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## A Quantitative Analysis of the Venetian Altarpieces: The Case of San Giobbe Altarpiece by Giovanni Bellini

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The study on art history, whose origin could be dated back to Giorgio Vasari's *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* in sixteenth century, has evolved various approaches such as stylistic analysis, formal analysis, iconographical interpretation, intellectual historical or sociological analysis and so on. These studies, however, are rather qualitative and essentially based on the personal impressions of art historians. Then a tentative study of the quantitative analysis on art works will be shown here using the database and the availability of this fresh method is going to be examined by taking up the San Giobbe altarpiece by Giovanni Bellini for instance.

The San Giobbe Altarpiece, executed by a great Venetian painter, Giovanni Bellini (1434c.-1516), is one of the finest masterpieces among Venetian altarpieces from quattrocento and cinquecento (fig. 1). This work is now shown at the Gallerie dell' Accademia in Venice, but originally it was intended for the second altar on the right wall of the church of San Giobbe. It is a monumentally huge pala, that is an altarpiece with a unified picture plane, (469 x 261cm at present, cut about 55cm in the vertical direction), and it was installed in the architectural marble frame of the church, which is still seen in situ.

This altarpiece has been long praised as a "prototype" of the Venetian Renaissance altarpieces, but both the date of its completion and the identity of the commissioner still remain uncertain because of a paucity of documents

concerning the commission. A lot of references to this work, however, have been continuously made by many critics and art historians. From the middle of the fourteenth century to the late fifteenth century, the most popular type of the venetian altarpieces was the so-called *sacra conversazione*, which depicts several saints gathered together around the Madonna and Child who are represented on a high throne. The San Giobbe altarpiece is also one of the most famous works belonging to this formula.

However, observing the S. Giobbe altarpiece in the contemporary tendency of altarpiece styles, a lot of dissimilarities and a distinctive intention could be found *vis-à-vis* this artifact. So here, in the first place I would like to analyze whether the San Giobbe altarpiece is indeed a prototype of the *sacra conversazione* and secondly to determine the proper place of this work in the tradition and development of venetian renaissance altarpieces.

## I. History of the notices of the San Giobbe altarpiece<sup>1</sup>

San Giobbe altarpiece has been highly praised since the very moment it was completed. Though the exact date of its completion remains on undetermined matter, the first references to it are found in the contemporary literature. One is in *De Venetae urbis situ*, the guide to Venice written by Marc Antonio Sabellico, who was a non-native venetian humanist offering his services to the Venetian Republic, while another can be found in a writing by a venetian noble, Marin Sanudo.

Marc Antonio Sabellico: *Visitur in parte aedis Joaniis Bellini tabula insignis quam ille inter prima artis suae rudimenta in apertum retulit. (De Venetae urbis situ, Venezia, 1493)*

In part of the church is seen the famous picture by Giovanni Bellini which

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<sup>1</sup> In this part, I owe a lot to the master thesis of Olivia Richardson. She summarized the history of literal sources of the San Giobbe altarpiece in the appendix. Olivia Richardson, *Hodegetria and Venetia Virgo: Giovanni Bellini's San Giobbe Altarpiece*, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Antonio Sabellico, *De Venetae urbis situ*, Venezia, 1493, Giles Robertson, *Giovanni Bellini*, Oxford, 1968, p. 68. Original word of “rudimenta” has been interpreted in several ways by art historians.

he exhibited among the rudiments of his art. (English by Glis Robertson)<sup>2</sup>  
 Marin Sanudo: A Santo Joppo uno altar di Zuan Bellin che di le belle cose  
 habbi fatto & bene. (*Laus urbis venetae*, Venezia, 1493)<sup>3</sup>  
 At San Giobbe, an altar by Giovanni Bellini, which is one of his finely made  
 works. (English by author)

These notices imply that the S. Giobbe altarpiece had already been installed  
 in the church by this time and they also gave early appraisals for this work.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the already familiar fame  
 of the S. Giobbe altarpiece increased perpetually. Though Vasari generally  
 rendered Bellini's style as "secco e crudo e tagliante (dry, uncouth, and harsh)",  
 when referring to the S. Giobbe altarpiece, he highly evaluated it in his *Vite*  
 taking several lines<sup>4</sup>. Then in 1660 Marco Boschini selected the S. Giobbe as  
 a typical work that reveals Giovanni Bellini's understanding of the perspective  
 and admired his almost unique ability to integrate fictive and real architecture  
 in a single whole, while being impressed by the celestial, numinous expression  
 of holy beings and jovial angels<sup>5</sup>.

