

# The School of Charity

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## History

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The School of Charity was one of the most important and ancient lay brotherhoods in Padua, and administered the bequests intended for the relief of the sick and poor, to equip young girls and for other good works. Remembered since the fifteenth century, it was however older, as can be deduced from the fact that its sister city in Venice was remembered as early as the thirteenth century.

In 1419 we find the School temporarily housed in the immediate vicinity of the most important hospital in Padua, that of S. Francesco Grande, while the construction works of the hospital itself, the church and the convent of the Osservanza were in full swing, works financed by the very rich Baldo spouses Bonafari from Piombino and Sibilla de Cetto, from Padua, who lived in the houses opposite, where the School building later arose.

Baldo Bonafari was advisor to Francesco Novello da Carrara and his "vicar" of assets in the territories of Anguillara and Oriago. He had married the pious Sibilla, already widow of the jurist Bonaccorso Naseri da Montagnana, who died in prison in Padua for the support given to Gian Galeazzo Visconti, enemy of the Carraresi.

It must be assumed that, upon Sibilla's death, which occurred in 1421, a few years after the death of her husband, the houses they owned passed to the Scuola, through purchase or transfer by the executors.

About a century and a half later, this place must have been so inadequate for the growing needs that radical restoration work was deemed necessary. Once the new windows were opened, which flooded it with light, a new splendid coffered ceiling was built, the walls were decorated with a new cycle of frescoes illustrating the events of the Virgin, the environment must have appeared truly resurrected. The walls had previously been frescoed by an unknown painter who had painted fifteen panels, which were restored in 1530 by Girolamo Dal Santo. Traces of the old decoration are still visible in the band below the portraits of the Bonafari spouses.

Thanks to the enormous patrimony left by Baldo and Sibilla, the works begun on 25 October 1416 continued, focusing primarily on the hospital. The whole complex was completed at the beginning of the 16th century. Also in the same century, the "Sala della Carità" was restored and took on its current appearance. In the following centuries, until the 1970s, the Hall of Charity was a very important cultural center as the seat of the Chair of Franciscan Culture.

## The frescoes of the Hall of Charity

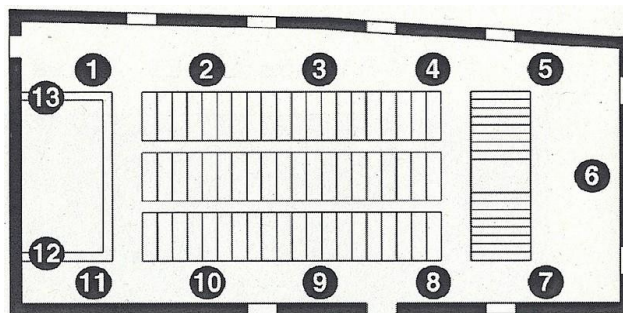
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In the years 2005-2008 the Hall of Charity, with a masterful restoration, was brought to its full functionality and beauty. Inside the room you can see a splendid coffered ceiling. The walls, however, are frescoed with twelve panels that tell as many episodes of the life of the Virgin, a work composed by Dario Varotari in 1579, which begin with the Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple and end with the Assumption of Mary.

A thirteenth fresco, painted on the south wall, contains the portraits of Baldo Bonafari and Sibilla de Cetto.

## Arrangement and description of the frescoes

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## The five frescoes on the east wall

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## Joachim's expulsion from the temple

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The scene is dominated by the elongated and severe figure of the high priest Reuben who, next to the red cylindrical altar, on which the fire of sacrifice burns from an elegant brazier, sweeps away the barren Joachim and his offering with a sweeping gesture.

The quality of the colors reveals the Veronese origins of Varotari's pictorial culture, with a choice of intense and strong colours, which adapt to the Padua tradition of Stefano Dall'Arzere.

From a formal point of view, elements of Venetian origin, such as Titian and Tintoretto, can also be found.



### **Announcement by the angel to Joachim**

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It is the most complex scene of the cycle.

