



Standing in the Threshold: Carpaccio's Calling of Saint Matthew Reconsidered

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THE SCUOLA DALMATA DEI SANTI GIORGIO E TRIFONE IN VENICE

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Résumé de l'article

In 1502 Vittore Carpaccio delivered the Calling of Saint Matthew to the Venetian Scuola Dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone, a confraternity founded in 1451 by the Dalmatian community residing in Venice. The painting's recent restoration sponsored by Save Venice offers an opportunity to re-examine the work and reconsider its iconography. Building upon new visual and documentary evidence, this article argues that Carpaccio painted the tax collector Matthew not as a Jewish moneylender, as previously assumed, but as a Venetian moneychanger within his workplace, a banco de tapeto that once faced Campo San Giacomo at Rialto. An examination of Matthew's gesture reveals that Carpaccio depicted the moment that preceded, rather than followed, the Evangelist's decision to abandon his profession and follow Christ. This change to the traditional iconography, I suggest, should be regarded as a visual exemplum of Christian charity, the virtue central to the Scuola Dalmata's devotional practices.

Standing in the Threshold: Carpaccio's *Calling of Saint Matthew* Reconsidered

Gabriele Matino*

Summary: In 1502 Vittore Carpaccio delivered the *Calling of Saint Matthew* to the Venetian Scuola Dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone, a confraternity founded in 1451 by the Dalmatian community residing in Venice. The painting's recent restoration sponsored by Save Venice offers an opportunity to re-examine the work and reconsider its iconography. Building upon new visual and documentary evidence, this article argues that Carpaccio painted the tax collector Matthew not as a Jewish moneylender, as previously assumed, but as a Venetian moneychanger within his workplace, a *banco de tapeto* that once faced Campo San Giacomo at Rialto. An examination of Matthew's gesture reveals that Carpaccio depicted the moment that preceded, rather than followed, the Evangelist's decision to abandon his profession and follow Christ. This change to the traditional iconography, I suggest, should be regarded as a visual exemplum of Christian charity, the virtue central to the Scuola Dalmata's devotional practices.

Vittore Carpaccio is renowned today for the narrative cycles, comprising more than thirty paintings in total, that he created for the *scuole*, the lay confraternities of Venice.¹ At the time of the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797, there were over nine hundred *scuole piccole* in the city.² When, in 1806, the *scuole* were closed by Napoleonic decree, their possessions were sold at auction and their paintings dispersed. The Scuola Dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone, also known as San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, is an exception to this rule as it retains the only pictorial cycle by Carpaccio still in its

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¹ On Carpaccio's narrative paintings for the Venetian *scuole*, see Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative*.

² Gietz, "The Scuole Grandi," 139.

original location, rendering it one of the most remarkable artistic treasures of the city.

The Scuola Dalmata was founded in 1451 by the so-called Schiavoni, the Dalmatian community residing in Venice. On 19 May, the Consiglio dei Dieci approved the petition issued by “some Schiavoni sailors” to establish a *scuola piccola* dedicated to Saint George and Saint Tryphon, patron saints of, respectively, the Dalmatian cities of Antivari (today Bar) and Cattaro (today Kotor) from which many of the Scuola members had arrived.³ The mission of the Scuola, as discussed below, was to provide material and spiritual assistance to its membership. On 30 May 1451, the confraternity moved into a space formerly occupied by the Ospedale di Santa Caterina in a fourteenth-century building owned by the Priory of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem. The structure was located only steps away from San Giovanni del Tempio, the neighbouring church known today as San Giovanni di Malta. In 1452 the new Dalmatian Scuola transformed the ground floor into a chapel. Three years later, the upper floor was divided into two rooms in which the *banca* (the governing council of the Scuola) held its meetings and ran the confraternity.⁴ In 1551, the centennial of the Scuola’s foundation, the *gastaldo* (chief officer) Giovanni da Lissa launched a campaign to renovate the building under the supervision of the *proto*, or chief architect, of the Arsenale, Giovanni de Zon.⁵ On that occasion, the ground floor was rebuilt, the ceiling raised, and the sober fourteenth-century facade updated with an elaborate design, articulated with pilasters and decorated with reliefs, in the manner of Jacopo Sansovino.

³ On the petition to the Consiglio dei Dieci, see Archivio di Stato di Venezia (henceforth ASVe), Consiglio dei Dieci, Deliberazioni Miste, XIV, fol. 47v: “Intesa la devota et umile supplicatione de alcuni marinari Schiavoni habitatori de questa benedetta città di Venetia, [...] per li quali fu supplicado per li detti Schiavoni poder levar in Venetia una fraternitade, over scuola, secondo la condition dell’altre scuole picciole de questa nostra gloriosa citade, la qual i diti supplicanti intende de fare ad honor de miser san Zorzi, et miser san Trifon, nella chiezia de miser san Zane del tempio.” On this topic, see also Marinković, “Saints’ Relics in Scuola,” 27, and note 3. Saint Jerome, the holy patron of Dalmatia, joined the Scuola’s dedication only later, in 1464 (see Archivio della Scuola Dalmata dei SS. Giorgio e Trifone, *Catastico della Scuola di SS. Giorgio e Trifone della Nation Dalmatina*, fol. 4v: “In ecclesia Sancti Georgii de sclavonibus Venetiis [...] qui ecclesiam in qua dicta Societas congregabitur in festis sancti Georgii, Corporis Christi, sancti Hieronymi, sancti Triffonis, et in prima Dominica post Ascensionem Domini devote visitaverint.” See also Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio*, 69–70.

