

The Narrowing of Giorgione's Masterpiece (To the Problem of the Hermitage Judith's Original Measurements)

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The *Judith* in the museum of Hermitage is one of the few universally acknowledged works by Giorgioneⁱ, perhaps the last of them to achieve this standing, for the first time in the 18th century and then definitely, more than a hundred years ago. Such works are rare. Giorgione's authorship of even the *Castelfranco Madonna* has been (recently) contestedⁱⁱ, not to mention a much more complex case of Dresden *Venus*ⁱⁱⁱ. The most rigorous approach to the size of Giorgione's oeuvre leaves the artist with only the *Three Philosophers* in Vienna and the *Tempest* in Venice, along with the *Judith* (in spite of some earlier opinions, which have been rejected long ago). None of these attributions is based upon a documentary evidence, be that a verified signature or any archival source, for the only work documented in artist's lifetime is the one executed for Fondaco dei tedeschi^{iv}, a fresco cycle long lost to a salty air of Serenissima, its pitiful remains (on show at Franchetti gallery) offering no chance to draw stylistic conclusions for the identification of the other works in question. Yet it is precisely the stylistic analysis that all accepted attributions to Giorgione rely upon, adding to the scarce historic testimonies of not always a trustworthy nature.

The earliest relations concerning the Hermitage painting go back to the 17th century^v; for a long period of time it had been attributed to Raphael though an inexcusable misconception! As Raphael's it was acquired for Catherine the Great from Pierre Crozat's collection^{vi} and filed under this name in the catalogues for almost a century^{vii}, even if there were doubts as to the authorship. The earliest one has been published already in the *Recueil* of the most notable paintings in the French collections, as an opinion "of some experts"^{viii}, which may be a modest expression of commentator's Pierre-Jean Mariette own concern. In fact he was the first to mention Giorgione's name in this context, a remarkable foresight one may say obviously mistaking today's conception of the Venetian genius and his circle for what even the most advanced connoisseur of him could have known three centuries ago! It is true that this painter was never forgotten, moreover by then there had already been some kind of Giorgione's craze^{ix}, among the collectors at least causing an intensive counterfeit production yet all that Mariette could really rely upon was Giorgio Vasari's biography^x since Carlo Ridolfi's writings^{xi} are considered to be hardly better than those contemporary counterfeits. Anyway Giorgione's paintings were much rarer than those of godly Urbinate, so that an art lover would have been happy to discover another creation of his. Similarly could be interpreted German art historian Gustav Friedrich Waagen's intention to reestablish an artistic personality of the "undeservedly forgotten" contemporary of Giorgione, Moretto da Brescia. Having visited St. Petersburg in the 1870s, Waagen dedicated a couple of passages in his description of Russian art collections to this man^{xii}, whose several works still can be found in the Hermitage. He believed to have made a correct reattribution^{xiii} of the painting in question to this obscure master, and for a while his views were accepted^{xiv}. Then another reattribution occurred, first made public by Austrian researcher and artist Daniel Penther^{xv}, who must have followed somewhat earlier statements made by Russian art collector Karl von Liphart^{xvi} and independently by famous connoisseur Giovanni Morelli^{xvii}, who had never visited Russia though and judged by a reproduction^{xviii}, namely the 18th century fine engraving done by Toinette Larcher and included in the above-mentioned *Recueil*. (These researchers must have known Mariette's conjecture as well.) Even if this opinion was contested at first by other experts some of them proposed different names^{xix}, some preferred to think of this work as a copy^{xx} after Giorgione's invention with the time it became accepted by all the art historians, who dealt with Venetian

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painter, starting with two authors of the early monographs dedicated to him, Lionello Venturi^{xxi} and Ludwig Justi^{xxii}, who upon examination of the original painting arrived at the unconditional acceptance of this attribution albeit with the opposed views as to the painting's preservation. It should not be forgotten that the *Judith's* (relatively) remote location always impeded such de visu explorations, especially during the subsequent Soviet period.

