

# Brush with Genius

Andrew Butterfield

## Tintoretto

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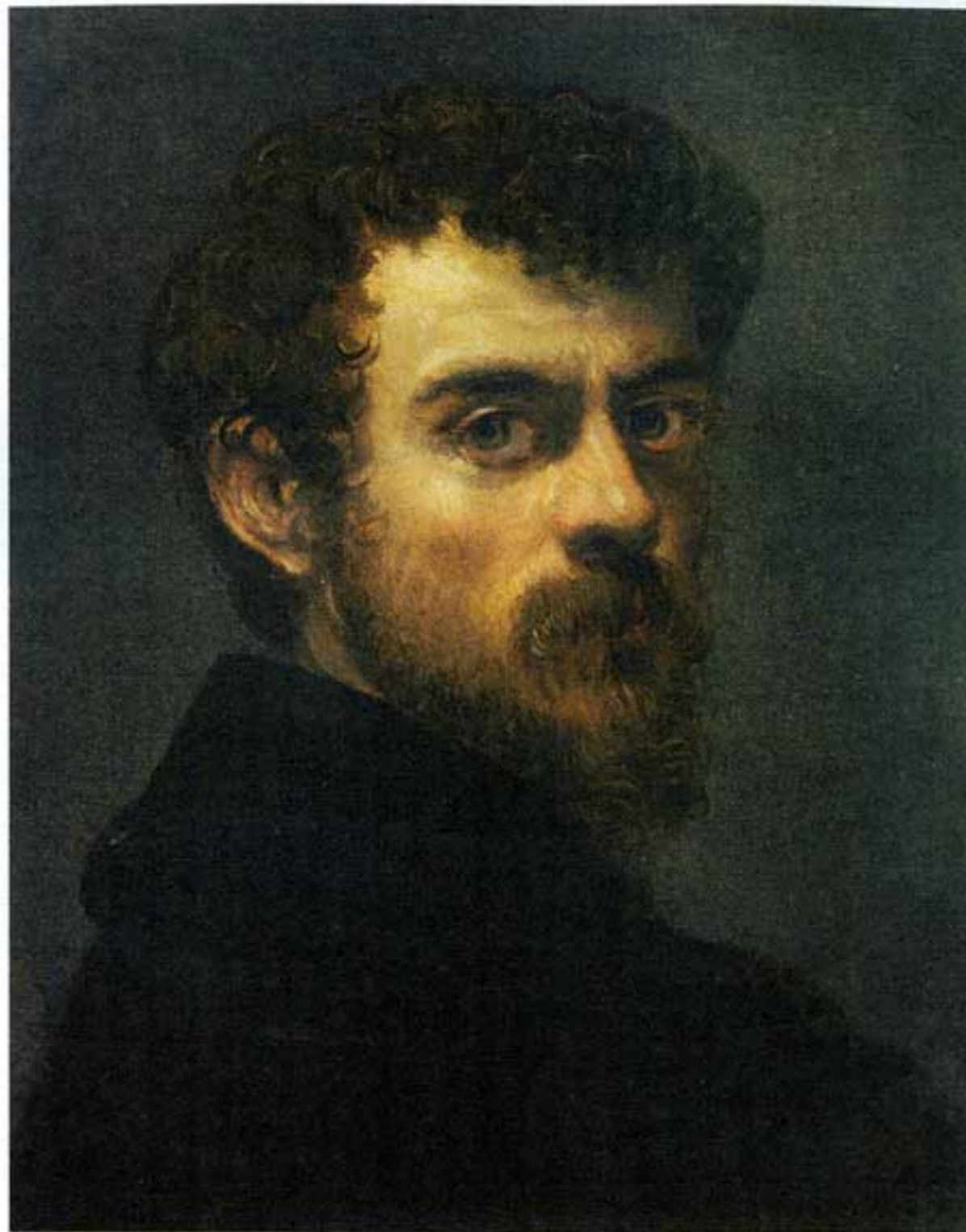
The paintings of Jacopo Tintoretto come as a revelation. According to standard opinion Michelangelo, Titian, and Raphael were the supreme artists of the sixteenth century; yet often during the last four hundred years, viewers have gazed in awe and surprise at works by Tintoretto, and wondered if he might be the greatest painter of all. Thus John Ruskin during his first visit to Venice wrote:

