

2023

Tintoretto: Painting in The Chaotic Reformations

Summer Markham
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/ourj>



Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Markham, Summer (2023) "Tintoretto: Painting in The Chaotic Reformations," *OUR Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 10, Article 10.

DOI: 10.25778/bxdk-x108

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/ourj/vol10/iss1/10>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in OUR Journal: ODU Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

TINTORETTO: PAINTING IN THE CHAOTIC REFORMATIONS

By Summer Markham

Venetian artist Jacopo Tintoretto had perhaps one of the most influential impacts on art during the Counter-Reformation. His oil painting, *Last Supper*, completed in 1594, is one example of how his work impacted the art world during this time (Figure 1). Through this mannerist painting, Tintoretto was able to use light to emphasize Christ as the only illuminating hope during the dark, confusing era that Europe was experiencing throughout the Counter-Reformation. Additionally, Tintoretto's use of *chiaroscuro* and *sfumato* further alludes to the darkness surrounding the self-indulgence, financial abuses, and religious corruption. Scholarly research, such as Michael Levey's "Tintoretto and the Theme of Miraculous Intervention," suggests that Tintoretto presents the vision of hope through the presentation of the Eucharist in a supernatural and spiritual atmosphere.¹ There is also discussion about how the techniques and mediums he uses are influential to how he depicts his religious narratives and demonstrates the mystic aura that surrounds transubstantiation and the Eucharist. Thomas Worthen, in his article "Tintoretto's Paintings for the Banco del Sacramento in S. Margherita," also states that this depiction of *Last Supper* is the best depiction of the deception of Judas as well as the Counter-

¹ Michael Levey, "Tintoretto and the Theme of Miraculous Intervention", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 113, no. 5109 (1965): 707-725.

Reformation viewpoint on the sacrament.² In regards to the historical context of the time, Tintoretto's use of exaggerated painting techniques and symbolism results in his *Last Supper* not only successfully coinciding with the events of the time era but connecting to the transubstantiation, the Eucharist, and the seven sacraments that the Catholic church followed. Mary Leven, the author of "Encountering the Counter-Reformation," even describes the Counter-Reformation as a period full of paintings that echoed the principles of Catholicism which consisted of the saints, transubstantiation, purgatory, debauchery, and the rich.³ *Last Supper*, along with many of Tintoretto's works, are reflections of the popular biblical narratives in religion, such as the *Fall of Manna* which is placed alongside with *Last Supper* in the San Giorgio Maggiore (Figure 2). Tintoretto's painting, *Last Supper*, not only reflects the historical atmosphere of the Counter-Reformation, but also depicts Judas' betrayal of Christ as destiny just as the day of judgment is ultimately inevitable – reflecting a time of chaos when religious people were conflicted as to where to turn to be saved.

Before focusing on the meaning within Tintoretto's painting, it is important to set the stage as to what was happening during this period. During the 16th century, religious conflicts erupted between Martin Luther and Pope Julius II. These conflicts began when Martin Luther visited Rome in 1510 expecting it to be a land of faith and purity. Instead, Martin Luther discovered the exact opposite. Rome had become filthy, and the streets were filled with crime.

² Thomas Worthen, "Tintoretto's Paintings for the Banco del Sacramento in S. Margherita", *Art Bulletin* 78, no. 4 (1996): 707-732.

³ Mary Laven, "Encountering the Counter-Reformation", *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no.3 (2006): 706.

Luther's visit became the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation. Pope Julius II advocated for the selling of indulgences for the church and government to obtain a percentage of the funds for their personal use and promoted that people who bought these indulgences could get out of purgatory "quicker." As a result, the last judgment image was everywhere emphasizing that the end of days is coming, therefore reinforcing the importance of indulgences. Alongside this, the spread of the Bubonic Plague increased the "importance" of indulgences as the plague was viewed as evidence of the beginning of the end of days. Moreover, this conflict would ultimately lead to the Protestant Reformation and the posting of the 95 theses by Martin Luther surrounding the selling of indulgences.

