

PAINTING IN VENICE :
LA SERENISSIMA, QUEEN OF THE ADRIATIC
Study Day
Hendrika Foster MA - 5 February 2020
Venice: Its Creation and Decoration



Vittore Carpaccio, *The Lion of St. Mark*, 1516. Palazzo Ducale, Venice

The Basilica of St Mark was built to house the alleged relic of the saint brought from Alexandria in Egypt by merchants in 828. Mosaics would transform the building into an opulent jewel box of colour and light. The earliest government sponsored buildings were clustered around this central point from the 11th century. They include the Doge's palace, the library, the mint and offices and apartments for government officials. Churches and houses, large and small, evolved around the needs of the increasing population in a city without roads and reflected the increasing wealth of the Venetian Empire. Mosaics and then paintings were used, from the 12th to the 16th century, to enhance the buildings and to promulgate the notion of the Venetian Republic as a perfect state.

The day will include study of Venetian paintings of the 15th century and work produced in the Bellini workshop followed by the innovations of the short life of Giorgione. Titian would pick up the baton of excellence in the 16th century and become known not only in Venice but across Europe in his work for the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the King Philip II of Spain.



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GIOVANNI BELLINI (c1430-1516)



Giovanni Bellini, *Portrait of Doge Loredan*, 1501,
National Gallery, London

The family workshop of artists is quite a feature of Venetian Renaissance painting. Giovanni with his older brother, Gentile, trained in the workshop of their father, Jacopo, who had visited Florence and was a pupil of Gentile da Fabriano. The flamboyant International Gothic style of Gentile da Fabriano perfectly suited Venetian taste and by 1429 Jacopo was the pre-eminent painter in Venice. His two sons also benefited from the ideas of their brother-in-law, Andrea Mantegna. Giovanni developed a masterly technique in the handling of light and colour, *colore* is arguably the most important element in Venetian painting. His early works can express intense drama and restrained emotion that softens in later works but maintains an elegant stillness in warm, rich colours. In 1483, he became *Pictore Laureatus*, state painter to the Venetian Republic, a position he held until his death. In this capacity he executed paintings in the Doge's palace which were destroyed by fire in 1577 and portraits like that of Doge Loredan in the National Gallery in London. The meticulous skills of execution of oil

painting used by the Northern European artist, Jan van Eyck, and others reached Venice through the influence of Antonella da Messina. This was crucial for Giovanni in the introduction of superb oil painting techniques as well as stylistic influences. The two major altarpieces for *San Giobbe* (Accademia) and *San Zaccaria* attest to this influence. Giovanni established Venice as an artistic centre on a level with Florence and Rome and brought it to the threshold of the High Renaissance. He was the teacher of Giorgione, Titian, Palma Vecchio and Sebastiano del Piombo.

GIORGIO BARBARELLI known as GIORGIONE (c1475-1510)



**Giorgione, *Fete Champetre*, c1510, Louvre, Paris
(? Completed by Titian.)**

Born in Castelfranco in the Veneto, Giorgione was a pupil of Giovanni Bellini during the 1490s where he met Titian. Little is known of his life though he is attributed with introducing the High Renaissance style to Venetian art. Like Bellini, his use of colour became the most important vehicle in his painting. His paintings were built up through harmonies of complimentary colours, using a

gentle, fairly subdued palette. He creates a hazy atmosphere, similar to his contemporary Leonardo's *sfumato*, but rather than using gradations from dark to light, Giorgione works from hue to hue of one colour. His figures are usually introspective, creating a dreamy mood to his works that is accentuated by the surrounding landscape. *The Tempest* is an evocative pastoral scene in which landscape for the first time is treated for its own sake rather than as a background. He seemed to enjoy depicting the wild, unkempt aspects of nature, which he accentuates with dark shadows and threatening skies. This established a new genre in Venetian art of easel painting which became known as *poesie*. Giorgione was one of the first Venetian artists to work predominantly for private collectors and also thought to be the first to apply paint directly onto the canvas without under drawing. No drawings by him exist and secure attributions of paintings are few. He died aged c34 probably of the plague.

TITIAN (Tiziano Vecellio) (c1487/90-1576)



Titian, *Bacchus & Ariadne*, 1523, National Gallery, London

Born in Pieve di Cadore, situated high in the mountains of the Dolomites, he moved south to be trained in the workshop of the Bellini family, where he is first recorded aged about 20 working with Giorgione on frescoes on the exterior of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, the warehouse for German merchants in Venice. He also learned from Giorgione but quickly he moved beyond this idiom. Throughout his career he was a master of brushwork. Not only using this implement for descriptive task of depicting shapes and masses but also to express light, depth, astonishing colour and emotion. His variety of brushwork is evident throughout his long and very productive career.

