

# MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ



LVII. BAND — 2015  
HEFT 3





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1 Titian, Pietà, 1575/76.  
Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia

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# TITIAN'S MIRACLES ARTISTRY AND EFFICACY BETWEEN THE SAN ROCCO *CHRIST* AND THE *ACCADEMIA PIETÀ*

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Christopher J. Nygren

Titian's final painting, the *Pietà* now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia (Fig. 1), is haunted by a phantasmagoric presence: a severed human arm stands disconcertingly at the right edge of the picture, propped against a sculpture of the Hellespontine Sybil (Fig. 2). The penumbral arm seems to emerge directly from the statue's plinth; it is not connected to any body. In this arm, Titian's skittish brush-strokes do not describe a living being, nor do they represent a protagonist within the structure of the picture. Rather, they evoke an intense belief in the thaumaturgical power of art and demarcate a quadrant of the picture where the fictive capacity of painting is brought into contact with the miraculous power of objects and images. The arm is made to look like one of the myriad

wax or terra-cotta votive offerings that filled miraculous shrines in the pre-modern period.<sup>1</sup> Just below the arm is a painted votive tablet also leaning against the Sybil's base. Behind this *tavoletta* rests Titian's coat-of-arms. The votive tablet literally overshadows the most prominent public recognition of Titian's artistic achievement and sets his artistic persona against a different order of artistry, one that produces miraculous images.

The *Pietà* was to adorn the artist's own tomb, thus the picture is often read autobiographically as a sort of "painted prayer" for protection from the plague that eventually took Titian's life.<sup>2</sup> Along these lines, the elderly figure kneeling in front of the Virgin, generally identified as St. Jerome, is often read as a "self-portrait

<sup>1</sup> The arm was confirmed to be a votive object following its restoration in the 1980s. Giovanna Nepi Scirè, "Tiziano, 'La Pietà'", in: *Restauri alle Gallerie dell'Accademia*, Venice 1987 (*Quaderni della Soprintendenza ai Beni Artistici e Storici di Venezia*, XIII [1987]), pp. 31–42.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Titian: Prince of Painters*, ed. by Susanna Biadene/Mary Yakush, Munich/New York 1990, p. 374; *Masterpieces Restored: The Gallerie dell'Accademia and Save Venice Inc.*, ed. by Giulio Manieri Elia, Venice 2010, p. 225; Tom Nichols, *Titian and the End of the Venetian Renaissance*, London 2013, pp. 7–12.



in disguise”.<sup>3</sup> The physiognomic resemblance between this figure and Titian’s known self-portraits suggests that there is some warrant for this identification. But while elements like this reflect Titian’s artistic identity, the painting also attests to the complexity and instability of that identity in relation to the larger question of how images and image-makers mediated the dispersal of divine grace. Titian’s painting enfolds two types of votive objects that were both connected to actual cult practice. Within the fictive world of the painting, these votives appear as the products of other artistic agents: votive limbs were made by sculptors through a process of physical impression, while votive tablets were typically produced by painters decidedly less skilled than Titian. Titian’s conscious presentation of these votive offerings alerts the beholder to the transaction of miraculous grace that gives rise to this pictorial ensemble. Yet, the beholder is left to ask: whence derives this grace?

The beginning of an answer may be found in the votive tablet pictured in the lower right of the painting. Like an actual votive tablet, the *tavoletta* in Titian’s *Pietà* points toward the source of miraculous agency: the efficacious image is clearly visible in the upper left-hand corner of the inset painting, where the Virgin, cloaked in a crimson garment, blue mantle, and pale headdress, clutches the lifeless body of her son on her lap. Christ’s body is oriented along a diagonal that runs from his feet, at the lower left, to his head, at the upper right. His visage turns outward to confront the beholder,

and his arm is in the pronated position that Titian often used in images of death.<sup>4</sup> As has been recognized since at least the nineteenth century, the miraculous apparition in the votive tablet repeats the central figural group of the altarpiece itself.<sup>5</sup> According to the structural logic of early modern cult practice, the inset image is evidence of grace already received. The repetition of this iconographic motif suggests that the *Pietà* represented in the center of the canvas has *already* operated as a conduit of grace.<sup>6</sup> Scholarly narratives that focus on the painting’s autobiographical significance have largely overlooked the audacity of the gesture by which Titian inserts his own painting into the circuitry of divine grace as an implied source of miraculous agency. This article seeks to remedy this oversight.

In order to provide a more inclusive account of how the picture operated in relation to general ideas about cult images and miraculous agency in sixteenth-century Venice, this article will consider the votive objects included in the *Pietà* in light of the painting’s intended placement within the church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari and the altarpiece’s position within the trajectory of Titian’s career, a trajectory that includes a commitment to cult images. The argument will emphasize how Titian wove his painting into a network of images, objects, and practices associated with miraculous images. While this account shifts attention away from the question of Titian’s painterly style, which has rightly been discussed in much recent literature, it does so for a specific purpose.<sup>7</sup> Allowing the

<sup>3</sup> Luba Freedman, *Titian’s Independent Self-Portraits*, Florence 1990, pp. 49–57. While some scholars contest the identification of this figure as St. Jerome, I follow Carlo Ridolfi (*Le meraviglie dell’arte: ovvero le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello Stato descritte da Carlo Ridolfi*, ed. by Detlev von Hadeln, I, Berlin 1914, p. 206) in reading it as such. For the various identities ascribed to this character, see Daniela Bohde, *Haut, Fleisch und Farbe: Körperlichkeit und Materialität in den Gemälden Tizians*, Emsdetten 2002, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> David Rosand, “Titian and the *Bed of Polyclitus*”, in: *The Burlington Magazine*, CXVII (1975), pp. 242–245.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph A. Crowe/Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *Titian: His Life and Times. With Some Account of His Family, Chiefly From New and Unpublished Records*, London 1881, II, p. 412.

<sup>6</sup> On the function of votive tablets, see Fredrika H. Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Recent literature, especially in German, has forced a reconsideration of the self-conscious aspect of Titian’s late style. I see the account presented here as being complementary to that line of inquiry. In this respect see the contributions of Paula Carabell, “*Finito* and *non-finito* in Titian’s Last Paintings”, in: *Res*, XXVIII (1995), pp. 79–93; Irene Tobben, *Die Schindung des Marsyas: Nachdenken über Tizian und die Gefährlichkeit der Künste. Ein Essay*, Berlin 1997; Valeska von Rosen, *Mimesis und Selbstbezüglichkeit in Werken Tizians: Studien zum venezianischen Malereidiskurs*, Emsdetten 2001; Bohde (note 3); Nicola Suthor, *Augenlust bei Tizian: Zur Konzeption sensueller Malerei in den frühen Neuzeit*, Munich 2004.

question of Titian's late style to settle temporarily will permit other issues to percolate to the surface.

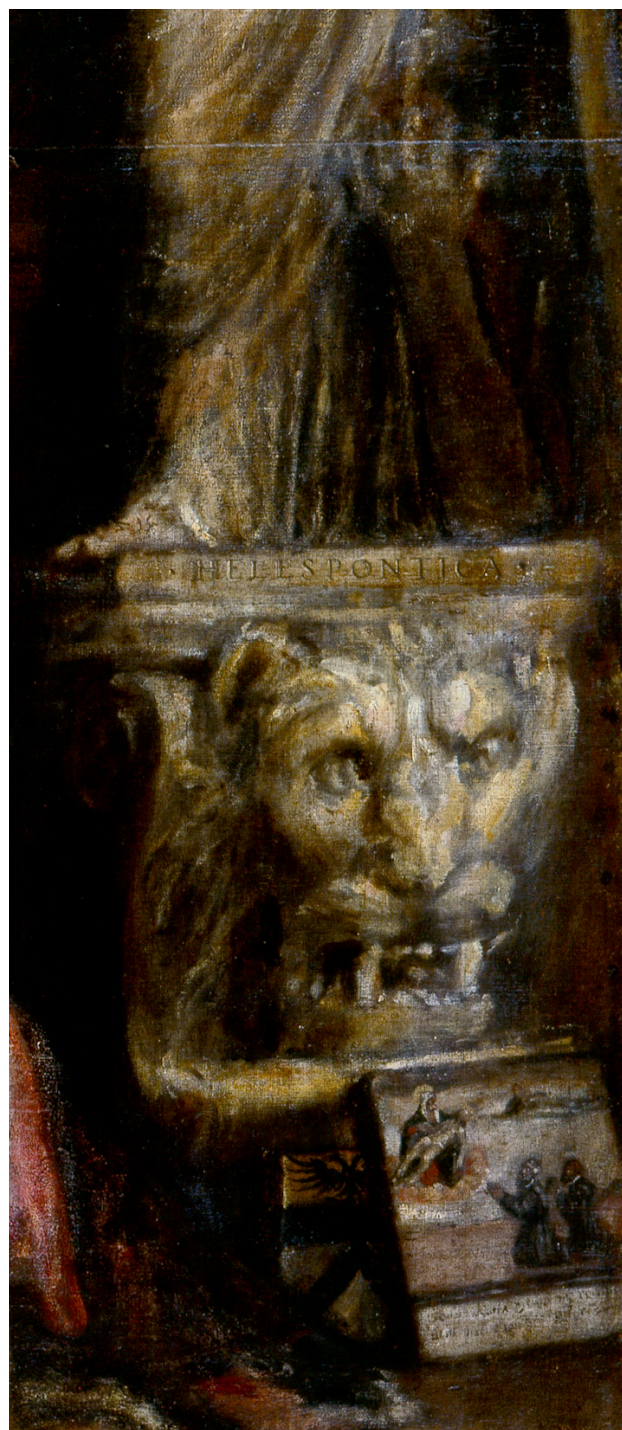
By the time he set to work on the *Pietà*, Titian was widely credited with having painted the *Christ carrying the Cross* (Fig. 5), a painting that began working miracles in 1519.<sup>8</sup> The cult surrounding this picture brought Titian into contact with votive offerings in a way that informed his self-conscious redeployment of them in the *Pietà*. Recognizing the depth of Titian's involvement with votive objects and questions of miraculous agency not only shifts our perspective of the artist's career but also has the potential to redress a lingering bifurcation in Renaissance studies whereby issues of art are considered separately from issues of cult practice. This article contributes to the revision already proposed by a number of scholars regarding the interaction between the categories of 'image' and 'art', which Hans Belting raised as a critical issue more than twenty years ago.<sup>9</sup> Recent interest in the question of miraculous agency has contributed greatly to this revision.<sup>10</sup> And yet it remains possible for scholars studying miraculous images to assert that there is little "common ground" between miracle-working icons and the works produced by leading artists like Michelangelo or Titian.<sup>11</sup> Given the field's current con-

<sup>8</sup> The bibliography on the San Rocco *Christ* is vast and cannot be fully summarized here. See, most recently, *Tiziano*, exh. cat., ed. by Giovanni Villa, Milan 2013, pp. 80–83, no. 6, which gives comprehensive bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, Chicago/London 1994. Many scholars have proposed important emendations to Belting's thesis, which cannot all be collected here. The most important for the argument set forth in this article are: Klaus Krüger, *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren: Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien*, Munich 2001; Gerhard Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel: Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance*, Munich 2002; David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, London 2003, pp. 251–341; the essays gathered in: *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. by Erik Thunø/Gerhard Wolf, Rome 2003; Alexander Nagel/Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2010; Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin 2010.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Jacobs (note 6) and Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, New Haven/London 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Garnett/Gervase Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present*, London 2013, p. 30.