I never was so utterly crushed to the earth before any human intellect as I was today before Tintoret. Just be so good as to take my list of painters, and put him in the school of Art at the top, top, top of everything, with a great big black line to stop him off from everybody.... As for painting, I think I didn't know what it meant till today.

Tintoretto was a painter of daring originality and dazzling technical command. He was also an artist of epic breadth and profound human sympathy. Henry James compared him to Shakespeare; Bernard Berenson likened him to Tolstoy.

The full measure of Tintoretto's colossal achievement can only be grasped in Venice, the city of his birth where he worked for his entire career. It is only there that one can see his most important pictures, above all, the series of paintings he made for the confraternity of the Scuola di San Rocco between 1565 and 1588. Covering the walls and ceilings of two floors of a large building, these include a monumental *Crucifixion*, a work El Greco called the greatest painting ever made. Not only are such pictures rightly considered too precious to travel, many of them are also simply too big to move. Tintoretto worked on a vast scale the likes of which had never been seen before. The *Crucifixion* in the Scuola di San Rocco is more than twelve meters wide; the *Last Judgment* and the *Worship of the Golden Calf* at the Madonna dell'Orto, Tintoretto's parish church, are nearly fifteen meters high, the tallest paintings on canvas made during the Renaissance.

Daunted by the practical challenges of doing a show about Tintoretto, no one has tried for the last seventy years. Now, however, the Prado museum in Madrid has mounted an exhibition of his works, organized by Miguel Falomir, a curator at the museum. Lacking so many of the artist's masterpieces that could not come from Venice, the show does not give a full sense of the painter. Nonetheless, with some forty-nine paintings and thirteen drawings on view, it is a beautiful exhibition, with an excellent catalog, and it is certain to stimulate new interest and research. There are also considerable advantages to studying Tintoretto



Jacopo Tintoretto: Self-Portrait, circa 1546–1547

not in isolation but rather at the center of one of the great museums of European painting; it makes it easier to see what was new and influential about the master's work. This is especially true at the Prado, owing to its incomparable holdings of El Greco, Rubens, and Velázquez, three artists who drew the deepest inspiration from Tintoretto's example. One can even look from the exhibition space into the main gallery of Velázquez and thus view almost simultaneously Tintoretto's monumental *Washing of the Feet* (see illustration on page 12) and the painting it did so much to inspire, *Las Meninas*.

Jacopo Robusti was born in 1519, the son of a wool dyer; it is from his father's profession that he derived his nickname Tintoretto (little dyer). He is said as a youth to have studied for a few days in Titian's studio until the older master recognized his immense potential, and, feeling threatened, kicked him out. Early biographers report that Tintoretto thereafter worked with a variety of artisans, from muralists to furniture painters, to learn his craft. Although he may also have apprenticed in the shop of a second-tier painter, he was essentially self-taught as an artist.

From the start Tintoretto was a figure of titanic ambition and absolute self-confidence. Even before he could paint or draw with complete professional skill, he felt certain he would become an artist of the highest stature. The pictures he made in his early

twenties are rudimentary in execution. Nonetheless, they show an impatient disregard for the traditional norms of Italian painting and an intense desire to achieve something bold and new. The figures in his early pictures twist and thrust with restless energy, and the paint is slapped on with startling abandon.

