

Rightfully remembered for his exceptional temper, both artistic and human, Jacopo Tintoretto led a rather normal life.

Information we have about his career and private life depends on a wealth of documents unearthed by a surge of scholar interest spread between the second half of nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth.

Enriched by further discoveries, all this documentation has been carefully revised and interpreted by four women during the last fifty years.

They are:

Paola Rossi, who cocurated with Rodolfo Pallucchini the monograph on the painter published in 1982.

Linda Borean, who did the job on the occasion of the 2007 exhibition at the Prado.

Melania Mazzucco, who fell in love with the artist and his family, above all with his first daughter Marietta, and devoted ten years of her life to a research in the

immense State Archive of Venice. On that base she then wrote a thousand-page book upon the subject.

Stefania Mason, who carefully crosschecked all the documentation related to both the works and the patrons for her essay in the present catalogue, and whose paths I'm going to follow.

Among the leaders of Venetian painting, side by side with Titian, Veronese and Bassano, Jacopo is the only one born in the Serenissima, having all the others arrived from the Terraferma. But we can't forget that even his family came from Brescia, in the west part of the Venetian republic's mainland. In 1509, after the battle of Agnadello, where the Serenissima had been defeated by the alliance of the strongest European powers, his father and uncle, Giambattista and Antonio Comin, fought at the defence of Padua – the beginning of redemption – gaining the sobriquet, then surname, Robusti – meaning robust – for their strength and bravery. Then they moved to Venice following the large trend that led the population of the

capital to grow of a quarter in fifty years (from 120.000 inhabitants in 1500 to nearby 169.000 in 1563).

Remaining in the general historical framework, during Tintoretto's lifetime, the opening of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) marked the Catholic Church's official response to Protestant inroads and had many repercussions on cultural, moral and artistic freedom. This strongly affected Tintoretto in his being the most religious of his contemporaries.

His father Battista was an artisan, a dyer, with a workshop in the district of San Cassiano, fairly well-off though belonging to the popular class, and married to a "well born-woman", according to the sources.

Tintoretto is thought to have been born around 1518/1519, from his death certificate of May 31st, 1594, where he is given the age of seventy-five. By 1538, probably twenty years old, he was settled as an independent artist, with the title of "Maestro" and thus presumably already a member of the painters' guild,

having rented (by the patrician Urbano Bollani) a house with a studio in the parish of San Cassiano, a busy urban district not far from the market of Rialto and near his father's workshop.

Indeed, Jacopo proudly declared the family connection with the dyeing practice, adopting the nickname by which he is best known – Tintoretto, that means “the little, because he was very short, dyer” – as seen in his signature on paintings as well as in various documents, from 1548 on.

Jacopo had only one documented sibling, a brother Domenico, but an odd later document, the so called *Genealogia de la casa de Tintoretto*, speaks of twenty-one, that seems unlikely would all have gone unrecorded. The brother Domenico who was a musician and moved to Mantua, where he played the same trade as his father.

Jacopo seems to have enjoyed at least a basic education and may also have shared music lessons with Domenico, for Vasari attests that “he delighted in all

the virtues and particularly in playing music on different instruments”.

His most important biographer, the seventeenth century Venetian painter Carlo Ridolfi, writes that Tintoretto had a short apprenticeship in Titian’s studio, that got quickly to an end for the master’s envy and because the two had quite different interests: the “classical”, magnificent Titian addressed to satisfy the commissions of the principal lords and intellectuals of the entire Continent, the rebel Tintoretto fixed in Venice, engaged in a body to body with painting and even capable of working for free in order to assert himself. It is sure that the former didn’t like the latter, since he did not invite him to take part in the decoration of the ceiling of the Libreria Marciana, to which far less significant painters contributed.

Art historians have recently proposed that Tintoretto could have been for a certain time a pupil of Bonifacio de’ Pitati, called Bonifacio Veronese. Yet, Tintoretto himself promoted the idea of being an autodidact.

“As recounted by the sources, Jacopo’s earliest work blurs with the program of self-training, especially in the genres of façade frescoes and decorative paintings for interiors” says Stefania Mason. The so-called “dipintori da banche” did work in Piazza San Marco, under the arcades of the Procuratie Vecchie.

Both these kinds of juvenile works, frescoes and decorative painting, must have contributed to increase his **operational** speed, a feature for which he was first appreciated – for instance by Pietro Aretino – and then, for centuries, blamed, from Giorgio Vasari to Roberto Longhi, who thought he should have used greater diligence to avoid the unfinished effect.

While belonging to a refined circle opened to artistic novelties, Tintoretto’s earliest patrician patrons were not leaders in the political arena.