2 Titian, *Pietà* (detail from Fig. 1). Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia

figuration, there is little space for an artist like Titian within the study of miraculous images.<sup>12</sup> By focusing on the case of Titian, this article isolates an important point of contact between the realm of ‘cult images’ and the rarefied category of ‘high art’, thus underlining the possibility of an artist-driven account that also addresses the important concerns that have been raised by the recent interest in miraculous images. Titian is the only artist of Vasari’s *terza maniera* to have been credited by his contemporaries with having painted a miraculously efficacious image.<sup>13</sup> This fact creates an important context for understanding the *Pietà* and allows for a re-reading of Titian’s final painting, as well as his career more broadly, by focusing on miraculous agency.

### Renaissance Votives

Titian’s *Pietà* contains two kinds of votive offerings: an anatomical presentation of an arm and a painted votive tablet.<sup>14</sup> The former represents a category of objects that have a long history in Mediterranean cult practices of all religions, while the latter were a remarkably recent invention, having emerged only in the fifteenth century.<sup>15</sup> In order to avoid confusion, throughout this essay the former category will be described simply as votives or votive objects while the

latter sort will be specifically discussed as votive tablets or panels. Titian’s inclusion of both classes of votives may seem redundant, but the two kinds of gifts served distinct functions. Votive objects and fictive tablets were two forms of currency that facilitated different transactions within the economy of divine grace.

Anatomical votives were temporally flexible: while the theology supporting votive objects suggested that they ought to serve as signs of thanksgiving after a miracle had occurred, actual ritual practice shows that many votaries presented them before experiencing a healing.<sup>16</sup> Anatomical votives, then, could operate as propitiations, a kind of ‘bribe’ in the economy of grace with the aim of persuading the deity to take action.<sup>17</sup> Other objects could be offered in thanksgiving for healings already affected. These were normally physical relics of a past life rendered superfluous by the sudden transformation of misfortune into a moment of grace through miraculous intervention. Actual body parts like a bladder stone or everyday objects such as crutches, walking sticks, prisoners’ shackles, medical prostheses, and weapons acquired significance for the community by symbolizing the bond of thanksgiving between the votary and the deity.<sup>18</sup>

Recently scholars have struggled to articulate the flexible relationship between mimesis and presence that

<sup>12</sup> Holmes (note 10), p. 258.

<sup>13</sup> Moretto da Brescia is the only other contender for this distinction. His *Madonna di Paitone* (1534) was described as an “artistic miracle”; however the term was used only metaphorically. Another of Moretto’s paintings, the *Virgo lactans* (church of San Giovanni Evangelista, Brescia), is a copy of a miracle-working fresco held in the same church. Sources suggest that the designation ‘miraculous’ was reserved for the original. Nevertheless, this raises interesting questions regarding Moretto’s art and its repeated exploitation as a ‘surrogate’ for the miraculous. See Ridolfi (note 3), I, p. 265, and Pier Virgilio Begni Redona, *Alessandro Bonvicino: il Moretto da Brescia*, Brescia 1988, no. 100. Jacopo Sansovino’s *Madonna del Parto* in the church of Sant’Agostino in Rome was also understood to possess miraculous powers. It is important to note, however, that the miraculous activation of the image occurred long after its installation, certainly after the artist’s death, and perhaps as late as the eighteenth century. See Bruce Boucher, *The Sculpture of Jacopo Sansovino*, New Haven/London 1991, I, pp. 26–28.

<sup>14</sup> On the various functions and typologies of votive offerings, see: Richard Andree, *Votive und Weihgaben des katholischen Volks in Süddeutschland*, Braun-

schweig 1904; Pierre-André Sigal, *L’homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale, XI–XII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1985, pp. 86–107; Michele Bacci, “*Pro remedio animae*”: *immagini sacre e pratiche devozionali in Italia centrale (secoli XIII e XIV)*, Pisa 2000, pp. 147–197; Georges Didi-Huberman, “Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time”, in: *L’Esprit Créateur*, XLVII (2007), 3, pp. 7–16; *idem*, *Ex voto*, Milan 2007. Unfortunately the volume edited by Ittai Weinryb (*Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*, Chicago 2016) was going to press at the same time as this article, and thus was not able to be incorporated into the argument presented here.

<sup>15</sup> Annabella Rossi, “Tracce di continuità culturale fra paganesimo e cristianesimo: le offerte votive”, in: *Ex voto tra storia e antropologia*, ed. by Emilia De Simoni, Rome 1986, pp. 29–34.

<sup>16</sup> Andree (note 14), p. 112; Bacci (note 14), pp. 181–184; Christopher S. Wood, “The Votive Scenario”, in: *Res*, LIX/LX (2011), pp. 207–227, esp. pp. 221f.; Holmes (note 10), p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Maniura, “Persuading the Absent Saint: Image and Performance in Marian Devotion”, in: *Critical Inquiry*, XXXV (2009), pp. 629–654.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobs (note 6), pp. 85–125.



is implied in these votive objects. The malleable viscosity of wax votives has been understood to challenge traditional conceptions of resemblance by offering other, non-mimetic forms of representation.<sup>19</sup> This is the kind of offering we see in Titian's ghostly arm, whose materiality stands in for the body of the votary. Importantly, these objects offer no commentary on the agent responsible for the healing, nor do they articulate the cult object that was the target of the votary's invocations. Thus, the miracles these objects propitiate or claim to record were not beyond contestation and misinterpretation; efficacious agency was only made implicit through their physical proximity to the cult image. This is important to bear in mind since, as Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser note, "It is not unusual to find multiple miraculous images in one place."<sup>20</sup> In fact, both of the Venetian churches to be discussed here, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari<sup>21</sup> and San Rocco,<sup>22</sup> contained multiple miracle-working objects. In these cases, the numerous vectors of miraculous agency contained in a single cult site could create confusion regarding which image or object ought to be credited with a particular miraculous occurrence. Painted votive tablets brought an element of rigor to analyzing the circuitry of divine grace. While they may lack the element of "direct force" evident in objects that came into physical contact with the votary's body,<sup>23</sup> votive tablets compensate for this through visual specificity.

Votive tablets first appeared in Italy in the fifteenth century and quickly became commonplace.<sup>24</sup> While most sanctuaries have been emptied of their votive accoutrements, significant caches of votive tablets are still present at the Madonna dell'Arco in Naples, the Santuario della Madonna dei Miracoli in Lonigo (Veneto), and the Sanctuary of Santa Maria del Monte in Cesena, among others.<sup>25</sup> The surviving pictures demonstrate that votive tablets filled an important role in the economy of divine grace by providing perpetual testimony of specific miracles that had already occurred and visually identifying the source of miraculous agency. As Fredrika Jacobs notes, "Without exception, early modern votive panel paintings include a likeness, a portrait if you will, of a cultic shrine's titular saint."<sup>26</sup> While the anatomical votive represents the locus of suffering or recovery, votive tablets "add an explanatory dimension" to miraculous healings.<sup>27</sup> Thus, votive tablets were invariably offered after a miracle had already occurred. Rather than propitiate, votive tablets claimed evidentiary status by offering an eyewitness account of the events. The votive tablet invokes the unique capacity of the visual arts to capture and represent the moment in which grace is miraculously infused or transmitted.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to underline here that in early modern Italy miraculous images rarely worked miracles *in situ*: miracles (almost) always occurred at a dis-

<sup>19</sup> Roberta Panzanelli, "Compelling Presence: Wax Effigies in Renaissance Florence", in: *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. by eadem, Los Angeles 2008, pp. 13–39; Georges Didi-Huberman, "Viscosities and Survivals: Art History Put to the Test by the Material", *ibidem*, pp. 154–169; Hugo van der Velden, "Medici Votive Images and the Scope and Limits of Likeness", in: *The Image of the Individual: Portraits in the Renaissance*, ed. by Nicholas Mann/Luke Syson, London 1998, pp. 126–137.

<sup>20</sup> Garnett/Rosser (note 11), p. 95. See also Holmes (note 10), p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare, descritta in XIII libri*, Venice 1581, c. 65v–66r.

<sup>22</sup> For the documents regarding these objects, see Franco Tonon, *Devotissima Scuola e Fraternità del Glorioso Missier San Rocco: Registro delle Parti, 1488–1549*, Venice 2003. These objects have also been discussed in Elsje van Kessel, "How to Make an Image Work? The Presentation of Giorgione or Titian's Miraculous *Christ Carrying the Cross* at the Scuola di San Rocco", in: *Studiolo*, IX (2012), pp. 12–25.

<sup>23</sup> Wood (note 16), p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> Arnaldo Ciarrocchi/Ermanno Mori, *Le tavolette votive italiane*, Udine 1960, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> See: Michele Miele, *Le origini della Madonna dell'Arco: Il 'Compendio' di Arcangelo Domenici. Introduzione, testo, note, e illustrazioni*, Naples/Bari 1995; Gino Fogolari, "Le tavolette votive della Madonna dei Miracoli di Lonigo", in: *Dedalo*, II (1922), pp. 580–598; Leandro Novelli/Mario Massaccesi, *Ex voto del Santuario della Madonna del Monte di Cesena*, Forlì 1961; Ermanno Giardino/Michele Rak, *Per Grazia Ricevuta: le tavolette dipinte ex voto per la Madonna dell'Arco: il Cinquecento, Pompeii 1983*; Franco Faranda, *"Fides tua te salvum fecit": i dipinti votivi nel santuario di Santa Maria del Monte a Cesena*, Modena 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Jacobs (note 6), p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago/London 1991, pp. 136–160, and Jacobs (note 6), p. 107.



tance from the cult image.<sup>29</sup> The cult history of the San Rocco *Christ carrying the Cross* demonstrates that sacred agency inhered not so much in the physical presence of the image circumscribed in paint on canvas and located within the church, but rather in the image inscribed on the heart of the devotee.<sup>30</sup> The most loquacious source on the miracles of the San Rocco *Christ* is a small treatise in verse written around 1523 by a Friulian polyglot named Eustachio Celebrino.<sup>31</sup> Of the seventeen miracles he attributes to the image, not a single one takes place in the presence of the picture itself. The disparate locations in which Celebrino reports healings to have occurred make clear that the painting *qua* work of art is decidedly absent from the moment of the miraculous event. This is quite standard for miraculous images of the period, and it is one of the reasons that votive tablets emerged as actors in the network of miraculous efficacy. They help localize and define the material source of divine grace.

