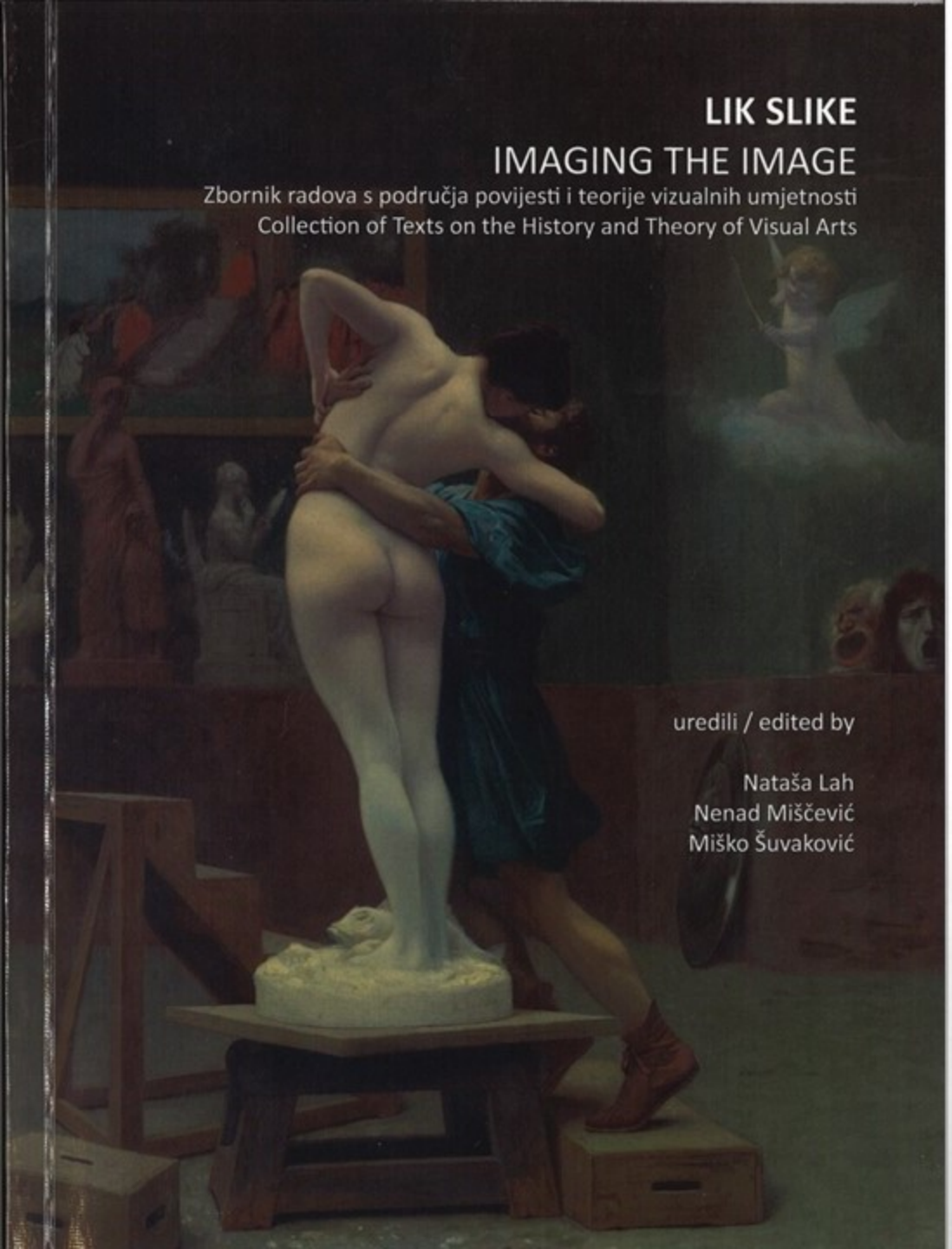

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Matteo Ponzone, *Bog Otac sa sv. Antom Padovanskim i sv. Klarom* crkva sv. Frane, Šibenik, četvrto desetljeće 17. st./ *God the Father with St. Anthony of Padua and St. Claire,* Church of St. Francis, Šibenik, 1630s

