



FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT
WRITERS IN MUSEUMS 1798-1898

EDITED BY
ROSELLA MAMOLI ZORZI
AND KATHERINE MANTHORNE



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Introduction: From Darkness to Light: Writers in Museums 1798–1898

Rosella Mamoli Zorzi and Katherine Manthorne

This book originated from the international conference ‘From Darkness to Light: Writers in Museums 1798–1898’, organized by the Venice Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society, the Fondazione Musei Civici Veneziani, the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, which took place in Venice between 27–29 April 2016.

The aim of the conference, and of this book, is to compare the viewing experiences of writers and journalists in museums, galleries and churches in the United States, in Europe, and in Japan *before* electric light was introduced. Our historical focus ranges from 1798, the time when the Louvre became a museum open to the public, to the end of the following century.

The project was born in the Scuola di San Rocco, when the new LED lighting system was installed in the lower hall of the Scuola: in the brightness of the LED light, the phantasmagorical figures of the horsemen in Tintoretto’s *Adoration of the Magi* suddenly emerged from the background of the painting, as if the rest of the painting had been erased and the ghostly figures shown in all their power as if in a close-up. It was as if the subconscious of the painter had risen to the light, suddenly.

This upsetting experience caused us to consider a problem often discussed: how lighting can completely change the viewer's perception of a painting. Even if Tintoretto knew exactly what type of (natural) light there would be in the Scuola, and kept it in mind as he was painting his great *teleri*, his paintings nonetheless underwent some transformations over time — for example his colours became much darker than they had been when the paintings were initially completed. The lack of plentiful natural light in the Scuola meant that some of the paintings were obscured by darkness; both John Ruskin (in 1846) and Henry James (in 1869) lamented the difficulty of actually *seeing* the paintings, except for the immense *Crucifixion* in the Sala dell'Albergo, which did receive enough light from the side windows.

In spite of this obscurity and the gradual darkening that the paintings had suffered, both Ruskin and James were absolutely conquered by the beauty and power of Tintoretto's *teleri* in the Scuola. We are therefore confronting an infinite admiration for paintings that could not be seen well: one could even say that we are facing an aesthetics of darkness. Ruskin himself, in spite of lamenting the lack of light, saw in the obscurity the possibility of the 'imagination penetrative.'¹

This aesthetics of darkness had its admirers, including many of the nineteenth-century visitors to the museums of Florence and Rome, as we explore in this volume. It is still respected today in Sir John Soane's London Museum, as Helen Dorey explains in Chapter 15, as well as in ancient civilizations whose influence is still alive today, as we see in the contributions from Antonio Foscari, who discusses Byzantine culture in Chapter 27, and Dorsey Kleitz and Sandra K. Lucore, who focus on Japan in Chapter 24.

The Scuola Grande di San Rocco remained dark until 1937, lit only by the varying natural light of clear or cloudy days. In that year Mariano Fortuny was asked to light the Scuola with the indirect illumination with which he had experimented in theatres. If this seems a late date for the introduction of electricity many other museums were just as tardy, although a few were more avant-garde — as for instance the Rembrandt Peale Museum in Baltimore, which had gaslight as early as 1816, while the Victoria and Albert Museum used gaslight from 1857.

1 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 5 vols. (New York and Chicago: The Library Edition, 2009), II, Chapter 3.

Part I begins with 'On Light' by Melania Mazzucco, a very well-known Italian writer and the author of two magnificent books on Tintoretto, *La lunga attesa dell'angelo* (2008) and *Jacomo Tintoretto & i suoi figli. Storia di una famiglia veneziana* (2009). Mazzucco introduces us to the 'inner' light of Tintoretto's works. Lamps, candles, tapers and other sources of illumination are not often portrayed by the painter: Tintoretto's light comes from other sources; it is a transcendental luminescence.

The essay by David Nye, one of the best-known world experts on the history of lighting, deals instead with the technology of lighting, the delay between the discovery of new forms of lighting and their application, and explains why so many museums were slow to install electric light.

Agnese Chiari Moretto Wiel, of the Scuola, introduces Part II: On Light at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco and in Venice. The essay by Rosella Mamoli Zorzi deals with the reactions of John Ruskin and Henry James to the Scuola, to their denunciation of its darkness, but also to their articulation of an aesthetics of darkness. Demetrio Sonaglioni's contribution leads us through the changes in the lighting of the Scuola up to the moment when Mariano Fortuny was asked to install his indirect lighting in 1937, developing a system of cupolas that have also been used in the new LED installations. Camillo Tonini illustrates the problems of lighting the Palazzo Ducale, which suffered frequent fires; Emma Sdegno takes us to the Gallerie dell'Accademia with John Ruskin; and finally in this section Cristina Beltrami shows us the reactions of several nineteenth-century French writers to the light of Venice, its natural reflections and its new artificial lighting.