The steps in Tintoretto's progress from his crude but powerful paintings of the early 1540s to the first masterpieces of his career in 1548 are not completely known; simply too much of the record has been lost. Yet in broad outline the means of his self-transformation are clear. All early sources stress Tintoretto's huge intelligence and relentless determination. Giorgio Vasari, the Florentine artist and writer, disliked Tintoretto's work, yet nevertheless proclaimed he had "the most prodigious brain ever seen in the art of painting." Pietro Aretino, the poet and chief arbiter of taste in Venice, said he was brilliant and headstrong. Carlo Ridolfi, Tintoretto's main biographer, stated that his mind was "filled to the brim with countless ideas" and that "he was always thinking of ways to make himself known as the most daring painter in the world."

Tintoretto's early self-portrait of the 1540s confirms the truth of these characterizations (see illustration on this page). Painted on life scale, and focusing solely on the artist's head and shoulders, the picture presents a young man of smoldering intensity. With eyes as big as a hawk's, he looks straight out, implacable and unflinching. Many

have commented on the concentrated force of Picasso's gaze and how it seemed to take in everything around him; Tintoretto's eyes appear to display the same directness and power of observation. The handling of the paint in the picture is also noteworthy. The brushwork is evident and animate, flickering with highlights and shadow across the surface of the skin. The velvety blacks of the hair and the warm golds and reds of the face add to the impression of heightened sensitivity. A friend of the painter described him as being "All dash and verve... he is full of spirit, and conveys a notable sense of profundity." These are the very qualities on view in the portrait.

In the *Dialogue on Painting* written in 1548 the Venetian art theorist Paolo Pino stated,

If Titian and Michelangelo were a single person, if the drawing of Michelangelo were added to the color of Titian, then we would have the supreme god of painting.

Tintoretto shared this ideal and applied his formidable intelligence to its achievement. We know from the testimony of Raffaele Borghini, a contemporary Florentine humanist, that he copied the works of Michelangelo and Titian above all. Ridolfi says the artist even hung the words "the drawing of Michelangelo and the color of Titian" on the walls of his studio.

Tintoretto hardly ever left Venice, and he appears never to have seen a sculpture or painting by Michelangelo in the original, but he did acquire prints, drawings, and statuettes made after the sculptor's works. According to Ridolfi:

He had brought from Florence the small models that Daniele da Volterra had copied from [Michelangelo's] Medici tomb figures in San Lorenzo, that is to say *Dawn*, *Dusk*, *Day*, and *Night*. These he studied intensively, making an infinite number of drawings of them by the light of an oil lamp, so that he could compose in a powerful and solidly modeled manner by means of those strong shadows cast by the lamp. Nor did he cease his continuous study of whatever hand or torso he had collected, reproducing them on colored paper with charcoal and watercolor and highlighting them with chalk and white lead. Thus did he learn the forms requisite for his art.

Some of these drawings survive and as one can see in the *Study of Michelangelo's Dusk* in the show, they are among the most astonishingly inventive copies one great artist ever made of another great artist's works. While faithful to the poses, Tintoretto routinely chose viewpoints one could never have of the originals, such as from above or behind the sculptures. He also changed the forms of the statues, adding muscles where none appeared on the originals or in the copies. More radical still was Tintoretto's stylistic transformation of the

Philadelphia Museum of Art



material. The standard practice of drawing in Renaissance Italy stressed the contours and surfaces of the volumes depicted, features also emphasized in Michelangelo's sculptures. But Tintoretto drew his copies in a wholly original manner whereby the contours were broken into a series of wavering and interconnecting outlines and the surfaces were rendered as aggregates of shimmering darks and lights. In his drawings Tintoretto accentuated the dynamic play of the illumination, rather than the stable solidity of the underlying form. Copies after Michelangelo's figures appear in Tintoretto's paintings from the beginning. They reach a crescendo in *The Miracle of Saint Mark Freeing the Slave*, the artist's

mauve jacket with pale blue and pewter gray highlights on the man at the left of center in *The Washing of the Feet*, are painted with far greater simplicity than they would have been by any other Venetian painter, such as Titian or Veronese.

