



Titian and Workshop

Titian

Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576

Italian 16th Century

## *Saint John the Evangelist on Patmos*

c. 1553/1555

oil on canvas

overall: 237.6 x 263 cm (93 9/16 x 103 9/16 in.)

framed: 265.5 x 290.9 x 10.7 cm (104 1/2 x 114 1/2 x 4 3/16 in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1957.14.6

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### ENTRY

The picture originally formed the central element of the ceiling decoration in the so-called Albergo Nuovo of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista in Venice. Set within an elaborately carved and gilded wooden framework, [1] it was surrounded by 20 much smaller panels (now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, except for one that is lost), variously representing the symbols of the Four Evangelists, with putti or reclining nudes [fig. 1]; winged putto heads; and masks of females and satyrs. The ensemble is recorded in situ, as the work of Titian, by all the main Venetian sources of the 17th and 18th centuries, beginning with Francesco Sansovino in 1581. [2] The ceiling was demolished and the framework destroyed after the suppression of the confraternity in 1806, when the paintings were confiscated by the state, and in 1812 all 21 were consigned to the Accademia. The Venetian superintendent of paintings, Pietro Edwards, then decided not to retain the *Saint John on Patmos* for the Accademia galleries, judging that it was “a very lively composition, of which no more than a miserable trace has survived, having first been ruined, and then shamefully repainted.” [3] He considered the options of sending it to the Brera

Gallery in Milan or of installing it on the ceiling of the Sala della Bussola in the Doge's Palace, before ceding it in 1818 to the dealer Barbini in Turin as part of an exchange. [4] All sight of the picture was lost from the end of the 19th century until 1954, when it reappeared on the Italian art market and was acquired by the Kress Foundation.

The Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, founded in 1261, was one of the four original *scuole grandi*, lay confraternities that played a central role in the religious, social, and cultural life of late medieval and Renaissance Venice. Dedicated to Saint John the Evangelist, the Scuola was the custodian of a particularly prestigious relic, a fragment of the True Cross, which was reputed to perform miracles. The confraternity undertook an ambitious series of artistic projects in the last decades of the 15th century, including a classicizing architectural screen by Pietro Lombardo, a double-branched staircase by Codussi, and a cycle of canvases by Gentile Bellini and others representing the Miracles of the True Cross (now Accademia). This cycle decorated a room that originally served both as the shrine of the sacred relic and as the meeting room of the Scuola's board of governors (*albergo*), but in 1540 it was decided to separate the two functions by building a new boardroom (the Albergo Nuovo) adjoining the old. A pair of new doors had to be cut through the west wall of the old Albergo to provide access, and in April 1544, Titian was called in to give expert advice on the implications of this operation for the two canvases occupying the wall. Otherwise, however, his involvement with the Scuola is not documented, and on the basis of the external evidence, work on the ceiling could have been undertaken at any time from the later 1540s or 1550s. Certainly, the Albergo Nuovo was still being furnished in the early 1550s: in 1552 its lower walls were equipped with wooden benches, in 1554 work was continuing on the windows of the north wall, and in 1555 a wrought iron gate was made for the doorway. [5] Much later, in the early 1580s, Palma Giovane was employed to paint four canvases with scenes from the Book of Revelation for the walls of the room (in situ). [6]

Palma's canvases provided a natural thematic complement to the principal element of Titian's ceiling. According to legend, John the Evangelist—patron saint of the Scuola—was exiled by the emperor Domitian to the Greek island of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse). Titian showed the saint, as if on the peak of a mountain, with his attributes of a gospel and an eagle, experiencing a vision of God, who instructs him to record what is to be revealed to him ("What thou seest, write in a book"; Rev. 1:11). Or, more precisely, as suggested by Erwin

Panofsky, Titian represented a pregnant moment immediately before the vision, when the saint reacts in awe and astonishment to the voice of God (“I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet . . . And I turned to see the voice that spake with me”; Rev. 1:10–12). [7] Silvia Gramigna Dian has argued that the subsidiary panels were iconographically carefully integrated with the apocalyptic theme: thus the putto- and satyr-heads would refer to the final battle between Good and Evil; the symbols of all four Evangelists refer to their appearance round the throne of God in Revelation 4:6–9; the nudes with golden amphorae in the Saint Luke and Saint Mark paintings refer to the “seven golden vials full of the wrath of God” mentioned in Revelation 15:7; and the four female heads refer to the contrast between the City of God and Babylon. [8] Against all this, however, it could be observed that if Titian or any iconographic adviser had wanted to invoke the Book of Revelation in the subsidiary panels, they could have made the references more explicit; and Robert Echols may be right to lay greater stress on the probable decorative unity between the various painted heads and the original carved framework, which is likely to have included similar heads as part of a standard ornamental repertory. [9]

