



EDITED BY  
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# VENICE AND THE VENETO DURING THE RENAISSANCE

## THE LEGACY OF BENJAMIN KOHL



# **Reti Medievali E-Book**

**21**

**Venice and the Veneto during the  
Renaissance: the Legacy of Benjamin Kohl**

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**Firenze University Press  
2014**

# Altichiero in the Fifteenth Century

by John Richards

## 1. Introduction

The complex polarities of fame and infamy, fame and death, contemporary reputation and posthumous glory occupied a central place in early Renaissance thought, above all in that of Petrarch (1304-1374)<sup>1</sup>. Not the least of his contributions to Renaissance culture was his extension of these polarities to the lives of artists. The main thrust of his piecemeal eulogy of Giotto (1266/1267-1337), pronounced in various contexts, was that the painter's reputation was founded on demonstrable substance, therefore deserving to survive. Dante (c. 1265-1321) famously chose to illustrate the shifting nature of celebrity by means of Giotto's eclipse of Cimabue (c. 1240-1302) but without commenting on the justice or injustice of the transference of fame involved<sup>2</sup>. Petrarch's concerns were rather different. No less keen than Dante to underline the ephemerality of renown, he was careful to contrast with it something that emerged as a central theme of his vision of history: a concept of true Fame, deserved Fame, the *Gloria* which triumphs over Death. The eclipse of contemporary repute was to be expected; "it happens daily and as a common

<sup>1</sup> When Ben Kohl gave what he described at the time as his first ever art history lecture it was mainly about Altichiero. This was at the Association of Art Historians' Conference in Edinburgh in 1984. Robin Simon (convenor and a co-contributor to this volume), Ben, Robert Gibbs, Evelyn Silber and I presented papers, mostly on trecento painting in the Veneto. Though this was many years before his great book on Padua appeared, Ben had already achieved legendary status as the man who had read the whole Paduan archive. This was knowledge he was always happy to share. He allowed me to read drafts of *Padua under the Carrara* in advance of publication and readily shared his thoughts on various matters whenever prompted. I recently found myself giving a paper in the very room in which our AAH session had taken place, some twenty-seven years previously, and I was reminded of Ben's extraordinary scholarship and of the void he has left behind. Not very long before he died he had agreed to contribute to a volume of Petrarch studies which I and others were planning. The association of his name with this project added immensely to its prestige. That the book will not now appear as planned is perhaps appropriate, and this paper, of which a version was published in the *RIHA Journal*, 20 August, 2013, must serve in its place as my tribute.

<sup>2</sup> *Purgatorio*, XI, 94-96.

thing that many who were famous and prominent in their lifetime become unknown and obscure after they have died. Does this surprise you?”<sup>3</sup>.

Against this, Petrarch offsets the prospect of future renown where it is deserved. That this proven fame is to be expected only after death, and perhaps long after, is of a piece with most of the rather chilly consolations offered by the *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (1353-1361): “true Glory only exists for those who are no longer present”<sup>4</sup>. Petrarch further, and remarkably, allows a concern with Fame as a mark of artistic distinction: “If anyone says that craftsmen are not seeking fame but money, I would probably have to agree as far as the common sort is concerned. But I deny it regarding the very best craftsmen”<sup>5</sup>.

Fluctuating renown is demonstrated nowhere better than in the case of Altichiero (*fl.* c. 1360-1393), an artist with whom Petrarch is likely to have had personal contact, who is associated more than any other with the contemporary translation of Petrarch’s literary output into visual form, and in whose work after Petrarch’s death the poet’s own reputation and likeness were preserved for posterity<sup>6</sup>. When scholars like Förster and Schubring began to write about Altichiero in the nineteenth century they were to a considerable extent raising him from the dead. There was in their time no consensual critical tradition which recognised Altichiero’s stature. His name had survived in the wider domain as no more than an appendix to Vasari’s life of Carpaccio. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the painter’s reputation came into focus again, allowing him to enjoy the *rivincita* attributed to him by Giuseppe Fiocco<sup>7</sup>. The rather unsettled, fragmentary and distracted nature of this renewed critical attention, even when it did appear, may be seen as a consequence of the lost centuries of regard.

It is the chief purpose of this discussion to demonstrate that the loss of a tradition of Altichiero’s significance happened not immediately after his death (by April 1393), as is generally the fate of the undeserving in Petrarch’s definition, but more gradually, and that he remained a living force in the Quattrocento, not at all to be despised as a model. This excludes discussion of Altichiero’s presumed pupils and the considerable number of *Altichiereschi* and semi-*Altichiereschi* whose work still graces the churches of the Veneto and beyond. Much of this work is pretty good, and painters like Martino and Jacopo da Verona are well worth the kind of extended discussion they have never yet received, but their connections with Altichiero tell us little about the extension of his reputation and influence beyond the circles of his pupils, which I take both to have been<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Petrarch 1:313.

<sup>4</sup> Petrarch 3:204-05.

<sup>5</sup> Petrarch 3:204.

<sup>6</sup> Richards, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Fiocco, 284-85, notes some key figures of the Altichiero revival.

<sup>8</sup> Aliberti Gaudioso offers a well illustrated survey. Sandberg Valalà, 190-321, made the first serious attempt to catalogue Altichiero’s Veronese followers and influence.

