



**FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT**  
**WRITERS IN MUSEUMS 1798-1898**

EDITED BY  
**ROSELLA MAMOLI ZORZI**  
**AND KATHERINE MANTHORNE**

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Writers in Museums 1798–1898

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Katherine Manthorne*



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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-78374-549-4

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-550-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-78374-551-7

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-78374-552-4

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 978-1-78374-553-1

ISBN Digital (XML): 978-1-78374-723-8

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0151

Cover image: Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Adoration of the Magi*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice (graphic elaboration by Pier Giovanni Possamai, The University of Venice, Ca' Foscari). Cover design: Anna Gatti

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# Acknowledgments

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This book originated in a conference held in Venice at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco and at the Salone da Ballo of the Correr Museum, 27–29 April 2016. It was organized by the Venice Committee of the Società Dante Alighieri together with The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Our thanks go first and foremost to the *Guardian Grando* of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Franco Posocco, for hosting the conference among the marvellous Tintoretto paintings in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, to the *Vicario* of the Scuola, Demetrio Sonaglioni, and to the *Procuratrice* of the Scuola, Maria Agnese Chiari Moretto Wiel; to the President of the Musei Civici di Venezia (MuVe), Mariacristina Gribaudo, and to its Director, Gabriella Belli, for receiving us in the Sala da Ballo of the Correr Museum. We would also like to thank Thomas Callegaro of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco for his help collating the images. The conference would not have been possible without a grant from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation through Save Venice Inc., whose Venice Director, Melissa Conn, also received us at the Rosand Library. We are also grateful to Arch. Ettore Vio, former *proto* of the Basilica, for an unforgettable visit to the Basilica di San Marco, which we entered in total darkness and then saw in all its golden light. We would also like to thank the Secretary General of the Società Dante Alighieri, Alessandro Masi, for participating to the welcome addresses together with the *Guardian Grando*, the President and the Director of MuVe, and with the President of the Amici dei Musei, Paolo Trentinaglia de Daverio. Several scholars chaired the different sessions, making them lively with their comments: we would like to thank Gabriella Belli, for her lively introduction to the works; Paola Marini, Director of the Gallerie

dell'Accademia; Philip Rylands, Director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection; Renata Codello, General Secretary for MiBact for the Veneto region; Ileana Chiappini di Sorio, art historian; and Daniela Ciani, Pia Masiero, and Simone Francescato, Americanists of the University of Venice, Ca' Foscari. We thank for their papers Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa, professor of art history at the University of Bergamo; Andrea Bellieni, Director of the Correr Museum; Gianfranco Pocobene, of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; and Jean Pavans, the most important translator of Henry James in France: for various reasons their papers could not be included in this volume. Finally, we would like to thank Pier Giovanni Possamai, of the University of Venice Ca' Foscari, for understanding immediately what the conference was about and therefore suggesting the telling image on the cover of this book.

Rosella Mamoli Zorzi and Katherine Manthorne

# 7. Latent in Darkness: John Ruskin's Virtual Guide to the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice

Emma Sdegno

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It is a fundamental premise of this essay that the main aim of Ruskin's works was to raise and develop the reader-viewer's awareness and critical attention.<sup>1</sup> His readings of artworks and landscape orient our gaze through an experience that is unique and contingent, rooted in the particular moment in which it takes place. Elements such as a painting's position, setting, and lighting thus have precise rhetorical purposes in Ruskin's discourse, with objective spatial features acting as markers that help the viewer to construct sense and meaning. Pervasive as they are throughout his works, these techniques are of paramount importance in later publications, such as the *sui generis* guides of the 1870s.

In this chapter I shall focus on the *Guide to the Principal Pictures in the Academy of Fine Arts at Venice* published in two parts in 1877. In this much underrated work,<sup>2</sup> Ruskin talks us through the rooms of the gallery using a language that is often unconventional for the genre but is, I hope to demonstrate, carefully and deliberately chosen. Words are used in an

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1 I wish to warmly thank Jeanne Clegg for reading a draft of this chapter and for the ongoing stimulating discussions.

