Coming of age: Jacopo Tintoretto

A series of exhibitions in Venice marking the 500th anniversary of Tintoretto’s birth emphasises the painter’s ‘Venetianess’ and central place in the city’s artistic culture, but his often difficult relations with local patrons and concern with social outcasts should not be forgotten.

by TOM NICHOLS

I t appears that Jacopo Tintoretto (1518/9–94) has finally come of age as a respectable old master. In 2018, the quincentenary of his birth, an ambitious series of interlinked exhibitions has been mounted in the painter’s home city, Venice. An excellent display of his paintings and drawings at the Palazzo Ducale, curated by the American scholars Robert Echols and Frederick Ilchman, will transfer to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, early in 2019, albeit with a slightly different selection of works. A further exhibition, focused on Tintoretto’s early work, deftly co-curated by Roberta Battaglia, Paola Marini and Vittoria Romani (with input from Echols and Ilchman) is at the Gallerie dell’Accademia. Smaller supporting exhibitions at the Scuola Grande di S. Marco and Palazzo Mocenigo do not include paintings by Tintoretto but display a useful range of artefacts to illuminate the wider historical and cultural contexts in which he worked. The scale and ambition of this Tintoretto fest reflects the burgeoning interest in the painter over the past few decades, during which time several major loan exhibitions have been organised: in Madrid (2007), Rome (2012), and Cologne and Paris (both 2017), alongside the publication of a rich array of catalogues, conference collections and scholarly monographs.

This level of interest represents a significant departure from past scholarship, much of which has been sceptical about Tintoretto’s artistic quality. Criticised by Giorgio Vasari in 1658 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. He was partially reintegrated into the history of art during the twentieth century, when his work was broadly interpreted as ‘Mannerist’, although the application of this label was injudicious, given the expressive urgency of his narrative painting and the rough non-finito of his technique. An extensive catalogue raisonné of his religious and mythological works, published in 1982 was far from conclusive, as it included many paintings from the master’s workshop or by more distant followers and misdated several others. Echols and Ilchman took issue with many of the attributions and dates offered in the catalogue and in 2009 published an important revision in the form of a checklist of autograph works and dates.

The Tintoretto œuvre they propose is leaner and more accurate, thereby throwing the master’s high artistic quality into sharp focus. An excellent selection of autograph works – based on Echols and Ilchman’s stringent criteria for attribution – underpins the success of the new round of exhibitions. These shows are substantial without being overlong and are easy to navigate. The Palazzo Ducale exhibition usefully highlights Tintoretto’s virtuosic technique and his unusually abbreviated process of artistic production. Tintoretto’s handling was necessarily ‘personal’ and unique, but it also supported the almost industrial scale of his artistic output. His constant recycling of individual forms and reuse of artefacts to illuminate the wider historical and cultural contexts in which he worked: the scale and ambition of this Tintoretto fest reflects the burgeoning interest in the painter over the past few decades, during which time several major loan exhibitions have been organised: in Madrid (2007), Rome (2012), and Cologne and Paris (both 2017), alongside the publication of a rich array of catalogues, conference collections and scholarly monographs. This level of interest represents a significant departure from past scholarship, much of which has been sceptical about Tintoretto’s artistic quality. Criticised by Giorgio Vasari in 1658 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. He was partially reintegrated into the history of art during the twentieth century, when his work was broadly interpreted as ‘Mannerist’, although the application of this label was injudicious, given the expressive urgency of his narrative painting and the rough non-finito of his technique. An extensive catalogue raisonné of his religious and mythological works, published in 1982 was far from conclusive, as it included many paintings from the master’s workshop or by more distant followers and misdated several others. Echols and Ilchman took issue with many of the attributions and dates offered in the catalogue and in 2009 published an important revision in the form of a checklist of autograph works and dates.