In Part III: On Light in American Museums, we move to the United States. Burton Kummerow's essay presents the fascinating Peale Family's extraordinarily early faith in gaslight, introduced as early as 1816 in their museum in Philadelphia. Katherine Manthorne illustrates the ways in which a very famous and very popular painting, *The Heart of the Andes* by Frederic Church, was illuminated and exhibited in various venues. Kathy Lawrence examines the Yale gallery of 'primitivi' collected by James Jackson Jarves, which nobody at the time really wanted, and the efforts to establish a 'European' gallery. Holly Salmon discusses the challenge of lighting the Isabella Stewart Gardner

Museum of Boston, balancing the need to honour the decisions made by Gardner, who wanted to preserve a sense of mystery in the museum, with the choices made by the board after her death in response to the requirements of modernity. Lee Glazer takes us to the Freer Gallery of Washington, analysing Freer's promotion of the 'power to see beauty' through the creation of his museum, even for people who did not have his privileges.

In Part IV: On Light in Museums and Mansions in England, France and Spain, Sarah Quill deals with the strong opposition to gaslight and electric light in the London National Gallery, and links the idea of extending opening hours (which required artificial lighting) to the fear of having drunkards or prostitutes meeting in the museum. Helen Dorey takes us to the London Museum created by Sir John Soane, 'the architect of light', discussing its original lighting and the effort to keep the museum as mysterious as its founder wanted it.

Marina Coslovi examines the passion for collecting demonstrated by some of the dukes of Cavendish, the owners of Chatsworth, and their resistance to gaslight (which was used only in the kitchens and other domestic spaces) but not finally to electricity. Paula Deitz discusses various moments of appreciation in different museums, including the Louvre, the Avignon Museum and the Venice Palazzo Barbaro, in the essays and novels of Henry James. Pere Gifra-Adroher examines the great Prado in Madrid as it was recorded in the diaries and travel narratives of American visitors in the nineteenth century.

In Part V: On Light in Italian Museums, Cristina Acidini takes us inside the Uffizi and deals with the excess of natural light and the remedies developed to counteract it, without neglecting the darker rooms; she then tells us the shocking story of the lighting of the Cappella dei Magi in the Medici Riccardi palace, painted by Benozzo Gozzoli, ending her essay with the history of the special placing of Michelangelo's *David* in the Tribuna. Margherita Ciacci's essay takes us from Florence to Rome, as Ciacci examines the different perceptual habits of American travellers who sought a new cultural status within a 'process of selective cultural appropriation', where light and darkness are part of the construction of one's subjectivity. Joshua Parker discusses Henry James's ambiguous relation to darkness and light as experienced in the museums of Venice and Florence. In presenting Timothy Cole's amazing engravings of Old Italian Masters for *The Century*, Page S. Knox explores the difficult

material conditions in which these reproductions were completed in dark and ice-cold places. Finally Adrienne Baxter Bell introduces us to an extraordinary and hitherto forgotten woman, Anne Hampton Brewster, who wrote for the *Philadelphia Ledger* not only on works of arts and ceremonies in Rome, but also on the excavations of antiquities in Italy's capital and in the surrounding cities.

In our concluding section, Part VI, On Light in Museums in Japan, Dorsey Kleitz and Sandra Lucore lead us to Japan and to its aesthetics of 'shadows', showing us the influence of Fenollosa in forging a new consciousness for Japanese art.

In the *Postscript*, Sergio Perosa takes us from Shakespeare's 'interpenetration of darkness and light(ing)', to Henry James's museums and his Shakespearean 'contradictory phases of appreciation', by way of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and George Eliot, ending with a Latin poem by Fernando Bandini on the newly restored Cappella Sistina frescoes, where again 'fear of impending doom, that light will be lost and darkness prevail' surfaces at the end.

Alberto Pasetti Bombardella's essay underlines the new possibilities offered by LED lighting in the 'staging' of Tintoretto's paintings, going back to Plato's myth of the cavern as a starting point, while Antonio Foscarini's essay meditates on the slow and fascinating perception of art in a centuries-old orthodox church, where obscurity prevails initially, and on the changes brought about in Renaissance buildings by modern sources of light.

Although this collection explores many museums and exhibition spaces there are some that we have not been able to cover, most obviously the history of lighting in the Louvre (though this museum is represented by James's interpretation in Deitz), the Victoria and Albert Museum, the New York Metropolitan Museum, and other major museums. We also regret the absence of papers that were delivered at the conference but could not be published here for various reasons, in particular the essay by Jean Pavans on a story by Henry James and the painting in a French museum that inspired it; the contribution by Gianfranco Pocobene on the lighting scheme that John Singer Sargent conceived for his Boston Library murals; that by Andrea Bellieni on the Museo Correr, one of

the most important museums of Venice; and the paper by art historian Giovanni Villa on the Tintoretts of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco.

This book therefore represents a starting point in a field where much work remains to be done. As we were preparing our conference, for example, we learned that some museums are returning to the use of natural light only, such as the Museum Voorlinden that opened in Holland in 2016. As Cristina Acidini underlines, much time-consuming research work in museum archives is still to be done, looking for contracts, circulars, comments on fear of fires, on electricity, etc. We hope future scholars will be as fascinated as we all were by this topic, and will throw light on it in the years to come.