

Tintoretto, Jacopo

Also known as

Robusti, Jacopo

Venetian, 1518 or 1519 - 1594

BIOGRAPHY

Jacopo Tintoretto was, along with Titian (Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576) and Veronese (Venetian, 1528 - 1588), one of the three giants of 16th-century Venetian painting. No one else came close to matching the sheer number of pictures he provided for Venice's churches, confraternities, government buildings, and private palaces. His paintings are notable for their free, painterly technique (sometimes described as "drawing in paint"), their dynamism, and their unconventional approaches to the depiction of narrative scenes, particularly biblical events. His bold brushwork, which emphasizes strong contours as it exploits and energizes the canvas surface, provided inspiration to later artists from El Greco (Greek, 1541 - 1614) and Sir Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577 - 1640) to French painters of the romantic period to our own day. A great painter of religious subjects—and a great storyteller—he depicted the timeless narratives of Christian art with verve, drama, and touches of the unexpected. His approach was visionary, sometimes even hallucinatory, yet always grounded in everyday experience. A strong sympathy for the poor and downtrodden pervades his work, anticipating the sensibilities of painters such as Caravaggio (Roman, 1571 - 1610) and Diego Velázquez (Spanish, 1599 - 1660).

Throughout his career, Tintoretto was the subject of controversy. While he was praised for his power and inventiveness, detractors often complained that his paintings looked unfinished. Typical is the grudging admiration accorded him by Giorgio Vasari (Florentine, 1511 - 1574), who recognized his extraordinary talent and creative imagination but fundamentally disapproved of his failure to follow the rules, and in particular of his rapid technique: "In the matter of painting [Tintoretto is] swift, resolute, fantastic, and extravagant, and the most extraordinary brain that the art of painting has ever produced, as may be seen from all his works and from the fantastic compositions of his scenes, executed by him in a fashion of his own and contrary to the use of other painters. Indeed, he has surpassed even the limits of extravagance with the new and fanciful inventions and the strange vagaries of his intellect, working at haphazard and without design, as if to prove that art is but a jest."^[1]

Born in Venice in 1518 or 1519, Jacopo Robusti took his professional name of Tintoretto, “the little dyer,” from his father’s occupation (*tintore* in Italian).[2] His 17th-century biographers Carlo Ridolfi and Marco Boschini recount that Tintoretto spent a brief period in Titian’s workshop, from which he was dismissed because of Titian’s jealousy or his own prickly personality. After leaving Titian’s workshop, the youth is said to have embarked alone upon an ambitious program of copying works by other artists, especially sculpture, drawing from life, and even dissecting corpses, guided by the motto “il disegno di Michelangelo e il colorito di Tiziano” (the draftsmanship of Michelangelo and the coloring of Titian). Whether or not the claim that Tintoretto was entirely self-taught is accurate, the story of his commitment to the “disegno of Michelangelo” retains a core of truth. Early on he forged connections with the circle of Rome-oriented patrons, artists, and critics who gravitated around Pietro Aretino, the Tuscan writer and arbiter of taste who had settled in Venice. In his youthful works Tintoretto strongly identified himself with Michelangelo and his followers, omnivorously exploring and recapitulating the themes and imagery that he found in prints, drawings, and the works produced by central Italian artists who visited or settled in Venice, among them Jacopo Sansovino (Florentine-Venetian, 1486 - 1570), Giorgio Vasari, and Francesco Salviati (Florentine, 1510 - 1563).

With the triumphantly successful *Miracle of the Slave* for the Scuola Grande di San Marco (1548), Tintoretto became the dominant force in Venetian painting. His mature style is characterized by an emphasis on human figures at once idealized and convincingly real; strong, sometimes violent chiaroscuro; an elastic and unstable treatment of space; free, strong brushwork, with an emphasis on line; dynamism of form and pictorial technique; juxtaposition of the spiritual and the mundane; and an emphasis on the surprising and the unexpected. In portraiture, by contrast, Tintoretto favored an understated model based upon prototypes developed by Titian. The sitters who most engaged him are men in their maturity and, in particular, in old age, depicted with unsparing but sympathetic candor—never more movingly than in his own late self-portrait (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

Tintoretto’s clientele was extremely varied. While he executed works for wealthy and powerful patricians, the Venetian state, and the city’s richest confraternities—and even a small number for princely patrons outside of Venice—he never abandoned the poorer confraternities and less prominent churches that had been among his earliest patrons. His aggressive marketing

techniques often rubbed his peers the wrong way; intensely ambitious, he regularly agreed to execute works for discounted prices or even at cost. In 1564, Tintoretto embarked on the project that was to become his best-known monument, the decoration of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, a task that he completed only two and half decades later. Tintoretto's paintings for San Rocco represent the greatest concentration of works by a single artist anywhere in Venice, and are the most personal and intensely felt of his works.

Tintoretto employed workshop assistants throughout his mature career, but in the later 1570s his studio practice began to take on the character of a family firm, as several of his children joined him there. His daughter Marietta, born in 1554 (out of wedlock, possibly by a German woman), is reported to have had a lively talent, such that the Emperor Maximilian II, Archduke Ferdinand II of Austria, and Philip II of Spain all inquired about her availability as a court painter. His son Domenico, who was to become the key figure in the studio, taking it over after his father's death, was born around 1560. Another son, Marco, a year younger than Domenico, may have joined the studio as an apprentice, but it is not clear how long he was active there. The workshop also included other apprentices and assistants, among them a number of painters from beyond the Alps, some of them employed as landscape specialists. Jacopo himself remained at the helm until his death in 1594, although his role in the final years of his life was often limited: developing the overall conception, sketching in the principal forms and working out the relationship among the figures, and delegating and overseeing the final production. Even at San Rocco the handiwork of assistants is frequently evident and the quality of the execution is not always high. In what should have been the capstone of Jacopo's career, the enormous *Paradiso* standing at the head of the Sala del Maggior Consiglio in the Palazzo Ducale—the single most prominent painting in Venice—the contributions of Domenico and other assistants are all too apparent.

The collaborative nature of Tintoretto's studio practices, coupled with an astonishing productivity and a willingness to adapt his style to suit the site or occasion, combine to create extraordinarily difficult questions of attribution and chronology. Many paintings ascribed to Tintoretto in collections and catalogs (including the catalogue raisonné of Rodolfo Pallucchini and Paola Rossi) are actually the productions of followers or imitators. Recent scholarship, however, has begun to clarify the scope of the artist's oeuvre.

[1] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, introduction and notes by David Ekserdjian (London, 1996), 2:509–511; Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence, 1906), 6:587–589.

[2] According to a family history, his father Battista Robusti was originally Brescian in origin and won his surname “Robusti” as a result of the vigor with which he and his brother fought in the siege of Padua in 1509. The brothers’ family name may originally have been “Comin,” but this name should not be used in reference to Tintoretto, since his father was always known in Venice as Battista Robusti and the artist himself always used “Robusti” or “Tintoretto.” Melania G. Mazzucco presented new biographical evidence concerning Tintoretto and his children in *Jacopo Tintoretto e i suoi figli: Storia di una famiglia veneziana* (Milan, 2009).

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