From Darkness to Light

Writers in Museums 1798-1898

Edited by Rosella Mamoli Zorzi and Katherine Manthorne

From Darkness to Light explores from a variety of angles the subject of museum lighting in exhibition spaces in America, Japan, and Western Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Written by an array of international experts, these collected essays gather perspectives from a diverse range of cultural sensibilities. From sensitive discussions of Tintoretto's unique approach to the play of light and darkness as exhibited in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, to the development of museum lighting as part of Japanese artistic self-fashioning, via the story of an epic American painting on tour, museum illumination in the work of Henry James, and lighting alterations at Chatsworth, this book is a treasure trove of illuminating contributions.

The collection is at once a refreshing insight for the enthusiastic museum-goer, who is brought to an awareness of the exhibit in its immediate environment, and a wide-ranging scholarly compendium for the professional who seeks to proceed in their academic or curatorial work with a more enlightened sense of the lighted space.

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4. John Ruskin and Henry James in the Enchanting Darkness of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco

Rosella Mamoli Zorzi

The great Tintoretto paintings of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco\(^1\) continue their dialogue with their contemporary visitors: with a well-known writer, Melania G. Mazzucco, the author of two wonderful books on Tintoretto, La lunga attesa dell’angelo (2008) and Jacomo Tintoretto e i suoi figli. Storia di una famiglia veneziana (2009); with a Lebanese-Canadian-French playwright, Wajdi Mouawad, who used Tintoretto’s Annunciation of the Scuola in his play CIELS (2009), as a crypto-indication of a terrorist assault by a group of jihadists, whose name is, indeed, ‘Tintoretto’; with such unexpected figures as Woody Allen, who set an irresistibly comic seduction scene in the movie Everybody Says I Love You (1996) in the upper hall. These are only a few examples of the reactions of contemporary authors to their experience of the magnificent and powerful ‘teleri’ by Tintoretto in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, now lit

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\(^1\) Salvatore Settis and Franco Posocco (eds.), La Scuola Grande di San Rocco, ‘Memorabilia Italicae’, n. 15 (Modena: Panini Editore, 2008), is a fundamental study. See Posocco’s essay on the ‘vicenda urbanistica’ of the Scuola, which was seen by both Ruskin and James with the square closed off by a large wall (‘muraglione’), which was torn down in 1910 in order to open a passage to the railway station. On the visitors’ ‘vasta gamma di possibilità ricettive’ (‘vast range of reception possibilities’, p. 86) and on the ‘nessi tra lo spazio reale e quello del quadro’ (‘on the links between real space and the space in the paintings’, p. 133), see Astrid Zenkert’s essay in the same volume (pp. 85–159).
with indirect lighting and new LED lighting, as Demetrio Sonaglioni’s and Alberto Pasetti Bombardella’s essays document.

But in the nineteenth century the experience of viewing the great canvasses by Tintoretto in the Scuola was very different, as the only light available was natural light: therefore visitors interested in the paintings visited the Scuola at different times of the day, and, if possible, on sunny and unclouded days. This was the experience of the two great writers I am going to consider, John Ruskin and Henry James, who fell in love with the paintings despite not being able to see them properly.

In 1845, the young John Ruskin, the future author of *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), was absolutely ‘overwhelmed’ by the power and the beauty of the Tintoretto paintings in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, as he wrote to his father on 23 September and in other letters that followed: ‘I have been quite overwhelmed today by a man whom I never dreamed of — Tintoret. I always thought him a good & clever & forcible painter,

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2 There are not many studies on the lighting of museums in the nineteenth century, while there are many on the history of the lighting of streets, homes, and theatres. Many are the recent publications on electric and LED lighting in museums. As regards Venice, due to chronological reasons, the subject is not discussed in the important three volumes on Venetian collecting: Michel Hochman, Rosella Lauber and Stefania Mason (eds.), *Collezione d’arte a Venezia. Dalle origini al Cinquecento* (Venice: Fondazione di Venezia and Marsilio, 2008); Stefania Mason and Linda Borean (eds.), *Il Seicento* (Venice: Marsilio, 2007); and Stefania Mason and Linda Borean (eds.), *Il Settecento* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009). In the third volume, however, the ‘nuova sensibilità per gli allestimenti’ (‘the new sensibility regarding layout’) at the beginning of the nineteenth century is mentioned in the essay by Linda Borean, ‘Dalla galleria al “museo”’ (p. 40). For a history of lighting, but not in museums, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Luce. Storia dell’illuminazione artificiale nel secolo XIX* (Parma: Pratiche, 1994). The exhibition *Light! The Industrial Age 1750–1900*, at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (20 October 2000–11 February 2001) was also important as it dealt with the relationship between lighting, pictures and artists. As regards restoration, the critical literature is immense and detailed.

