

A SECOND MIRACLE AT CANA: RECENT MUSICAL DISCOVERIES IN VERONESE'S *WEDDING FEAST*

Peter Bassano

1. And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there:
2. And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage.
3. And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine.
4. Jesus saith unto her, Woman what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come.
5. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.
6. And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece.
7. Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim.
8. And he saith unto them, Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bare it.
9. When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was: (but the servants which drew the water knew;) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom,
10. And saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worst; but thou hast kept the good wine until now.

– *John 2: 1-10 (King James Version)*

In Paolo Veronese's painting of the *Wedding Feast at Cana*, as in St. John's version of this story, not everything is as it seems. For many years this painting has been recognized by musicians as an important work for the study of 16th-century Venetian instruments and their playing technique. In the foreground (Figure 1) there is a group of five musicians playing two tenor viols, a violin, a cornett, and a violone; to the left of the group, with their instruments mainly hidden, are a cherubic sackbut player and turbaned trumpet player. High up on the left in the gallery are a lutenist and what looks like a group of three singers (Figure 2).

The Wedding Feast at Cana is 6.77 meters high and 9.94 meters wide. It is displayed in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (Inv. 142) and was acquired by the gallery in 1798. The painting was commissioned for the sum of 300 ducats by the Benedictines of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, to be hung in the reconstructed refectory designed by Palladio. It was completed and first shown in 1563 and took up the whole of the end wall of the refectory, in much the same way that Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* occupies similar space in the Sistine Chapel. Veronese adopts the traditional way of showing the miracle in the Marriage Feast by emphasizing the servants pouring stone jugs of water into more elegant wine pitchers. Only the servants and Jesus and Mary are aware of the miracle that has just taken place. Since musicians in 16th-century Venice were regarded as "servant-class," they presumably are amongst the *cognoscenti* also. From earlier in the century this feast became a common subject for display in refectories, where constant scrutiny would make attention to detail and biblical accuracy of paramount importance to the artist.

THE DRAMATIS PERSONAE

In 1674 Marco Boschini¹ identified four of the musicians as painters, the so called “Circle of Gold,” a title symbolically introduced because of the gold ring worn on the hand of each musician. Veronese’s self-portrait as principal tenor viol player can be confirmed by Agostino Carracci’s engraving (Figure 3), while Titian, playing the violone, is authenticated by his late self portrait in Madrid (Figure 4, Museo de Prado). Richard Cocke² argues that “Boschini is wrong in identifying the violinist as Tintoretto who is more likely to be shown playing the second viol next to Veronese; the bearded and foreshortened head fits in with the self-portraits of Tintoretto in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Louvre.” He continues, “It is not possible to check that Jacopo Bassano plays the cornetto muto.” In 1563 Jacopo Bassano was in his late forties, whereas the figure in Veronese’s painting looks considerably younger, consequently it is unlikely that the cornett player is the painter Jacopo Bassano.

A tradition developed by Antonio Zanetti³ identifies a number of figures seated at the table on the left (Figure 2) as portraits of famous personages, some of whom were dead by 1563: Alfonso D’Avalos,⁴ Mary Tudor, François I, Suliman the Magnificent, Victoria Colonna, and Emperor Charles V. Richard Cocke suggests that the figure wearing the jester’s cap with bells on could be the architect Palladio; if true, this shows that Veronese was not above having a little fun.

