

## Notes on Tintoretto's Use of German Woodcut

Michiaki KOSHIKAWA

In *Der Cicerone* of 1855, Jacob Burckhardt wrote his passages on Tintoretto's paintings that still remain, despite their deep-rooted classicist bias, a most insightful comment on the artist's extraordinary talent as a creator of dramatic narratives. On the great *Crucifixion* in the Sala dell'Albergo of the Scuola di S. Rocco, the author wrote:

Here one first learns to understand Tintoretto's highly important historical position; he first (especially in the large upper hall) gives form to the sacred history from beginning to end in the sense of absolute naturalism, perhaps with the object of producing immediate effect and emotion.<sup>1)</sup>

This positive assessment of Tintoretto's historical position is inseparable from the author's aesthetic criticism on the "vulgarism" of Tintoretto's representations. "Along with much that was grand, there was in him certain coarseness and barbarism of feeling<sup>2)</sup>"; "he falls utterly into commonplace; thus, for instance the *Last Supper* [in the upper hall of the Scuola di S. Rocco] has hardly ever been more vulgarly conceived."<sup>3)</sup> Today we are freer from classicist aesthetic ideals than the great historian of the 19th century, and we can now consider what Burckhardt regarded as vulgarism from different perspectives. Tintoretto's choice of popular types of figures and architectural settings, his details evoking low life-style which are often captured with striking vividness, and his representations of action caught in a hasty movement instead of a noble dignity constitute the characteristic imagery of "an idealized conception of poverty", which can be analyzed in the context of the artist's sense of social identity, or of contemporary

religious ideals.<sup>4)</sup> This aspect is indeed an essential part of that groundbreaking "absolute naturalism" noted by Burckhardt.

The principal question that enframes my following observations is what kind of visual sources assisted Tintoretto in his establishment of such a pictorial language. In any discussion on Jacopo's stylistic formation, his avid adoption of Central-Italian models has always been emphasized – of course rightly. The numerous extant drawings after sculpted models of Central-Italian origin made by Tintoretto and his school are eloquent testimony to the practice of studying such models in the artist's workshop. However, the Venetian master seems to have used these models in a strikingly original way, quite differently from his colleagues in Central Italy. To cite Tom Nichols's apt observation, "Tintoretto re-signified the stylised, expressively arbitrary language of contemporary *maniera* painting, investing forms ultimately derived from classical or High Renaissance sources with a new moral content."<sup>5)</sup> In other words, the artist could subordinate difficult and sophisticated forms of Central-Italian *maniera* to his own necessity of creating a forcible narrative, with his "object of producing immediate effect and emotion".

Obviously, Tintoretto's keen interest in the Mannerist style itself does not explain the aspect of his art which was condemned by Burckhardt as "commonplace" or "barbarism" but that we consider as an essential component of his mature narrative style. Instead, what I would propose in the following discussion is the possibility that the artist may have made extensive use of a different kind of visual sources, much cheaper and more readily available in Venice than Central-Italian sculpted models: northern woodcuts.



fig. 1 Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Crucifixion* (detail), Scuola di S. Rocco, Venice



fig. 2 Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Raising of the Cross* (from the *Fall and Redemption of Mankind*), woodcut



fig. 3 Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (detail), Sistine Chapel, Vatican

In the S. Rocco *Crucifixion*,<sup>6)</sup> Tintoretto introduced the impressive motifs of the good and bad thieves' crosses, one on the left being erected (fig. 1), and the other on the right still lying on the ground to which the bad thief is now being tied. These two crosses give a strong sense of temporal sequence to the entire scene, and form a remarkable contrast with crucified Christ, immobile and mysteriously radiant in the center.<sup>7)</sup> The action of the men raising the cross on the left – two lifting up the cross's arms, one pulling the rope, and three holding the lower part of the cross – are so forcibly realistic. (Everyone who has ever tried to raise a tall and heavy object would know that one should tightly secure the lowest point of the object, exactly as in Tintoretto's picture.) Carlo Ridolfi's concluding comment on this painting sounds so appropriate: "To sum up, Tintoretto did not leave out anything that might be likely to have happened in that event, or that arouse emotions of compassion in the onlookers, as if he had actually beheld that tragic event [come s'egli avesse veduto & osservato quel tragico successo]."<sup>8)</sup>

