

提香聖馬可祭壇畫贊助之研究

A Study on the Patronage of Titian's Saint Mark's Altarpiece

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摘要

這幅聖馬可祭壇畫位於威尼斯的巴洛克安康聖母大殿（Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute）聖器室內，是著名藝術家提香（Tiziano Vecellio, c. 1488–1576）早期傑出的作品之一。該作品係為威尼斯瀉湖南部與聖靈島（Santo Spirito）島上同名修道院而作。儘管這件作品是提香職業生涯早期的作品，但已揭示了他對祭壇上的傳統主題宗教藝術的原創和獨特處理方式，即為聖馬可坐在中央寶座的神聖對話場景。

這幅祭壇畫的歷史背景細節，特別是有關創作和贊助時間的相關資料，目前未有保存任何檔案記錄。因此，首先需要透過觀察 16 世紀和 17 世紀的一些描述，其次從作品的圖像中，重建其最初的情形。聖馬可寶座底部的四位聖人，洛可、賽巴斯蒂安，以及聖醫生科西莫與達米安，皆明顯與 16 世紀初肆虐威尼斯的瘟疫有關。

在瘟疫時期，描繪特定聖人的祭壇畫經常被創作以感謝神的救贖或為社群尋求協助。然，這幅具有公共主題的作品最初卻被置放在一個瀉湖島上的修道院內。藝術家兼作家喬治奧·瓦薩里（Giorgio Vasari, 1511–1574）曾提到，這幅作品中的瘟疫聖人的面容可能為肖像。這可能為這幅作品的贊助者提供了一些線索。

本文分析了委託提香創作祭壇畫的可能原因，並對於 1500 年前後影響威尼斯的瘟疫提供了不同的視角。將特別關注於委託這件畫的贊助者之身份。

關鍵字：

Saint Mark's Altarpiece, Titian (Tiziano Vecellio, c. 1488–1576), Venetian Renaissance painting, plague saints.

Abstract

The *Altarpiece of Saint Mark's* in the Sacristy of the Baroque church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice is one of the first great masterpieces by the Venetian artist Titian (c.1488–1576). The work was created for the monastery of Santo Spirito on the homonymic island in the south of the Venetian lagoon. Even though this work stems from the painter's early career, it already reveals his original and ingenious approach to a traditional theme of religious art on the altar, the *sacra conversazione* with Saint Mark enthroned in the center.

No archival documentation has been preserved to clarify the details of the altarpiece's historical background, especially regarding its time of creation and patronage. Therefore, it is all the more necessary to observe, first, some descriptions of the 16th and 17th centuries and, second, the work's iconography to reconstruct the circumstances of its origins. The four saints at the foot of Saint Mark's throne, Roch, Sebastian, and the holy doctors Cosmas and Damian, are clearly associated with the plague that ravaged Venice in the early 16th century.

In the time of the plague, altarpieces featuring particular saints were commonly created to thank God for salvation or request assistance for the benefit of the general community. Yet, this work with a public theme was originally placed in a monastery on a lagoon island. Artist and writer Giorgio Vasari (c.1511–74) mentioned that the plague saints' faces in the work could be portraits. This might give a hint to the work's patron.

The present paper analyzes the possible reasons for the commission of Titian's altarpiece with a differentiated view on the plague that affected Venice in the decades around 1500. A special focus will be given to the question of who commissioned the painting.

Keywords:

Saint Mark's Altarpiece, Titian (Tiziano Vecellio, c. 1488–1576), Venetian Renaissance painting, plague saints.

Introduction

Tiziano Vecellio's (c.1488–1576) *Saint Mark's Altarpiece* represents a strikingly novel interpretation of the traditional Venetian *sacra conversazione* with the city patron Mark in the center and two pairs of saints on the foot of his throne. The young master created it for the church of the Augustinian Canons at Santo Spirito in Isola, a monastery on an island in the southern Venetian lagoon (Fig.1).¹ When the monastery was suppressed in the 17th century, the work was transferred to the Baroque church Santa Maria della Salute, then still under construction, where it remains today.

In September 2015, the organization *Save Venice* finished a campaign of conservative maintenance to remove a thick layer of dust and woodworm infestation and protect its areas of flaking paint.² The work is now back on the altar in the sacristy of Santa Maria della Salute.

