters a strengthening of this connotation and introduces great dynamics, adding to the gestures of the picture. A bottom-left upward movement appears. This movement turns into the movement of John's face, turned round, and his coat; it is expressed in the scarcely seen blue configurations of the background.

4. Folds

Pieta (figure 23) is an example of Bellini's work where key meanings of the biblical event are expressed in developed sign systems and materialized in complicated intertwining of connotations. The most essential of



Figure 23. *Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà" (1505, oil on wood, 65 × 90 cm Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)*

these connotations are those developed in the outlines of the scenery and Madonna's clothes, the contours of the mournful hands and running tears. Obviously, the meanings do not reduce themselves to representaments of signs. However, by presenting the relations between them in a somewhat sketchy form, one can see how active visual signs of the connotations contribute to the beginnings of connotative semantics.

Connotations of suffering are rendered in special sign forms. Uncertain, sad, falling movements and rhythms are expressed in peculiar configurations, lines, and contours. The configurations have angular outlines with curves and fairly rough contours. These lines mark downward flow, hands down, exhausted motions, and an adynamia that is close to death. Due to polysemy and uncertainty, they are perceived in an abstract way, as if there was a veil between this and a different world. There is a falling cascades of forms; the symmetrical development of forms is top down, opposing an upward development. Dark soft colors are contrasted to light and merry ones — the features that emotionally color the connota-

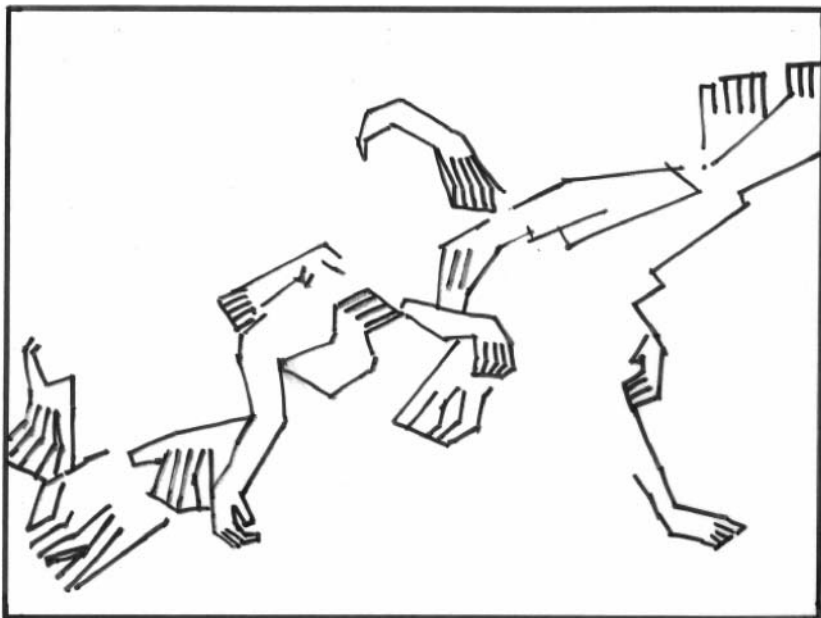


Figure 24. Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà." Connotation: arms. The bleeding arms of Christ are the essential sign. A sign system is developed in the composition. The arms extend on clothes' outlines, parts of the body, and the stones. A metric interchange of bright stripes (fingers) and dark stripes (spaces between fingers) is a representamen of this connotation. The similarity of Christ's arms and ribs — main painful points of crucifixion — has an important meaning

