Books

A multi-author book aims to extricate Tintoretto from the clichés attached to the artist since Ridolfi's biography

Jacopo Tintoretto: Identity, Practice, Meaning
Edited by Marie-Louise Lillywhite, Tom Nichols and Giorgio Tagliaferro. 350 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Viella, Rome, 2022), €49. ISBN 978–88–331–3823–7.

by **PAUL HILLS**

Introducing this volume of papers, first delivered at a conference in Oxford in 2019, Tom Nichols implies that it disputes 'the view that the quincentenary exhibitions in Washington and Venice appeared to establish' (p.11).[1] Given that three of the contributors wrote essays for one of the exhibition catalogues, it might be more accurate to claim that the volume challenges the view of Jacopo Tintoretto (1518/19–94) propounded by Carlo Ridolfi in his Life of the artist, published in 1648 and quoted by scholars ever since. In 'Beyond rivalry: Tintoretto and the challenge of composition', Giorgio Tagliaferro argues that reliance on biographical anecdotes in the early accounts, notably in Ridolfi's, have led to the formation of enduring clichés attached to the artist. Doubtless with the major exhibition *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice*, held in Boston and Paris in 2009–10, in mind, Tagliaferro criticises the emphasis upon rivalry as a driving force and argues that Tintoretto's ambition is better understood in the light of what sixteenth-century theorists constructed as perfect style or the *bella maniera*.[2]

The formation of artistic identity is approached from a different angle in Philip Cottrell's illuminating discussion of the artist's nickname, Tintoretto (little dyer). Noting that Gioanventura Rosetti's treatise on dyeing was published in Venice in 1548, the same year as Tintoretto's breakthrough painting, the *Miracle of the slave* (1547–48; Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice), was unveiled, Cottrell demonstrates in some detail how the processes of dyeing and the artist's painterly achievements are more than casually related. His research into Tintoretto pictographic signature, which

the artist used on a *Sacra conversazione* (1540, private collection), clarifies the iconography of several lesser-known paintings, and his remarks on artists' names, such as Parrasio Micheli (d.1578), leads to reflections on how such sobriquets as Parrasio, after the Greek painter Parrhasius, arose within the literary-epistolary culture of mid-sixteenth-century Venice. In the only essay to focus on a patron, Marie-Louise Lillywhite draws on the recently discovered autobiography of Antonio Milledonne to enrich our understanding of the altarpiece he commissioned of the Temptation of St Anthony (c.1577; S. Trovaso, Venice).[3] Taking her cue from Tintoretto's painting, as well as Milledonne's presence at the Council of Trent (1545–63) and the history of the Council he wrote later, Lillywhite contends that the Council's endorsement of the spiritual power of images offered an opportunity to painters 'rather than a new dawn of artistic repression' (p.204) as previously thought.

Like Tagliaferro, Roland Krischel takes aim at the legends that have grown up around Tintoretto and his working practices. In 'Problems in Tintoretto – mostly graphic' he re-examines Ridolfi's oft-quoted account of seeing little sculptural models in wax and clay in Tintoretto's studio long after the artist's death, which he thought were evidence that Tintoretto had used a box-like puppet theatre to invent and stage his compositions and to try out their lighting. Noting how cleverly Tintoretto adapted his paintings for their intended positions, often within complex architectural spaces and involving oblique views, Krischel points out that three-dimensional models of the space to be decorated would have been more useful than a miniature stage of the fictional scene to be painted. The little sculptural models may have been used by the artist or his assistants, but it is unlikely that he needed anything resembling a stage set. Krischel's keen observations of the artist's graphic practices, especially his analysis of the use of squaring, support this conclusion. He ends his paper with the fascinating hypothesis

that the abbreviated method of creating the three-dimensional form of the human figure with curved lines resembling the hoops of a barrels, typical of a number of drawings by Tintoretto and his workshop (Fig.1), might have been inspired by the construction methods of the Venetian shipbuilders, in which the *corbe* or ribs established the essential shape of the vessel.

