

Biography of Tintoretto (1519 - 1594)

The son of a dyer which is where he got his nick name from, Jacopo Robusti spent his entire life in Venice, with the exception of a trip to Rome - which probably took place in 1545 - and a visit to Mantua in 1580. Very little is known of his life. Even establishing the year of his birth was no easy task: his record of baptism having burnt down in the fire of the San Polo Archive. The information was gleaned from his obituary preserved in San Marziale that allowed his birth to be ascribed to the year 1519, seeing as there is reference to the death of "Jacopo Robusti known as Tintoretto", that took place on "the 31st of May 1594" after "fifteen days of fever" at the age of "seventy five years". The documentary evidence speaks of a short apprenticeship under Titian, who soon banished him from his school, though probably not out of jealousy, as is usually reported, but due to contrasting artistic views and incompatible characters, given the rebellious spirit of the young pupil, who a friend mockingly described in Venetian as a "granelo de pévere" (a pepper corn). His first public works are datable to the end of the fourth decade of the Sixteenth century: the "Last Supper" in Church of San Marcuola dates back to 1547, and clearly owes a great deal to Titian, particularly in its chromatic choices, while "The freeing of the slave", (1548) was painted for the Scuola Grande of San Marco - a religious and lay confraternity that helped the needy and the sick - and was responsible for bringing Tintoretto to public attention, as can be gleaned by a letter by Pietro Aretino who praises him. Fifteen or so years later, commissioned once again by the Scuola Grande (1562), Tintoretto painted other canvases featuring the Miracles of Saint Mark, among which stands out the "Finding of the body" a striking episode conceived within the framework of an ambitious iconographic project that included the "Stories of the Passion" of the "Old" and "New Testament" and the "Stories of the childhood of the Virgin and Christ". In the "Bronze Serpent" situated in the main hall of the Scuola, the merging of the natural and supernatural unfolds with astonishing representational effectiveness. In May of 1564 the councillors of the Scuola Grande of San Rocco decide to have the ceiling of the "Albergo" - the hall used for the meetings of the "board" - located in their new premises build behind the Apse of the Church of Santa Maria Gloriosa ai Frari, decorated at their own expense. Tintoretto, invited to take part in the competition, presented a sketch for a canvas representing "The glory of San Rocco"; this was the beginning of a collaboration that was to last twenty years (it will come to an end only in 1587), that will result in the halls of the Scuola di San Rocco filling with the artist's works, until they formed a vast figurative poem, whose importance has often been compared to that of the Brancacci chapel in Florence or the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The theme depicted on the walls of the Albergo is the "Passion". The scenes with "Christ before Pilate", the "The Ascent to Calvary" and the Crucifixion reveal a style that has at this stage reached full maturity and a figurative composition imbued with a strong theatrical element in presenting its narrative and considerable awareness of spatial and dynamic values. Between 1575 and 1581, in the Main Hall on the first floor of the Scuola di San Rocco, next to the Albergo, Tintoretto first painted the ceiling canvases with biblical themes, then those on the walls with evangelical themes: remarkable, for the use of light and its chromatic originality, is the "Adoration of the Shepherds". Between 1583 and 1587 the large San Rocco cycle is completed with the painting of the canvases in the Lower Hall, that include various scenes from the "Life of the Virgin" and the "Childhood of Christ", "Saint Mary Magdalene reading" and "Saint Mary the Egyptian in meditation". While he was busy with the canvases of the Scuola of San Rocco, Tintoretto also painted for private patrons, for churches and for the government: as one of his latest endeavours, he undertook the decoration of a wall of the hall of the Large Council Room in the Palazzo Ducale, depicting "Paradise", a vast canvas mainly entrusted to his assistants, which nevertheless reveals the considerable creative effort that he himself put into it. In his last paintings, produced between 1592 and 1594 for the San Giorgio Maggiore Presbytery ("The Gathering of the Manna", "Last supper", "Deposition of Christ in the Sepulchre") the dramatic tension so typical of his compositions here reaches peaks of fiercely visionary intensity, while in other instances it reveals a level of profound and intimate spiritual concentration.