⁴ Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative*, 288–289.

⁵ On Giovanni da Lissa, see Vallery, *Personaggi dalmati*, 29–48. On the new meeting house see: Ceriana/Mueller, “Radicalamento delle comunità straniere,” 325.

Carpaccio's activity in the Scuola probably dates to the period of 1501–1507/12.⁶ The original placement of the canvases is not known, nor is it clear whether the paintings were hung together in a single room or not.⁷ The total number of Carpaccio's canvases is also uncertain, since a 1557 inventory lists far more paintings than those currently at the Scuola, whereas others in the room today are unexpectedly omitted.⁸ Carpaccio's surviving cycle has nine scenes: two paintings showing episodes from the Life of Christ, three from the Life of Saint Jerome, another three depicting Saint George, and one of Saint Tryphon. The narrative cycle is admired by scholars and the public alike since it features famous masterpieces of Italian Renaissance painting, including *Saint George and the Dragon* and the *Vision of Saint Augustine*.⁹ Far less known is the *Calling of Saint Matthew*, which may be the result of its current placement in the corner of the room, or the fact that its subject seems little-connected to the Scuola's patron saints. Recent restoration sponsored by Save Venice has brought to light the picture's exceptional quality (fig. 1).¹⁰ This article seeks to reassess the painting by reconsidering its iconography against new visual and documentary evidence. First, it will demonstrate that Carpaccio painted the Biblical tax collector Matthew not as a Jewish moneylender, as assumed by most scholars, but as a Venetian banker within his workplace. Second, by examining Matthew's gesture and attitude, it will show that Carpaccio deliberately depicted the moment that preceded, rather than followed, the Evangelist's decision to abandon his profession and follow Christ. I argue that in this painting Carpaccio re-invented the Biblical episode to interpret and indeed project the collective ideals of Christian charity shared by the confraternal community.

⁶ Scholars tend to date the narrative cycle to 1502–07 (see Menato, "Scuola degli Schiavoni," 171). Augusto Gentili's alternative hypothesis that dates the cycle to 1501–1511/12 is worth considering; Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio*, 82–84, 172–173 note 112.

⁷ Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative*, 288–289. Most scholars believe the cycle was first installed in the upper floor and then, presumably after the 1551 renovation of the meeting house, moved to the downstairs oratory. This hypothesis remains however speculative and leaves many questions unanswered. On this topic, see also Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio*, 172–173 note 112; Mason, "Carpaccio pittore," 20; Menato, "Scuola degli Schiavoni," 171, and, in this issue, Piovan, "Carpaccio's Original Painting Installation."

⁸ For a transcription of the inventory, see Perocco, *Carpaccio nella Scuola*, 225–229 doc. IX; Vallery, *La Scuola Dalmata*, 67–77; Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative*, 288–289.

⁹ On the cycle, see Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative*, 70, 88, 112, 159, 161, 190–191, 210–215, 222, 287–290; Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio*, 47–90. For a review of the scholarship on Carpaccio's narrative cycle, see Menato, "Scuola degli Schiavoni," 170–174 (with bibliography).

¹⁰ On the conservation treatment of the canvas, financed by Save Venice in 2019–20, see Valentina Piovan's essay in this volume.

Signed and dated 1502, Carpaccio's *Calling of Saint Matthew* is based on the Gospel of Matthew (9:9–13), which narrates the encounter between Christ and his Evangelist. Having left Nazareth, Christ travelled to the village of Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee to begin his ministry and heal the possessed, paralyzed, and dying. In Capernaum, Christ called the Apostles Peter, Andrew, James, and John to join him, and it was there that he first met Matthew. As Christ walked through the streets, he noticed a tax collector sitting at the customs post. "Follow me" is all Christ had to say for Matthew to get up and follow him without hesitation. Matthew's swift decision, his immediate and untroubled response to Christ's call, became one of his distinctive traits. For example, in the *Golden Legend*—a medieval compendium of the lives of saints which deeply inspired Carpaccio's imagery—Jacobus de Voragine interprets the name "Matthew (or Matthaëus)" as "a hasty gift [...] by his speedy conversion." Matthew, Jacobus continues, "quit his customhouse immediately to become a follower of Christ and nothing else."¹¹ As we will see, this is a passage Carpaccio and his patrons must have pondered at length when deciding how to render the Gospel account of the *Calling of Saint Matthew*. But first, however, we shall focus on the painter's depiction of the Evangelist, whose distinctive attire has been misread by most scholars.

