Paolo Caliari (*aka* Veronese)
(1528- 1588)

This month's essay deals with one of the important Venetian painters of the late Renaissance period. He was known as a supreme colorist, and after an early period with Mannerism, he moved to a naturalist style of painting and came under the influence of the 16th- century Venetian school, especially its most important member—Titian. Along with Titian, Tintoretto, and Giorgione, he dominated Venetian painting during the Cinquecento.

His most famous works are huge, elaborate narrative cycles, executed in a dramatic and colorful style, full of majestic architectural settings and glittering pageantry. His paintings of biblical feasts, crowded with figures, painted for the refectories of monasteries in Venice and Verona are especially famous, and he was also the leading Venetian painter of ceilings. Since most of these works remain in situ *(especially in Venice), his paintings that are exhibited in most museums are mainly composed of smaller works such as portraits that do not always show him at his best or most typical.*

(N.B. Veronese's oeuvre is quite large. To have focused on all of the pieces would have been far beyond the scope or purpose of this essay. The artworks I have chosen to write about, I believe, demonstrate important characteristics and qualities of his work). (Self-portrait, left)

The youngest of five siblings, Paolo Caliari, nicknamed "Veronese" after his birthplace, was born in 1528 in the Italian city of Verona, then the largest possession of the Republic of Venice on the mainland. He was born in the artists' quarter of Verona, located in the district of San Paolo, which may have accounted for his parents' choice of his Christian name—Paolo. His father, Gabriele, was a stonecutter; his mother, Caterina, the illegitimate daughter of a Venetian nobleman named Antonio Caliari.

Not much is known about Paolo's early life. He initially apprenticed under his father, which meant that he also went for some time by his professional name: Paolo Spezapreda (Paolo the Stonecutter, *spezapreda* means stonecutter in the Venetian dialect). However, while working with his father, Paolo's precocious talent for drawing became apparent and, at age 14, his apprenticeship was transferred to the studio of a local master, Antonio Bandile.

Veronese assisted Bandile with altarpieces in 1543 and 1544 and sections of these works already bore his signature style. However, as he started to develop his own preference for a more colorful, more expressive, palette than the tones of the High Renaissance, his talent soon exceeded the standards usually demanded of Bandile's students. His work on the altarpieces impressed Michele Sanmicheli, the architect of many important buildings in Verona, and Sanmicheli provided Veronese with his first important commission—working on frescoes for the Palazzo Canossa (1545-46).

