The social lives of paintings in Sixteenth-Century Venice

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Conclusion

At the beginning of this study I proposed that paintings in sixteenth-century Venice had, what I called, social lives. As we saw, these paintings had a variety of roles, functions, and effects in the period they were produced; roles, functions, and effects that hardly match modern-day ideas about what paintings are and what they do. The case of the Doge's Palace made clear that modern notions of fixed genres tend to become irrelevant when applied to sixteenth-century Venetian paintings: paintings could be *historie*, portraits, and cityscapes at the same time and yet defy our ideas of what all these genres were meant for. The Doge's Palace furthermore showed that in Venice, boundaries between representations of reality and real presence tended to dissolve. Thus, this thesis set out to study a selection of Venetian paintings from the period using a new and interdisciplinary method of approach. This approach is inspired by Alfred Gell's notion of the art nexus, and is contextual in nature, in the sense that it aims to connect paintings with the culture that produced and was the first to use them.

The Artist

Any painting is undeniably made by a human being, a painter. Yet, in sixteenth-century Venice this painter, the one who physically produced the work, did not necessarily play an important part in the social life of his pro-

duct. This became apparent in the case of the *Annunciation* altarpiece in Treviso, where Titian's authorship is merely attributed in later art-historical scholarship, rather than having been acknowledged in the period itself. When the painting became a victim of a violent attack, being defaced with pitch, the sources did not mention Titian or any other artist. The same may be said of the *Christ Carrying the Cross*, owned by the Scuola di San Rocco. Sources dating from the first years that this painting was believed to perform miracles and was promoted as such by the Scuola, do not mention any artist. As we have seen, this situation changed in the course of the century: the miraculous painting was increasingly presented as the product of Titian's brush.

In Venice it was this same period, from about 1550 onwards, that saw a sudden outburst of theoretical writings on the art of painting. These writings, as we have seen in the chapter on the young noblewoman and amateur paintress Irene di Spilimbergo, often discussed the notion of authorship in painting. In these discussions the protagonist was Titian. When Irene di Spilimbergo died, Titian's contribution to bringing Irene back to life was deemed essential: by giving her painted portrait the finishing touch, he could turn it into an almost living surrogate. In the poetry collection composed after Irene's death, the painter as artist takes centre stage. Yet, to suggest that in the second half of the sixteenth century painters had permanently become the most important agents within the art nexus, is to neglect evidence to the contrary. As is shown in Chapter Four, Scipione Pulzone's role as maker of Bianca Capello's portrait often received recognition, but he had altogether little influence on the portrait's social life once it had arrived in Venice. The cult around Capello's portrait was primarily a political phenomenon, to which the artist remained subservient.

Regarding the artist's agency, two general observations need to be made. Firstly, the importance of Titian, which is hard to overestimate. This may seem self-evident, given the artist's well-known prominent position in Venice, Italy, and Europe as a whole. New is Titian's primacy if we want to better understand 'living' art. It is not a mere coincidence that he is related to four of the five paintings intensively discussed in these pages (and the master died, we may remember, before Bianca Capello became grand duchess): it is first and foremost with him that we find the connection between painting, liveliness and authorship. Titian comes to figure as the archetypal demiurge, the god-like creator who invests his creatures with life. In the second place,

throughout the sixteenth century the role of the artist could be subservient to that of other interested parties; from the situation in early modern Venice, where paintings were part of society, to our modern conception of autonomous art as the individual expression of an artist's genius, there is no straight line.

The Prototype

The main question regarding the prototype running through all of the preceding chapters may be formulated as: how did people think of the relation between a painting and the thing or person represented in that painting? As it turned out, this question is particularly hard to answer. In the case of Broccardo Malchiostro, patron of the Treviso *Annunciation*, his painted donor portrait was damaged by his fellow clerics in order to damage its prototype, Malchiostro himself. His caricaturized features on the wall of the Treviso chapter house were painted to make Malchiostro himself look ridiculous. Using images was by all means only one of the strategies his enemies applied: they simultaneously tried to attack Malchiostro's body directly. This behaviour fits in a wider European tendency of that period: images of saints and ecclesiastical representatives were ridiculed and attacked in the same ways as actual human beings. Such interaction with images may be characterized as volt sorcery.