Since there is a total lack of archival material, the work is undated. Based on its iconography that—due to the appearance of the four saints at the foot of Saint Mark's throne, Roch, Sebastian, and the holy doctors Cosmas and Damian—is connected with the plague, scholars usually position its time of origin in the years between 1508 and 1512, a period when vehement plague waves ravaged Venice. The special emphasis on the imposing holy figures clad in colorful attires, who create and dominate the picture space, is characteristic of Titian's style foreshadowing the artist's dominating the Venetian art scene of the 16th century.

Knowledge is limited regarding the circumstances in which the altarpiece was created. This paper focuses on who may have commissioned the work by carefully analyzing the its iconography and historical background.

State of Research

No original documents pertaining to the work, such as a contract or notes in an account book, have been discovered. Yet, the painting is recorded in three books from the 16th and 17th centuries. In his *Vite (The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters*

¹ Oil on panel, 218 × 149 cm. While the original frame is lost, the panel is today kept in a more recent rectangular frame made of gilded wood, which is inserted into a lavish marble aedicule of the Baroque altar.

² The recent preservation of the painting was undertaken in 2015 by Save Venice. The preservation of Saint Mark Altarpiece at <<https://www.savevenice.org/project/saint-mark-enthroned-with-saints-cosmas-and-damian-roch-and-sebastian>> (accessed on 5 June 2022).

Sculptors and Architects), Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) mentioned this work in his biography of Titian.³ Two years before the publication of the second edition of the *Vite* in 1568, Vasari had visited Venice and personally met Titian.⁴ Therefore, the altarpiece can undoubtedly be attributed to Titian, a fact that is also confirmed by the work's style.⁵

The first edition of Francesco Sansovino's (1521–86) description of Venice, *Venetia, Città Nobilissima, et Singolare* (1591), records the situation of the church and monastery on the island of Santo Spirito; the author records the altarpiece still *in situ*.⁶ In his *Maraviglie dell'Arte (Lives of Venetian Painters)* of 1648, Carlo Ridolfi (1594–1658) mentions *Saint Mark Altarpiece* being in Santo Spirito without offering further details.⁷

In the first volume of his *catalogue raisonné The Paintings of Titian*, published in 1969, Harold E. Wethey expresses his doubts regarding the painting's early date proposed by the German art historians Oskar Fischel (1870–1939) and Georg Gronau (1868–1938).⁸ The author briefly mentions the work's condition, the historical background of its creation, and early sources that refer to it.⁹

In his 1980 monograph, Charles Hope (1945–) contextualizes the altarpiece with other early works by Titian and from other masters of the same period.¹⁰ Hope connects the asymmetric composition of Titian's *Saint Mark* with the *San Giovanni Crisostomo Altarpiece* by Sebastiano del Piombo (1510–11; *Saint John Chrysostom, Venice*), which must have been executed approximately at the same time, but before Sebastiano's departure for Rome in 1511 (Fig. 2).

In his monograph *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* of 1993, Peter Humfrey (1947–) discusses the relationship between altarpieces and their altars; not only do

³ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori*, vol. 7, Florence: Sansoni, 1881, pp. 431–432. For an English translation, see Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, transl. by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 492.

⁴ Juergen Schulz, "Vasari at Venice," in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 103:705 (1961): 500-509, 511.

⁵ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, p. 492.

⁶ Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia Città Nobilissima et Singolare* (Venice: Jacopo Sansovino, 1581), p. 83v.

⁷ Carlo Ridolfi, *Le Maraviglie dell'Arte Ovvero le Vite degli Illustri Pittori Veneti e dello Stato*, vol. 1, ed. Detlev von Hadeln (Berlin: Grote, 1914), p. 153; for an English translation of Titian's biography see Carlo Ridolfi, *The Life of Titian*, transl. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, University Park (Penns.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 59–60.

⁸ Oskar Fischel, *Tizian*, 3rd edition (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1907), pl. 4 (c. 1504); Georg Gronau, *Tizian* (Berlin: Ernst Hofmann & Co., 1900), p. 299 (probably commissioned 1504).

⁹ Harold E. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian*, vol. 1: *The Religious Paintings* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1969), p. 143, cat. 119.