In the eighteenth century, however, the perception toward the S. Giobbe  
 altarpiece has changed due to the fact that the achievement of luminous and  
 coloristic venetian renaissance style had tended to be ascribed to one of  
 Giovanni's disciples, Giorgione (1476c.-1510). For instance, Zanetti even  
 traced the influence of Giorgione in the S. Giobbe altarpiece, though the  
 contemporary literature by Sabellico and Sanudo had implied that its date was  
 sometime between late 1480's and early 1490's<sup>6</sup>, which corresponds to the  
 very early days in Giorgione's life.

Despite of these vicissitude, the contemporary attitude of the critics respect  
 to Bellini's creation of S. Giobbe has persisted since the nineteenth century,  
 and this work came to be regarded as the typical venetian altarpiece. The next  
 reference by Pignatti would sufficiently summarize the historical attitude

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<sup>3</sup> Marin Sanudo, *Laus urbis venetae*, Venezia, 1493.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori scritte da  
 Giorgio Vasari, pittore aretino con nuove annotazioni e commenti di Gaetano Milanesi*,  
 Firenze, 1878, Tomo III, p.155.

<sup>5</sup> Marco Boschini, *La Carta del Navegar Pitoresco*, Venezia, 1660.

<sup>6</sup> A. M. Zanetti, *Della pittura veneziana e delle opere pubbliche de' veneziani maestri*,  
 Venezia, 1771.

toward the S. Giobbe<sup>7</sup>.

...la pala di San Giobbe è uno dei raggiungimenti capitali del Bellini maturo, e segna il punto in cui il suo stile, dopo le esperienze pier francescane, sembra quasi voler rientrare nel grande alveo della tradizione più propriamente veneziana, quasi a costituire un prototipo che poi dovrà servire di esempio per molti decenni. (Terisio Pignatti: *Dizionario Biografico degl' Italiani*, Rome, 1960)

...the San Giobbe altarpiece is one of the capital attainments of Bellini in maturity. It marks the moment when his style had almost seemed to return to the grand flow of the more properly venetianistic tradition after his experiencing the creations of Piero della Francesca and to constitute the prototype which here after should serve as an example for many decades. (English by author)

Up on considering these historical attitudes regarding this altarpiece, I would like to reexamine the stance of the S. Giobbe in the evolution of venetian renaissance altarpieces according to three following points: (1) in the church of S. Giobbe, (2) among other altarpieces by Giovanni Bellini, (3) among the venetian altarpieces from the latter half of fifteenth century to the first half of the next century.

## II. The place of the San Giobbe Altarpiece in the church of San Giobbe

The church of S. Giobbe is located in Sestiere di Cannaregio, the north-western section of the venetian island. Originally it had been founded in 1380 by a venetian noble, Giovanni Contarini (1335c.-1407), as a hospital for the poor and from 1428 to the fall of the Republic, it came under the aegis of Observantine, while presently its status diminished to that of a parish church<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Terisio Pignatti, *Dizionario Biografico degl' Italiani*, Rome, 1960.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the history of the church of S. Giobbe, see P.Ferdinando Finotto, *San Giobbe La Chiesa dei Santi Giobbe e Bernardino in Venezia*, 2da ed., Verona, 1994. Andrea Gallo, Giovanna Nepi Scirè, *Chiesa di San Giobbe Arte e devozione*, Venezia, 1994. Richardson, *op.cit.*, Appendix II.

Figure 2. Plan of the church of San Giobbe

Figure 1. Giovanni Bellini, San Giobbe altarpiece, 1478-83c. Venice, Gallerie dell' Accademia

Figure 4. Giovanni Bellini, Frari triptych, 1488, S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice

Figure 3. Engraving by Francesco Zanotto after Giovanni Bellini's lost S. Catherine altarpiece, 1470c. in SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice

Figure 5. Giovanni Bellini, Priuli triptych, 1507, Kunstsammulungen der Stadt, Düsseldorf

