

Tintoretto at San Rocco

1. A special element in Tintoretto's life was his relationship with the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. Their particular relationship lasted forty-five years – from 1549 to 1594 - and gave birth to the most extraordinary cycles in Jacopo's career, both in the Scuola and in the church dedicated to the patron saint of the confraternity. In the beginning, he was simply an outside collaborator, even if a protégée of some influential members, but beginning in 1565 he became a member of the Scuola. In the years of his maturity and old age he was often on its board, taking care of many different aspects of its administration. The last document referring to him dates to May 1st 1594, just 30 days before his death.
2. In 1549, after the great success of *The Miracle of the Slave*, Jacopo painted San Rocco Cures the Plague Victims for the chancel of the church, an amazing work set in the dramatic nocturnal interior of the hospital. This picture, that marks the real beginning of his engagement with the Scuola, was supposed to be the first of four episodes of San Rocco's life, but after its delivery the project was halted. Some believe that the interruption was suggested by Titian – a member of the Scuola as well – who was jealous of the success of his younger competitor. More probably it was due to a contemporary lack of funds, the Scuola at the time working on the completion of the new monumental building for its meetinghouse.
3. In 1559 Jacopo painted the theatrical Christ at the Pool of Bethesda originally intended to adorn the doors of a large cupboard for storing silver votive offerings in the church. In 1674 the cupboard was eliminated and the various parts of the painting sewn together. In the 18th century, it was enlarged to adapt it to its new position in the church. In 1937 these additions were removed, unfortunately together with other portions of the work which were wrongly thought not to be original. Despite these vicissitudes, the quality of the canvas is still evident in the magisterial composition and the dramatic tension the painter achieves in the narration of the event.
4. On May 22nd 1564, the board of the Scuola decided to have the ceiling of the Sala dell'Albergo decorated, beginning with the central oval canvas. On May 31st they decided to announce a competition among the best painters in Venice, who had to present their drawings within a month. According to Vasari, however, while the others were still working on their projects, Tintoretto managed to install his San Rocco in Glory in the center of the ceiling, provoking the reaction of his clients, who claimed they had only asked for drawings and had not commissioned the work itself. Jacopo replied that that was his way of drawing, and that if they did not want to pay him for the work, he would donate it to them. On June 22nd, the Scuola accepted the gift, and a few days later they ordered that the painting should remain in place.
With this decision, an extraordinary “art pact” was established between the painter and the Scuola, an arrangement which was destined to produce one of the most extraordinary and coherent painting cycles in the whole of Italian art.
5. On March 11th 1565, Jacopo became a member of the Scuola and was immediately elected to its board. He was, in many ways, a patron of himself when he created the amazing *Crucifixion* in the Albergo. In conception and execution, the huge canvas is one of the most unusual and powerful scenes of this subject. Naturally, the painting centers on the crucified Christ, but the two thieves executed beside him are not traditionally shown already hanging

from their crosses. All around Jacopo offers a panoramic scene of Golgotha, populated by an astonishingly varied crowd engaged in all manner of different activities and movements.