## 2. Marin Sanudo and Flavio Biondo

It is clear that, locally at least, the frescoes Altichiero painted in the newly built *Sala Grande* of Cansignorio della Scala's (1340-1375) palace in Verona in the 1360s were still thought of as something worth seeing throughout the Quattrocento. The evidence of two documents of 1427 and 1431, both referring to a "sala magna depicta"<sup>9</sup>, is fleshed out in stanza 135 of the *Fioretto* of Francesco Corna (1477), which indicates their exceptional quality: "et è sì ricca d'oro de pinture con le figure tante naturale, che tutta Italia non ha un'altra tale"; and identifies the subject matter: "le istorie di Tito Vespisiano"<sup>10</sup>. Marin Sanudo's *Itinerarium... cum syndicis terre firme* of 1483 establishes the location of "la salla pynta", that it was "excelente", and by use of the definite article that it stood out amongst the many painted rooms in the sprawling Scaligeri palace complex, seat of the Venetian Podestà in Sanudo's time<sup>11</sup>.

Sanudo (1466-1536) offers no attribution, but in a later paragraph he names Altichiero and Pisanello (c. 1395-1455) as the two leading painters of Verona. The significance of these references emerges from their particular context. The *Itinerarium* is a book describing a journey through sixty centres of population on the Venetian mainland, running to some 140 pages of text in the Paduan printed edition of 1847. In the course of this, Sanudo mentions only one other artist (Donatello) and only three other examples of figurative art, all large-scale fresco decorations, one of which is the *Sala virorum illustrium* in Padua, also in part attributable to Altichiero<sup>12</sup>.

His reference to the *Sala Grande* suggests a first-hand experience of the hall and its approaches:

À do piazze, una sopra la cui è la fontana bellissima nominata Madonna Verona; et li se fa el mercado de marti, zuoba e venere, e nel giorno di San Zuanne Batista si giostra ivi; l'altra dove è i palazi, dil Podestà, magnifico, con la salla pynta excelente; l'altro dil Capit[ano], et ivi in corte sta il Camerlengo. Apresso è una chiesulla antiqua de S.[ta] Maria, unde è le arche de li Signori de la Scalla, tre, alte, marmoree et intalgiate<sup>13</sup>.

This is a walk made by countless tourists today, from the Piazza Erbe to the Scaligeri cemetery of Santa Maria Antica. Only access to the former Podestà's residence is presently more difficult. The *Sala Grande*, the main public space of Cangrande della Scala's palace as enlarged by Cansignorio after 1364, and seat of Venetian civic authority in Verona in Sanudo's time, was then more accessible.

<sup>9</sup> Sandri, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Corna, 50. The narratives were evidently based on the *Jewish Wars* of Josephus.

<sup>11</sup> Sanudo, 97. A new critical edition of the *Itinerarium* has just been published, edited by Gian Maria Varanini, sadly too late for the purposes of this essay.

<sup>12</sup> Mommsen, 1952; Richards, 2000, 104-34.

<sup>13</sup> Sanudo, 97.

The ostensible origins of Sanudo's mention of Altichiero's name are typical of humanist practice. Sanudo, only seventeen when he made his journey, had already given proof of his credentials in the *Memorabilia deorum dearumque*, written at the age of fifteen and heavily dependent on Boccaccio<sup>14</sup>. The convenient habit of imitation served him well throughout his writing life. The *Itinerarium*, though written in the *volgare*, is no exception, Gaetano Cozzi suggesting that Sanudo wrote his book as a result of his contact with Flavio Biondo's *Italia illustrata*, first published in 1474<sup>15</sup>. If anything, this understates the extent of Sanudo's dependence on Biondo (1392-1460), which is nowhere more evident than in Sanudo's list of Veronese worthies, which ends with: "Giacomo Cavalli... Captain General of the Venetians... Nicolò Cavalli and his sons; the learned Guarino... and, excellent in the art of painting, Altichiero and Pisan[ell]o"<sup>16</sup>.

This is clearly derived from Biondo's account of Verona, which similarly goes through the list of distinguished members of the Cavalli clan, pays homage to Guarino (1374-1460) in more extended terms, and concludes with the best painters: Altichiero, "an excellent painter" in the previous period, and the superior Pisanello, the supreme painter "of our age... of whom Guarino has written" (Biondo, 1474)<sup>17</sup>.

Sanudo's deviations from his source invite comment. His elimination of Biondo's careful distinction between Altichiero and Pisanello, a distinction of both chronology and esteem, may reflect the rather simpler needs of a book largely concerned with listing things of note in Venetian territory<sup>18</sup>. But it might also reflect something more specific, both here and elsewhere in Sanudo's discussion, an aspect of his journey suggested by his more detailed attention to the role of the Cavalli in Veronese and Venetian history. It is clear from his

<sup>14</sup> Cozzi, 335.

<sup>15</sup> Cozzi, 336.

<sup>16</sup> "Jacomo Caballo, milite splendido, di militia prestantissimo, de' Venetiani Cap[itano] generale meritissimo, et nel numero di patricij azonto, *usque in hodierna* dura; et è Nicolao Caballo con li figlioli soi: Guarino docto, di fama nominato, pochi anni vi è stato, *etiam* veronese, et do in arte pyctoria excelenti, Alticherio et Pisano. Sed in questa nostra etate vi riconobi io Leonardi Pelegrin et Andrea suo filio..." Sanudo, 98-99.