Using his method, Tintoretto sacrificed much of the subtlety and luminosity that had been characteristic of Venetian painting ever since Giorgione in the early sixteenth century. The body of Titian's *Danaë* at the Prado glows with soft, warm, radiant light. This is not the case in any of Tintoretto's nudes, whose skin by comparison seems dull and lusterless. Tintoretto did not really care about this loss, however, because he was in-

Brushwork is the key to Tintoretto's artistry. Given the relative simplicity of layering in the preliminary strata of paint, the forms in Tintoretto's pictures would appear nearly unmodeled were it not for the strong brushwork on the surface. It is with the final mighty blows of the brush that Tintoretto gives shape to the figures and objects in his paintings. It is with these same strokes, too, that he adds the accents of hue and light that so powerfully enliven his pictures. For Tintoretto, it was through his new method of painting that he could achieve his ideal and unite drawing and color.

No artist before Tintoretto had ever painted with such radical economy of

and clothed figures emerge almost of their own accord.

Four hundred years later, Tintoretto's paintings retain this sense of magic and immediacy. Standing before his pictures in the Prado, one still has the impression that the figures are materializing right in front of one's eyes, whether for example in the allegory of *Summer* of circa 1546 (see illustration on page 14) or *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* of 1569-1576. As Aretino's remark indicates, the speed of execution was not merely for the display of virtuosity; it was also the source of the vital spark of life that animates the paintings. Writing in 1611 Alessandro Guarini commented,



Jacopo Tintoretto: *The Washing of the Feet*, 1548-1549

breakthrough picture, painted in 1548.

Tintoretto's approach to Titian and to Venetian methods of oil painting was even more original and inventive. While borrowing freely from many techniques in the local tradition, Tintoretto conceived new ways of painting. For his contemporaries this was the most striking and controversial feature of his art.

Several characteristics of Tintoretto's painting technique stand out. One is the relative simplicity of layering in the application of successive strata of paint. A Renaissance painting is built of many layers of different hues that combine to create the desired colors and effects. This is especially true in the paintings of Titian and the other Venetian artists who pioneered the technical and pictorial capacities of oil, a comparatively new medium. Painting slowly over many work sessions, Titian would lay down a series of translucent glazes on his pictures, each layer adding to and blending with the pigments already applied.

Not Tintoretto. He devised a new method that entailed a minimum of layering. Working on top of a substratum of dark pigment, he would, with some exceptions, first paint a middle value of the color of an area of the picture; then he would add broad swaths of brighter or darker intensities of that color to indicate passages in light or shade; finally he would apply the highlights and shadows in large and bold strokes of the brush. Even sections of chromatic complexity, such as the

interested in something else: dazzling brushwork.

Accustomed as we are to evident brushwork as a stylistic feature in the history of art from Rubens and Rembrandt to Franz Kline and William de Kooning, we tend to take its existence for granted. But painters did not always think brushwork should be seen, and it was Tintoretto more than any previous artist who made it a central part of the painter's repertoire. To be sure, Giorgione and Titian had begun to explore the use of visible brushwork at the beginning of the sixteenth century, but they did so in comparatively restricted ways. Its use was limited initially to a few, select highlights; and even when in the middle and late periods of his career Titian displayed brushwork more liberally, he would routinely brush or glaze over the freer passages to tone them down and make them less obvious.

Tintoretto used the brush with a degree of spontaneity and boldness never seen before. Painting at great speed, and with large brushes, he would apply the highlights in long and rapid strokes. These shoot with astonishing force across the surface of the canvas, giving form and creating life as they go. Contemporary observers compared Tintoretto's brushwork to flashes of lightning and it is easy to see why, so great is the display of energy. Recording the impetus of the painter's hand, the brushwork looks dynamic, as if even now it were in motion and might never come to rest.

