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Rosand: Painting in Cinquecento Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto

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Rosand: Painting in Cinquecento Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto
Reviews and Discussion


Reviewed by Peter Burke
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This study—or more exactly this collection of essays, neatly reconstructed into a book—has two main aims, one relatively limited and the other more ambitious. The more limited aim is to re-place the work of three great Venetian painters in “the specific context for which they were intended.” The notoriously imprecise term context is here understood in more than one sense. Like many art historians of late, Rosand is well aware of the social context of painting, the position of the artist, and the conditions of patronage. He is also concerned with problems that have attracted less attention, concerning the physical context of particular paintings, their original location, and their architectural frames. The value of this latter approach is demonstrated most clearly in Rosand’s interpretation of Titian’s asymmetrical Madonna di Ca’ Pesaro as “a response to the challenge of a particular site” (to the left of the high altar in the church of the Frari) rather than “a deliberate assault upon aesthetic and theological tradition.”

Rosand’s second and more ambitious aim is to reveal and trace the history of the “expressive conventions” of painting in sixteenth-century Venice. He rejects the term iconography because he is unhappy with the implied distinction between form and content. He does undertake analyses of a type that others would call iconographic, including an interpretation of the old egg-seller in Titian’s Presentation of the Virgin as a symbol of the Synagogue, but the thrust of his argument goes in a different direction. The author is at his most interesting when dealing with what he calls the “narrative space” of paintings intended for “lateral scansion” from left to right as if the figures were walking in procession. As he points out, these conventions allow individual artists considerable freedom for manoeuvre. Titian’s Presentation, for example, breaks the flow from left to right with figures looking back, while Veronese’s Family of Darius confronts the spectator with “a great wave sweeping down from the left frame . . . met by the solid block of figures of the Greek warriors.” In both these cases, the narrative flow is “parallel to and close behind the picture plane,” as was traditional in Venice: “the protagonists act on a narrow foreground stage.” Tintoretto, on the other hand, broke with tradition by adopting a deep perspective that made lateral scan-

sion impossible. To give the spectator the necessary cues, he relied on the gestures of the figures, as in his Miracle of St. Mark.

In these spatial analyses, which are generally convincing (and throw into high relief the contrast between Tintoretto and his predecessors), Rosand may be thought to have left “context” far behind. However, his book does contain a middle ground where narrative space and local conditions meet: the theater. Especially in the case of Veronese, the author demonstrates both the artist’s involvement with the stage and his imitation of theatrical backdrops, costumes, and other visual conventions in his pictures. It is too bad that so little is known about the staging of religious plays, in particular, in Renaissance Venice, so that religious paintings have to be interpreted in the light of the conventions of secular drama, but the method remains illuminating. Painting in Cinquecento Venice betrays its origin in self-contained studies by some of the ends left hanging loose. After the Titian chapters, the imaginative replacement of paintings in their original locations is virtually abandoned (if for lack of evidence in the cases of Veronese and Tintoretto, the author might have told us so). Apart from the case of Tintoretto’s St. Mark, curiously little attention is paid to gesture, despite its potential for enriching a dramaturgical approach to painting. All the same, Rosand’s achievement is considerable. Anyone interested in art as part of a cultural system would do well to meditate on this book and how to adapt its approach to read the narrative paintings of other cultures.


Reviewed by Jeanne Thomas Allen
Temple University

Thomas Waugh’s Show Us Life is a distinctive, much-needed text devoted to what he calls the “committed documentary.” Why he does not say political documentaries of the radical left would perhaps be an essay in itself, but the collection serves the extremely valuable function of organizing an often superb body of periodical literature and academic research of the last fifteen years. Show Us Life will be of particular use to scholars not specializing in this area and students whose rate of attrition on “closed reserve” arti-