

The Offense of *Romanitas*: Jacopo Tintoretto's Ceiling Paintings for the Scuola Grande di San Rocco

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Summary: This article examines the ceiling paintings executed by Jacopo Tintoretto for the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. The Venetian painter's stylistic choices are analyzed utilizing the dialectic between *romanitas* and *venezianità* as elucidated by Manfredo Tafuri. This framework, combined with a consideration of the larger political and social context of the *scuole grandi*, highlights the cultural affinities expressed by the artist and his patrons.

In 1564 the Scuola Grande di San Rocco proposed to hold a competition for the decoration of their *albergo* ceiling, inviting four prominent artists to submit designs.¹ Before this decision was reached, however, it is recorded that one member of the *banca*, Zuan Maria Zignoni, offered to donate fifteen ducats for the painting of the ceiling (much more than the standard one or two) with the singular stipulation that the commission *not* be awarded to the Venetian painter Jacopo Tintoretto.² While such fraught patronal relations occurred frequently in Tintoretto's career, the reasons for these difficulties generally remain obscure. This paper explores the possibility that Tintoretto's style formed the main point of contention. His radical artistic interests frequently ran counter to the traditional pictorial norms preserved in Venetian painting, often resulting in dramatic conflicts when Tintoretto worked for the conservative patrons of the *scuole grandi*.

Manfredo Tafuri, in his book *Venice and the Renaissance*, saw a similar dialogue between traditional and innovative styles at play in the architecture of the Serenissima in the sixteenth century. He termed these two opposing styles *mediocritas* and *novitas*. The former, *mediocritas*, refers to an architecture characterized by its adherence to the Venetian values of prudence, equality, and humility, made visually manifest through scale, structural layout, and decorative detail. The traditional design of Venetian palazzi dictated a rectangular building with floors structured along a central corridor, and the primary façade facing the water. Large courtyards and magnificent staircases were eschewed. The porticoes and windows along the canal were surrounded by twisted columns and other gothic *spoglia*, displaying a wealth of textural details not necessarily related to the building's interior space. *Novitas* was instead characterized by an interest in innovation, specifically incorpo-

¹ All extant images mentioned in this essay can be found online through the Artstor database.

² Berliner, "Die Tätigkeit Tintoretto's in der Scuola di San Rocco," 469.

rating *all'antica* forms inspired by new discoveries in Rome. Such buildings were defined by a greater monumentality of scale and spatial organization, as well as integration between structural design and decoration. In his analysis Tafuri emphasized the political connotations embodied by these two stylistic choices, one affirming an alliance with the egalitarian values essential to the continued stability of the Republic, the other signalling a rupture with tradition by favouring the tastes of the individual over those of the community. The social implications of these opposing modes, which could also be labelled *venezianità* and *romanitas*, were heightened by the ever-fluctuating tensions between the Venetian Republic and papal Rome.³

The complex Venetian reception of Roman *all'antica* forms, both architectural and pictorial, supports Tafuri's politicized reading of these styles. Doge Andrea Gritti's *Renovatio urbis* of the 1530s is often interpreted as demonstrating Venice's unilateral acceptance of Roman architecture. Yet, as Deborah Howard has noted of Jacopo Sansovino's work in Piazza San Marco, "the sculptural and chromatic richness of buildings such as the Library and the Loggetta served rather to enliven the surfaces than to emphasize the monumental scale of the structures or the volume of the spaces within."⁴ In this way Sansovino masked the innovative layout and scale of his design beneath a more traditionally decorative façade, indicating a concession to the stylistic legacy of *venezianità*. Certain private patrons, on the other hand, were more receptive to all aspects of Sansovino's new architectural concepts and also employed central Italian painters, notably Giorgio Vasari and Francesco Salviati, clearly demonstrating their affinity for *romanitas* over *venezianità*. Tafuri emphasized that such patrons belonged to aristocratic families who possessed political connections to Rome and the curia, and that these families (such as the Grimani and Corner) were using their advocacy of culturally innovative forms "as an instrument of group and family definition, as a sign of 'difference.'"⁵ Thus, the patron's role in Venetian society and relationship to Rome was a critical factor in determining his stylistic preferences, making the unusual case of the *scuole grandi* particularly worthy of investigation.

While not technically government institutions the *scuole grandi* were inextricably linked to the rule of the Republic. As early as 1312 the Council of Ten was directing the affairs of the *scuole*, yet official control over these institutions was exercised with caution. Their immediate management was left in the hands of those members who could claim to be *cittadini originari*, thus allocating a significant degree of power to the second tier of Venetian society that was ineligible to serve in the *Gran Consiglio*.⁶ Sixteenth century historians, such as Donato Giannotti, Gasparo Contarini, and Giovanni Bot-

³ Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, 81–101.

⁴ Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*, 194.