<sup>17</sup> "Ea quoque expeditione, in qua Luchinus Vermes Cretam Veneto reparavit imperio, Georgius Caballus Veronensis eques praestantissimos militares ducens ordines navatae fortiter operae id retulit decus, ut senator a Venetiis fuerit constitutus... Sed iam claudat Veronensium gloria digniorum aciem Guarinus quem supra in eorum catalogo, quos eloquentiam in nostrum saeculum longo postliminio reduxisse ostendimus, merito laudum praeconio decoravimus. Pictoriae artis peritum Verona superiori saeculo habuit Alticherium. Sed unus superest, qui fama ceteros nostri saeculi faciliter antecellit, Pisanus nomine, de quo Guarini carmen extat qui Guarini Pisanus inscribitur". Biondo, *Italia illustrata*, I, 377, cited in Clavuot, 129.

<sup>18</sup> That Altichiero had a formative influence on Pisanello's development has been a given of much modern scholarship from Hill to Paccagnini, e.g. "both [Altichiero and Avanzi] represent the same tendencies which culminated in Pisanello": Hill, 9; and "[it was] the awareness [Pisanello] developed of the austere and monumental quality of Altichiero's art, which... became a truly integral part of his artistic expression": Paccagnini, 148.

later chapter on Vicenza that Sanudo had been travelling up to that point in the company of Nicolò Cavalli “doctor jurisconsulto”<sup>19</sup>. As a member of this distinguished family of Veronese servants of the former Scaligeri *signori*, Nicolò was well placed to redirect Sanudo’s attention to a figure not mentioned by Biondo, Giacomo Cavalli (d. 1384), greatest of his family and the first to hold high office in Venetian service.

It most of all invites comment that Sanudo mentions Altichiero and Pisanello at all. That their names were already embedded in the list provided by his chosen source is more a question of opportunity than of explanation. It is possible that textual conservatism of this kind is the whole of the answer. But Sanudo’s use of Biondo is not so inflexibly slavish that he is unwilling to bend it to his particular needs, or according to his specific local knowledge. Sanudo is likely to have seen dozens of works of art in his travels without finding it worth mentioning them. If he was happy to accept the singling out of these two painters with the rest of what he took from Biondo, he must have had his reasons.

The extra factor may have been, quite simply, Nicolò Cavalli, who could have drawn Sanudo’s attention to his family chapel in Sant’Anastasia, to the great votive fresco by Altichiero on the south wall and perhaps to Giacomo Cavalli’s role in its commissioning<sup>20</sup>. Sanudo’s restitution of equality between the two Veronese painters may thus have been a sop to Cavalli family pride. The yoking together of the two great names may also have been reinforced by the sight of the adjacent Pellegrini and Cavalli chapels in Sant’Anastasia, boasting major works by Pisanello and Altichiero respectively. The layout of Sanudo’s text perhaps preserves an echo of this experience in the way his account shortly afterwards slips so easily from the Cavalli to the Pellegrini family<sup>21</sup>. If we can reconstruct from Sanudo’s reference to the “salla pynta” the walk from the Piazza Erbe that took him there, we might imagine an extension of this stroll – no great distance – to Sant’Anastasia, where Biondo’s reference, fortified by Cavalli interests, was given additional solidity in Sanudo’s young mind.

This is only one of several possible explanations. The juxtaposition of Altichiero’s name with the description of the “salla pynta” allows for no firm inference that Sanudo had connected the two things, and it cannot be taken for granted that Nicolò Cavalli either knew or cared who had painted his family’s fresco in Sant’Anastasia more than a hundred years before. No such assumptions can be made with any confidence for a period when the cult of the individual artist, the deliberate preservation of his memory after death, was still in its infancy. Even so, the relative solidity of the local tradition of the *Sala Grande*’s importance is clear, and it is perhaps on account of it that the first section of Vasari’s note on Altichiero in the 1568 version of the *Vite* is

<sup>19</sup> Sanudo, 110.

<sup>20</sup> Richards, 2000, 92-96.

<sup>21</sup> Sanudo, 99. See n. 15 above.



apparently so much more coherent than the section on Altichiero's Paduan works which succeeds it.

If Sanudo's references require examination, even more so do those of Biondo, who was not a native of the Veneto. The form of his reference to Altichiero is not itself at all remarkable; it is as much of a humanist commonplace as descriptions of Giotto as a second Apelles. Altichiero is treated as a sort of John the Baptist, precursor to the greater Pisanello, much as the developing tradition for artists' biographies used Cimabue in relation to Giotto. What is significant is that Biondo knew his name at all.

Biondo's knowledge of Verona came, as was usual with him, from a mixture of first-hand investigation and enquiries made via his voluminous correspondence. In the case of Verona the two types of source may have combined to some extent in the person of another of the city's great names, Guarino Guarini, mentioned in both Biondo's and Sanudo's texts. Biondo appeared in Guarino's circle around 1420, remaining in Verona for about two years. Other meetings took place during the 1420s, when Biondo was in the service of the Venetian Republic in various places. In 1427 he returned to his native Forlì. He visited the Veneto again around 1450, when he was assembling the evidence for *Italia Illustrata*, by which time Guarino had been long resident in Ferrara. Contact between the two, predominantly by letter, was constant during the intervening years.

The passage from *Italia Illustrata* given above makes it clear that Biondo's reference to Pisanello is secondary to, and its presence explained by, his familiarity with the ekphrastic poem "Si mihi par voto ingenium fandique facultas..." addressed by Guarino to Pisanello<sup>22</sup>. The most likely inference must be that Biondo had also heard of Altichiero, whose name he is unlikely to have encountered outside the Veneto, from Guarino. Whether this happened while Biondo was in Verona, perhaps with Guarino acting as his guide and faced with the frescoes, or by letter, is a matter for conjecture. What is more to the point is that Guarino, if he was the source, must have impressed on Biondo some idea of Altichiero's importance. Biondo's particular approach to the two painters is expressly calculated to give the palm to his contemporary Pisanello, but the process also serves to reflect back on Altichiero a measure of esteem, even if only of the kind doled out to the precursor Cimabue in early Tuscan art-historiography.

