TINTORETTO’S HOLY HERMITS AT THE SCUOLA GRANDE DI SAN ROCCO

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You who let come near to you women who have greatly sinned, and augment the gains of penance in eternity forever, grant unto this good soul also-one who lost her head but once, unaware that she did wrong-as is fitting, your forgiveness!

– Faust II, Holy Hermits Chorus to Mater Gloriosa: Mary Magdalene, The Woman of Samaria and Mary of Egypt

Likened to Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, Jacopo Tintoretto’s1 colossal series of painted canvases at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco2 in Venice comprise one of the most celebrated cycles of sixteenth-century Italy. The famed Crucifixion, Passion of Christ, and ceiling paintings

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1 A younger contemporary of Titian and Paolo Veronese, Jacopo Tintoretto (1519–94), is often described as the most skilled Venetian painter to engage in an anti-classical Mannerist mode. The most current scholarship suggests that Tintoretto’s eclectic style and unprecedented rapid technique was nurtured in the company of “semi-established” artists of the 1530s such as Jacopo Bassano and Andrea Schiavone in Bonifazio de’ Pitati’s Venetian workshop. See discussion by Philip Cottrell, “Painters in Practice, Tintoretto, Bassano and the Studio of Bonifazio de’ Pitati,” in Jacopo Tintoretto: Proceedings of the International Symposium (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2009), 50–51; 55–56. Tintoretto’s ability to secure an overwhelming number of public commissions in Venice, including the Doge’s Palace, the Churches of Madonna dell’Orto and San Giorgio Maggiore, as well as the Scuola della Trinità and the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, is unrivaled compared to any other artist of his era.

2 The Scuola Grande di San Rocco remains the only active lay confraternity in Venice today. This sixteenth-century meeting hall was built to accommodate a growing membership dedicated to the plague saint, San Rocco, or Roch. The scuole grandi were the wealthiest and most powerful confraternities, originating in the thirteenth century when the flagellant movement was popular throughout Italy. By the sixteenth century these spiritual corporations became more practical in their focus, assisting their members on an economic and social level, thereby reflecting the mission of San Rocco. San Rocco confraternity members were obliged not only to attend Mass, processions, and administrative meetings, but also to offer religious and economic assistance, attend to the sick, and those who died.
of Old Testament typological parallels lavish the ornate upper floor of the confraternity meeting hall. While overall the subject matter of the cycle is straightforward, controversy befalls the identification of two problematic paintings in the Marian cycle dated between 1582 and 1587 on the sala terrena, or ground floor³ (fig. 5.1). The two problematic canvases, which depict solitary female saints set within landscapes, are presently located in the southeast and southwest corners flanking the altar. Relative to their surroundings the figures are relatively small in scale (figs. 5.2 and 5.3). Each saint is chastely covered by a red robe and voluminous mantle and dons a halo. The positions of the saints within the landscape compliment each other. The figure identified as Mary Magdalene, to the left of the

³ Rudolf Berliner, “Die Tätigkeit Tintorettos in der Scuola di San Rocco,” Kunstchronik und Kunstmarkt, 31 (1920): 468 and 492 cited in Charles De Tolnay, “L’Interpretazione dei Cicli Pittorici del Tintoretto Nella Scuola di San Rocco,” Critica d’Arte 7 (1960): 341, no. 2. This contentious point is addressed in the present essay. There are no documents that explicitly suggest a manufacture date for the Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt paintings. As a result, only approximate dates have been assigned to the paintings by Berliner, and more recently, by Valentina Sapienza in “Vecchi documenti, nuove letture. Ragionando sulla cronologia delle Storie di Maria di Jacopo Tintoretto nella Scuola Grande di San Rocco,” Venezia Cinquecento 16 (2006): 174.