¹⁰ Charles Hope, *Titian* (London: Jupiter Books, 1980), pp. 28–30.

altarpieces reflect a religious purpose, as the author confirms, but also their social environment, their patrons' requests and intentions, and the preferred forms of pictorial expression of their respective era.¹¹ Humfrey underlines that, at the beginning of the 16th century, Santo Spirito was an Augustinian monastery and the identities of the figures in the painting. He analyzes the 16th century sources on Titian's Saint Mark, such as Francesco Sansovino's *Venetia, Città Nobilissima, et Singolare* of 1591. Therefore, the original location of *Saint Mark Altarpiece* can be considered as certain.¹²

Paul Joannides' (1945–) book *Titian to 1518: The Assumption of Genius* concentrates on Titian's early works. Through a meticulous visual analysis of the work, Joannides not only points out its connection to the historical context of the plague, but speculates that the commissioning of this work might have served as gratitude for the patron's survival during the plague or as a commemorative piece, but any conclusions reached remain uncertain.¹³

1. Historical Background of the Altarpiece

Some small remains of the Monastery of Santo Spirito in Isola are to be found on a small island located in Venice's southern lagoon (Fig.3). As handed down by Sansovino, Titian's altarpiece was originally located in the church of that monastery. The history of the monastery can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when, in the 12th century, canons regular and then Cistercians settled there; the monks were replaced in the 15th century by Augustinians.¹⁴ Vasari mentions that the work had sometimes been misattributed to Giorgione (1477/78?–1510), but confirms that it was painted by Titian.¹⁵

The four saints at the foot of Saint Mark's throne, Roch, Sebastian, and the holy doctors Cosmas and Damian, are clearly associated with the plague.¹⁶ This indicates that the altarpiece was commissioned in the context of one of the numerous plague waves that ravaged the city around 1500. A couple of documents from Titian's close environs affirm the presence of the epidemic around 1510. According to Carlo Ridolfi,

¹¹ Peter Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (London: Yale University Press, 1993) pp. 242–245, 355–356, cat. 78.

¹² Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, p. 242.

¹³ Paul Joannides, *Titian to 1518: The Assumption of Genius* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 148–151.

¹⁴ Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, p. 242.

¹⁵ See note 3. Titian must have met the painter Giorgione da Castelfranco in Giovanni Bellini's workshop. They collaborated at the frescoes of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, the German warehouse at the Rialto in Venice; Hope, *Titian*, pp. 11–16.

¹⁶ Ridolfi, *The Life of Titian*, p. 63.

Giorgione had died in 1511, when Venice was struck by the “Divine Hand with a plague,” as he puts it.¹⁷ Later research indicates that Giorgione had already passed away in 1510. Isabella d’Este (1474–1539) wife of the Marquis of Mantua, Francesco II Gonzaga (1466–1519), wrote a letter dated 25 October 1510, to her agent Taddeo Albano (?–?), in which the marchioness mentioned that she wanted to buy a piece of Giorgione’s art. However, when Albano replied on 8 November, not only had he failed to locate an appropriate painting, but he also confirmed that Giorgione had already died from the plague.¹⁸

The city of Venice reacted to the epidemic with categorical decrees. For example, the following regulation was announced on June 17, 1510 by the Republic’s authorities: “It is forbidden for anyone to visit the sick before the suspicious days have passed, subject to the permission of the local judge, under pain of being sent to the Lazzaretto.”¹⁹ This law together with other records shows that the plague had struck the city of Venice in 1510.

Another account of the 1510 plague in Italy is provided by Tommasino de’ Bianchi (1473–1554). He reported that in July of that year, patients in Emilia-Romagna suffered from respiratory problems and fever. These patients eventually recovered after several days. This record confirms the outbreak of the epidemic in northern Italy in 1510. The spread of the plague via merchant ships in Mediterranean cities is also associated with the location of Venice.²⁰

Apart from *Saint Mark’s Altarpiece*, Sansovino also mentioned Titian’s ceiling paintings with scenes from the *Old Testament*, executed in the years 1542–44 for the church of Santo Spirito.²¹ Sansovino’s father, the Tuscan sculptor and architect Jacopo Sansovino (1486–1570), had been engaged in the building’s design.²² Francesco Sansovino describes the altarpiece beside the church’s main altar, as follows: “Titian made there in the vigor of his youth [...] the altarpiece of the main altar, with another panel nearby, showing vivid nudes with such beautiful clothes, and

¹⁷ “[...] toccà di pestilentia dalla Divina mano;” Ridolfi, *Le Maraviglie dell’arte*, p. 157; Ridolfi, *The Life of Titian*, p. 63.

¹⁸ Renata Segre, “A rare document on Giorgione,” in: *The Burlington Magazine* 153:1299 (2011): 383-386.

¹⁹ Nelli-Elena Vanzan Marchini (ed.), *Le Leggi di Sanità della Repubblica di Venezia*, vol. 3, p. 177. *Vietato a chiunque il visitar ammalati prima che sieno trascorsi li giorni sospetti, previa licenza del Magistrato, in pena di essere spedito al lazzaretto [...].* (my translation).