There are no references to Altichiero in Guarino's surviving work, but it is hard to think that he would not have known of him, not least through his extensive and close relationships with the Cavalli. Guarino, it should be remembered, was born (if only just) during the *signoria* of Altichiero's patron Cansignorio della Scala, and he lived the first decade and more of his life under Scaligeri rule. Altichiero himself was probably still alive and working well into Guarino's early maturity. Guarino's early life brought him into contact with

<sup>22</sup> Hill, 113-18, Baxandall, 87-96.

precisely those followers of Petrarch responsible for key aspects of the rapprochement between literary humanism and the visual arts, men like Pierpaolo Vergerio (1370-1444/1445) and Giovanni Conversino (1343-1408), under whom Guarino studied in Padua<sup>23</sup>. For all that, Guarino's understanding of painting is still rather naïve. The abundant classical allusions of his poem – “interesting rather than beautiful” as Hill puts it<sup>24</sup> – cannot disguise the essential simplicity of Guarino's judgemental basis: “I put forth my hand to wipe the sweat from the brow of the toiling figures... The image, though but painted, speaks so vividly, that I scarce dare to utter a sound...”<sup>25</sup>. This could almost have been written in the 1370s; the language is that of Boccaccio and Villani, Pisanello as *naturae simia*. The undeveloped nature of Guarino's criteria reflects what Baxandall calls “one of the more disconcerting facts of Quattrocento art history that more praise was addressed to Pisanello than to any other artist of the first half of the century... [and that] Pisanello, not Masaccio, is the ‘humanist’ artist”<sup>26</sup>. Pisanello, to put it simply, gives you more to describe.

Sanudo's reference to the Veneto's other great trecento fresco cycle on an Antique theme, Francesco da Carrara's (1325-1393) *Sala virorum illustrium* in the Reggia in Padua (c. 1370-1380), suggests almost as strongly as his description of the “salla pynta” that he had seen it for himself: “È sopra la piazza grande il palazzo dil Prefecto, bellissimo, primo, *ut multi dicunt*, de palazzo de Italia, dove è camere, grande salle, et una con tuti li Imperadori et viri illustri, le opere sue; retrato ancor è Francesco Petrarca et Lombardo Asserico; questa fece riconzar, perché era antiqua, F.S.”<sup>27</sup>. His description of the iconography of the hall is predominantly accurate: it contained some, though not all, “imperadori” and many “viri illustri”, together with representations of “le opere sue”. The trecento frescoes were destroyed by fire in the sixteenth century, except for the portrait of Petrarch, twinned on the end wall with the repainted portrait of Lombardo della Seta (“a Serico”, d. 1390). It is not surprising that Sanudo was shown this great hall, the Paduan equivalent of the *Sala Grande* and, like it, part of the Venetian administrative complex after 1406. Biondo had preceded him here too, listing the Reggia among the “belli palagi” of his day<sup>28</sup>. Once again, even without any reference to authorship of the paintings, it is still remarkable that Sanudo singled it out among all the painted rooms he must have seen throughout the region, many of more recent vintage. In this instance Sanudo's family piety may have been a factor, for the F.S. of his text was Francesco Sanudo, *Capitanio* in Padua in 1480 and responsible, as Sanudo notes, for the restoration of the frescoes.

<sup>23</sup> Sabbadini, 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Hill, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Baxandall, 93.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> Sanudo, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Biondo, *Roma Trionfante*, IX, 320r-v, cited in Pellecchia, 377.

### 3. Michele Savonarola

Sanudo's personal encounter with the *Sala virorum illustrium* may be compared with the description given by the Paduan Michele Savonarola (1385-1468) in his *Libellus de magnificis ornamentis regie civitatis Padue* (c. 1445-1447), written in Ferrara, to which city he had moved in 1440<sup>29</sup>. In the present context Savonarola's work has one useful feature which distinguishes it from the accounts by Biondo and Sanudo: he makes explicit attributional connections between works of art and named artists. His attributions have been intermittently discussed in recent years; they are central to what was until recently the chief focus of most writing about Altichiero, the issue of his collaboration with the Bolognese painter Jacopo Avanzi (*fl.* c. 1360-1384)<sup>30</sup>. The present discussion requires no raking over these coals, beyond a reminder that Savonarola's attributions are generally well founded, if incomplete.

Just like Sanudo's, Savonarola's account appears to record the direct experience of the locations he describes<sup>31</sup>:

When one ascends the principal staircase, one finds balconies, all decorated, on the upper floor around the loggia, with marble columns and magnificent windows overlooking both courtyards. On either side are two most spacious halls, of which the first is called [the Sala] Thebarum and the other [the Sala] Imperatorum... by the hands of the illustrious painters Ottaviano and Altichiero<sup>32</sup>.

Throughout the *Libellus*, Savonarola provides a wealth of local detail quite beyond the scope of Sanudo, or even Biondo (in the Veneto at least). The essential purpose of his book relates it to the genus of patriotic *laudatio* to which the *Itinerarium* and others belong. What distinguishes Savonarola is not just his depth of knowledge but the level of sophistication at which he operates. The *Libellus*, as well as containing a significant body of information about artistic life in Padua, has a place – if perhaps a minor one – in the process by which painting achieved a status parallel with that of the Liberal Arts, whether or not Savonarola intended this in such explicit terms<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> For Savonarola's life see Gloria, 1:496-97.