2 For a philological reconstruction of the *Guide* see Paul Tucker's introduction to his Italian edition of John Ruskin, *Guida ai principali dipinti nell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia 1877* (Milan: Electa, 2014), pp. 9–66. For the stylistic features of the *Guide* see Emma Sdegno, 'Nota del traduttore', *ibid.*, pp. 67–69, and eadem, 'On Translating Ruskin's Academy Guide', *The Companion* 15 (2015), 48–49.

expressionistic way so as to fit within a programme of picture viewing that he had been elaborating in several essays since the 1850s, and that he implicitly puts into practice in the *Guide*. ‘Dark’, ‘light’, ‘bright’ and related words prove to be key signifiers in this educational visit. At a time when debates concerning the introduction of artificial light into picture galleries were heating up, Ruskin makes his voice heard against the practice, resisting primarily for conservational reasons,<sup>3</sup> but also, I shall argue, because he sensed that this might bring about dramatic and deleterious changes in the way we perceive and frame the artwork.

## 1. The Venice Academy and Ruskin’s Ideal Museum

By the time Ruskin came to write the *Guide to the Academy* his concerns had shifted from artists — the declared addressees of *Modern Painters* (1843) — to visitors at large. He claimed the purpose of his late guides to Italian cities, such as *Mornings in Florence* (1875–77), the *Guide to the Academy* (1877) and *St. Mark’s Rest* (1877–84), was to raise the cultural and spiritual awareness of ‘the few travellers who still care for [their] monuments’, and offer critical alternatives to mainstream handbooks for travellers.<sup>4</sup> This programme was also related to an evolving theory of picture viewing. As Donata Levi has pointed out, Ruskin’s ideas about museums were complex and evolved over time.<sup>5</sup> If in 1844 he privileged ‘a mode of picture viewing which was mainly private and isolated in contrast with exhibition spaces which were crowded, noisy and ostentatious’, for museums were to be experienced in a ‘one-to-one relationship’ and ‘a quiet attitude of receptiveness’,<sup>6</sup> by the 1860s he had come to conceive of the museum as an educational and transformative

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3 See Geoffrey N. Swinney, ‘The Evil of Vitiating and Heating the Air. Artificial Lighting and Public Access to the National Gallery, London, with Particular Reference to the Turner and Vernon Collections’, *Journal of the History of Collections* 15.1 (2003), 83–112 (p. 93). Conservation was the theme of the exhibition: ‘Colour and Light: Caring for Turner’s Watercolours’, The National Gallery of Ireland, 2011.

4 See dedication of *St. Mark’s Rest*. E. T. Cook, A. Wedderburn (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903–12), XXIV, p. 193. Future references to the *Works* will be included in the text parenthetically.

5 Donata Levi, ‘Ruskin’s Gates: dentro e fuori il museo’, Roberto Balzani (ed.), *Collezioni, museo, identità fra XVIII e XIX secolo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2006), 68–105.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

place aiming at a 'spiritual advancement in life'.<sup>7</sup> The *Guide* is informed by this radical purpose. In these apparently fragmentary little volumes all references to paintings aim to enact this process, to search for, display and articulate a system of aesthetic, social and spiritual values that looks back to early Christian art. The *Guide* focuses on the early Venetians and their Byzantine roots, artists he calls 'painters of the heart' as opposed to 'painters of the eye'.<sup>8</sup> Linking spiritual values to chromatism, Ruskin contrasts 'brightness' with 'colourfulness,' and genuine faith with doubt. In this series of correspondences, the space hosting the painting is linked directly to modulations of and contrasts between light and shade, and thus semanticized.

Ruskin had outlined his notion of an ideal gallery in two articles he wrote for the *Times* in 1847 and 1852, when plans for a museum to house the Turner bequest were being discussed. The 'two imperative requirements' he summed up in his 1852 letter were:

that every picture in the gallery should be perfectly seen and perfectly safe; that none should be thrust up, or down, or aside, to make room for more important ones; that all should be in a good light, all on a level with the eye, and all secure from damp, cold, impurity of atmosphere, and every other avoidable cause of deterioration (XII, 410–11).

