

Tintoretto

Jacopo Comin (1518 –1594), known as **Tintoretto**, was born in Venice as the eldest of 21 children. His father, Giovanni, was a dyer, or *tintore*; hence the son got the nickname of Tintoretto, little dyer, or dyer's boy, For his phenomenal energy in painting he was termed *Il Furiioso*. His work is characterised by its muscular figures, dramatic gestures, and bold use of perspective in the Mannerist style, while maintaining colour and light typical of the Venetian School.

Tintoretto scarcely ever travelled out of Venice. His early biographers write of his intelligence and fierce ambition; "he was always thinking of ways to make himself known as the most daring painter in the world." He loved all the arts and as a youth played the lute and various instruments, some of them of his own invention, and designed theatrical costumes and properties. He was also well versed in mechanics and mechanical devices. While being a very agreeable companion, for the sake of his work he lived in a mostly retired fashion, and even when not painting was wont to remain in his working room surrounded by casts. Here he hardly admitted anyone, even intimate friends, and he kept his work methods secret, shared only with his assistants. He was full of pleasant witty sayings, whether to great personages or to others, but he himself seldom smiled.

Out of doors, his wife made him wear the robe of a Venetian citizen; if it rained she tried to make him wear an outer garment which he resisted. When he left the house, she would also wrap money up for him in a handkerchief, expecting a strict accounting on his return. Tintoretto's customary reply was that he had spent it on alms for the poor or for prisoners.



Self Portrait (1588) aged 70

In childhood Jacopo, a born painter, began daubing on the dyer's walls; his father, noticing his bent, took him to the studio of Titian to see how far he could be trained as an artist. This was supposedly towards 1533, when Titian was already (according to the ordinary accounts) fifty-six years of age. Tintoretto had only been ten days in the studio when Titian sent him home once and for all, the reason being that the great master observed some very spirited drawings, which he learned to be the production of Tintoretto; and it is inferred that he became at once jealous of so promising a scholar. This, however, is mere conjecture; and perhaps it may be fairer to suppose that the drawings exhibited so much independence of manner that Titian judged that young Jacopo, although he might become a painter, would never be properly a pupil.

He sought for no further teaching, but studied on his own account with laborious zeal; he lived poorly, collecting casts, bas-reliefs etc., and

practising by their aid. Being largely self-taught may account for the originality and idiosyncrasies of his style.

In 1548 he was commissioned to paint a cycle of four pictures of the patron saint of Venice in the Scuola di S. Marco: the ***Finding of the body of St Mark***, the ***St Mark's Body Brought to Venice***, a ***St Mark Rescuing a Saracen from Shipwreck*** and ***The Miracle of the Slave***. Like its companion piece, ***St Mark's Body Brought to Venice***, the composition of the ***Finding of the Body*** exemplifies Tintoretto's preference for dramatic effects of perspective and light. According to the art historian Thomas Nichols, "the linear logic of the emptied, boxlike perspective vistas is undermined by an irrational play of light and shade. Both paintings suggest the simultaneous existence of different levels of reality through the use of a range of pictorial techniques."

St Mark died and was buried in Alexandria. In the 9th century Venetian merchants went to find the body and bring it back to Christendom from Islamic Egypt.



The location of the discovery is a cemetery at night, depicted by Tintoretto in exaggerated perspective causing a rushing motion in the eye of the viewer from the dramatic scene in the foreground to the rectangular patch of light in the background. According to current interpretations the picture encompasses three scenes:

Scene 1. A deep perspectival space draws the eye to the back wall, bringing attention to the raised hand which is on the vanishing point. On the back wall is a brilliantly illuminated tomb with the stone removed.

Scene 2. In the foreground to the left the foreshortened body of the saint is laid out on a carpet. (The extreme foreshortening is reminiscent of Mantegna's *Dead Christ* of c.1490)

The Patron, near the centre, kneeling in a red robe gestures towards the body. He is depicted as a 16th century Venetian, not from the recorded date of the episode in the 9th century, resulting in a collapsing of time and space.



Scene 3. The figure standing on the extreme left is an apparition of St Mark, his head bathed in light, gesturing to stop the raiding of the tombs on the right, where a corpse is being lowered to the ground.

On the right two figures possessed by demons (one in light falling back into the picture, the other in shadow leaning towards us, together forming a V shape) are grabbing at a woman who is recoiling and moving out of the picture surface into our space.

The technique and style of painting is characterised by a radical use of light and colour, and dramatic contrasts of light and dark. There is an impression of the space rushing back into the depths, inducing a sensation of disorientation. St Mark is heroic and elongated. Expressive and Mannerist, a world of mystery with only the faintest delineation of form. All the balance and harmony of the High Renaissance, such as we see in Raphael, is opposed in a composition that is coming apart, that is stretching at its seams.

