

FROM THE VAULT

# Merchant of Venice

ALEXANDER NAGEL ON “JACOPO TINTORETTO (1519–1594)” AT THE MUSEO DEL PRADO, MADRID



Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti), *Venus and Mars Surprised by Vulcan*, variously dated from ca. 1545–ca. 1555, oil on canvas, 53 x 78”.

TINTORETTO was born in Venice in 1519, making him a member of the first generation to take for granted something that can be called an art world. People had started dropping the names of artists—like Raphael, or Michelangelo, or Dürer—who were famous and awesome figures understood to be contending with one another in a common field. Paintings now typically came packaged with references to other works of art, and buyers had developed the skills to read them that way. Moreover, the innovations of Leonardo and Giorgione had brought about a fundamental change in the status of the picture. The fifteenth-century obsession with transparency was over; the pictorial field had acquired a new density and opacity. The settings—dense atmospheres, dark shadows, lush landscapes, even interiors—now behaved like a ground from which figures emerged, which is to

say they recapitulated, again and again, the ambiguities of the pictorial field. The figures themselves became “figurations,” instances of painting at work. The early-sixteenth-century experiments with brushwork and the material thickness of paint were a direct consequence of this new understanding of the pictorial field—that is to say, of painting *as* field.

Tintoretto learned all these lessons firsthand as a young man in the circle and possibly in the studio of Titian, until their relations soured. It is not clear what provoked the break, but it is probably not a coincidence that between 1545 and 1548 something happened to this son of a dyer (*tintore*)—something on the order of the bluesman going down to the crossroads and coming back with scary new powers. It has happened to a few other artists in their mid-to-late twenties: Raphael, Picasso, the Beatles, and, yes,

Robert Johnson in the years before his death in 1938.

The upcoming Prado exhibition and the accompanying catalogue will redate the *Venus and Mars Surprised by Vulcan* in Munich’s Alte Pinakothek to this phase of Tintoretto’s career—to 1545, seven to ten years earlier than usual—a move that will certainly focus new attention on this astonishing painting. In 1538 Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, lying naked with her hand between her legs and looking directly out of the picture, had posed a provocative challenge to the viewer, just on this side of decorum. Tintoretto crosses the line and shows us the ensuing disturbances. The lusty male viewer tumbles into the painting, and the dog that had been peacefully slumbering at the feet of Titian’s Venus now yelps with excitement. The round mirror on the wall behind offers a partial picture of what is going on, and

also a more familiar one—two figures only, your classic mythological rape scene. The scenario in the painting-space before the mirror is more complex. The adulterous Mars is hiding under the table to the right, trying to shush the dog, while Vulcan rushes in to find Venus reclining on a bed, as Venuses tend to do. The intent older man—looking not unlike the aging Titian—is driven by lust, but it is the second-order lust known as jealousy: desire in the furrow of someone else’s desire. He pulls back her covering, not to ravish her but to inspect her, to see who has been messing with his Venus, to hunt for stains on the linen.

Lying between them—like a figurative hyphen between his head and her body—is the sleeping Cupid, or rather, Cupid in complicity with Venus, *pretending* to sleep. (He must have been pretty active a few moments before.) Like Venus, he is based on a work of art, a now-lost sculpture of Michelangelo’s that was famous for its checkered history as a forgery of an antique statue. Cupid’s job is generally to cut through the complications, to pull two bodies irresistibly together like magnets, but this artful Cupid—sleeping but not sleeping, a painting lapsing back into sculpture, a modern antiquity—seriously complicates the leap into bed. For all his rushing, Vulcan is frozen, the contours of his body caught between three works of art, none of which tells a very clear story: Venus displayed on the linen (which she stretches like a canvas behind her body), sleeping Cupid on a pedestal, and the mythological roundel. Insistent circles—the bottle-glass windows, the inlaid tile flooring, the mirror—give a sense of harassing enclosure. There is an opening on the right, but it leads straight to Vulcan’s fiery forge. It won’t be easy to get out of this chamber of repetitions and compulsions.

Tintoretto’s entire future repertoire is in place here: the tilting bodies, the carefully described yet malleable spaces, the concatenation and contiguity of figures, the gazes that don’t meet, the Michelangelesque wrench in the Titianesque works, and the resulting overall sense that the act of viewing is never cool and objective but always caught up in the





Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti), *The Last Judgment* (detail), 1562–63, oil on canvas, 47' 7" x 19' 4".

nexus of emotion and impetus—that is, in a space that is controlled by no one.