In 1910, the critic Osvaldo Böhm declared in *The Burlington Magazine* that Carpaccio had portrayed Matthew as a Jewish moneylender.¹² This interpretation, which has gained wide acceptance, was based on the assumption that, in Carpaccio's time, Jews were forced by Venetian authorities to wear a yellow band around their cap to distinguish themselves from Christians.¹³ This notion was incorrect; although reasonable in principle, it cannot apply to Carpaccio's painting, since Venetian Jews were never required to wear a head-covering similar to that in the painting, as evidence demonstrates. Similarly, Böhm's claim that Carpaccio staged the scene at the gate of the Venetian Ghetto was also inaccurate, since the Ghetto would not be built for another fourteen years.¹⁴ In pointing out Böhm's oversight, scholars have proposed that the walls in the painting depict those of a city of the *Terraferma*, such as Mestre, Padua, or Treviso,

¹¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 183, 186. On the role played by the *Golden Legend* in Carpaccio's work, see Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio*, 12–13, 47–64.

¹² Böhm, "The Calling," 228–233.

¹³ Böhm, "The Calling," 233: "They [Jews] were obliged to wear distinctive badges, and among these was a yellow band round the cap, and such a head-dress the publican painted by Carpaccio wears." See also Humfrey, *Carpaccio*, 64–65; Pinna, "21b. Vocazione di San Matteo," 208–209; Borean, "Vocazione di Matteo," 78; Romanelli, *La Scuola Dalmata*, 56.

¹⁴ Böhm, "The Calling," 233. This theory was also supported by Perocco, *Tutta la pittura*, 61; Lauts, *Carpaccio*, 32; Muraro, *Carpaccio*, LXXVIII.

where Jewish moneylenders were forced to work prior to the establishment of the Ghetto in 1516.¹⁵

The practice of distinguishing Jews by special clothing precedes Carpaccio's time by centuries. In the Muslim world, the Pact of 'Umar II (r. 717–720), and the periodic decrees that followed it, regulated the attire for non-Muslims living under Islamic rule (*dhimmis*), who were forced to wear distinctive signs called *ghiyār*.¹⁶ Colour, like dress, was used to mark religious minorities. Jews, for example, were required to dress themselves with a yellow cloth covering both chest and shoulders, and a yellow girdle or belt.¹⁷ In the Christian world, the first official church legislation on Jewish dress was instituted in 1215, when the Fourth Lateran Council ordered that Jews and Saracens “of either sex, and in all Christian lands, and at all times, shall easily be distinguishable from the rest of the populations by the nature [*qualitate*] of their clothes.”¹⁸ Over the centuries, secular authorities complied with the Church's prescription by issuing regulations on the matter of Jewish dress.¹⁹ Venice was no exception. As early as 27 August 1394, the Senate decreed that all Venetian Jews had to wear a yellow circle on their exterior clothing as large as a loaf of bread costing four *denarii*.²⁰ In people's mind, the colour yellow had negative connotations because it was also used to identify prostitutes and pimps.²¹ In 1408, the government specified the material from which the circular badge had to be made, namely a yellow braided rope a finger in width; by 1430, the requirement had been extended to the Jews of the entire Venetian state, that is both the *Terraferma* and the *Stato da Mar* (overseas possessions).²² Legislation on the matter remained almost unaltered until 1496, when the yellow circle was replaced by a more clearly visible yellow *baretta*, or cap.²³ From that time forward, the characteristic yellow cap—not a red one with a thin golden band—became the most distinctive garment for Venetian

¹⁵ Humfrey, *Carpaccio*, 65; Borean, “*Vocazione di Matteo*,” 78; Romanelli, *La Scuola Dalmata*, 56.

¹⁶ Blumenkraz, “Badge, Jewish,” 63–70.

¹⁷ Santillana, *Istituzioni di diritto mussulmano*, 101, and note 97; Houtsma et al., *E.J. Brill's First*, 159.

¹⁸ English translation in Tanner, *Decrees*, 266.

¹⁹ Kisch, “The Yellow Badge.” See also Wisch, “Vested Interest,” 147–148; Cassen, *Marking the Jews*.

²⁰ Ravid, “From Yellow to Red,” 182.

²¹ Ravid, “From Yellow to Red,” 182. Ravid (203 note 29) also notes that in Bologna, Brescia and Pisa prostitutes were also forced to wear yellow clothes.

²² Ravid, “From Yellow to Red,” 182–183.

²³ Ravid, “From Yellow to Red,” 183. See also Ravid, *The Venetian Government*, 6–7.

Jews. That is how any Venetian, including Carpaccio, could easily recognize a Jew at a glance.

Venetian legislation on Jewish yellow badges remained unchanged during Carpaccio's time, and regulation concerning the yellow cap had been introduced six years before he painted his *Calling of Saint Matthew*. The painter, famed for the amount of detail within his pictures, must have been familiar with such symbols, and surely would have understood the ramifications of including them in a painting on this subject. If Carpaccio had really intended to portray a Jewish moneylender, he would have represented Matthew wearing either a yellow circle or a yellow *baretta*, or both. We can thus conclude that Carpaccio and his clients had a different idea about how the Biblical tax collector should be represented. If ethnic and religious identification were not the point, what then was the purpose of the painting? What was its intended message, how did the artist convey it, and who was the expected audience? To begin to engage with these questions, it is worth focusing on the setting in which Matthew is called to make his choice.