In the year 1935 however an ambitious show of Italian art taking place in Paris^{xxiii}, there was the only chance for the majority of art lovers to see the work, which since never left the confines of this country^{xxiv}. By then however the reigning consensus as to its authorship could hardly be influenced by any kind of the first-hand experience. The same concerns the present day visits of the western scholars to the Hermitage; yet one has to consider some serious changes to the painting's appearance that occurred in the interim. In the late 1960's (1968-1971) a thorough restoration was undertaken that altered conspicuously the *Judith's* most essential features^{xxv}. As there are no reasons to question the Hermitage restorers' skills, brilliantly demonstrated on so many occasions, one has to reconsider certain statements made by the creators of the classical monographs, f. i. those concerning "golden tone" and "typically Venetian colouring", which so often featured in their descriptions^{xxvi}. To put it in the words of the Hermitage researcher, who published the official report on the restoration^{xxvii}, T.D. Fomichova: "The removal of the yellow varnish completely changed the whole colour scheme of the picture. Instead of that warm, golden glow to which we were all accustomed, colours became cooler, colour contrasts stronger."^{xxviii} As I may only compare the present state of *Judith* to the pre-restoration photographs it is not possible to make here any definite statements, yet it seems that if similar changes took place *before* Penther's publication, the history of attribution of this work could become incomparably more entangled, which does not exclude a possibility of arrival at the same final point albeit by longer detours.

It is however not Giorgione's authorship that I am going to reconsider here, but a peculiar detail of the painting's history, which was brought to everyone's attention on the occasion of its restoration by the above-mentioned Soviet author^{xxix}. Surely not unknown before, yet thoroughly investigated for the first time was the fact of picture size change(s), easily visible by a comparison of its present state to the above-mentioned Larcher's engraving. It was *broader* back then! the difference amounting to 17 cm^{xxx}, equal parts being cut off on both sides of it. Unfortunately, it has not been established at what time let alone under what circumstances this narrowing took place. Judging by catalogues the date should be sought for between 1838 and 1863; in fact a document was found, a report by the Hermitage first curator, Franz Labensky^{xxxi}, who in the beginning of the 19th century opted for the liberation of what was then firmly believed to be Raphael's painting from the unnecessary additions (as painted by someone else^{xxxii}); the exact motives of his proposal remaining obscure, he must have had some well-grounded reasons though... Now that the painting has been transferred from wood to canvas in 1893, there is no chance to examine its original ground; the most apparent reason of Labensky being that the later additions could be visible on the reverse of the painting, where there must have been the added pieces of wood. The restorer in charge of the transfer did not report them, yet it is known thanks to Mariette^{xxxiii} that there were traces of the painting's initial function as probably the shutter of a wardrobe the latch removed and perhaps replaced with a new piece of wood.

This interesting fact however does not corroborate Fomichova's explanation, as this author refers to it in support of her opinion that the additions were correctly removed in the 19th century. To the contrary, if there was some kind of a latch it must have been on the right (or the left) *edge* of the original shutter's board. If the painting was enlarged on either side this must have happened after the latch had been removed, that is at the moment, when the work of the great Renaissance master (be that Raphael or Giorgione) was given a more respectful position than that of a wardrobe's front piece; it would be as perfectly visible by a position of the former latch that such an enlargement did happen and how considerable it was. Mariette however keeps silence on this point.

If the latch's trace was still on the *edge* again after the transfer it can be no longer determined there would be no better proof of the paintings' original size. Yet it is not impossible that Mariette simply mistook any defect of the wood for a latch's trace. Now that Fomichova published a Russian version of this research results before the restoration^{xxxiv}, it is possible that from the very start hers was an opinion that the painting that everyone may enjoy in the Hermitage today was exactly the same that Giorgione once made. There were opposite voices lamenting the loss by the painting of its initial size. The researcher however believed to have found a sufficient proof in certain historic reproductions of the *Judith*, two of which were made before Larcher's engraving. These are a drawing by Jan de Bischof and an engraving by the enigmatic monogramist L. Sa., published by Abraham Blooteling^{xxxv}.

What period they belong to is not known, judging from van Bischoop's and Blooteling's lifetimes it must have happened in the middle of the 17th century. Nowadays that it is easy to graphically combine the outlines of these versions of the same painting that of Larcher corresponding with the recorded measurements of the *Judith* prior to narrowing Fomichova's persuasion that both of them show painting's present day size should be rather put in question.