Largely shared today, he expected that this idea would be received as odd and revolutionary by his contemporaries:

I know that it will be a strange idea to most of us that Titians and Tintorets ought, indeed, all to have places upon 'the line' as well as the annual productions of our Royal Academicians; and I know that the *coup d'oeuil* of the Gallery must be entirely destroyed by such an arrangement. But great pictures ought not to be subjects of '*coup d'oeuil*' (ibid., p. 411).

In the later pamphlet 'Notes on the Turner Gallery at Marlborough House, 1856' he reiterates and expands on the subject, listing twelve detailed 'rules' on picture viewing:

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7 Ibid., p. 100. On the 'programme of textual revision and moral reformation' informing the *Guide* and Ruskin's late works on Venetian art, see Tucker, *Guida*, p. 13.

8 Paul Tucker, ed., *Résumé of Italian Art and Architecture (1845)* (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2003), xli–xlvi.

1st. All large pictures should be on walls lighted from above; 2nd. Every picture should be hung so as to admit of its horizon being brought on a level with the eye of the spectator, without difficulty or stooping. A model gallery should have one line only; and some interval between each picture, to prevent the interference of the colours of one piece with those of the rest. [...] 4th. There would be a great advantage in giving large pictures a room to themselves. 5th. It is of the highest importance that the works of each master should be kept together. [...] 8th. Though the idea of a single line of pictures, seen by light as above, involves externally, as well as internally, the sacrifice of architectural splendour, I am certain the exterior even of this long and low gallery could be rendered not only impressive, but a most interesting school of art. I would dispose it in long arcades; if the space were limited, returning upon itself like a labyrinth; the walls to be double, with passages of various access between them, in order to secure the picture from the variations of temperature in the external air (XIII, 176–81).

Although we still know little about the disposition of the rooms composing the Galleries of the Venice Academy and the arrangement of the paintings within them, which changed continuously, we may be certain that they did not respond to these requirements.<sup>9</sup> We can infer something of the lighting conditions, however. In 1877, the year Ruskin's *Guide* was published, the Galleries were illuminated solely by natural light, as were most museums of the time, and were therefore, as Murray's handbooks announced, open from 12pm to 3pm.<sup>10</sup> In 1864 artificial light had been introduced to illuminate some of the Academy rooms, namely those dedicated to the evening life classes. In a lengthy unpublished letter, Carlo Blaas, professor of Life Drawing at the Academy in the decade 1856–66, made a formal request for gas lighting in these rooms, at the same time informing the *Presidenza* of the Accademia di Belle Arti about the overall lighting conditions of the building, complaining about over-exposure to light in the statues' rooms (*statuaria*) on the upper floor, and proposing that the lights (*lanternali*) that had been opened on the roof of the Church of the Carità when it was adapted to house

9 See Nico Stringa (ed.), *L'Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia, l'Ottocento*, 2 vols. (Crocetta del Montello, TV: Antiga edizioni, 2016). I wish to thank Sileno Salvagnini, general coordinator of this work, and his collaborator Sara Filippin, for kindly helping with information about unpublished material.

10 John Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy: Comprising Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Venetia, Parma, Modena, and Romagna* (London: John Murray, 1869), 11th ed., p. 422.

the Schools be covered or closed.<sup>11</sup> In March 1877 the issue of lighting at the Accademia was raised again in a letter written by the painter Augusto Wolf, and signed by thirty-nine artists, who asked for better illumination of the exhibition rooms.<sup>12</sup>

In 1877 the Academy art schools were still on the ground floor of today's Galleries, occupying the former buildings of the Scuola, Chiesa and Convento della Carità. The place was defined as 'a partly casual but magnificent aggregate of former buildings and later additions', 'the appropriate seat of wonderful works',<sup>13</sup> which reflected a 'system of correspondences between the art schools on the lower floor and the gallery rooms on the upper one'.<sup>14</sup>