Matthew stands on the threshold of a Venetian *banco da scritta*, a fifteenth-century deposit bank similar to those that once crowded Campo San Giacomo at the heart of the Rialto market.²⁴ No detail is left to chance. The booth is located on the corner of a building whose structure recalls that of some shops still standing in the Rialto area today (fig. 2). Two carpets, probably of Islamic manufacture, are laid across the wooden countertop. As demonstrated by Reinhold Mueller, their display refers to the so-called *banco da tapeto*, a term that in Venice—and elsewhere in Italy, as we shall see—indicated a licensed deposit bank whose sureties had been approved by the *Consoli dei Mercanti*.²⁵ On the right-hand side of the *banco*, extending over the edge of the countertop, sits an unusual funnel-shaped tray (fig. 3). Venetian bankers used such trays for counting and stacking coins. Indeed, an identical wooden counting board can be observed in a number of fourteenth-century Venetian manuscripts, including a drawing in Livy's *History of Rome* that shows a *Camerlengo da Comun* emptying a sack of coins into an identical tray (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana), or on the table of the *Camera degli imprestiti* where an official uses the board's funnel to slip coins into the sack of a lay brother of the monastery of San Maffeo di Murano (Venice, Archivio Patriarcale).²⁶ Less known is an illumination from a fourteenth-century *Evangelistarium* depicting the *Calling of Saint*

²⁴ Mueller, *The Venetian Money Market*, 3–9, 26–32.

²⁵ Mueller, *The Venetian Money Market*, 42, 52–62. On this topic, see also Martino, "The Calling of Saint Matthew," 78.

²⁶ On these manuscripts, see Mueller, *The Venetian Money Market*, 74–75 (fig. 6), 460 (fig. 17); Calabi/Morchiello, *Rialto*, figs. 13–14. A further example depicting the Office of the *Procuratoria di Supra* is discussed in Mueller, *Venezia nel tardo medioevo*, 30–31.

Matthew (fig. 4), in which the tax-collector, probably identifiable as a Jew by his yellow turban, remains seated at his desk while listening to Christ's summons.²⁷ Notably, the miniaturist painted a tray next to Matthew that is very similar to the one depicted by Carpaccio more than a century later. Returning to Carpaccio's picture, on the left-hand side of the counter, piles of gold ducats and silver *lire* wait to be moved into the tray, counted, stacked into bags, and deposited into the safe at the back of the worktable. The walls are decorated with a floral motif on a green background—perhaps a silk tapestry or a *cuoridoro*—while leather pockets overflowing with receipts and debtors' notes hang from upholstery nails above. This portion of the booth should look familiar to art historians as reminiscent of the famous *trompe-l'oeil* Carpaccio painted some years before on the reverse side of his *Hunting in the Lagoon* (now Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum).²⁸ To students of economic history, however, this certainly brings to mind the habit, common amongst bankers, of putting receipts into designated pockets or hanging them on a tape nailed onto the wall.²⁹

Three important points stand out from the representation of Matthew's booth and may shed some light on the purpose of the painting. First, the care with which Carpaccio selected and portrayed these details shows that he took pains to design the setting of his picture. Indeed, it seems reasonable to assume that the painter, in preparation for his composition, visited Rialto to copy a *banco da tapeto* from life. Or, it could be speculated that Carpaccio, like his colleague Giovanni Bellini, had a bank account at one of the *banchi* in Rialto and hence was already familiar with the setting he envisioned for his painting.³⁰ Either way, Carpaccio's intention was to design a historically convincing context, or, as Patricia Fortini

²⁷ Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, cod. Lat. I, 100 (=2089), fol. 80^v. It should be noted that starting from 1310, the Mamluk authorities introduced regulations concerning *ghiyār*, namely the obligation for Jews to wear yellow turbans (Stillman, *The Jewish of Arab Lands*, 69). This obligation was still enforced at the beginning of the sixteenth century, as documented by Pietro Martire Milanese, *Relationi*, fols. 31^v–32^r: “Et i dolopani, che portano in capo sono forte differenti: perche non solamente per loro si conoscono i Giudei, & i Christiani sudditi del Soldano, i quali vestono i medesimi habiti, che i Macomettani, ma vi è distintione anco tra i Mamalucchi propri, & li Signori, & tra li Signori stessi, secondo i lor gradi, perche il Macomettano ha il suo dolopan con molte pieghe rivolto, come il Giudeo, e il Christiano; è vero, che il Christiano è conosciuto dal color turchino, il Giudeo dal giallo, & il Machomettano dal bianco.”

²⁸ For a review of the scholarship on the painting, see Peter Humfrey, “14. Fishing and Fowling.”