3 Although experiments on the change of colours due to light were carried out by Isaac Newton (*Opticks: or a Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light*, 1704), Pierre Bouguer (1729) and Theodor Grotthuss (1817), it was above all *The Russell and Abbey Report on the Action of Light on Watercolours* (1888) and *The Chemistry of Paint and Painting* (1890) by A. H. Church that had a real influence on museums. The most widely read and significant essay with recommendations on the intensity of light was published only in July 1930 (*The Burlington Magazine*). See James Druzik and Bent Eshoj, ‘Museum Lighting: Its Past and Future Development’, in T. Padfield and K. Borchersen (eds.), *Museum Microclimates, Contributions to the Conference in Copenhagen, 19–23 November 2007* (National Museum of Denmark, 2007), http://www.conservationphysics.org/mm/musmic/musmic150.pdf, pp. 51–56 (pp. 51–52). The problems light poses for the conservation of paintings appears to have become relevant from the end of the nineteenth century onwards.
but I had not the smallest notion of his enormous power’. The next day he wrote:

I have had a draught of pictures to-day enough to drown me. I never was so utterly crushed to the earth before any human intellect as I was today, before Tintoret. [...] As for painting, I think I didn’t know what it meant till today — the fellow outlines you your figure with ten strokes, and colours it with as many more. I don’t believe it took him ten minutes to invent & paint a whole length. Away he goes, heaping host on host, multitudes that no man can number — never pausing, never repeating himself — clouds & whirlwinds & fire & infinity of earth & sea...

And, a little later, he wrote:

... that rascal Tintoret — he has shown me some totally new fields of art and altered my feelings in many respects — or at least deepened & modified them — and I shall work differently, after seeing him, from my former method. I can’t see enough of him, and the more I look the more wonderful he becomes.

What is interesting is the fact that Ruskin was ‘overwhelmed’ by Tintoretto’s paintings even if he complained again and again about the impossibility of seeing the pictures properly, due to the bad lighting. Before giving a detailed descriptions of the paintings in the ground-floor


5 Letter of 24 September, in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, p. 211.

6 Letter to his father, 10 October, in ibid., p. 221. The quotations from *The Stones of Venice* are here used only to illustrate the material conditions of the Scuola. Of course biblical references were very important to Ruskin. On the subject of Tintoretto’s theological and biblical ideas in the paintings see Giandomenico Romanelli, *La luce e le tenebre. Tintoretto alla Scuola Grande di San Rocco* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011).
hall, Ruskin offered some general comments on the characteristics of the three halls, which were ‘so badly lighted, in consequence of the admirable arrangements of the Renaissance architect, that it is only in the early morning that some of the pictures can be seen at all, nor can they ever be seen but imperfectly’.8

Ruskin attributes the bad lighting to an architect of the ‘Renaissance’, a period he notoriously hated. The Scuola architect’s work is ironically described as ‘admirable’. The ground-floor hall is ‘a room plunged into almost total obscurity’. (Stones III, 323); it is presented as ‘the dungeon below…’ (Stones III, 333); ‘… what little sun gets into the place contrives to fall all day right on one or other of the pictures, they are nothing but wrecks of what they were; …’ (Stones III, 323). This observation is clarified by what follows: ‘…as during the whole morning the sun shines upon the one picture, and during the afternoon upon the other, hues, which were originally thin and imperfect, are now dried in many places into mere dirt upon the canvas’. (Stones III, 329)

As for the upper hall, The Adoration of the Shepherds, ‘painted with far less care than that of the lower’ is ‘in good light’ (the ‘far less care’ is Ruskin’s recurring criticism against Tintoretto’s technique of quick brush strokes, a technique that has been appreciated as a sign of modernity by more recent critics):10 ‘It is one of the painter’s inconceivable caprices

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7 Ruskin began his description of the Scuola from the ground floor hall, while it is well-known that any visit should start from the Sala dell’Albergo, as Tintoretto began his work there. The artist then continued with the upper hall, and finally concluded in the ground floor hall. The chronology is as follows: 1564–67 Sala dell’Albergo; 1575–81 upper hall; 1582–87 ground floor hall. See Paola Rossi, ‘Regesto’, in Rodolfo Pallucchini and Paola Rossi, Tintoretto. Le opere sacre e profane (Milan: Electa, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 126–28, and pp. 188, 200, 225.


9 The Scuola architects were more than one, due to the uncertainty of the ‘Banca’ of the Scuola: Maestro Bon, Zuan Celestro, Sante Lombardo (and his son Tullio, for the decoration of the façade), Antonio Abbondi aka Scarpagnino, aided by the ‘pratici’ Alvise da Noal and Costantin de Todero. See Manfredo Tafuri, Venezia e il Rinascimento. Religione, scienza, architettura (Turin: Einaudi, 1985), Chapter IV, ‘Scuole Grandi’, pp. 130–44.

10 On Tintoretto’s fastness in painting see Romanelli, La luce e le tenebre, who reminds the reader of the first evidence of this skill in a 1545 letter by Aretino, and the following comments, n. 5, p. 134. In presenting the great 1937 exhibition Nino Barbantini in his article ‘La mostra di Tintoretto: un grande successo’ wrote that the ‘presunta incompiutezza’ (‘presumed lack of finish’) of Tintoretro’s art was the mark ‘della sua grandezza e della sua modernità’ (‘of his greatness and modernity’),
that the only canvases that are in good light should be covered in this hasty manner, while those in the dungeon below, and on the ceiling above, are all highly laboured’. (Stones III, 333)