THE INSTRUMENTS

Identification of the cornett has proved problematic over the years; Boschini erroneously called it *il flauto*. Its identification as a *cornetto muto* is also incorrect, as a mute cornett is straight rather than gently curved, and possesses an integral mouthpiece. The instrument depicted here is simply a left-handed cornett.⁵

The mammoth task of renovating the painting involved making X-rays of the entire canvas. This revealed that Veronese had some second thoughts, and made a number of radical changes before its completion, most notably to the groups of singers and instrumentalists. Comparison of the group of singers and lute player (Figure 5) with the X-ray (Figure 6) of the same section of canvas shows that originally the gallery from which they are performing was a meter or so higher, and that there were two lutenists rather than one. Comparison of the group of seven musicians (Figure 1) with the X-ray photograph (Figure 7) of the same section shows that the second viol player and the trumpet player were not present in the original painting, and that the figure of Veronese – the principal viol player – originally had crossed legs and an extended right arm. A little to the left of the flat open partbook, the fingers of this figure’s left hand are visible in a playing position on a fingerboard with a scroll. It is not possible to make out the definite shape of the body of this instrument; despite the curious playing stance implied by the acute leaning of the upper torso it seems that the most likely instrument played by this figure was some form of *viola da braccio*. Another major change to this section of the painting is that the two characters

to the lower right of Christ were first painted as the rear view of a single servant.

Perhaps the most significant difference, though, is that on the area of canvas now occupied by the cornettist there was originally a bearded balding figure playing a tenor sackbut. Left where it was, in the center foreground directly below the figure of Christ, the sackbut would have been a prominent feature of the painting. Regarding the identification of the sackbut player, I would like to draw attention to the *Self-Portrait* (Fig.8) by Jacopo Bassano (c. 1515-1592) in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Despite the difficulties of making a detailed comparison, I would suggest that the sackbut player in the *Wedding Feast at Cana* and the subject in Jacopo Bassano's *Self-Portrait* show a strong physical resemblance. It is likely therefore that it was the sackbut player and not the cornettist to whom Boschini's source of information referred. To further confuse matters, it is worth noting that this candidate bears the same name as the Jewish Venetian instrument maker and *piffaro*, Jacopo Bassano, who died sometime between 1559 and 1566, and who returned from England to Venice between 1542 and 1545.⁶ The latter Jacopo Bassano was the grandfather of Giovanni Bassano, cornettist and *maestro de concerti* at the Basilica of San Marco.⁷ Bearing in mind the subject of this painting, it is a nice coincidence that in 1539 Henry VIII granted Jacopo Bassano and his brother Anthony a license to import Gascon wine into England.⁸ There is no known consanguinity between the Bassano musicians and the Bassano painters, and since the family name of the painters was da Ponte, any relationship seems unlikely. However it is probable that some members of each family knew one another, since they originated from the same small Veneto town of Bassano (now Bassano del Grappa).

A number of questions arise from this painting. Were the Circle of Gold painters musically competent, and did they really play the instruments they are shown holding? In Leandro Bassano's (da Ponte's) painting *Family Concert* in the Uffizi Gallery, Jacopo, his father, can be identified as one of the singers; it is then reasonable to assume that the Bassano (da Ponte) family was musical. Tintoretto was known to be a friend of Zarlino, and Giorgione was known to play the lute. In 1540, Titian accepted a portable organ from Alessandro Trasuntino in exchange for a portrait.⁹ Conjecture on this subject alone is fascinating, but my chief interest is: Why should Veronese have chosen to exchange the sackbut for a cornett?

THE THEORIES

Friends of mine who have far more knowledge of painting than I believe that the sackbut was scrapped for reasons of perspective. They tell me that the line of the sackbut, from the bow of the slide past the bell to the upper end of the instrument, leads the eye of the observer away from Christ – the obvious central character – towards Mary. Despite the plausibility of this argument, I have some doubts about this theory being the sole reason for the alterations; after all, Mary's role in the events at Cana was almost equal to her son's. Furthermore, were a painter of Veronese's talent and experience to make such a miscalculation in artistic perspective, is it likely that he would not have spotted it at the sketch stage? Since the original foreground was substantially completed before Veronese made these

changes, there could be any number of explanations. Let's look at one possibility.