²⁹ See, for example, the woodcut representing the interior of a fifteenth-century Florentine bank in the frontispiece of Chiarini, *Questo e ellibro*.

³⁰ On Giovanni Bellini's bank account, see Fletcher/Mueller, “Bellini and the Bankers,” especially 7–8.

Brown might suggest, to confer “documentary authority” upon his version of the Biblical episode.³¹ By this reading, Carpaccio’s detailed rendering of a sixteenth-century Venetian *banco da tapeto* serves the purpose of convincing the beholder of the truthfulness of the painted event. Second, in terms of the unfolding narrative, Matthew’s booth acts as the story’s starting point. Proceeding from left to right, it is from the threshold of the stall’s door that Matthew takes his first step toward Christ, who in turn bends his right knee to step forth and resume his journey with a new disciple at his side. On a deeper level, finally, the booth also functions as a temporal watershed in Matthew’s life. Taken together, the carpets, the funnel-shaped tray, the gold ducats and silver *lire*, the safe, and the bills of exchange fastened to the wall all relate to Matthew’s secular existence. In Carpaccio’s painting, the *banco da tapeto* thus stands for Matthew’s life before meeting Christ: the very life the Saviour is now asking him to renounce.

It is time to return to the argument posed at the start of this study—that Carpaccio reworked the Biblical narrative into a story that highlights Matthew’s internal conflict at the moment of decision, rather than his prompt choice to follow Christ. To execute the *Calling of Saint Matthew*, Carpaccio must have considered the subject’s pictorial tradition. By the end of the fifteenth century, two main iconographic types had developed in parallel: one focusing on Matthew’s acceptance of Christ’s call, the other representing Matthew’s initial indecision. With regard to the former, it is worth recalling the example of the Orcagna brothers’ *Triptych of Saint Matthew* (c. 1367), commissioned by the *Arte del Cambio* to adorn a pillar of the church of Orsanmichele in Florence (fig. 5).³² In this painting, the tax collector is portrayed in the act of leaving his booth that, as shown by the carpet laid over the countertop, was a Florentine *banco da tapeto*. The Orcagna brothers appear to have adhered closely to the Gospel story; Matthew’s hands lifted up in both prayer and acceptance, and his eyes cast upon Christ prove to the viewer that the tax collector obeyed the call without hesitation: “He said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.” A different approach was taken in a now-lost fresco of c. 1333, currently attributed to a follower of Pietro da Rimini, that once decorated the chapel of Saint Matthew in the church of Santa Maria in Porto Fuori, Ravenna (fig. 6).³³ Unlike the *Triptych of Saint Matthew*, this scene has been moved from the square outside Matthew’s booth to its interior. Christ stands on the edge, his body turned toward the observer. He stretches his arms in an attitude of urgent insistence, while his head turns back to Matthew who, nevertheless, remains seated at his desk. Matthew is accordingly depicted as torn between

³¹ Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative*, 125–137.

³² On the painting, see Taylor-Mitchell, “Images of St. Matthew,” 54–60.

³³ Trerè, “«Quei pittori riminesi»,” 104–112 (with bibliography).

the impulse to follow Christ and his desire for wealth, his left hand touching his gold as he considers his options.

In discussing the many visual sources Carpaccio employed to design his compositions, Fortini Brown stated that not a “single motif was ever adopted wholesale and untransformed.”³⁴ The *Calling of Saint Matthew* fits this strategy. As in the case of the triptych of the Orcagna brothers, Carpaccio represented Matthew leaving his workplace. The left foot stepping on the dusty ground, the hand holding that of Christ, and the body leaning toward the Saviour as if pulled by his call all find their roots in the iconographic tradition embodied by the Florentines. At the same time, however, Carpaccio shows his awareness of the other pictorial tradition. On his way out, Matthew reaches back and rests his right hand upon the countertop. At first glance, one might assume that he is balancing himself. Matthew is actually inserting his fingers into the pile of coins, as if momentarily unable to leave his wealth behind (fig. 7). In Carpaccio’s rendering of the episode, Matthew remains suspended between the “follow me” ordered by Christ and the “he got up and followed him” that comes next in the Gospel account.

Carpaccio carefully combined the two iconographic traditions to create a new approach. It may be for this reason that, as demonstrated by recent scientific examinations,³⁵ the painter decided to include the word “FINGEBAT” on the *cartellino* in the bottom left corner of the canvas to emphasize that it was his invention. In appropriating this verb, often employed within humanist circles,³⁶ Carpaccio boldly identified himself as the *fictor*, or creator, of the work, signalling his capacity to go beyond the verbatim Gospel narrative—even beyond Jacobus de Voragine’s ingenuous etymological proposal for Matthew’s name—in order to give shape to a world conceived within his own imagination.³⁷ By merging the two iconographic motifs, Carpaccio was able to expand the iconographic possibilities of a traditional theme by employing visual opposites; Matthew holding Christ’s hand is counterbalanced by Matthew touching the coins. Together these gestures visualize Matthew’s inner struggle. By this means, Carpaccio has transformed Matthew’s formerly quick decision into a dilemma, albeit momentary, possessing emotional and psychological depth.

