

# Relishing the Embellishments

**A CIRCUS TYCOON'S MUSEUM GIVES VERONESE'S FLAMBOYANT STAGECRAFT THE CENTER RING.** BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



Paolo Veronese, *The Baptism of Christ*, oil on canvas, late 1550s.

*ELEGANT, FESTIVE and supremely stylish, the art of Venetian Renaissance painter Paolo Veronese (1528–88) has found favor with American collectors ever since Old Masters began migrating to the New World during the Gilded Age. The current exhibition at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Fla.—“Paolo Veronese: A Master and his Workshop in Renaissance Venice”—presents a sumptuous array of Veronese’s works from North American public and private collections, offering a dual narrative of the artist’s career and the latter-day fascination*

*with his paintings. In conversation with Art & Antiques, the Ringling’s curator of European art, Virginia Brilliant, discusses this irrepressibly agreeable master, whose lively sense of design and ingenious figure groupings have furnished art history with a seemingly endless repertoire of graceful poses and gestures.*

**A & A:** What were some of the first of Veronese’s paintings to come to America?

**BRILLIANT:** The early collecting of Veronese’s works in America centered on portraits and mythological scenes. *Diana and Actaeon* (circa 1560–65) from the Phil-

adelphia Museum of Art was one of the first, acquired by John G. Johnson in 1902.

**A & A:** What is the narrative of *Diana and Actaeon*?

**BRILLIANT:** The young hunter Actaeon stumbles on the goddess Diana bathing, so she transforms him into a stag, and then his own hunting dogs devour him. It's actually a gruesome story, but it looks so pretty in the painting—the sensual nudes, the beautiful landscape. That's the fascinating thing about Veronese: even these rough subjects can become very elegant.

**A & A:** Were there other troubling motifs that he depicted with special grace?

**BRILLIANT:** When people see the executioner's gesture in the *Martyrdom and Last Communion of St. Lucy* (circa 1585), from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, they often wonder if it's some kind of courtship picture because the executioner seems almost to be caressing Lucy's breast. But he isn't—he's stabbing her.

**A&A:** Was it paintings like these that the renowned Harvard University professor and Dante scholar Charles Eliot Norton had in mind when he cautioned Isabella Stewart Gardner against Veronese's work, saying it represented a frivolous phase of Italian art, a wanton embrace of sensuality and a betrayal of the Renaissance ideal?

**BRILLIANT:** Charles Eliot Norton was a bit prudish.

**A&A:** Was he?

**BRILLIANT:** Mrs. Gardner paid him no attention—at least where Veronese was concerned.

**A&A:** She didn't like prudes?

**BRILLIANT:** No, she didn't; you need only look at her great Titian, *The Rape of Europa*, to be sure of that. And she went on to acquire several works by Veronese, or works that were considered to be by Veronese at the time. Veronese's aesthetic perfectly complemented what she was trying to achieve at Fenway Court—constructing a dramatic environment in which to appreciate art.

**A&A:** In your catalogue essay you suggest that Veronese was the ideal Old Master for America's Gilded Age. Was it his sense



*The Baptism of Christ*, circa 1580-88.

of stagecraft that you had in mind?

**BRILLIANT:** I love reading old novels by Henry James and Edith Wharton, where there are descriptions of grand parties in Gilded Age homes that seem like scenes from a Veronese feast. We know that James was thinking specifically about Veronese, and Wharton was probably familiar with his work as well. The zeitgeist was very similar; the theatricality, the artifice, the stage-set architecture and the fabulous scenery make for some wonderful visual parallels.

**A & A:** Your institution's founder, the circus impresario John Ringling, was no



From left: *The Virgin and Child With Angels and Appearing to Saints Anthony Abbott and Paul, the Hermit*, 1562; *Rest on the Flight Into Egypt*, 1570.



stranger to theatrical effects, and he built his home on Sarasota Bay to look like a Venetian palazzo—but Ringling chose the Venetian Gothic style, which is actually not a type of architecture we see in Veronese’s paintings, whose settings tend to be of classical design. Why didn’t Veronese stage his Venetian scenes in a more typically Venetian milieu?

**BRILLIANT:** By Veronese’s time the Palladian classical style from mainland Italy had become the dominant architectural idiom in the Venetian republic; Venetian Gothic lasted only until about 1480. So he was depicting the Venice of his day, although this may not be the Venice we expect. We’ve done some architectural elements in the show to give a sense of atmosphere—a grand entryway, an altar-like set-

ting for the Chrysler altarpiece—and we actually used marble columns from our own collection at the Ringling to build these things in the appropriate Palladian manner.

**A & A:** Wasn’t Veronese’s *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (circa 1572) the first painting Ringling purchased?

**BRILLIANT:** It was one of two pictures he acquired to inaugurate his collection in 1925.

**A & A:** The museum opened just six years later. How did the project come together so quickly?

**BRILLIANT:** In 1925 Ringling was working on the construction of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Longboat Key, near Sarasota, and he went off to Europe to buy decorative sculpture and architectural fragments



for use in the hotel. He went with a friend, Julius Böhler, who was an art dealer from Munich; at some point on the trip, Ringling announced that he wanted to establish an art museum, and he wanted Böhler to help him build a collection for it.

**A & A:** What was Böhler's response?

**BRILLIANT:** Apparently Böhler said that he had two pictures in Munich he thought Ringling should buy right away—the Veronese and an altarpiece by Luini.

**A & A:** Did Ringling go to Munich to see them?

**BRILLIANT:** He bought them sight-unseen.

**A & A:** Did he at least see photographs?

**BRILLIANT:** Not as far as we know. According to Böhler, Ringling just told him, "I trust you; I'll buy them"—which seems to have been fairly typical of Ringling's relationship with Böhler, from whom he bought a lot of very high-quality objects in a short period of time.

