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COMING OF AGE: JACOPO TINTORETTO IN 2018

It appears that the Venetian painter Jacopo Tintoretto (1518/19-94) has finally come of age as a respectable old master. In 2018, the quincentenary year of his birth, an ambitious series of interlinked exhibitions have been mounted in the painter's home city of Venice. An excellent display of his paintings at the Palazzo Ducale, curated by the American scholars Robert Echols and Frederick Ilchman, will transfer to the National Gallery in Washington D. C. early in 2019, albeit with a slightly different selection of works on show.¹ A further exhibition, focussed on Tintoretto's early work, deftly co-curated by Roberta Battaglia, Paola Marini and Vittoria Romani (though with further input from Echols and Ilchman) is on display at the Gallerie dell'Accademia.² Smaller supporting exhibitions at the city's Scuola Grande di San Marco and Palazzo Mocenigo do not include Tintoretto paintings, but display a useful range of material artefacts to illuminate the wider historical and cultural contexts in which the painter worked.³ The scale and ambition of this new Tintoretto fest reflects the burgeoning interest in the painter over the past few decades, which have seen the organization of major loan exhibitions in Madrid (2007), Rome (2012), Cologne and Paris (2017), and the publication of a rich array of supporting catalogues, conference collections and independent scholarly monographs.⁴

¹ 'Tintoretto 1519-1594', 7th September 2018-6th January 2019, Venice, Palazzo Ducale, Appartamento del Doge; Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art, March 10th-July 7th 2019.

² 'Il Giovane Tintoretto', 7th September 2018-6th January 2019, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia

³ 'Art, Faith and Medicine in Tintoretto's Venice', 6th September 2018-6th January 2019, Venice, Scuola Grande di San Marco; 'Tintoretto's Venice', 6th September 2018-6th January 2019, Venice, Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo.

⁴ Exhibition catalogues: M. Falomir, ed., *Tintoretto*, Madrid, 2007; V. Sgarbi ed. *Tintoretto*, Milan, 2012; R. Krischel, *Tintoretto: A Star was Born*, Cologne and Paris, 2017. Monographs include G. Cassegrain, *Tintoret*, Paris, 2010, and R. and G. Villa, *Tintoretto*, Milan, 2012. See also the conference collections: M. Falomir, ed.,

This new level of interest represents a significant departure from the past, when many remained sceptical about Tintoretto underlying artistic quality. Criticized by Giorgio Vasari in 1568 as 'working at haphazard and without design', Tintoretto was long thought to be wildly eccentric and untrustworthy and to have painted too much too quickly.⁵ Tintoretto was partially reintegrated into the history of art during the twentieth century, when his work was typically interpreted as 'Mannerist', though the application of this style label soon seemed forced, given the expressive urgency of his narrative painting and the rough *non-finito* of his technique. An extensive catalogue raisonné of the religious and mythological works was published in 1982 but was very inaccurate, including many paintings from the master's workshop or more distant followers, and misdating many others.⁶ In the following decades, Echols and Ilchman took issue with many of the attributions and dates offered in the catalogue, eventually publishing an important revision to it in the form of a new checklist of autograph works and dates.⁷

The leaner Tintoretto oeuvre they now propose is more accurate, and generates a sharper view of the high quality of the master's autograph works. An excellent selection of autograph works, based on Echols and Ilchman's newly stringent criteria for attribution, underpins the success of the new round of exhibitions. These shows are substantial enough without being overlong, and are easy to navigate. The Palazzo Ducale exhibition very usefully highlights Tintoretto's virtuosic technique, as also his unusually abbreviated process of artistic production. If Tintoretto's handling was

Jacopo Tintoretto: Actas del Congreso Internacional, Madrid, 2009, and G. Cassegrain et al, *La Giovinezza di Tintoretto*, Venice, 2017.

⁵ G. Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* [1568] Vol. 2, trans. G. de Vere, London, 1996 p. 509.