Martin Luther, after condemning the selling of indulgences, began to advocate for *sola fide* (faith alone) and *sola scriptura* (scripture alone). This emphasizes the idea that the Pope is not necessary for faith; rather, faith is more of a personal matter. The battle of the Protestant *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* versus the Catholic faith and good works arose from this, and the spirit crises collided with the artistic crises. Artists, during this crisis, began to push the boundaries of art making – breaking the rules and causing trouble. Mannerism, the style of painting that emerged in Rome and Florence during the later years of the High Renaissance, arose in the midst of this along with Tintoretto – a mannerist painter. Martin Luther also had an indifferent stance towards religious images. While he did not consider them a form of idolatry, he was concerned about Christians believing they could buy their way into heaven through art endowments. Instead, Luther favored historical representations of Christ and rejected images of certain saints and representations of the Virgin that denied the primacy of Christ. One result of this upheaval regarding religious doctrine was the beginning of the Counter-Reformation.

One of the attempts by the Catholics during the Counter-Reformation to fight back was the Council of Trent. Its sessions were held by Pope Paul III. In 1563, during the final session, the council provided a defense of sacred imagery in response to Protestant criticism and iconoclasm. Throughout the reformations and with the help of Gutenberg's printing press, Catholicism continued to thrive through campaigns that had the addition of patronage of artists who were initiated by popes and religious clients.⁴ According to the Council of Trent, sacred images were necessary because of their function to instruct the faithful, particularly the illiterate, and served as memory aids. Sacred images also served as models of piety. Images of saints, the Virgin, and Christ were a means to incite devotion and stir the emotions of viewers. Tintoretto's art was directly influenced by this, post Council of Trent, resulting in his spiritual, atmospheric depictions of sacred images. Along with this, it is important to note the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and matrimony. Protestants recognize only two of the seven sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist. Protestants also do not believe in transubstantiation. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that Protestants emphasize the word of the Bible more than the art.⁵ Protestants did not condone or commission religious altarpieces for churches. Their art was largely Protestant propaganda or instructive depictions about the life of Christ. These efforts on the part of the

⁴ Robert Brown, "The Propagation of Awe: Public Relations, Art and Belief in Reformation Europe", *Public Relations Review* 30, no.4 (2004): 382.

⁵ Andrew Coates, "What is Protestant Art?" *Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and the Arts*, (2018): 2.

Catholics and the Protestants are important in understanding their influence on Tintoretto's *Last Supper*.

When trying to understand the historical context into which *Last Supper*, its symbolism – along with the paintings in the Church of San Giorgio and those commissioned for the Banco del Sacramento – all play a key role. Symbolism in *Last Supper* is demonstrated through Tintoretto's art techniques, dramatic scenery, and use of perspective. Tintoretto's strong use of *sfumato* and *chiaroscuro* creates an energy to help illuminate the dark times of this religious crisis. The scholar, Michael Levey, described in his article, "His prayer is always 'lighten our darkness'; and part of the power of his comes his strong sense of darkness as well as light."⁶ This further supports that Tintoretto's use of *chiaroscuro* was purposely used to demonstrate that through Christ there is hope and that hope is not through the selling of indulgences. Furthermore, this hope is obtained through the sacraments of the Eucharist and confirmation ultimately reflects Tintoretto's obedience towards the decree of sacred images that the Council of Trent created. Tintoretto also employs mannerist techniques to create dramatic imagery. The mannerist techniques that Tintoretto implemented include dark spaces; unorganized, crowded scenes; and an intense, sharp color palette. Tom Nichols, the writer of "James, Ruskin, and Tintoretto," states, "the painting is praised for its genuineness in the startling figures and richly, vibrant, and realistic foreground."⁷ Another mannerist technique that Tintoretto used was to create exaggerated, grotesque, and contorted figures which resulted in lumpy lines that made figures

⁶ Michael Levey, "Tintoretto and the Theme," 724.