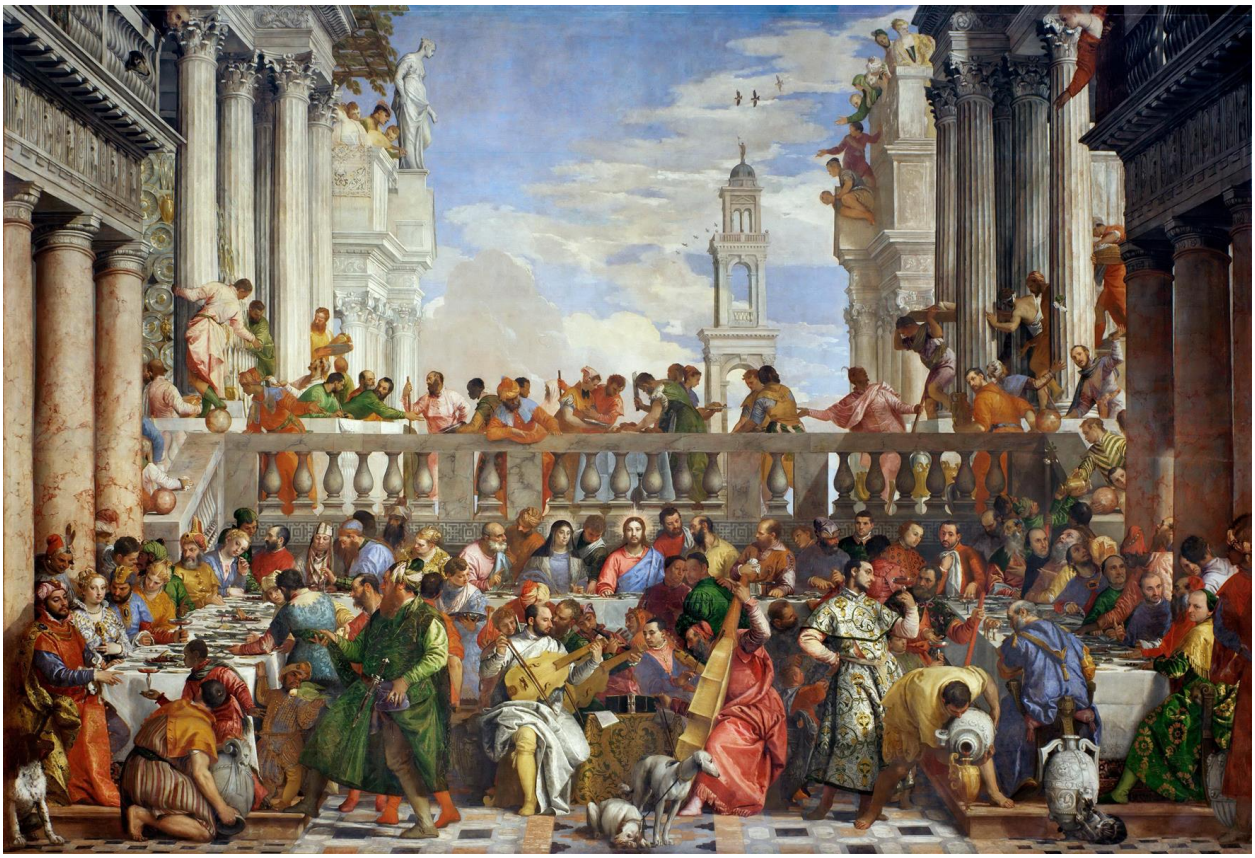
In 1548, Veronese moved to Mantua for a brief time, where he made the acquaintance of Giulio Romano, Raphael's principal pupil and assistant, and one of the pioneers of the Mannerist style, a style well suited to Veronese's penchant for painting elegance. He doubtless used his time in Mantua to study the ceilings by Romano; it was as a painter of ceiling frescos that he would initially make his mark when he was in Venice. In 1552, Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga, great-uncle of the ruling Guglielmo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, commissioned an altarpiece for Mantua's Duomo, which Veronese painted *in situ*. He also created several other frescoes in the Duomo before he left for Venice in 1553.

The year 1553 was an important one for Veronese. First, he relocated to Venice after obtaining his first state commission to decorate in fresco the ceilings of the *Sala dei Consiglio dei Dieci* (Hall of the Council of Ten) and the adjoining *Sala dei Tre Capi del Consiglio* (Hall of the Three Heads of the Council) in the Doge's Palace. These were new rooms replacing those that had been lost in the fire of 1547. His most important piece in the Doge's Palace is his *Triumph of Venice* (1583) in the *Sala del Maggior Consiglio* (Higher Council Hall) of the Ducal Palace, which shows in its center Venice as a female allegorical figure, resplendent in opulent beauty and ease, crowned by Victory and raised by clouds, slowly ascending to the heavens.

Second, with the death of his father that year, he decided to take the name *Caliari* from his mother's family, hoping that this would afford him greater access to the Venetian aristocracy. He also began to use the name "*Veronese*" primarily for the purpose of signing his art works and to draw attention to his place of birth. Working in Venice allowed Veronese to take advantage of the new demand for Venetian painting stirred by the works of Giorgione, Titian and Tintoretto. Following in their esteemed footsteps, Veronese quickly received commissions from important art-governing bodies of the city.

He followed the work on the Doge's Palace with three large paintings in the ceiling of the nave of the Church of San Sebastiano, commissioned by the prior of the church, Bernardo Torlioni. The series was entitled ***Stories of Esther***, *detail shown to the right*, (sometimes called the *Cycle of Esther*) completed between the end of 1555 and October 1556), and depicted scenes from the biblical *Book of Esther*. (This church would ultimately become his burial place). Whereas in the Doge's Palace, he had often worked in collaboration with a fellow artist from Verona, Giovanni Battista Zelotti, Veronese worked alone in San Sebastiano. He would return, off and on for the next 15 years, to continue decorating parts of the church.

In the *Stories of Esther*, Veronese used foreshortening of the groups of characters in the pictures and placed them in luminous architectural frameworks, all of which became a hallmark of his art. Each scene culminated in a nobly quiet pose or gesture. The effect of the whole was at once decorative and moving. He followed this with equally impressive but gentler paintings for the organ shutters that showed, when closed, the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* and, when opened, *Christ at the Pool of Bethesda* (1558-1560). These he placed in a setting of classical columns that connect the world of the paintings with the view of the organ pipes. Finally, he painted two extremely rich scenes from the life of St. Sebastian (1565) that decorated the choir of the church. One showed the saint in military dress exhorting his fellow Christians with a grand gesture; the other depicted him naked and meekly awaiting his execution. (He was first shot by arrows, which miraculously did not kill him. After being nursed back to health by a woman friend, he was finally beaten to death).