Ruskin had been visiting the Academy since the 1840s, but this system of correspondences had started to interest him only in the 1860s, when he was thinking of new museal forms that would fulfill both a pedagogic and an aesthetic purpose. Moreover, in these years he started commissioning copies of Venetian paintings from young painters, some of whom were students at the Venice Academy, and in 1873 he became an honorary member (*socio d'onore*) of that institution.<sup>15</sup> The Academy had other features that attracted Ruskin's interests in the 1870s, principally the fact that it housed the largest collection of the early Venetian art works that were absorbing his interests and energies in those years, among them Carpaccio's Saint Ursula cycle. But it was far from what he thought an ideal museum should be: its rooms were not devoted to one painter only, paintings were not arranged chronologically, nor were they on the eyeline.

11 Letter dated 15 May 1863, *Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia, Fondo storico, Atti, 1860–1870, Amministrazione, Economato*, VI, B. 1, fasc. 'Illuminazione gas portatile'.

12 See Sara Filippin, 'Fotografie e fotografia nella storia dell'Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia, 1850–1950', in Nico Stringa, *L'Accademia di Belle Arti*, I, pp. 233–69 (p. 249).

13 See Antonio Dall'Acqua Giusti, *L'Accademia e la Galleria di Venezia. Due relazioni storiche per l'esposizione di Vienna del 1873* (Venice: Visentini, 1873), 'L'Accademia', 5–73; 'La Galleria', 5–29 (p. 56). This historical report provides a census of the artworks exhibited at the Pinacoteca and details about the distribution of paintings in the rooms. See also Murray's plan, in his *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy*, p. 422.

14 'Room 2 or *Sala dell'Assunta* was above the School of Ornamentation, the Sculpture room was above the classroom of Architecture, Painting and Life Drawing; [...]. In fact, the Academy and the Gallery were born together and developed in such a connected and interdependent way that the two institutions are to be considered a single whole, just as the building was a single whole', Dall'Acqua Giusti, 'L'Accademia', p. 56. My translation.

15 See Tucker, *Guida*, pp. 14–15, 47n.



One of the most interesting features of the *Guide* is that it seems to trace an itinerary through the Galleries alternative to that which the actual ordering and positioning of the pictures invite the visitor to follow. Ruskin's authoritative and prescriptive mode of directing the visitor orients his gaze in such a way as to virtually reorganize the existing spaces. As in Ruskin's ideal museum, the *Guide* to the Academy constructs a path in which paintings are arranged in a roughly chronological order, and placed one after the other on an ideal eyeline. The viewer is addressed personally and urged to follow instructions: to move from one room to the next, look selectively at paintings, turn, move on, shun and avoid, stop and linger, go back, leave. Once she has accomplished this journey through fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Venetian painting, the visitor will have covered the labyrinthine circular trajectory Ruskin had imagined for his ideal gallery. This reorganization of space is based on a close rhetorical control that also exploits such external signs as the rooms' light and shade, conditions that become signposts, signifiers, and symbolic labels with multiple meanings attached. Let us see how this strategy is enacted.

## 2. Looking Into Dark Recesses

The *Guide* starts with a conditional and an imperative that together set the tone of the whole discourse:

In the first place, if the weather is fine, go outside the gate you have just come in at, and look above it. Over this door are three of the most precious pieces of sculpture in Venice; her native work, dated; and belonging to the school of severe Gothic which indicates the beginning of her Christian life in understanding of its real claims upon her (XXIV, 149).

The imperative urges the visitor to go back and notice what s/he might have just neglected, launching a visit that, from the start, takes the form of a journey of discovery of hidden or unseen works. The condition is that there be 'fine weather': it must at least be dry enough for one to be able to look at the sculptures on the façade, but it must also be sunny enough to visit a gallery that was illuminated only by natural light. This apparently trivial detail alerts the viewer that s/he must be receptive to the basic contingent factors that affect a visit to buildings housing

works of art. The viewer must be aware of all the physical factors that intervene and make up the experience.

