



A reconstruction of the altarpiece

# Reconstructing a Renaissance Masterpiece after 200 years

Xavier F. Salomon, Curator,  
describes how four pieces of  
a butchered masterpiece are  
brought together

Paolo Veronese:  
The Petrobelli Altarpiece  
10 February – 3 May

It seems fitting that, after Guido Reni's *Saint Sebastian*, the second painting from the permanent collection that will be the centre of an 'in focus' exhibition in Room 10 is its neighbour at the end of Soane's enfilade, Paolo Veronese's *Saint Jerome and Girolamo Petrobelli*. This is the most important Renaissance painting in the gallery, and, apart from the group in the National Gallery, the only large-scale painting by Veronese in London.

The painting was in Desenfans' collection in London by 1795. In that same year the historian Pietro Brandolese described the work as a fragment from a large altarpiece, which had been removed from the church of San Francesco at Lendinara, in the north-east of Italy, in 1788. The altarpiece – more than five metres high – had been painted by Veronese around 1563 for the cousins Antonio and Girolamo Petrobelli for their family burial chapel, which was dedicated to Saint Michael. When the Order of the Franciscan Minor Conventual Friars was suppressed in 1769, the church and convent were closed down and by 1811 they had been replaced by fields. Veronese's large painting was ruthlessly cut down and sold in pieces. One of the fragments reached Desenfans in London, while two others appeared in the Duke of Sutherland's collection at Stafford House. These three surviving fragments are now preserved at Dulwich, in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, and in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. The central part of the altarpiece, representing Saint Michael, disappeared after the cutting-up of the painting.



Paolo Veronese (Callian). Saint Anthony/Abbot as Patron of a Kneeling Donor, National Gallery of Scotland



Paolo Veronese, Saint Michael, Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas

Long thought lost, what remains of the archangel – its head – has been re-discovered in the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, as part of the preliminary research for this exhibition. Subsequent technical examination undertaken in Ottawa has confirmed that this fragment was indeed part of the original painting.

The Dulwich and Edinburgh fragments of the altarpiece were briefly reunited at Dulwich in 1981, but the Ottawa and Austin fragments have not been seen in Europe alongside the other two pictures since the eighteenth century. This exhibition – the first uniquely devoted to the work of Veronese in the United Kingdom – reunites the four parts of the *Petrobelli Altarpiece* for the first time since the painting's brutal division. Both the Ottawa and Austin fragments have been especially cleaned and restored by the National Gallery of Canada in preparation for the exhibition. The installation will take place in Room 10, and the reconstructed altarpiece will provide the centre of a chapel-like room.

Towering at the centre of the room, Saint Michael, trampling Satan and weighing human souls in his scales, presides at the heart of the painting. At each side, the two cousins, Antonio and Girolamo, piously gaze at the archangel and pray for their own salvation and that of their family, in the afterlife. Both are protected and accompanied by their name saints, Anthony Abbot with his attributes of a crozier, bell, and wild boar, and Jerome holding the model of a church (which identifies him as one of the Fathers of the Church) and with his faithful lion to the right. Above, in a lunette, the classical Palladian columns give way to a heavenly vision of three



Paolo Veronese, St Jerome and a Donor © Trustees of Dulwich Picture Gallery

angels (dressed in red, white and green – the colours of Faith, Hope and Charity) holding the body of the dead Christ, while two smaller angels flutter around holding instruments of the passion.

The Scottish artist and dealer Gavin Hamilton, writing about the altarpiece and its mutilation in 1788, tragically noted how the painting 'will be sold just like meat in a butcher's shop, poor Paolo, poor Painting'. The reunion and reconstruction at Dulwich, which will then travel to Ottawa and Austin, will be a unique occasion to re-evaluate an important masterpiece that has been much abused and almost forgotten.

**Curator's Lecture**  
 Thursday 12 February  
 12.30pm/Linbury Room  
 Free, no booking