<sup>30</sup> For Avanzi see Benati, Simon and Richards, 2000, 167-74.

<sup>31</sup> Simon, 267.

<sup>32</sup> "Cumque honoratas scalas ascendis, podiola lodiam parte in superiori circumstantia, columnis marmoreis ac magnificis fenestris, que ad utramque curiam aspectum habent, etiam ornate invenis. Stantque due amplissime et picturis ornatissime sale ad latera horum situate, quarum prima Thebarum nuncupatur, altera Imperatorum nominatur prima maior atque gloriosior, in qua romani imperatores miris cum figuris, cumque triumphis, auro optimoque cum colore depicti sunt. Quos gloriose manus illustrium pictorum Octaviani et Alticherii configurarunt... Et ut uno verbo, pace aliarum civitatum, dicam, nullum in Italia ita magnificum, nullumque ita superbum invenitur". Savonarola, 49.

<sup>33</sup> Baxandall, 76, compares Savonarola unfavourably with Filippo Villani.

The discussion of painters and painting in the *Libellus* falls into three categories. The first and most conventional type, broadly cognate with Sanudo's references, is topographical and biographical. During the course of his discussion of Padua's most significant sites and famous men, Savonarola's itinerary takes him into a number of chapels and other ornamented interiors. The accompanying descriptions are accurate but otherwise unexceptional, the emphasis being on the inherent interest of the site or of the person buried there or otherwise associated with it. The discussion of the jurist Prosdocimo Conti, for instance, triggers a reference to the Conti family's chapel in the Santo, decorated by Giusto de' Menabuoi (c. 1320-1391) in the 1380s, Savonarola emphasising its qualities in general terms<sup>34</sup>. An earlier reference to the same chapel in the section *De divinis et spiritualibus* and to the other most prominent chapels in the Santo, that of St. Anthony in the north transept, and the facing chapel built by Bonifacio Lupi (d. 1390) between 1372 and 1379 and dedicated to St. James the Great, are of this type, though the decorations of these last three are attributed to specific painters<sup>35</sup>. The nearby Oratory of San Giorgio, listed just after these, is described in much the same way, though without an attribution at this stage<sup>36</sup>.

The second category concentrates on the painters themselves, six of whom are singled out in the long third chapter, "De viris illustribus non sacris", after the clerics, natural philosophers (Pietro d'Abano e.g.), medics (Savonarola's own profession), and other men of intellect, including the twin stars of early Paduan humanism, Albertino Mussato (1261-1329) and Lovato Lovati (c. 1240-1309). Savonarola's choice of artists was hardly calculated to pander to any narrow *Patavinitas*. He begins, all the same, with Paduans or what he defines as Paduans: "In hoc autem ordine duos famosos civitas nostra habuit, Guarientum... et Iustum"<sup>37</sup>. Giusto de' Menabuoi was actually a native of Florence, though a citizen of Padua by the time he came to paint the baptistery frescoes which Savonarola describes. The palm goes to Guariento d'Arpo (1310-1370), a genuine son of Padua, and specifically to his great fresco of *Paradise* in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio in Venice, arguably the greatest commission of the north Italian Trecento and to Savonarola crowning proof of the dominance of the Paduan school<sup>38</sup>.

Of the remaining four painters of the Paduan Trecento on this list, none was a native. The painter of the St. Anthony chapel in the Santo is for the second time identified as Stefano da Ferrara<sup>39</sup>, and the extra-Paduan origins of the other three, listed in order of merit – an approach used consistently throughout

<sup>34</sup> Savonarola, 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Flores D'Arcais, 72-73.

<sup>39</sup> Savonarola, 44.

the *Libellus* for all categories of person – are unequivocally spelled out: “... primum in sede locabo Zotum Florentinum... Secundam sedem Iacopo Avancii Bononiensi... Tertiam vero Altichiero Veronensi...”. The award of supremacy among the outsiders to Giotto, “pictorum princeps”, rests in this passage on established humanist arguments of a rather generalized kind<sup>40</sup>. For the more specific basis on which Savonarola made his selection, implicit to an extent in the actual nature of the list, we must look to the third level of discussion, first encountered in two passages placed before and after the list of painters. Though exact interpretation of Savonarola’s meaning is rather impeded by the confused quality of his text, of which, as his modern editor remarked, “molti passi sono oscuri”, the gist of his critical choices is clear enough<sup>41</sup>.

In this part of the *Libellus* Savonarola turns to a consideration of the “mechanicos”, including the mathematicians, “whose knowledge is not far from philosophy”. and the painters, “to whom is given knowledge of the lineaments of figures and the projection of rays” within the ambit of “the science of perspective”<sup>42</sup>. In the passage following the list of Paduan painters, Savonarola attributes to them the creation of “a most famous school of painters”, whose distinction rests on perspective, “the mother of painting”, again placing special emphasis on “the wonderful projection of the rays”<sup>43</sup>.

Though Savonarola maintains the established distinction between liberal and mechanical arts, the substance of his text tends to push painting in a liberal arts direction, rather as though his observations outran his categories. He returns to the theme in a long passage near the end of the *Libellus*. Here painting, “in respect of which the splendour of our city is uniquely manifested”, and its “mother” perspective – which is “a part of philosophy” – are linked with the study of literature and other arts as a peculiarly Paduan mark of civic distinction. The presence of Giotto as the *fons et origo* of this status is once again specified, and its importance for Padua is underlined by Savonarola’s observation that “from all parts of Italy the painters gather” and that without this aspect of Paduan culture “the fame of our city would never have crossed the Venetian lagoon”<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>40</sup> “[Giotto], qui primus ex antiquis et musaicis figuris modernas mirum in modum configuravit”. Savonarola, 44.