VALUE AND PRICES OF PAINTINGS IN VENICE, ISTRIA AND DALMATIA DURING THE 17TH CENTURY

(Some Examples)

Nina Kudiš, Marin Bolić

It is to be supposed that today as well as during the past centuries, and here we will be especially interested in the *Seicento*, all those involved in the art market acted rationally. Thus, the exceptionally important, yet frustratingly inconclusive theoretical approaches to the issue of value of art that deal with the beholder's share (that is, with the standpoint of the evaluator) or, vice versa, with the (im)possibility of agreement about the value of some works of art scattered in time and space (the *vexata quaestio* of the existence/inexistence of the eternal values)[1] or that deal with the everlasting tension between (the perception of) intrinsic and instrumental value of the works of art,[2] will have to be left aside. We will try to show, instead, how the rational actors such as

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1 Koerner, Rausing (2003²: 419-433)

2 Van den Braembussche 1996:32-33. The question concerning the relation between the artistic and the economic value of works of art became very important already during the middle decades of the 16th century. The debate was especially motivated by Michelangelo's artistic production that was considered unrivalled (Sohm 2010:2).

donors, collectors, agents or merchants and, last but not least, appraisers or adjudicators (most commonly painters themselves),[3] made decisions about the value of a particular painting in the territory of *Serenissima* during the 17th century.

The theory of visual arts, especially if advocated or interpreted by scholars that are not exceptionally familiar with the field research or with the *case study*[4] methodology or are not art historians[5] at all, tends to act as Cinderella's evil stepsisters. True to the ancient Central European folk tradition of raising children by dint of frightening stories, they cut off a part of their heels and toes in order to fit the golden slipper. Here the opposite approach should be taken: from the particular cases that demonstrate the accepted practice towards more general considerations.

Supporting the notion of eternal tension between the aesthetics and monetary value in evaluation of works of art, the price of paintings in Venice during the 17th century was formed, generally speaking, according to two criteria.[6] The first concerns the quantity, measured by the dimensions of the canvas and the number of the represented figures. The second concerns quality, that is, the perceived or estimated artistic value. It is, essentially, the same criterion that functioned in Venice from the *Quattrocento* onwards, summarized by Peter Humfrey in two words: time and reputation.[7] In order to produce larger compositions, whether they were made in tempera on wood or in oil on canvas, and if they were populated with an important number of figures, a painter employed many more working hours than for the execution of small compositions or those that were dominated by the backdrop consisting of

[3] Sohm (2010:17)

[4] There is a vast list of literature discussing this method of research in social sciences and humanities. On this occasion, we would like to indicate the article by Rob Van Wynsberghe and Samia Khan (2007) in which he redefines the term and its content, while warning about the prejudices connected to it. One of these is the opinion that the *case study* method cannot produce generalisations, although the authors warn against their uncritical acceptance. The generalisations could be accepted, the author underlines, only if they are confined to a certain period or context (VanWynsberghe, Khan, 2007 : 85).

[5] A telling example here are all the theoreticians, mostly philosophers, that in the past but also recently advocated extreme positions that see art as the medium for achieving the sublime experience or, on the contrary, as a commodity. On this see, for example, Van den Braembussche (1996 : 34-41)

[6] In fact, the price of paintings was formed in a more complicated manner and it was influenced by the subject, that is, the genre (for example, *pittura d'istoria* was the most valued genre, followed by portraiture, landscape and, finally, still life; see Félibien, 1669: *Preface*, s. p.), the date of execution, dimensions, the number of figures, etc. The original and autograph paintings were more expensive than numerous copies that were present on the market, as well as the works executed by the master's collaborators. The prices were quite often influenced by the age of the painter (the older they got, the lower the retributions became), his reputation, the fame of the patron or collector, since the painters adjusted their claims to their means. Sohm (2010 : 23-30)

