

# **The Little Cloth Dyer: Analyzing Tintoretto's Style And Imagery Through The Lens Of Poverty And Charity In Renaissance Venice**

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## **Abstract**

The Fifteenth and early Sixteenth Centuries were not only times of artistic reinvention as Venice underwent its own Renaissance, but also a time of civic renewal as the Venetian government reevaluated concepts of poverty and charity. Caught between these two dynamics was the artist Tintoretto. Expelled from the famed Titian's studio at a young age, Tintoretto can be viewed as an outsider in the Venetian Renaissance art culture. Not only was he rejected by the upper classes in terms of patronage, his style was viewed as unfinished and his figures and placement often went against the accepted configurations. While this separation can be seen as an attempt to create a completely personal style in opposition to Titian and his student Veronese, I will argue that Tintoretto's paintings reflect the views of poverty present in Venice at the time. In the 1520's, after increasing famine and sickness, Venice sought to control the begging population of the city, creating extensive new poor laws, and thereby increasing the power of the *Scuole Grandi*, traditional distributors of charity and strong patrons of Tintoretto. In this essay, I will look at the structure and results of these poor laws, as well as the role of the *Scuole* in an attempt to understand the shifting views of the poor in Renaissance Venice. Through this perspective, I will then look at specific paintings by Tintoretto in order to show that his distinctive style was a result of his fabricated connection to the lower class as well as his relations with Titian and patrons. I also will show that his imagery, specifically that of poor or crippled figures, is a direct reflection of the changing status of beggars in Venetian society.

**Keywords: Tintoretto, Venice, Poverty**

## **1. Introduction**

The Fifteenth Century in Europe was a time not only of artistic reinvention with the dawn of the Renaissance, but also a time of great social change. These two factors are very apparent in Venice, as the arts gained sophistication and importance, and the city went through large shifts in regards to the treatment of the lower classes. The *Scuole Grandi*, traditional medieval providers of charity, began to slowly distribute more and more money outside of their own brotherhoods as focus was put on the religious nature of the poor. With this increased attention paid to the lower classes, as well as disease running through the streets of Venice, the city itself finally took initiative and instituted a series of laws that moved the poor off the streets and into housing, hospitals, and jobs. A key player in regards not only to the social changes, but also the Venetian art community, was the painter Jacopo Tintoretto (fig.1). Born Jacopo Robusti in 1518, Tintoretto is thought of as one of the leading figures of the Venetian Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> After his talent was recognized early in his life, he was put into the school of Titian, but was quickly thrown out after the Venetian master recognized Tintoretto's inherent talent.<sup>2</sup> Despite this setback, Tintoretto continued to become a well-known independent master in his own right, but due to exclusion by his contemporaries

he found the most success in connecting himself with poorer patrons and the lower classes not only through commissions, but also technique, imagery, and even his own name. Throughout all of this social change, Tintoretto's goal as an artist was not to continue in the tradition of his contemporaries by showing the poor in his art as passive receivers of the charity of others. Instead, influenced by his connection to the lower classes, Tintoretto chose to reflect the holy nature of the poor and the responsibility of the rich to care for them as a response to the role of the *Scuole* in Venice and the new laws created by the Venetian Government.

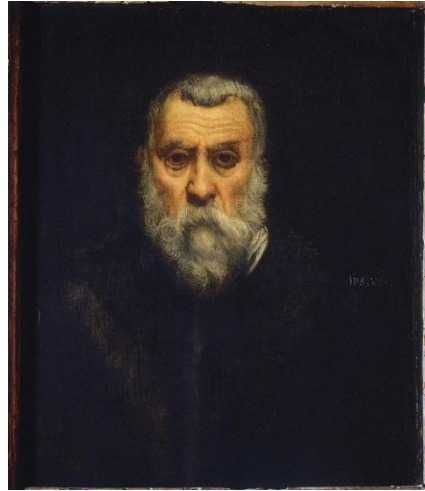


Figure 1. Jacopo Tintoretto, *Self Portrait in Old Age*, 1587. Oil on canvas, 62.5cm x 52cm. Musée du Louvre. Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed March 28, 2013).