Sunlight hit both paintings on the right and the left of the main altar, causing damage. The Last Supper ‘has not only been originally poor, but it is one of those exposed all day to the sun, and is dried into mere dirty canvas; where there was once blue, there is now nothing’. (Stones III, 338) Similarly The Miracle of the Loaves ‘is more exposed to the sun than any other picture in the room, and its draperies having been, in great part, painted in blue, are now mere patches of the colour of starch;…’ (Stones III, 338)

Ruskin proceeds to describe other paintings, including the figure of San Rocco. The figures of the saints ‘are quite in the dark, so that the execution cannot be seen […] I cannot answer for them).’¹¹ (Stones III, 341). Ruskin presumes these may be the work of Tintoretto but cannot guarantee it. The figures of San Rocco and Saint Sebastian can be seen only ‘By a great deal of straining of the eyes, and sheltering them with the hand from the light…’ (Stones III, 342) As for the ceiling paintings, such as Moses Striking the Rock, ‘they are at least distinctly visible without straining the eyes against the light’. (Stones III, 343) Christ before Pilate, in the Sala dell’Albergo, can be seen to its best advantage, according to Ruskin ‘… on a dark day, when the white figure of Christ alone draws the eye, looking almost like a spirit; …’ (Stones III, 353)

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¹¹ The attribution to Domenico Tintoretto ‘non ha ricevuto conferma dal restauro del 1971’ (‘has received no confirmation from the 1971 restoration’), see Valcanover, Jacopo Tintoretto, p. 88. Also Pallucchini and Rossi, Tintoretto, vol. 1, p. 204.
These quotations testify to the light — or rather the darkness and lack of light\(^{12}\) — in the Scuola when Ruskin visited, first in 1845 and then subsequently.

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The situation had not changed more than twenty years later, when Henry James arrived in Venice in 1869, and it did not change during James’s following visits. James wrote to his brother from Venice in September 1869:

And then you see him [Tintoretto] at a vast disadvantage inasmuch as with hardly an exception his pictures are atrociously hung & lighted. When you reflect that he was willing to go on covering canvas to be hidden out of sight or falsely shown, you get some idea of the prodigality of his genius. Most of his pictures are immense & swarming with figures; All have suffered grievously from abuse & neglect.\(^{13}\)

Ten years later, in his 1882 essay *Venice*, James wrote:

It may be said as a general thing that you never see the Tintoret. You admire him, you adore him, you think him the greatest of painters, but in the great majority of cases your eyes fail to deal with him. […] At the Scuola di San Rocco, where there are acres of him, there is scarcely anything at all adequately visible save the immense ‘Crucifixion’ in the upper story.\(^{14}\)

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12 Ruskin commented on the *Madonna e Santi* by Giovanni Bellini in Hall 2 of the Accademia: ‘...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 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. Repainted, the right-hand angel, and somewhat elsewhere; but on the whole perfect; unspeakably good, and right in all ways.’ *Guide to the Principal Pictures in the Academy of Fine Arts at Venice* (1877), in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *The Complete Works of John Ruskin in 39 vols.* (London: Allen, 1903–12), vol. 24 (1906), p. 151.


James’s observations on the darkness reigning in the Scuola di San Rocco extend to other places, as do those by Ruskin. James wrote: ‘The churches of Venice are rich in pictures, and many a masterpiece lurks in the unaccommodating gloom of side-chapels and sacristies. Many a noble work is perched behind the dusty candles and muslin roses of a scantily-visited altar; some of them indeed, hidden behind the altar, suffer in a darkness that can never be explored’.\(^\text{15}\)

The bad lighting\(^\text{16}\) and the hanging of the pictures, far too high,\(^\text{17}\) seem to be a continuous refrain, both as regards Italy in general\(^\text{18}\) and the Scuola and the churches and museums of Venice in particular. In the essay ‘The Autumn in Florence’ (1874) James celebrates the ‘strong American light’ — as opposed to the darkness of Italian museums — which might make a picture look its best:

… I noted here [in the Florence Accademia], on my last occasion, an enchanting Botticelli so obscurely hung, in one of the smaller rooms, that I scarce knew whether most to enjoy or resent its relegation. Placed, in a

\(^{15}\) Ibid. p. 23, my emphasis.

\(^{16}\) The opening hours of the Accademia in 1856, from 12pm to 3pm, clearly show that there was only natural lighting during that period. See Andrea Querini Stampalia, *Nuova Guida annuale di Venezia* (Venice: Premiata Tipografia di Gio. Lacchin, 1856), p. 133. As for the Museo Correr, it was open on Wednesdays and Saturdays; see p. 134. The room of the drawings at the Accademia was also open only on Wednesdays and Saturdays from 12pm to 3pm The 1867 and 1870 Baedeker guidebooks indicate as the Accademia opening hours 9am to 3pm, and during 1867 and 1870, and during ‘festivals’, 11am to 2pm. The instruction to enter was given as ‘Visitors ring’ in both editions (1867, p. 245; 1870 p. 199). The 1879 Baedeker indicates the Correr opening hours as on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10am to 4pm (p. 211).