The Tintoretto œuvre they propose is leaner and more accurate, thereby throwing the master’s high artistic quality into sharp focus. An excellent selection of autograph works – based on Echols and Ilchman’s stringent criteria for attribution – underpins the success of the new round of exhibitions. These shows are substantial without being overlong and are easy to navigate. The Palazzo Ducale exhibition usefully highlights Tintoretto’s virtuosic technique and his unusually abbreviated process of artistic production. Tintoretto’s handling was necessarily ‘personal’ and unique, but it also supported the almost industrial scale of his artistic output. His constant recycling of individual forms and reuse of canvases for different paintings indicate the economies he operated in the workshop, reflecting a well-worked-out marketing ‘strategy’ based on the workshop, reflecting a well-worked-out marketing ‘strategy’ based on the workshop, reflecting a well-worked-out marketing ‘strategy’ based on the workshop, reflecting a well-worked-out marketing ‘strategy’...
Coming of age: Jacopo Tintoretto

on rapid production, high turnover and low price. The only very briefly indicated figures in Tintoretto’s drawings suggest his overarching concern to save time rather than his theoretical engagement with the 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 was also remarkably accurate, generating a sense both of the entire three-dimensional form in space and of the torsions and stresses of its movement (Fig.2).

The Palazzo Ducale show also helps to define Tintoretto’s particular qualities as a painter of portraits and mythologies. Although the artist modified his non-finito style in such works, they nonetheless share certain characteristics with his sacred paintings. Tintoretto pointedly withdraws from the depictions of lavish surfaces, textures and accessories that are typical of Venetian Renaissance portraiture in favour of formal austerity (Fig.3). He often allows his sitters to make direct eye contact with the viewer, establishing an effect of intimate immediacy that is quite distinct from the kind of subtle deflections and mediations at play in Titian’s portraiture, for example. In his many group portraits for public buildings, Tintoretto’s approach is different again; he places emphasis on the physiognomic and psychological similarities between sitters, whose collective identity is more significant than the definition of their independent personhoods (Fig.4). Despite the tighter handling and higher levels of local colouration in his mythological works, Tintoretto makes his pagan world subject 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 (Fig.5), the radical instability of the ‘snapshot’ view of tumbling or upended bodies and objects brilliantly captures the physical and moral disorder attendant on Tarquin’s sexual violation.

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 By the end of the Accademia exhibition it is no clearer who (if anyone) might have taught Tintoretto, and the question of how he managed to transform himself from an unexceptional minor painter of rather ugly and conceptually scrambled works into a masterfully original narrative painter on a monumental scale also remains unanswered. The climax of the exhibition is inevitably the Miracle of the slave (Fig.6), the outstanding painting of Tintoretto’s early period, which is exhibited in close proximity to related drawings, engravings, sculptural reliefs and paintings that illuminate its artistic gestation. Whether one considers the Miracle of the slave alongside bronze reliefs by Tintoretto’s friend Jacopo Sansovino, or a print after a recent fresco by Michelangelo, the Conversion 2.


of St Paul, or a woodcut featuring stage-set architectural perspectives from Sebastiano Serlio’s Il Secondo Libro di Perspetiva (1545), it is not quite clear just how Tintoretto pulled off this extraordinary work. The assemblage of supporting artistic materials at the Accademia only serves to draw attention to the work’s astonishing originality and to the way in which its creation immediately redefined the scope of narrative painting beyond the possible promptings of the 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. Its contents are, however, more digestible than the larger book supporting the Palazzo Ducale show. Whereas the Accademia publication is meticulously laid out in traditional style, with an impressive series of interpretative essays followed by a detailed chronological catalogue of the works on display, the Palazzo Ducale publication includes only a shorter checklist of the works exhibited. Il giovane Tintoretto will probably serve as a better aide-memoire of its exhibition, while Tintoretto 1519–1594 has grander aims, seeking to offer (in the words of its editors), ‘a definitive 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 might, however, ultimately prove of greater value than the whole, given that the volume includes some outstanding new contributions to the literature, especially 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).

In the small but intriguing exhibition mounted at the Scuola Grande di S. Marco – in the very room for which the Miracle of the slave was painted – much can be gleaned about the culture of the lay confraternities or scuole for whom Tintoretto so often worked. This modest but insightful show, supported by an excellent short catalogue, stresses the overlapping interests of the fratelli of S. Marco in science and religion and the questions of faith and artistic representation these generated. New

4. Madonna of the treasurers, by Jacopo Tintoretto. 1567. Canvas, 221 by 520.7 cm. (Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice).