As demonstrated in Fig. 1, the outlines of the early copies do not coincide either with each other or with what is now on display in the museum. The reasons are easy to find: the 17th century standards of reproducing artworks surely had nothing to do with that sort of precision, which has been achieved afterwards thanks to the invention of the photography. Their purpose was to reproduce more or less exactly the main figure(s), which relation to the background and the overall composition obviously not an insignificant issue in the history of the classical art! were as difficult to repeat as any other subtle features of the originals like traces of the brushstrokes etc. Therefore, margins could be left out as something less important than the centerpiece and besides it could be done to emphasize the latter the figure of the heroine in this case being made more prominent by these omissions. Otherwise one would have to explain for what reason L. Sa.'s engraving left out a good deal of the upper part of the *Judith*, which if judging by this replica only should have been removed as well. It is an interesting coincidence that about the same time these two Netherlanders made copies^{xxxvi} of (then considered Giorgione's) *Concert champêtre* (in Louvre), which again significantly differ both from one another and from the original. Such copies should be considered as a kind of free retelling of some story all the main features are there, yet the whole is not the same.

The third reproduction (or rather a sketch) used by Fomichova belongs to the late 18th century being made on the margins of the catalogue of Crozat's pictures by painter Gabriel de Saint-Aubin. It looks quite narrow and was thus used as an additional proof^{xxxvii} by supposing that this artist somehow knew (or sensed) the painting was once enlarged (more than half a century before Mariette did not know nor noticed it!)... therefore, he wanted to sketch it as it should be. The only problem is that even this sketch with somewhat vague outer margins when placed against the central figure of Larcher's engraving betrays the sizes that in no way correspond to the picture's present state! It is a kind of the optical illusion that makes this reproduction seem to be as narrow as the painting in the Hermitage.

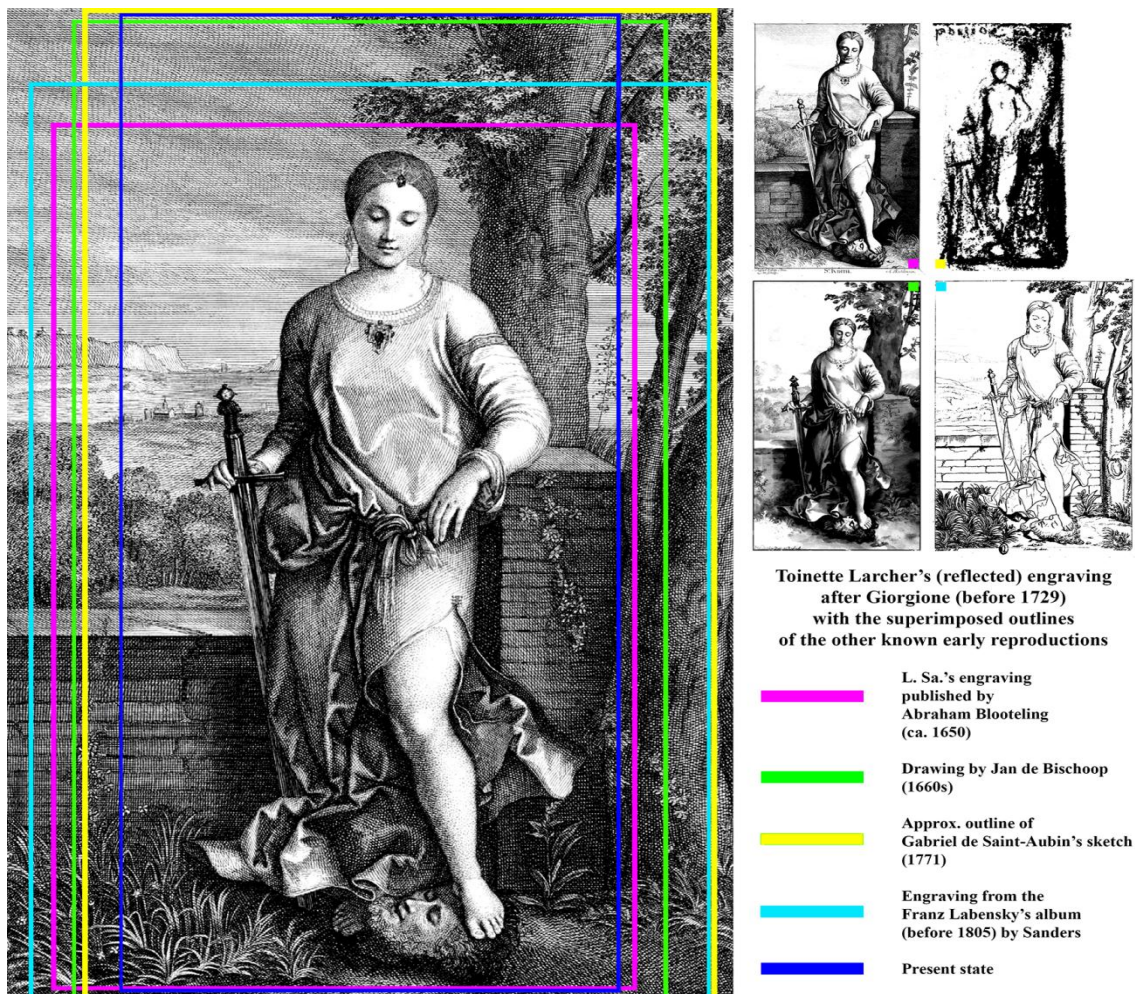
Another question should be raised: if it was typical for that (or any) period that the paintings were enlarged^{xxxviii} rather than clipped to fit somewhere as Fomicheva explained the reasons for the *Judith*'s widening while in Crozat's possession. Such enlargement naturally implied commissioning someone to make additions to "Raphael" if only in seemingly insignificant parts. Cutting off of such parts to make a painting fit was no less impertinent toward the great artist's creation, yet at least less troublesome (and costly). Labensky could see the stylistic differences between the original central part and those supposed later additions that cannot be found in all these reproductions, even in the one as carefully made as that by Larcher. Another reason to take side as to the necessity of the narrowing of the picture could be the consideration of the *typical sizes* of Giorgione's paintings.