²⁰ David M Morens, Michael North and Jeffery K Taubenberger, “The art of medicine Eyewitness accounts of the 1510 influenza pandemic in Europe” in: *The Lancet*, 376:9756 (2010): 1984-85.

²¹ Sansovino, *Venetia Città Nobilissima et Singolare*, p. 83.

²² Sansovino, *Venetia Città Nobilissima et Singolare*, p. 83.

colors [...].”²³ Although this description is not completely clear regarding the panel’s precise location, it roughly matches the naked figure, Saint Sebastian, and the lavish and colorful attires of the other saints depicted in the painting. As the monastery was demolished in the early 19th century, the interior of the church is only handed down through textual descriptions. Together with other paintings, the altarpiece was moved after 1656 to the Sacristy of Santa Maria della Salute, where it remains to this day (Fig.4).²⁴

2. Visual Analysis of the Altarpiece

The work is a “pala centinata,” meaning that it has the form of a round arch. Most probably, its lost architectural frame—either made of stone or wood—have had a high rectangular shape, as it was usual in the decades before and around 1500.²⁵ Seated on a high pedestal, Saint Mark the Evangelist, Venice’s main patron saint, is the central figure, with a pair of saints standing on either side at the foot of the throne. Saint Sebastian and Saint Roch appear close together on the right, whereas the holy doctors, the saints Cosmas and Damian, stand on the left. While Mark indicates a direct connection of the altarpiece with the city of Venice, the presence of the other saints implies that the work was commissioned during a plague epidemic.²⁶

Saint Mark sits in a *contrapposto* position on an elevated throne that raises him over the four saints to the upper part of the vertically arranged composition. Consequently, he impressively stands out against an azure sky animated with white clouds. His upper body is angled slightly backwards. With his left arm, he supports himself on the seat of the throne, while he poses a book, his Gospel, in an upright position on his knee, holding it with his outstretched right arm.

A shadow hits his face at a sharp angle, engulfing his reclined upper body in darkness. The shadow can be interpreted as a symbolic allusion to Venice being

²³ Sansovino, *Venetia Città Nobilissima et Singolare*, p. 83. “Titiano vi lavorò, nel primo vigor della sua gioventù, [...] la palla dell’altar grande, con un’altra tavola appresso, con atti tanto viventi con panni & coloriti così belli” (my translation).

²⁴ Sansovino, ed. Martinioni, 1663, p. 230.

²⁵ See, for example, the altarpieces from the Venetian ex-convent church of San Giobbe and their stone frames, which are still *in situ*; Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, pp. 43–44.

²⁶ The literature on saints invoked against the plague is extremely vast. See, for example, Louise Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy,” in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, 7:3 (Autumn, 1994): 485–532. ; ead., “Reading the Body of a Plague Saint: Narrative Altarpieces and Devotional Images of St Sebastian in Renaissance Art,” in: Bernard J. Muir, ed., *Reading Texts and Images: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Art and Patronage* (Exeter University Press, Exeter, 2002), pp. 237–260; ead., “A New Plague Saint for Renaissance Italy: Suffering and Sanctity in Narrative Cycles of Saint Roch,” in: Jaynie Anderson, ed., *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence: the proceedings of the 32nd International Congress of the History of Art* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2008), pp. 543–549.

ravaged by the plague, when the altarpiece was commissioned.

The Evangelist is dressed in a bright red tunic highlighted with white and tied around his waist with a thin string, and a blue mantle is wrapped around his legs. The folds and lighter areas of his clothes emphasize his chiastic posture. The saint is depicted as a middle-aged man, with a dark brown beard and hair. Titian has given him the typical characteristics of Saint Mark, reported in hagiographic texts and numerous artistic representations. The physical characteristics of the saint were described in great detail by the Dominican author Jacobus de Voragine (c.1230–98) in the *Golden Legend*.²⁷ In the 16th century, especially in Venice, the image of Saint Mark had been established in a long tradition harking back to the Middle Ages. Titian seems to refer to a representation of the saint in the *Sermon of Saint Mark in a Square in Alexandria in Egypt* by Gentile and Giovanni Bellini (1429–1507; 1430–1516), a canvas formerly in the Scuola Grande di San Marco (1504–07; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan).²⁸ Titian's representation matches both the physical characteristics including the beard and clothing of the saint in that painting (Fig.5). The technique of Titian's brushstrokes can be observed in Saint Mark's frizzy hair and black beard. The black hair contrasts with the white clouds in the background, making the brushstrokes more noticeable.

