AN UNFINISHED TINTORETTO EXPLAINED
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Tintoretto’s painting of Doge Alvise Mocenigo Presented to the Redeemer was purchased by the Museum in 1910, and an article about it appeared later in the Bulletin. But there remained some further observations to be made on the subject, especially so after a thorough cleaning and technical study recently were completed.

The painting is a fairly elaborate study on canvas, about 98 by 78 inches, for the much larger and more complicated picture in the Sala del Collegio of the Ducal Palace at Venice. In 1852, while traveling in Italy as a comparatively young man, John Ruskin, who admired Tintoretto above all other painters (except perhaps Turner!), was so fortunate as to find the picture for sale, and at a very low price. In a letter of July 19 in the following year he asked his father to send the money to Italy to pay for it. “I am very glad I have got it,” he wrote, “as I think it thoroughly magnificent now I see it again.... It is the Doge Mocenigo on his knees before Christ, with the Ducal Palace and sea in the distance, and I thought considering all I had done about the Ducal Palace and Tintoret that it was well worth the 50 Napoleons to me.”

A few days later he wrote again: “I hope you will like the Tintoret, in spite of its wretched state. It is interesting as being a sketch for a well-known picture in the Ducal Palace, and full of variations; that is to say, the picture is not the least like the sketch, and the genuineness of the study is so far proved by this, as any forger of old pictures would assuredly have followed the figures of the larger work.”

When in 1896 Ruskin lent his picture to the Winter Exhibition of Old Masters at the Royal Academy it was described at length in the Athenaeum by the well-known critic R. A. M. Stevenson. In those days connoisseurs were apparently less aware than now of the physical aspects of paintings, and the puzzled critic for the Athenaeum, noting in the left foreground of Ruskin’s painting the dark irregular area of underpainting and the lion only partly established against it, found an almost hallucinatory explanation. The doge, he wrote, “is facing the spectator as well as a group of the Virgin and Child, which although close to us, is not shown in the picture, and only made apparent by a large dark shadow carefully delineated upon the large platform, and within the picture-plane. The visitor should observe, too, that in the foreground the golden lion of St. Mark crouches, half concealed in the shadow at the foot of the group of the Virgin and Child.”

Ruskin’s observation that the large painting in the Palazzo Ducale is “not the least like the sketch” has in it much truth but also much exaggeration. The first thing the spectator notices in viewing the large completed work is its squarer shape, its more crowded and turbulent composition, and its curious ruddy and orange tonality. This larger work is generally judged to have been designed by Tintoretto but ex-
Doge Alvise Mocenigo Presented to the Redeemer, by Tintoretto. Kennedy Fund, 1910
The final version in the Ducal Palace, Venice
cuted in part by assistants. The workmanship is
difficult to appraise, however, for there is much
discolored varnish present and probably much
repainting as well. Yet, as may be seen from a
comparison of photographs of the two versions,
the main features are identical. The scene is
laid apparently in a porch or doorway of the
basilica of San Marco in Venice, giving a vista
of the Piazzetta with the Palazzo Ducale at the
left and the sparkling Libreria Vecchia at the
right. Each picture is divided in the middle
by a column against which the doge is seen in
three-quarters view kneeling on a raised plat-
form. His arms are spread in a gesture of sup-
pllication while the benign figure of Christ ad-
ances through the air toward him. Behind the
doge are four tutelary saints and crouching by
the platform is the winged lion of Saint Mark.

On the other hand there are some striking
elements in the larger painting which vary from
the Museum's calmly spacious sketch. We no-
tice, for instance, that there are two bearded
senators portrayed at the right. They are
younger members of the Mocenigo family, ac-
cording to dependable early writers. The bare-
headed young saint standing second from the
right in the Museum's sketch is replaced in the
final picture by an older bearded saint who
kneels. A conspicuous figure absent from the
sketch is the angel who flies passionately into
the finished work from the left, but the most
striking difference of all is the absence in the
sketch of Saint Mark, who in the Venice picture
officiates as a warmly expansive master of cer-
emonies. There he is readily identified by the
familiar lion at his feet, which through being
the symbol of the Evangelist eventually became
the ubiquitous symbol of Venice herself. In the
Museum's sketch the doge kneels alone on his
dais, unsponsored and perhaps even a little for-
lorn. The absence of Saint Mark seems all the
more remarkable when we extend our examina-
tion to the four additional votive paintings on
the walls of the Collegio. At the end of the great
room farthest from the entrance is the doge's
throne or tribune. Above it is Veronese's cel-
bration of the victory at Lepanto (1571), show-
ing Sebastiano Venier, admiral of the Venetian
fleet, kneeling in gratitude before Christ. Oppo-
site, above the main entrance, Tintoretto has
portrayed Andrea Gritti praying to the Virgin.
The wall at the left is all windows, and on the
side wall opposite the windows appears the
now familiar painting of Alvise Mocenigo Pre-
sented to the Redeemer, as well as two further
subjects by Tintoretto and his helpers—a mar-
riage of Saint Catherine with Doge Francesco
Donato in prayer and a painting of Doge Nicolò
da Ponte kneeling before the Virgin. In every