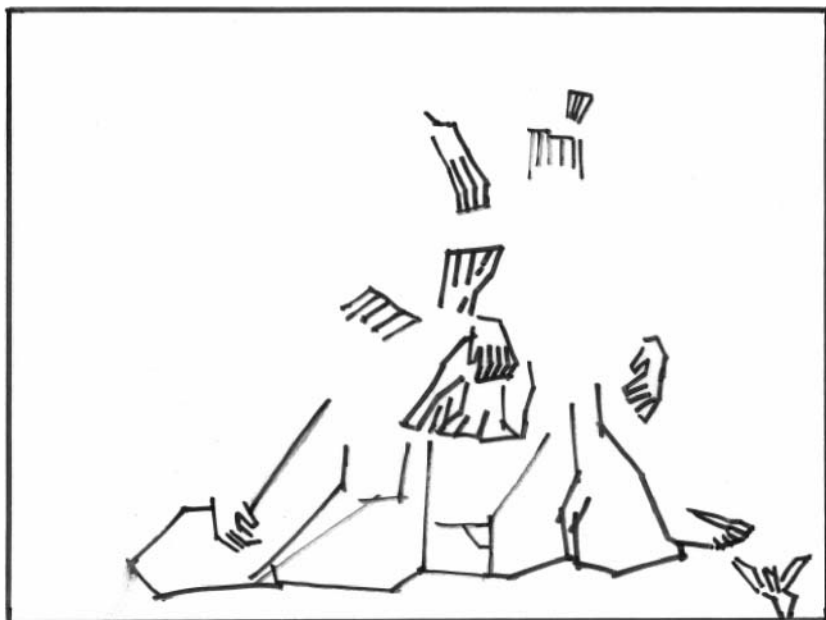


Figure 25.



Figure 26.

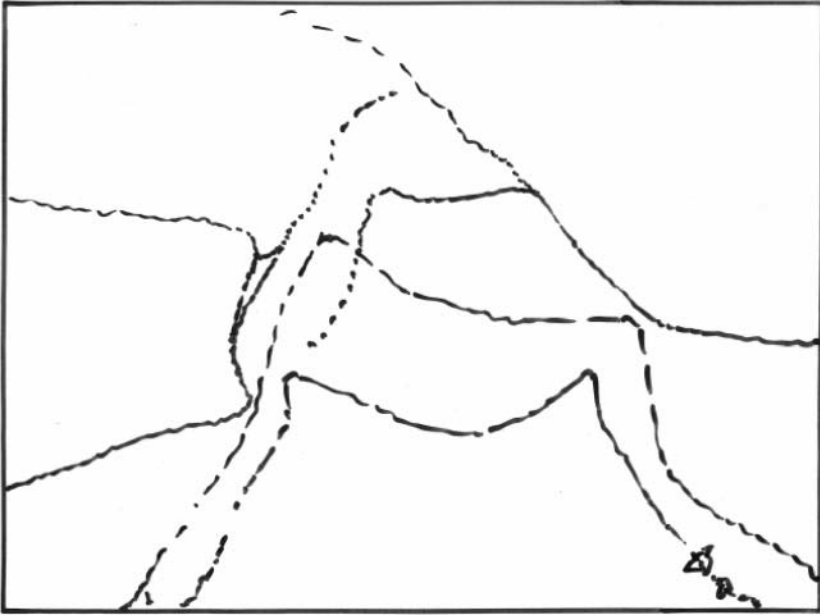


Figure 27. Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà." Connotation of Christ's body. Configuration of Christ's body, bright configuration of trapezium-shaped outline, has active signs. The configuration of Christ's body is as if it were bent under heaviness from above. It has sharp apexes with rounded contours. These signs are repeated in other organizing configurations (outlines of bottom of figures of Christ and the Mother of God, a drawing of stones)

tions of the work. Depicting folds of clothes and their color differences plays a significant role in materialization of these connotative formations. Bellini uses folds as visual material to create twisted, angular, large signs in the folds of clothes (figures 24–26) similar to Christ's hands (the basic sign of suffering). The signs of suffering see further development and materialization in the entire area of the image.

Figure 25. Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà." Connotation of trapezium-shaped configurations similar to arms and ribs. Arms are identified as ribs. Trapezium-shaped configurations extend down, pass to the creases of the clothes of the Mother of God, and are found in plants' outlines

Figure 26. Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà." Connotation: tears. Vertical, small lines, and zigzag forms on the sides of planes form signs of crystals and dripping rain's drops. A special crystal-clear world with a rain of tears falling from above is created. The sides of plains and sharp-angular zigzags also carry out an organizational function. They organize the plane of the picture by unified geometrical signs

