



FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT
WRITERS IN MUSEUMS 1798-1898

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3. Tintoretto in San Rocco Between Light and Darkness

Maria Agnese Chiari Moretto Wiel

The following group of essays are specifically focused on light and its relationship to the production and function of Tintoretto's paintings that remain in *situ*, a theme that may be considered from three main points of view, with particular reference to the monumental cycle the master created for the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. First, the creative approach of Jacopo, who used light as an extraordinary element of communication with the viewer. Second, the often dramatically negative effects of exposure to sunlight on the colour of his canvases. Finally, the problem of the inadequate lighting of the rooms in the Scuola, preventing a proper appreciation of the master's canvases, which were often difficult to read before the recently introduced lighting systems.

The great adventure of the work of Tintoretto, so often defined as the 'painter of the light', begins in San Rocco with a significant night scene: the amazing *Saint Roch Healing the Plague Victims*,¹ created by the young artist in 1549 for the presbytery of the church built by the Scuola to house the relics of its patron saint. In the vast and dark interior of the hospital where the charitable activities of the saint are portrayed, it is the light that is the 'fulcro della composizione, più precisamente la doppia illuminazione, provocata nel fondo dalla luce artificiale delle torce e

1 The painting can be viewed at chapter 1, Fig. 1.2, or online, <http://www.scuola.grandesanrocco.org/home-en/tintoretto/church/>

in primo piano da un fascio di luce irreale che investe lateralmente la scena, a trasfigurare in senso fantastico il tema'.²



Fig. 3.1 Tintoretto, *Ascent to Calvary*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, 1566–67. Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Droga_krzy%C5%BCowa.jpg

Already in this early masterpiece the light is the key to reading the event. 'Irradiating the darkened interior with warmth, caressing the morbidly unhealthy flesh of the victims, dramatically spotlighting the central moment of saintly cure and seemingly gathering itself to greatest intensity in the halo outlining Roch's head the light is heavenly rather than natural. As its concentration around Roch suggests, it is created

2 'The cornerstone of the composition. More precisely, it is the double illumination, created in the background by the artificial light of the torches and in the foreground by a beam of imaginary light laterally striking the scene, which imaginatively transforms the subject.' (Author's translation). Stefania Mason Rinaldi, 'La peste e le sue immagini nella cultura figurativa veneziana', in *Venezia e la Peste. 1348–1797* [exhibition catalogue] (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1979), p. 244, http://opac.regesta-imperii.de/lang_en/anzeige.php?sammelwerk=Venezia+e+la+peste%2C+1348-1797

by the presence of the saint, whose relics in the apse could be seen as the ultimate source, dispelling the darkness of the sickroom with the promise of cure'.³

Many years later, in the *Ascent to the Calvary* in the Sala dell'Albergo (1566–67), a pronounced play of light and darkness distinguishes the two sections of the composition, becoming a dramatically expressive element. The deep shadow of the lower half, where the two thieves advance with difficulty, bent under the weight of their crosses, contrasts with the bright tonalities of the upper zone in which Christ walks towards the top of Golgotha immersed in a full light that already seems to foretell his triumph over death.



Fig. 3.2 Tintoretto, *Moses Striking the Rock*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, 1577. Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:File-Tintoretto,_Jacopo_-_Moses_Striking_Water_from_the_Rock_-_1577_-_122kb.jpg

³ Louise Marshall, 'A Plague Saint for Venice: Tintoretto at the Chiesa di San Rocco', in *Artibus et Historiae* 66 (2012), 153–88 (p. 174).

In the late 1570s, the painter offers once again a visionary and fantastic interpretation of the theme of light on the ceiling of the Chapter Hall of the Scuola, in the large canvas representing *Moses Striking the Rock* (1577). Here the light assumes the new, undisputed role of protagonist, being one of the most relevant elements in the structure of the composition, as witnessed also in many of the scenes in the later cycle that he painted on the walls of the same room (1578–81).