The artist depicts Saint Sebastian on the right as a beautiful nude with long curly hair, who proudly exposes his beautiful naked body. This peacocky contrapposto with a sharply turned head characterizes him as a self-absorbed young man. The saint gathers his arms behind his back, exhibiting the motif of his being tied to a column or tree. A long white linen is knotted around his hips, reaching to the ground. One arrow pierces his chest, leaving his body immaculate, with a second one placed at his feet. The brushstrokes here depict the raw edge of the linen.

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Saint Sebastian was often represented naked, especially during times of plague, referring to his first martyrdom, as stated by Jacobus de Voragine:

“But Diocletian gave the command to tie him to a post in the center of the camp, and ordered the soldiers to shoot him full of arrows. They shot so many arrows into his body that he looked like a porcupine, and left him for dead.”²⁹

²⁷ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 242–243.

²⁸ Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, *The Sermon of Saint Mark in a Square in Alexandria in Egypt*, 1504–07, oil on canvas, 347 x 770 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, inv. 160.

²⁹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, vol. 1, p. 100.

In the central panel of a triptych, dated around 1370, Tuscan painter Giovanni del Biondo (1356–99) portrayed Roman soldiers shooting at the saint with their bows (Fig. 6). Sebastian's body is pierced by arrows, leaving bleeding wounds. Del Biondo follows Jacobus's description exactly, with the saint's body resembling a porcupine.

Titian's approach is completely different. He avoids allusion to the saint's martyrdom in the drastic manner common in the late Middle Ages, characterizing the saint, instead, as a beautiful young man representing the humanistic ideal of a classical hero. As a saint and a hero who conquered his fate, Sebastian represents here the triumph over death. Michelangelo's (1475–1564) early *Pietà* in Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican (1497–99) exhibits a comparable approach to the ideal of the immaculate body of Christ that widely differs from *Pietà* representations from the late Middle Ages, especially from north of the Alps (Fig. 7).³⁰

Standing behind Sebastian, Saint Roch is depicted as a contemporary pilgrim wearing a typical mantle over a doublet, chemise, and a pair of tights and carrying his characteristic pilgrim's staff. His right stocking is lowered, uncovering a bubo caused by the plague, which is directly indicated by the saint.

On the opposite side of the painting the holy doctors, the Saints Cosmas and Damian, create a compositional counterpart to Roch and Sebastian. They were said to be brothers or twins.³¹ Titian's painting of Cosmas and Damian depicts the saints in the refined attires of contemporary physicians. Both wear heavy, intensely colored mantles, one red and the other yellow lined with purple, over a doublet and white chemise. Both seem to converse with the other saints, creating a narrative through gazes and gestures.

The doctor in front clad in a red mantle exhibits a jar used for anointments or medicine curing the plague buboes. The other saint, with little hair and a plump face, points to Saint Roch's plague sore.

Titian evidently attempted to enhance the painting's verticality not only in its general composition but also in its details. Saint Mark's high throne is raised on two steps. Its front is covered with a green cloth of honor, patterned with clusters of black vertical lines. The four saints stand on a floor decorated with red and yellowish tiles separated by gray stripes. A cluster of shaded pilasters and a round column rise behind Saint Sebastian and Roch. These architectural elements underscore the *pala*'s vertical composition; moreover, the column can be associated with Saint Sebastian's martyrdom.

³⁰ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, vol. 2, pp. 196–198.

³¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*.

The floor tiles on the ground do not emphasize the linear perspective to create spatial depth, but the gray stripes contribute to the composition's verticality. This highlights the viewer's perspective. With a height of 218 cm, the *pala* is rather small; Titian's emphasis on verticality, by contrast, enhances the monumentality of the composition. Additionally, the viewer's gaze *di sotto in su* makes the throne appear higher. This further concentrates the viewer's focus on the central figure. However, because Saint Mark's face remains in darkness, the figure seems to evade dialogue with the faithful.

3. Questions of Iconography

Jacobus de Voragine's accounts of the three saints Sebastian, Cosmas and Damian represented here help illuminate the iconography of the altarpiece. For Roch, a 14th century saint, later sources have to be consulted.³² Furthermore, artists of the time may not have followed only this text but other literary and visual references. This might have also applied to Titian. The following in-depth examination of the painting's iconography is meant to provide insight into its commission.

