A miracle has happened, not just in Paolo Veronese’s Marriage Feast at Cana (1562–1563; Musée du Louvre, Paris) but at the Venetian monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore itself, where, through the miracle of modern technology, Veronese’s most celebrated painting has been restored to its original site. Factum Arte, a Madrid-based company specializing in reproductions of historic works of art, created a full-scale facsimile of the painting by scanning the original in sections, then transferring the scans to canvas, and ultimately mounting the image onto the end wall of the refectory. We can now experience the painting as it was meant to be seen, as an integral part of the monastery’s monumental Palladian refectory, and can imagine the dining experience of the Benedictine monks whose tables continued along the walls as an extension of the painting. In effect, the monks shared the meal, becoming part of the miracle portrayed in Veronese’s grand banquet.

The painting depicts Christ’s first public miracle. Jesus, Mary, and some of his disciples were among the guests at a wedding feast at the village of Cana in Galilee. When the wine ran out, Mary asked Jesus to order six stone jars filled with water. The master of ceremonies then tasted the contents and was astonished to find that the water had turned into wine of the very best quality.

It might seem ironic that the pious monks who gazed at this painting while eating their supposedly humble meals on everyday plate would have commissioned such a large-scale and opulent painting for their refectory. In fact, evidence suggests that the Benedictine monks frequently ate the same foods as depicted in the painting, and that when entertaining guests they ate from lavish plate. Veronese’s marriage feast thus reflects not only the long-standing Benedictine culinary tradition, rich in vegetables and fruits cultivated in the monastery gardens, but also the Benedictine rule that emphasized hospitality. According to St. Benedict, the monks were to welcome and provide hospitality to guests, just as Christ had been welcomed at Cana. Veronese’s painting, set in the sumptuousness and decadence of late-sixteenth-century Venice, reflects the dining practices and sociability of the time.

Giovanni Pontano, writing in the 1490s, identified dining as one of the most important social activities. He used the term “conviviality” for the virtue of coming together in an atmosphere of familiarity to enjoy a meal. Dining was an expression of social aspirations, civility, and splendor. The banquet, a choreographed event, was a ritual of aristocratic hospitality communicating wealth and power. Thus, objects crafted in gold, silver, rock crystal, and hard stones contributed to the transformation of meals into extravaganzas.

Vessels in motion or at rest were meant to be enjoyed against the best wine had been saved until the end, thus equating the richness of the fabric with the quality of the wine. The servant in rich brocades at the far right, presumably the wine steward, gazes intently at the contents of his glass, as if to show that he understands the miracle. As one of the principal officers of the table, the wine steward (bottigliero) was responsible for mixing the wine with water and tasting it; he had to decide whether the wine should be diluted only slightly or whether water should predominate, depending on the stage of the meal. Because he also poured the wine for the hosts and guests, he needed good timing and coordination to avoid spillage. Drinking from the shallow bowls that were in fashion at the end of the sixteenth century similarly required poise and elegance on the part of the guest. Veronese faithfully depicted the wide, shallow drinking bowl, called a tazzetta, made especially for red wine,
because it maximized the amount of wine exposed to oxygen, allowing it to breathe.\textsuperscript{11} In doing so he also advertised Venice’s glassmaking industry, especially luxury glassware like that displayed here.\textsuperscript{12}

The musicians at the center of the composition reflect the entertainment common between courses,\textsuperscript{11} something to occupy the guests while they waited for the next course to begin. Meanwhile, the guests talk, pick their teeth, wipe their mouths with napkins, or discuss the relative merits of their jewelry, ignoring their empty plates and the glasses left on the table. Toothpicks were generally kept in a case suspended from a gold chain and worn around the neck;\textsuperscript{14} the cases themselves were often of gold, embellished with precious jewels and pearls. By the 1550s toothpicks were considered uncouth, no longer fashionable. What does this say about Veronese’s woman to the left, who picks her teeth as she gazes toward the bride. Is she uncouth or merely unfashionable?