We encounter the same lack of distinction between a painting and the person it represents in the case of the miraculous *Christ Carrying the Cross*. In a way, the painting seems to be just another depiction of Christ; yet that it became the centre of a shrine and attracted masses of pilgrims means that 'that Christ' (*quel Christo*), as certain sources called it, had an added value: the moment it became successful as a miraculous image, it was *the* means for people in its vicinity to reach Christ; it made Christ physically present in Venice. That, around 1550, the painting came to be regarded as a product of a contemporary artist, put Christ as the prototype at a distance – although we may wonder whether this is true for all people who engaged with the painting.

In Chapter Three we have seen how painting and poetry were invoked to revive a person who had passed away. Yet the poem collection for Irene di Spilimbergo also shows that the power of painting was feared to have a sinister side: contributors to the memorial volume, afraid of where artists' ever

increasing powers of lifelike representation might lead to, insinuate that paintings may extract life from the painter. Apart from that, this remarkable collection of poetry, expressing collective mourning over the death of a young and talented woman, can hardly conceal that Irene herself had no influence on the development of her 'image'; or on the life lived by her painted portrait. Compared to that, we may expect Bianca Capello to have managed to keep a tighter grip. As a living woman in a relatively powerful position, she decided to send a painted portrait of herself to Venice. Once there, it came to act as a stand-in for her which she could not really control.

As these reflections make clear, the exact relation between paintings and their prototypes is difficult to grasp. There was not always a direct link between prototype and owner, or between prototype and painting, and each party in a painting's network had an agenda of his own. Part of the difficulty arises from the fact that some sources *do* distinguish very clearly between a painting and whom it represents. This was illustrated in particular in Chapter Four, where the owner of Capello's portrait explicitly differentiated between the lady herself, far away in Florence, and the portrait he was holding in front of him. We may suggest that on the cognitive level, people distinguished between paintings and their fellow human beings; yet socially, they easily neglected these distinctions and thereby made them disappear.

The Recipient

Regarding those who commissioned, owned, or simply visited the paintings under discussion we have encountered both continuity and change. First of all, many of the users of paintings discussed had some kind of relation with the Holy See; many of them modelled their artistic patronage on central-Italian examples. This is far from self-evident in the Venetian Republic, which officially took an independent position in relation to the Vatican. Yet my research shows that there was much more cultural exchange with other parts of the Italian peninsula, and in particular with Rome, than is usually thought. What is more, paintings with what we could call a flowering social life seem to have mostly existed where political, religious, social, and cultural interests converged.

Apart from that, the four chapters have made a development visible towards institutionalization and increasing interference by the Venetian state.

The success of the miraculous *Christ Carrying the Cross* may be defined as a bottom-up phenomenon: it started with some 'ordinary people', was then recognized as an opportunity by the Scuola's administration and as such became part of the Scuola's attempts to rival with other Venetian confraternities and to emulate the State. In Treviso, Broccardo Malchiostro's *Annunciation* was installed to guarantee its patron's salvation, as well as to enlarge his presence in the worldly domain, but, as we have seen, inadvertently became a victim of opposing factions within the Trevisan diocese. The veneration of Irene di Spilimbergo through painting and poetry was initiated by her family and quickly developed into a pan-Italian event, engaging writers from all over the peninsula. All this happened against the background of a state strengthening its grip on its subjects. A state, furthermore, that had disbanded the Accademia della Fama; which has led scholars to believe the Irene di Spilimbergo project to be an attempt of the suppressed Academy to continue its activities underground. First and foremost, however, the construction of 'Irene' as an ideal woman made visible the cultural, social, and political activities of her family, the Spilimbergo clan. The portrait of Bianca Capello, finally, was introduced top-down by the grand duchess herself. It thus quickly attracted the attention of the Venetian government, as has been shown, and came to play a part on the stage of international politics; which, furthermore, was dominated by the same 'romanist' families that we encountered in earlier chapters.

