

## Simona Cohen

### **Changing Functions of the Canine Image in Venetian Religious Paintings of the Sixteenth Century**

Most scholars have assumed that Renaissance artists related to animal depictions as part of the new naturalistic perception of nature and rejected the symbolic and didactic function assigned to them for over a millennium, thus obscuring many conservative and retrospective aspects that are reflected in the persistence of medieval iconography after 1400. This paper demonstrates how Venetian Renaissance artists perpetuated the symbolic contexts of animal symbolism, which they disguised under the veil of genre and narrative in religious art. The questions of continuity and innovation in Renaissance culture are examined in the specific context of canine symbolism, in the religious art of sixteenth century Venice. Venetian painters of the *Cinquecento* shared an unprecedented penchant for depicting animals in general, and dogs in particular, in their secular and religious iconography. A dramatic pattern of change is demonstrated in their approach to canine iconography, as demonstrated from the 1540s to the 1590s, in religious works by Titian (c.1488-1576) and Tintoretto (1519-1594).

Conceived as an ambivalent creature from classical antiquity until the Renaissance, the dog was praised for its fidelity, wisdom, vigilance, prophetic vision, and curative abilities, but was negatively associated with sexual promiscuity, anger, gluttony and avarice. In the series of Capital Sins the dog most frequently represented *Luxuria*, *Avaritia*, *Ira* or *Invidia*. The conception of his licentious nature, which originated in Greece, was perpetuated in medieval moralizing literature and survived as an artistic theme during the Renaissance. Bestiaries still survived in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts written in Tuscan or Venetian dialect. Medieval moralizations were likewise perpetuated in preacher's sermons until the 16<sup>th</sup> century and after.

Throughout his career, Titian consistently adopted the negative moralistic connotations of the canine image, which had been transmitted to the Renaissance by medieval literature and art. It is not surprising that symbolic dogs in his religious paintings are associated with negative human passions.

The function of the canine participant in Tintoretto's art presents quite a different picture. Dogs that have no inherent relation to the narrative theme appear in more than a dozen of his religious paintings. Among the documented works in this category are at least four versions of the *Last Supper*, and at least two or three versions of the *Washing of the Feet*, all of which feature a prominent canine figure. Additional examples of his canine depictions, appearing in varied religious contexts, have no precedents in Italian art.

It is demonstrated that the significance of these animals, as depicted in sacred events, are related to classical sources that illustrate positive conceptions of the canine character and faculties. In literature of the sixteenth century the dog was increasingly cast in an authoritative role, attesting to miraculous and supernatural events by virtue of its superior perception or exemplifying the ideal of rationality. About the same time that Tintoretto was beginning to introduce dogs into his religious paintings, for example, the humanist scholar and medical doctor Conrad Gesner published his four-volume *Historia animalium* (1551-58), translated by Edward Topsell as the *History of four-footed beasts* (London, 1607 & 1658). Among the sources adopted by Gesner were Aristotle's *De animalibus* and Pliny's *historia naturalis*, both published in Venice in the late Quattrocento, and Aelian's *Περὶ Ζῴων Ἰδιότητος* which he translated into Latin as *De natura animalium* and published in 1532. These conceptions influenced humanistic iconography.

Classical sources also provided prototypes for canine epitaphs and laudatory poems in sixteenth century writings. Among the Renaissance authors who contributed to the revival of these literary forms were the prominent Venetian scholars Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) and Andrea Navagero (1483-1529).

While writers of the sixteenth century praised canine cleverness, rationality, alertness, loyalty, vigilance, memory, prudence, and vision, Venetian artists were depicting the virtuous canine in allegorical contexts. By the late 1540s and 1550s, when Tintoretto began introducing canine images into his religious paintings, many of the relevant sources on animals had become available through the Venetian printing press.

Tintoretto's dogs fulfill different functions in his various paintings. This diversity of iconographic significance is also reflected in revived antique sources and contemporary literature. Concurrently with the innovations of Tintoretto, Veronese began introducing dogs into every possible context, obscuring definable borders between secular and religious iconography.