The importance of drawing at all stages of the invention and execution of Tintoretto's paintings, emphasised by several contributors, calls to mind Alberto Giacometti's youthful enthusiasm for Tintoretto, when he spent a month in Venice in 1922 and sought out every painting by the artist in churches and galleries throughout the city. Years later, Giacometti's paintings, drawn with the brush, such as *Isabelle in the studio* (1949; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), conjure a transparent space akin to the Venetian's. This blurred boundary between painting and drawing is the subject of Maria Aresin's expert discussion of a group of some twenty sheets from Tintoretto's workshop with figure studies on the recto and tracings made with reddish-brown oil paint on the verso. The tracings or mirror images generated a second pose from a single study; they furnished a stock of drawings for future reference; and they provided formulas to train an army of assistants. Where the oil rendered the paper somewhat transparent, Aresin speculates that they might have been pinned against a window frame and viewed *contro-luce*.

Catherine Whistler offers a more general survey of drawing from life, *dal vivo*, as it was called in sixteenth-century Venice, but makes little direct reference to Tintoretto himself. In her conclusion she argues that the key to understanding the distinctive artistic ideals of Venice as opposed to those of central Italy lies not so much in the opposition of Venetian *colore* to central Italian *disegno* as in contrasting attitudes to nature and the natural. Her argument prepares the ground for Gabriele Matino's brilliant contribution 'The allure of flaws: Domenico Tintoretto, Venetian academies and the crisis of the cinquecento tradition', in which he examines graphic works on paper by Tintoretto's son Domenico (1560–1635) that depict the far from canonical nature of female forms and poses. Matino shows how this embrace of the human form in all its variety was a deliberate rejection of the cinquecento ideals that Ridolfi wished to celebrate, and he aligns this rejection with the painter's attendance

1. *Study of a seated male nude*, by Jacopo Tintoretto. Charcoal on paper, 30.1 by 20.7 cm. (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, inv. no.2253).

at literary gatherings, where poets, including Giambattista Marino (1569–1625), celebrated flawed beauty and even ugliness.

A perennial problem of Tintoretto studies is that it is not always clear what constitutes their subject: is it solely Jacopo's œuvre or does it include that of his workshop and his children? Since it is one of the many virtues of this volume that it covers a range of workshop production and grants Domenico his due status as a distinct artistic personality, it is a pity the title implies that the identity, practice and meaning of Jacopo is its sole focus.

1 For a review of the exhibitions held to celebrate the quincentenary of Tintoretto, see T. Nichols: 'Coming of age: Jacopo Tintoretto', THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE 160 (2018), pp.1024–29.
2 Reviewed by Peter Humfrey in this Magazine, 151 (2009), pp.791–93.
3 M. Galtarossa: 'Vita d'Antonio Milledonne Secretario del Consiglio di X (1522–1588)', *Studi Veneziani*, NS 39 (2000), pp.239–52.

by **TOM NICKSON**

Aimed squarely at art history students in North American universities, this book surveys the art and architecture of Europe, Byzantium and the Islamicate world from c.250 to c.1450.[1] It is divided into ten chronological chapters, each covering between seventy and two hundred years, with slightly longer chapters for the period from c.960 onwards. Helpful maps at the start of each chapter locate the objects and buildings discussed, with an emphasis on topography rather than political borders. An introduction explores the inherent challenges in writing any such survey, starting with the title, and chapter 11 considers the 'Afterlives of the Middle Ages'. A text box at the beginning introduces different dating systems and acknowledges that, despite its name, the term 'common era' adopted throughout is fundamentally based on Christian understandings of time. The superficially neutral organisation by chronology is thus shown to be subtly weighted towards a Western or Latin tradition; the same is true of the term 'Middle Ages' and arguably the art-historical concerns and methods privileged in the book. But whereas text boxes elsewhere explain that such historiographically freighted terms as 'Romanesque' or 'Gothic' have been avoided, common usage obliges the authors to accept some frameworks that they consider problematic. Thus, and despite their whiff of elitism, the terms 'art' and 'architecture' are used throughout, albeit interpreted according to their broadest possible definitions, presumably because 'visual culture' privileges sight over other senses, whereas 'material culture' downplays ritual and the ephemeral. One sympathises with this pragmatic approach and with the authors' resistance to imposing overarching arguments on their chosen materials. Instead, the introduction explains, the book highlights 'five broad themes that resonate across the medieval world: (1) artistic production, (2) status and identity, (3) connection to the past, (4) ideology, and (5) access to the sacred' (p.15).

In some respects, this organisation is the book's greatest strength. Of course, to select objects and themes is to make an argument