[7] Humfrey (1993 : 152)

landscape or architecture.[8] In addition, the amount of retribution depended inevitably on the reputation of the master: those perceived as weak or mediocre were never able to achieve the reward per represented figure as high as did the champions, such as Giovanni Bellini (Venice, about 1435 - 1516) or his follower Cima da Conegliano (Conegliano, 1459 – 1517). It should be noted, though, that it is impossible to assess what were the precise earnings of painters from the existing contracts and archival documents. When one detracts the expense for the material (for example the cost of the expensive pigments of gold leafs), as well as the expense for the backing or the frame, for the wages of the assistants and for the transport to a distant destination, the impressive agreed upon sum of several hundred ducats melts to a much more modest amount. The painter was left with maybe one fourth or one third of the total payment.[9] To complicate the things even more, the masters were sometimes additionally rewarded in money but they were also paid in kind, for example wine or wheat. Taking into consideration all the obscurities and the possibility that we lack the key data for most transactions, the fact remains that differences in the achieved prices reflect the difference in the evaluation of particular masters and they do not diverge much from the opinions of the contemporary experts in Venetian painting. To put it simply, during his entire career, Francesco Bissolo (Treviso, 1470 – Venice, 1554) was far less payed than Cima da Conegliano or Alvise Vivarini (Venice, 1446 – 1502).[10]

During the third decade of the 16th century in Venice and, gradually, in the entire territory of *Serenissima* a significant change in the pattern of forming prices of paintings took place. It was stimulated by the prices of Titian's (Pieve di Cadore, about 1490 - Venice, 1576) paintings increased many times over for the Venetian but even more

[8] The fundamental and often quoted chapter from the book by Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, entitled „Conditions of Trade"(1988²:3-27) elucidates the situation concerning the painting on the Apennine peninsula during the 15th century. The author analyses the changes in the content and the stipulations of contracts for paintings, mostly painted polyptichs by Florentine and Tuscan masters, detecting evolution in assessing their value. While at the beginning of the century, the lion's share of the costs was employed for acquiring materials and pigments, especially for the precious *lapis lazuli*, as the time passed the patrons began to increasingly appreciate and reward the painter's skill. It was measured by comparing the commissioned work to other famous or celebrated works by the same master or by comparing it to the works of some other eminent contemporary painter. The other touchstone of quality of the commissioned work was often formulated in the form of master's commitment to paint specified or the majority of the figures himself, single-handedly without delegating the job to his collaborators. In Venetian painting similar trends could be noted, especially as the use of golden leaves for the background was gradually abandoned.

[9] The transport by water, either by sea or by inland waterways, was much cheaper, so this factor could also influence the price of an artwork in the case the patron did not take care of it himself. Humfrey (1993 : 153, 155)

[10] Humfrey (1993 : 154, 155, 356, cat. 83.)

for the foreign patrons, mostly European aristocracy and rulers.[11] From that moment onwards, the paintings by the first-rate masters more often than not started to achieve first-rate prices strengthened by the eagerness of the potential patrons to acquire their work. Such developments on the market started the inflation that was additionally prompted by the wave of renovations of Venetian church interiors, of the *alberghi* of great and small confraternities (*scuole grandi* and *scuole piccole)* as well as of the Doge's Palace that suffered two big fires in 1574 and 1577.[12]

Indeed, during the last decades of the 16th century, the prices of paintings in Venice rocketed immensely. For example, at the beginning of the period, *Procurazia di Citra* payed five, then ten ducats for the portraits of their officials. Eventually they ended up paying the vertiginous price of seventy ducats per portrait. Ultimately, a decree was issued that limited the highest price to fifteen ducats for portrait. At the same time, it seems that the real price of this lesser genre executed by the most popular painters remained stable at 25 ducats during the whole century. [13] The average price for the large canvases intended for churches and public palaces, *i teleri*, made from the last decades of the *Cinquecento* up to the mid-17th century, amounted to fifteen ducats per square meter, with a considerable decline during the great plague epidemic around 1630. However, Jacopo Palma il Giovane (Venice, 1548/1550 – 1628) obtained the price of four hundred ducats for the large canvas that even today adorns the presbytery of the Venetian church Santa Maria dei Carmini, while Marco Vicentino (Venice, 1583 – 1615) for the painting of equal dimensions, situated on the opposite wall received only 140 ducats.[14] From the mid years of the *Seicento* the prices of *i teleri* started to bounce occasionally, reaching the impressive average of 46 ducats per square meter only in the third decade of the 18th century. At the beginning of the 17th century, the prices of altarpieces executed by prominent masters ranged from two to three hundred ducats, which entailed a significantly diverging reward per figure and approximately fifteen to twenty five ducats per square meter of the painted surface. At the end of the same century, the average price remained the same, although the most respectable painters started to charge for their altarpieces more than three hundred ducats, while the less sought after masters had to settle for rewards ranging between fifty and one hundred ducats. However, considering the period of 150 years, that is, from the beginning of the *Seicento* until the mid-18th