SYMBOLISM OF THE SACKBUT

Alan Lumsden states,

The generally accepted view of the origin of the sackbut postulates an instrument of which no specimens survive – the slide trumpet or “trompette des ménestrels.” The long straight trumpet of antiquity was limited to the first four notes of the harmonic series; it may indeed have normally been played only on its fundamental note as are the drone trumpets still used in some Middle Eastern countries today. The technique of bending metal tubes, known by the Romans, had been lost during the Dark Ages but was rediscovered or reintroduced into Europe towards the end of the 14th century. This made a longer yet more compact trumpet possible by the early 15th century; the normal shape was the double folded one.¹⁰

There is an example of one of these folded trumpets in the Hans Memling Triptych of about 1460. Philip Bate¹¹ has conjectured that the Memling illustration shows an instrument equipped with a long mouthpipe that enables the player to alter the sounding length of the instrument while playing. This enables the player to manage simple long-note tenor parts without too much difficulty.

The main disadvantage of the slide trumpet is that the player is obliged to hold the mouthpipe and suffer the awkwardness of having to move the whole instrument. With its double slide, the sackbut offers a very practical solution to this problem. The precise date of this development is uncertain; however it is clear that by the second half of the 15th century the sackbut was well established.

The most important center for brass instrument manufacture for more than two centuries was Nuremberg. Many of the early Nuremberg makers established family dynasties ensuring the quality of manufacture and a virtual monopoly on production throughout the active lives of their descendants. As far as we know, all of the instruments employed in Venice were brought there from Nuremberg. The earliest dated trombone still in existence is one of 1551 by Erasmus Schnitzer (in the Collection of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg) (Figure 7), and so the date and provenance of this instrument suitably fits the instrument in Veronese's painting.

From an early period the trombone was associated with the apocalypse, death, and penitential subjects. In the King James Version of the Bible the events of the apocalypse are heralded by seven angels bearing seven trumpets (Revelations 8: 2). Throughout the King James Bible, the two Hebrew words *chatsotserah* and *shophar* and the Greek word *salpigx* are all translated as “trumpet,” but Martin Luther in his German translation uses *Dromet* for *chatsotserah* and *Posaune* (trombone) for *shophar* and *salpigx*.¹² As Venetian sackbut players' source of instruments was Germany, the association of the *Posaune* with somber and

apocalyptic subjects may have made its way south across the Alps.

Similar associations can be seen later in Monteverdi's use of trombones in the underworld scenes in the "Cori di Spiriti" of *Orfeo*, Schütz' setting of *Fili mi Absolon*, the graveyard scene in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the accompaniment of the Oracle in his *Idomeneo*, and the trombone solo in the *Tuba mirum* of his Requiem Mass, up to contemporary usage in Stravinsky's *In Memoriam, Dylan Thomas*. Despite these associations, this didn't stop the trombone being used for secular occasions and less solemn services, including weddings.

In 1463 Margaret of Bavaria, bride of Federico I of Mantua, made her entrance into the city accompanied by 107 *trombi, pifari* and *tromboni*.¹³ In 1512 the literary plan of the triumphs of Maximilian talks of "sackbutts and good shawms...tuned and regulated together."¹⁴ In Ferrara in 1529 Don Ercole d'Este gave a banquet during the third course of which *dialoghi* were performed with "four voices, one lute, one viola, one transverse flute and one trombone in each group."¹⁵ When in 1539 Eleonora of Toledo arrived at the gate of the city of Florence before her marriage to Cosimo I de' Medici, Cortecchia's *Ingrederere* was sung on top of a specially constructed archway by "twenty-four voices in one group, and in the other four trombones and four cornetti."¹⁶ A contract from Paris in 1569 promises to play at the feast of St. Michael cornetts and violins if dry, but flutes and trombones if wet.¹⁷ In 1570 there is a record of Philip II making a ceremonial entry into Seville Cathedral through a floral archway. On one side there are six shawm and sackbut players, on the other, seven viol players.¹⁸ Moreover, in Bissoni's painting of the *Wedding Feast at Cana* there is to the left of his "rugby-scrum" consort of musicians a well-defined bass sackbut.¹⁹

Plenty of precedents there for Veronese to leave the sackbut where it was, and yet some consideration made him remove it, a consideration important enough to justify the considerable extra work needed to modify the painting.