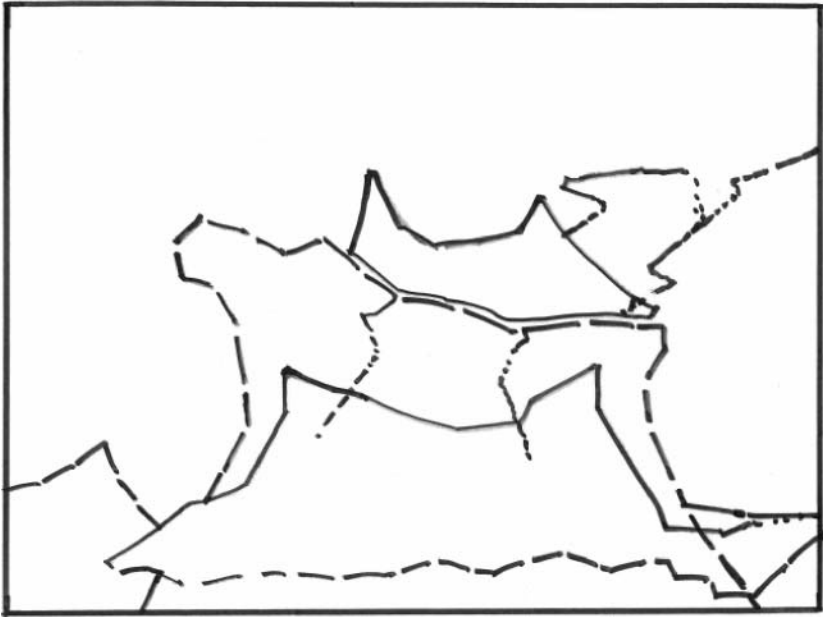


Figure 28.

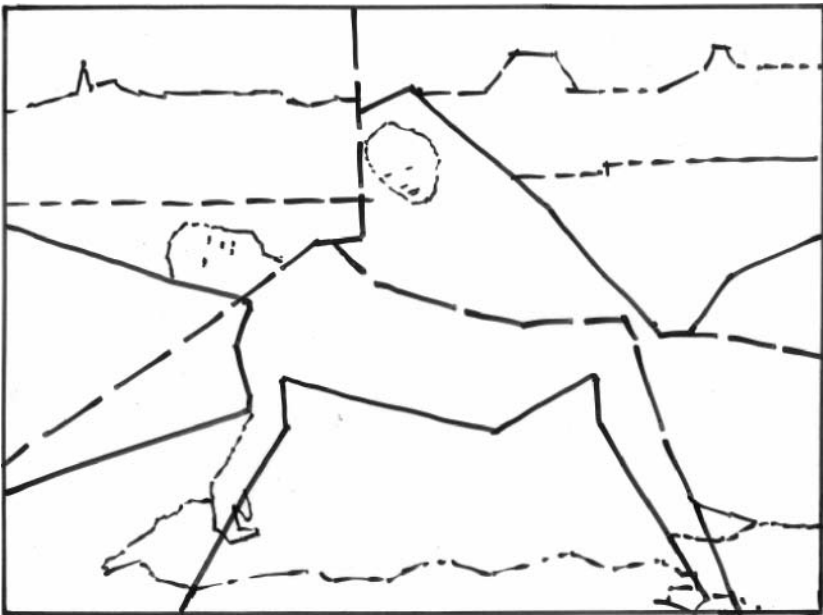


Figure 29.