## 2. The *Scuole* Of Venice

The first *Scuole* in Venice were formed in the thirteenth century as religious brotherhoods comprised of lay men who met on the grounds of churches or monasteries as representatives of their communities.<sup>3</sup> It is thought that these organizations grew up as a sort of Medieval reformation to the Catholic Church during a time when the laity was in many ways being excluded from the workings and practices of the Church.<sup>4</sup> Though originally focused on saying masses as a way to speed the journey of their members through purgatory, the *Scuole* began to move by the fourteenth century towards a focus on administering to the needs of the poor and sick.<sup>5</sup> The new goal of the *Scuole* was to build a stronger sense of brotherhood and mutual responsibility through helping the poor and eliminating sin in the community, which would in turn help the *Scuole* to accumulate merit, which deceased brothers could then draw upon to help speed their way to heaven.<sup>6</sup> During the fifteenth century, five of the *Scuole* were raised to the status of *Scuole Grandi* which gave these specific *Scuole* the ability to increase their numbers and gain more power and prestige.<sup>7</sup> Many of Tintoretto's most famous works are located in one of these *Scuole*, the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco* (fig.2).



Figure 2. Cassy Juhl and Pilar Peters, *Scuola Grande di San Rocco facade*, 1516. Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed March 28, 2013).

An interesting aspect to the *Scuole* was that they were comprised of both upper and lower class members, possibly as a way to provide the lower classes with a sense of power since they had no say in the government of Venice.<sup>8</sup> Along with the promotion of the *Scuole Grandi*, the fifteenth century also saw the beginning of a divide between these upper and lower class members.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, while the upper classes retained administrative power in the *Scuole*, they felt a stronger obligation through brotherhood to the poor of their *Scuola*, resulting in poor members of the *Scuole* gaining preferential treatment in the receiving of charity. In order to continue allocating funds to those outside the *Scuole*, the brotherhoods became more discriminatory as to who deserved charity, following the new view of the poor that arose in the Sixteenth Century. Instead of mere beggars, these poor were thought of as ideal Christians because they were the most willing to work to improve their position since they had the farthest to rise in society.<sup>10</sup> Because of this new opinion, the charity distributed by the *Scuole* was distributed based more on external piety and who deserved the charity the most. As the *Scuole* began distributing more and more money into the community, the government of Venice finally permitted them to provide charity to prisoners, monasteries, convents, and hospitals, still within the boundaries of the concept of the deserving poor. This is important not only because it continued the drive towards charity for the deserving, while limiting those who made begging their profession, but also because it marks one of the first attempts by the government of Venice to control the distribution of charity within the city.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Venetian Poor Laws

As the Venetian *Scuole* rose in power as the major providers of charity for their members and the community, the government slowly recognized the need for the distribution of charity to be governed and regulated.<sup>12</sup> Through the influence of the brotherhoods, the importance of the lower classes, especially in terms of Christianity and their spiritual needs, came to a head between the years of 1527 and 1529. These years marked a time of famine and increased flooding in Venice, but more importantly the spread of diseases such as typhoid which prompted the need to get beggars off the streets so as to prevent the spread of disease through human contact.<sup>13</sup> Initially, the Venetian government only created more hospitals and housing for the poor, but later focus was put directly on the distribution of charity, specifically in terms of who could receive it and how it would be passed out.<sup>14</sup> The main goals of the city were to efficiently determine between the worthy and unworthy poor, and eliminate professional beggars and those who refused to improve their situation.<sup>15</sup> These goals tied back to the concept of the poor as the ideal Christian favored by the *Scuole* which became an important part of the more secular government laws. The bulk of the poor laws created during this time worked to make the majority of the population of Venice self-sufficient. Those poor who were deemed able bodied were put to work at half pay on merchant ships, while those who were not able bodied were expected to stay at home and be cared for, or move into a hospital or almshouse if they were in fact homeless. In addition, children were to be educated so as to eventually join the work force themselves, and women were expected to perform small jobs that could be completed while still caring for any children they may have had.<sup>16</sup> While all these laws were over seen by deputies of the government, the *Scuole*, as well as monasteries and convents, were still the main distributors of charity.<sup>17</sup> Most important, though, was the new concept that the poor were deserving of the charity they received due to the work they did, not that they were passive recipients dependent on the goodness of others. In many ways these new laws implemented by the government did what they set out to do, and the lower classes were removed from view as they left the streets for jobs and housing.

