



PRESS RELEASE

from

THE FRICK COLLECTION

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VERONESE IN MURANO: *TWO VENETIAN RENAISSANCE MASTERPIECES RESTORED*

PAINTINGS TO LEAVE ITALY FOR THE FIRST TIME

October 24, 2017, through March 11, 2018



Paolo Veronese (1528–1588), *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*, 1566–67, oil on canvas, San Pietro Martire, Murano; photo: Ufficio Beni Culturali del Patriarcato di Venezia

This fall, The Frick Collection will present a focused exhibition on two important Renaissance paintings by the celebrated artist Paolo Veronese (1528–1588), *St. Jerome in the Wilderness* and *St. Agatha Visited in Prison by St. Peter*. While the paintings are known to scholars, their remote location in a church in Murano, an island in the lagoon of Venice known today for its glassmaking studios and shops, has made them difficult to study. *St. Jerome in the Wilderness* has been exhibited outside the church only once—in 1939, in the Paolo Veronese exhibition at Ca' Giustinian, in Venice— while *St. Agatha Visited in Prison by St. Peter* has not left the church since being installed in the early nineteenth century.

These two rarely seen canvases now leave Italy for the first time since their creation, over 450 years ago.

And thanks to Venetian

Heritage and the sponsorship of BVLGARI, they have been fully restored and returned to their original glory. *Veronese in Murano: Two Venetian Renaissance Masterpieces Restored*, on view

October 24, 2017, through March 11, 2018, will provide a unique

opportunity for an international audience to discover these two masterpieces in the Frick's unique setting. The exhibition is organized by the Frick's Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator Xavier F. Salomon, an eminent Veronese scholar (who wrote the accompanying catalogue), and Venetian Heritage.



Veronese, *St. Agatha Visited in Prison by St. Peter*, 1566–67, oil on canvas, San Pietro Martire, Murano; photo: Ufficio Beni Culturali del Patriarcato di Venezia

ABOUT THE PAINTINGS

The first of these two works depicts St. Jerome, who lived between the fourth and fifth century in Dalmatia and is known primarily for having translated the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible into Latin. Jerome spent substantial time in the desert, probably in Syria, where he led an ascetic life. In a letter to his friend Eustochium, Jerome describes his trials: “living in the wilderness, in the vast solitude that provides a horrid, sun-scorched abode to monks . . . Tears all day, groans all day—and if, resist it as I might, sleep overwhelmed me, my fleshless bones, hardly holding together, scraped against the bare ground. I say nothing about food or drink . . . All the company I had was scorpions and wild beasts . . . So it was that I wept continually and starved the rebellious flesh for weeks at a time. Often I joined day to night and did not stop beating my breast until the Lord restored my peace of mind . . . Angry and stern with myself I plunged alone, deeper and deeper, into the wasteland; and, as the Lord is my witness, from time to time and after many tears I seemed to be in the midst of throngs of angels.”

While living as a monk in Bethlehem, Jerome was visited by what was to become one of his most frequent iconographic symbols. As he and the other monks were reading the Scriptures, a lion limped into the monastery. The men fled in terror, but Jerome realized that the animal was injured. He asked his fellow monks to help him remove the thorn that tormented the animal’s paw, then dressed the wound. Once healed, the lion “lost all his wildness, and lived among [them] like a house pet.”



Detail of *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*

Veronese portrays Jerome in the desert, with trees framing the composition. On the right, wooden beams held together by ropes and covered by a roof of leaves indicate a rudimentary hut, a shelter from the elements. Underneath this structure is a still life of objects traditionally associated with Jerome: a crucifix, an hourglass, a skull, and two open books. The hourglass and skull refer to the transience of life, while the volumes allude to Jerome’s translation of the Bible. The saint is an isolated figure in this landscape, alone in his gruelling devotion. His muscular body is tense, covered only by a red cloth secured by a cord. Toothless and haggard, his face is transfixed as he focuses his tear-filled eyes on the crucifix, while beating his chest with a rock. The bruised ribs are visible, and drops of blood testify to his self-punishment. A divine wind rustles the saint’s graying beard, an extraordinary passage of bravura painting. The faithful lion on the left is the only witness to his frenzied state.



Detail of *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*

While *St. Jerome in the Wilderness* was a common subject for Italian Renaissance paintings and was a theme often treated by Venetian artists, the second Murano canvas depicts a less typical narrative: *St. Agatha Visited in Prison by St. Peter*. Agatha was a third-century martyr from Sicily who lived in Catania at the time of the Christian persecution

under the Roman emperor Decius. Of noble origin, she had pledged her chastity to God and therefore would not yield to the advances of Quintianus, a Roman consul, who was enticed by her beauty. Quintianus first tried to bend Agatha to his will by forcing her to live for a month in the brothel of a woman named Aphrodisia. Firm in her resolve, Agatha left the house untouched. Quintianus then commanded Agatha to worship pagan idols; when she refused, he sent her to jail where she was tortured and Quintianus ordered her breasts to be cut off. Left in prison without food or water and with no medical aid, she suffered greatly. One night she was visited by an old man who revealed himself to be St. Peter, telling her he had been sent by God to comfort and heal her. When the jailers were alerted by Peter's supernatural light, the saint vanished, and Agatha knelt in prayer, finding that her wounds were gone. Quintianus, however, did not desist. He had her placed naked over burning coals, but she was saved by a heaven-sent earthquake. Finally, having been sent back to jail, she prayed to God to end her torture, and she peacefully died in prison.