⁷ Tom Nichols, "James, Ruskin, and Tintoretto", *The Henry James Review* 23, no. 3 (2002): 300.

appear extremely muscular.⁸ These techniques, however, were not used coincidentally but purposefully as symbols to be a cross-referenced to the manna. This cross-reference is shown in the overcrowded background and in the actions of the individuals. For example, in the background, a woman appears down on her knees offering a bowl to a man who is turned away taking a pumpkin from the table.

This is a representation of vanity and because of the disparity between the divine food and fruit positioned on the table, the man is unable to see or notice that the food is divine which is a cross-reference to the manna that was disregarded by the Israelites. Once again, Tintoretto follows the decree of sacred images by demonstrating the tie between the manna and the Eucharist. Ultimately, Tintoretto's clear demonstration of following the decree that the Council of Trent created reflects the importance of following the seven sacraments to be prepared for the day of judgment.

Perspective is a key attribute to Tintoretto and other Mannerist painters. In *Last Supper*, which he painted for the Church of San Marcuola, Tintoretto uses perspective to position Christ so that he is seated across from the *Scuola* board. Tintoretto intentionally did this so that approaching petitioners would see Judas hiding the money behind his back.⁹ Another interesting use of perspective by Tintoretto at the Church of San Marcuola is his use of perspective to change with the viewer's viewpoint. This gives the viewer of the painting the ability to understand how the *Scuole* board wanted each group of the church seated around the painting to

⁸ John Marciari, *Drawing in Tintoretto's Venice*, New York: The Morgan library & Museum, (2018): 116.

⁹ Benjamin Paul, "Review of Exhibition", *Renaissance Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 253.

be viewed. This raises the possibility that Tintoretto was communicating the same idea across all his variations of *Last Supper* by alluding, through the placement of the figures, who was going to be saved on the day of judgment and what actions needed to take place to be saved. In *Last Supper* of the Church of San Maggiore, Tintoretto once again uses perspective by skewing the table and grants the viewer active participation with the painting at every angle by his positioning of the figures. The composition of the table also brings attention to the detail of Eucharist and transubstantiation. Therefore, Tintoretto was not only using perspective to create an interesting composition but also to give the viewer an impression of what is viewed as faithful and unfaithful behavior.

The islands of San Giorgio Maggiore are not only the location of the infamous church of San Giorgio Maggiore but also the setting of Tintoretto's artwork and the location of his workshop. Three paintings at the Church of San Giorgio – the *Last Supper*, *Fall of Manna*, and the *Entombment of Christ* – play an important role in depicting the historical events and messages of the Counter-Reformation, the Eucharist, and how their historical connection. Firstly, the paintings in the Church of San Giorgio were commissioned for the iconographic program which centered around the principles of the Counter-Reformation.¹⁰ The *Last Supper* and the *Fall of Manna* both correlate specifically to Christ's body as the host and the sacrament of the Eucharist. The *Fall of Manna* presents the Israelites focused on their work, regardless of the manna that God had sent to feed them.¹¹ While *Last Supper* depicts the deception of Judas in the

¹⁰ Thomas dalla Costa, Robert Echols and Frederick Ilchaman, eds., *Tintoretto in Venice: A Guide*, (Venice: Marsilio Editori, s.p.a., 2018), 134.

¹¹ Dalla Costa, Echols, and Ilchman, eds., *Tintoretto in Venice*, 134.

most favorable way of the Counter-Reformation's view of the sacrament. The symbolic link between the two paintings consists of both having relations to the manna as a foreshadowing of the holy food for the host. The *Entombment of Christ* also belongs in this series having Eucharistic themes (Figure 3). Its symbolic tie to *Last Supper* and *Fall of Manna* depicts salvation of the spirit using the images of the crucifixion, the Virgin Mary, the resurrection, and the Calvary. Furthermore, this provides evidence that during the Counter-Reformation, altars were also dedicated to the devotion of crucifixions and the torture of Christ on the basis of the desire for salvation brought to a person's soul through the sacrament.¹² The connection and cohesiveness between these paintings shows how appealing they were towards the Catholics through works of art especially those that emphasize salvation of the soul which was of great importance during the Counter-Reformation.