The Wedding at Cana **(1562-1563)**

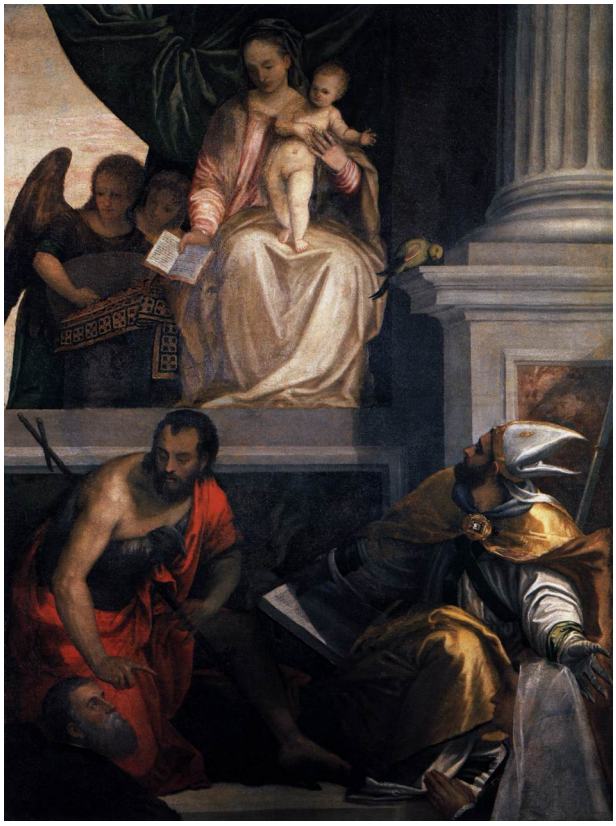
Villa Barbaro, Madonna and Child, and Refectory Paintings

Contemporaneously with his decoration of San Sebastiano, Veronese received numerous commissions for altarpieces, devotional paintings, and some Last Suppers. Around 1560-61, during a break in his work for San Sebastiano, he was commissioned by Daniele Barbaro, a Renaissance humanist and architect, who had studied the Vitruvian Man's Proportions and the

Golden Ratio together with Andrea Palladio in Rome, to provide frescoes for the Villa Barbaro in Maser (in the Veneto), owned jointly with his brother Marcantonio, a sculptor and an amateur architect. The newly-finished villa (1558) had been designed by Palladio.

Veronese's frescoes were designed to unite humanistic culture with Christian spirituality. The paintings included numerous portraits of the Barbaro family, especially paintings that included the brothers in various classical and Renaissance settings. The ceilings illustrated blue skies and mythological figures depicted as Renaissance personages. Veronese's decorations in the villa used complex perspective and *trompe-l'œil* (an art technique that uses realistic imagery to create the optical illusion that the depicted objects exist in three dimensions, thus they appear real to the viewer). This joint connection between architecture and painting resulted in an artistic triumph of illusion.