The figure of Saint Mark revealed by X-rays.
The heavy cross is merely the stretcher.
A detail photograph made with infra-red rays
one of these five pictures a conspicuous figure is
to be noted, namely that of Saint Mark, patron
saint of Venice and indispensable sponsor in
Venetian votive pictures. His absence from the
Museum's sketch recalls the proverbial per-
formance of Hamlet with the melancholy Dane
left out. How can we account for this extraor-
dinary omission? Tintoretto at the time the
Collegio was adorned was a man of sixty years
or more, experienced enough to know who was
who among saints, and at the same time a re-
sourceful painter, whom Ruskin and many a
connoisseur before and since have considered
to be the most impetuous and accomplished
composer in the entire history of painting.
Thus he could scarcely be suspected of finding
himself unable to introduce his good San Marco
into our picture if he had really wanted him
there. Nevertheless, the Museum's X-rays and
infra-red photographs emphatically demon-
strate that in this instance Tintoretto actually
did make serious errors in choreography. These
errors, which he corrected when he came to the
large picture in Venice, appear to have been
considered irretrievable in the sketch and they
evidently caused him to abandon it as hopeless.

Just what is it, then, that the modern labora-
tory has revealed? Beneath the visible paint
near the unfinished lion has been found the tall
figure of a male saint who stands at the foot of
the steps, the top of his head reaching as high
as the doge's own. His back is turned toward
the spectator and he carries a book under his
arm. Obviously he is San Marco and none other.
He is drawn in Tintoretto's most brilliant and
expressive style and the painting is carried rather
far toward completion. Yet for the message of
the picture as a whole one can readily see that
the figure is too imposing and placed in an in-
tolerable position. The doge would have been
made to appear insignificant, his communica-
tion with the Redeemer blocked off, and the
Redeemer himself offended by the brusque
shoulde and back presented by this rude Saint
Mark. Above this beautiful but unfortunate fig-
ure the artist projected in the sky a flying angel,
but it had reached only the status of a crude
preliminary drawing when Tintoretto put the
picture aside. At a later time some other artist,
recognizing the painting's splendid qualities,
must have undertaken to render it enjoyable
(and salable) with the least possible alteration.
He left as it was the lion and the undeveloped
surrounding area but concealed the offending
saint and the misplaced angel by extending the
steps, the pavement of the Piazzetta, the blue
sky, and the water with its picturesque small
ships. Four years ago when the painting was
cleaned and examined, Murray Pease, the Mu-
seum's Associate Curator in Conservation and
Technical Research, stated: "The somewhat
discolored paint lying over the incomplete fig-
ures, left center, appears to be very old, but,
since there was already an old crackle in the
original underlying paint into which the newer
paint has flowed, it is obvious that a generation
or two at least must have intervened between
the original painting and the overpainting."

From all these considerations it is possible to
understand some of the changes which Tinto-
retto made in composing the larger version of
his painting for the Sala del Collegio. But to
realize adequately the significance of the pic-
ture one must understand that despite its pre-
ponderating supernatural elements it was designed as the acknowledgment of an important actual moment in Venetian history. The event set forth occurred on the eighth of September, 1576. The chief actor in the drama, doge Alvise I Mocenigo, was an illustrious member of a multitudinous and distinguished Venetian family, which provided the republic with numerous officials, including seven doges. Alvise I, the eighty-fifth doge in the long succession, appears in history sometimes under variations of this name such as Alvigii, Aluigi, and most often as Luigi (i.e. Louis). He was born in 1507 or 1508, and at the age of about twenty-five years was already a member of the Maggior Consiglio. Ultimately, in 1570, he was acclaimed doge. A year later the combined Venetian and Spanish fleets worsted the Turks in the important battle of Lepanto, but Cyprus was lost and the power of Venice was beginning to decline. More serious perhaps than the loss of Cyprus was the plague which followed four years later. It was this epidemic, presumably bubonic plague, which occasioned our painting by Tintoretto, as Dr. E. Tietze-Conrat pointed out to the Museum.