It seems clear that Tintoretto had made various studies after life for this scene of the cross being raised. However, it has already been observed that the scene was also inspired by a northern representation of the *Raising of the Cross*. Nichols has related Tintoretto's representation with a woodcut from the series *Fall and Redemption of Mankind* by Albrecht Altdorfer which dates from c. 1513 (fig. 2).<sup>9)</sup> The comparison of the two images is telling indeed. The German master's diagonal composition was transplanted into a larger narrative context and effectively evokes a sense of unstable movement. For the postures of the men raising the cross, Tintoretto did not borrow anything literally from Altdorfer's woodcut, but rather his solution appears as a sort of combination of the display of Michelangelesque foreshortening (cf. fig. 3) and the adoption of the harsh, down-to-earth

figure types of the German woodcut. In short, we have here a remarkable synthesis of the two apparently incompatible trends, the *maniera* grace of forms and the northern realistic style of narrative. It seems clear that this latter component is at the root of Burckhardt's impression, "certain coarseness and barbarism of feeling".

Taking the starting point from Nichols's comparison, now I would maintain that this particular woodcut series by Altdorfer was actually known to Tintoretto, and several other compositions included in the series were also used as models by him. *The Miracle of the Slave* of 1548 for the Scuola di S. Marco (now in the Accademia Gallery, Venice)<sup>10)</sup> is certainly a demonstration piece of the young artist's mastery of the Central-Italian style of composition, and the boldly foreshortened figure of St. Mark precipitating downwards (fig. 4) – an ancestor of the flying Superman in 20th-century comic strips – was also



fig. 7 Nicolaes Beatrizet (after Michelangelo), *The Conversion of St. Paul* (detail), engraving

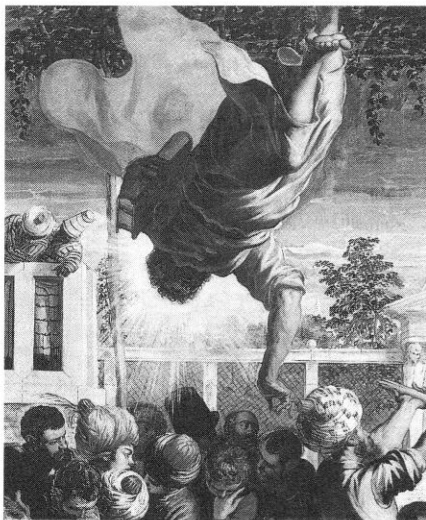


fig. 4 Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Miracle of the Slave* (detail), Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice



fig. 5 Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Annunciation to Joachim* (from the *Fall and Redemption of Mankind*), woodcut

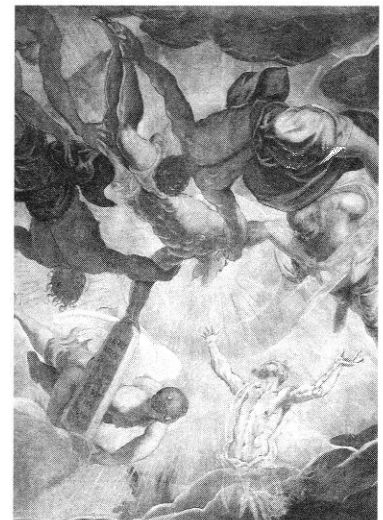


fig. 6 Jacopo Tintoretto, *Moses Receiving the Table of the Law* (detail), Madonna dell'Orto, Venice