

Notes on Tintoretto's Use of German Woodcut

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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.¹⁾

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"²⁾; "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."³⁾ 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.⁴⁾ 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."⁵⁾ 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*,⁶⁾ 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.⁷⁾ 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]."⁸⁾

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).⁹⁾ 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)¹⁰⁾ 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 Nicolas Beatrixet (after Michelangelo), *The Conversion of St. Paul* (detail), engraving

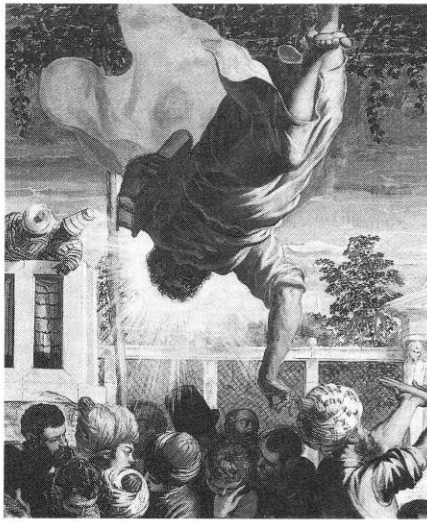


fig. 4 Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Miracle of the Slave* (detail), Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice



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

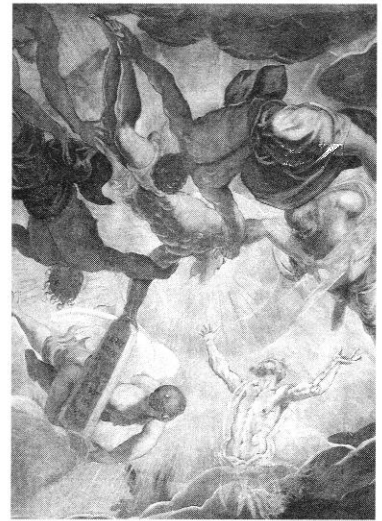


fig. 6 Jacopo Tintoretto, *Moses Receiving the Table of the Law* (detail), Madonna dell'Orto, Venice

understood in this context. The figure's direct forerunner has been identified as the figure of flying Mercury in the lost frescoes on the façade of the Palazzo d'Anna, executed by Pordenone around 1532.¹¹ The young Tintoretto doubtless saw Pordenone's works with keen interest, but, so far as this figure of St. Mark is concerned, a more convincing comparison may be made with Altdorfer's small woodcut representing the *Annunciation to Joachim* (fig. 5).¹² Besides the general resemblance of the posture, the angel in the small print foreshadows two salient features of Tintoretto's figure of St. Mark: the radical solution to sink the saint's face in dark shadow and hence almost indiscernible, and to cut a part of the figure at the upper border of the picture plane, thus heightening the dramatic effect of the flying figure rapidly entering the picture space.

The supposition that Jacopo actually used the *Annunciation to*

Joachim as his model is supported by another example of his reference to the same print. The encounter of the Archangel Gabriel and Joachim, with the ecstatic reaction of the latter, was skillfully adapted as that of the God and Moses in Tintoretto's enormous canvas for the Church of Madonna dell'Orto of c. 1560-62, *Moses Receiving the Table of the Law* (fig. 6).¹³ The diagonal arrangements of space and movement are exactly the same in the two images, which leaves scarcely any doubt on Jacopo's direct reference. Also here, we can observe the Venetian master's characteristic strategy for creating an original invention. Taking a basic figuration of compelling narrative from a northern model, he then transformed it into a stylistic category which may be loosely termed as Michelangelesque (cf. fig. 7).

The above observations regarding Tintoretto's use of Altdorfer's woodcuts in different periods make it plausible to suggest that the artist



fig. 8 Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Finding of the Body of St. Mark*, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan



fig. 9 Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Flagellation* (from the *Fall and Redemption of Mankind*), woodcut



fig. 10 Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Descent from the Cross* (from the *Fall and Redemption of Mankind*), woodcut

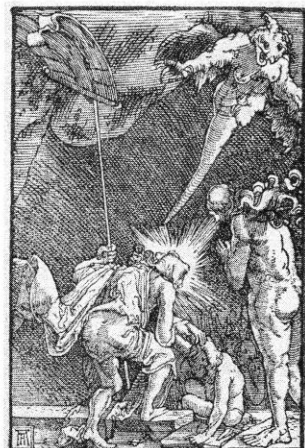


fig. 11 Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Descent into Limbo* (from the *Fall and Redemption of Mankind*), woodcut