It has recently been shown that this picture does not, as was long assumed, show the rediscovery of the body of Saint Mark on June 25, 1094, but various miracles of healing worked by the Patron Saint of Venice: he is depicted raising a man from the dead, restoring a blind man's sight, and casting out devils. As in *The Miracle of the Slave*, which he painted for the same location, Tintoretto illustrates the power of Saint Mark by placing the invisible guidelines of his construction of the perspective in the Saint's outstretched hand. The donor Tommaso Rangone, who claimed great healing powers for himself, thereby making large sums of money, had his own figure painted kneeling humbly, but none the less wearing the magnificent golden robe of a cavalier aurato.

The extreme perspective in **Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Body of the Dead Christ*** (c1490) prefigures Tintoretto's dramatic perspectives of nearly sixty years later. The realism and tragedy of the scene are enhanced by the violent perspective, which foreshortens and dramatises the recumbent figure, stressing the anatomical details: in particular, Christ's thorax. The holes in Christ's hands and feet, as well as the faces of the two mourners, are portrayed without any concession to idealism or rhetoric. The sharply drawn drapery which covers the corpse contributes to the dramatic effect. The composition places the central focus of the image on Christ's genitals - an emphasis often found in figures of Jesus, especially as an infant, in this period, which has been related, by Leo Steinberg and others, to a theological emphasis on the Humanity of Jesus.



Mantegna presented both a harrowing study of a strongly foreshortened cadaver and an intensely poignant depiction of a biblical tragedy. This painting is one of many examples of the artist's mastery of perspective. At first glance, the painting seems to display an exact perspective. However, careful scrutiny reveals that Mantegna reduced the size of the figure's feet, which, as he must have known, would cover much of the body if properly represented.

Tintoretto's style of painting is characterized by bold brushwork and the use of long strokes to define contours and highlights. His paintings emphasize the energy of human bodies in motion, and often exploit extreme foreshortening and perspective effects to heighten the drama. Narrative content is conveyed by the gestures and dynamism of the figures rather than by facial expressions.



The painting of *St Mark's Body Brought to Venice* (1548) is notable for its striking, deep perspective background lines. The colours are darker in the near subjects, while the figures in the background are white, nearly transparent. The strange red sky is roiling with ominous clouds, riven with a thunderbolt, affording the painting a heavy, dynamic atmosphere. Tintoretto himself is portrayed within the work as the bearded man beside the camel.

Tintoretto's wonderful painting illustrates another legend. Following the martyrdom, the pagans were going to burn the body of St Mark on the bonfire we see behind him, but a thunderstorm intervened, allowing the Venetians to make off with the body. Of course, this telescoping of history makes no sense. And it's not just history that is taken liberties with. Tintoretto's Alexandria bears an uncanny resemblance to the Piazza San Marco as it was in his day, with the saint being carted off in the direction of the basilica. Only the camel suggests a more exotic location.

An alternative view might be that the men in the picture are not the Venetians, but early Alexandrian Christians taking the body off for secret burial.

The *Miracle of the Slave* (1548) depicts an episode from Jacopo Varazze's *Golden Legend*, in which a Christian slave or captive was to be tortured as a punishment for venerating the relics of one of the Apostles.

The upper part shows the miraculous intervention by the spirit of Saint Mark, descending in a flourishing swirl of movement to save the devotee by shattering the bone-breaking and blinding implements which were about to be applied.

Although the figures are Michelangelesque, placed in an architectural setting, the colours are distinctly Venetian.



The pictorial wit of Tintoretto is evident in compositions such as *Saint George, Saint Louis, and the Princess* (1553). He subverts the usual portrayal of the subject, in which Saint George slays the dragon and rescues the princess; here, the princess sits astride the dragon, holding a whip. The result is described by art critic Arthur Danto as having "the edginess of a feminist joke" as "the princess has taken matters into her own hands ... George spreads his arms in a gesture of male helplessness, as his lance lies broken on the ground ...It was obviously painted with a sophisticated Venetian audience in mind."

In 1560 Tintoretto was commissioned to decorate, the Scuola Grande de San Rocco, the headquarters of the Scuole, a religious brotherhood founded to protect the poor and needy of Venice, a work which took him

twenty four years to complete, with over forty major paintings. The *Christ Before Pilate* (1566-67), shown along with the *Coronation of Thorns* and the *Ascent to Calvary* is one of the most highly praised paintings of the series, and is based on a print by Dürer.