Fig. 3.3 Tintoretto, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, 1578–81. Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacopo_Tintoretto_-_The_Adoration_of_the_Shepherds_-_WGA22550.jpg

In *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1578–81) the light radiating down through the scattered roof beams of the humble stable suffuses and animates the scene, softly illuminating the calm upper zone. A stronger chiaroscuro accentuates the excited gestures of the shepherds joyfully

offering gifts to the Christ Child who, along with the Virgin, are illuminated by a strong beam of light, indicating the true protagonists of the event. Similarly, in the *Baptism of Christ* (1578–81) the light is a key element, decisive both for the composition and for the expression of spiritual value. Rather than the traditional daylight, Tintoretto shows veils of darkness interrupted by the divine light that pierces the clouds and bathes the back of the Saviour who humbly kneels with his bowed head at the feet of John the Baptist. The protagonists are neither in the foreground nor at the centre of the composition. 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 when God recognizes Christ as his son. The solid,



Fig. 3.4 Tintoretto, *The Baptism of Christ*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, 1578–81. Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacopo_Tintoretto_-_The_Baptism_of_Christ_-_WGA22551.jpg

vital, sculptural figure of the Risen Christ dominates the complex and elaborate scene of the *Resurrection* (1578–81): in the distance to the left, in the first light of dawn, the Holy Women approach the tomb; at the bottom, the soldiers are immersed in darkness; yet the fulcrum of the composition is the dazzling explosion of light that blasts forth from the open tomb.



Fig. 3.5 Tintoretto, *The Resurrection of Christ*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, 1578–81. Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacopo_Tintoretto_-_The_Resurrection_of_Christ_-_WGA22555.jpg

However, if the light he creates and controls with such extraordinary skill is a characteristic, brilliant and innovatively expressive medium in Jacopo's art, over the centuries sunlight has proved to be an enemy of many of the colours the painter had originally conceived, inexorably altering many of them.⁴

⁴ Francesco Valcanover, *Tintoretto and the Scuola Grande of San Rocco* (Venice: Storti, 1983), pp. 8–9, has observed that the general shade of the paintings had 'notably

These effects can be observed in the frieze with *putti* and garlands of flowers and fruits, which connects the wooden frame of the ceiling and the paintings on the walls in the Sala dell'Albergo. A comparison of the frieze today with a fragment of it depicting *Three Apples* (folded under the final part of the frieze itself until it was found during a restoration in 1905 and now framed on the bench in the same room) shows clearly the difference in the original polychromy of the fragment, which preserves the vivid intensity Tintoretto had conceived. Protected from the effects of light and oxidization for centuries, the *Three Apples* reveal the changes that have occurred in the extant frieze, which enjoyed no such protection.⁵

Perhaps even more obvious is the case of the representation of *The Virgin Mary Reading* (commonly known as *St. Mary of Egypt*), located to the right of the altar in the ground-floor Hall. Mary's cloak, originally blue, now appears as a warm golden brown, making the iconographic interpretation of the painting even more difficult.⁶ Even after the careful and demanding restoration that took place between 1969 and 1974 and gave them new life,⁷ the paintings in the ground-floor hall were still hardly visible, as they had been in the days of Ruskin and James, whose strongly critical impressions are analysed by Rosella Mamoli Zorzi.⁸

darkened due to the alteration with time of some pigments and their relative colour combinations. In particular the blue has become lead-grey, the green brown, the red pale pink, the yellow amaranth. This has created an irreversible change which, if on the one hand has lessened the tone-colour vividness of the chromatic harmony, on the other hand has increased that intensity of luminous effects which originally must have been dramatically set off in the semi-darkness of the room...'.⁵

- 5 About the chromatic alteration of Tintoretto's palette see: Stefano Volpin, Antonella Casoli, Michela Berzioli and Chiara Equiseto, 'I colori scomparsi: la materia pittorica e le problematiche di degrado', in Grazia Fumo e Dino Chinellato (eds.), *Tintoretto svelato. Il soffitto della Sala dell'Albergo nella Scuola Grande di San Rocco. Storia, ricerche, restauri* (Milan: Skira editore 2010), pp. 138–45; Gianluca Poldi, 'Gli azzurri perduti nei dipinti di Tintoretto. Ri-vedere le cromie grazie alle analisi scientifiche', in Sara Abram (ed.), *La Crocifissione di Tintoretto. L'intervento sul dipinto dei Musei Civici di Padova* (Turin: Editoria 2000, 2013), pp. 101–13.
- 6 See: Poldi, 'Gli azzurri perduti', figs. 58–61, pp. 105–06.
- 7 See: Franco Posocco, 'Il restauro di Tintoretto a San Rocco', in *Scuola Grande Arciconfraternita di San Rocco. Notiziario* 37 (May 2017), 104–07.
- 8 See: the *Notiziario* of the Scuola (Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, 'Dal buio alla luce: la Scuola di San Rocco da Ruskin e James a Fortuny', in *Scuola Grande Arciconfraternita di San Rocco. Notiziario* 32 (December 2014), 49–73).