Tintoretto offered to paint the façade of Ca’ Soranzo for free, once covered the cost of the materials, then much more expensive than today: he was looking for getting noticed and to gain visibility.

The *Virgin and Child with Saints* of 1540, his first dated painting, was destined to a client from a comparable social background, the Molin “alla Maddalena” family, whose members are represented in the artwork by their respective saints.

From a minor branch of the noble Marcello family came another early patron of Tintoretto, Girolamo di Andrea, who asked him, probably in the late Forties, to celebrate the only notable event of his political life, his appointment as Procuratore di San Marco occurred ten years earlier.

The San Paternian branch of the Pisani family, although it could not boast important political offices, rose to social prominence thanks to Vittore, who founded a large private bank and, in his twenties, improved the public image of the family entrusting the construction of a villa to the young Palladio and to Tintoretto, who was the same age as him, the decoration of the Venetian Palace where he brought to

live the new wife Paolina Foscari, after their marriage in 1542.

But around the middle of the fifth decade, things began to change and Tintoretto went gradually assuming the role of *de facto* state portraitist, and official portraits often led to private commissions by the ruling class.

Politically guided by the wise doge Andrea Gritti (1523 – 1538) and artistically dominated by Titian, after the Sack of Rome, Venice became one of the favourite shelters of artists and intellectuals, who were going to become points of reference for Tintoretto with the experiences they brought from Rome and Florence, the cities of Raphael and Michelangelo. Immediately after the Sack arrived the architects Jacopo Sansovino and Sebastiano Serlio, the intellectual Piero Aretino and the publisher Francesco Marcolini.

Aretino was a poet, a playwright and much more, and above all the arbiter of artistic taste. He was the most important of his early patrons, praising in a letter of

1545 the ceiling Tintoretto had painted for his Venetian house. Later on Aretino had to choose between Titian and Tintoretto and opted for the former.

Francesco Marcolini was the meeting point between Aretino and other intellectuals, men of letters and artists very close in their stylistic choices to Tintoretto, like Andrea Schiavone, Giuseppe Porta and Lambert Sustris. He printed thirty-five of Aretino's works in ten years and his publication *Le sorti*, one of the most beautiful illustrated Italian books of the Sixteenth century, was a fundamental vehicle for the diffusion of Mannerism in Venice and outside.

Among the Venetian literati, Tintoretto's closest friend was a comic playwright, as he son of a dyer: Andrea Calmo. Calmo describes brightly the painter at twenty, calling him a "peppercorn":

a great spirit, a light beard, much intellect, not much flesh, and high heart, young in years and old in judgement

and about his rapidity, he adds:

with a flourish of the brush you paint a face from life in an hour.

Calmo's written portrait is as vivid as the self-portrait accomplished by Tintoretto at the same time: let me say that it could well be a caption of it.

This and other witnesses of Tintoretto's involvement in the literary elite and the related support broke up due to the increasing antagonism of the influent Titian towards the younger artist. By mid-fifties, Paolo Caliari from Verona, who got Titian's esteem, was also active in town.

To quote again Stefania Mason, even if "Jacopo has sometimes been presented as a painter 'of the people'...many of his clients belonged to the aristocracy, including some with Romanist tastes, although his support among them did not rise to the level of Veronese's". For instance, in the early 1550s Tintoretto was a member of Francesco Doni's Accademia Pellegrina, a group associated with the poligrafii. In 1566 he was elected a member of the

Accademia del Disegno in Florence together with Titian, Palladio, Danese Cattaneo, Giuseppe Salviati and Battista Zelotti.

More than with any other source of patronage, Tintoretto was linked with the Scuole, or lay confraternities, a typical Venetian institution, of medieval origin, consisting in very powerful and wealthy charities, above all the six Scuole grandi, that offered middle-class citizens a substitute for the political power otherwise denied.

The Scuole del Sacramento, connected to parish churches, whose members comprised merchants and artisans, were particularly connected to the Counter-Reformation historical moment, promoting orthodox values: Tintoretto painted for them nine canvases, starting with the *Last Supper* for the church of San Marcuola in 1547, responding to their request for images of great emotional intensity and immediate religious comprehension.

He worked for the Tailor's guild and for the Scuola of the Fishmongers; the magnificent *Baptism of Christ* for the church of San Silvestro of 1580 was commissioned by the Scuola of the Bargermen's guild.

The artist's personal relationships as well played a great role. Two of Tintoretto's friends, Andrea Calmo and Marco Episcopi, his future father-in-law, being brothers and officers at the Scuola grande of San Marco, surely supported him in obtaining his career-making commission for the *Miracle of the Slave* in 1547.