I believe that there are some further clues to this enigma. Symbolism is a strong feature of this painting, as indeed it is in most 16th-century Venetian painting and music. Loyalty is represented by the dogs; service, by the servants; the harmony of marriage, by the musicians; and order in the universe, by the architecture. The vanishing point of the architecture lies in the head of Christ (Figure 7), directly below which is the sackbut. The slide of this instrument passes over the hourglass placed in front of the partbook. It appears that the eyes of Veronese (in the X-ray) with his intent look are focusing on the partbook/hourglass. The hourglass is a reference to John 2: 4; "Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come." To the right of the violone player (Figure 8) stands a servant examining a glass of wine (the association of wine with Holy Communion hardly needs pointing out). The X-ray of this area of the painting shows that this figure originally had his right arm extended almost horizontally making a quasi-cruciform shape, but more than this, the index finger of his right hand appears to be pointing out the hourglass. Since this is the only major alteration to the painting apart from the musicians, is it possible that the initial concentration on the hourglass was intentional, but that after a period of reflection Veronese felt that the presence of the trombone, with its historic associations with Easter, coupled with a possible allusion to the Crucifixion and the Last Supper placed too much emphasis, for this particular subject, on Christ's predetermined

fate?

Why then did Veronese choose the cornett to replace the sackbut? Florence Gutreau makes the intriguing suggestion²⁰ that the artist made the change in order to accommodate the tessituras of an instrumental version of Orlando di Lasso's six-part motet, *Nuptiae factae sunt in Cana Galilae*. There is, after all, no more appropriate text. It is quite possible that Veronese had this work in mind when making his final choice of players. Lasso had been working in Italy in the previous decade, and his friend and pupil Andrea Gabrieli was shortly to become organist at St. Mark's, so his music would be well known.

If the artists did indeed play the instruments with which they are depicted, it would have been inconsistent with the other "musicians" for Veronese to allow Jacopo Bassano (da Ponte) merely to forsake his sackbut for a cornett. Yet this inconclusive position is frustrating, for it leaves unanswered the question of the identity of the cornett player. It is unlikely to be Benvenuto Cellini, who was sixty-three when Veronese painted this work. It also begs the question: if the sackbut was removed for reasons of symbolism, what contemporary symbolism was associated with the cornett to have it included instead? I simply don't know.

It has been claimed²¹ that it was fear of the Inquisition, as well as financial reward, that lead the Jewish Bassano brothers to flee Venice for England twenty-three years before this painting was completed. On 18 July 1573 Veronese was himself ordered to appear before the Inquisition to answer a series of questions about the painting of another feast, *The Feast in the House of Levi*, the composition of which shows many similarities to the *Wedding Feast at Cana*. When asked if he knew why he had been summoned before the Inquisition, Veronese replied,

I was told by the Reverend of Fathers, that is the Prior of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, whose name I do not know, that the Inquisition was here and that you illustrious gentlemen had ordered me to paint the Magdalen in place of a dog, and I replied that I would be glad to have done this and anything else for my honour and that of the painting, but that I did not think that a figure of the Magdalen could be added convincingly.²²

Little doubt, then, that whatever reasons Veronese had to replace the sackbut with the cornett, fear of the Inquisition wasn't one of them.