<sup>41</sup> Savonarola, vii. I am extremely grateful to Elisabetta Toreno for her invaluable help with Savonarola’s often baffling Latin. As Segarizzi further observes: “non dobbiamo cercare negli scritti di Savonarola né eleganza di stile, né purità di lingua”.

<sup>42</sup> “Postremo ad mechanicos gloriosos et sua in arte illustres viros me converto, quorum scire a philosophia non est longinquum, et mathematicarum artium practica est. Hi sunt pictores, quibus lineamenta figurarum et radiorum projectiones nosse datum est, ut quibus prospectiva scientia gloriatur per eos practicos demonstretur”. Savonarola, 44.

<sup>43</sup> “Hi etenim sua in arte illustres viri ita gloriosam suis pictoris urbem nostram reddiderunt, ut famiosor pictorum schola facta sit. Cumque de pictoribus commemoratio tam gloriosa sic a me facta fuerit et de geometria sic aliquid a nobis actum, cum perspectiva picture mater habeatur, et pars in ea dignior, cum de stupenda radiorum projectione pertractet”. Savonarola, 44.

<sup>44</sup> “Neque parve facio pictorie Studium, quod singulare decus urbis nostre existit, cum ad studium litterarum et bonarum artium pre ceteris artibus adhereat, cum pars sit perspective, que de

The overall thrust of this consideration of painting's broader characteristics is quite clear. The emphasis is placed on "perspective", and the nature of Savonarola's list can hardly fail to confirm as a determining criterion for its own construction what his remarks emphasise quite insistently, the projection of pictorial space, an art practised with unparalleled brilliance in the Padua of Guariento, Giusto and Altichiero two generations before Brunelleschi (1377-1446) stood on the Duomo steps in Florence. Five of Savonarola's six painters, and in this they evidently distinguished themselves from the dozens of recorded painters of Padua whom Savonarola might have mentioned, possessed, as their inclusion in this context implies, qualities of intellectual distinction related to that *ingenium* with which Petrarch credited Giotto, "cuius pulchritudinem ignorantes non intelligent", and here identified in perspectival/spatial terms<sup>45</sup>.

In the context of an article about Altichiero's reputation, Savonarola's attributions are obviously worth examining. His view of Altichiero was based on two of the three major commissions we know the painter carried out in Padua: the *Sala virorum illustrium* (probably early 1370s), the Chapel of San Giacomo (1377-1379) and the Oratory of San Giorgio (1379-1384). Savonarola allows him a part share of the *Sala virorum illustrium* and complete authorship of San Giorgio. San Giacomo he attributes wholly to Jacopo Avanzi.

The primary visual evidence, such as it is, establishes that Altichiero had a hand in the *Sala virorum illustrium*; the rather battered portrait of Petrarch is clearly by him. Secondary evidence, in the form of the illustrations of the Darmstadt codex of the text on which the *Sala virorum illustrium* frescoes were based, Petrarch's *De viris illustribus*, suggests the presence of Jacopo Avanzi too. As both literary and visual evidence suggests his collaboration with Altichiero in the *Sala Grande* and as a number of the frescoes in San Giacomo are identical in style with works reliably associated with Jacopo, Savonarola's attribution is correct as far as Avanzi's presence is concerned. How, then, do we account for Savonarola's omission of Altichiero, who was paid handsomely for his work in San Giacomo in 1379, and who is the author of the majority of the frescoes<sup>46</sup>?

projectionis radiorum loquitur. Hic etenim philosophiae pars est. Suis enim gloriosis atque formosis et plurimis in numero admirandis picturis Zotus pictorum princeps nostra vivit in civitate, sicque ceteri quatuor, de quibus primo loco actum est. Ad quas visendas ex omni Italiae parte pictores confluent, veniuntque iuvenes hoc studio cupidi, ut, sic ab eis doctores facti, ad lares deinde proprios redeant. Neque solatiosum hoc tibi tacebo. Nam cum ex Neapoli industrius iuvenis ad artem hanc adipiscendam Paduam profectus esset, ut eum de studio suo, in quo delectatus sum, aliqua interrogarem, post multa respondit: Famam civitatis nostrae lacunas Venetas nunquam pertransisse, nisi gloriosa studii pictoriae fama per illustres nominatos pictores illustrata fuisset". Savonarola, 55.

<sup>45</sup> Mommsen, 1957, 80. I exclude Stefano simply because his artistic personality is much less firmly defined than that of the others. His St. Anthony frescoes are lost. Savonarola may have included him as a sop to his new home. For the Paduan painters of the Trecento, see Sartori, 1976.

<sup>46</sup> Sartori, 1963, 320.

This can perhaps be explained by the suggestion that Savonarola had access to the book in which the chapel's patron, Bonifacio Lupi, bound together all the documentary material relating to the chapel's construction and decoration<sup>47</sup>. In this book, which is now lost but which probably included the original contracts, Savonarola might have encountered Avanzi's as the first, or only, name: either as senior partner of his and Altichiero's team, or because, around 1376, Altichiero may still have been finishing the Petrarchan frescoes of the *Sala virorum illustrium*, only fully joining the San Giacomo team a little later. The key point here is that Savonarola thought *all* the frescoes in San Giacomo were by Jacopo Avanzi and that his admiration of them may therefore be attached in large measure to Altichiero. It should be emphasised that Altichiero is the author of about 70% of the total frescoed surface and of everything below the main cornice, the area one would expect to attract most attention, including the great Crucifixion which dominates all views of the chapel from the main body of the church.