⁵ Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*. 7.

⁶ Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 22, 44.

ero, all acknowledged that the role the *scuole grandi* fulfilled as a type of surrogate government was essential to the stability of the Venetian Republic. This strong association with the state seems to account for the notoriously traditional nature of much the artistic patronage of the *scuole grandi* up to, and through, much of the sixteenth century.⁷ Yet it is precisely the collisions between *romanitas* and *venezianità* within the *scuole* that are most revealing of the way style functioned as a bearer of cultural significance in sixteenth century Venice.⁸

Proposing Tafuri's framework as a guide for this investigation raises a number of interesting questions. Are there indeed *pictorial* equivalents for Tafuri's architectural *novitas* and *mediocritas*? Would such distinctions in painting bear the same political implications? Ultimately, is Tintoretto shocking the sensibilities of his patrons, politically and artistically, through his use of an innovative, Roman style?

The middle decades of the sixteenth century witnessed both the development of Tintoretto's career as well as the political polarization of defining painting styles within the theoretical literature. Some writers, and particularly Giorgio Vasari and Lodovico Dolce, framed their discussions of the art of painting as a competitive discourse that pitted the central Italian virtue of *disegno* against the Venetian virtue of *colorito*. As distilled from these contemporary texts, the most salient components of *disegno* were: intentional difficulties of form (such as foreshortening); a puncturing of space, moving away from the surface of the picture plane; a sculptural quality in figures that emphasized relief over color; and an attentiveness to compositional complexity. *Colorire*, on the other hand, entailed: construction of the figure that tended to deemphasize contour; an attentiveness to the finer modulation of hues; focus on the overall tonality of the image, which often led to a greater surface unity at the expense of spatial depth, and was generally accompanied by more simplified narrative arrangement.⁹ Thus this contemporary dialogue provides a striking parallel for Tafuri's terms, *romanitas* and *venezianità*, wherein *disegno* was recognized as a distinctive attribute of Tuscan and Roman painting particularly as epitomized by the work of Michelangelo and *colorito* (or *colorire*) as the great strength of Venetian painting, exemplified best by the works of Titian.

Indeed, Titian's major work for the Scuola Grande della Carità, *The Presentation of the Virgin*, furnishes an excellent example of these pictorial principles within the context of the *scuole*, as well as further enriching the definition of *venezianità* as it applied to painting. Beyond the attributes of *colorire* elucidated above, Venetian painting tended to preserve compositional and stylistic elements of older works understood to possess historical authen-

⁷ See Wurthmann, "The Scuole Grandi and Venetian Art."

⁸ See Guidarelli, "Architecture and Charity."

⁹ See Pino, *Dialogo di Pittura* (1548); Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura, intitolato l'Aretino* (1557); and Vasari, *Vite*.

ticity.¹⁰ In this case, the initial design for the project, provided by Pasqualino Veneto to the scuola in 1504, was preserved by the *confratelli*, and it is likely Titian was required to honour this original in his composition. David Rosand has noted that this work does “recall a rather archaic type of Venetian mural decoration, the narrative tableau,” which was appropriate given such arrangements formed “the essential compositional unit of the decorative cycles of the Venetian scuole from the later Quattrocento.”¹¹ The figures are aligned horizontally along the picture plane in a fashion reminiscent of relief sculpture, and vibrant colors shimmer across the surface of the canvas. Depth and dramatic action yield to a supremacy of pattern and decorous movement. Even when Titian was later called on to execute a ceiling painting for the Scuola of San Giovanni Evangelista (a format that allowed for a greater degree of flexibility) his choices remained relatively conservative. Compared to earlier ceiling canvases created for the church of Santo Spirito in Isola, the foreshortening is less dramatic and “parallels between the painted forms and picture surface are more pervasive and insistent.”¹² Thus, Titian, particularly in his work for the scuole, embodied the painterly concept of *venezianità*. Tintoretto, on the other hand, displayed no such reverence for Venetian pictorial decorum.

In the early years of his career Tintoretto demonstrated a marked interest in the concept of *disegno* and in Michelangelo its most perfect practitioner. Privately, he studied terracotta models of the Medici chapel figures, while publicly he quoted the Tuscan master’s sculptures and paintings in works executed in both fresco and oil.¹³ The most famous of these is *The Miracle of the Slave* created for the Scuola Grande di San Marco in 1548. The composition of this work is clearly indebted to Michelangelo’s *Conversion of Saul*, which would have been known to Tintoretto through an engraving by Nicolas Beatrixet. Furthermore, the muscular poses of the two figures in the lower right derive from the Medici figure of *Dusk*, and one of the Sistine *ignudi*.¹⁴ This revolutionary canvas, with its explicit Michelangelesque references and decisive rupturing of the picture plane, failed to receive unanimous acclaim from his patrons. Carlo Ridolfi, in his seventeenth-century *Life of Tintoretto*, recounts that the *confratelli* were divided over whether to accept the work, and Tintoretto, offended, took the canvas back to his studio. Only later was some kind of reconciliation effected, and the painting took its place in the *sala grande* of the scuola.¹⁵ As already noted, such a dispute was not unique but rather would come to typify Tintoretto’s interactions with the scuole grandi.