Alack, the complex story of even the most reliable entries of his catalogue raisonné makes such conclusions almost impossible. So far the only objection of this kind to Fomichova's views has been formulated by the author of a highly unconventional monograph dedicated to the artist, Georg Tschmelitsch. It is possible that he had been opposed to this narrowing from the outset; unable however to revise Fomichova's results he had to invent all too artificial an explanation of the changes in painting's measurements. According to this researcher^{xxxix} the *Judith* was originally as wide as its reproduction by Larcher, then "the inability to understand Giorgione's manner" in time of the mannerism led someone to its narrowing to the sizes recorded by the early reproductions. Then the correct understanding having come back, someone felt urge to restore these new old parts. Afterwards they were removed... these changes testifying according to Tschmelitsch a prevailing ability vs. inability to understand the genius of Giorgione at different periods of art history. His basic opinion is that such a narrow format was untypical for the High Renaissance, maybe even absolutely impossible then. This would be quite a convincing argument if Tschmelitsch dilated more upon this issue drawing comparisons with many other works of the period.

One that comes to my mind refers to a work not mentioned in a rather voluminous monograph of the Austrian art historian; it is not held to be by Giorgione's hand by the majority of the experts yet is too exceptional to be so easily put aside. The fresco painting^{xl} on the western wall of the cathedral in Montagnana a fortified town of Venetian republic, Giorgione's sojourn there being a proven fact^{xli} shows similar representation of the biblical heroine contemplating her did, while its superficial similarity to the Hermitage painting only emphasizes a profound difference.

What is of interest from the viewpoint of the present article is that Judith is represented against a vast landscape backdrop, two times broader than that in the Larcher's engraving. Can it prove anything? I do not think so. Firstly Giorgione's authorship in this case is yet to be accepted by the researchers^{xlii}, secondly wall paintings have their own compositional logic which is hard to compare with the supposed wardrobe shutter, and thirdly even if this fresco is by Giorgione its width does not exclude a possibility that for his other (earlier?) treatment of the same story he could chose a completely different format.

Stylistic considerations being always somewhat vague, it seems that the discovery of a new archive document, explaining Labensky's proposal, might be instrumental in solving this problem of the Hermitage painting. But so as to undertake a search for it one has to agree that the proofs given by Fomichova fail to convince. So far it remains obscure why one person in the beginning of the 19th century proposed and another (unknown) ca. half a century later realized this narrowing. For in retrospect given the fact that all the researchers of Giorgione dealt with this size of the painting it is really hard to imagine what place in artist's œuvre it would take or how it would influence a general concept of his life and work had it retained the measurements it had at the time of painting's arrival at the museum. A similar question has been previously asked as to a possibility of the earlier removal of the yellow varnish mistaken for a golden tone, but there are so many unanswered questions that concern this artist's elusive personality that the art historians must have long become desperate as to any chance of getting a more precise concept of who this Giorgione of Castelfranco was, what kind of manner he had, and which works may be safely attributed to him.