The dramatic staging of the scene is completely original. In a very fine and measured luminous web the figure of Christ, wrapped in a white mantle, stands out like a shining blade against the crowd and the architectural scenery. He is centred by a bright ray of light and stands tall in front of Pilate who is portrayed in red robes and



as if sunk in shadows. The old secretary at the foot of Pilate's throne leans against a stool covered with dark green cloth and with great diligent enthusiasm notes down every moment, every word spoken by the judge amid the murmurings of the pitiless crowd which obstinately clamours for the death of Christ.



The haunting painting of **Christ at the Sea of Galilee** (c1575-80) illustrates an episode from the Gospel of John. After his Resurrection, Christ appeared to his wonder-struck apostles as they were fishing in the Sea of Galilee. The drama of the action and the supernatural nature of Jesus' appearance after the end of his earthly life were well suited to Tintoretto's highly individual style. The figure of Christ appears to be almost transparent, de-corporalised by the haze of white pigment brushed over his torso with a dry brush. The surface of the water, likewise, is fragmented into waves by strong light. The whole painting seems almost to flicker restlessly, an unsettling

sensation that is accentuated by its eerie green colour. He marshals the unstable forces of nature to heighten the drama of the scene; the wind that fills the sail and bends the mast also agitates the sea and sky, and the rocky waves meet the low clouds that blow onto the land. Christ's outstretched arm draws Peter like a magnet, the charge between them creating a dynamic link between the centre of the picture and the left foreground. Tintoretto has broken all forms into multiple planes, splintering the light, and frosting the edges with a brush loaded with dry, lead-white oil paint. This use of a thick, white impasto to accent the highlights and as a ghostly shorthand, as in the grassy shore at Christ's feet, is a hallmark of Tintoretto's bravura style.

According to the myth, depicted in **The Origin of the Milky Way** (c.1575–1580) the god Jupiter wished to immortalise his infant son Hercules, whose mother was the mortal Alcmena. The infant was brought to his sleeping wife the goddess Hera (Juno in Roman mythology) by Hercules's half-sister Athena, who later played an important role as a goddess of protection. Hera nursed Heracles out of pity, but he suckled so strongly that he caused her pain, and she pushed him away. Her milk sprayed across the heavens and there formed the Milky Way, while that which fell downwards gave rise to lilies. With divine milk, Heracles acquired supernatural powers.



Tintoretto's painting has been cut down by about a third and what we see now is only the upper part of the original. In the missing lower part, known from a seventeenth-century copy, Ops, the embodiment of Earth and mother of Juno and Jupiter, reclines on a bank beside white flowers. The scene relates to a medal commemorating Tintoretto's patron, the physician Tommaso Rangone. It is likely that the painting is also connected to Rangone; stars and flowers were both central to his learning.

The story was also depicted by Rubens in c. 1637.

The crowning production of Tintoretto's life, the last picture of any considerable importance which he executed, was the vast **Paradise** painted for the Doge's Palace, in size 9.1 by 22.6 metres (29.9 by 74.1 feet), reputed to be the largest painting ever done upon canvas. While the commission for this huge work was yet pending and unassigned Tintoretto was wont to tell the senators that he had prayed to God that he might be commissioned for it, so that paradise itself might perchance be his recompense after death.

Tintoretto competed with several other artists for the prestigious commission. A large sketch of the composition he submitted in 1577 is now in the Louvre Museum, Paris. In 1583, he painted a second sketch with a different composition, which is in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. He worked indefatigably at the task, making many alterations and doing various heads and costumes direct from life. When the picture had been nearly completed he took it to its proper place, where it was completed largely by assistants, his son Domenico foremost among them. All Venice applauded the finished work; Ridolfi wrote that "it seemed to everyone that heavenly beatitude had been disclosed to mortal eyes." Modern art historians have been less enthusiastic, and have generally considered the *Paradise* inferior in execution to the two sketches. It has suffered from neglect, but little from restoration.

Tintoretto was asked to name his own price, but this he left to the authorities. They tendered a handsome amount; he is said to have abated something from it, an incident perhaps more telling of his lack of greed than earlier cases where he worked for nothing at all.