For example, in his portrait of a *Procurator of St. Mark's* from the National Gallery of Art, shown at the Prado, the preliminary layers of color were laid down with broad sweeps of a large brush and have a loose and lively irregularity. Tintoretto kept the folds in the procurator's magnificent red cloak to a minimum and these he has dashed on with power, speed, and confidence. A few electrifying strokes are enough to indicate the highlights and shadows on each massive sleeve; and down the front of the cloak two or three highlights cascade nearly the entire length of the figure, glinting and shimmering as they fall. The result is an image of charismatic energy and extraordinary authority.

Tintoretto's technique made it possible for him to paint with breathtaking velocity. The early sources are full of startled comments about the speed and mastery with which he worked. This was seen as evidence of his complete technical and intellectual command of the art of painting. In 1580 the painter and writer Cristoforo Sorte wrote,

In one second he places with perfect judgment shadows, half-tones, highlights and well-imitated flesh tones with such bold expertise, speed and verve that it is amazing to watch him work.

Likewise Pietro Aretino commented,

Certainly the brevity of execution depends upon knowing exactly what one is doing.... Because of this total understanding, the naked

He was as fast with his hand as he was with his brain...and with only two touches of the brush he would make all appear more living and breathing than others could have by touching and re-touching them a thousand times.

Throughout the process of making a picture, Tintoretto sought to augment the life-giving sense of spontaneity in his paintings. This comes across well in one section of the exhibition that unites a late narrative picture, the *Rape of Helen*, with an X-ray of the underdrawing on the canvas and the surviving preparatory figure studies for the picture. The figure studies are small rapid sketches, in which Tintoretto intentionally eliminated all detail, concentrating instead solely on the kinetic force of the undulating outlines. When he transferred these studies to the underdrawing on his canvas, he made sure the designs kept the sketchy brevity of form. The X-ray of the underdrawing shows a tumble of swirling, tangling, and pulsating lines; these appear more like a field of energy than a blueprint of solid forms. Working on top of the underdrawing, Tintoretto then painted the figures at full speed. The body of Helen in the foreground is wrought with just two tones, one for the portion in light, and the other for the section in shadow. A handful of jabs with the brush suffice to indicate her diaphanous bodice and the jagged folds of her dress. Only a supremely gifted artist can do so much with so little.

Speed and boldness also made it possible for Tintoretto to work successfully



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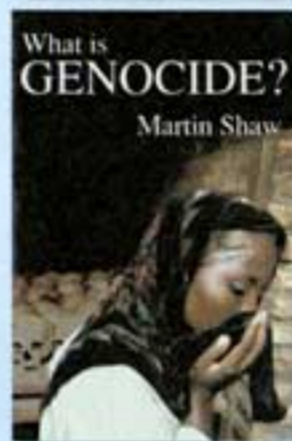
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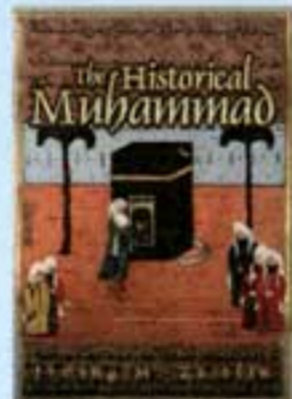
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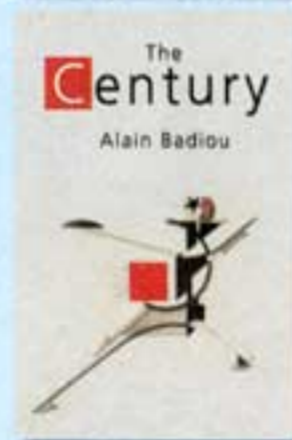
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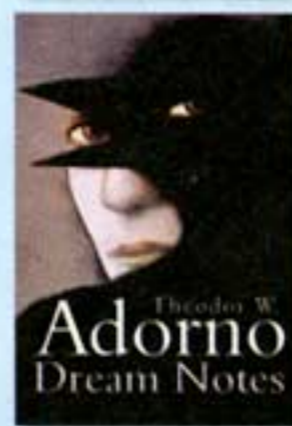


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on a gigantic scale. It was only thanks to the extraordinary dispatch of his technique that he could produce one colossal picture after another. Each of the main canvases in the Scuola di San Rocco is about twenty-five square meters or larger in dimension and Tintoretto made many dozens of paintings on that scale or bigger. No wonder visitors to Venice, then and now, can come away with the impression that the entire city is covered by the hand and the mind of Tintoretto.

