



TINTORETTO 2019

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Tintoretto's timeliness

Abstract

How can we determine Tintoretto's historical position in a context of rapid confessional diversification? For Erich von der Bercken he was the „painter of Counter-Reformation“. But Ulrich Middeldorf rightfully objected: “Tintoretto (...) has been characterized as a typical child of the counter-reformation, because of his elaborate interpretations of the sacred stories. Little is gained by such statements which seem too simple to come anywhere near an understanding of a complicated situation.”

The complexity alluded to by Middeldorf partially stems from an ambivalent and rather exceptional position of Venice itself. While the majority of the ruling patriciate adhered to the Catholic faith – not least in order to preserve their power – Venice's geopolitical situation and close trade relations across the Alps made it a gateway for Protestantism to enter Italy. Due to the efforts of the Venetian state to stay as independent as possible in political and religious matters – especially with regard to Rome – the city enjoyed a reputation as a place of refuge for minorities and the persecuted.

During Tintoretto's lifetime currents of Catholic Reform, Reformation and Counter-Reformation interacted in Venice and the Veneto. Groups such as spirituali, Evangelicals, Anabaptists, Millenarists etc. were not always in rivalry or opposition to one another, as sometimes their interests intersected and their doctrines overlapped. Thus any close reading of Jacopo's religious paintings has to keep in mind a multifaceted and constantly shifting background of piety.

An additional challenge comes with the use of terms like ‚heterodoxy‘. Who in the Venice of the 1530's knew which religious views were acceptable and which were not? At least into the 1540's extensive twilight zones still existed, since the limits of what was tolerated were just being defined.

In view of this „complicated situation“, a precise chronological comparison between

Tintoretto's artistic activities and the timeline of religious history in Venice and the Veneto proves highly illuminative. It shows how swiftly and precisely Tintoretto responds to events affecting the religious climate in his habitat. At the same time it allows us to gain insight into Jacopo's own attitude – as several examples will illustrate.