

Guillaume Cassegrain. *Tintoret*.

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Guillaume Cassegrain's monograph on Jacopo Tintoretto offers a model for coffee-table books. Not only is it heavy, equipped with mostly excellent color illustrations, and coming in at a very reasonable price, but it also is well-written and full of excellent observations. In five extensive chapters, Cassegrain, who teaches at the Université Lyon and has written his dissertation on the Venetian painter (advised by the late Daniel Arasse), covers the entire career of Tintoretto (although largely omitting the ducal votive paintings, portraits, and drawings) and discusses the ideological implications of the early scholarship on the artist. The first true

monograph on Tintoretto since Tom Nichols's 1999 study, it is a refreshingly unacademic, elegant essay.

Probably due to this essayistic orientation, a precise thematic delineation of the individual chapters is not central to the author. Roughly speaking, the first deals with the young artist between Titian and Michelangelo, the second with his self-fashioning, the third with his compositions, the fourth with the engagement of spectators, and the fifth with the historiography. Ultimately, however, all chapters (even the fifth) have the same concern: Tintoretto's pictorial intelligence. Cassegrain pays little attention to issues of iconography, patronage, historical context, and even art theory. He does not develop larger (historical) arguments or identify new aspects of Tintoretto's style. Cassegrain, therefore, does not substantially modify our understanding of Tintoretto yet the visual analysis even of seemingly familiar works certainly offers a rich and more complex picture of his art.

A case in point provides Cassegrain's beautiful reading of the *Miracle of the Slave* (1548), in which he characterizes the three soldiers at the base of the centurion's throne as artistic manifesto (66–70). They not only reference figures of Michelangelo and Titian, the two cornerstones of Tintoretto's artistic identity, but also exhibit his mimetic abilities, depicting three stages of (un)dress: a nude, a person whose shirt reveals the body, and a clothed person. To this *varietà* corresponds the headgear of the soldiers: the red turban displaying bravura brushwork and *colorito*, the helmet precise reflections of light, and the blue hat a combination of bravura and exact observation of nature. The three soldiers in Tintoretto's first masterpiece thus proclaim his ambitious project to combine *disegno* and *colorito* and to elevate Italian art to a new level. It is only consequential that Tintoretto signs this programmatic painting next to the soldiers on the base of the throne.

Another example of Cassegrain's original interpretation of individual works offers the decoration of the high altar chapel in San Cassiano from 1568 (239–40), in which he reveals the meaningful interconnections between the *Crucifixion* and the *Descent into Limbo* situated across from each other on the lateral walls. He points out that Christ occupies the same positions in both compositions, that Mary and Eve are arranged in parallel, and that the discarded red drapery on the floor of the *Crucifixion* becomes an animated "manteau glorieux" in the *Descent* (240). This interlocking arrangement of the two panels supports the promise of salvation, encapsulated by the gaze of the good thief across the chapel. San Cassiano thus provides a good example for what Cassegrain's calls the "phenomenology of signification" (197). Accordingly, Tintoretto generates meaning through visual means and less through iconography and content.

Cassegrain, therefore, seems to agree with several recent studies published in German (most of which he does not cite, however) and characterizes Tintoretto as a painter primarily concerned with the act of painting and exploring the possibilities of his medium (53). While this approach rightly draws attention to Tintoretto's sophisticated formal language, it is ultimately dehistoricizing and reduces his art to formal exercises. This becomes apparent in the first chapter in which Cassegrain discusses Tintoretto's remarkable plurality of styles, which he attributes to this

alleged self-referentiality of painting (45–53). But Tintoretto's application of styles is much more deliberate and meaningful. It often relates to the subject matter and the specific context of the commission. For example, Tintoretto uses an archaizing style for patrons with a strong interest in reform movements of the past and classicizing compositions, as in *Saint Roch in Glory* in the Scuola di San Rocco when he wants to please the patron and secure himself further commissions. Most striking, however, is Tintoretto's systematic use of much clearer colors, less-open brushwork, and more balanced compositions in the mythological paintings. He differentiates between the ontology of the natural and the supernatural. Accordingly, the decentered, dramatic compositions for which Tintoretto is known only appear in the religious paintings, in which they express the incomprehensible, overwhelming constitution of the divine. Yet, notwithstanding these minor reservations, Cassegrain's study significantly contributes to a better understanding of the great Venetian's pictorial intelligence.

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