The reconstruction diagram provided by Jürgen Schulz in 1966 has been accepted as essentially correct; [10] to this, however, Gramigna Dian proposed a number of minor modifications, to take account of the not precisely rectangular shape of the Albergo Nuovo [fig. 2]. [11] As is clear from the reconstruction, there is a striking contrast of conception between the subsidiary panels, which show the forms frontally, as *quadri riportati*, and the principal canvas, in which the steeply foreshortened figure of the Evangelist is seen from a dramatically low viewpoint, approximately corresponding to that of a spectator entering through one of the two main entrances on the west wall. In keeping with the approach to the problems of ceiling painting first formulated by Titian in his three large canvases for the nave of Santo Spirito in Isola (now in the sacristy of Santa Maria della Salute), Saint John is not portrayed as if seen directly from below, with the extreme logic of the worm’s-eye view, but obliquely, as if from the bottom of a slope, in a way that remains consistent with the high placing of the canvas, while not impairing the legibility of the figure’s face and pose. [12]

In adopting this compromise solution, soon to become characteristic of Venetian ceiling painting in general, Titian departed from the approaches on the one hand of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, and on the other of Correggio in Parma and Giulio Romano in Mantua, all of whom have plausibly been seen as otherwise

having provided inspiration for the present work. Following the reappearance of the picture in the 1950s, a majority of commentators have chosen to compare the foreshortened figure of the Evangelist with his counterpart by Correggio at the base of the dome decoration of San Giovanni Evangelista in Parma, a work that Titian would have seen when he visited the city in 1543. [13] More recently, Robert Echols and Paul Joannides have laid greater stress on the similarities of the pose with that of Michelangelo's figure of God the Father in the *Separation of Light from Darkness* on the Sistine ceiling. [14] Other possible sources adduced by Echols include Correggio's standing apostles at the base of the drum in the Cathedral at Parma; Giulio Romano's figure of Momus in the Sala dei Giganti at the Palazzo del Te; and the figure of *Niobe* (Galleria Estense, Modena) from a ceiling painted in 1541–1542 for Ca' Pisani a San Paternian in Venice by Titian's younger contemporary Tintoretto. [15]

When the picture was first published by Wilhelm Suida in 1956, it was generally thought to be stylistically similar to, and hence closely contemporary with, the Santo Spirito ceiling, which was then universally dated on circumstantial evidence to 1542–1544. [16] This dating of the *Saint John the Evangelist* to the early 1540s seemed consistent with Titian's only documented presence at the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista in April 1544. Subsequently, however, Schulz drew attention to the differences of pictorial handling between the two works, observing that the greater richness of color in the present work indicated that it was painted somewhat later, soon after the visit to Rome in 1545–1546. [17] This view then won general support, and Echols has added further convincing stylistic arguments for regarding the ceilings as separated by an interval of at least five years. [18] These include the fact that in the *Saint John the Evangelist*, the painter lays a greater emphasis on surface pattern than in the Santo Spirito canvases, with their greater penetration of pictorial space, and also that he now adopts a softer, looser pictorial texture. In the meantime, however, Joannides pointed out that the previously accepted dating of the Santo Spirito ceiling was far from secure, and provided arguments for supposing that in fact it was painted after Titian's direct experience of Michelangelo's work in Rome. [19] Although the same scholar nevertheless continued to date the *Saint John the Evangelist* to around the same time, [20] the logic of his redating of the Santo Spirito ceiling to circa 1546–1547, or even to circa 1549–1550, following Titian's return from Augsburg, is that the *Saint John the Evangelist* was probably painted in the early 1550s, and perhaps as late as circa 1555. [21] Stylistically, in fact, the picture is perfectly consistent with the *Gloria* (Prado, Madrid) of 1553–1555, and it may be significant that Carlo Ridolfi listed it

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with other works datable to the 1550s, such as the *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (Gesuiti, Venice), the *Saint Jerome in Penitence* (Brera, Milan), and the *Crucifixion* (San Domenico, Ancona). [22] Nor is this late dating contradicted by the circumstantial evidence, since (as has been seen above) the interior decoration and furnishing of the Albergo Nuovo was certainly still in progress in 1552/1554. Finally, it may be relevant for the dating that the same unusual and distinctive type of canvas support was also used by Titian for the version of the *Venus and Adonis* in the National Gallery, London, which there are good reasons to date to circa 1554–1556. [23]