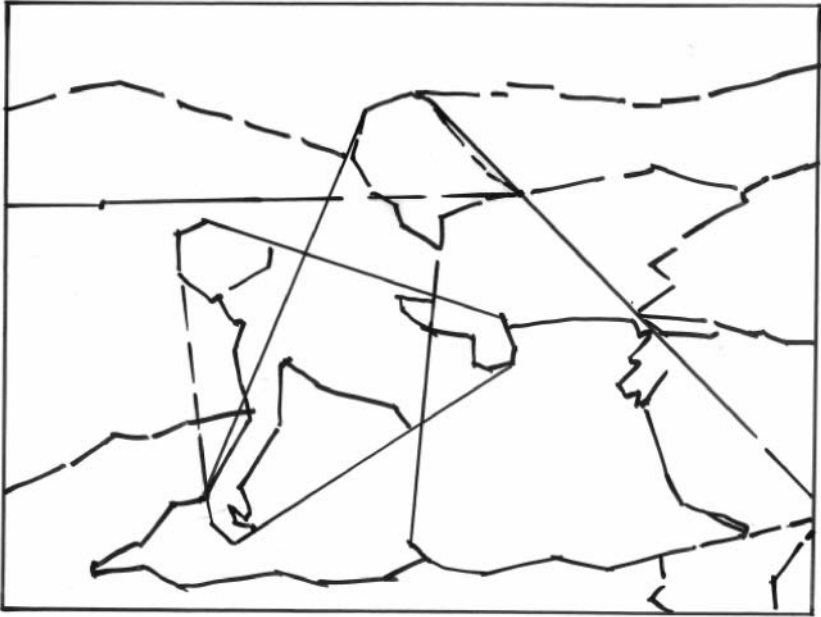


Figure 30. Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà." Connotative formations of the geometrical organization of the configurations. Trapezium-shaped configurations interconnect with three-cornered configurations

Connotations of sorrow are also developed in the work. The basic color configurations of the figures become similar to the configuration of face. This intensifies the entire sorrowful mood of the image. The Madonna's mournful face, framed by a black cape, is built in into the general composition. Christ's hands mark suffering and form a peculiar configuration: a largely separated one. A consistency of light elements, dissected inside by dark parts with curves, is formed. This connotative formation expands to figures, folds, land, and scenery. The deformed contours with obtuse angles become the leading organizational feature of the image (figures 27–

Figure 28. Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà." Connotation: elements similar to Christ's body. Connotation of Christ's body is developed in a rhythmical system of similar configurations and lines of the picture

Figure 29. Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà." Connotation: Christ's body and partitions of the field of the picture. Main trapezium-shaped configurations developing Christ's body are continued in partitions of the field of the painting. The composition of the image's plain is included in the connotation

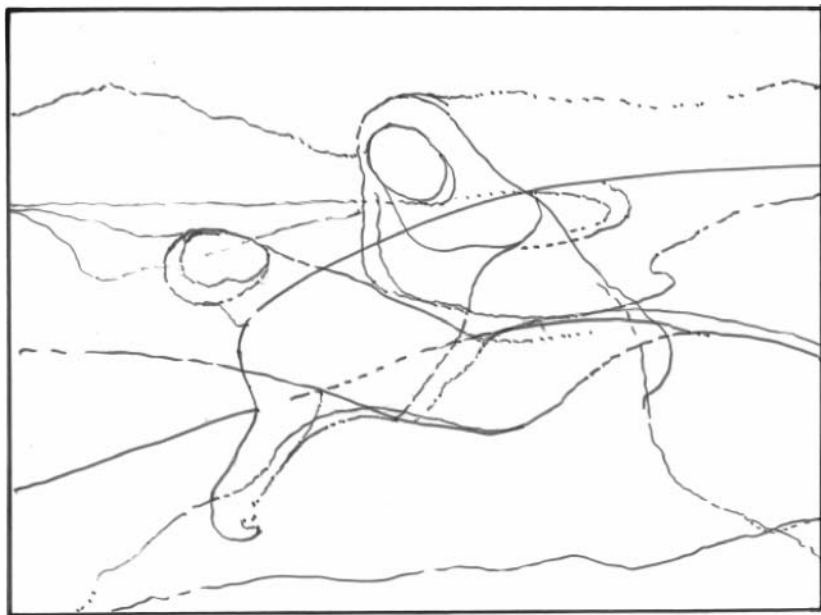


Figure 31. *Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà."* Connotation of streaming lines. General forming lines contribute to an integral formation. Curvilinear contours organize the picture. They also connote rest and conciliation

32). Therefore, there are no denotations of heads, faces, hands, that are actively emphasized. On the contrary, the artist aims to separate the forms of the denoted objects by means of active color configurations, to make basic the significant icons of suffering (eyes, lips, hands). Other denotations submit to complicated connotative formations (figures 31 and 33).

