This handsome picture has presented something of a puzzle since it first appeared on the art market. It entered the Gallery's collection in 1937 with an attribution to Dosso Dossi and was long known as The Standard Bearer. An attribution to Tintoretto and the current title were adopted in 1984, based on acceptance of the work by Tintoretto scholars at that time. [1] However, questions have remained about both the attribution and the subject.

The specificity with which the features of the sitter are represented indicates that the painting is a portrait. Beside the sitter rests a helmet, elaborately decorated with gilded relief. [2] Behind him is what appears to be the body of a grotesque dragon, similar to the one in Titian's Saint Margaret and the Dragon (Museo del Prado, Madrid, and other versions). While the dragon would suggest that the sitter is being presented as Saint George, his flag, bearing a white Latin cross on a red field, is not that of the dragon-slaying saint, which shows a red cross on a white field, but rather the banner of Saint John. This was the battle flag of the Order of the Knights of Malta [fig. 1]. [3] Contrasting with the heroic narrative suggested by these accoutrements are the elegant, decorative costume of the subject and his aloof, pensive expression. [4]

The style of the picture is eclectic, combining elements of Giorgionesque ambiguity, some of the dash and decoratism of Dosso Dossi, and an elegance that evokes Emilian mannerism. Not surprisingly, its attribution has been the subject of considerable debate and has evoked the names of several major artists of the Cinquecento. The attribution to Dosso was affirmed by Bernard Berenson (1936),

None of these attributions to artists of the Cinquecento are convincing. As the catalog of Tintoretto’s paintings, especially his early works, has been clarified since the 1980s, it has become clear that the picture is not from that painter’s hand. This was especially apparent when it was juxtaposed with autograph works in the 1994 exhibition of Tintoretto portraits in Venice and Vienna. Tintoretto’s subjects almost always look directly out at the viewer and have a small, white catchlight in their eyes, absent here. His brushwork is looser and drier, and his portrait heads always convey a strong sense of physical structure, of the skull beneath the skin. In the Gallery’s picture the brushwork is carefully controlled, and the paint appears to have been more fluid when applied. X-radiography [fig. 2] reveals none of the underlying structure that is characteristic of Tintoretto’s portraits (as in A Procurator of Saint Mark’s). Nor does the romantic treatment of the subject find a counterpart anywhere in Tintoretto’s oeuvre. Although a revolutionary in his narrative paintings, Tintoretto was relatively conservative in his portraiture, sticking close to formulas developed by Titian in the 1530s. [10]

The approach to the subject does show some characteristics of Dosso, evoking such works as Saint George (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles) [fig. 3] and the Standard Bearer (Allentown Art Museum). However, the Gallery’s painting is more delicate, the mood more pensive, closer to the elusive Giorgione than to the straightforward and less graceful Dosso. While the elegance and slender form of the figure are evocative of the portraits of Niccolò dell’Abate, such as the Man with
Parrot (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), the pictorial technique is softer and more diffuse than Niccolò's tightly focused precision. Niccolò's physiognomies also tend to be more mannered and his colors more metallic than in the Gallery's painting. Rearick's attribution to Mirola has the appeal of accounting for the Emilian characteristics of the picture, but the relationship to Mirola's firmly attributed works is too distant to be the basis of an attribution.

As a few scholars have recognized, the picture's puzzling combination of qualities, which has led to such diverse attributions, is best understood as the "retrospective romanticism" of a 17th-century artist looking back to Giorgione and Dosso through the lens of later painters. Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat, in a manuscript opinion in NGA curatorial files, placed the picture in this context, noting the similarity to a portrait of a young man as a halberdier attributed to Pietro della Vecchia (Pietro Muttoni). Creighton Gilbert, in a brief comment, similarly linked the painting to a Dosso revival in the early Seicento. However, the best solution to the conundrum posed by the picture lies in another attribution that has received scant attention, reported by Gilbert to have been made orally by Fiocco, to the 17th-century painter and printmaker Giuseppe Caletti. [11]