fig. 12 Albrecht Altdorfer, *Jael and Sisera*, woodcut

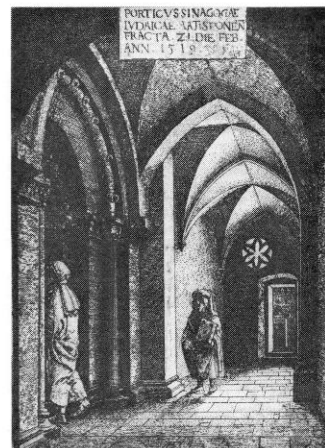


fig. 13 Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Porch of the Regensburg Synagogue*, etching

may have actually possessed the series composed of as many as forty small sheets, although his testament of May 1594 is silent about the print collection aspect of his studio equipment.¹⁴ In this context, the *Finding of the Body of St. Mark*, executed between 1562 and 1566 for the Scuola di S. Marco (now in the Brera Gallery, Milan),¹⁵ is very revealing (fig. 8). The staggering posture of the woman to the extreme right is based on the figure of Christ in Altdorfer's *Flagellation* (fig. 9),¹⁶ while the group of men lowering a corpse seems to have been inspired by the woodcut *Descent from the Cross* (fig. 10).¹⁷ Finally, the spectacular idea of the menacing figure of the devil floating in the dark, ghostly interior seems to derive from the *Descent into Limbo* (fig. 11).¹⁸ Even outside this woodcut series, a few other Altdorfer prints may be related to the composition of the Brera canvas. The foreshortened body lying in lower left, often related to Mantegna's foreshortened figure of *Dead Christ*, is in fact comparable with a similar figure in Altdorfer's woodcut *Jael and Sisera* (fig. 12)¹⁹; the sinister mood of the vaulted gallery dimly lit by artificial lights may well have been inspired by the depictions of the synagogue in Regensburg in Altdorfer's famous etchings of 1519 (fig. 13).²⁰ It is characteristic that Tintoretto made particularly intense references to the German precedents in the Brera *Finding of the Body*, whose subject is based on an episode from the local legends of St. Mark's life and did not have any strong iconographic tradition to respect. Relatively free from such constraints, the artist's narrative imagination with its intrinsically unclassical and bizarre tendency must have found the Danubian artist's works especially inspiring.

It has already been noted that a few woodcuts from Dürer's *Small Passion* cycle of 1511 served as compositional models for Tintoretto: the *Christ before Pilate* for the same subject in the Sala dell'Albergo of the Scuola di S. Rocco (1566-67),²¹ and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* for the same subject in the Sala Superiore of the same



fig. 14 Titian, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, Alte Pinakothek, Munich



fig. 15 Albrecht Altdorfer, *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (from the *Fall and Redemption of Mankind*), woodcut

Scuola (1577-81).²² It is known that Altdorfer's *Fall and Redemption of Mankind* was executed as a direct response to Dürer's *Small Passion* series, and Tintoretto's use of both series, especially in the 1560s, does not appear as mere exceptional episodes, but seems to reflect his consistent interest in the print media and the German representations of biblical narratives. Venice, a great commercial crossroad and renowned center of print culture, was naturally a very good place for artists to access northern prints.²³ After all, it was there that, according to Vasari, the young Marcantonio Raimondi bought Dürer woodcuts which he then copied enthusiastically.²⁴ Among the prominent print collections in the 16th century, those of Gabriele Vendramin in Venice and Marco Mantova Benavides in Padua stand as highly significant examples.²⁵ Tintoretto may have worked for the latter collector as early as 1541,²⁶ and a friend of the young Tintoretto, Anton Francesco Doni, was also a print collector who owned works by Schongauer, Dürer and Lucas van Leyden.²⁷ We have little documentary evidence regarding artists' print collections of the period, but a piece of information regarding Lorenzo Lotto is fairly indicative. Lotto's *Libro di spese* records that in 1542 he bought three prints for the price of one *lira* and 4 *soldi*, certainly for his professional use.²⁸ This kind of purchase must have been a common practice among Venetian painters.

From the comparisons shown above, we would even have the impression that Altdorfer's less sophisticated but more experimental and imaginative inventions may have appealed to Tintoretto more than Dürer's compositions. Jacopo was not the only one among his contemporary Venetian painters who found useful inspiration in Altdorfer's powerful expressiveness. Eugenio Battisti has pointed out that Titian's two versions of *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (now in the Louvre, Paris and the Alte Pinakothek, Munich) are based on the tiny woodcut of the same subject from the *Fall and Redemption* series (figs. 14, 15).²⁹ What Titian adopted from the print was the harsh brutality of the torturers, and the Venetian master completely italianized the style of figures while retaining the general compositional structure of his model. Tintoretto might have seen the Louvre version before it left Venice around 1542,³⁰ and, incidentally, it was Tintoretto himself who acquired the much later Munich version when, after Titian's death, it was sold by Pomponio Vecellio between 1579 and 1581.³¹ If Tintoretto was fully familiar with Altdorfer's *Fall and Redemption* series, was he not aware of the connection between Titian's great canvases and that small woodcut?