¹⁰ See Fortini Brown, “The Tradition.”

¹¹ Rosand, *Painting in Cinquecento Venice*, 91.

¹² Schulz, “Titian’s Ceiling in the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista,” 92.

¹³ Ridolfi, *Vita di Giacompo Robusti detto il Tintoretto*, 6–7.

¹⁴ Rosand, *Painting in Cinquecento Venice*, 184.

¹⁵ Ridolfi, *Vita di Giacompo Robusti detto il Tintoretto*, 20–21.

As his career progressed, so did Tintoretto's relationship to Michelangelo. In 1562, only two years before the infamous competition at San Rocco, Tintoretto completed two large paintings for the choir of Madonna dell'Orto, which Ridolfi would later describe as the "most conspicuous commission in the city."¹⁶ These works depicted *The Adoration of the Golden Calf* and *The Last Judgment*, the latter of which provides a direct comparison to Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel. In these two images the human body forms both the dominant structural component and the main bearer of meaning. Like Michelangelo, Tintoretto contorts his figures into a multiplicity of poses expressing the motions of the soul, as well as demonstrating an interest in the pictorial challenges of foreshortening. Tintoretto's only major concession to propriety seems to have been to clothe his nudes, a concession related solely to religious conventions rather than to the pictorial tenets of *venezianità*.

It is likely that this commission would have been very much in the minds of Tintoretto's potential patrons in the early 1560s, and might account for the resistance to his employment at San Rocco in 1564. Despite the offer made by Zuan Maria Zignoni to preclude him, Tintoretto was nevertheless one of the artists included in San Rocco's *albergo* competition. According to Vasari, instead of submitting a design as required, Tintoretto painted a full canvas and had it installed in the ceiling secretly during the night. When the *confratelli* saw this some protested and there followed a debate over whether to accept the work, at which point Tintoretto made a gift of the painting directly to Saint Roch.¹⁷

If Tintoretto's *Last Judgment* had raised questions of propriety in the minds of some of the *confratelli* at San Rocco, then the finished work for the ceiling must have confirmed these reservations. In the *Apotheosis of Saint Roch* the dynamic spatial movement created by the figures of God and the saint certainly departs from the earlier Venetian adhesion to the picture plane. In this work Tintoretto surpasses Titian's ceiling paintings that employed *di sotto in sù* perspective by allowing his figures to break away more completely from any sense of surface unity. Tintoretto's powerful figure of God the Father supported by nude *putti* is even more forcefully conceived than his likely prototype of God from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling.

The misgivings of the *confratelli* may have been exacerbated by the political situation of the time as well. The conclusion of the Council of Trent inaugurated a new era of tension between Rome and the lagoon Republic. As the Venetian Ambassador to Rome, Paolo Tiepolo, noted, "Asserting his own authority with firmness and vigor, [Pope] Pius IV began to follow his own thoughts and inclinations more freely. Thus one could easily discern in him rather the attitude of a prince who was attending solely to his own in-

¹⁶ Ridolfi, *Vita di Giacompo Robusti detto il Tintoretto*, 16.

¹⁷ Vasari, *Vite*, 593–594. The fact that there was to be a competition is confirmed by the records of the scuola itself, which called for "3 hover 4 maistri pittori più zelentti sittrova in venezia." As cited in Berliner, "Die Tätigkeit," 470.

terests than of a pope concerned about the benefit and salvation of others.”¹⁸ Such sentiments would be further aggravated by the actions of subsequent popes, and this tension would finally culminate in the papal Interdict of Venice in 1606–07. Clearly, Tintoretto’s *romanitas* could have caused tensions in the brotherhood, nevertheless, his donation to the patron saint of the scuola could not be refused, and his audacity was rewarded with a further commission to complete the decorative cycle for the *albergo*.

Tintoretto’s ultimate success in the *albergo* of San Rocco reveals an innovative current of patronage quite different from the characteristic traditionalism of the scuole. While the scuole grandi certainly functioned as a surrogate to the state, they were still made up of individual members whose particular tastes were often expressed through their artistic preferences. Thus more traditional figures like Zuan Maria Zignoni were countered by less conservative *confratelli*, such as Girolamo Rota, Matteo di Marin, and Paolo d’Anna.