Contemporaries tell how he used to build up his pictures in oil over a reddish ground which communicated warmth to all his colours. He would then turn the picture to the wall, sometimes for months before examining them again critically before applying new layers of paint followed by numerous layers of glazes. The word *velatura* or 'veiling' is very expressive, and glazes were used to tone down certain colours and to create a deep, rich tone in which colour, shadow and light seem to be suspended. He was to be the father of portraiture and the master of painting flesh in all its variety, from that of a small child to dignified old age. Throughout his long career he was imaginative and innovative in his style.

Titian was a shrewd business man who invested his earnings in woodland in Cadore in the Veneto. By 1531 he was able to buy a palatial residence in Venice, looking out across the lagoon to Murano and, on clear days, to the distant mountains of his birthplace. In 1530, the Duke of Mantua introduced Charles V, who had no court painter at the time, to Correggio and Titian. In 1533, he was summoned to Bologna to meet HRE Charles V who made him a Count Palatine and his children nobles. Only Rubens would attain this level of distinction. In 1545 he visited Rome and was awarded Roman citizenship on the Capitoline Hill and painted portraits of the Pope. Twice Charles V called him to Augsburg as court painter. This association would continue when Charles's son Philip II of Spain acceded to the Spanish throne and avidly collected Titian's *poesie* - mythological paintings.

On 27th August 1576, Titian died in Venice during, but not because of, an outbreak of Plague, thus there could be no grand funeral. His great memorial is in the Frari designed by Antonio Canova and executed by his pupils. His own *Pieta* intended for his tomb was never installed.

PAOLO CALIARI known as VERONESE (1528-88)



Central detail of *The Marriage at Cana*, includes self portrait of **Veronese**, 1563, Louvre, Paris.

The son of a stonemason he was born in Verona and trained initially by a fairly mediocre painter, Antonio Badile (c1518-60). He became one of the most prolific and successful painters in Venice where he moved the mid 1550s when Titian was the huge power in art. At the death of the master in 1576, Veronese with Tintoretto (10 years older) were the obvious heirs. By the mid 1550s, he settled in Venice and had contact with the eminent cleric and humanist Daniele Barbaro which led to the commission for decorating the Barbaro Villa Maser at Treviso designed by Andrea Palladio. The pictorial programme was devised by the Barbaro brothers – both eminent humanist scholars. The early support of a network of learned and wealthy patrician patrons ensured the smooth running of Veronese's career.

He was quick to exploit the possibilities of enormous canvases which, when covered in oil paint withstood the humidity in Venice far better than panel, and could be filled with dramatic scenes full of pageantry and colour. He demonstrates his mastery of orchestrating a wide range of colours and of evoking a wide range of surface textures. The extent of trade between Venice and the East ensured that the city was supplied with the very best pigments that were available. This same supply line, of course, also provided the raw materials for dying cloth. The silks and velvets in Veronese's paintings epitomise the love of luxury and colour that was an essential part of Venetian patrician life. He skilfully juxtaposed these colours and textures with glittering armour and cool creamy architecture so that in Leonardesque fashion one would accentuate the other. His figures are neither static nor dramatic but seemingly glide in stately rhythm across the picture surface in controlled, calm, unhurried elegance, undisturbed by excesses of physiognomy, gesture, passion or angst.

Veronese was at first drawn to the painterly style known as Mannerism, then quickly developed a very personal style ultimately counter to it. His figures display a controlled classical monumentality, his colours are the essence of Venice and its shimmering sunlight on water. He possibly had two or three trips to Rome during the 1550s and 1560s but Venice and its way of life remained the central dominant motivation for his work.

It can be argued that the laws followed by Veronese in many of his works are as much the laws of architecture as those of painting. To dismiss his work simply as sumptuous and decorative is to diminish the very obvious skills in juxtaposing form and space that his work demonstrates.

Architecture expresses its aesthetic power in the contrasts of solid and void. As scholarly humanism penetrated Venice, classical architectural forms became the new demonstration of power and scholarship. The most important Order of Architecture was that of the fluted column with Corinthian capital. It carried with it a notion of triumphalism. It was used extensively in new church building after the Sack of Rome and the challenge from Protestantism put Catholicism on the defensive.

From the 14th and 15th centuries, Venetian propaganda promulgated through its architecture and its art was of the myth of the Republic as the perfect state. It was indeed a spectacular city, the Queen of the Adriatic, at

the crossroads of East and West it was uniquely cosmopolitan. Its commercial fleet dominated trade between Europe and the Levant for centuries. By the middle of the 15th century the maritime republic ruled an empire that extended from the coasts of the Adriatic and the Aegean in the east and into the Italian mainland in the west, including the cities of Verona, Brescia and Bergamo. It presented itself as a republic ruled by constitutionally established law, apparently undisturbed by internal strife.