The Painting

What, then, was the role of the painting itself? This role, I have proposed, lies in the painting's form. To be sure, there are many formal differences between the paintings that have been studied: their (im)mobility, dimensions, and styles all differ. Yet there are a number of formal characteristics which return again and again. A first characteristic I would like to mention is life-size figures. A second characteristic is the representation of eyes in such a way that they invite the viewer to seek eye contact. These two qualities, we may conclude, make the depicted figures – be they hated or loved – physically present. At the same time, we know that the period produced many more paintings meeting these formal requirements, while it is uncertain if they elicited equally intense responses from their audiences. We should therefore be care-

ful with making generalizations regarding the question of form and instead study each case separately. It seems altogether much more fruitful to focus on the producing culture as a whole: the way a painting interacted with its environment was the result of a complex interplay of forces; form only being a small part of that.

Social Life

Paintings in sixteenth-century Venice often were living objects, in the sense that they participated in society. Notwithstanding official church dogma, they interacted with human beings in all kinds of ways: they received visitors and attracted pilgrims; they healed and saved people; they made money; they had people fall in love with them; they provoked aggression and were victims of violence; they worked as agents of artists, of noble families and princely courts; they were beaten; they were kissed and caressed. Therefore, we may consider them as person-like. What this study makes clear is that, in the theatrical environment that was Venice, paintings performed their roles just like human beings did, all of them directed by relatively fixed scenarios that were modelled on church liturgy, on Petrarchism and courtly love, or on the rites of the Venetian state.

What does this mean for our understanding of early modern 'art'? Formulated in terms of Alfred Gell's art nexus, which has structured our investigation throughout – indeed, the object's social life is the outcome, or realization of that art nexus – we may speak of 'art' when the artist's contribution to the art nexus is relatively large; in other words, when the artist's agency, compared to that of other positions in the nexus, is important. The relative importance attributed to the artist and other agents was not primarily the result of a developing 'era of art', as some scholars have argued. It was the other way around: the developing notion of 'art' as such was the accidental outcome of certain political, social and religious constellations. Art objects were instruments in the hands of religious institutions, governments, and families; and so, we could say, was the artist, most of the time. At the end of the sixteenth century, this was still largely true.

What about that other art-historical protagonist, the viewer? The term 'viewer' as such implies a specific kind of relation: between an active, viewing subject and a passive object that is being viewed. Yet, we have seen that

paintings in Venice often were person-like, active participants in social situations. Rather than one-way traffic, the relation between 'viewer' and painting was *inter*active, it went in two directions; the viewer was sometimes also the viewed. In this sense, the term 'viewer' seems inapt to describe the role of people interacting with paintings; for it excludes the agency of the painting. Apart from that, interactions between art objects and people consisted not solely of mutual viewing: as has become clear, they included listening, touching, and other kinds of (imagined) exchange.

Preservation and Display: Some Implications

While nowadays many Venetian paintings from the period are still being preserved in the city, some of them even on the very spot for which they were originally made, countless others have been dispersed, so that Venetian paintings may now be found all over the world. Yet, even if we encounter them on the altars for which they were once destined, or in the halls where they have been hanging for ages, their earliest interactions with the people who made, commissioned, and viewed them have long since become invisible; sometimes to the extent that what I have here defined as their social lives have completely gone out. In this sense, there is a parallel with our modern-day treatment of non-western artefacts which may have implications for the way we view, display, and preserve premodern European art.

In museum studies over the last decades, scholars have been discussing the handling of non-western artefacts that in their cultures of origin count as sacred or alive – what American ritual theorist Ronald Grimes has coined 'object-beings'. Curators have become increasingly aware that by preserving and displaying these living objects 'in the western way' – that is, by encasing them in glass, controlling humidity, filtering out the sun's rays, etcetera – they deny these objects both life and death. My research suggests that we could very well pose the same questions with regard to premodern artefacts from our own culture.

The case of the Spilimbergo portraits may serve as an illustration. Deposited in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., thus hidden from the public's view, they are neither dead nor alive. The curator's decision not to display them is mainly based on the portraits' bad condition; the fact that the museum currently considers them as painted by one of Titian's followers, and

not by the master himself, seems to carry weight, too. One of the questions arising from my research is whether such traditional arguments should prevail when deciding whether or not to display objects. More in general, we should ask ourselves if we could think of ways to preserve and display premodern European paintings that would do more justice to their living potential, both then and now.