3.1 The Saints

Saint Mark is the supposed author of the Second Gospel. Saint Peter sent him to Cyprus and Alexandria in Egypt to preaching, where Mark is said to have built the first church.³³ He became the patron saint of Venice after his remains were transferred there from Egypt in the 9th century.³⁴ According to Jacobus de Voragine, "Saint Mark was a well-built man of middle age, with a long nose, fine eyes, and a heavy beard, balding and graying at the temples."³⁵ This is how Giovanni Bellini and Titian depicted the saint.

Saint Sebastian was, according to the legend, a soldier from Narbonne, who was said to have lived in approximately the 3rd to 4th centuries.³⁶ He supposedly sought a higher military rank because he wanted to encourage imprisoned Christians, and was sentenced to death twice. First, he was shot with arrows and, then clubbed to death and thrown into the Roman Cloaca Maxima.³⁷ The scene of his first martyrdom

³² See, below, my mentioning the *Acta Breviora* and Francesco Diiedo's *Vita S. Rochi*.

³³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, vol. 1, p. 243.

³⁴ David Rosand, *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State* (Orange County: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 51–55.

³⁵ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, vol. 1, p. 244.

³⁶ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, vol. 1, p. 97.

³⁷ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, vol. 1, pp. 100–101.

became representative for him as a plague saint in Italy as well as north of the Alps.³⁸ The arrows in his body were seen as symbols of the plague because they did not kill him. His martyrdom was interpreted as a triumph against death and the plague.³⁹

The life of Saint Roch was recorded first by the *Acta Breviora* and Francesco Diedo's *Vita S. Rochi* (1478); other biographies followed.⁴⁰ According to these texts, Saint Roch originated from a noble family of Montpellier. He gave all his belongings to the poor and undertook a pilgrimage to Rome. On his return from Rome, he was struck by the plague and cured by an angel.⁴¹ The plague wound on his thigh is present in most artworks featuring Roch and a staff characterizes him as a pilgrim (Fig. 8).

According to Jacobus de Voragine, the Saints Cosmas and Damian were doctors active in the 3rd or 4th century.⁴² They cured poor patients without charging them.⁴³ In art, they are usually presented as a pair equipped with objects related to their profession, such as medical jars or surgical instruments. In Fra Angelico's (1395–1455) *Annalena Altarpiece* (c. 1430–35), Saint Cosmas and Damian wear red, representing their social status and the wealth of contemporary doctors (Fig.9).

3.2 Saint Mark's Altarpiece as *Sacra Conversazione*

The composition of the altarpiece can be described as a *sacra conversazione*. The saints share the same pictorial space, associated with each other regarding content and composition. Elevated on a high throne, Saint Mark, the patron saint of Venice, towers above the plague saints below. The saints are not self-sufficient and introspective but interact with each other. They are connected with each other through a narrative which are indicated by gazes and gestures, the content of which must be carefully interpreted. The pronounced shadow on Mark's face also contributes to this narrative.

4. Patronage of the Work

In order to identify the patron of this altarpiece, historical sources have to be

³⁸ Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy," pp. 488–500.

³⁹ Rachel Barclay, "The Reformation of a Plague Saint Sebastian in Early Modern Europe," in: *The Luther Skald*, 1:1 (2012): 2-37.

⁴⁰ Gilbert Tournoy, "Francesco Diedo, Venetian Humanist and Politician of the Quattrocento," in: *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, 19 (1970): 201-234.

⁴¹ Rosa Giorgi, *Saints in Art* (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), p. 319.

⁴² Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, vol. 2, pp. 196–198.

⁴³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, vol. 2, pp. 196–198.

examined. Three potential categories of donors must be considered, the government of Venice, a confraternity, and a private citizen or family.

4.1 City Government and Confraternities

The presence of Sebastian, Roch, Cosmas, and Damian imply that the altarpiece is related to the plague in Venice. After the Black Death occurred on the Italian peninsula in 1348, the plague continued to affect Europe for centuries. As a harbor city, Venice was especially affected by the pandemic. The choice of Saint Mark as the central figure raises the question of whether the altarpiece was commissioned by the Serenissima.⁴⁴ After 829, two merchants, Buono da Malamocco and Rustico da Torcello, had brought Saint Mark's relics from Alexandria to Venice; since that time, Saint Mark replaced the original patron saint, Theodore. Saint Mark later achieved a status in Venice similar to that of Saint Peter in Rome. In 1509, when Venice was in conflict with the papacy in Rome, Pope Julius II (1443–1513) issued an interdict against and excommunicated the city. As David Rosand (1938–2014) has emphasized, Venice stated its relationship with Saint Mark to be the same as that between Rome and Saint Peter.⁴⁵

In Titian's altarpiece, the Evangelist is both a representative and protector of Venice. The painting may have had public significance either in helping protect the city from the plague or thanking God, as an *ex-voto*, after the epidemic. Therefore, it may have been commissioned by the city's government or a devotional confraternity who had their responsibilities to both the citizens and society as a whole.