ⁱ Fomichova T. D. *Venetian Painting: 14 to 18 Centuries*. Moscow; Firenze, 1996. #127 (State Hermitage #95). P. 173-175; Anderson J. *Giorgione: the Painter of "Poetic Brevity"*. Paris; N. Y., 1997. P. 292.

ⁱⁱ Hope Ch. *Tempest over Titian* // *New York Review of Books*. 10 June 1993. P. 22-26. Cf. Anderson J. *Giorgione*. P. 293.

- ⁱⁱⁱ*Hourticq L.* Le problème de Giorgione: Salégende. Son œuvre. Ses élèves. Paris, 1930. P. 71 passim.; *Ballarin A.* Giorgione: Per un nuovo catalogo e una nuova cronologia // Giorgione e la cultura veneta tra '400 e '500: Mito, allegoria, analisi iconologica. (Attidelconvegno, Roma – novembre 1978.) Roma, 1981. P. 30. Cf. *Anderson J.* Giorgione. P. 307.
- ^{iv}*Anderson J.* Giorgione. P. 364-365.
- ^v*Fomicieva (Sic) T.* The History of Giorgione's "Judith" and Its Restoration // *The Burlington Magazine*. P. 417-421.
- ^{vi}*Lauber R.* La vendita sconvolse il mondo: Da Parigi al Ermitage i capolavori veneti di Crozat // *Venezialtrove*. Venezia, 2008.
- ^{vii}*Catalogue des tableaux qui se trouvent dans les galeries et dans les cabinets du Palais Impérial de Saint Petersburg*. St. Petersburg, 1774. P. 70 (#811); *Лабенский Ф. II.* Эрмитажная галерея, гравированная штрихами с лучших картин оную составляющих... Т. 1. Спб., 1805. С. 97-98; *Hand F.* Kunst und Alterthum in St. Petersburg, Bd. 1. Weimar, 1827. S. 108; *Livret de la galerie impériale de l'Ermitage de Saint-Petersbourg*. St. Pétersbourg, 1838. P. 71. #35.
- ^{viii}*Recueil d'estampes d'après les plus beaux tableaux et les plus beaux dessins qui sont en France dans le Cabinet du Roy, dans celui de Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans et dans d'autres Cabinets*. Paris, 1729. T. 1. P. 13.
- ^{ix}*Mason St.* Man findet von diesem Meister ja nur wenige Dinge. (Giorgione und der venezianische Sammelkreis.) // Giorgione: Mythos und Enigma. Wien; Milano, 2004. S. 33-39.
- ^x*Vasari G.* La Terza et ultima parte delle Vite degli architettori, pittori et scultori. Firenze, 1550. P. 577-581.
- ^{xi}*Ridolfi C.* Le Maraviglie dell'arte, ovvero Le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello Stato... Venetia, 1648.
- ^{xii}*Waagen G. F.* Die Gemäldesammlung in der Kaiserlichen Eremitage zu St. Petersburg nebst Bemerkungen über andere dortige Kunstsammlungen. München, 1864. S. 66. (#112).
- ^{xiii}In fact for the first time this proposal was made (very cautiously) by Johann David Passavant in his book on Raphael, where he decisively rejected the traditional attribution of this painting to his hero. Cf. *Passavant J. D.* Rafael von Urbino und sein Vater Giovanni Santi. Th. 2. Leipzig, 1839. S. 387. # 252b.
- ^{xiv}Cf. *Ermitage impérial*. (Catalogue de la galerie des tableaux.) St. Pétersbourg, 1863. P. 28. #112; *Catalogue de la galerie des tableaux*. Vol. 1. Les écoles d'Italie et d'Espagne. St. Pétersbourg, 1869. P. 46. #112
- ^{xv}*Penther D.* Kritischer Besuch in der Eremitage zu St. Petersburg / Beilage der allgemeinen Kunst-Chronik. #33. Wien, 1883. S. 34.
- ^{xvi}As reported by his son Ernst. Cf. *Лунгарм Э., де.* Императорский Эрмитаж: Приобретения и перевески // *Старые годы*. 1910. №1. С. 16.
- ^{xvii}*Morelli G.* Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei: die Galerien zu München und Dresden. Leipzig, 1891. S. 286.
- ^{xviii}Cf. *Anderson J.* Giorgione. P. 292.
- ^{xix}F. i. Cariani (*Schmidt W.* Giorgione und Correggio // (Helbing's) Monatsberichte über Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft. 1903. (Jg. 3.) Hf. 1. S. 3.) or Catena (by the same author: *Schmidt W.* Zur Kenntnis Giorgiones // *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*. Bd. 15 (31). 1908. S. 117.)
- ^{xx}*Gronau G.* Kritische Studien zu Giorgione // *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft*. Bd. 15 (31). 1908. S. 424; *Berenson B.* Certain Copies after Lost Originals by Giorgione // *Idem*. The Study and Criticism of Italian Art. London, 1901. P. 76-77.
- ^{xxi}*Venturi L.* Giorgione e il giorgionismo. Milano, 1913. P. 36 f.; *Idem*. Saggio sulle opere d'arte italiana a Pietroburgo // *l'Arte*. Vol. 15. 1912. P. 136.
- ^{xxii}*Justi L.* Giorgione. Berlin, 1908. Bd. 2. #9.
- ^{xxiii}*Exposition de l'art italien: de Cimabue a Tiepolo*. Paris, 1935. P. 86. #191.
- ^{xxiv}Cf. *Lauber R.* La vendita sconvolse il mondo // *Venezialtrove*. P. 125.
- ^{xxv}*Bialostocki J.* La gamba sinistra della Giuditta: Il quadro di Giorgione nella storia del tema // Giorgione e l'umanesimo veneziano. / *Civiltà Veneziana*. Saggi 27. I. Firenze, 1981. P. 196 f.
- ^{xxvi}*Phillips C.* The Picture Gallery of the Hermitage // *The North American Review*. Vol. 169. No. 515. (Oct., 1899.) P. 467; *Justi L.* Giorgione. Bd. 1. S. 114.
- ^{xxvii}*Fomicieva T.* The History of Giorgione's "Judith" and Its Restoration // *The Burlington Magazine*; *Fomiciova T.* Storia della "Giuditta" e del suo restauro // Giorgione e l'umanesimo veneziano. I. P. 257-268. Cf. *Малова А. М.* Реставрация картины Джорджоне «Юдифь» // *Художественное наследие: Хранение. Исследование. Реставрация*. 6 (36). 1980. С. 117-121.
- ^{xxviii}*Fomicieva T.* The History of Giorgione's "Judith" and Its Restoration // *The Burlington Magazine*. P. 419.