It was fine for a young painter to do a few strange and interesting paintings and even to throw off some fleeing humor, but the great *Saint Mark Freeing the Slave*, unveiled to clamor and acclaim in April 1548, presented a new order of challenge. The painting was made for one of the great religious foundations of Venice, the Scuola Grande di San Marco, making it plain that Tintoretto was an artist who meant business, a player poised to take over serious market share. Days after the unveiling, Titian's great ally the polemicist and pornographer Pietro Aretino—a critic whose influence with both the insiders and the larger public at this time was about equal to that of Clement Greenberg some four hundred years later—wrote Tintoretto a (semipublic) letter sounding the ambivalence that would dog the artist through the centuries: Your art is surpassing, your foreshortenings stupefying, but restrain your quickness, young man; cultivate “patience in the making”; put a

brake on the “career of carelessness.” If you don’t, advancing age will do it for you.

Well, it didn’t. Twenty years later, the biographer Giorgio Vasari acknowledged that the artist’s huge *Last Judgment*, unveiled in 1562 in Madonna dell’Orto, was an “extravagant invention”—but, looking more closely, he observed a hopeless mix-up of styles with no order at all. Tintoretto had made the fatal error of letting the “confusion, tumult, and terror” inherent in the *subject* throw the painting itself into disarray. Vasari could not suppress his admiration, but at the same time he suspected the worst kind of foul play: Tintoretto had “the most amazing brain that painting has ever known,” but he worked “by chance and without design, as if to demonstrate that this art is a joke.” In the late 1580s the art theorist Giovanni Battista Armenini was still sputtering at the brilliance and impudence of a painter who, he said, skipped the drawing phase altogether and passed off oil sketches as finished works, even on major commissions.

Is he brilliant, or careless? Are these works finished—that is, are they “works”? Is this all a *joke*? Artistic provocation doesn’t get any sharper than this. Centuries later, commentators were still reeling from it. In the eighteenth century, Joshua Reynolds could not quite stomach works that so obviously exposed “the mechanisms of painting.” Standing before the San Cassiano *Crucifixion* in the 1870s, Henry James felt he had been taken “to the uttermost limit of painting.” We might well ask, How was such work even imaginable *back then*?

It was, in fact, a symptom of the primary artistic dilemma of the age. Soon after Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* was completed in 1541, the question of “art in conflict with religion” became a central and even tiresome theme of cultural debate. Can painting reliably serve a high and serious purpose, or should we just accept that it is a thing “of no utility other than pleasure,” as the painter Agnolo Bronzino described it in 1547? Theorists and theologians responded to the situation with one treatise after another, patiently explaining how art could be made to serve as a vehicle of instruction, memory, and spirituality. Taking their cue, artists throughout Italy tried to work out the protocols of a new, reformed art that would shut down libidinous distraction and stay on message—a project that led to a fresh round of conflicting proposals until it produced a new monster, Caravaggio, who offered no solution to the problem but certainly cleared the decks.

Tintoretto’s response to the debate was simply to ramp up the audacity, managing to capture the larger public while the critics tried to make up their minds. The Warhol solution, in short: art made at the speed of the surrounding disarray, with a new level of artiness magically joined to a new capacity for cultural assimilation. Tintoretto may have been the first artist to profit in a big way from the idea that advanced art was *supposed* to be strange and extravagant. As with Warhol, the key was that his sensibility was always demotic, his dispatch deeply and satisfyingly pragmatic. Art was in jeopardy, yes, but that did not have to be paralyzing; in fact, it made it possible to suspend the larger questions while delivering the goods with

new swiftness and surprising force. In accepting his paintings, his primarily bourgeois clients (donors of most of the art for churches and Christian foundations in Venice) had acknowledged the most important thing, which was that art now operated from a certain remove—and that from there it could actually say something.

No ambitious artist—not even the hostile Vasari—could fail to be impressed by Tintoretto’s example. For Rubens he provided a model of how to produce a signature style on an industrial scale. Expand the model, he reasoned, and you can conquer all of Europe. El Greco, who had spent time in Venice in Tintoretto’s orbit, took away the deeper lesson. He went to Spain, threw unyielding idiosyncrasy and extravagance at the most dour Catholics of Europe, and created a market that only he could satisfy.

During his lifetime Tintoretto could hardly be made to leave his native city, and still today the majority of his production is to be seen there. His on-site work and several major paintings, including *Saint Mark Freeing the Slave*, will stay in Venice during the upcoming Prado exhibition (organized by Miguel Falomir), but works dispersed throughout the rest of the world will be gathered in a kind of parallel Venice in Madrid, for the first

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major Tintoretto retrospective since 1937. It will be a raucous assembly, with lots of chatter and a good deal of jockeying for position among the newly (re)acquainted pictures. Excellent conditions, in other words, for a new round of reassessment. For Henry James, “Tintoret—well, Tintoret was almost a prophet.” For Jean-Paul Sartre, he was a diagnostic mirror, “the manifestation of an age which refuses to recognize itself.” In the recent scholarship, Tintoretto has become above all a savvy businessman. What will he be for us? □

“Jacopo Tintoretto (1519–1594)” will be on view at the Museo del Prado, Madrid, January 29–May 13.

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