[11] Humfrey (1993:156)

[12] Humfrey (1998 : 518-552); Sohm (2010:208)

[13] Sohm (2010 : 208)

[14] Mason Rinaldi (1984 : 251-254); Sohm (2010:238)

century, the prices of paintings were rising steadily and much faster than the cost of, for example, work or wheat.[15]

The painters negotiated with the patrons directly and the intercession of agents was uncommon. However, quite often because of misunderstandings between the two parts or as stated by the reached agreement, at the end of the process the painting had to be assessed by an expert or by a committee of experts. These were chosen among painters according to their reputation, acquaintance or simply because of the vicinity of their workshop. They were quite free in formulating their judgement but they were expected to be just and impartial.[16] The practice diverged significantly from these principles and in order to demonstrate this the paradigmatic case of Francesco Ruschi (Rome, about 1598 – Treviso, 1661), a Roman naturalised in Venice, who worked for Francesco Morosini, is often quoted. The Venetian nobleman ordered the altarpiece that still adorns the last altar situated against the right wall of the then Venetian Cathedral – San Pietro di Castello, for 300 ducats. Eventually, the parsimonious patron, probably also displeased by the significant delay in delivery of the painting, offered only a hundred ducats. The adjudicators chosen by *Procuratore de Supra* were painters Sebastiano Mazzoni (Florence, 1611 – Venice, 1678) and Ermano Stroiffi (Padua, 1616 – Venice, 1693) that obviously decided to take a stand in the name of the entire profession. Mazzoni thus suggested that Francesco Morosini had to pay the unheard of sum of 900 ducats, while Stroiffi thought 550 ducats should suffice. Eventually, the *Procuratore* accepted the latter advice so the altarpiece by Ruschi became the example of the most expensive painting made in Venice during the mid-17th century.[17] At the same time, this case served as caution to all the patrons against trying to extort significantly lower rewards than those agreed.

The Secondary Market

A real, developed and booming secondary market of paintings, that is, the market for old masters' works and for the items that previously made part of a collection, evolved in

[15] Sohm (2010 : 210, 248-250) During the 17th century in Venice, the annual wages of a master glassmaker amounted to one hundred ducats, while a construction worker made sixty ducats per year. The annual wages of the apothecary assistant were a bit lower, while the translator at the Venetian consulate in Istanbul made more than two hundred ducats. Cecchini, 2007:144-145. It is implied that "ducat" means silver Venetian ducat, although the payments were carried out in liras. The exchange ratio between the two monetary units remained stable during the whole century, amounting usually to 6,4 liras for one ducat. Very often, the contracts or inventories state the ratio explicitly, in order to clear any doubt.

[16] Cecchini (2007 : 149)

[17] Sohm (2010 : 17)

Venice only during the 17th century. However, the regions of *Stato da Mar*, such as Istria and Dalmatia, witnessed no such development. Already at the beginning of the *Seicento*, the ownership of the works by famous painters of the past centuries was considered very important among the Venetian aristocracy. The phenomenon coincided with similar tendencies in other important urban centres on the Apennine Peninsula and all over Europe. The ease and frequency with which the paintings changed their owners in Venice during the 17th century is amazing, regardless of whether they were made by old masters, contemporary painters, copyists or they were part of a serial production. Since the original paintings by Titian, Paolo Veronese (Verona, 1528 – Venice, 1588) or some other sought after master of the *Cinquecento* became too expensive because of the demand on the market, a large number of copies were being made. They were also in high esteem if made "di buona mano", that is, by the contemporary masters engaged by the owners themselves. To this purpose, the collectors provided the copyists with accommodation for a certain period of time in their homes. It is probable that a distinct market for such copies existed at the time in Venice. Concomitantly, the works by the great masters very rarely appeared at the auctions held daily at Rialto or Piazza San Marco because private transactions yielded higher prices. The paintings were sometimes pawned for cash. They were lent for longer or shorter periods, for free or with compensation. They were given in lottery but they were very rarely given in present. They often changed their owners by virtue of testaments, that is, as inheritance. In all these cases the opinion of professionals, that is, the selected painters was needed, in order to agree upon the price in the process of buying and selling, for the auction or for the assessment of the (contended) inheritance. The elements that were taken into account during the appraisal were once again twofold. The objective elements concerned the state of preservation, the technique, the dimensions of the work of art, while those relating to the artistic value were quantified mostly according to the artist's reputation.[18] An important role was also played by the buyer: the famous collectors were presented with insane prices. Thus, the agents tried to keep their identity a secret in order to avoid overpricing. It is quite significant that although the role of the

