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Veronese in Murano. Two Venetian Renaissance Masterpieces Restored. Xavier F. Salomon with Machiol Clemente and Claudia Vittori. 96 pp. incl. 52 col. ills. (The Frick Collection, New York, 2017). ISBN 9780912114705

Reviewed by TOM NICHOLS

Paolo Veronese appears to be the most ‘pictorial’ of the great Venetian Renaissance painters: a master who put the formal qualities of painting first, rather than allowing himself to be too much swayed by the external demands of context (the requirements of picture type, patrons or subject-matter etc.). But as this useful short book shows, his stable and self-consistent style was more open to modulation than might at first appear. This publication is focused on two little-discussed paintings dating from 1566-7: *St Jerome in the Wilderness* and *St Agatha Visited in Prison by St Peter*, recently restored by Venetian Heritage and exhibited in Venice (Galleria dell’Accademia) and New York (Frick Collection). The book accompanied the New York showing and comprises an art historical essay by Xavier F. Salomon, the Frick curator who organized the large 2014 exhibition of Veronese in the National Gallery, London.¹ Salomon’s essay is supplemented by short accounts of the recent restoration of the paintings by Claudia Vittori and an interesting discussion of their Venetian Baroque frames by Maichol Clemente. Formal catalogue entries for the two works, a bibliography, along with transcriptions of two previously unpublished documents relating to the commission from the Venetian Archivio di Stato, complete the contents. Although the whole is little more than essay or article length, it is very nicely produced and illustrated, and proves to be a suggestive (albeit modest) contribution to the literature on Veronese.

The paintings were commissioned in 1566-7 for the private chapel of a little-known priest named Francesco Degli Albori, chaplain to the Augustinian nuns of the now-destroyed church of Santa Maria degli Angeli on the lagoon island of Murano, a mile or so northeast of Venice. The patron seems to have been unusually pious and self-effacing, given that he did not (like many other of Veronese’s clients) insist on the inclusion of family name-saints or portraits. The high-pitched emotionality of the two paintings he ordered makes an interesting contrast with other Veronese paintings of the 1560s that are more typically characterized by visual flamboyance, lavish colouration and formal complexity. In his carefully researched essay, Salomon patiently lays out the circumstances surrounding Degli Albori’s commission using the new archival evidence and paying careful attention to the patron’s possible motives in building his small chapel in the cemetery of the nun’s church. This was a geographically remote location, and Degli Albori’s own piety and social obscurity might have led him to identify with St Jerome’s isolation in the wilderness. It is likely that Veronese’s unusually simple paintings, featuring only a few figures, accommodated his patron’s low budget. But Vittori’s account of the recent restoration nonetheless reconfirms that the *St Jerome* is

¹ Reviewed by this author in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CLVI, Number 1339, October 2014, pp. 682-6.

an autograph work; and that the *St Agatha* was also by Paolo, although perhaps finished in the visually inert draperies of *St Peter* by his brother Benedetto.

In the *St Jerome in the Wilderness* Veronese shows the saint under the extremes of physical and psychological duress, rather than (as was more usual) a dignified intellectual scholar. Tears stream from his eyes as he cries out in pain, his mouth falling open to reveal a leathery tongue and the stumps of missing teeth, as he beats his chest with a rock. The *St Agatha Visited in Prison by St Peter*, which hung on the inner entrance wall of the chapel, was an equally unusual depiction in the Venetian context. Here, Veronese showed the martyr saint in prison following the brutal removal of her breasts by her torturers. In contrast with the physical pain emphasized in the *St Jerome*, Veronese here avoided any explicit reference to the saint's physical mutilation beyond a few flecks of blood glimpsed on a pale cloth, focussing instead on the sudden arrival of *St Peter* and the angel in a composition that owes more to depictions of the Annunciation to the Virgin than to earlier scenes of saintly martyrdom. Salomon finds this choice of subject mysterious, though the nuns of the Angeli would surely have identified with *St Agatha*, just as their chaplain did with the very masculine *St Jerome*. Though the little chapel was made with the patron's personal devotions in mind, he always envisaged its transfer to the nuns' ownership following his death. As the new documents show, this was the cause of consternation among Degli Albori's family, who strenuously disputed Francesco's pious bequest through the courts.

The protagonists of both paintings are shown in the proximity of small crucifixes, suggesting Veronese's attention to the importance of private prayer for Christian salvation. The focus on suffering saints, those traditional intermediaries whose spiritual relevance had been questioned by the Protestant reformers of northern Europe, indicates the wider religious context within which the two paintings were commissioned. These works suggest that Veronese's was more deeply and rapidly responsive to the emergence of a serious and doctrinally correct kind of Christianity in the 1560s than has often been allowed. Although he may never have read the decrees on sacred imagery issued at the final session of the Council of Trent of December 1563, within a few years his paintings sometimes took on just the kind of formal simplicity and emotional intensity that the Council had demanded. (Another example is the *St Barnabas Healing the Sick*, Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, painted for a modest altar under the organ in the church of San Giorgio in Braida in Verona around 1565). It is true that the painter was subsequently called before the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition to explain his inclusion of 'buffoons', soldiers and other unnecessary figures in a grandiose Last Supper for the Dominicans of SS Giovanni e Paolo in Venice in 1573. But the Murano paintings remind us that the worldly and flamboyant Veronese style was more capable of serving as an effective carrier of deeper spiritual meanings than his doubters allowed. From around 1580 onwards, indeed, it was this reformed 'Catholic' modulation of his style that emerged as the norm in many of his sacred works.