In the context of Tintoretto scholarship, the connection with German graphic art seems to have been a rather neglected aspect until recent times,³² with a notable exception of Theodor Hertzner's contribution of 1929.³³ On the other hand, the fantastic vision of Tintoretto's late landscapes has often been compared with northern landscapes, especially those of Altdorfer and the Danube school



fig. 16 Jacopo Tintoretto, *St. Mary of Egypt*, Scuola di S. Rocco, Venice



fig. 17 Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Landscape with a Large Fir*, etching

(figs. 16, 17).³⁴ If, as proposed above, Tintoretto held a significant interest in Altdorfer's prints from his early period, this would mean that some kind of affinity observed between the two artists' works was not merely based on the parallelism of their "Weltanschauung", but on a tangible historical context mediated by the accelerating circulation of printed images in the 16th century. Not by chance, Max Dvořák noted a profound similarity of attitude with German biblical narrative prints in Tintoretto's style of the paintings in the Scuola di S. Rocco.³⁵

Notes

- 1) J. Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone*, Stuttgart, 1978 [orig. ed. 1855], p. 931. The translation is by A.H. Clough (London, n.d.), cited in A.L. Lepschy, *Tintoretto Observed: A documentary survey of critical reaction from the 16th to the 20th century*, Ravenna, 1983, p. 92.
- 2) Burckhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 930 (see Lepschy, *op. cit.*, p. 91).
- 3) Burckhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 931 (see Lepschy, *op. cit.*, p. 92).
- 4) See the brilliant analysis in T. Nichols, "Tintoretto's poverty," in F. Ames-Lewis (ed.), *New Interpretations of Venetian Renaissance Painting*, Birkbeck College, 1994, pp. 99-110.
- 5) Nichols, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 106.
- 6) R. Pallucchini and P. Rossi, *Tintoretto. Le opere sacre e profane*, 2 vols., Milan, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 189-190, no. 283.
- 7) For an analysis on the narrative structure of the S. Rocco *Crucifixion*, see D. Rosand, "Action and Piety in Tintoretto's Religious Pictures," in Id., *Painting in Sixteenth-Century Venice*, revised ed., Cambridge, 1997, pp. 145-153.
- 8) C. Ridolfi, *Vite dei Tintoretto* (da *Le meraviglie dell'arte* [1648]), Venice, 1994, p. 36. The translation is based on C. Ridolfi, *The Life of Tintoretto*, trans. C. Engass and R. Engass, University Park and London, 1984, p. 32, but with my partial modifications.
- 9) T. Nichols, *Tintoretto: Tradition and Identity*, London, 1999, p. 166. For Altdorfer's woodcut series, see F. Winzinger, *Albrecht Altdorfer Graphik*, Munich, 1963, pp. 65-69, nos. 25-64; *Altdorfer und der fantastische Realismus in der deutschen Kunst* (exh. cat.), Centre Culturel du Marais, Paris, 1984, pp. 86-93, nos. 61-102; G. Bartrum, *German Renaissance Prints 1490-1550*, London, 1995, pp. 187-189, nos. 192; Id., *Albrecht Dürer and his Legacy*, London and Princeton, 2002, pp. 233-234, no. 187. Roland Krischel

compares Tintoretto's depiction of the raising with another German print, Hans Baldung Grien's *Raising of the Cross* from U. Pinder, *Speculum passionis domini nostri ihesu christi*, Nuremberg, 1507 (see R. Krischel, *Jacopo Tintoretto 1519-1594*, Cologne, 2000, p. 108).

