

“Bassano’s Alluvial Painting”

Painted by the Italian artist Jacopo Bassano (ca. 1510-1592) in 1576, *The Flood of the Colmeda* takes as its subject the disastrous 1564 inundation of the town of Feltre, a small community located in the mountains approximately one hundred kilometers north of Venice. The event was described in detail by an anonymous eyewitness who reported that the damage wrought by the flood was intensified by a bridge on the edge of town that obstructed the flow of water, causing it to spill over into the streets and the surrounding countryside. Several years later, a Venetian official was alarmed to find that the town’s residents continued to clear-cut the banks of the Colmeda in order to make way for more profitable vineyards and cornfields, a practice which was understood to exacerbate the already serious flooding problem in the area. This presentation will argue that Bassano’s painting displays the artist’s familiarity with recent theories that attributed much of the blame for the increasing frequency and severity of flooding on the Venetian mainland to the diversion and obstruction of rivers and the clearcutting of riverbanks. Drawing upon this hydrological knowledge, Bassano created a work of art which implies that the attempts of wealthy landowners to reshape the mountainous environment of the northern Veneto to their benefit was not without limitation or consequence.

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