After drawing attention to this earliest instance of Christian sculpture in Venice, Ruskin leads his reader straight into the building and places him in front of two early paintings in Room I, the *Coronation of the Virgin* by Stefano Plebanus di Sant' Agnese and the *Polyptych of the Madonna* by Bartolomeo Vivarini, 'a picture that contains the essence of Venetian art'. Soon after, in a hasty movement — 'Next, going under it, through the door' — he places him/her in what he laconically calls 'the principal room of the Academy'. This was Room II, known as the Sala dell'Assunta.<sup>16</sup> Stuffed with paintings of different periods and artists, it had been celebrated by Giuseppe Borsato (1757–1822) in his *Commemoration of Antonio Canova* (1824), and in the 1860s it was photographed by Domenico Bresolin and then Carlo Naya.<sup>17</sup> The first room in the Academy of which we have nineteenth-century photos was universally known for containing Titian's *Assumption*. In his *Pinacoteca dell'Accademia* (1830) Venetian art historian Francesco Zanotto had concluded his lengthy treatment of the altarpiece by defining it as 'the sun among minor stars, rescued from the darkness of its former seat in the Frari church and from the damages of candlelight and incense, and restored to the *full light* of the Academy, to shine among the masterpieces of the Veneto School'.<sup>18</sup> Murray repeated this almost *verbatim*.<sup>19</sup>

In introducing his reader/viewer into the room Ruskin shuns the painting by pointing at a 'back wall' where the 'best Bellini in the Academy' lingers:<sup>20</sup>

[...] you find yourself in the principal room of the Academy, which please cross quietly to the window opposite, on the left of which hangs a large picture *which you will have great difficulty in seeing at all, hung*

16 As in Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy*, p. 423.

17 G. Borsato, *Commemorazione di Antonio Canova*, Venezia, Galleria Ca' Pesaro, 1824. For Bresolin's and Naya's photographs, see Filippin, pp. 243–44.

18 Francesco Zanotto, *Pinacoteca della Imp. Reg. Accademia Veneta delle Belle Arti*, 2 vols. (Venice: Giuseppe Antonelli, 1830), I, unnumbered. My translation.

19 Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy*, p. 423.

20 Giovanni Bellini, *Virgin Enthroned with the Child, with Saints Francis, John the Baptist, Job, Dominic, Sebastian, Louis of Toulouse and musicanti angels*, known as the 'San Giobbe Altarpiece', Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, ca.1487, see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Accademia\\_-\\_Pala\\_di\\_San\\_Giobbe\\_by\\_Giovanni\\_Bellini.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Accademia_-_Pala_di_San_Giobbe_by_Giovanni_Bellini.jpg)

as it is against the light; and which, in any of its finer qualities, you absolutely cannot see; but *may yet perceive* what they are, *latent in that darkness*, which is all the honour that the kings, nobles, and artists of Europe care to bestow on one of the greatest pictures ever painted by Christendom in her central art-power. Alone worth an entire modern exhibition-building, hired fiddlers, and all; here you have it jammed on a back wall, utterly unserviceable to human kind, the little *angels of it fiddling unseen*. Unheard by anybody's heart. It is the best John Bellini in the Academy of Venice; the third best in Venice, and probably in the world (XXIV, 151–52).