Although undeniably less refined in its execution than Titian's most masterly achievements of the years around 1550, including the *Gloria*, the *Saint John the Evangelist* has been generally accepted as substantially the work of Titian himself. Part of the reason for the more abbreviated handling here may be that the painter was naturally inclined to lavish greater attention on commissions from his most socially elevated patrons, including the emperor Charles V and Prince Philip of Spain, than on one from a Venetian confraternity. It is also true that the breadth of execution would have been appropriate for the distant viewing of a ceiling painting. Even so, the figure of God the Father may be regarded as comparatively weak, probably because it was executed by a studio assistant, rather than because, as suggested by John Shearman, it represents a later substitution. [24]

The picture was engraved in 1716 by Andrea Zucchi for *Il gran teatro delle più insigne prospettive di Venezia*, published by Domenico Lovisa in 1720. [25]

Peter Humfrey

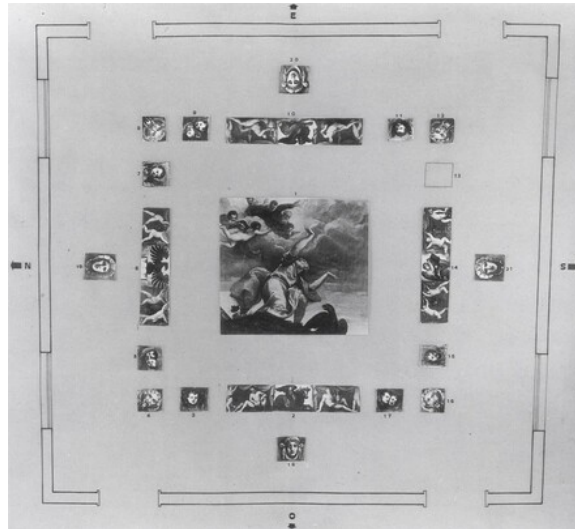
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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Titian and Workshop, *Symbol of John the Evangelist* from the ceiling of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, c. 1553/1555, oil on panel, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Su concessione del Ministero del beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo. Museo Nazionale Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia © Archivio fotografico G.A.VE



**fig. 2** Reconstruction of the ceiling of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista by Silvia Gramigna Dian, from *Titian, Prince of Painters* (Venice, 1990), 276

**NOTES**

- [1] This is mentioned in a document of 1789 quoted by Jürgen Schulz, "Titian's Ceiling in the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista," *Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 91. See also the comments by Wolfgang Wolters, *Plastische Deckendekorationen des Cinquecento in Venedig und im Veneto* (Berlin, 1968), 56.
- [2] Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare . . .* (Venice, 1581), 101; Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte, ovvero Le vite de gl'illustri pittori veneti, e dello stato*, ed. Detlev von Hadeln (Berlin, 1914), 1:205; Marco Boschini, *Le minere della pittura* (Venice, 1664), 295; Anton Maria Zanetti, *Descrizione di tutte le pubbliche pitture della città di Venezia* (Venice, 1733), 294; Anton Maria Zanetti, *Della pittura veneziana* (Venice, 1771), 124.
- [3] "Composizione spiritosissima di cui non rimane altro che una miserabile traccia, essendone stato prima distrutto e poscia vitupervolmente rifatto il pavimento." Quoted by Sandra Moschini Marconi, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Vol. 2: Opere d'arte del secolo XVI* (Venice, 1962), 262.
- [4] Francesco Zanotto, *Pinacoteca della I. R. Accademia Veneta di Belle Arti* (Venice, 1834), 2:n.p.; Sandra Moschini Marconi, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di*

*Venezia, Vol. 1: Opere d'arte del secolo XIV e XV* (Venice, 1955), xvi; Sandra Moschini Marconi, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Vol. 2: Opere d'arte del secolo XVI* (Venice, 1962), 262.