The connotations of the figures of Madonna and Christ become elements of more general connotative formations. The relaxed motions of Christ's head and hands and the entire light silhouette of his figure form an unusual light-and-shade drawing — a connotation that has complicated partitions and contours. This configuration has an emotional character, expressing relaxation and calmness. The state of calmness, sadness, and silence is expressed by the character of the drawing of Madonna's figure. Madonna embraces Christ's neck and legs with her hands. The hands holding Christ acquire major importance. Therefore, they are interpreted as centers of the composition of the picture. In this composition, the hands are as significant as the face. Their importance, similar to other

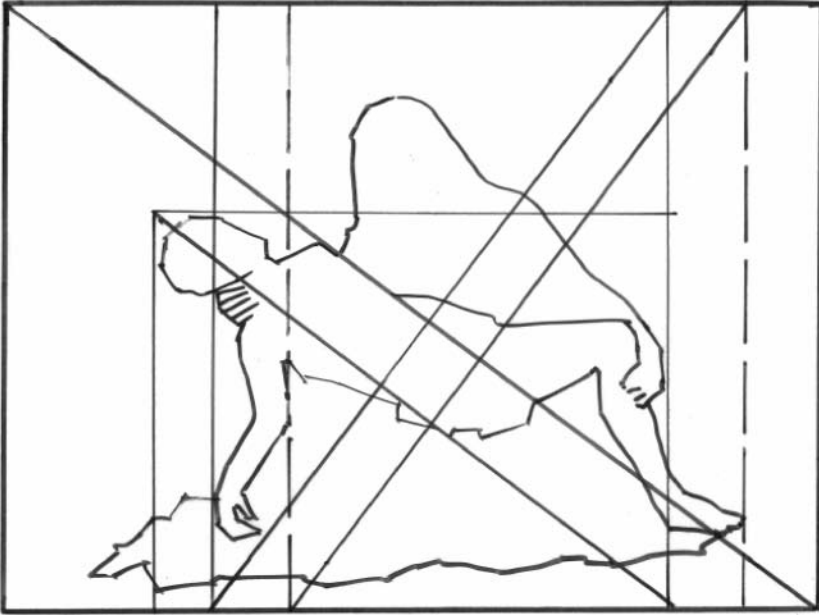


Figure 32. Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà." Systemity of main signs. The figures of Christ and the Mother of God, the main configurations of the parts of the body and clothes, are organized in interlocking relations. The systemity of elements connects different denotations with connotations

most essential denotations, is maintained by a clear structure of mutual disposition. The analogy of hands also sets the activity of the connotative elements of the picture. Christ's and Madonna's hands are actively separated by fingers and, most importantly, by shadows between them, and they are similar to each other. They express the meanings of sorrow, relaxation, and eternal rest. Christ's hands and feet, pierced by nails, are active symptoms of pain. Expression of weakness and calmness in the drawing leads to the development of connotations in the general configurations and lines of the painting. These configurations, dissected inside, form groups of elements (figure 33). The clothes, falling and creeping on the ground, become similar to the relaxed contours of hands. Christ's ribs are interpreted as similar to his hands in the picture. These repetitions enhance the general connotative consistency of the painting.

The connotations of flows form independent meanings. Diverging circular configurations remind one of the flow of water, roads, circuit of energies. These connotations acquire the character of structural formations that organize a layer of signals; i.e. they become organizing structures.