Figure 6. Giovanni Bellini, S. Zaccaria altarpiece, 1505, S. Zaccaria, Venice

Figure 9. Marco Zoppo, Pesaro altarpiece, 1471, Staatliche Museen, Berlin

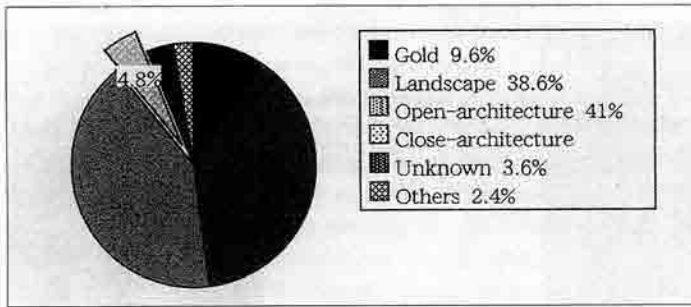


Figure 7. Analysis of Background Setting of Venetian Altarpieces

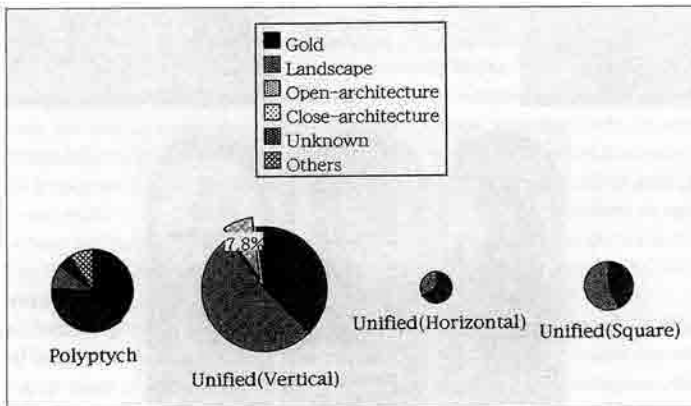


Figure 8. Analysis of Form and Background Setting of Venetian Altarpieces

To the present days, the church preserved the architectural style completed after the reconstruction in the 1470's under the direction of Pietro Lombardo (1435c.-1515). Around this time, it had a close relation to both St. Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444, canonized 1450), who had been exceptionally soon canonized after his death, and the doge i.e. the venetian first magistrate, Cristoforo Moro (1390-1471, doge 1462-1471) who adored S. Bernardino personally. The reconstruction of the church was also carried out by means of the generous endowment specified in Moro's testament.

Through above mentioned renovation, the church of S. Giobbe acquired the structure that we can still observe at present and it was consecrated in 1493. At that time the church comprised two chapels, namely the main chapel, the Martini chapel (the second chapel on the left), as well as the S. Giobbe altarpiece. Hence at the time of the consecration, there only existed the S. Giobbe altarpiece on the right wall, while opposite it, one could see the Martini chapel. Setting the main chapel at the apex, these three constitutive elements formed a triangle in the plan of the church (Fig. 2). Due to the structural restraints of the church, it was impossible to construct a chapel on the right side, so the S. Giobbe altarpiece would be considered as serving the role of a chapel to compensate for the Martini chapel on the opposite side. In addition to this architectural characteristic, they hold evident common motifs. Finally it could be said that the consecration of the church of S. Giobbe witnessed the existence of three chapels executed under a consistent decoration plan. As shown below, the S. Giobbe altarpiece has an extraordinary huge scale compared with the altarpieces of this period. This fact suggests the S. Giobbe's ambivalent function. It was an altarpiece but at the same time it was intended to fulfil the role of a chapel.

Then several decades later, two more altars were established on both sides of the S. Giobbe. The venetian leading aristocratic families dedicated an altarpiece for each of them: the Foscari, *Agony in the garden* by Marco Basaiti for the altar on the left side of the S. Giobbe, and the Sanudo, *Presentation in the Temple* by Vittore Carpaccio for the altar on the right side. Their dimensions are 371 x 224cm and 421 x 236 cm respectively, that is a size smaller than that of S. Giobbe which, as stated previously, measures 530c. x 261cm. Now they share altogether a room of the Gallerie dell' Accademia in Venice and, even though this room doesn't match the favorable interior of the S. Giobbe church, the magnificent scale of the S. Giobbe altarpiece is still prominent in



the spectators' eyes. Consequently these altarpieces donated by those influential patrons couldn't intimidate the prestige of the S. Giobbe altarpiece in the church.