Certain prodigious pictures and objects ‘transfigured’ their physical characteristics as an outward manifestation of divine approbation.<sup>32</sup> Along these lines, Megan Holmes has drawn attention to the *Pietà* of Bibbona, which began to change its colors in April of 1482.<sup>33</sup> The Scuola Grande di San Rocco, where the icon of *Christ carrying the Cross* was located, also possessed a relic from Christ’s crown of thorns, which miraculously flowered on the feast of the Annunciation in 1519.<sup>34</sup> Objects like this, though miraculous,

are not thaumaturgical insofar as they do not bring about miraculous healings; transfigured objects evince miraculous agency by transforming their matter, not necessarily by performing healings.<sup>35</sup> Miracle-working images, by contrast, do not *do* anything, at least in the strictest sense. Miraculously efficacious images undergo no transformation and operate at a distance. Thus miraculous agency is only hesitantly attributed to them. As Bruno Latour observes, “An invisible agency that makes no difference, produces no transformation, leaves no trace, and enters no account is *not* an agency. Period. Either it does something or it does not.”<sup>36</sup> Since they leave no visible trace, figuring the agency of thaumaturgical images is problematic. Votive tablets combat the ambiguity endemic in the economy of miraculous grace by insisting without hesitation upon the importance of the miraculous picture as a social agent. Votive tablets are essential to the miracle mechanism because they provide visual evidence that the miracle was affected *by the image*.<sup>37</sup> Votive tablets bear witness to the nature of the miraculous deed and point toward the source of the miraculous intervention, which usually appears as a heavenly apparition in the upper left-hand corner. They are a unique instance of artworks registering the agency of miraculous images.

The earliest surviving votive tablets are non-specific: they show the votary, usually kneeling in prayer before a nondescript crucifix, a standard image of the Virgin and Child, or perhaps a patron saint such as

<sup>29</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago/London 1981, pp. 106–127. See also Christopher J. Nygren, “Non-Angetive Efficacy: Some Data on Presence, Absence and the Ontological Entanglement of Miraculous Images”, in: *Presence and Agency: Rhetoric, Aesthetics and the Experience of Art*, conference proceedings Leiden 2012, ed. by Caroline van Eck/Antje Wessels/Frederik Knegt (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> This can be seen in the documents relative to the Madonna delle Carceri published by Isabella Gagliardi, “I miracoli della Madonna delle Carceri in due codici della Biblioteca Roncioniana di Prato”, in: *Santa Maria delle Carceri a Prato: miracoli e devozione in un santuario toscano del Rinascimento*, ed. by Anna Benvenuti, Florence 2005, pp. 97–153.

<sup>31</sup> Eustachio Celebrino, *Li stupendi et maravigliosi miracoli del glorioso Christo de Sancto Roccho novamente impressa*, Venice [ca. 1525]. See also Christopher

J. Nygren, “Figuring Miraculous Agency Between Literature and Art: An Analysis and Translation of Eustachio Celebrino’s *Li stupendi et maravigliosi miracoli del glorioso Christo* (ca. 1523)”, in: *Modern Language Notes*, CXXXI (2016), forthcoming.

<sup>32</sup> On this phenomenon, see especially the contribution of William Christian Jr., “Images as Beings in Early Modern Spain”, in: *Sacred Spain: Art and Belief in the Spanish World*, ed. by Ronda Kasl, New Haven/London 2009, pp. 75–99.

<sup>33</sup> Holmes (note 10), pp. 446–450.

<sup>34</sup> Marino Sanuto, *I diarii [...]*, ed. by Guglielmo Berchet *et al.*, Venice 1897–1903, XXVII, col. 107.

<sup>35</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, New York 2011, pp. 125–176.

Saint Sebastian (Fig. 3).<sup>38</sup> These images serve not so much to indicate the vector of grace, but rather as generic acknowledgments of divine intervention.<sup>39</sup> Around 1500, though, votive tablets began to offer more complex narrative accounts of how miracles had occurred.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, votive tablets began showing the particular image that had affected the miraculous healing, explicitly indicating the image as a conduit of the deity's charisma.<sup>41</sup> The entanglement of the deity and its image has a long tradition in the Mediterranean, and Christian saints often appeared under the guise of their cult images.<sup>42</sup> Votive tablets from about 1500 onward demonstrate that the Christian deity was understood as identical to and interchangeable with its local image. Votive tablets point to this privileged relationship of resemblance and participation by presenting a sort of portrait of the miraculous image/agent and clearly indicating that the cult image enjoyed special divine approbation. Thus, at the very moment, circa 1500, that Hans Belting suggests presence was being evacuated from cult images, votive tablets emerged to insist upon the ontological entanglement between the divine prototype, the cult image, and the healed votary. Titian's *Pietà* is of such interest for the manner in which it resists the disenchantment of cult images by reinscribing manufactured artifacts into the circuitry of miraculous grace, and this is what distinguishes Titian's inset images from other, formally similar experiments in picture-making.<sup>43</sup>



—  
**3 Anonymous artist,**  
 Ex-voto: Virgin and Child  
 with Saint Sebastian  
 and votary, late fifteenth  
 century. Cesena,  
 Santa Maria del Monte

<sup>36</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford/New York 2005, p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> Freedberg (note 28), p. 119.

<sup>38</sup> Novelli/Massaccesi (note 25), p. 52, no. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Faranda (note 25), pp. 147, no. 1, and 149f, nos. 6 and 9.

<sup>40</sup> Jacobs (note 6), pp. 126–162.

<sup>41</sup> Faranda (note 25), pp. 149–153, nos. 7, 10, and 14, and *passim*. See also Eugenio Battisti, “Fenomenologia dell’ex voto”, in: *Ex voto tra storia e antropologia*, conference proceedings Rome 1983, ed. by Emilia De Simoni, Rome 1986, pp. 35–48, esp. p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> See Krüger (note 9), p. 20, and Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, Princeton 1951, p. 105.

<sup>43</sup> Including inset images in large altarpieces had become fairly common by

the middle of the fifteenth century, most notably in the works of Fra Angelico, Botticelli, and Fra Bartolomeo. While all of these experiments might be considered a form of “meta-painting”, these early paintings-in-a-painting hover in front of the fictive space of the picture and undercut the beholder’s impression that access to the sacred pictorial space can easily be gained. Rather than hover above the picture plane, Titian’s tablet is a prop within the larger fiction of the painting and a category of pictures connected to actual cult practice. See William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, New Haven/London 1993, p. 98; Megan Holmes, “Neri di Bicci and the Commodification of Artistic Values in Florentine Painting 1450–1500”, in: *The Art Market in Italy 15th–17th Centuries*, Ferrara 2003, pp. 213–223: 216; Diane Cole Ahl, *Fra Angelico*, New York/London 2008, p. 118. On early modern “meta-painting”, see Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, Cambridge 1997.



## Venetian Votives and the Creation of Feedback Loops

Votive tablets operate within a sort of positive feedback loop in which they simultaneously rely upon and assert the miraculous authority of cult images. In certain instances the feedback loop actually began with a votive tablet rather than a miraculous icon. The solipsistic logic underpinning this development becomes clear in the case of the *Madonna della Navicella* (Fig. 4). The cult of the Navicella Madonna was established in Chioggia, a town located about 30 kilometers south of Venice, on 24 June 1508, when the Virgin appeared to a certain Silvestro, who was tending his garden.<sup>44</sup> When she appeared, the Virgin was riding in a small boat (hence the name 'Navicella') and holding her dead son on her lap. The Virgin's iconography evidently followed a standard visual type, in this case the *Pietà*.<sup>45</sup>

Because the apparition of the Virgin quickly dissipated and left behind no visible trace, the cult first coalesced around a piece of wood that had come into contact with the apparition of the Virgin.<sup>46</sup> It took about a year for the cult to receive the icon which still serves as the centerpiece of the Navicella cult. The advent of this icon is recorded in a 1515 inscription in the church as well as other early modern sources, which narrate that in May of 1509 there appeared

[una] Immagine di Maria, dipinta in tela con Cristo morto sulle ginocchia, e nell'abito ed atteggiamento,

con cui apparve all'Ortolano: Immagine, che con sorpresa di tutti era stata trovata sei anni prima [1509] sopra la soglia di sua primitiva Cappella, né si sa poi da chi colà posta, né da qual mano effigiata.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, eleven months elapsed between the apparition of the Virgin and the arrival of the icon. However, the cult had become a major destination for international pilgrimage as early as February of 1509.<sup>48</sup> Marino Sanuto tells how, in the absence of an icon, the notoriety of the cult spread thanks to votive images depicting the *Pietà*, Silvestro, and the boat, which were sold in great number.<sup>49</sup> These early votive tablets did not simply offer testamentary evidence of a miraculous healing, rather they anticipated and thus pre-emptively authorized the icon that eventually became the centerpiece of the cult. In this instance votive tablets helped make the icon. It will become clear that, building on the example of the Navicella cult, Titian's *Pietà* initiated a similar feedback loop by synthesizing numerous miraculous agencies in a single picture that is predicated upon the notion of efficacy, which is certified by the votive tablet in the foreground of the painting.

It has become commonplace in the literature to describe the two kneeling figures in the votive tablet as portraits of Titian and his son Orazio.<sup>50</sup> This reading interprets the votive tablet as a last (and unsuccessful) prayer in which "Titian and his son Orazio beg the Virgin for immunity from the plague" that

<sup>44</sup> Sanuto (note 34), VII, col. 575.

<sup>45</sup> Ottavia Niccoli, *Vedere con gli occhi del cuore: alle origini del potere delle immagini*, Bari 2011, pp. 131–134.

<sup>46</sup> On the history of the cult, see Girolamo Vianelli, *Nuova serie de' vescovi di Malamocco e di Chioggia accresciuta e con documenti in gran parte ora sol pubblicati*, Venice 1790, II, pp. 79–85.

<sup>47</sup> "[...] an image of Mary, painted on canvas with the dead Christ on her knees, wearing the clothes and in the pose under which she appeared to the gardener: an image which, to the surprise of all was found six years earlier [1509] above the entrance to its primitive chapel. No one knows who placed it there nor by whose hand it was painted." *Ibidem*, II, p. 84.

<sup>48</sup> Sanuto (note 34), VII, col. 761.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, col. 575.

<sup>50</sup> On this subject, see: Crowe/Cavalcaselle (note 5); Harold E. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian*, London 1969–1975, I, p. 122; Nepi Scirè (note 1); David Rosand, *Painting in Sixteenth-Century Venice*, Cambridge 1997, p. 60; Rona Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian*, New Haven/London 2002, p. 385; Peter Humfrey, *Titian*, London 2007, p. 214; Bernard Aikema/Giorgio Tagliaferro, *Le botteghe di Tiziano*, Florence 2009, p. 289; Megan Holmes, "Ex-Votos: Materiality, Memory, and Cult", in: *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World*, ed. by Michael W. Cole/Rebecca E. Zorach, Aldershot 2009, pp. 159–181; Jodi Cranston, *The Muddied Mirror: Materiality and Figuration in Titian's Later Paintings*, University Park 2010, p. 69; Sefy Hendler, *La guerre des arts: le Paragone peinture-sculpture en Italie XV<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Rome 2013, pp. 288–291.