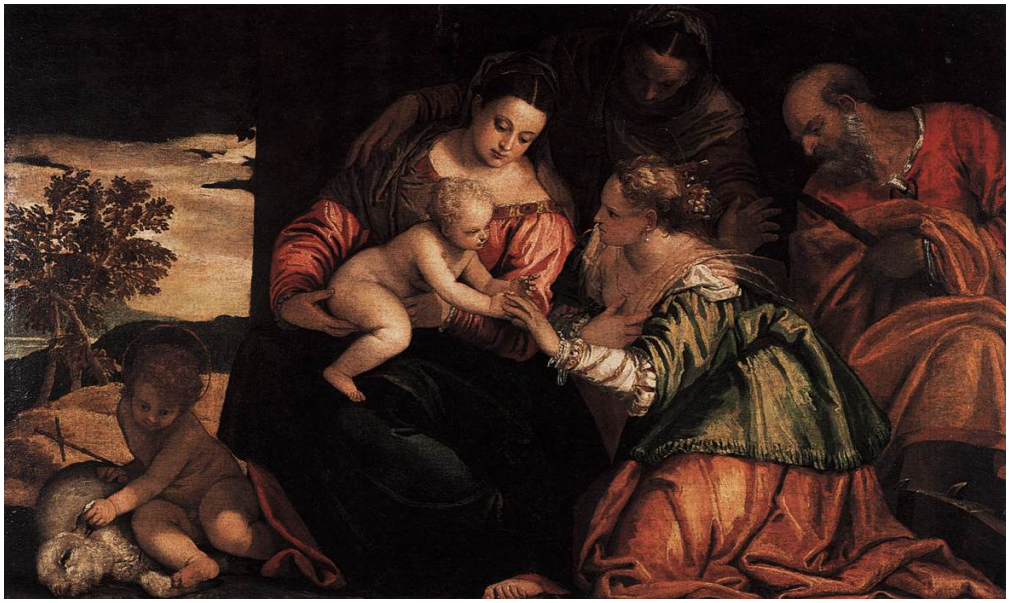
The Wedding at Cana **(1562-1563)** was a collaboration between Veronese and Palladio. It was commissioned by the Benedictine monks for the San Giorgio Maggiore Monastery on a small island (San Giorgio Maggiore) across from St Mark's Basilica in Venice. The contract insisted on the huge size (to cover 710.5 square feet), and that the pigment and colors should be of premium quality. (For example, the contract specified that the blues should contain the precious and very expensive mineral lapis lazuli). The contract also specified that the painting should include as many figures as possible. There are a number of portraits in the painting (including those of Titian and Tintoretto, as well as a self-portrait of Veronese himself) staged upon the canvas that is nearly 33 feet wide. The scene depicted in the painting is taken from John 2:1-11 and depicts Jesus' first miracle, the changing of water into wine, at a marriage in Cana, Galilee.



The foreground celebration, which is a frieze of figures painted in the most shimmering finery, is flanked by two sets of stairs leading back to a terrace, Roman colonnades and a brilliant sky.

In 1562, Veronese also painted *Madonna and Child with Saints Joseph, Justina, Francis, the Infant John the Baptist, and Jerome* (sometimes called the San Zaccaria Altarpiece). It was executed for the refurbishing of the Bonaldo family chapel in the sacristy of the *Chiesa di San Zaccaria* (Church of St. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist) in central Venice. In January 1562, Francesco Bonaldo, a silk and wool merchant, donated money for the redecoration of the chapel in which his brothers Girolamo and Giovanni had just been buried. Hence, the saints at the feet of the **Madonna and Child (*seen to the right*)** within the apse are the three brothers' saints—in the center with his back to the viewer is the infant *San Giovanni Battista* (St. John the Baptist), to the right *San Girolamo* (St. Jerome) in his cardinal's attire, and to the left *San*

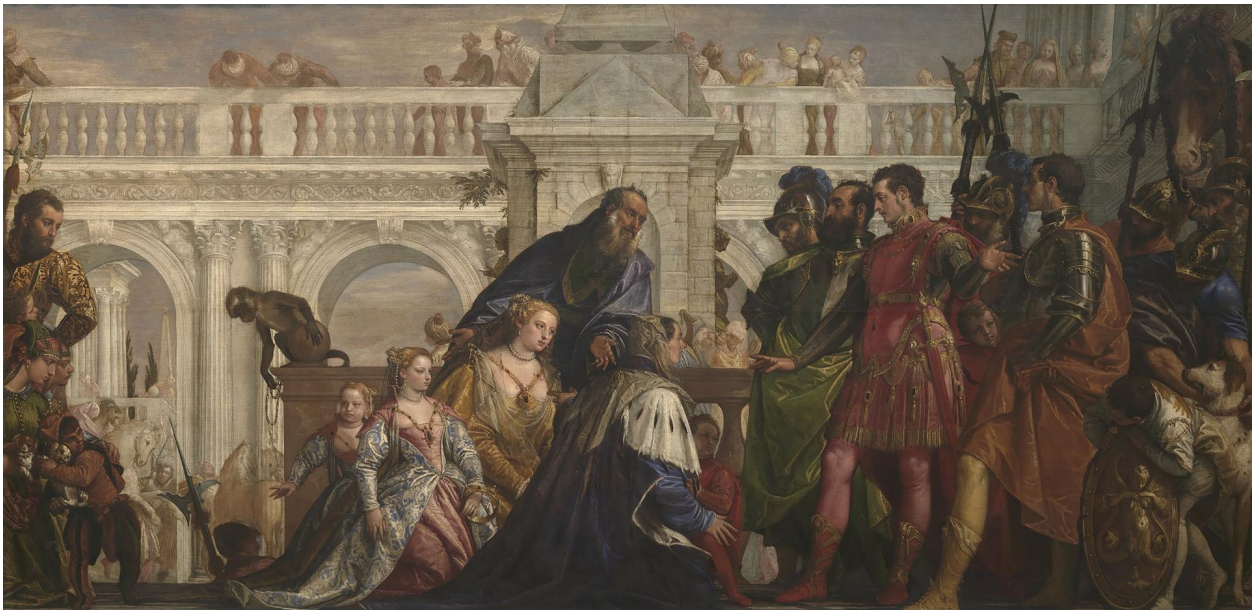
Francesco (St. Francis). The other saints in the painting are *San Giuseppe* (St. Joseph), beside the Madonna and Child, and *Santa Giustina of Padua* (St. Justina), who was a patroness of Padua and Venice. The composition of the painting, albeit asymmetrical, is harmonious and balanced, and was inspired by the 15th and 16th-century Venetian tradition of large altarpieces, from Giovanni Bellini to Titian. Veronese paid careful attention to the lavish rendering of the fabrics and cloths in the painting. He carefully balanced the forms of the Holy Family and rendered them using a balance of warm and cool colors. He also carefully studied the light and the painting's relationship with its surroundings to make use of the natural light coming in from the sacristy windows.