### 4. Tintoretto And The Lower Classes

At the same time that Venice was addressing the issue of the poor in the city, Venice was going through its own artistic Renaissance, headed by the likes of Titian and Tintoretto. Though Tintoretto was documented as an independent master beginning in the year 1539, the art scene in Venice was greatly dominated by the older master Titian.<sup>18</sup> After being expelled from Titian's school at a young age, Tintoretto was very much excluded by the other major Venetian artists of the time, which also meant exclusion from the upper class patrons who favored the Roman style of Tintoretto's contemporaries.<sup>19</sup> Tintoretto was able to still become an independent master, though, by working for many of the lower class patrons ignored by the major Venetian artists. These commissions were gained through Tintoretto's carefully created connections with the poor, the most obvious being his name. Born Jacopo Robusti, Tintoretto changed to his now well-known nickname which means "Little Cloth Dyer." Though this may be

a call back to the profession of his father Battista Robusti, it is not known what stage of the cloth dying process Tintoretto's father was involved in, and therefore what social class Tintoretto was born into.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Tintoretto's nickname harkening to a lower class profession can be thought of as a deliberate connection to the poor majority in Venice, especially in a time when painters were more often attempting to align themselves with the noble upper classes.<sup>21</sup> Once this initial connection to the poor was established, Tintoretto was able to attract many poor patrons through his methods of pricing his works. In this time, Titian was known for charging inflated prices for his works and selling them to other patrons if the original commissioner refused to pay the requested amount.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, Tintoretto was known for greatly reducing his prices, or even donating his works to poor patrons. Though this brought further dislike from Titian and his circles, it made Tintoretto very popular with those who desired great art but did not have the funds to pay for it.<sup>23</sup> This practice required Tintoretto to paint a large volume of works in order to continue to make a profit. In fact, Tintoretto painted 650 paintings over his 55 to 60 year career, double that of his contemporaries including Titian. With the large volume of work being put out, almost ten to twelve paintings each year, each individual painting needed to be completed much more quickly than was normal for a Renaissance painting, resulting in Tintoretto's distinct sketch-like style, and his reuse of figures from painting to painting.<sup>24</sup> While used throughout his career, these aspects can especially be seen in two versions of *The Raising of Lazarus*, one painted between 1558 and 1559 (fig.3), and the other painted between 1585 and 1590 (fig.4).



Figure 3. Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Raising of Lazarus*, 1558-59. Oil on canvas, 70 7/8in x 180 1/4in. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed March 28, 2013).



Figure 4. Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Raising of Lazarus*, 1585-90. Oil on canvas, 121.6cm x 196.2cm. North Carolina Museum of Art. Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed March 28, 2013).

One key feature of Tintoretto's quick style is his lightly sketched figures, which allowed him to complete the required amount of figures for a work in the least amount of time. This can be seen in the light figures in the background of the 1585 version that are only lightly sketched in white with their bodies defined by the quickly rendered fabrics around them. In the 1558 version, the figures in the background are very similar to those in the other version, but additionally the figures found in and around the arch on the left of the painting display Tintoretto's preference to start with a dark background and build up figures in shadow so that only the faces needed to be quickly rendered with light paints and the bodies could be left dark. Additionally, it can be noticed that the figure of Lazarus in both works, as well as the figure in the bottom right corner of the 1558 version are very similar in position. It is thought that Tintoretto kept many sketches of basic figures in his workshop, allowing him to quickly insert them into different paintings, again saving valuable time.<sup>25</sup> While these unique aspects of Tintoretto's painting style arose from his need to paint quickly, they continued to connect him with the lower classes by allowing him to paint for poorer patrons and still make a respectable profit.

## 5. Reacting To The *Scuole* And Poor Laws

Tintoretto's unique style eventually gained him access to the upper classes through portraiture for state officials. Since these offices changed so often, portraits needed to be completed in a short amount of time, providing the

perfect use for Tintoretto's fast style, and reusing of body positions.<sup>26</sup> Once Tintoretto was more accepted by upper class patrons, aided by Titian's eventual withdrawal from the Venetian art scene in 1560, he was able to paint more and more for rich patrons such as the *Scuole*.<sup>27</sup> Still influenced by his previously established connection with the lower classes though, Tintoretto's paintings took on a different look from those of his contemporaries. The division found in the *Scuole* between the rich and poor brothers made it very easy for the upper class members to lose sight of the lower class members as they worked administratively to retain the *Scuola's* power in Venice. Tintoretto can be seen attempting to counter this in his depiction of the *Annunciation* (fig.5) for the *Scuola Grande di San Rocco*.



Figure 5. Jacopo Tintoretto, *Annunciation*, 1583-87. Oil on canvas, 13ft 10in x 17ft 11in. Sala Terrena, Scuola di San Rocco. Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed March 28, 2013).