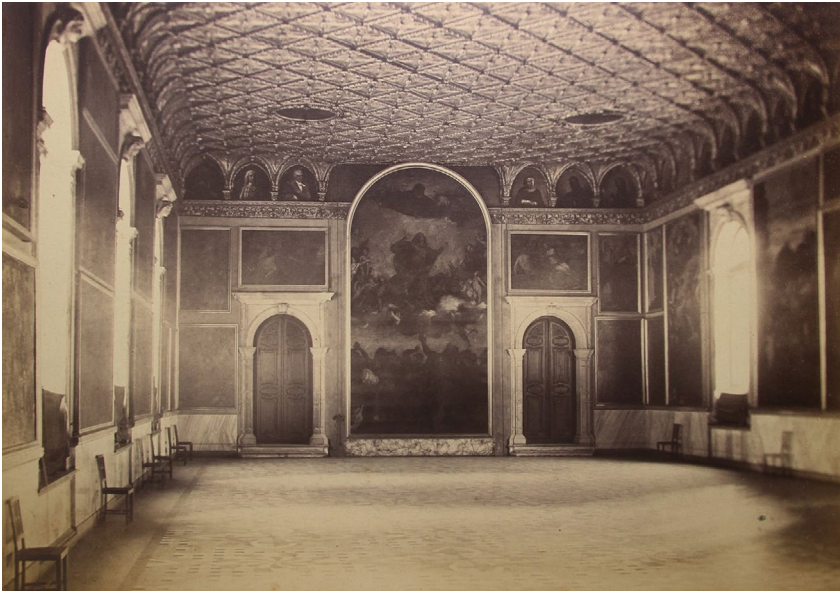


Fig. 7.1 Carlo Naya. Sala dell'Assunta, Accademia di Belle Arti, Venice.

Darkness and invisibility here become meaningful signs for the visitor, who will have to decode their implications. Ruskin teaches his viewer to consider the museum as a *semiotic space* in which all signs can convey information about a painting. This implies the proxemic assumption that in order to understand a painting one must consider the place where it is set, the room itself, its relationship with the other paintings, as well as the building in which it is housed. In the second part of the *Guide*, Ruskin deals extensively with the three buildings and institutions of the Carità that form that 'casual but extraordinary assemblage', encouraging his reader to meditate on the origin of this

art gallery and school, and recognise symbolic and spiritual meaning in the expository buildings as such. To look at the 'dark spot' occupied by Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna*, first and foremost involves avoiding the conventional paths followed by the mass of viewers. Most of the Academy paintings to which Ruskin draws his reader's attention are described as being in shaded or inaccessible positions. At another level, the darkness into which the Bellini has been cast speaks of the museum's approach, and implies criticism of institutional choices, frequent targets of attacks by Ruskin in those years.

In Ruskin's personal semiosis of the Accademia, invisibility is the halo surrounding neglected and valuable works, ultimately 'dark' because of their value. The early Christian association between humility and glory is an implied reference here, an association which helps to explain why what lingers unseen deserves attention, and thus why one should look carefully at Bellini's *Madonna*.

The hidden position (and glory) of the Bellini is in sharp contrast with Titian's *Assumption*, which Ruskin mentions soon after. Unlike Bellini's, Titian's painting is in full view, with chairs in front of it for visitors to look at it comfortably, turning their backs on the rest of the works in the room. In the *Venetian Index* (1853) Ruskin had appreciated the *Assumption*, but he had also raised the issue of its visibility: 'The traveller is generally too much struck by Titian's great picture of 'The Assumption' to be able to pay proper attention to the other works in this gallery' (*ibid.*, p. 152), adding that the viewer is deceptively attracted by the painting's technical features: 'on the picture's being larger than any other in the room, and having bright masses of red and blue in it' (*ibid.*). Now in 1877 he diminishes the value of largeness and bright colour and corrects the viewer's criteria for appreciation: 'the picture is in reality not one whit the better either for being large or gaudy in colour', and urges him/her not to be deceived by size and colour but take 'the pains necessary to discover the merit of the more profound works of Bellini and Tintoret.' Far from being too bright, the *Assumption* is actually not 'bright enough', for it is full of dark spots (*ibid.*, p. 153). Acknowledging that 'as a piece of oil painting, and what artists call 'composition,' with entire grasp and knowledge of the action of the human body, the perspectives of the human face, and the relations of shade to colour in expressing form, the picture is deservedly held unsurpassable', he feels

that this is an art no longer inspired by a genuine belief: '[Titian] does not, in his heart, believe the Assumption ever took place at all':

[...] a strange gloom has been cast over him, he knows not why; but he likes all his colours dark, and puts great spaces of brown, and crimson passing into black, where the older painters would have made all lively. Painters call this 'chiaroscuro'. So also they may call a thunder-cloud in the sky of spring: but it means more than light and shade (*ibid.*, p. 154).