⁶ R. Pallucchini and P. Rossi, *Jacopo Tintoretto. Le opere sacre e profane*, 2 vols., Milan, 1982.

⁷ R. Echols and F. Ilchman, 'Towards a New Tintoretto Catalogue, with a Checklist of Revised Attributions and a New Chronology', in Falomir, ed., *Jacopo Tintoretto: Actas del Congreso Internacional*, pp. 91-150.

necessarily 'personal' and unique, then it also supported the almost industrial scale of his artistic output. His constant recycling of individual forms, like his reuse of canvases for different paintings, indicates the economies he operated in the workshop, reflecting a well worked-out marketing 'strategy' based on rapid production, high turnover and low price. The very briefly indicated figures in Tintoretto's drawings suggest his overriding concern to save time, rather than his theoretical engagement with the famous Renaissance principle of *disegno*. Rapidly adumbrating the outlines and musculature of the male figures or statuettes that he typically studied with just a few smudgy marks, Tintoretto did not so much make 'life drawings'; but rather brief indications of the essentials that already translated the complex world of outer appearances into his own radically abbreviated formal language **(Fig. 1)**.

The Palazzo Ducale show also helps to define Tintoretto's particular qualities as a painter of portraits and mythologies. Although he modified his *non-finito* in such works, they nonetheless share certain characteristics with his sacred paintings. Tintoretto's portraits pointedly withdraw from the display of lavish surfaces, textures and accessories more typical in Venetian Renaissance examples in favour of a new kind of formal austerity **(Fig. 2)**. This approach also serves a new interaction between viewer and subject, often supported by direct eye contact, to create an effect of intimate immediacy that is quite distinct from the kind of subtle deflections and mediations at play in Titian's portraiture. In the group portraits he often made for public buildings, Tintoretto's approach is different again with emphasis falling on the physiognomic and psychological similarities between sitters, whose collective identity is more significant than the definition of their independent personhood **(Fig. 3)**. Despite the tighter handling and higher levels of local colouration in his mythological works, Tintoretto

subjects the pagan world to the same kind of narrative energies and sudden transformations found in his sacred paintings, eschewing the more passive erotic sensuality typical in Venetian works of this type. Flesh does not quite attract or invite in the way it does in a Titian *poesia*. In Tintoretto's extraordinary *Tarquin and Lucretia*, the radical instability of the 'snapshot' view of tumbling or upended bodies and objects brilliantly captures the simultaneously physical and moral disorder attendant on Tarquin's violation (**Fig. 4**).

Little is known about Tintoretto's training or early career, despite repeated attempts to clarify matters in the specialist literature over the past seventy years.⁸ The Accademia exhibition may not yet have resolved the underlying issues raised by a topic that is familiar enough to Tintoretto buffs. By the end of the show it was no clearer who (if anyone) might have taught Tintoretto, while the question of how he managed to transform himself from an unexceptional minor painter of rather ugly and conceptually scrambled works into an outstandingly masterful and original narrative painter on a monumental scale remains unanswered. The climax of the exhibition is inevitably the *Miracle of the Slave*, the outstanding masterpiece of Tintoretto's early period, exhibited in close proximity to a fine selection of related drawings, engravings, sculptural reliefs and paintings that illuminate its artistic gestation (**Fig. 5**). Whether one considers the bronze reliefs by his friend Jacopo Sansovino, a print after Michelangelo's recent fresco of the *Conversion of St Paul* in the Vatican, or a woodcut featuring stage-set architectural perspectives from Sebastiano Serlio's recently published *Il Secondo Libro di Prospettiva*, it is not quite clear just how Tintoretto pulled off the extraordinary *Miracle of the Slave*.

⁸ See R. Pallucchini, *La giovinezza del Tintoretto*, Milan, 1950; R. Echols, 'Giovanni Galizzi and the Problem of the Young Tintoretto', *Artibus et Historiae*, 31 (1995), pp. 69-110; and more recently Cassegrain et al, *La Giovinezza di Tintoretto*.