\(^{17}\) In the Accademia, in Venice, James observes: ‘…a simple Adam & Eve, in the same room, or a Cain & Abel, its mate, both atrociously hung — away aloft in the air’ (my emphasis). James is referring to the hall of the Accademia where there was the *Miracle of St. Mark’s, CLH] 1855–1872*, II, p. 117. Ruskin too observed the excessive height at which the picture of the *Visitation* hung, on the landing of the staircase of the Scuola di San Rocco. Until recently the picture was located on the right side of the main altar on the second floor, on an easel; it has now been placed on the landing wall once again, but with new lighting. As one would expect, Ruskin considered the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings by Zanchi and Negri on the staircase ‘utterly worthless’ (*Stones* III, p. 332).

\(^{18}\) Obscurity and decay seem to prevail throughout Italy, where, according to James, ‘we see a large number of beautiful buildings in which an endless series of dusky pictures are darkening, dampening, fading, failing through the years’ (my emphasis). See James, ‘Italy Revisited’ (1877) in *Italian Hours* (1909), p. 113. In his important introduction to this edition of *Italian Hours*, John Auchard only observes as regards lighting that it ‘has been improved dramatically’ (p. xiv).
mean black frame, where you wouldn’t have looked for a masterpiece, it yet gave out to a good glass every characterization of one. Representing as it does the walk of Tobias with the angel, there are really parts of it that an angel might have painted. That was my excuse for wanting to know, on the spot, though doubtless all sophistically, what dishonour, could the transfer be artfully accomplished, a strong American light and a brave gilded frame would, comparatively speaking, do it. There and then it would shine with the intense authority that we claim for the fairest things — would exhale its wondrous beauty as a sovereign example.19

In Venice James again and again laments the darkness of other places, such as the Accademia or the Scuola Dalmata:

There is one of them [paintings by Giovanni Bellini, the so-called Pala di San Giobbe]20 on the dark side of the room at the Academy that contains Titian’s ‘Assumption’,21 which if we could only see it — its position is an inconceivable scandal — would evidently be one of the mightiest of so-called sacred pictures. So too is the Madonna of San Zaccaria [1505], hung in a cold, dim, dreary place, ever so much too high…’22

The same is true for Carpaccio’s paintings in San Giorgio degli Schiavoni:23 ‘The place [San Giorgio degli Schiavoni] is small and incommodious, the pictures are out of sight and ill-lighted, the custodian is rapacious, the visitors are mutually intolerable, but the shabby little chapel is a palace of art.’24

A comment on the darkness25 of churches appears also in the essay ‘Two Old Houses’, regarding a church that may be the church of San Stae:26 ‘The old custode, shuffling about in the dimness, jerks away, to

19 James, ‘The Autumn in Florence’ (1874) in Italian Hours, p. 244, my emphasis.
20 Madonna in trono, con il Bambino, con angeli musicanti e i santi Francesco, Giovanni Battista, Sebastiano, Domenico, Giobbe e Ludovico di Tolosa, known as the Pala di San Giobbe (from where it came in 1815), now in Hall 2 of the Accademia, at the time in Hall 1 where Titian’s Assumption had been placed.
21 As is well known, Titian’s Assumption was moved to the Accademia in 1816, where it remained until 1919. See the painting by Giuseppe Borsato, Commemorazione di Canova, 1822, when Canova’s coffin was placed beneath the Assumption.
22 James, ‘Venice’, p. 27.
23 The Scuola Dalmata also now has LED lighting.
24 James, ‘Venice’, p. 29, my emphasis.
25 See also the description of St. Mark’s: ‘The church arches indeed, but arches like a dusky cavern’. However, one can ‘touch and kneel upon and lean against’ things, and ‘it is from this the effect proceeds’. Ibid., p. 15.
26 ‘The obscure church we had feebly imagined we were looking for proved, if I am not mistaken, that of the sisters’ parish; as to which I have a but a confused recollection of a large grey void and of admiring for the first time a fine work of
make sure of his tip, the old curtain that isn’t much more modern than the wonderful work itself. He does his best to create light where light can never be; but you have your practiced groping gaze…”

In spite of these complaints about the darkness of the Scuola and of the churches, James, just as Ruskin, was ‘overwhelmed’ by the power of Tintoretto’s painting. James wrote to his brother William from Venice on 25 September 1869: ‘But you must see him [Tintoretto] here at work… to form an idea of his boundless invention & his passionate energy & of the extraordinary possibilities of color…”

In his 1872 essay, ‘Venice. An Early Impression’, James wrote:

It was the whole scene that Tintoret seemed to have beheld in a flash of inspiration intense enough to stamp it ineffaceably on his perception, and it was the whole scene, complete, peculiar, individual, unprecedented, that he committed to canvas with all the vehemence of his talent. […] You get from Tintoret’s work the impression that he felt, pictorially, the great, beautiful, terrible spectacle of human life very much as Shakespeare felt it poetically — with a heart that never ceased to beat a passionate accompaniment to every stroke of his brush.

James found in Tintoretto’s paintings a world that he himself wished to represent in language: ‘I’d give a great deal to be able to fling down a dozen of his pictures into prose of corresponding force and color’.