Soon after completing this painting, Veronese painted another Madonna and Child. This one depicted a different set of saints with the main characters, Mary and Jesus: *Madonna and Child with Saint Elizabeth,* ***St Catherine and the Infant John the*** **Baptis**t (above) (ca 1565-70). St. Catherine is at the right of the painting, with the Madonna and Child in the center. In contrast to Italian works of a century earlier, the infant in this painting, like the one in the San Zaccaria Altarpiece, is rendered convincingly as an infant. What one notices in this painting is the infant's reaching out to St. Catherine, since a baby of this age would normally be depicted limiting his gaze to his mother or to the viewer. (St. Catherine could be either St. Catherine of Siena, 1347-1380, or St. Catherine of Alexandria, c. 287-305; both of whom had a marriage to Christ in a mystical vision in the presence of the Virgin Mary). Veronese depicted St. Catherine in the painting reaching upward toward the Christ Child in recognition of this mystical event. Completing the work is St. Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary and the mother of St. John the Baptist, located on the left.

In ***The Family of Darius before Alexander*** *(next page)* (1565-1570), commissioned by the Pisani family of Venice, Veronese arranged the architecture to run mostly parallel to the picture plane, accentuating the processional character of the composition. Alexander the Great, the Macedonian emperor, visits the distraught family of King Darius III of Persia, whom he has defeated in battle. Darius' mother, Sisigambis, mistakenly thinks Hephaestion, who is

Alexander's friend and general, is Alexander, the victor of the battle. (Hephaestion is the one in the painting wearing plate armor and an orange cloak). She calls on him to be merciful to Darius's wife and children. Alexander comforts her, and insists that the family be treated as royalty and retain their finery.



Veronese used color and light in the painting to show exhilaration; this may have been a reflection of his own personal feeling of joy and happiness, for while he was painting the canvas, he married Elena Badile in 1565, the daughter of his first master, Antonio Bandile, and by whom he would eventually have a daughter and four sons.

The Pilgrims of Emmaus (1559) and ***Feast in the House of Levi*** **(1573)**, in addition to *The Wedding at Cana*, are several of the refectory paintings that Veronese has become famous for. They all allowed him to compose large groups of figures in increasingly complex Renaissance architectural settings that attest to his knowledge of the works of the 16th-century Venetian architects Sanmicheli, Palladio, and Jacopo Sansovino. The paintings offered little in the representation of emotion; rather, they illustrated the carefully composed movement of their subjects along a primarily horizontal axis that was reinforced by the architectural structures. His decorative genius was to recognize that dramatic perspective effects would have been tiresome in a living room or in a chapel, and that the narrative of the picture could best be absorbed as a colorful diversion. Thus, in typical Veronese style, they were about the luminosity of light and color.

In *The Pilgrims of Emmaus*, Veronese depicts the famous biblical episode (Luke 24:13-35) of Jesus meeting and having dinner with two pilgrims from Jerusalem. In the left foreground, one can see Jesus walking with the two pilgrims. The main part of the painting shows, in typical Veronese color and light, the moment when the pilgrims recognize Him as the risen Christ, at the meal when He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.