Veronese extended this concept in paint. His work shows knowledge of the ideas of Jacopo Sansovino (1486 – 1570), sculptor and principal architect in Venice after the Sack of Rome in 1527. [Designer of the Piazzetta, Library and Mint]. Veronese's close contact with Daniele Barbaro and Andrea Palladio would consolidate these ideas. The concept of a building expressing the character or even the attitude of a patron or occupant was the most subtle and the most recent to receive elaborate treatment in the 16th century. However his use of pictorial space dominated by architectural features follows much that was modern in the concept of theatrical space enclosed by architecture as backdrop. Veronese extends the metaphor of architecture to compliment his subject matter and by extension to compliment either the patron or the building in which the painting would be displayed.

In 1588 Veronese died in Venice and is buried in San Sebastiano, surrounded by his own paintings.

JACOPO ROBUSTI known as TINTORETTO (1518-94)



Tintoretto, *Mary of Egypt*, 1570s, Scuola di San Rocco, Venice

Divided by the internal struggles and the assault of France and Spain, many of the Italian States were in political decline in the early cinquecento. Venice was weakened but she was still free, even though she had to use force, diplomacy, money and compromise to remain so. At Tintoretto's birth, Titian was almost 30 years old and already established as an important master. The years of great power, glory and wealth of the Serenissima were somewhat subdued by the League of Cambrai, 1508-16. Whereas Titian grew up influenced by the humanist Renaissance, Tintoretto's formative years were under the impact of the increased atmosphere of religious revival associated with the Catholic Reformation.

“The two artists can be seen to represent two strands of the Venetian character. Titian answered its craving for sensuous richness, Tintoretto its taste for mystical fantasy....never before can a single city have contained two artists so great, so different and so complimentary. They have created a lasting division between lovers of Venetian painting. Great collectors have usually admired the worldly Titian above all artists. Ruskin preferred Tintoretto and so did Turner” (Hugh Honour)

Little is known of his early years. He was reputedly briefly a pupil of Titian, from whom he learned much about the handling of colour. He was familiar with, and fascinated by, the works of Michelangelo, probably through prints and engravings. He was a master in 1539 but his early works are unknown. He aimed to synthesise the drawing of Michelangelo with the colour of Titian, and a Mannerist concept of the Ideal. In fact his drawing is nothing like that of Michelangelo and his colour does not resemble that of Titian. Tintoretto was unworldly and religious, and lived a fairly simple life at home with his wife and eight children in the family's 15th century Gothic house on the Fondamento dei Mori in Cannareggio near his parish church of Madonna del' Orto in which hang his masterpieces *The Worship of the Golden Calf*, *The Last Judgement* and *The Presentation of the Virgin* and where the memorial of the artist lies. His early paintings are noted for their daring use of colour and unconventional figure groupings like *St Mark Rescuing a Slave*(Accademia) painted after Tintoretto had visited Rome in 1545 and seen Michelangelo's recently completed *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel. The painting was commissioned for the Scuola Grande di San Marco. The new pictorial formula was the result of long and careful experiment which disperses the interest over the whole canvas, sometimes using *repoussoir* figures, opposing diagonals and contrasts of light on dark and dark on light. The spectacular stage effects reflect the contemporary taste for the theatre and the propensity for the age to see the world as a stage, a combination eluding reality and a liking for spectacle. His biographer, Ridolfo, relates how he used wax and clay models which he set in a box with a light in order to experiment with different lighting effects.

His masterpiece is the series of paintings in the Scuola di San Rocco executed 1568-87, scenes from the Old and New Testaments showing his

skill with a variety of light effects and experiments with illusionist devices. These works were to have a profound influence on the painters of the following century notably Rubens, who visited Venice c1605. Tintoretto had a great ability to paint very rapidly and imbue familiar scenes with increased drama enhanced by artificially constructed light. His manipulation of figures and *chiaroscuro* in these paintings mark him as a leading Mannerist painter.

His preference for very large canvases reflected his need for space and movement and satisfied his instinct for large gestures. He worked very rapidly with a vigorous touch, conveying an impression of immense energy. He studied Michelangelo's drawing - *disegno* and Titian's use of colour-*colore*, and created his own inimitable style. His arbitrary use of brilliant colour leads to him being referred to as a Mannerist artist. He carefully manipulated effects of lighting so that they imposed an unreal atmosphere of anxiety. His work was referred to during his lifetime as 'modern' as he filled large spaces of canvases with energetic movement and large gestures rendered with a rapid and vigorous touch. Within a decade of his death Rubens visited Venice and studied Tintoretto's work and would later use many of the same methods as he became the ultimate European Baroque artist of the following age.

The architecture of Palladio stretched across the Veneto, before extending beyond Italy to Europe and from thence to America, thanks to the 18th century Grand Tour. Veronese and Tintoretto painted during what would become the zenith of the Republic before its slow decline in wealth and importance. The once proud Empire would succumb to the power of Napoleon in 1797. In 1797 Napoleon arrived, the Doge was forced to abdicate, the Scuole were closed and Venice was handed to the Austrians. The Venetian Republic ended. In 1866 finally free, it was annexed to Italy after the Risorgimento.



Carnival and the Bridge of Sighs

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