

A

Spotlighting a great master of painting does not only mean organizing exhibitions and conferences. It also gives the opportunity of updating and studying scientifically the production of that painter and examining his or her works more closely. In the case of Tintoretto, his paintings are usually set in well defined architectonic contexts, such as altar pieces and *teleri* (large canvasses) in Venetian churches and *Scuole*, that is, Guilds.

The fifth centennial of Tintoretto's birth has provided a great opportunity to define new paths in the critical analysis of his production, to examine some of his less known works, and, most of all, to promote and realize the restoration of some of his masterpieces.

B

While this exhibition here in Washington and the one in the Ducal Palace in Venice are milestones of the celebrations, the centennial has given the Ateneo Veneto in Venice the opportunity to rediscover a very important painting of its patrimony and to make it known world wide: *“The Apparition of the Virgin to Saint Jerome”*.

C

This painting was not well known to the general public, it never left Venice, and was never shown in an exhibition, till now.

But it was examined by great critics in the past and is being examined even now: Rodolfo Pallucchini and Paola Rossi understood the importance of this painting and Pietro Zampetti, as the chairman of Ateneo Veneto, worked hard

to bring it back to its original home from the Gallerie dell'Accademia (the Accademia galleries) where it had been stored for long years. Then we must thank Ileana Chiappini di Sorio, the former curator of the Ateneo and the author of a Guide to the Ateneo which is still an invaluable instrument for the knowledge of the history of the Ateneo itself.

Now the Venetian Scholar Stefania Mason is going to publish an exhaustive essay full of well-grounded new intuitions.

Then, last but not least, there are the editors and authors of the Catalogue of this exhibition.

D

As far as iconography is concerned, this painting is unusual, and this is one more reason why it has become a case-study: the protagonists, Mary

and Saint Jerome, have the same importance and dignity, and this is really unique in Art History. As a matter of fact there is no written record of the Saint hermit's life reporting this miraculous event. For this reason the title of the painting has been changed according to the different interpretations of the meeting of Jerome with the Immaculate Virgin, or rather with Our Lady of the Assumption. More probably, Tintoretto wanted to tell the meeting with Virgin Mary of whom Saint Jerome was a devotee.

E

Anyway there is a historical reason for the invention of this new subject:

The seat of the Ateneo Veneto, was *The Scuola Granda of Santa Maria e San Girolamo* until 1806, when it was suppressed by the Napoleonic

Government. As you may know the Scuole in Venice were Guilds, today we can call them charities.

So, to go back to our Ateneo: it was the Guild of Saint Mary and Saint Jerome, and it was also known as *Scuola di San Fantin* (which is the name of the church in front of it) or *Scuola dei picai* (that is, the hanged people).

Its task was accompanying both materially and spiritually the people condemned to death; it was founded in 1458 (fourteen fifty eight) merging two *Scuole*, two guilds, *Santa Maria della Giustizia* and *San Girolamo*.

F

They started building the headquarters very soon, and in 1572 (fifteen seventy-two), a document in the *Mariegola*, that is the Statute of the *Scuola*, certifies the existence of an altar

dedicated to Saint Jerome. The *Mariegola* is kept in the Venice State Archive and has been studied by Chiara Traverso.

With no doubt it was the board of directors of the *Scuola* that asked Tintoretto to celebrate the two patron saints in the altar piece, and it probably suggested the miniature in the *Mariegola* showing Saint Jerome kneeling in front of the Cross as reference model. In this miniature, Saint Jerome turns towards Virgin Mary who is ascending into Heaven.

Thanks to Tintoretto's creative power the model was transformed into a new model of devotion for the Brothers of the *Scuola*, which fulfilled the obligation of the presence of the two holy characters who share the wide space of the altar piece in this unprecedented narrative unity.

The relation between the altar piece and the whole setting is important in order to understand its message: it was to be seen by a restricted group of people, the board of the guild, and only in such dramatic situations as the hanging, the brothers were admitted and participated in the Mass in front of Tintoretto's altar piece before assisting the ones sentenced to death.

G

As for the dating of the painting, the critics do not agree. At first they thought it was painted between 1582 (fifteen eighty two) and 1585 (fifteen eighty-five), when the building hosting the Scuola was also undertaking renovations and

Alessandro Vittoria was realizing its façade. Anyway before 1588 (fifteen eighty-eight)), when Agostino Carracci engraved it thus showing that the altar piece was already considered a masterpiece, even though the author was still alive.

H

The building of the altar in the *Sala dell'Albergo* in 1572 (fifteen seventy-two), suggests the dating of the altar - piece immediately after, before the end of the fifteen-seventies.

It is well known that *The Apparition of the Virgin to St Jerome* was not the only painting the *Scuola* asked Tintoretto to paint. In 1562 (fifteen sixty-two) he had started painting the ceiling of the church of the *Scuola dei Picai* on the ground floor, which is the *Aula Magna* of today's *Ateneo Veneto*.

I

The painting was removed a few years after Tintoretto's death by the Brothers and was replaced, between 1595 (fifteen ninety-five) and 1600 (sixteen hundred) by a series of paintings by Palma il Giovane, a cycle concerning the Purgatory, a subject which was in those days closer to the new iconographic directions by the Council of Trento.

Even this sudden change in the taste of the Brothers for the decoration of their *Scuola* is another case-study needing further documentary inquiries.

Tintoretto's original ceiling is considered lost until now (although the history of art may be surprising, sometimes), except for three fragments whose quality is far below the one of the altar piece:

L

St John the Evangelist

M

St Mark,

and

N

St Jerome receives some gifts from the merchants.

O

In more recent times the history of the conservation of Tintoretto's altar piece has been complex, the same as with many other art works in Venetian *Scuole* and Churches, especially in the 19th (nineteenth) century.

In 1812 the Ateneo Veneto di Scienze, Lettere e Arti was established by Napoleonic decree and was assigned to the building of the suppressed School of San Fantin.

In 1840 (eighteen forty) a lightning hit the Ateneo Veneto causing the ceiling of the second floor to collapse, and consequently the canvass was rolled up and was put in the attic together with other paintings. In 1854 (eighteen fifty four) the painting was placed in the ground floor hall and it remained there until 1913 (nineteen thirteen) when it was moved to the Academy of Fine Arts as the Ateneo was being restored. It remained in the Academy until 1973 (nineteen seventy three), when it was deeply restored by Antonio Lazzarin and was placed back in the Library of the Ateneo Veneto, at the second floor, where it had been originally placed.

45 (forty five) years after the first restoration, this exhibition has provided the opportunity for a new brilliant restoration of this painting; the Ateneo Veneto is soon publishing a report on it in which you will find all the technical details.

Now I want to show some pictures of the restoration, sponsored by the Save Venice foundation.

P-Q-R-S-T-U-V

The cleaning, filling and retouching work was carried on by an expert as well as young team directed by the Superintendency for the artistic and architectural heritage of Venice, composed by Paolo Roma, Martina Serafin and Annamaria d'Ottavi of the Venetian company MAUVE.

With the collaboration of Paolo Bensi from Genoa University, as far as the lab analysis are concerned, they worked for over five months at this complex and brilliant restoration of such a piece belonging to the mature period of Tintoretto's work, which is really amazing for its composition, its chiaroscuro and colors.

As I have tried to explain the case -study concerning this painting has not come to a conclusion, there are still many problems to solve.

But this is our passionate job!

Z

We, members of the Ateneo are very happy that today our painting is here in Washington on exhibition, in one of the greatest museums in the world. And we are happy that a competent and sensitive public may have the opportunity of appreciating it together with the other works on exhibition.

Thank for your attention