

# Rivals in Venice



An ambitious attempt to chart the way that the careers of Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese intertwined presents all three artists in a novel – and not always flattering – light, writes **Jonathan Lopez**.

**T**itian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice' can justly be described as both the most ambitious and the most visually gratifying exhibition of Old Master paintings to be organised

by an American museum this year. Currently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and travelling this autumn to the Louvre, it examines with uncommon insight the fraught personal and professional relationships between the three principal masters of mid-*Cinquecento* Venice. Presenting apposite comparisons of their works, it proposes that the artists demand to be understood in the context of each other's evolving careers – for, in the words of the exhibition's curator, Frederick Ilchman, 'art history not only is about setting, patronage and technique, but also stems from such basic human passions as jealousy, competitiveness and pride'.

The idea that a culture of rivalry might have informed the output of these three great painters has received only sporadic attention from specialists – some of whom would argue, not unreasonably, that Venetian society, with its conservative veneration of the *ordine antico* – the ancient order – naturally discouraged the kind of competition that Vasari, for instance, described among the artists of Florence. Indisputably, a respect for consensus and hierarchy did distinguish many aspects of Venetian cultural life: there was, for instance, a longstanding tradition of multiple artists being employed in the decoration of major public buildings, thus underscoring that the work produced was subordinate to the source of patronage. But, as *Venice Reconsidered*, an excellent volume of essays edited by John Jeffries Martin and Dennis Romano (2000), made quite clear, the elaborately sensitive vision of *venezianità* cherished by many art historians derives more from the atmospheric writings of Henry James and Thomas Mann than from a sober and historically grounded understanding of the Venetian city-state as it truly

1 *The Baptism of Christ* by Paolo Veronese (Paolo Caliari; 1528-88), early 1580s. Oil on canvas, 104.8 x 88.3 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

2 *The Baptism of Christ* by Jacopo Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti; c.1518-94), about 1580. Oil on canvas, 283 x 162 cm. S Silvestro, Venice. Photo: Francesco Turio Bohm





**3 Danaë by Titian (Tiziano Vecellio; c. 1488-1576), 1544-46. Oil on canvas, 120 x 172 cm. Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, Photo: Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali/Art Resources**

existed during the renaissance. In reality, *La Serenissima* was a dynamic mercantile republic, constantly adapting to the cut-throat circumstances of international trade throughout the years of its greatest power and influence.

In this light, one wonders if Tintoretto, a native of Venice and a famously aggressive self-promoter, was actually the atypical personality that he has so often been portrayed to be in the history of Venetian art. Is it not possible that he merely displayed in public a competitive streak that others, for reasons of decorum, chose to cloak? 17th-century sources such as Boschini and Rinaldi, for instance, indicate that Titian, the established leader of the Venetian school, felt nothing but scorn for Tintoretto; yet, it would be a mistake to imagine that his distaste signified disinterest. Hardly above intrigue, Titian is said to have actively promoted the work of the young Veronese – a far more ingratiating figure than Tintoretto in both art and life – thereby manipulating circumstances to harm a coming man while boosting the prospects of a more amiable acolyte.

Although the loans orchestrated for this exhibition by Ilchman and his collaborators at the Louvre, Jean Habert and Vincent Delieuvin, are remarkable for their quality and number – the Titians, which include the *Venus Anadyomene* from Edinburgh, the Farnese version of *Danaë* (Fig. 3) and the Louvre's *Madonna of the Rabbit*, would, for instance, make a fine monographic display

on their own – one is impressed above all by the exquisite care with which precisely the right pictures have been secured in order to substantiate the exhibition's central argument. For example, to see united, on a single wall, three wildly contrasting yet plainly related treatments of the biblical story of the Supper at Emmaus by these artists is formidably edifying. All employ similar compositions and architectural settings in depicting the risen Christ, as described in the Gospel of Luke, revealing his identity to two disciples over a meal at a humble inn. Titian, whose work (in an alternate version) was publicly accessible to the two younger artists, sets a very high standard with his restraint, gravitas, and luminous handling. Tintoretto, quite young when he attempted his version, displays a characteristically brash ambition, with his slashing brushstrokes and dynamic, twisting figures. But, much though he may have wished to challenge Titian, and Venice, with a new and personal manner, Tintoretto was unable to achieve, at this point in his career, the union of style and content that would give his later religious pictures, for instance the *Baptism of Christ* of around 1580 (Fig. 1), such potent spiritual force. It is

interesting to note, though, that for all the shortcomings of Tintoretto in his youth, his consistent striving after the profound may, in the end, show him to have been a more worthy successor to Titian than was Veronese, whose treatments of both *Emmaus* and *The Baptism of Christ* (Fig. 2) are theatrical to the point of festivity. Although admirably polished and refined, they ultimately seem, like the man who made them, a bit too eager to please.

It would be possible to expound at much greater length upon this exhibition's virtues, but one is obliged also to note a few faults. There are, for instance, problems of context. Who else was working in Venice at this time? What outside influences were significant? These questions could stand to be addressed in considerably more detail, especially in the catalogue, where one finds that several legitimate issues of debate in the field – including the concept of the so-called Mannerist Crisis, which lay at the heart of the provocative Doge's Palace show 'From Titian to El Greco' of 1981 – receive only scant attention.

Likewise, while Ilchman's lead essay is extremely strong – as are Patricia Fortini Brown's on patronage in Venice and Linda Borean's on collecting – several other contributions are either weak or eccentric. The catalogue entries on the nude, written by the renowned American scholar of Venetian art David Rosand, for instance, provide a vivid and expansive narration of each image's erotic possibilities – a recondite form of onanism that seems somewhat infelicitous in this context.

Yet, were it not for this exhibition's very high intellectual and aesthetic calibre, quibbles such as these would hardly be worth mentioning. 'Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese' is a memorable event and an outstanding curatorial debut for Mr Ilchman at the Museum of Fine Arts.

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