

*Passion and Commerce*  
Art in Venice in the 17th  
and 18th centuries



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Giandomenico Tiepolo. *The Charlatan* (detail)  
MNAC, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona

*Horse Race in Prato della Valle*

Oil on canvas  
120 x 152 cm  
Inscription bottom left: **GIORGIO FOSSATI**[...]/  
VENET.  
MUSEI CIVICI, MUSEO D'ARTE MEDIOEVALE  
E MODERNA, Padova  
inv. no. 2877

This canvas, of unknown provenance, is the only pictorial evidence of the work of Giorgio Fossati, better known as an engraver and as the *proto* (architect) of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. According to the chronicles of the eminent Pietro Gradenigo, this canvas was displayed on 16 August 1773, the feast day of the saint who worked miracles, alongside other 'modern paintings' in the *campo* leading to this school run by the famous confraternity in Venice. Gradenigo was so impressed with the unusual theme and the descriptive meticulousness of the piece that he described it as a "truly complicated work". Over and above its artistic quality, however, the painting is of tremendous importance as a document, since it shows the location of the enormous marshy reservoir prior to the urban development works set in motion by Andrea Memmo, who in 1776, during his time as governor of Padua, ordered the construction of an artificial garden island complete with 88 statues. In comparison with Canaletto's two etchings known as *Prà della Valle*, which capture just a part of the surrounding buildings in the artist's energetic and atmospheric line, according greater importance to the impressive mass of the Basilica of Santa Giustina, Fossati's bird's-eye view restores the irregular shape of the space and the density of the urban fabric, consisting of churches, buildings and modest homes around about. The horse race, which was in fact held in 1767 to mark the appropriation of the land by the authorities, became a narrative pretext for the composition of a pleasing and anecdotal work that is in part a genre scene and in part a visual description of the *forma urbis*.

P.D.



Bibliography: LISVAN 1942, p. 238; CROSTO, in *Cento opere* 1981, pp. 142-144, no. 50; PEPPI 1986, pp. 81, 92-94, 102, 106; PAVANELLO, in *Da Padovano a Tulpolo* 1997, pp. 311-313, no. 266; *Da Tizian au Futurisme* 2003, pp. 44-45.