

## Foreword

# The return of *The Wedding at Cana* to the monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore

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The island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice lies just opposite St Mark's Square, from which it is separated by a narrow stretch of lagoon. For over 800 years, from 982 to the early eighteenth century, it was the seat of a Benedictine abbey, which rapidly became and remained for centuries one of the largest centers of spiritual and cultural life that the Order has ever created in its long history. The abbey's rich library was known worldwide, but it was only one of several magnificent features in the monastery. At the height of its splendor in the sixteenth centuries, the abbey of San Giorgio commissioned architects such as Palladio and Longhena to reconstruct and enlarge the monumental complex, while artists of the caliber of Vittore Carpaccio, Jacopo Tintoretto and Paolo Veronese were summoned to enhance the monastery's iconography.

The story told by this book is in fact about a great painting which the monks commissioned from Paolo Veronese in 1562. Painted from 1562 to 1563, the canvas of about 70 square meters filled the entire rear wall of Palladio's Refectory, and was conceived as a logical and glorious *trompe-l'oeil* completion of the architecture. The painting illustrated the celebrated biblical episode of *The Wedding at Cana*, the first miracle attributed to Christ, and clearly an appropriate theme to embellish the great room in which the monks and their guests dined. The sacred theme was framed in a stage-like setting which fitted in incredibly harmoniously with the architectural space. The masterpiece became so celebrated that anyone visiting Venice made a point of going to San Giorgio to see it. According to Cosimo de' Medici, the painting alone was a reason for visiting Venice. Sovereigns and

princes throughout Europe asked for copies. This generated so much interest that the friars, to avoid being disturbed by all the requests, decided that no one would be granted permission to reproduce the painting.

The enduring chorus of praise and marvel also induced Napoleon and the French – who had occupied Venice – to seize the work in 1797 as war reparations. Having been cut up into several parts for the purpose of transport, the canvas was packed – as revealed by a report signed by Napoleon's commissars – and sent to Paris on 11 September 1797. The work was duly re-assembled and shown at the Louvre (where it still hangs today) on 8 November 1798. The masterpiece was never returned on the flimsy pretext of the difficulty of transporting it, and compensation was given in the form of a mediocre painting by Le Brun (now in Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice), despite the vehement protests of Canova.

A few years after *The Wedding at Cana* had been removed, the monastery was closed and the island of San Giorgio became a military deposit. For around 150 years it remained in a state of deep decay and abandonment.

In the early 1950s, Vittorio Cini – an entrepreneur from Ferrara and one of the leading players in the history of Italian industry at the time – fell in love with Venice and was granted a concession from the Italian state to use San Giorgio as the headquarters of a Foundation named after his son Giorgio, who had died prematurely in a plane crash. The Foundation's aim was to “promote the restoration of the monumental complex of San Giorgio and encourage the creation and development in the area of educational, social, cultural and artistic institutions... and to promote... cultural activities linked directly or indirectly with Venice, its history and traditions as a meeting place of various civilizations.” The huge resources employed, the frenetic building and speed with which

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the work was completed reveal Vittorio Cini's cultural ambition and his urgent desire to cancel the interlude of 150 years of degradation and re-establish the glorious tradition of the monastery through the new story of the nascent institution, rooted in the same place and capable of interpreting its spirit.

The palladian refectory, like the other great architectural features on the island – Buora's dormitory, the cloisters by Buora and Palladio, and Longhena's grand stairway and library – were restored to their former glory. But the bare rear wall of the refectory, a stubborn dumb artifact, betrayed the incomplete nature of the restoration. And although the wall once occupied by the great canvas was filled by a fine Tintoretto, the space lacked the "irreverent illusionistic extravagance" (Puppi, 1980), which Veronese had added to Palladio's severe architecture. The solidity of the architecture was thus no longer contrasted by the "movement of the painted story" (Bertelli, 2008). The fact the masterpiece could not be returned to the place for which it had been conceived was an open wound and a source of chagrin for Vittorio Cini, who strove in vain to have the work returned.

Even after the death of Vittorio Cini in 1977, the wound did not heal. In early 2001, when plans were being made for new restoration work on the monuments – by then 50 years had elapsed since the first restoration ordered by Vittorio Cini – there was a discussion on the possibility of reconstructing the wood paneling that once adorned the side walls in the refectory (as evidenced in the celebrated engraving by Coronelli shown opposite). The idea was abandoned not only because of the high cost of the work, but most importantly because, according to many, it would have highlighted even further the absence of Veronese's painting and thus add more salt to the wound. In March 2005 these feelings were what drove us to attempt to stage a kind of virtual return of *The Wedding at Cana* by projecting a high-definition image of the painting on the wall. The results were disappointing. The large windows had to be blacked out to see the image and this prevented an understanding of the dialogue between the painting and the architecture. I expressed my disappointment to Bruno Latour – the sociologist and philosopher of science who at that time had begun to



Figure 2. The picture of *The Wedding at Cana* projected in the Palladian refectory.

collaborate intensely with the Cini Foundation – and he told me about the possibility of making a facsimile of the painting that would be indistinguishable from the original. Latour put me in touch with Adam Lowe, who had created Factum Arte in Madrid, a studio specialized in the use of digital technologies for reproducing works of art. Lowe came to Venice and stayed three days at San Giorgio to explore the spirit of the place. He photographed the refectory from all angles and began passionate painstaking research into every detail of the painting, its execution and history.

This marked the beginning of a fascinating adventure whose outcome was difficult to foresee. There had never been a previous attempt to make a physical reproduction of a such a large canvas that was so accurate as to be indistinguishable from the original. Many people worked on the project, which involved the use of sophisticated digital technology and the expert craft skills of professional restorers. The facsimile was assembled and placed in the refectory in August 2007. On 11 September 2007, exactly 210 years after its removal, the canvas

was ‘unveiled’ and the overall work of art consisting of the architecture and painting was fully reconstructed and could once more be admired by Venetians and the rest of the world.

This book tells the story of this adventure. It contains basically three sections respectively concerning 1) the biography of the original painting ; 2) the detailed description of the technical processes through which the facsimile has been produced ; 3) the critical reflection on the aesthetic and historical significance of this operation, and the new light it brings on issues of conservation and restoration. Indeed, the unprecedented quality of the facsimile rekindled the issue in aesthetic theory concerning the relation between original and copy, a subject on which many feel Walter Benjamin said the last word with his notion of “aura.” As many reflections made in the third session show, the new perspectives created by Adam Lowe’s work lead us to conceive the “aura” in a radically different and dynamic way, as something which can “migrate,” from one place to another, from the original to its “copies.”