Caletti was active from about 1620 until 1660. He signed some of his prints Ioseffo Cremonesi, implying that he was originally from Cremona, but his artistic career seems to have taken place almost entirely in Ferrara. Caletti's style as a painter and draftsman reflects that of his contemporary Guercino, with whom he may have apprenticed. In addition, Caletti took inspiration from the painters of the previous century—in particular Dosso, who had been court painter in Ferrara for three decades, as well as Giorgione, Titian, and such Lombard painters as Altobello Melone and Romanino. Indeed, Caletti often deliberately worked in the styles of Dosso and the great Venetians. Whether he intended them to be deliberate forgeries or not, such paintings sold during his lifetime and in the years after his death on the antiquarian market as works by Giorgione, Dosso, and Titian. In the modern era, his paintings continued to pass as the work of these masters. [12]

The National Gallery of Art painting shows especially striking similarities to some of Caletti's etchings. For example, the male figure in The Lovers [fig. 4] is seen in a similar pose, in profile with one arm extended, and sports a similar ostrich feather fastened by a badge in his hat. In Caletti's etching of David Considering the Head of Goliath [fig. 5], the protagonist's pensive mood matches that of the sitter in the Washington picture. The treatment of the eyes, ears, nose, and hands is also
consistent with etchings by Caletti of anatomical studies. [13] A distinctive characteristic of the Gallery’s painting, the deep shadowing of some of the drapery folds, especially those at the bottom center of the painting, reappears in all of Caletti’s works—paintings as well as etchings. [14] Otherwise, the paintings assigned to Caletti, while occasionally similar in mood to the Gallery’s picture, offer fewer direct comparisons than do his etchings. [15] Occasional similarities, such as the treatment of golden embroidery on fabrics or the sharply cut eyelids of some of his figures, seem insufficient to pin down an attribution of the Washington painting to the artist. Nevertheless, the specific connections with his etchings, as well as the more general connections to the sources upon which he relied, make a strong case for his authorship. [16] Caletti’s oeuvre as a painter may not yet be fully understood, and it is possible that further study may provide confirmation for this attribution. (For example, no portraits have yet been attributed to him.) In any case, the picture can be assigned more generally to a painter from the era of Guercino seeking to evoke the spirit of Dosso and other artists of the previous century. A date of circa 1620 to 1630 seems reasonable, since all of Caletti’s etchings mentioned above appear in a book published in the second half of the 1620s.

The iconography of the picture remains ambiguous. Aside from the banner, there is no other indication that the sitter might be a Knight of Malta. The dragon suggests a reference to Saint George; perhaps the sitter was named Giorgio. Alternatively, if the picture did indeed have a Ferrarese origin, the fact that Saint George is the patron saint of Ferrara may have some connection to its subject. The overall mood of the picture, evoking Venetian and Ferrarese painting of a century before, may have been more important to the artist and patron than any specific references.

Robert Echols
March 21, 2019

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 2 X-radiograph, Attributed to Giuseppe Caletti, *Portrait of a Man as Saint George*, c. 1620s, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection
fig. 3 Dosso Dossi, *Saint George*, c. 1513/1515, oil on panel, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

NOTES

[1] NGA Board approval October 4, 1984. The title The Standard Bearer was adopted on February 1, 1941; previously, from the time of acquisition, it was known as Portrait of a Man with a Flag.

[2] The helmet, decorated in pseudoclassical style with relief ornament, including foliate scrolls, gilded in the style known as damascening (or the less expensive pseudodamascening), is similar to the “Morosini Helmet” in the Gallery’s collection, 1942.9.356. Armor of this type was a specialty of Milan from about 1530 to 1555. See Carolyn C. Wilson, Renaissance Small Bronze Sculpture and Associated Decorative Arts at the National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC, 1983), 144; Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance: Filippo Negroli and His Contemporaries (New York, 1998), no. 67, repro., as “Visored Burgonet by Master AP.”

[3] The Latin cross, as distinct from the more familiar eight-pointed Maltese

Portrait of a Man as Saint George
© National Gallery of Art, Washington
The white Latin cross on a red field appears in a near-contemporary series of paintings depicting the 1565 siege of Malta by Matteo Perez, now in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. A 1629 engraving by Joseph Furtenbach (Musée de la Marine, Paris) shows one of the order’s galleys bearing banners and flags with the same emblem. Pinturicchio’s frescoes in Siena Cathedral depict Nicolò Aringhieri wearing the emblem on his armor; see H. J. A. Sire, The Knights of Malta (New Haven and London, 1994), 88, repro., and pl. 3.