- [5] Jürgen Schulz, "Titian's Ceiling in the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista," *Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 90.
- [6] Annalisa Scarpa Sonino, "Sala dell'Albergo Nuovo," in *Le scuole di Venezia*, ed. Terisio Pignatti (Milan, 1981), 66; Stefania Mason Rinaldi, *Palma il Giovane: L'opera completa* (Milan, 1984), 146–147.
- [7] Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic* (London, 1969), 36.
- [8] Silvia Gramigna Dian, in *Titian, Prince of Painters* (Venice, 1990), 278.
- [9] Robert Echols, in *Titian, Prince of Painters* (Venice, 1990), 274; Robert Echols, "Titian's Venetian *Soffitti*: Sources and Transformations," in *Symposium Papers XXV: Titian 500*, ed. Joseph Manca, National Gallery of Art, Studies in the History of Art, vol. 45 (Washington, DC, 1993), 42.
- [10] Jürgen Schulz, "Titian's Ceiling in the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista," *Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 89–95.
- [11] Silvia Gramigna Dian, in *Titian, Prince of Painters* (Venice, 1990), 276.
- [12] Jürgen Schulz, "Titian's Ceiling in the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista," *Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 89–95; Robert Echols, "Titian's Venetian *Soffitti*: Sources and Transformations," in *Symposium Papers XXV: Titian 500*, ed. Joseph Manca, National Gallery of Art, Studies in the History of Art, vol. 45 (Washington, DC, 1993), 29–49.
- [13] Wilhelm Suida, "Miscellanea Tizianesca, II," *Arte veneta* 10 (1956): 74–75; A. E. Popham, *Correggio's Drawings* (London, 1957), 38–40; Jürgen Schulz, "Titian's Ceiling in the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista," *Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 92; Harold Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian* (London, 1969), 1:137–138; Johannes Wilde, *Venetian Art from Bellini to Titian* (Oxford, 1974), 172–173; Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings* (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:490–492; John Shearman, *Only Connect . . . Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, 1992), 224–225.
- [14] Robert Echols, "Titian's Venetian *Soffitti*: Sources and Transformations," in *Symposium Papers XXV: Titian 500*, ed. Joseph Manca, National Gallery of Art, Studies in the History of Art, vol. 45 (Washington, DC, 1993), 37; Paul Joannides, "Titian and Michelangelo / Michelangelo and Titian," in *The Cambridge Companion to Titian*, ed. Patricia Meilman (Cambridge, 2004), 140. The latter points out that the outstretched arms of Titian's figure correspond to an earlier conception of God the Father by Michelangelo, which Titian may have known in the form of a drawing.
- [15] Stefania Mason, "Intorno al soffitto di San Paternian: gli artisti di Vettore Pisani," in *Jacopo Tintoretto nel quarto centenario della morte: Atti del*

*convegno internazionale di studi*, ed. Paola Rossi and Lionello Puppi (Padua, 1996), 71–75.