Litta, in his Famiglie Celebre Italiane (vol. vii, 1872), gives the following account: "The pest manifested itself in the city in August 1575, redoubled in fury during the following spring, and despite all the attainments of science and the diligent efforts of the state, grew more cruel in every quarter and among all classes; so much so that, driven by extreme terror, the nobles and the common people knew of nothing to do but to take refuge in flight. The streets became deserted, commerce was given up and even the work of the civil courts was interrupted. . . . This pestilence, which robbed Venice of fifty-one thousand inhabitants, among them the near-centenarian Titian, lasted until July 1577. In September 1576 the doge in the presence of the people in the basilica of San Marco made a solemn vow to cause a majestic temple to be erected in honor of the Redeemer (i.e. Redentore) if the city could only be relieved of the scourge."

The vow was faithfully and promptly fulfilled. Before the pestilence had entirely worn itself out the new church of the Redentore had been designed by Palladio, and on May 3, 1577, the cornerstone was laid at the chosen site on the Giudecca, across the water from and within sight of the Piazzetta. But Alvise Mocenigo did not live to see the handsome structure completed, for he died on June 4, one month after the first stone had been put in place. According to one account it was the plague that carried him off.

In Tintoretto's votive picture on the wall of the Collegio an urgent and prominent figure is that of the angel who hurries toward the doge bringing him the palm fronds which announce his impending death. The painting, and the Museum's sketch as well, must have been executed in or after 1577, but before 1584, and the likeness of the doge in both must have been copied from Tintoretto's own life portrait of Mocenigo now in the Accademia, Venice—hence the sidelong glance and the head turned toward the spectator rather than toward the Redeemer.

The four saints ranged behind Mocenigo in the Collegio picture are John the Baptist (with cross and lamb), Saint Louis (youthful bishop
of Toulouse and Alvise Mocenigo's name saint), the kneeling Saint Andrew (identified by tradition) and nearest the spectator, Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, his miter held aloft by angels while he makes his bow before Christ. It will be recalled by those who are versed in saints' lore that the Venetians claim to have acquired by theft in the year 1100 the relics of Saint Nicholas, and he is highly venerated in Venice, although the Church recognizes only the conflicting claims of the pious citizens of Bari. More certainly the body of Saint Mark had been "translated" (in this case also by theft) from Alexandria to Venice in the ninth century, and soon afterward the wondrous basilica of San Marco had been built around it as a shrine. In the Museum's sketch the kneeling figure thought to represent Saint Andrew is not present. In his place is a "refined and compassionate" young man who fits Mrs. Jameson's description of Saint Roch of Montpellier, a fourteenth-century saint who died in his thirty-second year after a life devoted to nursing the plague-stricken wherever he could find them. Hence his appropriateness in a picture devoted to deliverance from pestilence. In 1485 some venturesome Venetians, following the time-honored precedent, stole the young saint's body from Montpellier and brought it home with them, and soon afterward, in celebration of the new acquisition, the church of San Rocco was built in Venice near the great church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. Next to San Rocco in later years was erected the Scuola di San Rocco, and it was upon the walls and ceilings of this fine edifice that Tintoretto painted the stupendous works which constitute probably the most expressive and lucid decorative project in all Europe.

In their important book about Tintoretto, Erich von der BERcken and August L. Mayer (1923) express regret that the Venice picture of Alvise Mocenigo before the Redeemer is drastically altered by repainting. "This injury is the more impressive," they write, "when we remember the magnificent sketch in the Metropolitan Museum with its much sharper accentuation and arrangement of the separate groups, where the doge (who is not accompanied by Saint Mark as in the finished picture in the Doge's Palace) seems in his isolation far more expressive and the group of saints at the right incomparably more alive."

Such admiration as this for Tintoretto's sketch in the Museum seems to be fairly general, and naturally it has not been without influence in the decision as to what should be done about the newly revealed figure of Saint Mark. The X-rays do not discover whether or not the figure was given its final colors, and neither do we know exactly how much damage it might suffer if the removal of the hard covering paint were undertaken. Furthermore, what to do about the barely indicated angel? Inevitably the recovery of the lost figures would bring us to the selfsame pictorial predicament which caused Tintoretto to abandon the picture in the first place.