**A & A:** There seems to be a great deal of activity in the *Rest on the Flight into*

*Egypt*—what's happening in the picture?

**BRILLIANT:** The Virgin and Child and St. Joseph are enjoying a happy hiatus by a date palm on their way into Egypt after fleeing Herod's massacre. Veronese conceived the scene as a sort of "Upstairs, Downstairs" version of the Holy Family, in which angels act as domestic servants. One of them is pulling dates from a palm and tossing them to a second angel, who gathers them up in a cloth. Another one is setting out a picnic; another is folding laundry; another is grooming the donkey. They're fabulous. And they're all wearing colorful little outfits—there's one that's practically neon raspberry. You can see on the backs that Veronese has tried to figure out what kind of tunic an angel needs in order to accommodate its wings—so there are actual wing holes on these outfits.

**A & A:** Wing holes?

**BRILLIANT:** If you start looking at other pictures of angels, most artists don't think about how an angel's wings come out of the body; they just assume that the wings are

*From left: The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine, pen and brown ink and wash heightened with white on gray-green paper, before 1575; Portrait of Agostino Barbarigo, after 1571.*



From left: *Portrait of a Man*, 1576–78;  
*Allegory of Painting*, 1560s.

attached to the outfit like a Halloween costume. But Veronese very carefully imagines the anatomical presence of the wings, and this gives you some insight into his mind, which was weirdly literal yet also filled with flights of fancy.

**A & A:** Didn't Veronese's habit of embellishing biblical narratives get him into serious trouble?

**BRILLIANT:** One of Veronese's great specializations was the creation of enormous feast pictures for the refectories of monasteries, such as the *Marriage at Cana* (1563), which is now in the Louvre. In 1573 he painted what was supposed to be a Last Supper for the refectory of the Dominican church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, which is one of the great churches of Venice; a few months after he installed the picture the Inquisition summoned him and charged him with indecorum.

**A & A:** What was the specific objection?

**BRILLIANT:** They said that a Last Supper should not include "buffoons, drunkards, Germans, dwarves and other such scurrilities."

**A & A:** Germans?

**BRILLIANT:** I think it's really the part about the Germans that does it for me, because my husband is German and not at all indecorous. But of course Germany was the epicenter of Lutheranism, so you can understand why the Inquisition looked askance.

**A & A:** What happened in the end?

**BRILLIANT:** Veronese was ordered to make changes and to correct everything, but instead he changed the title of the picture from *The Last Supper* to *The Feast in the House of Levi*—which, as biblical episodes go, is kind of a non-event.



*The Martyrdom and Last Communion of Saint Lucy, circa 1582.*

**A & A:** I must admit I had to look it up, as I was not familiar with the passage. It's from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus sits down to eat with tax collectors and sinners because it is the sick, not the healthy, who need a physician.

**BRILLIANT:** In any case, it takes some chutzpah to change the title and not change the picture—although Veronese never painted a Last Supper with that kind of lively population again, so it does seem to have had an effect on him.

**A & A:** Was there an element of seriousness behind all the festivity in Veronese's art?

**BRILLIANT:** There is this whole Counter Reformation idea that comes in toward the end of his career of trying to identify with a protagonist in order to draw viewers emotionally into the scene. Art historians often say, "Oh well, Veronese is so decorative, so elegant, so pretty, so facile that he can't achieve those effects," but I'm not so sure. The references to everyday life in Venice, to the things that people would have recognized—the contemporary architecture, the costumes, the fabrics—yes, they're a little theatrical, but in a way, the immediacy and the beauty pull you in just enough, and

before you realize what's actually going on you're hooked.

**A & A:** Are there any works in the show that bear this out?

**BRILLIANT:** I'm thinking of the two Baptisms that we have: the early one from Raleigh and the late one from the Getty. Christ makes very different gestures in the two paintings. In the early picture, it's all about interiority and this private act that inaugurates his public ministry, but in the late one, he has his arms outstretched in a way that clearly alludes to, or prefigures, the Crucifixion. These very theatrical, performative things like gesture contributed enormously to the meaning that you get from the painting.

**A & A:** Did Veronese think consciously about the language of gesture?

**BRILLIANT:** Over his career he comes back to these same biblical subjects, like the Baptism, and he is constantly working through how to show things slightly differently, how to vary the emphasis, how to change the scene, how to improve the pose, how to add drama. You see his mind constantly at work.

**A & A:** Do his drawings offer any insight into his creative process?

**BRILLIANT:** A lot of the drawings that we have in the show are *primi pensieri*, or first thoughts. They can be hard to read; you have to imagine the blank sheet and then try to figure out at what point the various elements came in. But once you begin to grasp the line of development, you can see his mind rapidly at work, darting around the page, considering option after option—turning and twisting a figure, taking one figure out and putting another in, looking at things from a different direction, and then eventually getting to the solution that you can see in a finished painting.

**A & A:** What can we learn by observing Veronese's hand at work on such an intimate scale?

**BRILLIANT:** You think of Veronese, and you think of the Palazzo Ducale or the Villa Barbaro—these big paintings and complex decorative schemes—and yet when you see some of these drawings that are smaller than a piece of writing paper, he's incredibly successful and thoughtful on a small scale.

**A & A:** Are there any small paintings that share the thoughtfulness of the drawings?

**BRILLIANT:** One of the knockout pictures in the show is the little *Allegory of Painting* (1560s) from Detroit. When you walk into the gallery it's quite far away, but even at a distance it holds up. It's really beautiful, like a Rubens oil sketch—it's got that kind of immediacy and freedom of handling—and it absolutely looks like art personified, a blonde goddess painting away in her little niche. 🎨

**Paolo Veronese:  
A Master and his  
Workshop in  
Renaissance Venice**

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