

Paolo Veneziano

Also known as

Martino da Venezia, Paolo di

Venezia, Paolo di Martino da

Venetian, active 1333 - 1358

BIOGRAPHY

Son of Martino and brother of Marco, both painters but whose works are unknown to us, Paolo was the most prominent painter of his native city between the second and third quarter of the fourteenth century. The fame of his workshop is documented by prestigious commissions not only for the most important churches of Venice and of the Venetian mainland territories but also for churches in Bologna and for towns on the Adriatic coast (both Italian and Dalmatian). His style left a lasting influence on painting in these areas, thanks also to the activity of his three sons, Giovanni, Luca, and Marco, who continued to disseminate his style after the master's death. Paolo's date of birth is unknown, but since his sons Giovanni and Luca signed, together with their father, the *Pala feriale* (the painted wooden cover of the *Pala d'oro*) of the high altar of San Marco in Venice in 1345 and must have been adults by then, it may be assumed he was born in the last years of the thirteenth century and that his career as a painter began at least in the second decade of the fourteenth century. However, not all art historians agree with this conclusion, not least because Paolo's earliest securely dated work, the altarpiece with the *Dormitio Virginis* now in the Museo Civici in Vicenza, dates as late as 1333. The problem of the painter's initial phase has thus been the subject of conflicting hypotheses. Nonetheless, it seems plausible to ascribe to his hand the figures of donors painted at the foot of the polychrome wooden altarpiece-relief of Saint Donatus in the church dedicated to him in Murano (Santi Maria e Donato), accompanied by the date 1310. The five stories of the Virgin in the Musei Civici in Pesaro must have been executed a few years later; here the artist faithfully followed the corresponding compositions of Giotto (Florentine, c. 1265 - 1337) in the Arena Chapel in Padua, although adjusting his style to local artistic idioms. In particular he follows in the footsteps of the anonymous Master of the Washington Coronation (Italian, active first third 14th century), an artist who some authorities suggest could have been his father.

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The frescoes recently attributed to Paolo in the church of San Fermo in Verona^[1] probably date to the final years of the second decade of the fourteenth century. The Vicenza triptych of 1333 reveals a considerable advance over these frescoes in the refinement of its expressive means. This circumstance has suggested to some the possibility that the artist had journeyed in the intervening years to Byzantium, but the innovative features of the work reflect not so much the influence of the Palaeologan Renaissance as Paolo's efforts to enrich the traditional figurative formulae of the city of the lagoon with elements derived from the transalpine Gothic.

The following stages of his career are punctuated with only a few securely dated works. They include—apart from the *Pala feriale*—the *Madonna and Child* dated 1340 in the Crespi Collection in Milan; that of 1347, now in the Museo Diocesano at Cesena but with a provenance from Carpineta; the polyptych in the church of San Martino at Chioggia, of 1349; the polyptych in the Louvre, Paris, of 1354; and that of the church of San Giorgio at Pirano d'Istria of the following year, a panel now on deposit at the Museo di Palazzo Venezia in Rome. *The Coronation of the Virgin* in the Frick Collection in New York, signed by Paolo together with his son Giovanni and dated 1358, originally must have formed the centerpiece of a polyptych whose laterals are now in the Museo Civico at San Severino Marche. This imposing multipart altarpiece was probably one of the last works of the master, who was already reported dead in 1362.

[1] See Andrea De Marchi, “La prima decorazione della chiesa francescana,” in *I santi Fermo e Rustico: Un culto e una chiesa, per il xvii centenario del loro martirio (304–2004)*, ed. Paolo Golinelli and Caterina Gemma Brenzoni (Verona, 2004), 205–211. De Marchi dated Paolo's intervention in the church to the start of the third decade, but it is possible to push this date back to 1319–1320, i.e., to the years in which his local associate in the Veronese enterprise, the Master of the Redeemer, was at work.

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