This painting depicts the Virgin Mary in a room dominated by a rich red canopied bed and gilded ceiling, reminiscent of contemporary depictions of the Holy Family in settings of upper class Renaissance Italy. Tintoretto's twist, though, is that the room is obviously dilapidated, seen in the crumbling and badly patched pillar in the foreground and the damaged wicker chair in the back of the room, as well as the chaotic world outside from which the angels enter. When prominently displayed in the *Scuola*, this painting served as a reminder that no matter how the Holy Family was portrayed in Tintoretto's age, they were said in the Bible to have lived in poor conditions, much like the lower class brothers of the *Scuola*. The dilapidated state of the room also served as a reminder that even the grandest houses can fall apart and that even the rich may someday need charity, which acted as further incentive for the upper classes to care for the poor when possible, in hopes that they would be cared for should the need arise. With the advent of the new poor laws in Venice, Tintoretto continued to work on behalf of the lower classes, choosing to make them the focus of his art in a time when the poor were being moved out of the public eye both literally and figuratively. As the poor were being slowly moved into almshouses, hospitals, and jobs by the new laws in Venice, painters of the time mimicked this trend by pushing the poor to the edges and backgrounds of their paintings. This can be seen in Titian's work *St. John the Almsgiver* (fig.6).





Figure 6. Titian, *St. John the Almsgiver*, 1550. Oil on canvas, 264cm x 148cm. Private Collection. Reproduced from *Wikipaintings*, <http://www.wikipaintings.org> (accessed March 28, 2013).

This work depicts Saint John giving alms to a beggar, a typical scene for a Renaissance Christian painting. What is important, though, is the placement of the beggar. While the saint, wearing a white robe that instantly draws the viewer's eye to him, is seated prominently in the center of the pictorial space, the beggar, in dark rags, is hidden in the shadows at the bottom left corner of the painting, almost pushed out of the frame. Not only does this work reflect the separation of the poor from the upper classes, it also shows the poor as passive receivers of charity. In this case, the beggar is seated in a lower, darker position than the saint, and is being given alms through the goodness of Saint John, not through any effort of his own. Conversely, Tintoretto chose around the same time to not only bring those members of the lower classes to the forefront of his paintings, but also reflect the current view of the poor as the ideal Christian, such as in his work *The Miracle of St. Augustine* (fig.7) which depicts the saint healing a large group of poor crippled pilgrims.



Figure 7. Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Miracle of St. Augustine*, 1549. Oil on canvas, 255cm x 175cm. Museo Civico di Vicenza. Reproduced from *ArtStor*, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed March 28, 2013).

In this work Tintoretto shifts his composition from Titian's immediately by placing the figure of St. Augustine high up in the background of the painting, and depicting him in an almost two-dimensional, iconographic fashion.

Conversely, the figures of the cripples, when compared to the figure of the beggar in Titian's work, dominate the foreground and lower two thirds of the painting. Instead of sitting in the corner of the painting like Titian's beggar, they twist and turn with a three dimensional vivacity demonstrating the life found within them. This reflects the new concept of the poor as ideal Christians brought about in connection with the new poor laws. These poor can be seen as deserving of charity since unlike the beggar in Titian's work they are not passive receivers, but instead have the vivacity to work in exchange for charity. In this way Tintoretto not only challenged the previous convention of painters to hide the poor at the edges of paintings, but also reflected the new concepts of the poor as ideal Christians full of life and willing to work to raise their social status.

## 6. Conclusion

Tintoretto, like most artists, can be thought of as a product or reflection of his age. As the government of Venice worked to move the poor off the streets and into jobs and housing and the rich members of the *Scuole* strived to continue providing charity to their poor members, Tintoretto sought to remind the upper classes of their role in the distribution of charity, and to keep the poor in the mind of the public even as they were moved out of sight. Tintoretto's main goal, though, was to reflect the current view of the poor as ideal Christians willing to improve their status through work, a goal stemming not only from the aesthetics of Christian painting, but from his own personal connection to the lower classes through his nickname, connections, and early patronage and commissions. In this way Tintoretto's personal painting style and chosen depictions are not only a reflection of the changing culture of poverty and charity occurring around him in Renaissance Venice, but also a response to these changes through a reflection of his own personal experiences with poverty and his resulting views regarding the importance of the lower classes in Venetian society.

## 7. Endnotes

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