The assemblage of supporting artistic material at the Accademia only serves to draw attention to the extraordinary originality of the new work, and to the way in which its creation immediately redefined the scope of narrative painting beyond the possible promptings of any supposed sources.

The Accademia exhibition is naturally of more specialist interest, its 'local' flavour apparently acknowledged by the fact that the accompanying catalogue is available in Italian only.⁹ Its contents are, however, more digestible than the larger book supporting the Palazzo Ducale show.¹⁰ If the Accademia publication is meticulously laid out in traditional style, including an impressive series of interpretative essays followed by a detailed chronological catalogue of the works of display, the Palazzo Ducale publication only includes a shorter checklist of the works exhibited. *Il Giovane Tintoretto* will probably serve as a better aide-memoire of the exhibition, while *Tintoretto 1519-1594* has grander aims, seeking to offer (in the words of its editors), 'a definite modern account' of Tintoretto. It is not entirely clear whether this ambition will be fulfilled given the somewhat casual combination of closely argued essays interspersed with workaday chunks of text providing chronological orientation for the more general reader. This layout militates against the development of a sustained or coherent overarching argument or thesis such as one would hope to find in a scholarly monograph. Its parts, however, might ultimately prove of greater value than the whole, given that the volume does include some outstanding new contributions to the literature, especially evident in the thematic essays by Stefania Mason (documents), Roland Krischel (working practice), Peter Humfrey (altarpieces), Michiaki Koshikawa (drawings) and Giorgio Tagliaferro (works for the Palazzo Ducale).

⁹ R. Battaglia, P. Marini, V. Romani, eds., *Il Giovane Tintoretto*, Venice, 2018.

¹⁰ R. Echols, F. Ilchman, eds., *Tintoretto 1519-1594*, Venice, 2018.

In the small but intriguing exhibition mounted at the Scuola Grande di San Marco, the very room for which the *Miracle of the Slave* was painted, much can be gleaned about the typical cultural conditions of Tintoretto's Venice, especially the often quite learned but also communal and conventional world of the city's non-noble lay confraternities or *scuole*. This modest but insightful show, supported by an excellent short catalogue, stresses the overlaps between sixteenth-century scientific anatomical and religious ideas, and the questions of faith and artistic representation these generated.¹¹ New documentary discoveries by the curators, Gabriele Marino and Cynthia Klestinec, establish the correct subject matter and original positioning of the works that Tintoretto's eldest painter-son Domenico produced to complete the St Mark cycle in the Scuola's Sala Capitolare. Jacopo Tintoretto's own paintings for this room are among his most experimental works, but are now absent due to the vicissitudes of much later history (**Fig. 6**). It would, of course, have been a great coup to have returned these missing masterpieces to their original positions in the Sala. But they were, in any case, removed twice from the room within Tintoretto's own lifetime. The *Miracle* was initially returned to him as unacceptable shortly after it was painted, while his three later contributions were sent back in 1573 with the demand that Tintoretto remove the figure of their patron, the famous doctor and one-time Guardian Grande of the Scuola, Tommaso Rangone of Ravenna. Tintoretto had included very prominent individualized portraits of Rangone in the immediate proximity of St Mark in a manner that radically departed from the studied *mediocritas* of the group portraits in earlier contributions to the cycle. The painter's ready collaboration with a narcissistically self-promoting foreigner such as Rangone must have seemed like a conspiracy of individualist outsiders

¹¹ G. Marino, C. Klestinec, eds., *Art, Faith and Medicine in Tintoretto's Venice*, Venice, 2018. See also the beautifully produced and excellently written short guide to the master's paintings in Venice published to support the major exhibitions: T. Dalla Costa, R. Echols, F. Ilchman, eds., *Tintoretto in Venice: A Guide*, Venice, 2018.

to the tradition-obsessed *fratelli* of the confraternity. But Tintoretto never did make the required erasures.