4 Anonymous artist (Veneto), *Madonna della Navicella*, ca. 1509. Chioggia, Santuario della Navicella

was ravishing Venice during the summer of 1576.<sup>51</sup> While this story has a certain charm, it is misleading to suggest that the figures bear a particular resemblance to Titian and his son. They are too small to have any telling physiognomic traits. Moreover, it runs counter to the function of votive tablets within early modern devotion. As seen above, votive tablets served as evidence of miracles already completed, not as objects of propitiation. The actual historical function of votive tablets thus proves incompatible with the prevailing autobiographical reading of the *Pietà*.

A fugitive inscription further undermines reading the tablet as an autobiographical representation of Titian and Orazio. Although it is illegible to the naked eye, infrared reflectography has helped decipher the text, which reads: “Dona Katia Griego vere Piet(at)is signum comisit.”<sup>52</sup> The name Katia Griego or Greco does not seem to correspond to any known historical figure. Moreover, the generic quality of this name together with the formulaic inscription, which mimics inscriptions found on extant votive tablets, combine to suggest that Titian’s votive tablet served a rhetor-

<sup>51</sup> *Titian: Prince of Painters* (note 2), p. 374.

<sup>52</sup> “Commissioned by Katia Greco as a sign of true piety”. See Giovanna Nepi Scirè, “Restauro tizianeschi a Venezia”, in: *Tiziano: restauri, tecniche, pro-*

*grammi, prospettive*, ed. by Giuseppe Pavanello, Venice 2005, pp. 73–85, and *eadem*, in: *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, exh. cat. Venice/Vienna 2008, ed. by Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, Milan [2008], pp. 308–311, no. 3.20.





5 Attributed to Titian, Christ carrying the Cross, ca. 1510.  
Workshop of Titian, painted lunette showing God the Father  
with the Arma Christi, 1519/20. Venice, Scuola di San Rocco

ical rather than documentary function.<sup>53</sup> This votive tablet is presented as though it were an actual offering of thanksgiving. Within the fictive construction of the picture, Katia Greco has been touched by divine grace and has left this tablet as evidence of her satisfaction. Rather than serve as Titian's gesture of propitiation against the plague, the tablet serves as testamentary evidence of grace received and points to the grace-giving object, which is the *Pietà* at the center of Titian's painting.

### Titian and Miraculous Agency

How is one to read a votive tablet that is embedded within a deeper layer of mimetic representation? What is the evidentiary status of the *fictive* votive tablet included in Titian's *Pietà*? In order to adequately answer this question, it will be helpful to examine in greater detail the circumstances surrounding the San Rocco *Christ carrying the Cross*, which inserted Titian's art into the economy of divine grace in ways that resonate with the ambition evident in his final painting. That painting was made by a Venetian artist, probably Titian, sometime around 1510 (Fig. 5).<sup>54</sup> By 1519 the painting had made its way into the church of the Scuola di San Rocco, an important lay confraternity, and in that year the painting began to perform numerous miraculous healings.<sup>55</sup> The picture's cult was subsequently propagated through treatises as well as single-leaf print reproductions of it.<sup>56</sup> However, all of the promotional materials surrounding the picture, including Eustachio Celebrino's poem discussed above, suppressed the identity of its author. Vasari was the first to attempt an identification of the artist responsible for the painting, and at different points in



6 Titian, *Assunta*, 1516-1518. Venice, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari

<sup>53</sup> On the generic quality of Italian votive tablets, see Ciarrocchi/Mori (note 24), p. 29, and Eugenio Battisti, "Norme generali e casi di varianti", in: Giardino/Rak (note 25), pp. 15-29.

<sup>54</sup> On the San Rocco *Christ* see *Tiziano* (note 8).

<sup>55</sup> For a complete summary of the documents relating to the San Rocco *Christ*, see Maria Agnese Chiari Moretto Wiel, "Il *Cristo portacroce* della Scuola

Grande di San Rocco e la sua lunetta", in: *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, Classe di Scienze Morali*, CLVI (1997/98), pp. 687-732. See also Sanuto (note 34), XXIX, p. 469.

<sup>56</sup> Maria Agnese Chiari Moretto Wiel, in: *Giorgione*, exh. cat. Castelfranco Veneto 2009, ed. by Enrico Maria Dal Pozzolo/Lionello Puppi, Milan 2009, pp. 482-484, nos. 105-107.



his *Lives* he attributed the painting to both Titian and Giorgione.<sup>57</sup>

The empirical identity of the artist responsible for the San Rocco picture – its ‘real author’ – remains a serious point of contention among scholars. However, the ‘real’ authorship of the painting is not of primary interest here. Rather than re-adjudicate the connoisseurial issues surrounding the question of who painted the picture, what holds my attention is the fact that over the course of the sixteenth century the San Rocco picture came to be *perceived* as a work by Titian. Indeed, in his description of the works of Titian, published in the second edition of his *Lives* from 1568, Vasari self-consciously corrected his previous attribution of the picture to Giorgione.<sup>58</sup> In all likelihood, Vasari changed the attribution of the painting based on information gleaned from his interview with Titian.<sup>59</sup> This suggests that Titian promoted the perception that he had made the painting.<sup>60</sup> From Vasari’s second edition until the twentieth century, published sources almost universally regarded the San Rocco *Christ* as a painting by Titian. This is important to emphasize because Titian’s successful appropriation of the painting gives license to considering the picture as ‘a Titian’ even in the unlikely event that the attribution to Giorgione were to gain consensus among scholars. Late in his career, Titian identified this miracle-working painting as the product of his own hand, and this act of appropriation resonates in interesting ways with the themes set forth in Titian’s final painting.

The attribution to Titian first proposed by Vasari was reinforced by the painted lunette that had framed the painting since 1520. Though of modest artistic quality, the lunette is recognized as a prod-

uct of Titian’s workshop.<sup>61</sup> Stylistically it clearly relates to Titian’s *Assunta* in the Frari, installed in 1518 (Fig. 6). Here, the physical proximity of the church of San Rocco to the Frari is significant: the apse of the Frari abuts onto the Campo San Rocco. Exiting the main portal of the church of San Rocco, the apse of the Frari looms immediately to the viewer’s left. In fact, during the sixteenth century the apse of the Frari communicated directly with the Campo San Rocco through a doorway that allowed the faithful to pass quickly between the two cult spaces.<sup>62</sup> Titian’s *Assunta* hung in the apse of the Frari, and thus would have been the first thing seen by those transiting through this passageway. In this context the frame of the *Christ carrying the Cross* served as a kind of ‘visual signature’, unmistakably aligning the miraculous potency of the San Rocco painting with Titian’s own artistic agency. Through its frame, the miraculous picture in San Rocco is visually linked to the more sumptuous picture that had recently been installed next door. Following the framing of the picture, the miraculous ensemble bore the seal of Titian’s workshop and became irreversibly associated with his artistry. The subtle slide toward Vasari’s attribution of the picture to Titian was thus set into motion.

Titian’s involvement with the San Rocco icon brought him into direct contact with the sort of votive offerings that later appear in the *Pietà*. Documents in the Scuola suggest that already by 1521 the sanctuary was overrun with votive offerings.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, their presence in the circuit of grace pulsating around the *Christ carrying the Cross* is confirmed by a woodcut, produced in the early 1520s by Titian for the confraternity, which sought to capitalize on the miraculous

<sup>57</sup> For the attributions to Giorgione, see Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Paola Barocchi/Rosanna Bettarini, IV, Florence 1976, pp. 45f. For the attribution to Titian, see *ibidem*, VI, Florence 1987, pp. 159f. For the English text, see Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, New York/London/Toronto 1996, I, pp. 643f., and II, p. 786.

<sup>58</sup> Vasari 1987 (note 57), p. 160.

<sup>59</sup> David Rosand, *Titian*, New York 1978, p. 64.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Hope, *Giorgione or Titian? History of a Controversy*, New York 2003, p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Chiari Moretto Wiel (note 56), pp. 435–438, no. 49. See also *eadem* (note 55).

<sup>62</sup> Sansovino (note 21), c. 70v.

<sup>63</sup> Chiari Moretto Wiel (note 55), p. 716, note 67.



7 Titian, St. Roch, ca. 1520.  
London, British Museum

healings that had now become commonplace.<sup>64</sup> The woodcut is an innovative presentation of the Gothic *vita* altarpiece (Fig. 7).<sup>65</sup> The figure of Saint Roch stands at the center of the image set off against the Venetian cityscape visible at his back. The central figure of St. Roch is contained by a fictive frame, which is divided into four lateral compartments on each side of

the saint. These compartments contain vignettes that illustrate the life, death, and miracles of St. Roch. The ensemble of Saint and frame rests on a plinth that juts outward into the space of the viewer. Upon this ledge sit a small fictive alms box, used to collect offerings for the Scuola; a votive offering of a child's head, presumably a sculpture in wax or terra-cotta; and a votive tab-

<sup>64</sup> The dating of the woodcut is imprecise, though most scholars agree that it dates to sometime around 1520. Lisa Pon ("A Document for Titian's *St. Roch*", in: *Print Quarterly*, XIX [2002], pp. 275–277) has found a document from 1516 that "provides a slightly earlier date for the bureaucratic impulse that preceded the print's commission". However, given the important role accorded to the icon, production of the print cannot predate its miraculous activation in the summer of 1519.

<sup>65</sup> Compositionally, the figure of St. Roch resembles Titian's fresco of *St. Christopher* (ca. 1523). See *Titian and the Venetian Woodcut*, ed. by David Rosand/Michelangelo Muraro, Washington 1976, pp. 108–111, nos. 12A & 12B. See also Jacobs (note 6), pp. 156f.; Matthias Wivel, "Titian's *St. Roch*", in: *Print Quarterly*, XXIX (2012), pp. 131–141; Hans Tietze/Erika Tietze-Conrat, "Tizian-Graphik, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte von Tizians Erfindungen", in: *Die graphischen Künste*, Baden/Wien 1938, III, pp. 52–71: 63, 71.





let, which clearly records the healing of a bed-ridden supplicant. Roch's gaze indicates the miraculous agent responsible for these healings, as Christ appears amidst the clouds under the guise of the miraculous painting of San Rocco. The replication of the San Rocco prototype is unmistakable. This woodcut demonstrates that Titian was well aware of the role accorded to votive objects as well as votive panels within the economy of miraculous grace. His woodcut illustrates both categories of votive imagery, suggesting that his deployment of these objects in the *Pietà* was anything but naïve.

In fact, the San Rocco cult offered Titian other opportunities to consider the dual role that images played in the miracle mechanism, first propitiating miraculous healings and then serving as a public acknowledgment of gratitude, since this process was visualized within the decorative fabric of the church itself. In 1527 Pordenone decorated the church of San Rocco with a series of votaries, all of humble stock, who direct their attention toward the miraculous

Christ (Fig. 8).<sup>66</sup> They bring votive offerings of all kinds: a model ship, presumably the offering of a sailor saved at sea; a sword, perhaps from a soldier; a wax or terra-cotta cast of a leg; and we are faced with the disturbing prospect of what appear to be living children thrust precariously forward toward the object of devotion with little regard for their fragile state (Fig. 9). The child held by the kneeling mother at right flails his arms and seems on the verge of tumbling violently out of the picture frame. The object of their devotion is indicated by one of the figures at the right rear of the composition, where a child rides atop his father's shoulders while holding a votive tablet (Fig. 10). On the latter, four butcher-block posts schematically demarcate a bed containing a figure tucked under a dark sheet. In the upper-left a heavenly apparition takes the form of the two central figures from the San Rocco icon.<sup>67</sup> The crossbeam clearly weighs down Christ's shoulder, while at left the tormenting Jew reaches for Christ's throat. These elements clearly align the appa-

<sup>66</sup> On these paintings see Charles E. Cohen, *The Art of Giovanni Antonio da Pordenone: Between Dialect and Language*, Cambridge 1996, II, pp. 623–627, no. 51.