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NOTES

1. Marco Boschini, *Le ricche minere della pittura veneziana, Seconda impressione con nove aggiunte* (Venice, 1674; reprint, 1969), p. 755: "Il Vecchio, che suona il Basso, é Tiziano; l'altro che suona il Flauto, é Giacomo da Bassano; quello che suona il Violino, é il Tintoretto, ed il quarto vestito di bianco, che suona la Viola, é lo stesso Paolo."
2. Richard Cocke, *Veronese* (London, 1980), p. 64.
3. Antonio Zanetti, *Della Pittura veneziana e delle opere pubbliche de' veneziani maestri* (Venice, 1771), p. 170.
4. The Italian conductor and composer Francesco d'Avalos tells me that there are two portraits of his ancestor in the Museo del Prado, Madrid, that confirm the identity of Alfonso D'Avalos.
5. I am grateful to David Staff and Jeremy West, cornett players with *His Majesty's Sagbutts and Cornetts*, for this information.
6. Public Record Office, SP1/201, f. 154.
7. Guilio M. Ongaro, "16th-Century Venetian Wind Instrument Makers and their Clients," *Early Music* 13, no. 3 (August 1985): 391-7.
8. Roger Prior, "The Bassanos of Tudor England," *Jewish Chronicle*, Literary Supplement, 1/6/1979, pp. 1-2.
9. See *The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (London, 1984), 3: 620.
10. Alan Lumsden, *The Sound of the Sackbut* (Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 4-5.
11. Philip Bate, *The Trumpet and Trombone* (London, 1966), p. 134.
12. David Guion, *The Trombone: Its History and Music, 1697-1811* (New York, 1988), pp. 48, 55, 151-52.
13. See Iain Fenlon, *Music and Patronage in 16th-Century Mantua* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 14.
14. *The Triumphs of Maximilian: 137 Woodcuts by Hans Burgkmair and Others*, transl. Stanley Applebaum (New York, 1964).
15. Carl Anthon, *Music and Musicians in Northern Italy During the Sixteenth Century* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1943), p. 122.
16. In *Musiche fatti nelle nozze dello illustrissimo Duca di Firenze il signor Cosimo de Medici et della illustrissima consort sua mad. Leonarda da Tolieto* (Venice, 1539). Modern ed. in Andrew Minor and Bonner Mitchell, *A Renaissance Entertainment: Festivities for the Marriage of Cosimo I, Duke of Florence*,

in 1539 (Columbia, Missouri, 1968), pp. 104-17.

17. Cited in Francois Lesure, "La Facture Instrumentale à Paris au Seizième Siècle," *Galpin Society Journal* 7 (1954).

18. Robert Stevenson, *Spanish Cathedral Music in the Golden Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961), p. 157.

19. Giovanni Battista Bissoni, *Noces de Cana*. Ravenna, San Vitale.

20. Florence Gutreau, *Les Noces de Cana de Vérone, une oeuvre et sa restauration* (Paris, 1992), p. 245.

21. Prior, "The Bassanos," pp. 1-2.

22. P. Fehl, "Veronese and the Inquisition: A Study of the Subject Matter of the So-called Feast at the House of Levi," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 6e période, t. LVIII (Dec., 1961).

23. London, College of Arms, Mss.C24/152 (Visitation of London 1633/4); Norfolk 39/169; Surrey 18/303; Somerset R88/66.

24. Suggested by David Lasocki in *Professional Recorder Players in England, 1540-1740* (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1988), 2: 547.