The medal holding the plumes on the sitter’s cap appears to depict a reclining, clothed female figure. Nothing further can be determined of its subject. See Yvonne Hackenbroch, Enseignes (Florence, 1996), 124.

Bernard Berenson, Piture italiane del Rinascimento (Milan, 1936), 151; Edoardo Arslan, “Una Natività di Dosso Dossi,” Commentari 8 (1957): 260; Edoardo Arslan, Le pitture del Duomo di Milano (Milan, 1960), 33. Copies of undated manuscript opinions by Fiocco and Van Marle are in NGA curatorial files, as is a more tentative undated manuscript opinion by Berenson (“most likely Dosso, though hard to tell in the photo”).

Undated manuscript opinion, copy in NGA curatorial files.


(Washington, DC, 1979), 1:462–463. Copies of manuscript opinions by Longhi (1929), Perkins (1932), and Suida (1935) are in NGA curatorial files. Pierluigi De Vecchi listed a Saint George Killing the Dragon in the NGA among the "other works attributed to Tintoretto," which includes wrongly attributed works; this is presumably the Gallery’s painting. See Pierluigi De Vecchi, L’opera completa del Tintoretto (Milan, 1970), 134, no. C13.

Rearick compared the Gallery’s painting to the Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Sebastian, Roch, and Two Bishop Saints (Gemäldegalerie, Akademie der Bildenden Kunst, Vienna), which has been tentatively attributed to Mirola. W. R. Rearick, “Reflections on Tintoretto as a Portraitist,” Artibus et Historiae 16, no. 31 (1995): 58–59.

On Tintoretto’s conservatism as a portraitist, see Miguel Falomir, “Tintoretto’s Portraiture,” in Tintoretto, ed. Miguel Falomir (Madrid, 2007), 98; and Frederick Ilchman, “The Titian Formula,” in Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice (Boston, 2009), 206. Contrary to Shapley, the portrait visible in the x-radiograph also shows a different, much more careful, controlled technique from that in Tintoretto’s portraits, such as A Procurator of Saint Mark’s (National Gallery of Art, 1952.5.79), where one can see the artist building up the skeletal structure of the head with bold, broad brushstrokes as he roughs the forms in. Shapley’s suggestion that the Gallery’s painting and the x-radiograph both show a similarity to Tintoretto’s self-portraits is equally unconvincing. See Fern Rusk Shapley, Catalogue of the Italian Paintings (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:463.

Creighton Gilbert mentioned the Washington painting only peripherally, noting that Fiocco agreed that there was a romantic revival of Dosso c. 1600, “personified by Giorgio Caletti [sic] to whom he attributes the Washington Standard Bearer generally considered Dosso’s.” Gilbert agreed that the Gallery’s painting is closely based on Dosso but found the connection to Caletti’s documented work “less clear.” See Creighton Gilbert, The Works of Girolamo Savoldo: The 1955 Dissertation with a Review of Research, 1955–1985 (New York and London, 1986), 476–477. The mistake about Caletti’s name was repeated by Fern Rusk Shapley, Catalogue of the Italian Paintings (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:463. Tietze and Tietze-Conrat, in the undated manuscript opinion in NGA curatorial files (also cited by Shapley), described the Gallery’s picture as “almost a companion piece” to the portrait of a man in a plumed hat attributed to Pietro della Vecchia (see Alberto Riccoboni, Quattrocento pitture inedite: Prima mostra Nazionale Antiquaria [Venice, 1947], no. 77). “[S]canning Tintoretto’s, and incidentally Dosso’s oeuvre,” they wrote, “we look in vain for such a complicated posture . . . for such an ornamental filling of space, for such retrospective romanticism.” Pietro della Vecchia’s technique is generally more fluid, his colors more saturated, and his chiaroscuro more dramatic than in the Gallery’s painting. Nevertheless, the pose and “retrospective romanticism”
of the Portrait of a Man as Saint George are indeed similar to some of Pietro’s paintings. See, for example, the Portrait of a Philosopher (Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA) and the Warrior Attacking a Youth (Galleria Doria Pamphilii, Rome); in addition, the Standard Bearer (or Warrior with a Shield and Lance), known from the mezzotint by Prince Rupert of the Rhine, provides a particularly apt comparison. Bernard Aikema, Pietro della Vecchia and the Heritage of the Renaissance in Venice (Florence, 1990), 116–117, 148, 160; cat. nos. I.10, I.202, IV.3; figs. 56, 89, and 104.