- [16] Wilhelm Suida, “Miscellanea Tizianesca, II,” *Arte veneta* 10 (1956): 74–75 (just before the Santo Spirito ceiling); Sandra Moschini Marconi, *Gallerie dell’Accademia di Venezia, Vol. 2: Opere d’arte del secolo XVI* (Venice, 1962), 262–263; Francesco Valcanover, *L’opera completa di Tiziano* (Milan, 1969), 114; Filippo Pedrocco, “Vicende della Scuola,” in *Le scuole di Venezia*, ed. Terisio Pignatti (Milan, 1981), 49.
- [17] Jürgen Schulz, “Titian’s Ceiling in the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista,” *Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 90; Jürgen Schulz, *Venetian Painted Ceilings of the Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1968), 84–85.
- [18] Robert Echols, “Titian’s Venetian *Soffitti*: Sources and Transformations,” in *Symposium Papers XXV: Titian 500*, ed. Joseph Manca, National Gallery of Art, Studies in the History of Art, vol. 45 (Washington, DC, 1993), 41–42.
- [19] Paul Joannides, “On Some Borrowings and Non-Borrowings from Central Italian and Antique Art in the Work of Titian c. 1510–c. 1550,” *Paragone* 41, no. 487 (1990): 33–34. These arguments were accepted by Peter Humfrey, *Painting in Renaissance Venice* (New Haven and London, 1995), 274; and by Charles Hope, in *Titian*, ed. David Jaffé (London, 2003), 21.
- [20] Paul Joannides, “On Some Borrowings and Non-Borrowings from Central Italian and Antique Art in the Work of Titian c. 1510–c. 1550,” *Paragone* 41, no. 487 (1990): 34; Paul Joannides, “Titian and Michelangelo / Michelangelo and Titian,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Titian*, ed. Patricia Meilman (Cambridge, 2004), 139–140.
- [21] Peter Humfrey, *Titian: The Complete Paintings* (Ghent and New York, 2007), 277. The only previous scholar to have dated the picture to later than 1550 was Fisher, who, however, proposed an unacceptable attribution to Palma Giovane. See M. Roy Fisher, *Titian’s Assistants during the Later Years*, PhD diss., Harvard University, 1958 (New York, 1977), 62–66.
- [22] Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell’arte, ovvero Le vite de gl’illustri pittori veneti, e dello stato* (Venice, 1648), ed. Detlev von Hadeln (Berlin, 1914), 1:205.
- [23] See the Technical Summary for this work; also, Jill Dunkerton, “Titian’s Painting Technique from 1540,” *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 36 (2015): 9, 59.
- [24] John Shearman, *Only Connect . . . Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, 1992), 224–225.
- [25] *Il gran teatro delle pitture e prospettive di Venezia* (Venice, 1720), 1: no. 30.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Consistent with the intended placement of the painting on a ceiling, the support consists of an exceptionally robust, double-thread herringbone-weave fabric. [1] A horizontal seam approximately one meter from the top, just above the head of Saint John, was probably necessary to accommodate the limitation of the loom size. It is presumed that the support was prepared with a thin white ground, though it is not visible in the extensive areas of abrasion or on the edges of the fabric. Infrared reflectography at 1 to 2.5 microns [2] and x-radiographs reveal a number of pentimenti: in the position of John's head; in the wings of the lower cherub, one of which originally covered the cherub's forearm; and in the foliage near the book, which was originally larger and more complex in form. The paint was applied broadly and evidently at speed, with the figure painted first, then the background, and finally the rock and the eagle. The partial survival of the original tacking margins suggests that the painting has not been cut down. Clearly, however, the operation to remove it from the ceiling resulted in serious damage, notably in the form of a long vertical cut with a diagonal tail, running parallel to John's right arm and the right arm of God the Father. The painting has been lined, and extensive retouchings along the repair to the vertical cut and along the horizontal join in the fabric remain visible. Heavy abrasion of the ground and paint layers, exposing the tops of the threads, as well as remnants of discolored varnish, have resulted in an overall darkness of tone. The painting was treated by Mario Modestini in 1949, and discolored retouchings were inpainted in 2012.

Peter Humfrey and Joanna Dunn based on the examination reports by Ann Hoenigswald and Catherine Metzger

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] It has been noted that the unusual and distinctive weave, incorporating a chevron along its spine and of wider than normal width, was also employed by Titian and his workshop in the version of the *Venus and Adonis* of c. 1554–1556 in the National Gallery, London. See Jill Dunkerton, "Titian's Painting Technique from 1540," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 36 (2015): 9, 59.

[2] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Santa Barbara Focalplane

InSb camera.

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## PROVENANCE

Commissioned by the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, Venice; confiscated 1806 by the state, and transferred to the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice; exchanged 1818 with (Barbini, Turin).[1] Count Bertalazione d'Arache, Turin, by 1885.[2] (Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi, Florence); sold 1954 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York;[3] gift 1957 to NGA.

[1] Francesco Zanotto, *Pinacoteca della I. R. Accademia Veneta di Belle Arti*, Venice, 1834: 2:n.p.; Sandra Moschini Marconi, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Vol. 1: Opere d'arte del secolo XIV e XV*, Venice, 1955: xvi; Sandra Moschini Marconi, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Vol. 2: Opere d'arte del secolo XVI*, Venice, 1962: 262-263.

[2] Giovanni Battista Cadorin, *Note dei luoghi dove si trovano opere di Tiziano*, San Fior di Conegliano, 1885: 18.

[3] On 7 June 1954 the Kress Foundation made an offer to Contini Bonacossi for sixteen paintings, including the NGA painting which was listed as *St. John the Evangelist (Ceiling)* by Titian. In a draft of one of the documents prepared for the Count's signature in connection with the offer this painting is described as one "which came from my personal collection in Florence." The Count accepted the offer on 30 June 1954; the final payment for the purchase was ultimately made in early 1957, after the Count's death in 1955. (See copies of correspondence in NGA curatorial files and The Kress Collection Digital Archive, <https://kress.nga.gov/Detail/objects/1867>).

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1990 Tiziano [NGA title: Titian: Prince of Painters], Palazzo Ducale, Venice; National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1990-1991, no. 42a, repro.

2018 Tintoretto: Artist of Renaissance Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia and Palazzo Ducale, Venice; National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2018-2019, not in catalogue.

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