<sup>67</sup> The visual typology is easily legible when compared to other similar images. See Anna Maria Tripputi, *Le tavolette votive del Santuario di San Matteo in San Marco in Lamis*, Fasano 1981, fig. 41.



8–10 Giovanni Antonio de Sacchis, called Pordenone, *Saints Martin and Christopher with suppliants bearing votive offerings*, general view and details. Venice, Church of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco

rition with the miraculous icon associated with the hand of Titian.

Pordenone's fresco reflects the San Rocco icon's extraordinary power, and was calculated for effect. Pordenone's fresco serves as a framing device that reinforces the authority and power of the miraculous image by illustrating its effects. The picture is a visual corollary to the logo-centric phenomenon of corroborating miracles through the creation of notarized chronicles recording miraculous healings.<sup>68</sup> Through the fictive votive tablet the confraternity offers specific assurance that propitiation is effective. Pordenone's picture permanently registers the miraculous agency of the San Rocco icon in the decorative fabric of the church. Even

today, when the sanctuary has been purged not only of votive offerings but also of the miraculous image itself, Pordenone's fresco still testifies to the history of the cult site. Pordenone's fresco demonstrates the unique capacity of art to reflect miraculous agency without taking it up. It is an index that points the faithful toward the icon, deferring attention from itself and directing it toward the prototype, which was reportedly by Titian. Thus, Titian's woodcut and Pordenone's fresco were both conscripted into a feedback loop initiated by the miraculous potency of the San Rocco *Christ*. These men, who were often bitter rivals, found their works allied in proving the miraculous efficacy of a modern work of art.

<sup>68</sup> Holmes (note 50), p. 173, has noted that life-size wax votive offerings could serve as a sort of visual 'miracle book'. On the process of documenting miracles, see Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, transl. by David S.

Wiesen, Cambridge/London 1968, Book XXI, Chapters 6–10, and *Notai, miracoli e culto dei santi: pubblicità e autenticazione del sacro tra XII e XV secolo*, conference proceedings Rome 2002, ed. by Raimondo Michetti, Milan 2004.



In much the same way that the symbolism of Vasari's attribution to Giotto of the frescoes in the upper church at Assisi far outweighs the empirical evidence in support of the historical event,<sup>69</sup> similarly the import of Vasari's attribution of the San Rocco painting to Titian goes beyond the historical record of that picture's origin, which remains unknown. As Megan Holmes has noted, the simple perception of a living painter's artistic performance being correlated with an outflowing of miraculous grace was overburdened with "potential idolatrous implications".<sup>70</sup> Along these lines, this article is concerned with underlining the following facts: having produced a supplemental frame for the icon in 1520 as well as a woodcut that used the icon to raise money for the confraternity, from an early date Titian was inextricably tied to the miraculous agency of the *Christ carrying the Cross*. This connection was reinforced with Vasari's attribution of the painting to Titian in the 1568 edition of the *Lives*. The repercussions of this attribution have failed to register with requisite force in the literature on Titian. Even if the painting wasn't publicly recognized as Titian's work until decades later, from 1520 onward Titian was closely aligned with the Scuola's promotion of the miraculous cult.

Around the same time that Vasari attributed the San Rocco *Christ* to Titian, the artist set to work on the *Pietà*, which was destined for the church next door to San Rocco. The earlier miraculous painting remained not only physically proximate, but also conceptually ready to hand. The *Pietà*, I contend, afforded Titian an outlet to displace and channel any residual anxiety that attended the artist's reputation as the producer of a miraculous image. In his last painting, Titian brought

his artistry into contact with the paraphernalia of miraculous cult images in such a way as to give the impression that his own painting had once again become the source of miraculous grace.

### Miraculous Agency and the *Pietà*

Before moving to consider how Titian used the votive tablet in his *Pietà* to produce the impression of an efficacious image, we should first consider the history of the painting. The canvas is one of the largest ever used by Titian, measuring 378 × 348 cm. The picture, though, is actually composed of seven pieces of canvas that were stitched together in a patchwork manner to attain an integral surface. This is evident on the surface of the painting, where a large suture bisects the painting horizontally, passing just above the head of the Virgin. This line marks the largest joint, where the six pieces of canvas in the lower portion of the picture are united to the upper half of the image, which is made up of a monolithic segment of canvas. Palma il Giovane attempted to disguise this seam with the addition of varnishes that have been removed in recent cleanings, making the suture evermore apparent.<sup>71</sup> Technical analysis has revealed that the first piece of canvas used began as an *Entombment*, probably around 1559.<sup>72</sup> When this piece was converted into a *Pietà* cannot be known, nor is it clear at what point Titian added the six other pieces of canvas, though the evidence suggests that it had taken its final form and was essentially complete by 1575, when it was installed as an altarpiece.<sup>73</sup>

It is already evident that the *Pietà's* history is complicated, but two things are certain. First, from an early stage the picture was intended as the altarpiece for

<sup>69</sup> Hayden B. J. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation*, University Park 1997, p. 82.

<sup>70</sup> Holmes (note 10), p. 204.

<sup>71</sup> *Masterpieces Restored* (note 2), p. 227.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Hope, "A New Document About Titian's *Pietà*", in: *Sight and Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E. H. Gombrich at 85*, ed. by John Onians, London 1994, pp. 153–168; Nepi Scirè (note 1); *Masterpieces Restored* (note 2), pp. 220–239.

<sup>73</sup> Hope (note 72), pp. 157–159. Charles Hope appears doubtful that the altarpiece was installed in the Frari in its current form. However, Daniela Bohde (note 3), p. 71, and Tom Nichols (note 2), p. 15, have both pointed out that Titian's labored working practice late in his career makes it highly unlikely that he could have expanded the painting from the central piece of canvas (157 × 193.5 cm) to its present size (378 × 347 cm) in the short time between March 1575 and his death on 27 August 1576. On Titian's time-consuming style, see Cranston (note 50), pp. 8–11.

Titian's tomb in the church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. Second, though the painting was considered ready for installation in 1575, some emendations were made to the painting after Titian's death in August 1576.<sup>74</sup> Palma il Giovane, who self-identified as a pupil of Titian, retouched parts of the picture, including the torch-bearing putto at center, the putto in the lower left, and some elements of the architecture, especially along the upper edge of the picture. Palma recorded his intervention in an inscription on the step below the Virgin and her deceased child: "Quod Titianus inchoatum reliquit Palma reverenter absolvit [...]" ("That which Titian left inchoate, Palma reverently completed").<sup>75</sup> Importantly for the argument developed here, it is universally accepted that Titian rather than Palma painted the votive objects in the lower right-hand corner.<sup>76</sup>

Early modern printed sources are unambiguous in stating that Titian undertook the painting of his own volition and that it was intended to serve as the altarpiece for his burial chapel in the church of the Frari.<sup>77</sup> Carlo Ridolfi wrote of the painting in 1648 that,

[Titian] Haueua anco dato principio ad vna tauola col morto Saluatore in seno alla dolente Madre, à cui San Girolamo seruiua di sostegno, e la Maddalena con le braccia aperte si condoleua, che disegnaua por Titiano nella cappella del Christo nella chiesa de' Frari, ottenuta da' Padri con patto di farui quella pittura; mà portandosi la cosa in lungo ò perche, come altri dicono, non

vollero quelli perder l'antica diuotione del Crocefisso, che vi si vede, non vi diede fine, ma peruenuta dopo la sua morte nelle mani di Palma, fù da lui terminata, con l'aggongerui alcuni Angeletti e questa humile iscrittione: "Quod Titianus inchoatum reliquit, / Palma reuenter perfecit, / Deoque dicauit opus."<sup>78</sup>

We learn from this passage a number of important facts: first, Titian obtained burial rights in the chapel of the Crucifix by bartering with the Friars; second, the painting was intended as the altarpiece for the aforementioned chapel; third, the Friars were worried that the painting would diminish devotion to the painted crucifix already in that chapel, the cult object for which the chapel was named; fourth, it was probably because of the Friars' discomfort that the picture was not permanently installed on that altar.

Modern scholars have helped render Ridolfi's account more complex and intriguing. A document discovered in the Vatican archives by Charles Hope demonstrates that the picture was installed in the church some time prior to 1 March 1575. However, the Friars moved the picture from its position on the altar of the Crucifix and thereby nullified their agreement with Titian. This upset Titian enough to prompt an appeal to the Vatican, and a papal nuncio ordered the Friars to return the picture.<sup>79</sup> This episode suggests that Titian thought the siting of the painting was particularly important; inclusion within the decorative fabric of the chapel of the Crucifix was para-

<sup>74</sup> *Masterpieces Restored* (note 2), p. 225.

<sup>75</sup> Jérémie Koering has recently offered an evocative interpretation of this inscription, suggesting that Titian's late style was aligned with sculpture. Jérémie Koering, "Titien sculpteur?", in: *Venezia Cinquecento*, XVIII (2008), pp. 177–196.

<sup>76</sup> Nepi Scirà 2008 (note 52), p. 310.

<sup>77</sup> As Giovanna Nepi Scirà notes, the hypothesis put forward by Charles Hope (note 72) "that the work may, at least originally, have been started for the marquis of Ayamonte, however, does not seem plausible" (Nepi Scirà 2008 [note 52], p. 308).

<sup>78</sup> Ridolfi (note 3), p. 206. Hope (note 72), p. 153, translates the passage as follows: "[Titian] had also begun an altarpiece with the dead Savior on

the breast of his sorrowful mother, to whom St. Jerome provided support, and the Magdalene was grieving with open arms. This [picture] Titian intended to place in the chapel of Christ in the church of the Frari, which he had obtained from the fathers with an agreement that he would make the picture for that location. But because the business became protracted, or because, as some say, the Friars did not want to lose the ancient devotion to the crucifix which can be seen there, he did not finish it; but having passed after his death into the possession of Palma, it was completed by him, with the addition of some little angels and this humble inscription: What Titian left inchoate, Palma reverently completed, and dedicated the work to God."

<sup>79</sup> The document was published in Hope (note 72), p. 165, note 15.





11 Titian,  
Pesaro Altarpiece,  
1519-1526.  
Venice, Santa Maria  
Gloriosa dei Frari

mount in Titian's mind. However, there is nothing to suggest that relations between Titian and the Friars were permanently spoilt. Upon his death in August of 1576 he was promptly buried at the foot of the altar of the Crucifix, even though he had died of plague, and victims of the plague were generally not afforded official burial rituals.