The sum total of Savonarola's specific references to Altichiero's work, including those to Jacopo Avanzi, is greater than those of Biondo and Sanudo combined, but it is not much more informative in the sense of immediately identifying those qualities which underpinned the survival of Altichiero's reputation into the Quattrocento. Of San Giacomo Savonarola says little more than that it was by Jacopo Avanzi, and that the paintings were glorious<sup>48</sup>. Of the *Sala virorum illustrium* he says it was "painted with gold and colour by the illustrious painters Ottaviano and Altichiero"<sup>49</sup>, and of San Giorgio that Altichiero "decorated it with great skill"<sup>50</sup>.

These references straddle the boundary between the topographical and biographical elements of Savonarola's discourse, and the absence from them of the kind of reflection embodied in the third category of discussion is a consequence of Savonarola's division between the different strands of his argument. Padua, in his book, deserves fame for *these* locations, for *these* men, and for *these* aspects of its cultural and civic life. It makes perfect sense in context, as the retention of much the same division in guide books written five hundred years after the *Libellus* confirms. It means, though, that the basis for Savonarola's discrimination between the deserving-of-fame and the undeserving must be reconstructed from dispersed remarks rather than arguments specific to named artists.

<sup>47</sup> Sartori, 1966, 284.

<sup>48</sup> "Que manibus Iacobi de Avantio gloriosissimus imaginibus depicta est" and "secundam sedem Iacobi Avanti bononiensi dabimus, qui magnificorum marchionum de Lupis admirandam cappellam veluti viventibus figuris ornavit". Savonarola, 13.

<sup>49</sup> "Auro optimoque cum colore depicti sunt... manus illustrium pictorum Octaviani et Alticherii configurarunt". Savonarola, 49. For Ottaviano (da Brescia) in this context, see Mommsen, 1952, 101-02.

<sup>50</sup> "Maximo cum artificio decoravit". Savonarola, 44. Savonarola's longest reference to San Giorgio, 33, concentrates on the tomb of Raimondino Lupi, of which a detailed description is given. The tomb was painted by Altichiero, though Savonarola does not mention this.

One feature of Savonarola's *Libellus* that invites comment is the exclusion of any discussion of Quattrocento painting in Padua. Savonarola thus fails to mention either Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) or Filippo Lippi (c. 1406-1469), both of whom had worked in Padua prior to the writing of the *Libellus*, though in Lippi's case after Savonarola had left for Ferrara. Neither does he mention the most recent major fresco cycle to have been painted in Padua before his departure, Giovanni Storlato's *Life of St. Luke* (1437), which he must have seen, given the frequency of his references to the abbey church of Santa Giustina, where the frescoes are located. Nor does he refer to the Paduan Francesco Squarcione (c. 1395-1468), whom he surely knew, given the documented association between the painter and Savonarola's son<sup>51</sup>.

Lightbown suggests that Savonarola's exclusion of Squarcione and his contemporaries is to be explained because Squarcione's school "had as yet made no great impression stylistically. It may even have been [Squarcione's pupil] Mantegna's (c. 1431-1506) precocious genius that brought to it much of its subsequent fame"<sup>52</sup>. Martindale is generally more sceptical with regard to Squarcione: "exactly what Squarcione taught and what facilities his household and workshop offered are likely to remain a matter of speculation"<sup>53</sup>. Paduan painting of the early Quattrocento has rarely enjoyed much critical acclaim, a situation which is in marked contrast with its longstanding intellectual, scientific and pedagogical distinction. Indeed, Christiansen describes the city in this period as "artistically backward" and Battisti comments on the generally depressed conditions of a pictorial culture lacking exemplary contact with the new developments of Tuscany<sup>54</sup>. Donatello (c. 1386-1466) and Mantegna only arrived in Padua after Savonarola had left, and the *Libellus* was written before their work in the Santo and the Eremitani had been completed.

The omission of Uccello and Lippi cannot, in the light of Savonarola's trecento list, be accounted for on the grounds that neither was a native of Padua. More to the point is the nature of the *Libellus* itself. However superior it may be to other examples of its genre, its principal purpose is still that of establishing the grounds for Padua's fame. Savonarola's reason for including anything or anyone in his book hinges on their contribution to that. The assumption that follows from this is clear: in Savonarola's day Padua was famous for a number of its trecento painters, and for reasons which allowed him to give them something like the same billing as the men of intellect<sup>55</sup>. There

<sup>51</sup> Muraro, 69.

<sup>52</sup> Lightbown, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Martindale and Garavaglia, 7. Kristeller's reading remains valid. Of Squarcione he says: "One certainly does not gain from [his] pictures that impression that Squarcione was the influential artist whom the Paduan tradition, repeated since Vasari by almost all writers, represents him to have been" and that: "[Squarcione] was not so much the artistic, but rather the business head of his workshop". Kristeller, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Christiansen, 111, n.12. Battisti, 100.