However, the original location of the altarpiece in the church of Santo Spirito in Isola must be considered, too. The church was situated on a small island, at a certain distance from Venice's center. This choice of location would have been puzzling for an artwork that was commissioned to protect the citizens. It must be further asked whether the city government or a confraternity would have commissioned a work in a church situated on a rather isolated island.

4.2 Private Citizens

As the church of Santo Spirito was demolished in the 19th century, the physical environment of the altarpiece—an altar block and a private tomb with a tomb slab on the ground, for example—has disappeared. As already mentioned, an analysis of the descriptions of the church is therefore the only way to reconstruct the site. In his

⁴⁴ Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, p. 229.

⁴⁵ David Rosand, *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State*, pp. 51–55.

second edition of the *Vite*, Giorgio Vasari mentions the work *in situ*:

“And in the church of Santo Spirito, he painted a small panel of the figure of Saint Mark seated in the midst of various saints, whose faces include some portraits done from life and executed in oils with the greatest care.”⁴⁶

Whether Vasari visited the island during his 1566 stay in Venice must be considered. Arguments against his direct knowledge of the work could be that his description of the healer saints as “certi Santi” (various saints) was imprecise.⁴⁷ However, Vasari views the saints as cryptoportraits, that is, the saints bear the features of real individuals. This idea was expressed by Carlo Ridolfi in *Le Maraviglie dell’arte; ovvero, Le Vite degli Illustri Pittori Veneti e dello Stato*, who probably copied it from Vasari:

“For the fathers of Santo Spirito in Isola near Venice, Titian worked on the panel of Saint Mark in which he placed Saint Rocco, Sebastian, and other figures, and he did many other works for private citizens.”⁴⁸

At the end of the quote, Ridolfi might have alluded to the fact that the work resembled those Titian had done for private citizens. Indeed, the two short texts quoted herein provide clues that this altarpiece might have been commissioned by a private citizen. The patron may have been presented in the painting in the figure of one of their patron saints. They may have participated in mass to assure salvation.

That the patrons could be represented as saints, rather than being rendered in profile kneeling before the holy figures in the painting, is reminiscent of the *Frari Triptych* by Giovanni Bellini of 1488 (Fig.10). Because the saints in the altarpiece are exactly the patron saints of the Pesaro family’s male members—Peter, Nicholas, Benedict, and Mark—it is reasonable to assume that the father, Peter, and his three sons, are represented in the work. That the figures bear individual characteristics supports this hypothesis.⁴⁹

On the basis of this example, it is likely that the Saints Cosmas and Damian represented the donors, Venetian physicians, whose names are still unknown. Their

⁴⁶ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, p. 492.

⁴⁷ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori*, Vol.2, Fiorenza: Appresso I Givnti, 1568, pp.808-9. At: <<https://archive.org/details/levitedepiveccel03vasa/page/808/mode/2up>> (accessed on 20 August 2022).

⁴⁸ Ridolfi, *The Life of Titian*, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁹ Rona Goffen, *Piety and Patronage in Renaissance Venice: Bellini, Titian and the Franciscans* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 62.

facial characteristics are more individualized than the typified features of the Saints Mark, Sebastian, and Roch. While Saint Mark represents the city, Sebastian, Roch and the two holy doctors were invoked as intercessors to help against the plague or to thank God for the relief from the epidemic. As all saints in the altarpiece had suffered martyrdom, their example also visualized and ensured the faithful of the triumph over death. The altarpiece could have been made for a physician involved in the curing of people affected from the plague. The patron's appearance in the painting may have been considered to assure his own salvation. That the altarpiece ostentatiously commemorates a doctor's contribution during an epidemic is therefore conceivable.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed Titian's *Saint Mark Altarpiece* and its historical background in order to propose a solution for the problem of its uncertain patronage. As a young master, Titian had relied on traditional modes of representing the saints, but he connected these conventions with novel and surprising features. The most evident aspect is the narrative quality that links the saints with each other by means of gazes and gestures and creates contact with the faithful in front of the altarpiece. As regards the composition, vertical elements are intended to guide the viewer's attention to the central figure, the city's patron saint.