### **III. The place of the San Giobbe Altarpiece among other altarpieces by Giovanni Bellini**

Giovanni Bellini left a lot of works covering the various genre in his long career over a half of a century. In spite of the difficulties to identify the authenticity of the works attributed to Giovanni Bellini, 189 works could be considered to be the highest common factor of the expertise by the latest art historians<sup>9</sup>. Although depicting various genres of paintings such as religious narratives, portraits, historical paintings, etc., Giovanni has concentrated his creative spirit on religious themes, especially on the images of the Madonna and Child. Then observing the configurations of the works which render the Virgin and Child, this type of representation can be divided into one displaying an independent Madonna and Child and another one in which the Virgin and Child are flanked by saints. Furthermore they can both be subdivided in a full-length figure type and a half-length one. In Giovanni's oeuvre, there are twelve works including the S. Giobbe, which render the Virgin and Child with saints in full-length. In this category, following works are included: the St. Catherine of Siena altarpiece in the church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo (1470c., 300 x 277 cm?, destroyed 1867)(fig. 3), the S. Giobbe altarpiece (c.1478-80, 530c. x 261 cm), the Frari triptych in the church of S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (1488, 184 x 171 cm)(fig. 4), the Priuli triptych in the church of S. Michele in Isola (1505-1510c., 129 x 171 cm)(fig. 5), and the S. Zaccaria altarpiece in the church of S. Zaccaria (1505, 478 x 273 cm)(fig. 6).

Observing the background settings of these works, the S. Catherine altarpiece has an architectural structure widely opened to the sky, whereas the

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<sup>9</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, New Haven & London, 1989, Appendix 5, pp. 287-291. Anchise Tempestini, *Giovanni Bellini*, Milano, 1997, pp. 192-233. I extracted the highest common factor from their lists of Giovanni's work.

S. Giobbe shows a completely closed indoor space. The Frari triptych has a traditional triad frame structure and its architecture is also opened to the exterior in the lateral sides, while no architectural setting can be seen in the Priuli triptych. On the other hand in the S. Zaccaria altarpiece, the open architecture is introduced again. Among these works, though the Frari triptych bears a close resemblance to the S. Giobbe both in color and luminous effect (in which gold and brown of the mosaic apse is dominant and its luxurious gold-plated frame emphasizes solemn architectural elements in this altarpiece), it dares to open its architectural setting to the exterior by thin strips in both sides. Accordingly the S. Giobbe could be identified as the only altarpiece with closed architectural setting in *sacra conversazione* by Giovanni Bellini.

Then comparing the scale of five altarpieces above, it could be said that the S. Giobbe's original dimension exceeding five meter in height was extraordinary. Besides considering the original place of the S. Catherine altarpiece and the S. Zaccaria altarpiece, both of which take a unified and vertical picture plane identical with the S. Giobbe, the former used to be installed in the first altar on the right wall in the magnificent gothic church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, while the latter is still installed in the second altar on the left in the church of S. Zaccaria where the annual procession of the doge used to be carried out. That is to say, both churches have a larger scale and higher status than those of the S. Giobbe church, and in this situation, the aforementioned altarpieces should appear as an appropriate size precisely. Even in such a church as the SS. Giovanni e Paolo where many splendid tomb monuments of the doges can be seen in the vast interior space, the S. Catherine altarpiece would give the impression of modesty. Compared with these grand churches, the S. Giobbe can't be described as a marvelous edifice even though it had benefited through the protection of a doge, Cristoforo Moro. Being that the S. Giobbe altarpiece was the most sumptuous and the largest one of those days in Venice, we can easily imagine its splendor if installed in one of the prestigious venetian churches. However, seen in an ordinary church such as the S. Giobbe, its sublime beauty, now enlarged manifold, surpasses our power of imagination. From the observations stated above, the particularity of the S. Giobbe altarpiece among Giovanni Bellini's works featuring the Madonna and Child along with saints can be clearly seen.

#### IV. The place of the San Giobbe Altarpiece among the venetian altarpieces from 1450 to 1530

Here the analysis of the contemporary altarpieces will be done to deduce the place of the S. Giobbe altarpiece among them. Unfortunately in Venice, presently only few altarpieces can be still observed in the original altar. Some of them are preserved in Gallerie dell' Accademia in Venice but others met a different fate, being scattered or lost. Consequently it is no simple task to fully understand the nature of the altarpieces from the period of Giovanni Bellini but on the other hand, it is possible to presume roughly the tendency of altarpiece styles that developed during this period. In his *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*<sup>10</sup>, Peter Humfrey studied the altarpieces from 1450 to 1530, which corresponds to the venetian early Renaissance as well as to Giovanni Bellini's activities. Humfrey also wrote that he has 381 data of venetian altarpieces. 100 works among them were summarized in the appendix of his book, which I used to make a database of these works. Moreover my analysis makes full use of this database. Being that 17 works of them are sculptures, I treated the rest of 83 works as the population in this study.