Moreover, it is the boundless creativity of invention and the prodigious strength of execution that gives these pictures the pulse of life. A colossal canvas filled with hosts of figures could easily become a chaotic mass of indistinguishable particulars. Yet Tintoretto was able to make his monumental pictures seem vivid and

never ceased to beat a passionate accompaniment to every stroke of his brush.

In the same vein, Henry wrote in a letter from Venice to his brother William,

But you must see him here at work like a great wholesale director to form an idea of his boundless invention and his passionate energy.... I'd give a great deal to be able to fling down a dozen of his pictures into prose of corresponding force and color.

Not everyone was always so pleased with Tintoretto. In his own period the innovations of Tintoretto's style were considered by many to be an outrageous break with decorum. According to the norms of Renaissance art criti-



Jacopo Tintoretto: Summer, circa 1546

animate. It was the ability to invest panoramic visions of heaven and earth with the precise observations of living details that has compelled the admiration and the envy of John Ruskin, Hippolyte Taine, and many other writers. Of the many accounts in praise of this side of Tintoretto's genius, perhaps the most telling is that by Henry James:

Titian was assuredly a mighty poet, but Tintoret—well, Tintoret was almost a prophet. Before his greatest works you are conscious of a sudden evaporation of old doubts and dilemmas, and the eternal problems of the conflict between idealism and realism dies the most natural of deaths. In his genius the problem is practically solved; the alternatives are so harmoniously interfused that I defy the keenest critic to say where one begins and the other ends. The homeliest prose melts into the most ethereal poetry—the literal and the imaginative fairly confound their identity.

This, however, is vague praise. Tintoret's great merit, to my mind, was his unequalled distinctness of vision. When once he had conceived the germ of a scene it defined itself to his imagination with an intensity, an amplitude, an individuality of expression, which make one's observation of his pictures seem less an operation of the mind than a kind of supplementary experience of life.... You get from Tintoret's work the impression that he felt, pictorially, the great, beautiful, terrible spectacle of human life very much as Shakespeare felt it, poetically—with a heart that

cism, sketchiness and brevity only had a place during the initial design phase of creation. Completed works of art should show the artist's diligence and thoroughness in their execution and finish. Thus Vasari, although impressed by Tintoretto's manifest brilliance, was alarmed and offended by his paintings. Vasari wrote that they were

executed by him in a fashion of his own and contrary to the use of other painters.... This master at times has left as finished works sketches still so rough that the brush-strokes may be seen, done more by chance and vehemence than with judgment and design.

Vasari was not alone in this view. In his book *The Lament of Painting*, written in 1605, eleven years after Tintoretto died in 1594, Federico Zuccaro, the Central Italian artist, even blamed Tintoretto and his followers for the downfall of painting.

When Zuccaro made these remarks, the Baroque, a new period in the history of art, was already dawning. Two of the main instigators of the Baroque, Annibale Carracci and Peter Paul Rubens, looked to Tintoretto as one of their models, and later, Bernini, Velázquez, and others joined in the chorus of admirers. Through them the legacy of Tintoretto became an integral part of the Baroque and of the European tradition. All these artists were attracted to the extraordinary brushwork, the technical mastery, the colossal scale, the visionary sweep, and the forceful detail of Tintoretto's painting. Above all, they were inspired by a fundamental principle they found in Tintoretto's works, the idea that art should be a form of energy made visible. □

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