With this awesome painting he realised something deeply new, combining the colour of Titian with the drawing of Michelangelo. The latter's influence, at this point, was so strong that it makes us wonder if Tintoretto has not ever travelled to Rome.

The names and sometimes the portraits of supporters and patrons could be included in paintings as we do in the colophon of a catalogue. This is what happened, for instance, with the insertion of the presiding officer (guardian grande) Tommaso Rangone in three new

Histories of Saint Mark Tintoretto painted in early 1560s for the same Scuola grande. The display of such an ego was not accepted by members of the association, who gave back the canvases to the author; the latter, however, defiantly made no change.

But Tintoretto did not only want to work for the Scuole, he wanted to become a member of them.

Before getting to that point, we must remember that before, in the early 1550s, the first works for the State (the Procurators of San Marco and the Council of Ten) are documented, alongside with the beginning of the collaboration with the church of the Madonna dell'Orto, in the area in which he had moved his home by 1548.

In the meantime, older than forty, he had married the fifteen years old Faustina, daughter of his sponsor Marco Episcopi (also of Brescian origin), who belonged to the citizen class and his first legitimate son, Domenico, was born. He already had a much-

loved daughter, Marietta, born before his marriage, around 1554.

According to Ridolfi, Tintoretto dressed Marietta as a boy, took her with him wherever he went and above all trained her as an artist, but the claim that Marietta's mother was a German courtesan is not proved by any document.

Many of the children borne by Faustina died: those who reached majority were, after Domenico, Marco, (born in 1562,) Gierolima, who became sister Perina, Zuan Battista, who brought the name of Jacopo's father, Lucrezia, later sister Ottavia, and Laura. Marietta, Domenico and Marco were involved in the family-based workshop that survived Jacopo, with a much lower quality, for more than eighty years.

Tintoretto rose to a higher social level than that of his father and of most painters, and as a member of the Scuola dei Mercanti he got to the level of merchants rather than practitioners of a purely mechanical art, but he never reached the economic well-being of

Titian nor that of Veronese. He managed to buy a house of his own at about age fifty-six, (in 1574,) and he also owned a small property on the Terraferma to provide food and wine for his big family.

Indeed, Tintoretto seems to have been tormented by a chronic lack of money. In 1575, he even petitioned the State for tax relief, repeating several times the words “poor” and “poverty” and wrote that he had been wrongly taxed “because of some damaging information given by those of my profession who hate me”.

In 1564 Tintoretto confirms his donation of the oval painting for the central compartment of the ceiling of the Albergo to the Scuola grande di San Rocco: a border line expedient for defeating his competitors (from Giuseppe Salviati to Federico Zuccari, to Paolo Veronese) and the following year he becomes, at last, member of the confraternity.

Mid 1560 he started his decoration of the Scuola di San Rocco (in the church he had painted before): in

twenty years he accomplished his Sistine Chapel, sixty large paintings with episodes of Old and New Testament. Ten years later, obtaining an annuity of 100 ducats for the production of three paintings every year in the Scuola and in the church (before the feast of San Rocco) at his own expenses, he guaranteed himself regular income for the whole of his life but also, and above all, a place where he could express himself without any fear of competition, a place which would moreover allow him to fully express his urgency to paint and his own religious feelings. At the same time the Scuola got the services of a great painter at an advantageous price.

From mid 1550s he subsequently became the artist more often engaged by the State for a wide range of works, from votive paintings of the doges to portraits of senior officials and history cycles for the Sala del Maggior Consiglio and to other assignments, such as restorations, expertises, valuations, inventories and minor decorative works. Implementing the same strategy used in many other occasions, when in 1571

the Holy League defeated the Turks in the battle of Lepanto, with crucial support from the Venetian fleet, Jacopo regretted not having participated personally in the battle, but celebrated the victory in a painting for the Ducal Palace that he donated to the Republic.

In September 1574 Jacopo petitioned the Council of ten for a *sansaria* at the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, a sinecure that formally, if not effectively, recognized his holder as official painter of the Venetian Republic, which had previously been attributed to Giovanni Bellini and Titian. His petition was granted, but he was never able to collect the annuity of 125 ducats that derived from it.

The dreadful plague of 1575-1577, which decimated the population, and for which Titian died, left Tintoretto's large family unscathed, while the fires of 1574 and 1577 that destroyed a good part of the paintings in the Ducal Palace gave new opportunities of work to the artists.

Apart from the misunderstanding on the practice of drawing, which we know was widely used by Tintoretto, Vasari's judgement of "the most extraordinary brain that the art of painting has ever produced", the most prolific of the Venetian painters, is icastic and fitting:

"swift, resolute, fantastic, and extravagant, [...] 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".