There could be observed several types of background settings in venetian altarpieces, the S. Giobbe altarpiece being a conclusive example characterized by its glorious architectural setting. First of all, there exists a traditional polyptych type whose background is painted in gold or blue-sky color all over. Secondly in some polyptychs dating from an ulterior period and altarpieces with a unified picture plane, the Madonna and saints are involved in a landscape or in an architectural setting. Further, the background architectures can be classified in two categories, that is an open-architecture and a close-architecture. Figure 7 and 8 provide the results of analysis of the altarpieces in aforementioned database based on this classification criterion. Figure 7 represents the distribution of the percentage of each background type and figure 8 shows the distribution of the percentage according to the form of

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, New Haven & London, 1993.

altarpieces. The size of every circles varies from the number of included altarpieces. These results brought it to light that the close-architecture type, to which the S. Giobbe altarpiece belongs, occupies only a small percentage of altarpieces with the vertical form. At the same time, it also made clear that the most popular types are the backgrounds of landscape and the open-architecture setting.

To make a comparison with the S. Giobbe altarpiece, I will focused on the backgrounds with landscape first. It was made clear according to the above investigation that this type of background was one of the mainstreams of venetian altarpieces in those days. One of the very first examples of the composition that disposes the enthroned Madonna and Child in landscape could be identified in the altarpiece executed by Fra Antonio da Negroponte in 1450 for the church of San Francesco da Vigna in Venice. In the composition of this work, the throne of the Madonna is set in the garden with the typical hedge of roses and she is adoring the Child on her knees. This recalls intensely the traditional iconography of the Madonna such as the Madonna in the closed garden (*hortus conclusus*) or the Madonna of Humility. Then this composition was adopted to an altarpiece in renaissance style by Marco Zoppo's Pesaro altarpiece (fig. 9) with an inscription of 1471, in which the Madonna and saints are rendered with a consistent proportion in a unified picture plane. Catarina Schmidt ascribed the idea of grafting the Madonna and saints "in" landscape to Marco Zoppo<sup>11</sup>. Afterward this idea became popular in Venice and it was further inherited by many successors in quattrocento and cinquecento.

The other type of background in current consisted of open-architecture settings. In this type the Madonna and saints are placed in a loggia-like architecture open to the exterior, which is concretely represented by pilasters and a vault. The extent of the opening to the air is various. Some are widely open in the back, while in others we can observe thin strips of landscape in laterals. In any case, as the architectures in background are open in both sides, an airy atmosphere where winds are passing through could be experienced by spectators. Although the invention of this kind of setting is generally ascribed

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<sup>11</sup> Catarina Schmidt, *La "sacra conversazione" nella pittura veneta, La pittura nel Veneto: il quattrocento*, 2, ed. Maura Lucco, Milano, 1990, pp. 707-708.

to Donatello's altarpiece in the high altar of the church of Sant'Antonio in Padova<sup>12</sup>, it is inferred that Giovanni Bellini adapted it to his creations and thus established the venetian style with his S. Catherine of Siena altarpiece (fig. 3)<sup>13</sup>. This composition began to be introduced from the 1470's, and adorned with a great variety of settings, it widely prevailed up to the middle of the 1500's.

According to above examinations, it could be said that from the latter half of the 1400's to the first half of the 1500's, the most dominant taste in Venice was definitely for the airy atmosphere full of light and clear sky. On the other hand, turning our attention to the background of the S. Giobbe altarpiece, it employed the close-architectural setting which can't be considered to have been a prevalent type of that period. Among the artifacts in our analysis, four of them adopted this close architecture. However, one of them, called *Presentation in the Temple* by Carpaccio, which used to be in the same church of S. Giobbe, depicts a narrative theme intrinsically performed indoors. The other two works, whose dimensions are both about 1.8 x 2.5m, are much smaller than the S. Giobbe altarpiece over 5m in height and their architectures are incomparably modest than that of the S. Giobbe. Furthermore, the S. Giobbe altarpiece is dominated by warm brown and golden colors, which makes it clearly distinct from other open-architectural altarpieces that use primarily celestial, lucid colors.