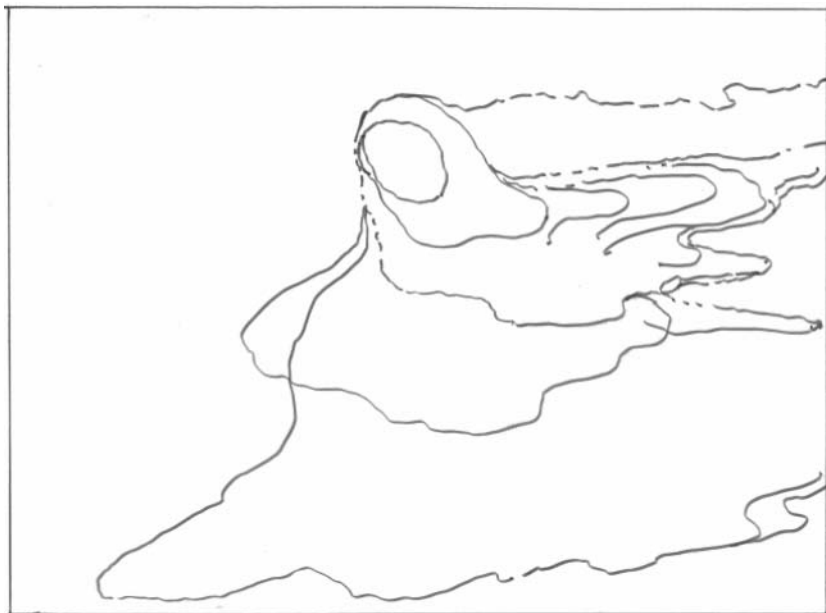


Figure 33. *Giovanni Bellini, "Pietà."* Connotation: clothes flapping in the wind, a moving aura. Behind the Mother's of God, active lines resemble flows of energy, hair flapping in the wind, the blowing and whirling of the wind, angels' wings. Figures move as if hovering over the earth

And, vice versa, organizing relations and groups of elements acquire a connotative character. The basic formations of connotative character that organize layers of signals connect semantics and syntactics, different groups of relationships in the picture. In particular, such formation is represented by the outline of the configuration of Madonna's head with a kerchief covering it. This configuration is similar to that of figures in general (figures 27 and 28). Madonna's repeated outline presents a connotative formation that is based on indexes and icons. This configuration reminds one of some water-crystalline world, something diffluent, trembling, with vaguely blinking patches of light, planes of fragile glass (figure 26). It is only tears that can be so trembling, slowly running, hiding clear sight. Here the flow of tears marks the configurations and lines of Christ's figure, contours and configurations of Madonna's clothes falling down to earth. These elements possess specific differential features — broken, streaming, trembling motions. The connotation is fostered by the combination of white and blue colors, stripes of roads, seaside and water lines. The main stripes and lines seem to flow from the right of the top to

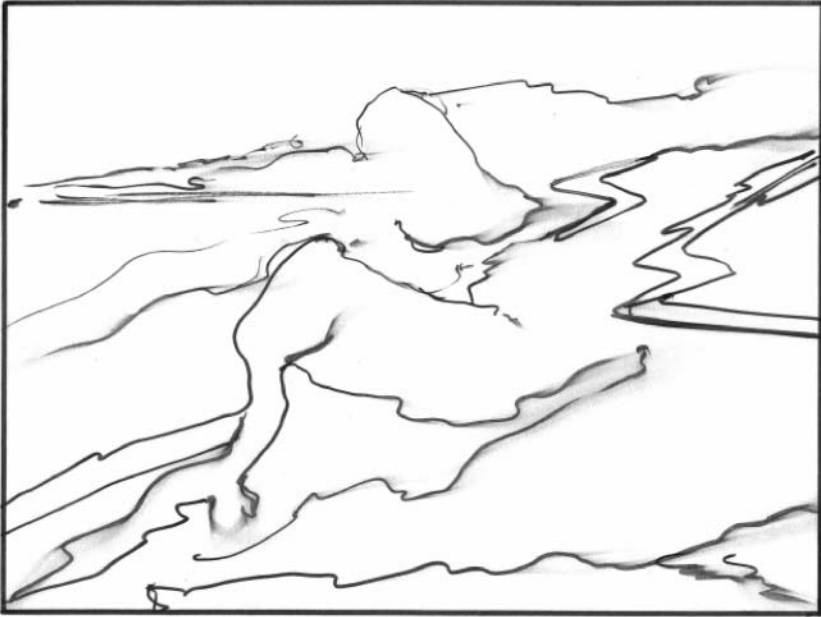


Figure 34. Giovanni Bellini, “Pietà.” Connotation of streams. Flowing streams include all elements of space. Streams of roads, rivers, brooks, and creeping plants. Lines of earth’s breaks, paths, rocks, and folds of clothes create a unified sign formation. This sign formation organizes the painting, at the same time promoting emotional resonance

the left of the bottom. Semantic relationships between connotations appear. Flows of denotations — roads — are enhanced by flows of connotations — tears (figure 34). Representation of Madonna’s eyes and face intensify the expression of sorrow. The denotative meaning of sorrow relies upon its connotative expression.

The connotative approach of Bellini had essential influence on some great masters — mainly on his apprentices Giorgione and Titian.

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