This essay set out to shed light on the intended message of the painting, suggesting that Carpaccio envisioned the Biblical episode as a visual

³⁴ Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative*, 193–196.

³⁵ See Valentina Piovan’s essay in this volume.

³⁶ On this topic, see McHam, “Reflections of Pliny,” 160–163. McHam (169 note 20) suggests that Carpaccio used the Latin verb to emphasize his ability to design a three-dimensional image on a flat surface.

³⁷ Muraro, *Carpaccio*, 75–78; Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative*, 217; Matthew, “The Painter’s Presence,” 638; Mason, “Carpaccio pittore,” 23.

exemplum of Christian charity, the virtue central to the Scuola Dalmata's devotional practices. To this end, it is necessary to consider the social context in which this painting was commissioned, rather than try to account for the motives of a single influential Scuola member whose identity remains uncertain despite the numerous hypotheses advanced over time.³⁸

Like all other lay confraternities of early Renaissance Europe,³⁹ the Scuola Dalmata embraced the virtues of religious solidarity (*Amor Dei*) and material charity (*Amor proximi*).⁴⁰ In particular, the Scuola's members participated in collective prayer, accompanied the body of the deceased to burial, prayed for the soul of the dead, and shared in commemorative Masses in the hope of gaining divine favour in life and protection in the afterlife.⁴¹ For its members, especially those who were poor, ill, or imprisoned, the Scuola provided alms, dowries, food, housing, medical care, funeral services, and burial expenses.

Evidence indicates that humble people constituted the majority of the Scuola. The first governing board of the Scuola makes the point well. With the only exception of a barber-surgeon and a goldsmith—whose occupations indicate a certain level of education and means—it appears that the founding members of the Scuola were men of relatively low status,

³⁸ Over the years, critics have identified him as either Sebastiano Michiel, the prior of San Giovanni al Tempio (who, however, had a pending lawsuit against the Scuola when Carpaccio delivered the painting), or Andrea Vendramin, a knight of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem (although his coat of arms does not correspond to that painted by the artist). Another hypothesis suggests that Carpaccio's specific patron was Gregorio dalle Acque, the *gastaldo* of the Scuola who received the relics of Saint George on 24 April 1502 from Paolo Vallaresso, *provveditore* of the Republic in Corone (today Koroni) and Modone (today Methoni). Incidentally, this donation happened the same year Carpaccio delivered the *Calling of Saint Matthew*. This theory would therefore explain the depiction of a reliquary emblem overlapping a red and blue coat of arms whose identification, unfortunately, remains unclear, right next to the *cartellino* bearing the 1502 date. Finally, it is also possible that Matthew was the name of the patron—perhaps another officer or, more likely, a distinguished brother of the Scuola—who in fact decided to be portrayed next to him. None of these hypotheses, however, is unanimously agreed upon and more evidence is required to determine the identity of Carpaccio's patron. For a review of the scholarship, see Menato, "Scuola degli Schiavoni," 171. See also Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio*, 173 note 112.

³⁹ On the Venetian *scuole*, see Pullan, *Rich and Poor*; Pullan, *Natura e carattere*; Mackenney, "Continuity and Change;" Mackenney, "The scuole piccole;" Fortini Brown, "Le Scuole;" Ortalli, *Per salute delle anime*; Glixon, *Honoring God*, 195–249; Vio, *Le scuole piccole*, 17–40.

⁴⁰ On the *scuola* principles of charity and love see Levin, *Arts as Confraternal Documentation*, 443 (with bibliography).

⁴¹ See the *Mariegola*: Chapters 5, 11–15, 19, 22–23, 31–32, 34, 44–46 (Vallery, *La Scuola Dalmata*, 40–41, 44–45, 48–49, 53, 55–56, 61–62).

including a mason, a tinsmith, a cobbler, and other modest craftsmen.⁴² Several chief officers of the Scuola were of similar backgrounds.⁴³ Though fragmentary and incomplete, archival documentation reveals that in the first fifty years of its existence the Scuola was presided over by artisans working in the manual crafts, labourers in the grain and textile industries, but also merchants dealing in commodities like oil and silk.⁴⁴ The lower levels of the Scuola's social structure are worth closer scrutiny. As shown by the 1451 petition to the Consiglio dei Dieci, the men who gathered to join the Scuola were seamen, most likely sailors and rowers.⁴⁵ The Scuola cared for them the most, since, as the petition specifies, they were "weakened," "starved," or "beaten to death" while serving in the Venetian fleet. Once discharged, they found themselves alone, in a foreign country, without a family to care for them. Others were employed in domestic service

⁴² "Per Governador[:] Simon de Zuane dalle Stagnade / Per Vicario[:] mistro Paolo Barbier / Per Scrivan[:] Nicolò da Catharo / Per Degani[:] mistro Zorzi de Marco casselero / Agustin de Alegreto Fruttaruolo / Zuane de Zorzi scudellaro in piazza / Zuanne de Piero orevese / mistro Zorzi de Jacomo coffanaro / mistro Piero sartore da San Fantin / mistro Paolo de Zorzi callegaro / mistro Martin Zancheta muraro / mistro Mathio dai Albori / mistro Mathio de Fior sartor / mistro Nicolò cimador / mistro Michiel Surian" (transcriptions in Vallery, *La Scuola Dalmata*, 11–12). On this topic, see also Perocco, *Carpaccio nella Scuola*, 20–21.