Detail of *St. Agatha Visited in Prison* by St. Peter

Veronese sets the scene in Agatha's dark prison cell, which he describes in detail. A high, barred window and a door to the right are the only portals to the outside world. Below the window is a bed, a simple wooden frame covered by a thin mattress; underneath it is a chamber pot. A candle at left illuminates a wood shelf on which Veronese has created a modest, yet exquisite, still life: a glass pitcher with red wine, a bowl, and a loaf of bread. Agatha has been interrupted during her prayers in the semi darkness. She is clothed in a green dress and clutches a pink drapery around her. A heavy chain below the bench makes clear that Agatha is a prisoner in this room. With her left hand, she draws a white, blood-stained cloth to her wounded breasts. She steadies herself against the bench, surprised by the two visitors that have burst into her cell. A glorious blond angel

dressed in light blue holds a long taper, bringing light into the shadowy room. He precedes St. Peter, who stands by the open door, monumentally dominating the right part of the picture. The saint is dressed in blue and burnt orange. In his left hand he holds the keys to heaven (one gold, one silver), his standard attribute. With his right hand he gestures upward, referring at once to his celestial mission and to Agatha's imminent healing, and possibly to her death and heavenly reward.



Detail of *St. Agatha Visited in Prison* by St. Peter

HISTORY OF THE WORKS

The two paintings were not originally intended for San Pietro Martire, but for a small chapel built near the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, on another part of the island. In 1566, a priest named Francesco degli Arbori, the chaplain of the Augustinian nuns of Santa Maria degli Angeli, was given a plot of land in the nuns' cemetery, adjoining the church, to construct a chapel dedicated to St. Jerome, and it was for this chapel that Veronese's two canvases were commissioned. Contemporary descriptions indicate that the chapel was simply decorated, with the two canvases being the main images in its interior: the *St. Jerome* hung over the altar with the *St. Agatha* facing it, on the

counterfaçade, over the main door. At the time, Veronese was one of the most successful and highest paid painters in Venice, creating magnificent images for the European aristocracy. (About 1565, he had painted *The Choice between Virtue and Vice* and *Wisdom and Strength* for an unknown patron. Both canvases now hang in the West Gallery of The Frick Collection.) How a priest on a small island got to know such a prominent painter and came to commission such costly paintings remains a mystery. Little is known about Degli Arbori's life, but the research conducted in preparation for this exhibition has uncovered two important documents relating to him: his deed of gift of the chapel to the nuns of Santa Maria degli Angeli, in 1566, and the priest's will, written soon before his death, in 1579.

In 1667, after hanging for a century in the chapel for which they had been created, Veronese's canvases were removed. On August 1 of that year, the nuns of Santa Maria degli Angeli, having determined that the paintings were "notably suffering damage from the injuries of time, inside the said chapel" had them relocated to the main church of Santa Maria degli Angeli. The nuns were also worried about possible theft.

From the second half of the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, the works were frequently described by Veronese's biographers and guidebook authors, who consistently gave their location as Santa Maria degli Angeli. With the fall of the Venetian Republic and the Napoleonic invasion of Italy in the early nineteenth century, most religious institutions were suppressed, and, in the late spring and summer of 1810, the majority of monasteries and convents in Venice were closed. Such was the fate of the nun's monastery at Santa Maria degli Angeli, which was officially suppressed in July of that year. By 1815, the *St. Jerome in the Wilderness* and the *St. Agatha Visited in Prison by St. Peter* had been moved to a neighboring Dominican church, San Pietro Martire, where they have remained. The chapel for which they were originally painted was left empty, abandoned, and eventually demolished, in 1830. The chapel's stone door, recently identified during research for this exhibition, is the sole architectural element of the structure known to survive. It is visible in the right wall of Santa Maria degli Angeli, presumably embedded there since the mid-nineteenth century.

Few examples of free-standing chapels created for single patrons are known to have existed in Venice. The chapel built for Francesco degli Arbori must have been an exceptional structure, and its destruction has meant the loss to subsequent generations of a fascinating site for Veronese's work. The island of Murano, however, has retained its enchanting character, and the humble monastic cemetery of Santa Maria degli Angeli still remains in its forsaken northwestern corner of the island. After his death, Francesco degli Arbori was buried in the cemetery, and his body presumably still lies there in the small plot of land adjacent to the church. Although the details of Degli Arbori's prestigious commission remain shrouded in the fog of the past, Veronese's compositions can be appreciated for their outstanding originality and skillful execution. The recent restoration of both canvases, as well as the technical analysis that accompanied their treatment, will enable future scholars to better understand these paintings and, perhaps, the nature of their commission.

The exhibition is made possible thanks to the generous support of BVLGARI. The accompanying catalogue is underwritten by the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.

INTERACT

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BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: 212.288.0700

Web site: www.frick.org

Building project: www.frickfuture.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

App: frick.org/app

Museum address: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue

Hours: Open six days a week: 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day

Admission: \$22; senior citizens \$17; students \$12; Pay-what-you-wish hours on Wednesdays from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. **PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS:** Children under ten are not admitted to the museum

First Fridays: Museum admission and gallery programs are free from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. on the first Friday evening of the month (except January and September)

Subway: #6 local to 68th Street station; #Q to 72nd Street station; Bus: M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: Included in the price of museum admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Shop: The shop is open the same days as the museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Museum Visits: Please call 212.288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is available online

Library address: 10 East 71st Street, near Fifth Avenue

Hours: www.frick.org/visit/library/hours

Admission: Open to the public free of charge

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For further press information, please contact Alexis Light, Senior Manager Media Relations & Marketing; Phone: 212.547.0710; E-mail: mediarelations@frick.org