Veronese’s painting shows only sweetmeats (candied fruit and ginger) and fruit (quinces) on the table in footed ceramic bowls. Because of the biblical text and the presence of fruit, the painting is often thought to represent the dessert course, even though meat (presumed to be lamb, a symbolic reference to Christ’s ultimate sacrifice) is being carved and brought to the guests.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, in the sixteenth century, meals, especially feasts, often began with expensive candied fruit.\textsuperscript{16} Food was presented in an alternating sequence of hot and cold courses. Hot food was delivered from the kitchen in carrying boxes,\textsuperscript{17} which are not evident in Veronese’s painting, although he does depict the sideboards or credenzas used as epicenters of dining operations. Courses of cold foods consisted of sliced meats, oysters, sweets, fruits, vegetables, pastries, and cheeses, which were prepared on serving tables adjacent to the credenza. Here, the man at the service table carving meat just above Christ’s head likely represents a talented carver (trinciante) who was expected to carve the meat in midair so that it would fall on the plate in a decorative pattern of slices, providing both entertainment and a service to the guests.\textsuperscript{18} Other servants bring empty plates to be filled, while full plates are carried to the waiting guests.
It is often noted that very little wine is being drunk and that not a lot of eating is going on in Veronese’s painting; rather, it depicts a lavish display of plate. Fine glassware symbolized aristocratic status, and precious metalwork was a dominant feature of elaborate meals like the one shown here. Stepped sideboards, placed against a wall near the table, displayed an abundance of precious objects of silver, gold, and pewter, including large dishes, large and small bowls, basins for washing hands at the beginning of the banquet and between courses, ewers, saltcellars, spoons, knives, cups, fruit bowls, and sweetmeat boxes. At the left in Veronese’s painting, jugs and plates are being taken down from the credenza; at the table in front, several men oversee the activities taking place around them, making sure that all is in order.

Each guest at the table has an individual place setting, complete with napkin, fork, and knife. Silver forks usually came in sets of twelve and could include matching spoons. Intended for eating fruit and sweetmeats, they were a symbol of sophistication. Veronese’s painting reflects the then-novel practices of eating with a fork instead of the fingers and using individual place settings rather than communal dishes; these practices directly affected the evolution of table, just as greater awareness of manners gave rise to new tools to accompany them. The finesse required to handle the wide range of fragile crystal and precious cutlery demonstrated one’s mastery of courtly manners in the company of others. Sixteenth-century treatises about banquet service, like Bartolomeo Scappi’s *Opera*, emphasized the kind of performance we see here—a flurry of activity around passive, waiting guests.

Despite the nominal subject of this and other paintings of banquets, feasting scenes often did not emphasize the food; rather, the focus is the conspicuous display of material goods for which the Venetians were famous. The opulence of the environment, the table settings, and service rival the sumptuous dress of the wedding guests. Gold and silver furnishings provided both aesthetic and intellectual pleasures within the spatial and gestural framework of feasting in
sixteenth-century Venice. Beyond their purely practical and decorative roles, silver and gold objects operated as effective cultural agents in a context where precise, codified human gestures and performances shaped the rituals of formal dining—even the dining practices of Benedictine monks who emphasized hospitality and sociability.

NOTES

1. For specifics on how this was accomplished, see Giuseppe Pavanello, ed., Il Miracolo di Cana: L’Originalità della riproduzione (Venice: Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Cierre edizioni, 2007), 105–113; see also their Web site: www.factum-art.com/en/conservacion/cana/default.asp.

2. In 1562 Veronese was commissioned to paint this scene for the refectory of the Benedictine monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, where it remained until Napoleon’s troops confiscated it in 1797. The contract was very specific. The monks insisted that the work be monumental in order to fill the entire end wall of the refectory. It hung 2.5 meters (almost 3 yards) from the ground and was designed to create an illusion of extended space. See www.Louvre.fr/oeuvres/detail (accessed 15 August 2007).

3. In addition to experiencing the space firsthand or through photographs, we can get a clear idea of how the refectory was used from Vincenzo Maria Coronelli’s Il Miracolo di Cana, 2, no. 9. Historically, the meal in the refectory was meant to recall Christ’s Last Supper, the more typical image for this setting. At San Giorgio Maggiore this scene is shown in the main church; to the right and left of the high altar Tintoretto depicted the Gathering of Manna and the Last Supper.

4. Paintings of the Marriage Feast at Cana sometimes depicted actual marriages. Tintoretto’s painting of the subject (1561–1570; Church of Santa Maria della Salute, Venice) is thought by Patricia Fortini Brown (Private Lives in Renaissance Venice: Art, Architecture, and the Family [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004], 60) to be representative of a middle-class Renaissance wedding. This is the case with Veronese’s Marriage Feast at Cana, part of a series of paintings commissioned by the Cuccina family for its palace on the Grand Canal in Venice. In addition, we know that Sandro Botticelli used this story to depict the Pucci-Bini marriage. See Anne Barriault, Spalliere Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany: Fabrics of Power for Patrician Homes (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 144, checklist 83-4, plate v.


6. Remains of vegetable gardens and orchards still exist on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. Islands in the Venetian lagoon, such as San Erasmo (known for its artichokes), produced the vegetables and fruits consumed by Venetians in the Renaissance, and they still do today. Generally, Benedictine monks abstained from eating flesh; this was not always the case when special guests were present, especially in Venice, a city notorious for its corrupt monasteries and convents, and a favorite target of the Inquisition.

7. Il Miracolo di Cana, 15.


10. Albala, The Banquet, 149–150. Undiluted wine was brought first; successive drinks contained more water as the meal progressed (110–111). Taylor suggests that the cup-bearer (coppiere) could also fulfill this role. See ibid., 627.


18. Ibid., 627; Albala, The Banquet, 153–159.