9 Battaglia, Marin and Romani, op. cit. (note 2).

10 Echols and Ilichman, op. cit. (note 1).
documentary discoveries by the curators, Gabriele Matino 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 Capitolore. Jacopo Tintoretto’s paintings for this room are among his most experimental works (Fig.8), but are no longer in situ. 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, and 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 individualised portraits of Rangone in immediate proximity to St Mark in a manner that radically departed from the studied mediocritas of the group portraits in earlier contributions to the cycle. To the tradition-obsessed fratelli of the confraternity, the painter’s ready collaboration with a narcissistically self-promoting foreigner such as Rangone must have seemed like a conspiracy of individualist outsiders. But Tintoretto never did make the required erasures.

This episode suggests Tintoretto’s willingness to ride roughshod over cherished local customs or artistic conventions. At the Scuola Grande di S. Rocco, as Vasari reported and the documents partially confirm, Tintoretto secretly inserted a finished ceiling painting rather than the required sketch during a competition for the commission in 1564. Although the artist went on to paint more than fifty pictures for this confraternity, it is clear that many fratelli at S. Rocco took exception to his departures from protocol. Some, too, must have found his unorthodox religious 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 characterised those of Titian and Veronese. A late altarpiece, the Baptism of Christ (Fig.7), is undoubtedly an autograph work, painted in his most experimental and innovative manner, such as Rangone must have seemed like a conspiracy of individualist outsiders. But Tintoretto never did make the required erasures.


6. The miracle of the slave, by Jacopo Tintoretto. 1548. Canvas, 415 by 541 cm. (Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice).
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 Terena at the Scuola Grande di S. Rocco, where impoverished fratelli regularly gathered to receive handouts, Tintoretto painted Mary and Joseph in the guise of a poor artisan couple living in a rough and grimy Venetian backstreet workshop/apartment. In an emotional late altarpiece for the Scuola di S. Fantin (Fig.3), the Virgin swoops down to give succour to the desperate St Jerome suffering in the wilderness. Tintoretto must always have known that his work was destined to be shown to condemned prisoners on their way to execution.

The underlying aim of the quincentenary shows is undoubtedly to cement Tintoretto’s reputation as a great old master painter and to demonstrate his centrality to the artistic culture of sixteenth-century Venice. It is his essential venezianità or ‘Venetianess’ that is to the fore, rather than his difficulties with local patrons or his concern with social outcasts. The evidence does nonetheless suggest that this artist’s approach to painting was not easy to digest for his contemporaries, and that it often stimulated distrust and dislike, even among the locals for whom it was intended. Just as Tintoretto’s propensity to break rules worried traditionally minded Venetians, so too his fierce rivalry with the city’s acknowledged leader in painting, Titian, challenged their aesthetic judgment. Within a single work, Tintoretto often exacted dizzying switches between realism and fantasy, or upset expectations by promoting the visual and semantic role of marginal accessory figures at the expense of the usual heroic historical actors.

Given the painter’s undoubted success in Venice, it is tempting to dismiss John Ruskin’s perception of Tintoretto as a Gothic spiritualist out of sympathy with the materialistic culture of his age, or Jean-Paul Sartre’s politically charged idea of him as the ‘Venetian pariah’ out to attack ‘the patrician aesthetic of fixity and being’. Yet the dialectical perception of these writers that this painter was as much outside his own time as he was a central figure within it is worth remembering. To the encapsulation ‘Tintoretto the Venetian’ (the title of an essay in the catalogue for Tintoretto 1519–1594) can justifiably be appended ‘Tintoretto the individualist’, or even ‘Tintoretto the outsider’. The quincentenary exhibitions will undoubtedly succeed in smoothing the way for Tintoretto’s absorption into the cultural mainstream of old-master art appreciation, but a continued 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 might be in danger of losing something of his original bite.