Paradise (1588) is a massive oil painting on canvas that dominates the main hall of the Doge's Palace in Venice. The composition is crowded with around 500 figures, depicted in detail. The final effect is of an overpowering tumult that seems to celebrate the greatness of the Republic more than it does the triumph of God. The Virgin Interceding with Christ portrays the scene surmounted by the dove of the Holy Spirit and raised upon a dense semicircular rank of cherubim and seraphim. The reference to the Annunciation that had figured in the previous fresco was present: the Archangel Gabriel is shown holding out a lily to Mary, depicted with a halo of 7 stars. The divine light emanates not from the dove of the Holy Spirit but from the figure of Christ the Judge, shown holding a globe surmounted by a cross; to his right stands

the Archangel Michael holding out the scales of justice. The order of the celestial hierarchy is respected: the evangelists appear in a semi-circle immediately beneath the main scene, with the saints aligned in the same order in which they figure in church litanies. From the centre of the stage a path of light opens up towards the Empyrean, allowing the souls of the Just to ascend (with the assistance of angels) and God's Grace to descend upon the Doge. At the centre of this path is the radiant figure of a semi-veiled Archangel.

Tintoretto's painting, **The Last Supper**, of 1592–94, is a work of his final years. It departs drastically from the normal compositional formula. The centre of the scene is occupied not by the apostles but instead by secondary characters, such as a woman carrying a dish and the servants taking the dishes from the table. The table at which the apostles sit recedes into space on a steep diagonal. Also personal is Tintoretto's use of light, which appears to come into obscurity from both the light on the ceiling and from Jesus' aureola.



The *Last Supper* makes use of Mannerist devices, notably its complex and radically asymmetrical composition. In its dynamism and emphasis on the quotidian—the setting is similar to a Venetian inn—the painting points the way to the Baroque. "The ability of this dramatic scene to engage viewers was well in keeping with Counter-Reformation ideals and the Catholic Church's belief in the didactic nature of religious art."

A comparison of Tintoretto's final *The Last Supper*—one of his nine known paintings on the subject—with Leonardo's treatment of the same subject provides an instructive demonstration of how artistic styles evolved over the course of the Renaissance. Leonardo's is all classical repose. The disciples radiate away from Christ in almost-mathematical symmetry. In the hands of Tintoretto, the same event becomes dramatic, as the human figures are joined by angels. A servant is placed in the foreground, perhaps in reference to the Gospel of John. In the restless dynamism of his composition, his dramatic use of light, and his emphatic perspective effects, Tintoretto seems a baroque artist ahead of his time.



Tintoretto was Venice's most prolific painter of portraits during his career. Modern critics have often described his portraits as routine works, although his skill in depicting elderly men, such as **Jacopo Soranzo** (c.1550), has been widely admired. According to art historians Robert Echols and Frederick Iichman, the many portraits from Tintoretto's studio that were executed largely by assistants have hampered appreciation of his autograph portraits which, in sharp contrast to his narrative works, are understated and somber. Lawrence Gowing considered Tintoretto's "smouldering portraits of personalities who seemed consumed by their own fire" to be his "most irresistible" works.

He painted two **self-portraits**. In the first (c.1546–47) he presents himself without the trappings of status that were customary in self-portraits that came before. The image's informality, the directness of the subject's gaze, and the bold brushwork visible throughout were innovative—it has been called "the first of many artfully unkempt images of the self that have come down through the centuries." The second self-portrait (c.1588 - above) is an austere depiction of the aged artist "bleakly contemplating his mortality". Édouard Manet, who painted a copy of it, considered it "one of the most beautiful paintings in the world."



After the completion of the *Paradise* Tintoretto rested for a while, and he never undertook any other work of importance, though there is no reason to suppose that his energies were exhausted if he had lived a little longer. In 1592 he became a member of the *Scuola dei Mercanti*.

In 1594, he was seized with severe stomach pains, complicated with fever, that prevented him from sleeping and almost from eating for a fortnight. He died on 31 May 1594. He was buried in the church of the Madonna dell'Orto by the side of his favourite daughter Marietta, who had died in 1590 at the age of thirty. Tradition suggests that as she lay in her final repose, her heart-stricken father had painted her final portrait.

Marietta had herself been a portrait-painter of considerable skill, as well as a musician, vocalist and instrumentalist, but few of her works are now traceable. As a girl she used to accompany and assist her father at his work, dressed as a boy. Eventually, she married a jeweller, Mario Augusta. In 1866, the grave of the Vescovi—his wife's family—and Tintoretto was opened, and the remains of nine members of the joint families were found in it. The grave was then moved to a new location, to the right of the choir.

Tintoretto had very few pupils; his two sons and Maerten de Vos of Antwerp were among them. His son Domenico Tintoretto frequently assisted his father in the preliminary work for great pictures. He himself painted a multitude of works, many of them of a very large scale. At best, they would be considered mediocre and, coming from the son of Tintoretto, are disappointing. In any event, he must be regarded as a considerable pictorial practitioner in his way. There are reflections of Tintoretto to be found in the Greek painter of the Spanish Renaissance, El Greco, who likely saw his works during a stay in Venice.