The Crucifixion, according to James the only picture which could be seen well in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, was described by the writer in a way that could be interpreted as the program of a poetics:

It is true that in looking at this huge composition you look at many pictures; it has not only a multitude of figures but a wealth of episodes;

art of which I have now quite lost the identity’ (‘Two Old Houses’ p. 66). San Stae could have been the parish church of the Mocenigo sisters, and could have given the impression of a ‘large grey void’, as it does nowadays. San Stae was probably in a dilapidated condition in James’s time, as it remained a parish church until 1810, and was ‘pressocchè abbandonata agli inizi del nostro secolo.’ See Il Patriarcato di Venezia 1974, ed. by Gino Bortolan (Venice: Tipo-Litografia Armena, 1974), p. 475. After 1810, San Cassiano became the parish church of the area, but it is unlikely that James refers to this church, as it contains one of Tintoretto’s Crucifixions, which James loved and described at length. The other possible church may be Santa Maria Mater Domini, which was a parish church until 1897, when it merged with San Stae. But the impressions of a ‘large grey void’ does not seem to apply to this church.

James, ‘Two Old Houses’ (1889) in Italian Hours, p. 70, my emphasis.


28 James, ‘Venice: An Early Impression’ (1873), in Italian Hours, p. 57.

29 Ibid., p. 63.
and you pass from one of these to the other as if you were ‘doing’ a gallery. Surely no single picture in the world contains more of human life; there is everything in it, including the most exquisite beauty. It is one of the greatest things of art; it is always interesting. There are works of the artist which contain touches more exquisite, revelations of beauty more radiant, but there is no other vision of so intense a reality, an execution so splendid.31

It was not a coincidence that many years later, in the preface to The Tragic Muse (1908),32 James should refer to this very Crucifixion as a model in which many stories were presented in the same painting:

A story was a story, a picture a picture, and I had a mortal horror of two stories, two pictures, in one. The reason of this was the clearest — my subject was immediately, under that disadvantage, so cheated of its indispensable centre as to become of no more use for expressing a main intention than a wheel without a hub is of use for moving a cart. It was a fact, apparently, that one had on occasion seen two pictures in one; were there not for instance certain sublime Tintorettos at Venice, a measureless Crucifixion in especial, which showed without loss of authority half a dozen actions separately taking place?33

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It is no wonder that two writers should be shocked into admiration for the wonderful canvasses by Tintoretto. However, one does wonder about their being able to admire Tintoretto when the darkness of the Scuola seemed to prevent a real appreciation of the works by this great master, except for the well-lit Crucifixion.

We are therefore confronting a deep admiration for paintings that cannot be seen well because of poor lighting: one could even say that we are facing an aesthetics of darkness (which is nonetheless lamented by both Ruskin and James). This darkness is also recorded by many other, less famous, travellers, such as, for example, Edgar Barclay, who in 1876 complained about the ‘bad light’ in San Rocco, allowing him to see the paintings only during some hours of the day.34

31 Ibid., p. 24.
32 See Anna Laura Lepschy, Davanti a Tintoretto, una storia del gusto attraverso i secoli (Venice: Marsilio, 1998), p. 190.
34 He also commented on the reflection: ‘having the light full in one’s eyes’ on the upper floor; see Notes on the Scuola di San Rocco (London: Spottiswood, 1876), p. 30.
An aesthetics of darkness seems to allow the viewer — or the writer — to construe an imaginative, and totally subjective, story regarding the figures represented in the paintings, as James did in creating a narrative for the young man in Titian’s Portrait of a Young Englishman (or Virile Portrait) or for one of the ladies in Sebastiano del Piombo’s St John Chrysostomos and the Saints Augustine, John the Baptist, Liberal, Mary Magdalene, Agnes and Catherine in the church of San Giovanni Grisostomo in Venice. The glimpse of a painting, however restricted, seems for James to be like a fragment of a story, sufficient to act on his imagination: ‘You do everything but see the picture. You see just enough to be sure it’s beautiful. You catch a glimpse of a divine head, of a fig-tree against a mellow sky, but the rest is impenetrable mystery’.

Darkness remains a constant element in the second half of the nineteenth century; it is interrupted only by candles. Even in the 1880s and 1890s, when gaslight was already in use and was on the brink of being supplanted by electric light, candles appear to have been the only source of light in the churches and in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. They were lit only during ceremonies, and snuffed out immediately afterwards for fear of fires.

James also recalls ‘the multitudinous candles’ in the Mocenigo sisters’ palace at San Stae in his essay ‘Two Old Houses’, published in 1899. These candles express the historical value of the house: ‘It was a high historic house, with such a quantity of recorded past twinkling in the multitudinous candles...’

36 Ruskin criticized the whole conception of The Resurrection of Christ, adding ‘...the whole picture is languidly or roughly painted, except only the fig-tree at the top of the rock, which, by a curious caprice, is not only drawn in the painter’s best manner, but has golden ribs to all its leaves...’ Stones III, p. 336.
37 James, ‘Venice’, p. 23.
38 In the Miscellanea sec. XVIII–XX b.1 of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco one finds several annotations regarding the candles (‘candelotti’) to be rented (‘a nolo’, 20-12-1884) at the ‘Fabbrica candele di cera di Penso Pasqualin’, or to be bought (10-11-1884: 50 candles plus 54 for 300 liras) in the same year. There were also lanterns, which were carried along in the Corpus Domini procession: a lasting (‘durevole’) restoration of these lanterns is annotated on 10 July 1862; on 15 August 1875 they are registered as restored (‘accomodati’). In 1877 we find an expense for oil (‘spesa d’olio’), probably used to light a room for meetings.
39 James, ‘Two Old Houses’ in Italian Hours, p. 64
By this time one might imagine that at least gaslight was used in Venice, and in fact it was: a contract had been signed in 1839 and in 1843 the St Mark’s area was lit with 146 gas-lit lamps. Ruskin denounced their vulgarity in a letter to his father in 1845: 40

