Veronese the magnificent

For some, Veronese has been over-hyped but the National Gallery's show reveals the artist as a fulcrum of the Venetian late Renaissance, and is surprising, revelatory and humbling. Review by Robin Richmond

Perseus and Andromeda, 1575-80
Oil on canvas 260 × 211 cm
Musée des Beaux - Arts, Rennes

In 1555, Paolo Caliari, in his late twenties, the son of a stonecutter from Verona, moved definitively from his birthplace to nearby Venice, the jewel of the Adriatic. His lustrous forebears in the Most Serene Republic, Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna, were long dead by this time.

Jacopo Tintoretto, his senior by ten years, was hard at work in the city's confraternities, and Tiziano Vecellio – otherwise known as Titian – was almost 60, and painting furiously for his adoring public, who ranged from the Este and Gonzaga families, the lords of Ferrara and Mantova, to (last but not least), the Emperor and the Pope.

Veronese, the young man from Verona, realised like many before him and many since, that such patronage was crucial and he set out to overcome his modest upbringing. He had laboured for aristocratic patrons his home town as a young man; knew the challenges of carving out a career both literally and figuratively from his father and was a skilled draughtsman and painter having trained in the workshops of two minor local painters Badile and Carolo. But he was driven, focussed, committed, talented and ambitious and Venice was the magnetic pole. It was there that he made his mark.

This is the very first exhibition to concentrate entirely on Veronese in the UK and it is extraordinary. To set its own magnificent collection in relief, the National has gathered to its august bosom works that never travel, and some that have never been shown together since they were propped up against the walls in the artist's Venetian studio some 450 years ago.

The Family of Darius before Alexander, 1565-7
Oil on canvas 236.2 × 474.9 cm © The National Gallery

He was the first Old Master ever bought by the early benefactors of the National, with their daring purchase of *The Consecration of Saint Nicholas* in 1811, and in 1857, when they paid the huge sum of 360,000 Austrian francs in silver coins for the magnificent *The Family of Darius* of to Count Pisani, its Venetian owner, causing a controversy not unlike the Tate's purchase in 1972 of Carl André's bricks.

Opinions clashed about his stature, as they still do in some quarters, not least in this author's mind until now. He was considered to be over-hyped, over-priced and "second- rate" to some and to others he was transcendent. That old curmudgeon John Ruskin stated of *Darius* that "for my own part I should think no price too large for it." This show posits Veronese as a fulcrum of the Venetian late Renaissance, and is surprising, revelatory and humbling.

To those of us who only know his work from the Venetian churches such as San Sebastiano and the Redentore, or who have craned our necks backwards to see his glowing frescos in the Palazzo Ducale or has been gobsmacked by his enormous Biblical scenes such as *The Marriage Feast at Cana* or the *Feast in the House of Levi*, we are presented with a surprisingly complex figure of enormous subtlety and variety.

Long associated with overpowering altarpieces and canvases, portraits seen here such as the Louvre's *Bella Nani* (mid-1560's), the Getty's *Portrait of a Gentleman* from the same fertile period, the *Portrait of Livia de Porto Thiene with her daughter Deidamia* and *Iseppo da Porto and his son Leonida* (1552) militate against a reading of Veronese's work as simply that of a virtuoso.

There is a luminous humanity and delicacy in the handling of the paint and in his generosity towards the sitters. Their faces gaze into some eternal middle distance, and in other clothes might be the lady or gent behind the till in our corner shop, admittedly with very good jewellery and very good hair.

The echoes of what came before him and what came after resound in these gun-metal grey and rich Bordeaux walls, thrillingly illuminated by daylight, and it is a relief that this show is not in the subterranean Sainsbury wing. His jewel-like use of colours, especially mustard yellows and the cobalt blues, owes much to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. The exaggerated musculature in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony Abbot* (1552) and the *Allegory of Navigation with an Astrolabe* (1555-60) nods respectfully to the earlier master's human prophets and sibyls. We might wonder if dynamically-charged Caravaggio knew of the diagonals and flying figures in Veronese's *Martyrdom of Saint George*.

But one of the greatest surprises is the tenderness amidst the theatrical storytelling that is so often associated with his work. We see here that the artist is inclusive. Dogs, camels, dozy horses, and monkeys play their part in the big deep dramas and children frolic with charm but without sentimentality. All human life is here and shored against the ruins, palaces, bible stories and allegories. His delight in the pleasures (and dangers) of sex in *The Four Allegories of Love* of the 1570's is fragrantly carnal. There is pomp and circumstance, but it is leavened with a lightness of touch and nothing is ever boring.

Portrait of a Lady, known as the "Bella Nani" about 1560-5 Oil on canvas 119 × 103 cm Musée du Louvre, Paris

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