However, Veronese departs from the traditional depiction of this famous episode. The three figures from the biblical story are surrounded by a family dressed in the fashion of the Venetian upper class in the 16th century. They are the members of the family who commissioned the picture. The adults are serving Christ the various dishes of the meal; their children sit at His feet. Likewise, the setting is not the traditional inn of the story, but a Renaissance palace. In the painting, the main motif is a bit overwhelmed by the splendor of the surroundings. The linear perspective created by the lines on the floor does not create enough depth, making the figures seem to be jammed into the scene.

Feast in the House of Levi, at 18ft. x 42ft. (756 sq. ft.)—one of the largest canvases of the 16th century—was really a Last Supper painting for the rear wall of the refectory at the Basilica di Santi Giovanni e Paolo, in Castello, Venice. Veronese received the commission to replace a Last Supper painting by Titian that had burnt in a fire. He originally titled it *The Last Supper*; however, the Venetian Inquisition took exception to the depiction of a banquet scene that included German soldiers, dwarfs, animals, and drunken revelers; they thought that Veronese had frivolously and blasphemously elaborated the biblical account. Although he defended himself ably, the Inquisition's tribunal ordered him to repaint the *The Last Supper*. He opposed this remedy and, in the end, decided to change the title of the work to the rather meaningless and misleading *Feast in the House of Levi*. Once again, *Feast in the House of Levi* indicated Veronese's technical development in using intense and luminous colors for texture, attention to narrative coherence, the acute representation of human emotion, and the psychologically subtle interplay that occurred among the characters that crowded the scene.

Last Years

The decade of the 1570s was one of great uncertainty for Venice. In 1571, Venice as part of the Holy League, an alliance of Catholic states (comprising Spain and most of Italy) arranged by Pope Pius V, inflicted a major defeat on the fleet of the Ottoman Empire in the Gulf of Patras, called the Battle of Lepanto. It marked the turning-point of Ottoman military expansion into the Mediterranean, thus improving the military, political and economic security of Venice.

Veronese consolidated his status and strong family ties during this time. In honor of the victory at the Battle of Lepanto, Veronese named his only daughter, Vittoria, when she was born in 1572. The resultant Counter Reformation, which saw a great resurgence in conservative Catholic culture as it sought to defeat Protestantism, was beginning to bring its influence to Venice. There was now less demand for erotic or mythological works, and Veronese was called upon to produce smaller devotional paintings. Between 1574 and 1577 major fires and plagues afflicted Venice (the plague claimed Titian's life in 1576) and Veronese began investing his substantial wealth into land and property. Also, in 1575, he went back to using his earlier name, Paolo Caliari.

By the 1580s, he had established a family workshop, including his younger brother Benedetto, as well as his sons Carlo and Gabriele, and his nephew Luigi Benfatto, also called *dal Friso* (from Friso). Although the quality of the studio's work initially was considered uneven (at best), the workshop eventually began producing great works independently of Veronese's hand. The workshop continued to be active for a decade after his death, signing their work *Haeredes Pauli* (Heirs of Paolo), and continuing to use his numerous and excellent drawings.

Paolo Spezapreda Caliari Veronese died from pneumonia on April, 19, 1588 at the age of 60. He was buried in the Church of San Sebastiano in Venice, surrounded by his many beautiful artistic contributions to the church.

Conclusion

Paolo Veronese's paintings are grandiose and magnificent visions of the spectacle of 16th century Venetian life. His art is inextricably linked to the idea of opulence and splendor in Renaissance Venice. His works are crowded compositions with theatrical effects, in which groups of sumptuously dressed characters re-enact religious and secular events. His dazzling and effective use of color and light are the special hallmarks of his work. During his prolific and highly successful career, he produced paintings ranging from complex fresco decorations for villas and palaces to large-scale altarpieces, smaller devotional paintings, portraits, and mythological, historical, and allegorical pictures in different formats. He also produced beautiful and carefully composed drawings for most of his painted projects.

Prints of Veronese's work were in high demand by collectors and artists throughout Europe, even during his own lifetime, something highly unusual for a living artist at that time. Thus, his influence, including his effect on Venetian Baroque painting, surpassed the limits of generations and the frontiers of his city. Generations of artists—well into the 19th century—studied Veronese's work closely. His influence can clearly be seen on artists such as the Carracci family, Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Antoine Watteau, Eugène Delacroix, and Paul Cézanne (among others), who were all inspired by his use of color and light to express exuberance and richness as well as to model form.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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