… it being just solemn twilight, as we turned under the arch [of the Rialto bridge], behold, all up to the Foscari palace — gas lamps! on each side, in grand new iron posts of the last Birmingham fashion, and sure enough, they have them all up the narrow canals, and there is a grand one, with more flourishes than usual, just under the Bridge of Sighs. Imagine the new style of serenades — by gas light. 41

Théophile Gautier in his Italia (1852) wrote about the St Mark gaslight42 and so did James in his ‘Venice’ essay of 1882. In 1820 the streets of Paris were lit by gas lamps, and towards the middle of the nineteenth century gas lighting had spread through Europe. The Philadelphia Theatre already had this type of lighting in 1816, and the London Lyceum Theatre had it in 1817. We know that the Victoria and Albert Museum boasted being the first gas-lit museum in 1857, but we also know that this was not true, since as early as 1816 the Baltimore Rembrandt Peale Museum had installed gas lighting, as Burton Kummerow’s essay in this volume tells us.

However, no gaslight was ever used in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, surely for fear of fires; neither was petrol. In 1877 James recalled a small shrine and an ‘incongruous odour’ near Florence:

… Presently I arrived where three roads met at a wayside shrine, in which, before some pious daub of an old-time Madonna, a little votive lamp glimmered through the evening air. […] I became aware of an incongruous odour; it seemed to me that the evening air was charged

40 Clegg, Ruskin and Venice, p. 57.
41 Letter to his father, 10 September 1845, Ruskin in Italy, pp. 198–99. Ruskin found Venice depressing and spoilt by the radical restorations that were going on, such as those on the façade of the Ca’ d’Oro or in the mosaics of St. Marks (‘It amounts to destruction — ’, 11 September, p. 199). The encounter with Tintoretto appears to have changed the tone of the letters, at least partly. See also Clegg, Ruskin and Venice, p. 57.
42 ‘Nous demandâmes qu’on nous conduisît tout de suite à la place Saint-Marc qui se trouvait bien où la ligne de gaz nous l’avait fait supposer la veille.’ Théophile Gautier, Italia (Paris: Hachette, 1855, 2nd ed.), p. 101. Some areas of the city were lit with oil lamps until 1854. The first experimentation with electric light was tried out on the Giudecca in 1886, and in 1889 it was installed in St Mark’s square, see Fondazione Neri, Museo italiano della ghisa, Storia dell’illuminazione, Origini e storia dell’illuminazione pubblica a Venezia, [n. p.].
with a perfume which, although to a certain extent familiar, had not
hitherto associated itself with rustic frescoes and wayside altars. […] The
odour was that of petroleum[.]\textsuperscript{43}

These writers were also interested in the poetics of ‘decay’, in addition
to an aesthetics of darkness.

The beauty of decline and decay was an important aesthetic category,\textsuperscript{44}
as we see in a letter written by James to his mother from Brescia in
September 1869, regarding Leonardo’s Last Supper in Milan: ‘I beheld
like-wise Leonardo’s great Cenacolo — the Last Supper — horribly
decayed — but sublime in its ruins. The \textit{mere} soul of the picture
survives — the form, the outline; but this is the great thing — being as
the container to the contained. There’s something unspeakably grand
in the simplicity of these blurred & broken relics of a magnificent
design — a sentence by the way which only half conveys my thought’.\textsuperscript{45}

James developed the subject in the essay ‘From Chambéry to
Milan’ (1872), where he wrote: ‘…we ask whether our children will find in the
most majestic and most luckless of frescoes much more than the shadow
of a shadow…’, concluding however that the fresco remained ‘one of
the greatest’.\textsuperscript{46}

In spite of this aesthetic of decay, both in Ruskin and in James one
finds negative comments on the restoration of paintings.\textsuperscript{47} The condition
of the canvasses of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco was certainly not
the best one. According to archival evidence, the condition of the (huge)
roof was one of the main worries in the meetings of the Cancelleria.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{43} James, ‘Italy Revisited’ (1878) in \textit{Italian Hours}, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{44} See Sergio Perosa (ed.), \textit{Ruskin e Venezia. La bellezza in decline} (Florence: Olschki,
2001).
\textsuperscript{45} CLHJ 1855-1872, II, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{46} James, ‘From Chambéry to Milan’ in \textit{Italian Hours}, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{47} ‘It [the art of Italy] is well taken care of; it is constantly copied; sometimes it is
‘restored’ — as in the case of that beautiful boy-figure of Andrea del Sarto at
Florence, which may be seen at the gallery of the Uffizi with its honourable
duskiness quite peeled off and heaven knows what raw, bleeding cuticle laid bare’.
See James, ‘Italy Revisited’ (1878) in \textit{Italian Hours}, p. 113. Auchard suggests James
might be referring to Andrea del Sarto’s \textit{John the Baptist as a Boy}, which was however
at the Pitti Palace. See note, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{48} The papers of the ‘Sedute di Cancelleria 1806–1849 (no. 30)’ refer often to the
repairs of the lead roof of the Scuola (21-5-1843, 27-10-1846, 4-7-1847, 16-7-1848);
on 12 August 1849 decisions were taken as regarded the damages caused to the
Regarding his visit of 1846 Ruskin wrote ‘the walls have been continually for years running down with rain’ (Stones III, p. 323). During his 1851 visit, the situation was even worse because of the damage caused by the bombings of 1849:

... three of the pictures of Tintoret on the roof of the School of St. Roch were hanging down in ragged fragments, mixed with lath and plaster, round the apertures made by the fall of three Austrian heavy shot. The city of Venice was not, it appeared, rich enough to repair the damage that winter; and buckets were set on the floor of the upper room of the school to catch the rain, which not only fell directly through the shot holes, but found its way, owing to the generally pervious state of the roof, through many of the canvases of Tintoret in other parts of the ceiling.\(^{49}\)

As regards restoration, it was done very badly\(^{50}\) — as modern criticism confirms. Suffice it to mention that the restorer Antonio Florian added his own name, very visibly, in 1834, on the stone of the tomb of Ascension of the Virgin on the ground floor.\(^{51}\)

Both Ruskin and James observed with lucidity and grief the danger that the great canvasses of the Scuola could become totally black. James wrote:

their almost universal and rapidly increasing decay doesn’t relieve their gloom. Nothing indeed can well be sadder than the great collection of Tintorets at San Rocco. Incurable blackness is settling fast upon all of paintings by the bombings of 1848; the subject was discussed again on 16 October 1849, and again on 7 April 1850 (in ‘Sedute di cancelleria 1850–1880, no.31’). In the papers titled ‘Lavori-Titoli diversi 1808–1894, b.139’ there are references to the works affected by an exceptional snowfall (24 June 1826); to the repairing or substituting of the silk curtains (‘cortine di seta’, 26 April 1857); to the restoration of the great lanterns adorning the great hall, which were used in the processions (‘grandi fanali che adornano la sala maggiore di questa arciconfraternità in tutte le funzioni, e che annualmente si portano a San Marco nella ricorrenza della solenne processione del Corpus Domini, danno motivo per la loro antichità ad una continua spesa di riparazione…’). A complete, lasting and proper restoration of the lanterns is proposed (un ‘lavoro completo, durevole e decente’) on 10 July 1862; to the renovation of the lightning rods (1888).


\(^{50}\) ‘... a Baptism of Christ by Cima which I believe has been more or less repainted’. James, ‘Venice’, p. 23, at the church of San Giovanni in Bragora.

\(^{51}\) Ruskin mentions this in the Stones III, p. 330. Perhaps Florian ‘copied’ the notion of putting his name in from the ‘Iacobus Tentoretus Faciebat’ placed on the basis of the tomb in the Assumption of the Virgin in the church of S. Polo, see Pallucchini and Rossi, Tintoretto, p. 206, n. 358. Fortunately the name was erased during the 1970s restorations by A. Lazzarin.
them, and they frown at you across the sombre splendour of their great chambers like gaunt twilight phantoms of pictures. To our children’s children Tintoret, as things are going, can be hardly more than a name; and such of them as shall miss the tragic beauty, already so dimmed and stained, of the great ‘Bearing of the Cross’ in that temple of his spirit will live and die without knowing the largest eloquence of art.\(^2\)

The darkness that threatened the great paintings has been defeated, and today Tintoretto’s paintings shine in their ‘tragic beauty’. Restoration has revealed the original colours that had been blackened, also erasing the unwelcome nineteenth-century additions. ‘The angel’s black wings’ (\textit{Stones} III, 325) in \textit{The Annunciation} now show white and red; the ‘variety of hues’ (of the \textit{Magdalene}) that had all ‘sunk into a withered brown’ (\textit{Stones} III, 329) have come back to life; the water of the brook, the sky lit up in the background, the trunk on the left and the leaves near it, all show their white and bright light. In the \textit{Flight into Egypt} one

\(^2\) James, ‘Venice: an Early Impression’, pp. 57–58.
can now see clearly the house on the right and the mountains, perhaps unmentioned by Ruskin because they may have been invisible (Stones III, 326–7). Ruskin’s ‘unseen rent in the clouds’ in the Baptism in the upper hall is now clearly visible, and the blue that had disappeared can now be seen both here and in The Last Supper (‘where there was once blue, there is now nothing’, Stones III, 338).  

When considering the responses of Ruskin and James to the paintings in the Scuola we are confronted with questions of aesthetics, of relationships between Europe and America, and of contrasting views on innovation and conservation. After ignoring the possibility of employing gas and oil lighting in the Scuola di San Rocco, the Cancelleria discussed the possibility of installing electric light in 1910, as documented by Demetrio Sonagliioni, whose work on the history of light in the Scuola is of great importance. It was only in 1937, on the occasion of the great Tintoretto exhibition organized by Nino Barbantini, that Mariano Fortuny was asked to install the patented indirect illumination with

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53 Ruskin wrote that the face of the Lord in Moses Striking the Rock may have been destroyed and painted over during a restoration of the roof (Stones III, p. 344). The painting was restored by A. Lazzarin in 1974; see ‘Opere autografe’ in Pallucchini and Rossi, Tintoretto, vol. 1, p. 202, n. 333.