This episode suggests Tintoretto's willingness to ride roughshod over cherished local customs or artistic conventions in Venice in his search for commissions. At the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, as Vasari reported and the documents partially confirm, he secretly inserted a finished ceiling painting rather than the required sketch during a competition for the commission in 1564. Though Tintoretto went on to paint more than fifty pictures for this confraternity, it is clear enough that many within it took exception to his departures from protocol and it is also likely that some, at least, found his strange paintings difficult to understand or enjoy. At the same time, as Vasari noted, Tintoretto's low prices and quick production made his paintings available to all comers. His patronage base remained unusually broad throughout his career, departing from the pattern of social exclusivity that characterized those of Titian and Veronese. A late altarpiece showing the *Baptism of Christ* (**Fig. 7**) is undoubtedly an autograph work, painted in his most experimental and innovative manner, its watery environment reflecting the occupations of the commissioning trade scuola of the bargemen. Even these relatively lowly artisan guildsmen were respectable enough, of course. But Tintoretto gave a prominent visual role to the socially outcast in many of his religious paintings, sometimes lending them the heroic forms of well-known reclining classical or *all'antica* sculptures. His imagery sometimes appears to anticipate not just the viewpoint of charitable citizens, but also that of the poor themselves. In the great *Annunciation* that he painted near the entrance to the Sala Terrena at San Rocco, where impoverished *fratelli* regularly gathered to receive handouts, Tintoretto painted Mary and Joseph in the guise of an impoverished artisan couple living in a rough and grimy

Venetian backstreet workshop/apartment. In an emotional late altarpiece for the Scuola di San Fantin (**Fig. 8**), the Virgin swoops down to give succour to the desperate saint Jerome suffering in the wilderness. Tintoretto's must always have known that his work was destined to be shown to condemned prisoners on their way to execution.

The celebratory quincentenary shows perhaps inevitably aim to establish Tintoretto's centrality within the artistic culture of his time. It is his essential *venezianità* or 'Venetianess', rather than his difficulties with local patrons or his concern with social outcasts, that is to the fore. But the evidence does nonetheless suggest that this painter's approach to painting was deemed strange or bizarre by many of his contemporaries, and that it often stimulated distrust and dislike among the locals. Just as Tintoretto's propensity to break rules worried traditionally-minded Venetians, so too his fierce rivalry with the city's long acknowledged leader in painting, Titian, challenged their aesthetic judgement. Tintoretto's paintings were self-consciously different from Titian's, and were individualistic in their departure from visual conventions. Within a single work, Tintoretto often exacting dizzying switches between realism and fantasy, or upset expectations by promoting socially marginal accessories at the expense of the usual historical actors. Given the painter's apparent localness, it is tempting to dismiss John Ruskin's perception of Tintoretto as a Gothic spiritualist out of sympathy with the materialistic culture of the late Renaissance, or Jean-Paul Sartre's politically charged idea of him as the 'Venetian pariah' out to attack 'the patrician aesthetic of fixity and being'.¹² Yet the dialectical perception of these writers that this painter was as much *outside* his time as he was a product of it is worth retaining. To the encapsulation 'Tintoretto the Venetian' (the title of one essay in *Tintoretto 1519-1594*) can justifiably

¹²John Ruskin, *The Modern Painters*, London, 1846, Vol 2 of E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin*, London, 1903; Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Le séquestré de Venise', *Situations IV* (Paris, 1964), pp. 444-59.

be appended 'Tintoretto the individualist', or even 'Tintoretto the outsider'. If the new round of shows will undoubtedly succeed in smoothing the way for Tintoretto's absorption into the cultural mainstream of old master art appreciation, then recognition of the more un-integrated or contradictory elements of his artistic identity needs to be carefully maintained. Shorn of his more reactive and radical qualities, the establishment 'Tintoretto' now in the process of being born is always in danger of losing something of his original bite.

WORDS: 2, 644 (including footnotes)

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Fig. 3 Tintoretto, *Madonna of the Treasurers*, 1567, oil on canvas, 221 x 520.7 cm., Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia

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