Titian's intentions for the painting in the summer of 1576 are lost to history. Charles Hope has suggested that Titian was transforming the painting for installation on the high altar in the church of Santa Maria Nascente in Titian's hometown of Pieve di Cadore. Hope bases this suggestion on the anonymous author known as Tizianello, who published an account of Titian's life and works in 1622.<sup>80</sup> As Hope himself recognizes, though, "the Anonimo is not a very reliable source".<sup>81</sup> It is possible, perhaps even probable, that this apocryphal story was simply another attempt by the Anonimo to reinforce the parochial interests of Pieve di Cadore, which was the author's primary goal in writing his treatise. More concretely, the Anonimo speaks exclusively about the intended destination of Titian's mortal remains; he does not comment on Titian's desires vis-à-vis his final painting.<sup>82</sup> More importantly, Hope's assertion that the final version of the *Pietà* "cannot have been made for the Frari" is neither proven by the documents nor shared by most scholars. As David Rosand pointed out, there is ample visual evidence to suggest that Titian continued to develop his painting with an eye toward its (re)installation on the altar of the Crucifix.<sup>83</sup>

Immediately after Titian's death, his estate fell into disarray.<sup>84</sup> Just weeks after the artist's passing his son Orazio also died, which precipitated a five-year battle over the painter's estate, including the contents of his

<sup>80</sup> See Tizianello, *Breve compendio della vita di Tiziano*, ed. by Lionello Puppi, Milan 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Hope (note 72), p. 159.

<sup>82</sup> Tizianello (note 80), p. 57. See also Rosand (note 50), pp. 57–61.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61. See also Bohde (note 3), p. 71.

<sup>84</sup> Aikema/Tagliaferro (note 50), pp. 300–312.

studio. At the conclusion of this dispute, around 1581, Palma il Giovane came into possession of the picture. By that point it seems that the impetus to install the picture in the Frari had passed, and the painting stayed with Palma until his death in 1628. Sometime around 1631, the picture was installed in the Venetian church of Sant'Angelo, where it remained until 1814, when it entered the collection of the Accademia. But what if it had been installed on the altar of the Crucifix according to Titian's intentions?

The side chapels of the Frari were decorated with large altarpieces, and within that context the size of Titian's painting would have been assertive but not overbearing.<sup>85</sup> The picture also seems a natural fit for the chapel of the Crucifix, which is the second chapel on the right of the nave, where Titian is now reportedly buried. Much like Titian's earlier Pesaro altarpiece (Fig. 11), which was installed on the left side of the nave about fifty years before, the *Pietà's* asymmetrical composition gives the painting a sense of directional thrust that could only be suited to a side altar; had it been installed, the altarpiece would have led the gaze of the faithful down the nave of the church toward the high altar. As David Rosand noted, the dynamic composition allows the picture to function "as both wall painting and altarpiece".<sup>86</sup> This was accomplished in two ways: formally, the triangular arrangement of the figures encourages the beholder's eyes to move across the painting from right to left, beginning with the kneeling figure of St. Jerome, who serves as a point of entry. Following the internal trajectory of the composition to its culmination at left, we see that the picture's iconography is encoded to acknowledge the picture's subservient position within the decorative fabric of the church. The Magdalene, clothed in green, directs both

her cry and her gaze beyond the picture frame, to the viewer's left. It is quite odd within Passion iconography to find an image in which the Magdalene so roundly ignores the principal action unfolding before her. Yet this breach of decorum and subversion of the picture's frame is mirrored by the fictive sculptures that stand on either side of the composition and ostensibly serve to contain the painting's lateral expansion. Their containing function, though, is undercut by the fact that, like the Magdalene, both statues are absorbed by some unseen object that looms outside of the picture's frame at the viewer's left. Given the altar's putative position within the church, it seems logical to conclude that the figures are directing the beholder's gaze toward the high altar.<sup>87</sup> At first glance the picture's deference to the high altar may seem to align with the incipient Counter Reformation concern for organizing churches in a unified manner around the high altar, thus emphasizing the Eucharistic celebration of the mass rather than the individual chapels and their altarpieces.<sup>88</sup> However, this theological reading does not account for the complexity of the church's decorative fabric, which is intrinsically linked to Titian's artistic identity.

The high altar of the Frari is inscribed in a particular way by Titian's intervention. The installation of Titian's massive *Assunta* in 1518 (Fig. 6) firmly established the artist as the Venetian *caposcuola* and marked the Frari as a major coordinate in the artistic landscape of Renaissance Venice.<sup>89</sup> The theological import of the *Pietà's* deference to the high altar cannot be divorced from the artistic significance of that gesture. As has been noted by previous scholars, the picture would have completed a triangle of Titian's altarpieces — *Assunta*, *Pala Pesaro*, *Pietà* — thus indelibly marking the fabric of the Frari with a triad of his paintings

<sup>85</sup> Bohde (note 3), p. 71.

<sup>86</sup> Rosand (note 50), p. 61.

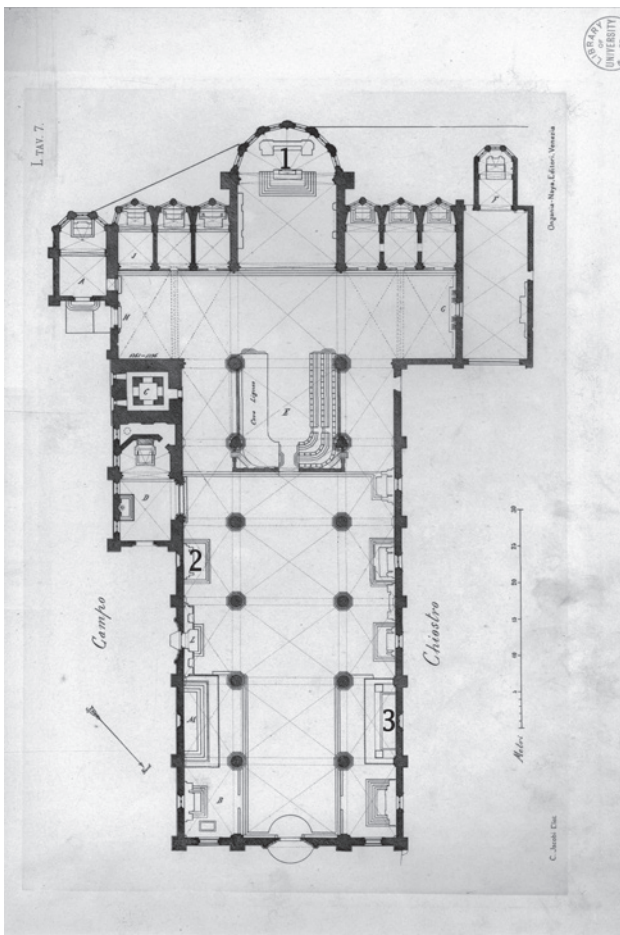
<sup>87</sup> This would be comparable to Pontormo's *Pucci Altarpiece* in the church of San Michele Visdomini. See Sydney J. Freedberg, *Painting of the High Renaissance in Florence and Rome*, Cambridge 1961, I, p. 521.

<sup>88</sup> For the most sophisticated reiteration of this thesis, see Alexander

Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art*, Chicago/London 2011, pp. 197–220.

<sup>89</sup> Paul Joannides, *Titian to 1518: The Assumption of Genius*, New Haven/London 2001, pp. 285–297. For a discussion of the *Assunta* as it pertains to the *Pietà*, see Nicholas De Marco, "Titian's *Pietà*: The Living Stone", in: *Venezia Cinquecento*, II (1992), pp. 55–92.





12 Floor plan of the church of the Friari illustrating the locations of Titian's three altarpieces: 1. Assunta, 2. Pesaro Madonna, and 3. Pietà. From Pietro Paoletti, *L'architettura e la scultura del Rinascimento in Venezia*, I.2, Venice 1893, table 7

(Fig. 12).<sup>90</sup> The Magdalene's pivot away from the devotional center of the *Pietà* toward the Virgin of Titian's *Assumption* ought to be read in light of the preceding observations as a self-conscious performance by the elderly artist, who wished to be buried under his altarpiece in the church whose decoration he had so fundamentally shaped. The altarpiece's intended siting indicates the painter's recognition of artistic tradition and is evidence of his attempt to assert himself as a controlling agent of that tradition as well as one of its sources.

Yet the episode involving the Papal nuncio suggests that Titian was deeply invested in the specific location of the picture within the church. Titian would only accept that the painting be installed on the *second* altar on the right. The document demands that the Friars return "a painted image of the Pietà which had previously been placed on a certain altar in your church conceded to said Titian and which had been removed from the altar by you".<sup>91</sup> Why such concern over the image's placement? It has recently been suggested that the Friars were bothered by the redeployment of "an altarpiece as a form of self-memorialization."<sup>92</sup> While the picture is undoubtedly invested in the creation of Titian's artistic legacy, I have sought to demonstrate that something more than self-presentation is at stake in the *Pietà*. Indeed, Titian's insistence on the site-specificity of the work seems to have been motivated by the same concern which gave discomfort to the Friars, in the end compelling them to remove the picture: the chosen altar constituted the center of miraculous power within the church of the Friari. The chapel had long housed a painted crucifix of the sort favored by the Franciscan order, which is probably of Umbrian manufacture dating from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century (Fig. 13).<sup>93</sup> It is

<sup>90</sup> Rosand (note 50), pp. 57–61; Bohde (note 3), pp. 63–89; De Marco (note 89); Nichols (note 2), pp. 10f.

<sup>91</sup> Hope (note 72) p. 165, note 15.

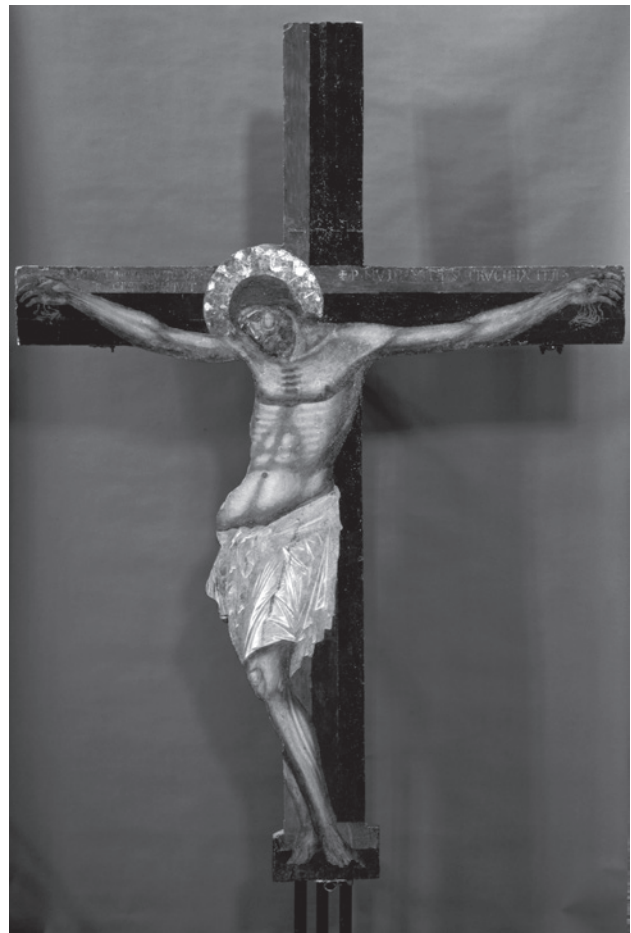
<sup>92</sup> Nichols (note 2), p. 10.