<sup>55</sup> "If the Paduan school of the fifteenth century had been independent and autochthonous, it would certainly have taken its departure from the splendid and important works executed in Padua by artists of the Trecento". Kristeller, 32.



was already a precedent for presenting painters of an earlier period as models to be followed in the way writers might model their work on Cicero in the form of Pierpaolo Vergerio's (1370-1444/1445) oft-cited observation (c. 1396) that the painters (implicitly Paduan) of the late Trecento followed the example of Giotto alone<sup>56</sup>. One of the effects of Savonarola's book may have been to adumbrate for the painters of his day, and for their patrons, an extended set of exemplars in the Giottesque tradition. His list could thus be seen as an intellectualised gloss on the Paduan practice, codified in the statutes of the painters' guild, of sending apprentice painters to copy from local frescoes on feast days<sup>57</sup>. Savonarola's emphasis is at least circumstantially supported by the argument it was precisely Filippo Lippi's exposure to the painters of the Paduan Trecento that played a decisive role in the development of his use of pictorial space<sup>58</sup>.

The analogy between humanist imitation of Cicero and Seneca and the use of Giotto and other trecento painters as exemplars was repeated in Savonarola's time by the humanist educator Gasparino Barzizza (c. 1360-1431), teaching in Padua between 1407 and 1421. Barzizza noted an analogy between his own pedagogical technique and that of painters:

I myself would have done what good painters practice towards their pupils; for when the apprentices are to be instructed by their master before having acquired a thorough grasp of the theory of painting, the painters follow the practice of giving them a number of fine drawings and pictures as models of the art<sup>59</sup>.

Barzizza gives no indication what type of work Paduan painters used for their pupils' instruction, nor is it entirely clear in what sense the term "model" should be understood. He does state that study of these masters was treated as a preliminary exercise, prior to the direct application of the master's wisdom to his pupils, but implies also that its purpose was to confront young painters with the best of their art – with the equivalent of what would for Barzizza's pupils, have been Cicero, Virgil and Seneca, rather than the less exalted models of the *ars dictaminis*<sup>60</sup>.

The place of Squarcione and his pupils in this context is unclear. Barzizza never mentions him by name and there is no particular reason to think he had him in mind at all. Connections between Squarcione's supposed academy and the firmly documented *Gymnasium* of Barzizza are purely conjectural, even if we go so far (and it is going some distance) as to allow Squarcione admission to Barzizza's category of good painters. Savonarola's list maintains the

<sup>56</sup> "Faciendum est igitur quod etatis nostre pictores, qui, cum ceterorum claras imagines sedulo spectent, solus tamen Ioti exemplaria sequuntur". Vergerio, 177.

<sup>57</sup> Fletcher, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Rowlands, 54-67.

<sup>59</sup> Eisler, 56.

<sup>60</sup> For Barzizza's school and influence, see Mercer, 118-131.

supremacy of Giotto's example asserted by Vergerio, adding to it a selected number of later painters most of whom might be defined as Giottesque progressives, and who broadly confirmed Vergerio's assertion that "the painters of [his] day" followed the example of Giotto alone. It is always possible that it was Squarcione himself, maybe with an eye to recruitment, who helped Savonarola assemble a list which served to enshrine and transmit a settled Paduan sense of its own pictorial exemplars, Altichiero amongst them<sup>61</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

Discussion of the visual evidence of Altichiero's impact is beyond the scope of this account. It would have to be extensive and it would have to be argued within a broader analysis of the insufficiently acknowledged role played by trecento painting in a Giottesque tradition in the development of the *ars nova* of early Quattrocento Florence. Even if one were to restrict oneself to the Veneto, the pervasive presence of Altichiero's inventions in the drawings of Jacopo Bellini (c. 1400-1470/1471) and the impact of his spatial adventures on the young Mantegna would support the rather fragmentary evidence of esteem considered here.

Altichiero's reputation in the century or so after his death rested chiefly on the *Sala Grande* and the *Sala virorum illustrium*. This is understandable. Both fresco cycles were located in public, governmental spaces where they would be seen, and both satisfied at least one established criterion for esteem, based as they were on Antique material. This is possibly reflected in Vasari's observation of the Veronese frescoes that "Mantegna used to praise them as the rarest painting"<sup>62</sup>. Apocryphal or not, the point of the remark is that Mantegna was identified as the sort of artist whose praise might be felt to say something significant about them. The frescoes of the *Sala virorum illustrium* were largely replaced in the early sixteenth century and those of the *Sala Grande* were lost to view by 1718 at the latest<sup>63</sup>. This left Altichiero to be represented by the two Paduan chapels done for members of the Lupi family, which were by Vasari's time – and by Vasari – embroiled in the attributional mess which served to obscure Altichiero's role in their creation and deny him his proper measure of renown.

<sup>61</sup> For the Ferrarese aspects of Savonarola's interests, see Richards, 2007b, 469-472.

<sup>62</sup> "Il Mantegna gli lodava come pittura rarissima". Vasari, 3, 635. It should be pointed out that Vasari attached this praise to the *Trionfi* which he says were part of the scheme and which he attributed to Jacopo Avanzi rather than Altichiero.

<sup>63</sup> Richards, 2000, 36.

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#### Abstract

Altichiero was the dominant north Italian painter of the later Trecento. In Padua, in the 1370s and early 1380s, he worked for patrons close to Petrarch and his circle and perhaps in direct contact with the poet himself. By the time of the second edition of Vasari's *Vite* (1568) the memory of Altichiero's work had suffered significant occlusion, and Vasari's account of him is little more than an appendix to his life of Carpaccio. Only since the later nineteenth century, and particularly in the last fifty or so years, has Altichiero's reputation been restored. It is the purpose of this paper to examine aspects of that reputation throughout the century or so after the painter's death (by April 1393).

#### Keywords

Middle Ages; Early Modern Times; 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century; Padua; art; painting; patronage; Altichiero

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