- 10) Pallucchini and Rossi, *op. cit.* (note 6), vol. 1, pp. 157-158, no. 132.
- 11) See R. Krischel, *Jacopo Tintoretto, Das Sklavenwunder. Bildwelt und Weltbild*, Frankfurt am Main, 1994, pp. 50-55.
- 12) Winzinger, *op. cit.* (note 9), no. 29.
- 13) Pallucchini and Rossi, *op. cit.* (note 6), vol. 1, p. 182, no. 236.
- 14) Archivio di Stato di Venezia, *Notarile, Testamenti*, notaio Antonio Brinis, b. 157, n. 483, cited in Ridolfi, *op. cit.* (note 8), 1994, pp. 127-128. Here, Tintoretto intends to leave "tutte le cose pertinenti alla mia professione" to the son Domenico Robusti, without any further specification of his atelier properties.
- 15) Pallucchini and Rossi, *op. cit.* (note 6), vol. 1, pp. 184-185, no. 244.
- 16) Winzinger, *op. cit.* (note 9), no. 48.
- 17) Winzinger, *op. cit.* (note 9), no. 56.
- 18) Winzinger, *op. cit.* (note 9), no. 59.
- 19) Winzinger, *op. cit.* (note 9), no. 23.
- 20) Winzinger, *op. cit.* (note 9), nos. 173, 174.
- 21) See, for example, Nichols, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 172.
- 22) See, for example, Krischel, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 109.
- 23) For a good survey on the reception of northern prints in Venice, see G.J. van der Sman, "Incisori e incisioni d'Oltralpe a Venezia nella seconda metà del Cinquecento," in B. Aikema and B. Brown (eds.), *Il rinascimento a Venezia e la pittura del nord ai tempi di Bellini, Dürer, Tiziano* (exh. cat.), Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1999, pp. 151-159.
- 24) G. Vasari, *Le vite* [1550, 1568], ed. G. Milanesi, Florence, 1906, vol. V, pp. 404-406.
- 25) See M. Bury, "The Taste for Prints in Italy to c. 1600," *Print Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 1985), pp. 12-26, esp. p. 20.
- 26) See B.M. Meijer, "Fiamminghi e olandesi nella bottega veneziana: il caso di Jacopo Tintoretto," in Aikema and Brown (eds.), *op. cit.* (note 23), p. 133.
- 27) Bury, *op. cit.* (note 25), pp. 15-16.
- 28) See D. Landau and P. Parshall, *The Renaissance Print 1470-1550*, New Haven and London, 1994, p. 295. This record is found in the category of expenses "per l'arte", and Landau supposes that the artist bought these prints in Venice before departing for Treviso where prints would have been less easily available.
- 29) E. Bartisti, "Di alcuni aspetti non veneti di Tiziano," in *Tiziano e Venezia. Convegno internazionale di studi, Venezia, 1976*, Vicenza, 1980, pp. 221, 223.
- 30) For the dating of the Louvre picture, see *Le siècle de Titien* (exh. cat.), Grand Palais, Paris, 1993, p. 528, no. 171 (entry by J. Habert).
- 31) For Tintoretto's acquisition of Titian's works left in the house at the moment of his death, see L. Puppi, *Per Tiziano*, Milan, 2004, pp. 79-80.
- 32) This is reflected in the fact that, in the monumental catalogue raisonné by P. Rossi of 1982 (*op. cit.* in note 6 above), Dürer's name is cited only twice and Altdorfer's name not cited at all.
- 33) See T. Hetzer, "Das deutsch Element in der italienischen Malerei des 16. Jahrhunderts [1929]," in *Das Ornamentale und die Gestalt (Schriften Theodor Hetzers, Bd. 3)*, Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 270-276. The author discussed the fundamental influence of German graphic art on the stylistic orientations of Venetian painting of the 16th century, and regarded Tintoretto as the most sensitive artist to such an influence.
- 34) See, for example, Hetzer, *op. cit.* (note 33), p. 275; K. Clark, *Landscape into Art*, Harmondsworth, 1966 [orig. ed. 1949], p. 62. Recently, Krischel compares the two fantastic landscapes in the lower hall of the Scuola di S. Rocco, *St. Mary of Egypt* and *St. Mary Magdalene*, with a drawing attributed to Hans Leu the younger (Krischel, *op. cit.* in note 9 above, pp. 122-123).
- 35) M. Dvořák, *Geschichte der italienischen Kunst im zeitalter der Renaissance*, eds. J. Wilde and K.M. Swoboda, 2 vols., Munich, 1927-28, vol. 2, p. 147.

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Summary

ティントレットによるドイツ木版画の利用に関する考察

越川倫明

比較的最近までのティントレット研究において、ドイツ版画との関連は一般にあまり——特にイタリアの研究者からは——注目されなかった側面である。一方、ドイツ語圏の研究者たちは早くからティントレット後期の幻想的風景表現と北方、特にドナウ派の風景表現のあいだに親近性を看取していた。本稿は、ティントレットの物語画構想に早い時期からアルトドルファーの木版画に想を得た表現が少なからず認められることを具体的に指摘する。交易および印刷文化の一大中心地であった当時のヴェネツィアは、芸術家が多く、版画イメージに接するためにきわめて適した環境だった。ティントレットの成熟期の物語表現を特徴づける非古典的側面、すなわち庶民的タイプの人物像や建築モチーフ、貧困に対するリアスティックな眼差し、ある意味では野卑ともいえる不安定で激しい動勢といった要素が、ドイツ版画の研究をひとつの重要な刺激として成立したものと想定したい。