In this way, Titian enables the viewer to understand the saints' meaning against the background of the menacing epidemic. It was intended to show that, on the basis of an attentive rereading of the few remaining literary sources and a fresh view on the painting's compositional and iconographic specifics, it can be considered a likely possibility that Titian's altarpiece was commissioned by one or two physicians. That doctors involved—and maybe successful—in cures of the plague might have wished to appear in a painting is conceivable against the background of the time's hardships.

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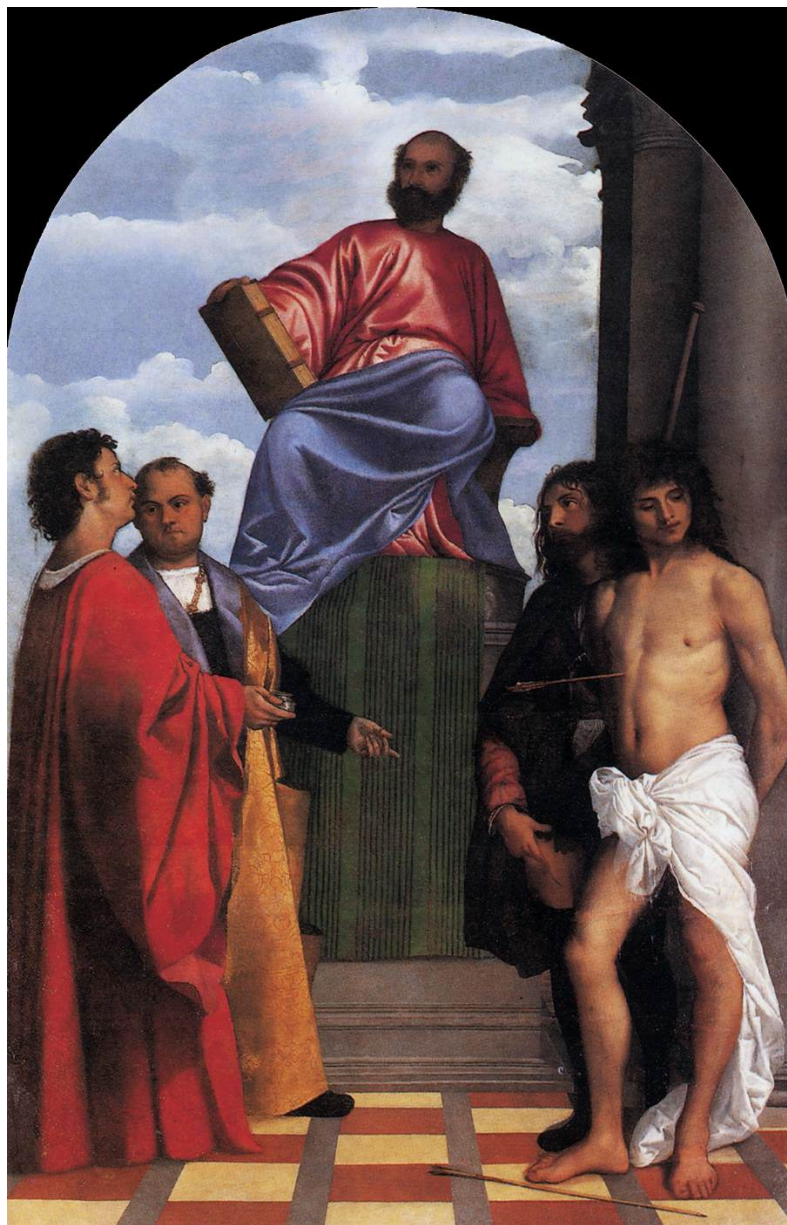
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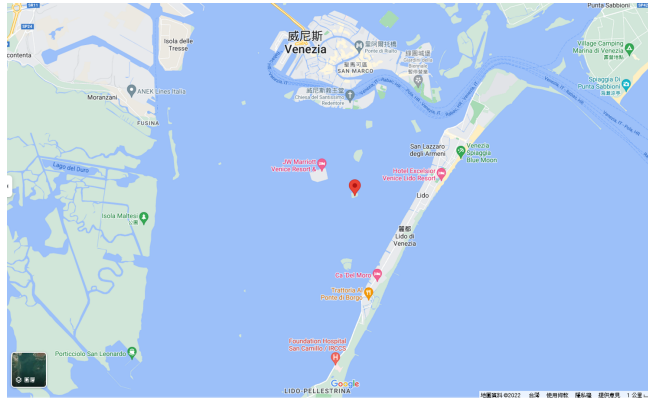
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2. Sebastiano del Piombo, *Saint Giovanni Crisostomo Altarpiece*, 1510–11.



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