^{xxxix}Ibid. P. 417 ff.

^{xxxviii}From 85 to 68 cm.

^{xxxix}Ibid. P. 418.

^{xxxix} Today everyone is absolutely sure that the whole painting was done by *somebody else* – than Raphael – namely by Giorgione. . .

^{xxxix}Recueil d'Estampes d'après les plus beaux tableaux...Т. 1. P. 13.

^{xxxix}Фомичева Т. А. О подлинных размерах картины Джорджоне «Юдифь» // Сообщения Государственного Эрмитажа. Л., 1956. Вып. 10. С. 19-20.

^{xxxix}Fomicieva T. The History of Giorgione's "Judith" and Its Restoration // The Burlington Magazine. P. 417; *Weiner P.* Notizie di Rossia // l'Arte. Vol. 13. 1910. P. 145-146; *Лунгарм Э., де.* Императорский Эрмитаж // Старые годы. С. 14.

^{xxxix}Haskell Fr. Giorgione's Concert Champêtre and Its Admirers // Journal of the Royal Society of Arts. Vol. 119. No. 5180 (July 1971).P. 543-555.

^{xxxix}Fomicieva T. The History of Giorgione's "Judith" and Its Restoration // The Burlington Magazine. P. 417

^{xxxix}Cf. *Lauber R.* La vendita sconvolse il mondo // Veneziaaltrove. P. 120.

^{xxxix}*Tschmelitsch G.* Zorzo gen. Giorgione: der Genius und sein Bahnkreis. Wien, 1975. S. 107-108.

^{xl}*Dal Pozzolo E. M.* Giorgione a Montagnana // Critica d'arte. 6. Ser. 56. 1991. 8. P. 23-42.

^{xli} Centro Studi castelli, Castel S. Zeno di Montagnana in un disegno attribuito a Giorgione // Antichità viva. AnnoXVII. # 4-5. 1978. (OmaggioaGiorgione). P. 40-52.

^{xlii} Cf. *Anderson J.* Giorgione. P. 333.