Tintoretto was not only commissioned to create paintings for the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore but also for the Banco del Sacramento in S. Margherita. The Banco del Sacramento in S. Margherita houses Tintoretto's painting that were specifically designed to go above the *banco* – bench and desk – of a Confraternity of the Sacrament.¹³ Tintoretto painted ten different version of *Last Supper*, one being in the S. Margherita. He took into consideration the main concerns of the *Scuola* which was the Eucharist and charity which Tintoretto made sure to depict in the *Last Supper*. In the painting, Tintoretto also portrays Christ as a symbol of charity by positioning him above all the secondary figures in the composition. This ties back to Tintoretto's consideration of

¹² Peter Humfrey, "Altarpieces and Altar Dedications in Counter-Reformation Venice and the Veneto", *Renaissance Studies* 10, no.3 (1996): 373.

¹³ Thomas Worthen, "Tintoretto's Paintings," 12.

how the observer would view each painting. This also brings to our attention another technique that Tintoretto would use. Whenever Tintoretto was commissioned to complete a painting for a public area, he would visit the site and observe the space from all perspective views. He would consider that viewers of the painting would obviously be mobile, which meant that every detail must be studied regarding its placement. This further evidences the notion that Tintoretto was seeking to communicate with perspective and point of view to demonstrate what each figure in the composition symbolized: the seven sacraments, charity, or the Eucharist.

Going into extensive detail with the techniques of Tintoretto's *Last Supper* is valuable to understand how his artistic choices were influenced by the Counter-Reformation and the themes to which he was seeking to depict and allude. Tintoretto's work also tends to represent his naturalistic views. In the article, "James Ruskin, and Tintoretto," it was said that this naturalistic side was a solution between the situations of realism and idealism.¹⁴ For instance, the light from the lamp and the light from Christ's halo highlights the supernatural and the natural intertwined together in *Last Supper*. This mystic aura around the lamp was a key factor Counter-Reformation artwork as it suggested the miraculous and mysterious side of religion. All these aspects – the composition, perspective, and placement – in the painting contribute to the mysteriousness of the act of transubstantiation. The light from the lamp is also a reason Tintoretto's paintings have been praised for their richly realistic and vibrant aspects along with his genuine yet startling

¹⁴ To Nichols, "James, Ruskin," 300.

human figures. This intertwines with Tintoretto's technique of using perspective for active participation with the viewer. For instance, in the *Last Supper*, skewing the table and the realistic details aided in the popularity of Tintoretto's art. The diagonal perspective of the table suggests to the viewer a sense of Christ on a high altar, with his utensils and plates at the altar's head. Meanwhile, the dreamy, ethereal angels at the top of the ceiling not only characterize the Eucharist but contribute to the image of the enigma of transubstantiation. This diagonal perspective of the table and Christ emphasizes the Eucharist immensely in the artwork of the Counter-Reformation, especially Tintoretto's, because it is one of the most cherished aspects and sacrament for Catholics.

As the perspective contributes to copious amounts of symbolic references, so does the positioning of these symbols in each paintings. As previously stated, some figures in *Last Supper* imply the image of vanity. The woman, in the bottom right corner, is positioned on her knees offering a bowl to the male figure who is turned away from her, reaching for a pumpkin – a symbol of growth and prosperity on a table which represents vanity. Along with the pumpkin is an assortment of other food on the table, exemplifying discretions between the holy food and fruit positioned on the table. This man is also powerless to perceive or regard this food, a reference to the Israelites disregarding manna. The harshly clothed figures plating food epitomize how society is corrupted by human ignorance with no alliance to Christ. Additionally, even the animals have symbolic meanings behind them. For instance, the cat peering into the vase, in the far bottom right corner, represents resurrection and rebirth because of its nine lives. However, on the other hand, the cat's nocturnal abilities are associated with wickedness, mysteriousness, and the supernatural. In detail, the celestial angels located overhead are connected to the Eucharist as they are described as “bread of angels,” and their mystical,

transcendental ambience stipulates the obscured nature of transubstantiation. These symbolic references communicates to viewers of the Counter-Reformation, especially the illiterate, the importance of participating in the Eucharist and believing in the essence of transubstantiation. This all played a role in Tintoretto informing and educating the public on what sacraments to follow and how to be saved for judgment day.