Brightness is created by other means (golden and luminous surfaces) and of mystical experience. Brightness applies to 'the painters of the heart', to what Ruskin calls 'the Vivarini epoch, bright, innocent, more or less elementary, entirely religious art, — reaching from 1400 to 1480' (*ibid.*, p. 155). Darkness is a mark of the existential condition of the modern painter, and the Gallery now becomes the spatial figure of modernity.

After highlighting the 'dark spots' of the *Assumption*, Ruskin draws attention to 'two dark pictures over the doors', Tintoretto's *Death of Abel* and *Adam and Eve*. Here he establishes a correspondence between the darkness of the space in which the painting is located, which the reader has by now learnt to consider a meaningful element of the Academy's grammar, and the dark colours in the painting itself, as another mark of modernity:

Darkness visible, with flashes of lightning through it. The thunder-cloud upon us, rent with fire. Those are Tintorets; finest possible Tintorets; best possible examples of what, in absolute power of painting, is supremest work, so far as I know, in all the world. [...] it would take you twenty years' work to understand the fineness of them as painting [...] All that you have to notice is that painting has become a dark rather than a bright art (*ibid.*).

It was indeed more than twenty years since Ruskin had himself begun to grasp Tintoretto's 'absolute power', and guided readers of *Modern Painters* and the *Venetian Index* through the shadowy spaces of the Scuola di San Rocco and the 'fireflylike' lighting of the canvases it houses.<sup>21</sup> We

21 Ruskin's readings of the Tintoretto's in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco are complex and deserve close study. I have discussed some aspects in 'Reading the Painting's Suggestiveness: Remarks on a Passage of Ruskin's Art Criticism', in Jeanne Clegg and Paul Tucker (eds.), *The Dominion of Daedalus. Papers from the Ruskin Workshop held in Pisa and Lucca 13–14 May 1993* (St. Albans: Brentham Press, 1994), pp. 100–14, and more recently in Emma Sdegno (ed.), Introduction to *Looking at Tintoretto with John Ruskin* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2018). On the physical aspects of the illumination of

may also note in passing that when reading paintings housed in other Scuole, which, like those in San Rocco, were conceived specifically for their spaces, Ruskin seems to establish close meaningful connections between subject and illumination. For instance, in *St. Mark's Rest*, the placing of Carpaccio's *Agony in the Desert* in the Scuola Dalmata degli Schiavoni seems to correspond to and guard the mystery of the agony:

It is in the darkest recess of all the room; and of the darkest theme — the Agony in the Garden. I have never seen it rightly, nor need you pause at it, unless to note the extreme naturalness of the action in the sleeping figures — their dresses drawn tight under them as they have turned, restlessly. But the principal figure is hopelessly invisible (XXIV, 343).

Similarly in the next painting, Carpaccio's *The Calling of Matthew*, bright natural light investing the scene will complete the picture: 'visible this, in a bright day, and worth waiting for one, to see it in, through any stress of weather' (ibid.). Light and darkness are means to aesthetic and spiritual experiences.

In the Accademia, on the other hand, picture viewing is an intermittent process, unfolding through a space that is crammed with heterogenous figures; the viewer must select some and discard others in order to make sense of the experience. The search for an aesthetic and religious vision traced by Ruskin follows a path constellated with many different sensorial forms, a path which leads the viewer to peer into shaded recesses. This dynamic process provides a sensory and aesthetic education: the reader is brought in front of paintings that are presented as visions of mystical experiences.

Ruskin attempts to make this elusive goal accessible by weaving a labyrinthine discourse through the spaces of the Galleries and investing the spaces themselves with an expressionistic function. This is one of his most innovative contributions to art. Ruskin's opposition to artificial lighting did not arise only from concern about the damage it would cause to colours and canvases. In the *Guide*, at least, it betrays something more: a fear that in dispelling the dark conditions created by the positioning of the paintings we might sacrifice the very quality that stimulates the reader to see the brightness latent in that darkness.

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the Scuola, see Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, 'Dal buio alla luce: la Scuola Grande di San Rocco da Ruskin e James a Fortuny', *Notiziario della Scuola Grande Arciconfraternita di San Rocco in Venezia* 32 (2014), 49–73.