⁴³ For the complete list of the Scuola's *gastaldi*, see Perocco, *Carpaccio nella Scuola*, 233–236; Vallery, *La Scuola Dalmata*, 151–162. Between 1451 and 1502, the list records only nine *gastaldi* of whom only five have their occupation specified.

⁴⁴ "Simon de Zuane dalle stagnade / Zorzi de Marco casseler / Bartholomio garbellador / Gregorio de Catharo samitarius / Zorzi da Frazi / Zuanne da Brazo" (italics mine). Zorzi da Frazi was a merchant of oil (Sommi Picenardi, "Del Gran Priorato," 134). A certain Zuanne da Brazo is recorded in a long inscription on the verso of a drawing by Carpaccio (*Scholar Writing in His Study*, Pushkin Museum, Moscow, n. 6213), which some have related to the *Vision of Saint Augustine* in the Schiavoni Cycle (transcription in Menato, *Vittore Carpaccio*, 231–232. On this topic see also Menato, "57. Scholar with Compasses," 171). I suggest that the Zuane da Brazo mentioned in Carpaccio's drawing may be the same who ran the confraternity in 1469. For a different hypothesis see Sara Menato, *Vittore Carpaccio*, 232, who argues that the inscription was written on a sheet held in the workshop of Carpaccio's father, who was a furrier, and then recycled by the painter some years later.

⁴⁵ "Intesa la devota et umile supplicatione de alcuni marinari Schiavoni habitatori de questa benedetta città di Venetia, li quali per pietade mossi, cognossando et vedando infinite novitate de homeni della sua nation, li quali nelle armade del nostro dominio percossi ad mortem, overo debilitadi, li quali da necessità e fame periro', non habbando sovention né sussidio de alcuna persona al mondo perché essi sono foresti"; ASVe, Consiglio dei Dieci, Deliberazioni Miste, XIV, fol. 47^v. Recent studies demonstrate that the 32% of the Scuola membership had a maritime orientation, and that the larger part of the artisans who joined it were employed in shipbuilding or ship repair; see Marinković, "Saints' Relics," 28. On the role of the Schiavoni in the Venetian fleet, see Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio*, 69–74; Lo Basso, *Uomini da remo*, especially 57–64; Ravid, *Venice and Its Minorities*, 457–458.

as indentured servants or maids, and lived their life in a condition of semi-slavery.⁴⁶ Some ended up in prison “for theft or petty theft” often perpetrated against their own lords—an occurrence that was by no means unusual among the destitute of the Dalmatian community.⁴⁷ This would explain the special care that the Scuola devoted to its imprisoned members, who are in fact explicitly mentioned in the 1451 petition.⁴⁸

This brief overview shows how a sizeable part of the Scuola’s membership was, or could easily become, the beneficiary of charity and material assistance.⁴⁹ Given the scarce means of those who joined the confraternity, it seems reasonable to assume that funding charitable deeds was not an easy task. However difficult that may have been, the whole community could count on a greater reward: the love of God and his redemptive mercy towards humankind. Such a crucial issue is clearly stated in the *Mariegola*, the statute book of the Scuola, that contains the guiding principles of the community. A good case in point is offered by Chapter 21:

Because the works of mercy are the means to spiritual health, we want and decree that, if any of our brothers or sisters of this Scuola are ill and in poverty, our chief and his officers are required to pay visit to the said ill to help them with the assets of our Scuola according to what is deemed right.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ On this topic see Mueller, “Aspects of Venetian Sovereignty,” 51–56; Romano, “The Regulation;” Romano, *Housecraft and Statecraft*.

⁴⁷ Ortalli, *Per salute delle anime*, 103–104; Ceriana/Mueller, “Radicamento delle comunità straniere,” 322.

⁴⁸ “Et ancora molti presonieri morir nelle carceri da fame et da necessitate, et li corpi loro così morti sotto li porteghi del detto palazzo in su la piazza”; ASVe, Consiglio dei Dieci, Deliberazioni Miste, XIV, fol. 47^r.

⁴⁹ According to estimates, between fifty and seventy percent of the population of the *Serenissima* could easily fall below the poverty threshold merely as a consequence of fluctuations in prices and salaries. Within this larger group, Brian Pullan distinguishes two subgroups: the ‘cyclical’ or ‘conjunctural’ poor (20%), whose misery derived from an increase in the cost of bread, and the ‘structural’ poor (4–8%), who had to rely entirely on charity because they were physically unfit to work (Pullan, “La nuova filantropia,” 19). On aggregate, Dennis Romano has approximated that in 1502 the two subgroups amounted to almost 26,520 people, a number destined to increase given that in 1563 it reached as much as 43,843. To this figure Romano adds all those workers who would be reduced to begging if they lost their jobs (70%), thus raising the estimate of potential poor to nearly ninety-eight percent of Venice’s population: 97,920 people in 1502 and 161,881 in 1563; Romano, “L’assistenza,” 360–363.