<sup>93</sup> See "Il Crocifisso duecentesco dei Friari", in: Isidoro Gatti, *S. Maria Gloriosa dei Friari: storia di una presenza francescana a Venezia*, Venice 1992, pp. 125–139.

not known when or how the image made its way into the Frari, but it was certainly installed on the altar by 1489, when it is reported as a miracle-working image.<sup>94</sup> From that date until at least 1581 it was at the center of the ritual life of the Frari.<sup>95</sup>

Titian's site-specific work, then, was intended to occupy a place of privilege within the decorative and devotional scheme of the Frari. The insertion of a new work thematizing miraculous agency into the charged ritual space of the miracle-working Crucifix was a calculated and rather unsubtle move. Titian's unfulfilled intention helps explain the presence of the votive tablet in the lower right-hand corner of the *Pietà*. In developing his picture, Titian sought to capitalize on the miraculous heritage of the altar of the Crucifix. Importantly, though, Titian's image does not repeat the cult image already established in that ritual space but instead offers a new cult object.

Given the context reconstructed in this article, it is no longer possible to see Titian's votive tablet exclusively as a painted prayer made by the aging painter for the salvation of his soul. Titian's career had repeatedly brought him into contact with miraculous agency, and he consciously evoked that agency in his final painting. The confluence of the votive tablet with the picture's intended siting combine to give the impression that the *Pietà* had attained an efficacious status analogous to the painted Crucifix for which the chapel was named. The votive tablet acted as a tacky surface that captured the efficacy formerly present in the chapel.<sup>96</sup> While the *Pietà* never became miraculously efficacious, Titian staged the display of votive offerings within the painting to draw an explicit and unmistakable parallel between his painting and miraculous icons. Given the miraculous heritage of the site where the picture was to be installed



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13 Anonymous  
(Umbrian?) artist,  
Crucifix, ca. 1300.  
Venice, Santa Maria  
Gloriosa dei Frari

<sup>94</sup> *Regesta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum Conventualium*, ed. by Gustavo Parisiani, Padua 1989, p. 67. See also "Il Crocifisso duecentesco dei Frari" (note 93), pp. 125–139.

<sup>95</sup> Sansovino (note 21), c. 66r.

<sup>96</sup> I use the term 'tacky' in the sense proposed by Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford 1998, pp. 73–95.





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14 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1498/99.  
Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica

and Titian's own previous connections to miraculous agency, the mere suggestion that his painting might be imbued with miraculous agency became a contentious gesture. In light of this account of Titian's painting, it becomes understandable why the picture discomfited the Friars so much that they removed the painting from its altar. At issue was not simply self-aggrandizement. Rather, the *Pietà* presented something that was theologically risky.

In its twenty-fifth and final session, promulgated in December 1563, the Council of Trent sought to reform the use of images and miracle cults within Catholic practice. The council outlawed all "unusual images" and insisted that local bishops approve all new miracle

cults in order to conform to true piety.<sup>97</sup> In his 1577 treatise on ecclesiastical decoration, Carlo Borromeo similarly noted that "prescribed caution" is required when dealing with votive tablets.<sup>98</sup> Titian's picture, put in place just two years before Borromeo's treatise, seems to wantonly defy the strictures that were increasingly coming to govern miraculous images. The *Pietà* certainly is "unusual" in how it circumvents the prescriptions of the Council of Trent by illustrating the entire miraculous process: a cure is propitiated through the votive arm, supplication of the image is enacted through St. Jerome, while the votive tablet testifies to a miraculous occurrence and clearly indicates Titian's *Pietà* as the source of divine grace.<sup>99</sup> Whether or not we read the altarpiece as a personal votive offering made by the aging artist recedes as a salient issue when we realize that Titian's votive tablet attempts to locate this miraculous efficacy *within* the image itself.

However, the hubris evident in Titian's final painting is mitigated by at least one important factor: Titian's miraculous prototype might not actually be his own invention. It has often been suggested that Titian's *Pietà* is a not-so-veiled citation of his erstwhile rival, Michelangelo.<sup>100</sup> Toward the end of his life, Michelangelo had been preparing a sculpture of the *Pietà* for his own tomb, and Titian was certainly aware of the Vatican *Pietà* (Fig. 14), which he had seen during his stay in Rome in 1545–46.<sup>101</sup> Michelangelo's *Pietà* was undoubtedly one source to which Titian appealed when composing his own painting of that subject.<sup>102</sup> However, the two images share only the most generic resemblance, and the divergences are important to underline. The orientation of Titian's figures reverses what is seen in Miche-

<sup>97</sup> *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Rockford, Ill., 1978, p. 217.

<sup>98</sup> Evelyn Carole Voelker, *Charles Borromeo's 'Instructiones Fabricae et Suppellectilis Ecclesiasticae', 1577: A Translation with Commentary and Analysis*, Ph.D. diss. Syracuse University 1977, p. 232.

<sup>99</sup> Unlike images examined by Christopher S. Wood (note 16), Titian's painting does not illustrate a pilgrimage site.

<sup>100</sup> See, most recently, Nepi Scirè 2008 (note 52), p. 311.

<sup>101</sup> On the rivalry between Michelangelo and Titian as it relates to the

*Pietà*, see Goffen (note 50), pp. 383–385; Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic*, New York 1969, pp. 25f.; Rosand (note 50), pp. 57–61; Una Roman D'Elia, *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 56–83; Thomas Puttfarcken, *Titian and Tragic Painting: Aristotle's Poetic and the Rise of the Modern Artist*, New Haven/London 2005, pp. 97–127.

<sup>102</sup> See, most recently, Nichols (note 2), pp. 9f.; Augusto Gentili, *Tiziano*, Milan 2012, p. 384, and Goffen (note 50), pp. 383–385.



15 Michelangelo Buonarroti, Moses, 1513-1515. Rome, San Pietro in Vincoli



16 Michelangelo Buonarroti, Christ carrying the Cross, 1519-1521. Rome, Santa Maria sopra Minerva

langelo's sculpture, and the position of the Madonna's arms and Christ's legs have been similarly transformed. Moreover, the bodies of Titian's Virgin and Christ diverge to create a V-shaped chasm between them; this is nowhere present in Michelangelo's sculpture, in which the Virgin looms over Christ almost like a column rising vertically out of his torso. In Michelangelo's sculpture, Christ's physique is heroic. Vasari praised this figure for the "detail in the muscles, veins, and nerves" making Christ an exemplar of "perfect sweetness".<sup>103</sup> In opposition to this, Titian's Christ appears desiccated and on the verge of disintegration. The sculptural vol-

<sup>103</sup> Vasari 1996 (note 57), II, p. 652.

ume of Michelangelo's *Pietà* does not register in Titian's picture. While Titian's painting evokes a vague memory of Michelangelo's sculpture, it seems to do so only in order to claim distance from that model.

Titian's fictive sculptures of Moses and the Hespontine Sybil also seem to obliquely acknowledge sculptures by Michelangelo.<sup>104</sup> Titian's Moses may have been developed in response to Michelangelo's *Moses* in San Pietro in Vincoli (Fig. I5), while the Sybil echoes the sculpture of *Christ carrying the Cross* in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva (Fig. I6). While both of these figures may synthesize other models, it seems

<sup>104</sup> De Marco (note 89); Gentili (note 102), p. 384; Bohde (note 3), p. 78.



17 Anonymous artist,  
Madonna della Navicella,  
sixteenth century (?).  
Private Collection



clear that Michelangelo was among the sources Titian appropriated.<sup>105</sup> What are we to make of these numerous references to the sculptural works of Michelangelo? Scholars have increasingly come to recognize that by the middle of the sixteenth century Michelangelo's outsized artistic persona had drawn responses from many of Italy's leading artists, each of which engaged the Florentine while simultaneously asserting his creative independence.<sup>106</sup> Titian's appropriations similarly reveal

a dynamic of acknowledgment and differentiation, but in a way unlike his peers and with very different stakes. An artist modeling himself on Michelangelo's example would not find miraculous agency anywhere in his model, and yet that agency is one of the central conceits in Titian's final painting. However, the theme of miraculous agency does emerge from another of Titian's possible sources, the *Madonna della Navicella* (Fig. 4) mentioned above.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>105</sup> For other sources, see Bohde (note 3), p. 75, and Antonio Niero, "Pietà liturgica e pietà popolare nel 'Vesperbild' di Tiziano", in: *Interpretazioni veneziane: studi di storia dell'arte in onore di Michelangelo Muraro*, ed. by David Rosand, Venice 1984, pp. 323–329.

<sup>106</sup> Morten Steen Hansen, *In Michelangelo's Mirror: Perino del Vaga, Daniele da Volterra, Pellegrino Tibaldi*, University Park 2013.

<sup>107</sup> The link between the *Pietà* and the *Madonna della Navicella* was suggested in passing by Niero (note 105), p. 326, who, however, did not develop the idea.

Renaissance beholders recognized that there was a certain familial resemblance uniting all images of the *Pietà*, even exceptional ones. One fifteenth-century description of the miraculous *Pietà* of Bibbona says: “there is a Virgin Mary seated with Christ on her lap as he was taken off the cross, as are painted other *Pietà*s.”<sup>108</sup> The generic similarity between Renaissance *Pietà*s militates against seeing Titian’s painting as a direct copy of the Navicella icon. However, the Navicella cult was hardly a stationary target of imitation, since the icon itself was the product of a feedback loop initiated by the votive tablets left at the shrine, as was outlined above. Titian, I suggest, made recourse not to the icon itself but to these votive panels in an attempt to tap into a circuit of miraculous agency that disseminated outward from Chioggia toward Venice.