Paolo d’Anna was a rich merchant whose grandfather originally had come from Brussels and been elevated to the status of a *cittadino originario* in 1545. It has been noted that members of this class, particularly those whose livelihoods derived from mercantile activities, frequently emulated the aristocracy in their tastes as a means of asserting their social standing.¹⁹ The d’Anna family was no exception. Most significantly, they had a palazzo on the Grand Canal with a façade decorated by Pordenone, on which dramatically muscular figures flaunted traditional Venetian concepts of space.²⁰ In 1577 when Paolo d’Anna was *Guardian Grande* he became a sponsor of Tintoretto, whose work had once again caused some consternation at San Rocco.

In 1575–77 Tintoretto painted the three main canvases for the ceiling of the scuola’s *sala grande*, after which he made the generous offer to complete the decoration of the scuola solely for the devotion he held for the saint, and a hundred ducats a year.²¹ This was an ideal arrangement for the *confratelli* and a vote in both the *banca* and the chapter general was overwhelmingly passed. Surprisingly, only a few months later a re-vote was held, tallying a much higher number of objections in both bodies.²² Absent other evidence the explanation for this startling reversal may have lain once again in the works themselves.

In the main canvas for the ceiling, *The Brazen Serpent*, Tintoretto returned to a style closest to that of his *Last Judgment* for the church of Madonna dell’Orto. The dominant similarity between the two works, which also links them back to Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, is his interest in the human form as one of the primary means of organizing the composition. Tintoretto’s

¹⁸ As cited in Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defence of Republican Liberty*, 187–188.

¹⁹ Tucci, “The Psychology of the Venetian Merchant in the Sixteenth Century,” 351–354.

²⁰ See Massimi, “Jacopo Tintoretto e i confratelli della Scuola Grande di San Rocco.”

²¹ Berliner, “Die Tätigkeit,” 493.

²² Berliner, “Die Tätigkeit,” 493–494.

figures of the Israelites are drastically foreshortened; contorted by pain they twist into variety of positions, allowing him to demonstrate his skill in artistic *difficoltà*. The strong compositional thrusts into and out of the three-dimensional space work to undermine any sense of pictorial unity or stability.

In this revolutionary canvas, whose representative strategies are followed in *The Fall of Manna* and *Moses Striking Water from the Rock*, Tintoretto pushed the *romanitas* style, particularly an interest in spatial rendering and foreshortening, to even greater lengths than his Tuscan predecessor.

So firm a juxtaposition between *novitas* and *mediocritas* may be an artificially exaggerated construct this late in the sixteenth century. Indeed, in his 1581 *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare*, Francesco Sansovino referred to *mediocritas* as a value of the past.²³ A brief examination of work conducted at the Ducal Palace during these years, however, offers a contrary view. After the disastrous fire of 1577 the Senate convened a learned committee of architects to advise on the necessary rebuilding, one of whom was Andrea Palladio. In his recommendation the palace should have been completely redone in pure, *all'antica* forms. Disregarding Palladio's suggestion, the Senate decided to follow the advice of other specialists and the palace was reconstructed as it had been before the fire.²⁴

Subsequent to the architectural restoration a competition was held to select the artist who would decorate the new wall behind the Doge's tribune. Tintoretto entered this most prestigious competition, but he lost to Paolo Veronese and Francesco Bassano, and it was only on the death of the former that he received commission.²⁵ Two studies often associated with this project survive, the second of which provides a telling comparison with the completed work still *in situ* today. This oil sketch from the Thyssen-Bornemisza, which clearly dates from the late 1580s, shows a heaven that does not possess a clear hierarchical arrangement. Further, the figures, which are larger in scale and more emphatically muscular than those in the final work, adopt a variety of dramatic poses created through the bold use of foreshortening. Ultimately, such a complex arrangement of interlocking figures was simplified in the completed painting. This results in a more schematically legible illustration of paradise where the traditional Venetian respect for unified lighting and adherence to the picture plane, while certainly tempered by an interest in *disegno*, remains the dominant characteristic of the image.

It is significant that this final work, executed in the very seat of the Venetian government, was created for a new, yet retrospective regime. In a constitutional crisis of 1582–83 a group of men referred to as the *giovani* came to power. These younger aristocrats demonstrated an affinity for the more traditional values of the Venetian Republic that they felt had been lost in recent

²³ Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare*, 140–142.

²⁴ See Wolters, "Le perizie sulla ricostruzione del Palazzo dopo l'incendio del 20 dicembre 1577."

²⁵ Ridolfi, *Vita di Giacompo Robusti detto il Tintoretto*, 80.

decades. They actively cultivated trade, emphasized the honour of serving the state, and enacted a more aggressive policy toward the papacy.²⁶ Thus, commensurate with the state's return to moral *mediocritas*, Tintoretto created a work deliberately aligned with the artistic principles of *venezianità*.

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²⁶ Bouwsma, "Venice Under the *Giovani*."

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