6. To complete the decoration of the Albergo, in 1566-1567, Tintoretto painted three further scenes from Christ's Passion (Christ before Pilate, Ecce Homo, the Way to Calvary).
7. In the same 1567 Jacopo returned to the chancel of the church, painting San Rocco in Prison Visited by an Angel, where the scene is characterized by a strong chiaroscuro, underlining the contrast between the brilliant radiance of the angel sent by God to comfort the dying saint and the dark anguish of his surroundings.
8. In the Arrest of San Rocco, hanging above, the tangible elements of the foreground are effectively contrasted with the evanescent rendering of the battle raging in the background. About 60 years ago the painting had been moved to the right wall of the nave, thus depriving it of its original narrative position immediately adjacent to that of the saint imprisoned. Last year, thanks to the generosity of Save Venice, the painting was restored and put back in its original location. The opportunity to have a closer look has revealed not only its high quality, but a re-evaluation of its dating to a moment not far from 1567 when the final three canvases for the chancel were commissioned.
9. In 1573 Tintoretto painted the Portrait of Marco Balbiani, Guardian Grando of the Scuola at that time. Balbiani had made plans to decorate the ceiling of the church but his project, in which we can reasonably assume Jacopo was involved, was stopped by his successor in 1574, and the wooden frame already constructed was moved to the Chapter Hall of the Scuola. In July 1575, Tintoretto offered to paint its large central panel, promising to complete it within a year for the feast day of San Rocco.
10. Moses and the Brazen Serpent depicts the biblical episode in which God sends poisonous snakes to punish the Jews for their sins, then instructs Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole and call the people to repent and be healed. This canvas was the largest ceiling painting seen in Venice up to that time. A work of overpowering drama, it contains all the thematic elements of the entire room and, at the same time, refers to the charitable mission of the Scuola. The snakes also denote the plague that periodically ravaged Venice, and thus San Rocco, who was invoked against the dreaded illness. Tintoretto's image of the serpent raised up on the post prefigures the Crucifixion, while the Michelangelesque crush of tormented bodies in the lower half of the picture recalls the Last Judgment.
11. In January 1577, Jacopo agreed to carry out the other main paintings, asking in exchange to be paid only for the materials. After some months, he declared he was willing to paint all the other canvases of the ceiling with the same conditions. Finally, at the end of 1577, he offered to continue with paintings for the Scuola and its church in exchange for an annuity of 100 ducats, citing "the great love that I have for our venerable Scuola and my devotion to the glorious San Rocco." This agreement brought undoubted advantages to both parties. The Scuola won the services of an esteemed painter at a reasonable cost, and Tintoretto was guaranteed not only a lifetime income but, above all, a setting in which he could express himself through his art and where he was free to demonstrate his religious sentiments in a whirlwind of inventiveness.
12. In the Baptism of Christ, on the walls of the Chapter Hall, Jacopo allows himself exceptional freedom, expanding the scene to include a grand chorus in the distance and using light as a key expressive element. The protagonists are neither in the foreground nor at

the center of the composition, and they are not the largest figures in the painting. Instead, their importance is demonstrated by the heavenly light that leads the viewer's gaze directly to Jesus, underscoring the dramatic intensity of the moment. The painting is also extremely innovative from the point of view of technique, showing notable variations in the execution of the different parts. Jacopo chose to define the figures of Christ and the Baptist in strongly modeled relief, whereas he used summary, white strokes, hastily traced with the tip of his brush on a dark ground for the diaphanous crowd in the distance awaiting baptism.

13. It has been properly noted that the present palette in Tintoretto paintings differs from the one he originally conceived. A proof of this is offered by the frieze Jacopo painted between the ceiling and the walls in the Albergo. A fragment of it showing Three Apples, which was discovered in 1905 during restoration, gives us a good idea of its original dazzling colors. The brightness of the original colors in many paintings that now appear darker was also confirmed by recent scientific analysis.
14. An important alteration of pigments happened also in the two late masterpieces you will admire at NGA: The Virgin Mary Reading and The Virgin Mary in Meditation. According to the interpretation that seems now the most convincing in relation to the theme of the Ground Floor Hall (representing episodes from the life of the Virgin and the childhood of Christ), both pictures show the Virgin. The careful conservation treatment they have just undergone was accompanied by several scientific analyses, which offered a lot of information about Jacopo's late technique and confirmed that in the mantle of the Virgin he used the so-called "smaltino", a blue color that deteriorated with time, becoming the brownish-yellow we see today.
15. There is no way to reverse these changes, but a photographic simulation made on The Virgin Mary in Meditation can offer at least an idea of the original as Tintoretto conceived it. The presence of blue, not only in the mantle of the Virgin but also in the sky - together with the various tonalities of browns and greens of the landscape, including the shimmering effects of the water rediscovered thanks to the restoration - seems to change forever the idea of being in front of monochromatic paintings as the two "Marys" have always been considered in the past.