Joachim is depicted in the act of sacrificing and at the same time receiving the angel's message.

Varotari's ability to paint animals and his considerable landscape skills are attested by the panel.

The brick obelisk is curious, to the left of the tree, and the architectural constructions in the background behind the seated shepherd are interesting.

A stylistic fact: the way in which the animals, the shepherd, the landscape and the figures of Joachim and the angel are treated is a curious inconsistency.



### **Joachim's meeting with Anna at the golden door**

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Here Varotari demonstrates his qualities as a landscape painter and animal designer, as well as a tasty designer of architectural motifs. The figure of Joachim is rather Titian-like, the woman on the far right, who personifies charity, recalls Veronese.



### **Nativity of the Virgin**

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Here Varotari shows his ability as a composer in an interior, distributing figures and objects with balance. Note the beautiful stone frame of the door open at the back, the high window with beautiful glass and the cradle with large spiral supports, among which the head of a cat peeks out suspiciously.



### **Presentation of Mary in the temple**

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The composition presents a diagonally ascending approach. The protagonist is the small figure of the young Virgin in a pathetic pose and with an elegant manneristic flourish of her pink cape. Reminiscences of Tiziano and Tintoretto are also mixed here with other elements of the culture of the time.

### **The fresco on the south wall**

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## Portraits of Baldo Bonafari and Sibilla de Cetto

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The fresco on the south wall contains the full-figure portraits of Baldo Bonafari and Sibilla de Cetto, kneeling in an open place; in the background you can see the Hospital, the Church and the Convent of San Francesco.

## The five frescoes on the west wall

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## Presentation of the flowering rod

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Here too, Varotari demonstrates considerable skill in composing many figures placed in a closed place. On a high podium of red marble the priest Zechariah links the two groups on the right and left. In the one on the left the semi-nude figure in the shadow is notable. It should be noted, behind the figure of Joseph, in the background the ruins of an ancient Roman building treated with a very fine touch.



## Marriage of the Virgin

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Well composed panel but with schematic and mannered figures (in the foreground) alongside others executed with commitment (Giuseppe, Maria and the group of women on the right). We find the usual use of heavy tones within the limits of a rigid modelling, from which the figure of the woman on the far right stands out, represented with notable fluency and freedom from drawing and plastic schemes.



## Annunciation

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One of the less happy panels, even if the alteration of certain shades has partly contributed to making it so. However, some of the furnishings are interesting: the kneeler, the straw chair, the hourglass, above the lectern next to the book and the woven wicker basket.



## Visitation

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The highlighted area with the beautiful white temple aligned on the same diagonal line as the colonnade, the hilly landscape (very damaged), the palace with the portico and the figure of Joseph with the donkey constitute the happiest part of the painting; The figure of Joseph treated with delicacy with the tip of the brush does not even seem to be by the same painter who painted the heavy figures with the usual paper-folded cloths found on the portico.



## Death of Saint Joseph

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Perhaps one of the best paintings of the series: the artist creates a work in which the drama of the moment is obtained precisely by using those intense, heavy, here even dark colours, which elsewhere were inadequate for expressive purposes. The angel hovering high in the middle of the dark room radiates its ghostly light, which strikes the surrounding objects with nocturnal effects similar to those used by Tintoretto.

## The two frescoes on the north wall

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## **Dormition of the Virgin**

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The scene is deliberately devoid of drama, the artist undoubtedly wanted to convey a very different spirit: one of solemn and melancholic peace. The marble frames of the door and window are noteworthy, with a cold beauty due to the effectiveness with which the sense of the hard worked material is conveyed.



## **Assumption**

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The Virgin reappears according to the elongated form present in the relief in front of which the Bonafari spouses pray. The type of the Madonna is neither Titian, nor Veronese, nor Tintoretti; this time too, it seems rather drawn from Tuscan-Emilian painting.

## **The altarpiece of the Virgin and Child**

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On the north wall, among the frescoes of the Dormition and the Assumption, there is a copy of the Altarpiece of the Virgin with Child, by an unknown author, in International Gothic style.



