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"With the eyes of their heart" - *Visio Corporalis and Visio Spiritualis in Tintoretto's Religious Painting*

Abstract

The stunning intensity in the pictorial representation of religious vision is one of the most striking qualities of Tintoretto's art. It has become a commonplace to describe his paintings as being visionary. What, however, does this exactly mean?

Even in the 16th century the Augustinian dichotomy of *visio spiritualis* and *visio corporalis* remains a challenge for each painter, trying to represent religious visions. How is it possible to depict a vision on the basis of the idea that physical sight is not only unable to grant us access to spiritual vision but may even prevent us from spiritual ways of seeing? In his experience on the road to Damascus, St. Paul lost his sight in the moment he recognized the redeemer.

My paper explores how Tintoretto deals with the painter's dilemma that it is only through the real eyes that he can make the spectators see with "the eyes of their heart" (Ephesians 1:18). Focusing on this problem may provide a new access to the religious dimension of his demonstrative despise of mimetic perfection of surfaces and of conventional beauty in color and finish, which in the last years had been interpreted primarily in terms of marketing strategies and branding.

Can we interpret those stylistic characteristics as methods of opening the spectator's eye for the spiritual dimension in order to prevent it from getting stuck on the sensual surface of the represented objects and on the surface of the painting itself? But which are the pictorial effects which function as an esthetic equivalent for the spiritual experience of seeing with the "eyes of the heart"? In this context Tintoretto's methods of making the spectator's whole body and not only his eyes respond to the painting may be considered as ways of achieving this effect. Paradoxically they can be conceived as part of a complex artistic strategy, suggesting the viewer to see the painted scene in a way which radically differs from his ordinary way of seeing and which thus seems to transcend the borders of the *visio corporalis*.

Analyzing some of his most outstanding depictions of visions, the paper studies the new ways Tintoretto exploits the structural analogies between esthetic and religious experiences by making the spectator feel as if he himself was experiencing a vision, instead of simply watching its pictorial representation.

Thus, functioning like a simulation of visionary experiences, painting can be able to achieve the same results as true religious visions: it can provoke religious conversion and enlightenment, it can strengthen faith and change the spectator's attitude and conduct. If painting is able to produce the same effects like religious visions, it may become a kind of medial substitute for them. Taking into account contemporary religious art theory, the paper discusses how this shift from representation to simulation changes the status of painting and painter.



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Reconsidering Tintoretto's role within this process, we may gain a fresh perspective on the "visionary" character and the religious potential of his painting.