[18] The modern secondary art market is a very complex and dynamic mechanism, so it is very instructive to see what the experts of this sphere consider important when pricing a particular work of art. On the Sotheby's web pages a series of interviews (published in December 2016) with experts from various departments of the famous auction house can be found. The series is entitled *The Value of Art* and according to Sotheby's experts, when assessing the value of an object of art, these ten factors should be considered - authenticity, condition, rarity, provenance, historical importance, size, fashion, subject matter, medium and quality. The last entry is the most difficult to define, according to Sotheby's experts. In order to evaluate quality one should take into account the intrinsic merit of the item, the skill of the master, technical innovation, craftsmanship, or possibly an achievement of the artist that exceeds his other works or his entire career. https://www.sothebys.com/en/series/the-value-of-art , the page was last visited on 19th January 2019.

painters in the secondary market consisted of offering an attribution and estimation of worth, the practice demonstrates that painters rarely dared act as connoisseurs, especially if they had to deal with "non-Venetian" paintings.[19]

As the 17th century went by the demand for paintings on the secondary market increased, as did the prices, which did not slow down the intense circulation of the works of art. The additional pressure on the market was exerted by the new aristocracy recruited from the ranks of filthy rich merchants that bought their titles in the moment when the depleted state treasury needed to be refilled after the Cretan War (1645 – 1669). By owning the works of old masters but also by the prominent contemporary painters, they wanted to demonstrate their wealth, taste, as well as the fictitious aristocratic roots. During the last decades of the *Seicento* the Venetian noblemen were joined in the pursuit of works of art by foreign diplomats but also by European aristocrats on the *grand tour*.

Istria and Dalmatia

The known archival documents related to the prices of paintings and rewards for masters during the 17th century in Istria and Dalmatia that belonged to *Stato da Mar* are rather meagre and they usually mention only the sum that was reimbursed to a certain painter. For example, in 1625 Domenico Tintoretto (Venice, 1560 – 1635) received seventy ducats for his altarpiece intended for the baptistery of the parish church in Piran. That is, about 18 ducats per square meter of the painted surface.[20] Stefano Celesti (Venice, ? – after 1659), the less known father of the prominent Venetian painter Andrea (Venice, 1637 – Toscolano Maderno, 1712) painted in 1638 the altarpiece representing *St. Mark* for the Cathedral of Koper. He was payed 223 liras and 4 soldi which would amount to 35 ducats, that is, ten ducats per square meter or 35 ducats per figure.[21] The same year, while staying in Split, Matteo Ponzone (Venice, 1583 – after 1663) painted two altarpieces (250 x 129 cm) for the Franciscan church in Šibenik for a rather modest sum of one hundred ducats, payed as usually in liras.[22] At the beginning of the *Seicento*, only Palma il Giovane was able to charge ten times over for his altarpieces, achieving the rewards that surpassed 300 ducats. Alessandro Varotari called Il Padovanino (Padua, 1588 – Venice,

[19] Cecchini (2007 : 142, 145-146, 148-149)

[20] Craievich (2001 : 197-198) Dimenzije slike su 270 x 145 cm, a napučena je mnoštvom likova i polulikova

[21] Lucchese (2001 : 46)