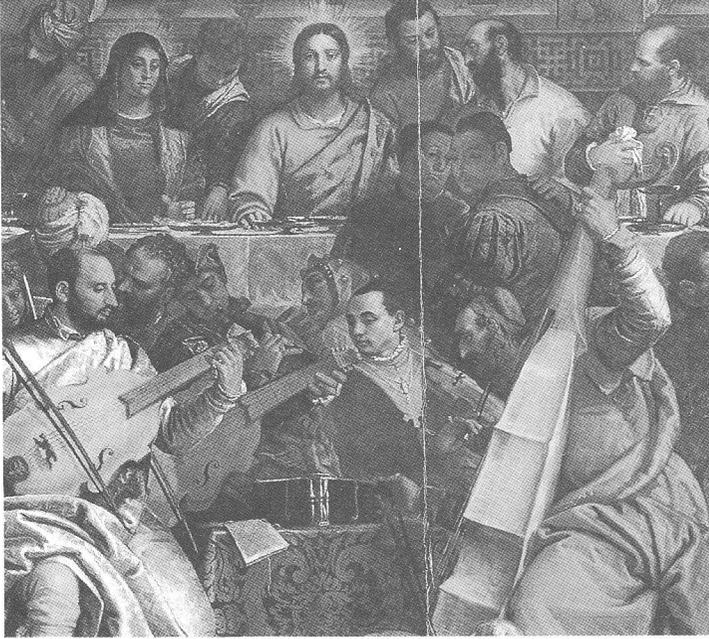


Figure 1
Veronese, *Wedding Feast at Cana* (detail)
(reproduced by permission, Musée du Louvre, Paris)

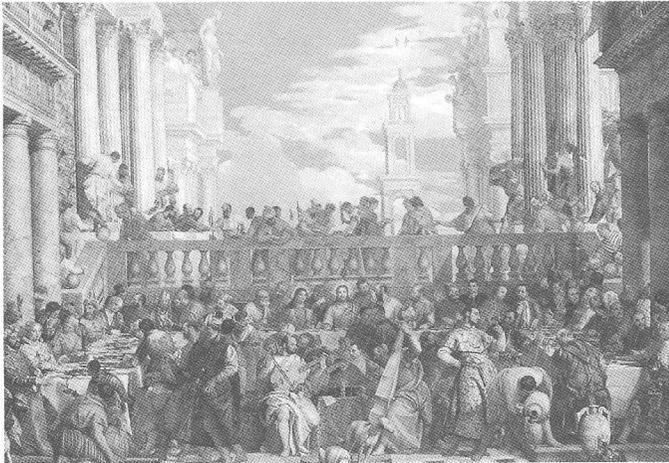


Figure 2
Veronese, *Wedding Feast at Cana*



Figure 3
Agostino Carracci, portrait of Veronese (engraving)



Figure 4
Titian, *Self-Portrait* (reproduced by permission, Prado, Madrid)

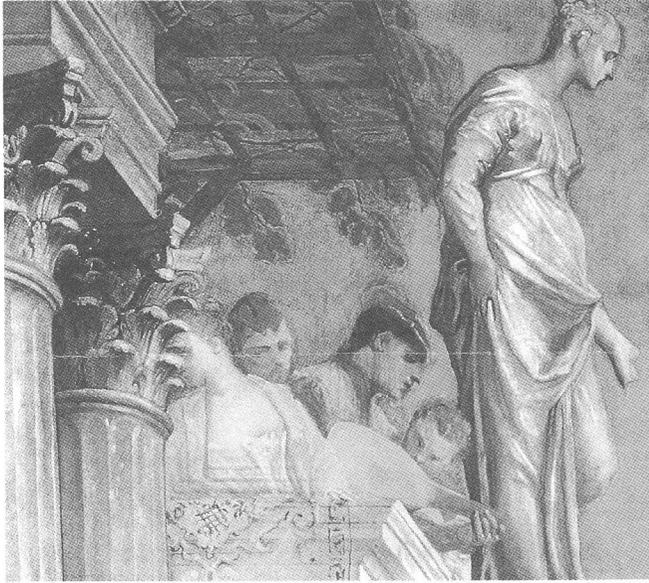


Figure 5
Veronese, *Wedding Feast at Cana* (detail)