Marino Sanuto stated that the cult of the Navicella Madonna first became known in Venice and elsewhere through the distribution of images illustrating the Virgin in the form of a *Pietà* with a votary kneeling in prayer. This same visual schema is reproduced in an important woodcut (Fig. 17) connected to the shrine.<sup>109</sup> As it exists in numerous versions, this seems to have been the officially sanctioned iconography of the Navicella cult.<sup>110</sup> The print was widely disseminated and even served as the model for the frontispiece in at least one treatise dedicated to the icon.<sup>111</sup> While dating popular devotional works of this nature is exceedingly difficult, the woodcut reproduced here in all likelihood reflects the prototype that Sanuto reports was in circulation even before the actual Navicella icon had been introduced.<sup>112</sup>

When this woodcut is examined next to Titian’s votive tablet, the similarities are striking: unlike Miche-

langelo’s *Pietà*, Christ’s head is at the viewer’s right and falls out toward the beholder; His pronated arm falls limply over the Virgin’s hand, which is cupped under Christ’s armpit; and, most importantly, a diminutive votary kneels with his hands clasped in prayer as he implores the protection of the Virgin. This arrangement is clearly echoed both within Titian’s fictive votive tablet and in the main element of the altarpiece, where Jerome kneels before the Virgin.<sup>113</sup> The gravitational pull of the Chioggia icon also registers in the central image of the *Pietà* in other subtle ways. While the positioning of the Virgin’s right arm is entirely unclear in the main figural group of Titian’s painting, its presence can be intuited where Christ’s right arm ‘decomposes’ in the lap of the Virgin.<sup>114</sup> Here, based on the positioning of her shoulder, the beholder also interpolates the arm of the Virgin. Visually, though, the Virgin’s arm is essentially absent, as it melds with Christ’s body. This is unusual amongst Italian *Pietà*s, where the Virgin usually supports Christ with both hands, one under his knees and the other under his head (as in Bellini’s Martinengo *Pietà*), or raises a hand in a gesture of prayer, as in Michelangelo’s sculpture, the *Pietà* of Bibbona, and others. The woodcut illustrating the miraculous apparition of the *Madonna della Navicella* is rare because it accentuates the bodily entanglement between Christ and the Virgin in a manner echoed in Titian’s painting. Similarly, the delicate crossing of Christ’s ankles (right over left) in Titian’s *Pietà* is atypical, but this feature is likewise seen in the Navicella woodcut. Importantly, the Navicella icon itself avoids both of these features in order to align with more standard *Pietà* iconography. Additionally, the outsized presence of the Hellepontine Sybil’s cross begins to look less eccentric when Titian’s *Pietà* is

<sup>108</sup> Holmes (note 10), p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> Alberto Vecchi, *Il culto delle immagini nelle stampe popolari*, Florence 1968, p. 87, and *I legni incisi della Galleria Estense: quattro secoli di stampa nell’Italia settentrionale*, exhib. cat., Modena 1986, no. 132.

<sup>110</sup> *La devozione alla Madonna della Navicella: narrazioni, poesie, immagini*, ed. by Vincenzo Tosello, Chioggia 2008, pp. 151f.

<sup>111</sup> See Lorenzo Baldacchini, *Bibliografia delle stampe popolari religiose del XVI–*

*XVII secolo: biblioteche Vaticana, Alessandrina, Estense*, Florence 1980, pp. 109f., no. 346.

<sup>112</sup> *Achille Bertarelli e Trieste: catalogo delle stampe donate alla Biblioteca Civica Attilio Hortis*, ed. by Alessandro Giacomello, Trieste 2000, p. 174.

<sup>113</sup> This point was noted though not developed by Niero (note 105), p. 326.

<sup>114</sup> Bohde (note 3), p. 88.



viewed next to the Navicella woodcut. Even granting Titian's recourse to Michelangelo's *Christ carrying the Cross* when ideating the Hellespontine Sybil, one is nevertheless struck by the similarity with the Navicella woodcut: both images include an inordinately large cross near the right border which is radically foreshortened to recede into the fictive space of the picture. Together these unusual iconographic elements make a strong case that Titian looked to the popular woodcut illustrating the apparition of the Virgin rather than to the painted icon.

Titian enlisted the prints used to disseminate the cult throughout the Veneto and into Venice as a means of inserting his own image into a network of miraculous agency that reaches back to the Navicella icon. However, this network of agency has at least five relays: the apparition of the Virgin at Chioggia in 1508; the votive pictures that offered a visual account of the miraculous event as little as a month after the apparition; the woodcut that broadcast the miracle throughout the Veneto; the painted icon around which the Navicella cult later consolidated; and Titian's emulation of the Navicella woodcut. At each relay point a certain amount of iconographic 'drift' was tolerated. Thus, to expect Titian's image to be an exact copy is to misunderstand the mechanism underwriting the Navicella cult and, indeed, cult images more generally. Rather than serve as a model for a literal copy of the cult image, the woodcut illustrating the origins of the Chioggia cult offered Titian a model for illustrating the efficacious power of an icon. The Navicella votive served as a platform upon which Titian could deconstruct the constituent parts of a miraculous cult and reconstitute them in his own altarpiece-cum-icon.

The connection drawn here between Titian's *Pietà* and the Navicella *Madonna* does not discredit the no-

tion that the artist was engaged in an artistic rivalry with Michelangelo. Renaissance artworks often embedded references to multiple sources of emulation, and the *Pietà* certainly does so. However, recognizing Titian's veiled reference to the Navicella *Madonna* complicates the relationship to Michelangelo. Titian provided a plausible alibi to the miraculous pretensions of his painting by gesturing toward the authority of an actual miracle-working icon familiar to Venetians. While the *Pietà* asserts miraculous status for itself, it can also be read as deriving its agency from the Navicella cult, thus deferring to an actual miraculous prototype. The painting was also intended to displace the miracle-working Crucifix. In light of these factors, the *Pietà* should no longer be read exclusively as part of an artistic *paragone* directed toward his main rival, but rather as a focused reflection on the limits of art.

### The Miraculous in the Renaissance

The *Pietà* never became an efficacious image. However, our critical language is far more precise than that of Titian's contemporaries. Within the incipient genre of art criticism, the term 'miraculous' was not always synonymous with efficacious, but was often used to describe excessive or stupefying artistry. Yet this paper has insisted that a proper understanding of the efficacious heritage of Titian's art is necessary for comprehending his final painting; this context may also be helpful in understanding his contemporaries' repeated recourse to the tired metaphor of miraculous artifice.<sup>115</sup> These authors struggled to verbalize the power of Titian's pictures, which tremble with the presence of human flesh and vibrate with the force of agency that seems beyond human manufacture.<sup>116</sup> For

<sup>115</sup> For a different approach that offers a metaphorical rather than theological account of the term 'miraculous' in Renaissance writings about art, see Fredrika Jacobs, "Rethinking the Divide: Cult Images and the Cult of Images", in: *Renaissance Theory*, ed. by James Elkins/Robert Williams, New York/London 2008, pp. 95–114.

<sup>116</sup> See on this subject Mark W. Roskill, *Dolce's Aretino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento*, Toronto 2000, pp. 213–217. See also Mary Pardo, "Artifice as Seduction in Titian", in: *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe: Institutions, Texts, Images*, ed. by James Grantham Turner, New York 1993, pp. 55–89.

instance, Sperone Speroni invoked the miraculous to account for the saturated presence of the sitter that he intuited in Titian's portraits, which not only represent but also re-present the model:

Tiziano non è dipintore e non è arte la virtù sua ma miracolo; e ho opinione che i suoi colori sieno composti di quella erba meravigliosa, la quale, gustata da Glauco, d'uomo in dio lo trasformò. E veramente li suoi ritratti hanno in loro un non so che di divinità che, come in cielo è il paradiso dell'anime, così pare che ne' suoi colori Dio abbia riposto il paradiso d'i nostri corpi: non dipinti ma fatti santi e glorificati dalle sue mani.<sup>117</sup>

The sacramental language of Speroni's description is readily apparent. He consciously evokes the doctrine of transubstantiation: like a priest, Titian is understood to confect the bodily presence of the sitter through the work of his hands. Speroni's text demonstrates that the Eucharist held currency as an alternative means of describing the miraculous power of Titian's art. Whether or not Speroni was aware of Titian's connection to the miraculous powers of the San Rocco *Christ*, his appeal to the language of transubstantiation is clear.

When viewed within the context reconstructed here, which encompasses Titian's entanglements with the San Rocco icon as well as Speroni's use of the language of miracle to describe his art, the *Pietà* takes on new levels of complexity. For his final picture Titian staged a work in which his artistry was entangled in a network of miraculous intensity. Read against the too-obvious-echo of Michelangelo's *Pietà*

and the citations of lesser-known works by Michelangelo, Speroni's language serves to underscore the fundamental difference that separates the two artists: Titian was understood to have produced a miracle-working image while Michelangelo had done nothing of the sort. This is underlined by the terminology that Vasari used to discuss Michelangelo's works in his *Lives*. Gerd Blum has recently drawn attention to how Vasari described Michelangelo's *Moses* as a quasi-miraculous image. The Jews of Rome, Vasari states, flocked like starlings in pilgrimage to "adore" that statue.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, Vasari describes Michelangelo's *Pietà* as "certainly a miracle".<sup>119</sup> In both cases, though, Vasari spoke metaphorically; he described artistic 'miracles', not theophanic events. Regarding the Vatican *Pietà*, the point is underlined by the fact that this sculpture was displayed in proximity of an actual miracle-working image, the *Madonna della Febbre*. By contrast, Vasari's discussion of the San Rocco *Christ carrying the Cross* does not rely on metaphor, and while Speroni was not speaking literally when he described Titian's work as "miraculous", it would be inaccurate to suggest that his theologically charged description is *merely* metaphor. Speroni's use of the language of sacramental theology to describe Titian's portraits had more at stake than a mere description of artifice: Speroni understood Titian's images to transubstantiate painterly materials. Speroni spoke of miracles, the very issue which this article has traced through the arc of Titian's career. The alignment of Titian's art with miraculous agency granted the aged master a unique position among living artists to dissect the complex interplay between artistic facture and miraculous agency. Titian's

<sup>117</sup> Sperone Speroni, "Dialogo d'amore", in: *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*, ed. by Mario Pozzi, Milan/Naples 1978, tomo I, pp. 547f. ("Titian is not a painter, and his virtue is not art but miracle. I hold the opinion that his colors are made of that marvelous herb, which, when Glaucus tasted it, transformed him from a man into a god. Truly his portraits have in them a certain something of divinity such that, as the paradise of our souls is

in heaven, so it seems that in his colors God established the paradise of our bodies. [They are] not painted, but made holy and glorified by his hands.")

<sup>118</sup> Gerd Blum, "Vasari on the Jews: Christian Canon, Conversion, and the *Moses* of Michelangelo", in: *The Art Bulletin*, XCV (2013), pp. 557–577.

<sup>119</sup> Vasari 1996 (note 57), II, p. 652.

embedded citation of the *Madonna della Navicella* shows the artist doing precisely that in his final painting. To call the *Pietà* a 'votive offering' is not necessarily incorrect, but this article has attempted to complicate what scholars understand by that deceptively simple turn of phrase. The painting was no simple painted prayer. At the end of his life Titian overtly aligned the power of his artistry with the forceful dispensation of votive images in an attempt to manufacture one last miraculous painting as viaticum for his final journey. Unlike Vasari, Titian still believed that was possible.

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In the 1568 edition of his *Lives*, Giorgio Vasari attributed a miracle-working icon to Titian. The magnitude of this claim has not been appreciated. Titian's final painting, the *Pietà* (Gallerie dell'Accademia), cannot be understood outside of this heritage of miraculous efficacy. In it Titian capitalized on the anxieties that attended his reputation as the producer of a miraculous image. While recalling this earlier moment in Titian's career, his final painting layers references to miraculous agency by including votive objects associated with miracles; appropriating the history of the painting's intended site; and citing a little known miracle-working image, the *Madonna della Navicella*.

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