[22] Stošić, 1940:31, note. 7. It should be noted, though, that the famous Giovanni Lanfranco (Parma, 1582 – Rome, 1647) asked for his Lastovo altarpiece of the almost equal dimensions, 110 ducats, that is, a bit more than the double price. Radić (1895 : 358-361)

1649) was happy to receive 70 ducats for the altarpiece representing *The Virgin with the Child, Justice and St. Mark* for Pordenone, while Maffeo Verona (Verona, 1576 – Venice, 1618) got only 30 ducats in 1610 for the altarpiece in the church of the nunnery in Udine.[23]

Some thirty years after Stefano Celesti made his altarpiece for the Cathedral of Koper, two large canvases were ordered for the same church from one of the most prominent living painters in Venice, *tenebroso* master Antonio Zanchi (Este, 1631 – Venice, 1722). He received a rather modest reward - one hundred ducats for each.[24] It should be noted, though, that the prices Zanchi achieved from the end of the 1660s to the end of the 1690s, at the peak of his career, varied a lot. Apart from the exceptional sum of 550 ducats received for an altarpiece in the Church of Saints Faustino and Giovita in Vicenza, Zanchi usually earned inferior rewards. Thus, the money he got for the Koper paintings, although being rather modest does not diverge significantly from his standard wages. During the second half of the 17th century, the *tenebroso* painters in Venice systematically obtained lower rewards than their colleagues that belonged to the so-called *corrente neoveronesiana*, like Pietro Liberi (Padua, 1614 – Venice, 1687). However, they were all payed best when copying the old masters such as Paolo Veronese.[25]

Archival records mentioning the prices of paintings in Venice during the 17th century as well as on the territory of *Stato da Mar* (Istria and Dalmatia) demonstrate that painters, patrons, collectors and adjudicators, as was supposed initially, generally acted rationally and in the spirit of the market, that is, according to the dictate of supply and demand. When it comes to the quantitative elements that were taken into consideration when forming the price of a painting, it is obvious that the dimensions and the number of represented figures played a very important role during the whole 17th century. Bearing in mind, though, that the larger the canvas was, the lower the price of a square meter of the painted surface became. One should expect that the other factors, such as the name of the painter, that is, the assessed quality of the painting, influenced the final price in a relatively uniform way. The significant variation in the achieved rewards even when a single painter in a rather brief span of time is taken into consideration, suggests that the dominant factor in forming of the prices were the specific conditions, or rather the willingness

[23] Sohm (2010 : 248)

[24] Lucchese (2001 : 47-48) The painting by Antonio Zanchi representing the *Marriage at Cana* (250 x 310 cm) is still situated in the presbytery of the Cathedral of Koper. Thus, it is easy to calculate that the master was payed 13 ducats per square meter and 7 ducats per figure.

[25] Sohm (2010 : 249)

of the patron to invest more or less money in a particular commission. This, in turn, did not depend only on the money those ordering the works of art were able to spend, but also whether the retribution came from a single or a collective patron (such as a confraternity or a community), whether the commission came from the patron himself or from his heirs, et cetera. On the other hand, in order to make business with profit and to survive on the market, the painters had to be able to determine when a price could be inflated and when to underprice. It is obvious that the Venetian painters were ready to accept lower retribution from the rather poor or parsimonious patrons from Istria and Dalmatia, in order to conclude the business and maybe receive more orders in the future. This entailed a more important contribution of the workshop in the execution of an altarpiece or paintings that were destined to decorate church or convent walls. However, unlike the Dalmatian patrons of the works by Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese who during the 16th century payed exorbitant prices for the works of the painters' assistants, believing to have purchased the masterpieces,[26] the new generations apparently had a much better insight into the Venetian art market. Although it is quite improbable that 17th century Dalmatian patrons had the ability to discern whether they were getting a mostly autograph painting or a work mostly done by the master's *bottega*, it is pretty sure that they spent their money much more carefully. It is quite probable that they considered several bids before placing a commission, comparing the prices and available information about the fame of the painter before initiating the negotiation.

Translation: Nina Kudiš and Lucija Burić

[26] Petter (1857 : 145); Krasić (1976 : 375-377); Tomić (2011 : 203-209), s prethodnom literaturom; Trška Miklošić (2011 : 192-195), with the previous bibliography.

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