

This photo is available in the print
version of *Hospitality*.

**Why was Veronese called before the Holy Tribunal of
the Inquisition to answer for this hedonistic portrayal
of Jesus' hospitality? Not because it featured Jesus as
the guest (and host) at a feast with a party atmosphere.**

Revelers

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The painting on the cover of this issue, now known as *Feast in the House of Levi*, is one of the most controversial depictions of Jesus' hospitality in the history of art.

The artist, Paolo Veronese, is considered to be one of Venice's most famous painters alongside Titian and Tintoretto. This phenomenal colorist, who excelled in huge fresco and oil paintings, specialized in depicting biblical feasts in monastery refectories, or dining halls, and creating illusionistic ceilings for churches and palaces.

Veronese had a "noble and open character, as is shown in his work; he dressed with dignity and bore himself as a great lord," wrote Marco Boschini (1605-1681), a near-contemporary biographer. Boschini also made a point of noting that the artist's reputation was not tainted by scandals.[†]

Although there were no scandals, Veronese was called before the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition in Venice on July 18, 1573, to answer for this painting.

Earlier in 1573, Veronese had been commissioned to paint a Last Supper for the convent of San Giovanni and Paolo. The Inquisition, which was authorized to interpret and apply the Council of Trent's decree from 1563 that Christian art should instruct the faithful and be appropriate or decorous in its nature, judged that certain details in Veronese's painting were an irreverent treatment of the religious subject. The placement of dogs, cats, midgets, Germans, and drunken revelers in the composition were considered indecorous. (See the detail on page 48.) When questioned about the inclusion of these figures, Veronese responded that he knew that only Christ and his apostles were present at the Last Supper, but he adorned the rest of the large picture with figures of his own invention and that these figures may have been outside the room.

Though his responses to the inquisitors had been penitent and humble, Veronese still was very surprised when they told him that he was free! They instructed him that within three months he must replace the dog with an image of Mary Magdalene and blot out the German soldiers.

His testimony before the Inquisition, besides demonstrating his ability to deal diplomatically with others and to protect himself, bears witness to his standing as a man of faith. However, Veronese never changed his image.

Instead, he removed any irreverence for the Last Supper scene by cleverly renaming the painting *Feast in the House of Levi*, a reference to this story in Luke 5:27-32 (cf. Mark 2:13-17):

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

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Paolo Veronese (1528-1588), *FEAST IN THE HOUSE OF LEVI*, detail, 1573. Oil on panel. 18'3" x 42'. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo: © Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Veronese depicts the elaborate banquet table – now in a tax collector's lavish house – with considerable artistic freedom from the biblical text, situating it under a huge arched portico. Jesus, in the center of the composition, is surrounded by revelers quite full of life and enjoying themselves. The sumptuous colors, diverse figural groupings, and overall merriment

within this architecturally organized composition succeed in entertaining us and maintaining our interest.

It is no surprise that this hedonistic portrayal of Jesus' hospitality would draw the attention of the Inquisition. Yet we should realize that even the Inquisition had no problem with Jesus being the featured guest (and host) at a feast with a party atmosphere — as long as it was not identified as the more solemn Last Supper.

NOTE

† Diana Gisolfi, "Veronese, Paolo," Grove Art Online (Oxford University Press, 2006), (www.groveart.com, accessed September 3, 2007).

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