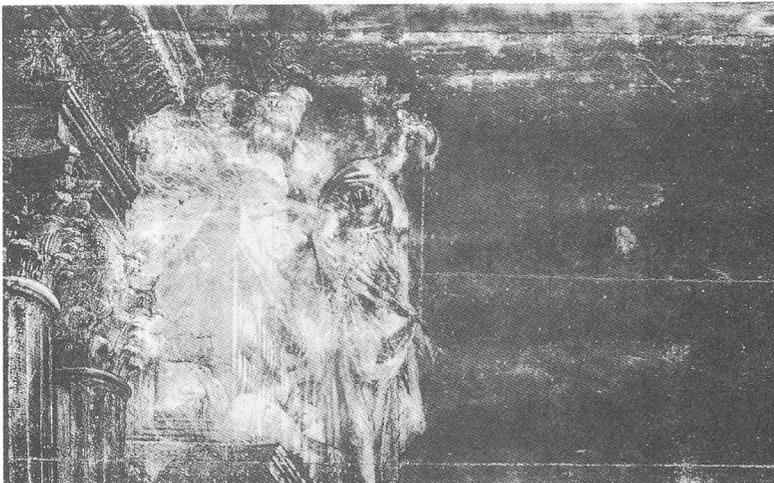


Figure 6
Veronese, *Wedding Feast at Cana* (X-ray of detail)



Figure 7

Veronese, *Wedding Feast at Cana* (X-ray of detail)

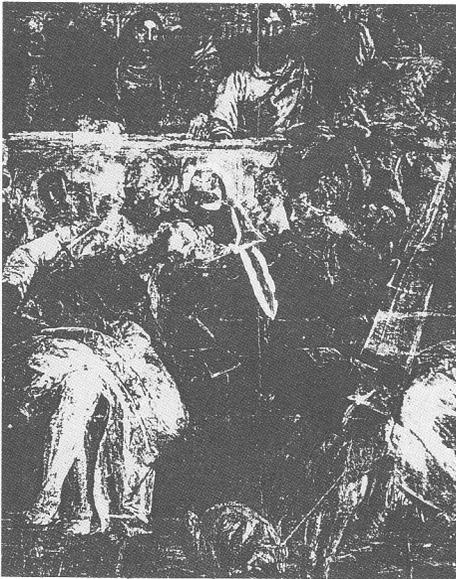


Figure 7a

Veronese, *Wedding Feast at Cana* (X-ray of detail)

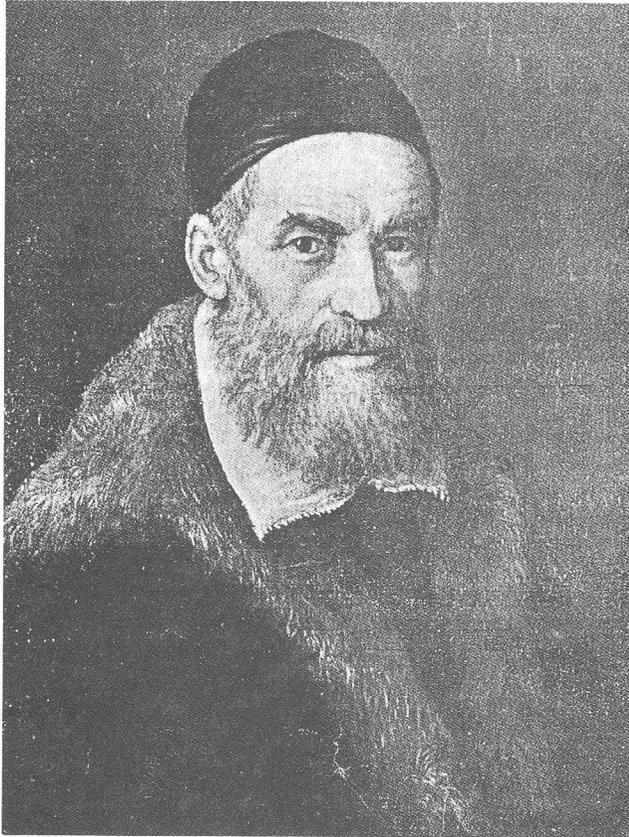


Figure 8
Jacopo Bassano, *Self-Portrait*
(reproduced by permission, Uffizi Gallery, Florence)