Step by step the Scuola sought a lighting system that would improve the legibility of Tintoretto's canvases. After successive important interventions, the Scuola has arrived at the current lighting system in the same ground-floor hall and in the Sala dell'Albergo.⁹ Thanks to this new illumination, one can now admire all the beauty, power and chromatic strength of Tintoretto's work. A further ambitious and complex project is being carried out in the Chapter Hall at the time of writing and is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2018.¹⁰

In past centuries and during recent years the problem of darkness, repeatedly emphasized not only by famous visitors but also by the members of the Scuola, influenced the exhibition of several important works.

This is true of Titian's *Annunciation* (ca.1535) and Tintoretto's *Visitation* (1588), which in the 1930s were removed from their sumptuously carved and gilded frames overhanging the arches of the landing of the staircase during the two important monographic exhibitions dedicated to these painters (1935 and 1937). They were not reinstalled there until 2014, since it was believed that in that location they were hardly visible and little appreciated because of the poor illumination.

9 In 2011 the Ground Floor Hall 'è stata oggetto di un progetto di rinnovamento illuminotecnico, cui hanno collaborato Osram e l'architetto Alberto Pasetti Bombardella. Tre gli obiettivi progettuali: conservazione, corretta percezione visiva e interpretazione cromatica, che riassumono la necessità di preservare le opere dal degrado fotochimico ottimizzando le condizioni per la loro visione. Lo studio della nuova illuminazione ha inoltre tenuto in considerazione i vincoli posti dal contesto architettonico e le problematiche legate alle grandi dimensioni dei teleri.' See: *Nuova illuminazione per la Sala Terrena della Scuola di San Rocco*, <https://www.theplan.it> '[T]he Ground Floor Hall was the focus of a project of lighting renovation, carried out thanks to the collaboration between Osram and architect Alberto Pasetti Bombardella. Among the aims of this project there were: preservation, proper visual perception and chromatic interpretation. Such elements sum up the requirement of preserving artworks from photochemical decay optimizing their visual conditions. The study of the new lighting took also into account the restrictions created by the architectural context and the problems connected with the large size of the canvases.' (Author's translation).

About the works in the Sala dell'Albergo see: Demetrio Sonaglioni, 'La nuova luce dinamica della Sala dell'Albergo' in *Scuola Grande Arciconfraternita di San Rocco*, pp. 74–87; Massimo Maria Villa, 'Venezia. Vedere oltre lo sguardo', *Luce e design*, 9 December 2014, <https://www.lucenews.it/venezia-vedere-oltre-lo-sguardo/>

10 This very complex work will hopefully be complete by the end of 2018, to coincide with the celebrations for the fifth centenary of Jacopo Tintoretto's birth (*Tintoretto 500*).



Fig. 3.6 Titian, *Annunciation*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, ca.1535.
Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Titian_-_Annunciation_-_WGA22805.jpg



Fig. 3.7 Tintoretto, *Visitation*, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice, 1588.
Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacopo_Tintoretto_-_Visitation_-_WGA22645.jpg

Now, at last, after having had their frames restored¹¹ and since the creation of a new lighting system that is appropriate and respectful of their preservation, these two extremely precious works can be read much better than in the past when they were shown on easels in the presbytery of the Chapter Hall. In fact, they are now seen from the correct point of view and with the proper enhancement of their ancient wooden frames in a setting for which they had been successfully ‘adapted’ since the sixteenth century (the *Annunciation*)¹² or conceived *ab origine* (the *Visitation*).

These examples may appear limited and marginal, however it is undeniable that the new possibilities offered by the recent technologies – permanent and dynamic, ‘warm’ and ‘cool’ lights – now allow the viewer to better appreciate the quality, the strength and the appeal of Tintoretto’s great enterprise in San Rocco, by discovering details that had been hidden by centuries of ‘darkness’.

11 The restoration has been carried out by Maristella Volpin, thanks to the generosity of the Friends of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco (Washington, D.C.).

12 For the details of the painting’s acquisition by the Scuola and the subsequent events see: Maria Agnese Chiari Moretto Wiel, ‘L’*Annunciazione* di Tiziano nella Scuola Grande di San Rocco. Appunti’, in *Scuola Grande Arciconfraternita di San Rocco*, pp. 50–57.