

Reconsidering the *concorso* for the *Paradiso* in the Palazzo Ducale, Venice

Abstract

This paper corrects some misconceptions concerning the so-called *concorso* (contest) for the execution of the *Paradiso*, a vast painted canvas for the east wall of the Sala del Maggior Consiglio in the Palazzo Ducale, Venice. This commission followed the destruction of the previous decoration by fire in 1577. While the painting, still *in situ*, was eventually realised by Jacopo Tintoretto, it was originally commissioned from Francesco Bassano and Paolo Veronese after some *modelli* (presentation sketches) were produced by five different artists and evaluated by the Venetian authorities. It is commonly assumed that this was an open contest that took place in 1582, with all painters being given the same assignment simultaneously and submitting their projects approximately at the same time. It is also believed that the sequence of lunettes indicated above the design of the *Paradiso* in some of the preparatory sketches refers to a provisional frieze that was intended to replace the former Gothic arches under the ceiling in the room, and that this temporary frieze was removed in 1582. By demonstrating, in the first instance, that most of these assumptions are based on the misreading of a document, this article argues against the accepted chronology of the commissioning process and proposes that it consisted of a sequence of multiple phases in which different solutions were taken into account and overlapped with one another. It also re-examines and puts forward new conclusions about the presence or absence of the lunettes in the known preparatory studies, which do not refer to a provisional frieze allegedly installed after the fire, as commonly believed. Finally, it revises the implicit notion that the so-called *concorso* was carried out within the same framework as modern contests between competing artistic visions and emphasises the role of individual sponsorship. Though the proposed hypothesis of reconstruction cannot be conclusive due to the limited nature of the evidence, this article draws a line between facts and fictions, thus providing a firm, new basis for future research.