⁵⁰ Translation mine. “Per ché le opere dela misericordia è caxon dela salute dele anime, volemo et ordinemo che sel sarà algun nostro fradello over sorela de questa nostra scuola el qual sia infermo et sia in povertà, chel nostro governador can i suoi compagni sia tegnudo de visitar el dito infermo e sovegnir quello de i beni dela nostra scuola secondo come parerà alla mazor parte de loro”; Vallery, *La Scuola Dalmata*, 48.

The chapter emphasizes how the works of mercy—to which the Scuola's members vowed to devote themselves during the admission ceremony—were considered the principal path to salvation, a charitable activity intrinsically tied to the community's spiritual well-being.⁵¹ Even more significant, in this respect, is a passage from Chapter 37, dedicated to the relief of the brothers who died in prison:

[...] that our chief and his officers are required to bury their brothers, so that God gives us in return a hundredfold, and then eternal life. Meaning what was stated before, namely the aforementioned soul of our blessed Scuola.⁵²

The Chapter quotes the closing sentence of the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3–34), in which the seed that falls on good soil grows and produces fruits “thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.” The passage is worth investigating in some detail. By investing the Scuola's funds to pay for the burial expenses of the poor who had died in jail, the Scuola expected to earn great returns, in fact to increase them a hundred times. What the Scuola wished to gain, however, was not economic earnings but spiritual merits. Investing in the poor—namely in the *pauperes Christi*, the living image of Christ on earth—would yield the whole membership divine favour and, ultimately, eternal life. In addition, the fact that Chapter 37 explicitly quotes the Parable of the Sower, implies that the Scuola understood Christ's metaphor in its fullest sense. It has been shown that the purpose of the parable is to announce the Kingdom of God to those who truly “listen” (4:3), to those who have “ears to hear” (4:9).⁵³ Clearly, the parable requires not just to hear but also to accept the ministry of Christ, “the sower who sows the word” (4:14). It requires the faithful to be confident in Christ's power which, as he announces, will bear surprisingly rewarding fruits.⁵⁴

The ideology that underpins Chapter 37 resonates with Carpaccio's particular rendering of the *Calling of Saint Matthew* and provides further evidence for the possible message. Given the degree of personal sacrifice expected from the Scuola's members, it could be argued that the painting—in which Matthew is unsure about the decision to renounce his former life

⁵¹ On the admission ceremony, see Glixon, *Honoring God*, 14; Humphrey, *La miniatura*, 99–101.

⁵² Translation mine. “Ch'el nostro governador con i suoi compagni sia tenuti de far sepelir quelli dal azzò chè Dio ne renda cento per uno et poi vita eterna. Intendendo chel predito over la predita anima de questa nostra scuola benedeta”; Vallery, *La Scuola Dalmata*, 57.

⁵³ Focant, *The Gospel*, 150–154, 164–169.

⁵⁴ John P. Heil, “Reader-Response,” 273–284.

and follow Christ—served as a visual aid to teach the brethren loyalty to the rules shared by the confraternal community. Indeed, in keeping with the principles of *Amor proximi* and *Amor Dei* upon which the Scuola was founded, each member was therefore reminded to follow the example of the tax-collector-turned-Evangelist who, although hesitant at first, chose to obey Christ's word, accepted his call, and eventually joined him in the Kingdom of God.

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1. Vittore Carpaccio, *Calling of Saint Matthew* (1502). Venice, Scuola Dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone. Photo: Venice, Save Venice / Matteo De Fina.



2. Shop in the Rialto area. Venice. Photo: Gabriele Matino.



3. Vittore Carpaccio, *Calling of Saint Matthew* (1502), detail. Venice, Scuola Dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone. Photo: Venice, Save Venice / Matteo De Fina.



4. *Calling of Saint Matthew*, in *Evangelistarium ad usum ecclesiae Sancti Marci* (XIV century), fol. 80^v. Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, cod. Lat. I, 100 (=2089). Photo: Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. By permission of the Ministero della Cultura – Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. Further reproduction prohibited.



5. Andrea di Cione and Jacopo di Cione, *Triptych of Saint Matthew* (c. 1367), detail. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi. Photo: Florence, Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi.



6. Pietro da Rimini (?), *Calling of Saint Matthew* (c. 1333), lost. Formerly Porto Fuori (Ravenna), church of Santa Maria. Photo: Bologna, Fondazione Zeri, inv. 27849.



7. Vittore Carpaccio, *Calling of Saint Matthew* (1502), detail. Venice, Scuola Dalmata dei Santi Giorgio e Trifone. Photo: Venice, Save Venice / Matteo De Fina.