55 ‘Seduta di Cancelleria n. 226 del 20/1/1937 e n. 228 del 15/4/1937’, in ‘Miscellanea sec. XVIII–XX b.1’ the 1933 Regulation on the lighting of theatres is mentioned (‘Regolamento […] sull’illuminazione dei teatri’). It shows that the discussions about the possibility of using electric light were ongoing.

56 Among Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo’s (1871–1949) inventions was the dome (‘cupola’) for the theatres, patented in 1904. Fortuny’s experiments of lighting in theatres are amply documented in studies of the artist: see Angela Mariutti de Sanchez Rivero, Quattro spagnoli in Venezia (Venice: Ongania, 1957), and the more recent Immagini e materiali del laboratorio Fortuny, ed. by Silvio Fuso and Alessandro Mescola (Venice: Marsilio, 1978), or Giandomenico Romanelli, et al. (eds.), Museo Fortuny a Palazzo degli Orfei (Milan: Skira, 2008). However, the lighting of the Scuola is only mentioned briefly: see Romanelli et al., p. 41. Guillermo De Osma, in Mariano Fortuny: His Life and Work (London: Aurum, 1980), dwells on the lighting of the Scuola and quotes a letter by Henriette Fortuny to Elsie Lee in which Henriette underlines Fortuny’s satisfaction and joy at having saved from darkness paintings that would be finally visible (p. 186); Maurizio Barberis’ study, ‘La luce di Fortuny’, quotes the ‘lampade dal design molto tecnico, come i proiettori che illuminano il Tintoretto’ (‘the lamps with a highly technical design, as projectors illuminating Tintoretto’, p. 45), underlining the effect of the indirect lighting (p. 47), in M. Barberis, C. Franzini, S. Fuso and M. Tosa (eds.), Mariano Fortuny (Venice: Marsilio, 1999). For the list of Fortuny’s manuscripts bequeathed to the Biblioteca
which he had experimented in several theatres at the beginning of the century.

In spite of further discussions, the new lighting was installed in the three halls in 1937. The Soprintendenza authorized the new lighting, which, according to the Guardian Grando, Count Enrico Passi, gave ‘wonderful results that reveal details and beauties in the marvellous paintings, until now invisible due to the unhappy position of the paintings.’

Once the work was finished, Fortuny was given a ‘silver medal’. On 14 January 1938 it was decided that the Scuola would retain the electric lighting system designed by Fortuny, which had been considered temporary until then. The same lighting system was used in the same period for Titian’s Assumption at the Frari (1515–18) and for the Carpaccios in San Giorgio degli Schiavoni.

This was a very late date to acquire electric lighting. Electricity was employed abundantly in Europe and America between 1870 and 1900: a great Fair of electricity at Frankfurt celebrated the new energy in 1891: Ex tenebris ad lucem, or Aus der Finsterniss zum Licht!, reads the poster of the ‘Internationale Elektro-Technische Ausstellung’, which published many images of women to signify the new freedom obtained thanks to electric light. Two years later, in 1893, the Chicago World Exposition was lit up by 100,000 incandescent lamps and the pavilions devoted to electricity were among the most popular: it was called ‘White City’.

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57 See ‘Seduta di Cancelliera’ of 3 March 1937, item 2, in which the previous discussions both ‘from the artistic and technical viewpoints’ are quoted (‘Sedute di Cancelliera’ 1928–1941, b.9)

58 ‘... risultati meravigliosi rivelando nei magnifici dipinti bellezze e particolari che per la infelice collocazione dei dipinti stessi erano finora invisibili.’(‘...wonderful results that reveal details and beauties in the marvellous paintings, until now invisible due to the unhappy position of the paintings’) ‘Seduta di Cancelliera’ of 20 January 1937, item 2.

59 Attributed also to Podestà Alverà, to Superintendent Forlati, to Nino Barbantini, see ‘Seduta di Cancelliera’ of 15 May 1937, item 2.

60 AMM 1938-42, b.11.

61 Il museo Fortuny a Palazzo Pesaro degli Orfei, p. 42.

Nevertheless, many other museums had extensive discussions about whether to install electric light or not, a delay David Nye’s essay clarifies. As Holly Salmon documents, Mrs Gardner in Boston thought of lighting up her magnificent Titian, *The Rape of Europa*, with electricity in 1897, in her ‘Venetian palace’, the future Fenway Court Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, but she ultimately decided in favour of candles. As Sarah Quill writes, the London National Gallery installed electric light only in 1935, after lengthy debates. Other museums were bolder, such as the Sir John Soane Museum in London, which had electric lighting in 1897.

We are now in the LED era, a type of illumination that allows the visitor to see paintings in a radically different way, according to the use of warm or cold light. It also includes the possibility of modulating the light. These are totally different conditions from those that prevailed in the nineteenth century and previously: they allow the viewer to study the details of the paintings in depth, but they also deprive him of that shadow that allowed Ruskin and James to appreciate the paintings with an inner vision (Ruskin’s ‘imagination penetrative’), seeing with their imaginations what their eyes could not grasp.