From the analysis undertaken in this chapter, the peculiar characteristics of the S. Giobbe altarpiece have been elucidated.

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<sup>12</sup> Martha Levine Dunkelman, *Donatello's Influence on Italian Renaissance Painting*, PHD dissertation, New York University, 1986, pp.39-42.

<sup>13</sup> There is a long history of discussions concerning the first inventor of the sacra conversazione in paintings. Giovanni's S. Catherine altarpiece is considered a very early example of this type in Venice as well as the S. Cassiano altarpiece by Antonello da Messina. I infer that the S. Catherine was prior to Antonello's altarpiece because of its rather unsophisticated composition. See Roberto Longhi, Piero dei Franceschi e lo sviluppo della Pittura Veneziana, *L'Arte*, 1914, Johannes Wilde, Die "Pala di San Cassiano" von Antonello da Messina, *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, III, 1929, Glis Robertson, The Architectural Settings of Antonello da Messina's San Cassiano Altarpiece, *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss*, ed. I.Lavin and J. Plummer, New York, 1977, Rona Goffen, *op. cit.*, Peter, Humfrey *op. cit.*, etc.

## V. Conclusion

Based on the above considerations, there are three remarks to be made for each point along which I conducted my examinations.

(1) In the church of S. Giobbe, the altarpiece in question is the most excellent one both in scale and in splendiddness. It was certainly intended to bear the role of a chapel equal in function and authority to the opposite Martini chapel and the main chapel.

(2) Among the altarpieces by Giovanni Bellini which render the full-length *sacra conversazione*, the S. Giobbe altarpiece is the unique one introducing a close-architecture setting and the largest one in scale.

(3) Among the backgrounds of venetian altarpieces from 1450 to 1530, the close-architecture setting applied to the S. Giobbe altarpiece occupied but a few percentages, while the leading types were the open-architecture setting and the landscape background in an airy atmosphere.

Reflecting on these observations, could it really be said that the S. Giobbe altarpiece actually embodies the historical perception toward it expressed in Pignatti's words, that is "the prototype which here after should serve an example for many decades"? Rather, I traced in it the distinctive intention of its creator to attempt to reach the other extreme of the prevailing style where clear, luminous environment is represented. It results partly from the fact that this altarpiece was meant to function as a chapel. When a painting is intended to match the grandness of a real architecture, it is necessary to render a superb architectural background with fully three-dimensional illusion. The setting of the S. Giobbe, almost all the upper half of which is occupied by architectural elements, was suitable for this purpose.

Another reason of its remarkable prestige probably stemmed from the past of the church. Studying the context of the S. Giobbe altarpiece's dedication,

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<sup>14</sup> Rona Goffen, Bellini, S. Giobbe and Altar Egos, *Artibus et Historiae*, 14 (VII), 1986, pp. 62-66.

Rona Goffen presented an answer to this question<sup>14</sup>. The title saint of the S. Giobbe church used to be S. Job himself according to the name of the church. However, at the request of the influential patron, Cristoforo Moro, the title of the main chapel was changed from S. Job to S. Bernardino of Siena, and still more, on the occasion of the consecration in 1493, the church itself was dedicated to Job and Bernardino. Then the status of S. Job reduced to a co-title saint in addition to the deprivation of his honor at the high altar. Goffen suggested that the Scuola di S. Giobbe, the confraternity of Job (whose members venerated S. Job as their patron saint and gave their services to this church), commissioned the S. Giobbe altarpiece to restore Job's honor deprived in the main chapel. According to her, this work was intended to be the second chancel. This discourse could explain the extraordinary majesty and excellent artistry of the S. Giobbe altarpiece. Although a definitive evidence to identify the commissioner as this Scuola has not been found yet, and although there is still room for investigation whether a confraternity not so large could order such a gorgeous altarpiece as the S. Giobbe, it is an attractive hypothesis to explain the special status of this work.

Consequently, the above observations ascertain that the S. Giobbe altarpiece can't be considered as the "prototype" of venetian altarpieces in the second half of the fifteenth century and the first half of the next century viewed in the light of its scale as well as in that of its unusual setting of close-architecture.

Now the impression of an art historian has been demonstrated quantitatively. Though the importance of the connoisseur eye or close examination of documents will never be diminished, the unconventional way of analysis using statistical method should be another potent tool for art historical study.