[14] For example, David with the Head of Goliath, David Considering the Head of Goliath, Mary Magdalen (all locations unknown); see Eugenio Riccòmini, Il Seicento ferrarese (Ferrara, 1969), figs. 29, 30a, 30b.

[15] The two Davids cited in the preceding note provide the best overall comparisons to the Washington picture among the paintings attributed to Caletti.

[16] Early works by Guercino that share a somewhat similar pensive mood with the Washington picture include Et in Arcadia Ego (Galleria Nazionale d’Arte, Rome; 1618–1622) and the Return of the Prodigal Son (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; 1619). A figure in the latter was adopted for a David in a picture attributed to Caletti (Museo Civico, Ferrara). Altobello Melone’s Portrait of a Young Man (Harvard Art Museum/ Fogg Museum; c. 1527–1528) shows a sitter who similarly looks off into the distance.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting has been lined, but the original support is a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric. X-radiographs show shallow cusping along all four margins, but it is
strongest along the bottom edge, indicating that the painting may have been cut down slightly, particularly along the top and sides. In addition, the top and left edges of the painting show fractured paint and losses consistent with edges that have been cut. Microscopic analysis reveals a white ground beneath the paint layer. There is some indication that a thin brown wash was applied as an imprimatura layer over the ground, but this has not been confirmed. Infrared reflectography at 1.5 to 1.8 microns [1] and the x-radiographs show that originally the feathers of the sitter’s hat were taller and extended down the back of his head to the nape of his neck. They also show that originally there was a curtain where the flag is located. Perhaps most significantly, the x-radiographs reveal the presence of another, nearly complete portrait beneath the present one, oriented in the opposite direction [fig. 1]. Based on the x-radiographs, the handling of the paint in the portrait, especially in the treatment of the drapery, appears to be similar to that in the visible picture.

The paint layers are generally thin, with some impasto only in a few highlights. Transparent glazes were applied over white underpainting to create the bright reds and greens. The decorations on the banner are heightened with gold leaf. The texture of the paint has been flattened, probably as a result of excessive pressure during lining. Thin, branched cracks with small areas of loss at the junction are visible in normal light. There are numerous small areas of retouching throughout the painting. The largest areas of retouching appear around the head in the background, in the beard, along the junction of the cloak and sleeve, and on the lower edge of the cloak. The entire picture suffers from abrasion. The flatness and opacity of the dark cloak suggest that it may have been repainted. Overall, the varnish is discolored and cloudy. The painting was treated by Stephen Pichetto in 1932.

Joanna Dunn and Robert Echols based on the examination reports by Carol Christensen and Ina Slama and the treatment report by Joanna Dunn

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PROVENANCE


[1] The first reference to the painting, in a letter by Roberto Longhi of 1929, a copy of a letter from a person named Longhi to Contini-Bonacossi, Rome, 1929.
of which is in NGA curatorial files, does not mention the painting’s location, although Longhi’s opinion may have been solicited by Contini-Bonacossi.

[2] The bill of sale that includes the painting, which is listed as Portrait of a Man with Flag by Jacopo Tintoretto, is dated 4 March 1932; copy in NGA curatorial files. A handwritten annotation reads "on records as: Dosso Dossi or Jacopo Tintoretto or Francisco Mazzola."

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1932 An Exhibition of Italian Paintings Lent by Mr. Samuel H. Kress of New York to Museums, Colleges, and Art Associations, travelling exhibition, 24 venues, 1932-1935, mostly unnumbered catalogues, p. 40 or p. 45, repro., as Portrait of a Man with a Flag by Dossi.

1938 Exhibition of Venetian Painting From the Fifteenth Century through the Eighteenth Century, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, June-July 1938, no. 24, repro., as Portrait of a Man with a Flag by Dosso Dossi.

1938 Special Exhibition of Venetian Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection, Seattle Art Museum; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Alabama, August-October 1938, no catalogue.


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1950  Pallucchini, Rodolfo. La giovinezza del Tintoretto. Milan, 1950: 107, fig. 182, as by Tintoretto.