The Counter-Reformation, beginning in 1517, changed how artists created and depicted their beliefs due to the Council of Trent's decree on sacred images. This influenced artists like Tintoretto to change their artistic styles post Council of Trent. The result of Martin Luther visiting Rome in 1510 and truly observing how it was not a place of purity or faith but instead corrupted by sin and especially with the selling of indulgences ultimately resulted in the 95 theses – the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation. After this, the Council of Trent was formed, the first official meeting of the Catholic's attempt to fight back, and the Counter-Reformation took place resulting in new guidelines for sacred imagery, such as the decree on sacred images, the changing functions of sacred images, and Tintoretto's art being ultimately influenced by the period. This leads to the historical context also influencing Tintoretto's painting of *Last Supper*. Aspects that tie into this influence includes the symbolism, artist techniques, and perspectives used by Tintoretto in the painting. Tintoretto created ten different versions of *Last Supper*, each correlating heavily on perspective to incorporate the viewpoints of where people are seated in the churches along with understanding the viewpoints of a mobile viewer. They also present the similar symbolic reference of charity and the Eucharist. There is also significant relations between *Fall of Manna*, *Entombment of Christ*, and *Last Supper*. The connection between these three paintings is that they all demonstrate the Eucharist sacrament, and their symbolic link is that the manna is a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. Tintoretto's paintings have further led to

discoveries that the influence that the Counter-Reformation had on his techniques. These discoveries include that his paintings post-Council of Trent became spiritual, atmospheric, and followed the guidelines of the decree of sacred images. It was also observed that his work became more naturalistic, situated somewhere between realism and idealism, with depictions of the natural and supernatural intertwined, along with the position of figures and objects in his painting having symbolic meaning and the use of perspective to create realistic details and viewpoints to show figures in a certain light. Ultimately, Tintoretto's *Last Supper* showed the chaos of people trying to figure out how to worship God "the right way" and what precautions to take to ensure salvation when the day of judgment finally came. Furthermore, *Last Supper* gives its viewer the ability to not only observe the emotions during that period but to also observe how religion changed the course of art's creation and its depiction of biblical scenes.

REFERENCES

- Brown, Robert E. "The Propagation of Awe: Public Relations, Art and Belief in Reformation Europe." *Public Relations Review* 30, no.4 (2004): 381 -389.
- Coates Andrew T. "*What is Protestant Art? Brill Research Perspective in Religion and the Arts.* Leiden: Brill, 2018.
- Dalla Costa, Thomas, Robert Echols, and Frederick Ilchman, eds., *Tintoretto in Venice: A Guide.* Venice: Marsilio Editori, s.p.a., 2018.
- Humfrey, Peter. "Altarpieces and Altar Dedications in Counter-Reformation Venice and the Veneto." *Renaissance Studies* 10, no. 3 (1996): 371 – 387.
- Laven, Mary. "Encountering the Counter-Reformation." *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2006): 706-720
- Levy, Michael. "Tintoretto and the Theme of Miraculous Intervention." *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 113, no. 5109 (1965): 707-725.
- Marciari, John. *Drawing in Tintoretto's Venice.* New York: The Morgan Library & Museum, (2018): 116-181.
- Nichols, Tom., "James, Ruskin, and Tintoretto." *The Henry James Review* 23, no.3 (2002): 294-303.
- Paul, Benjamin. "Review of Exhibition." *Renaissance Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 251-259.
- Worthen, Thomas. "Tintoretto's Paintings for the Banco del Sacramento in S. Margherita." *Art Bulletin* 78, no.4 (1996): 707-732.

Fig. 1. Tintoretto, *Last Supper*, 1592-94. Oil on canvas, 365 x 568 cm. Church of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice.



Fig. 2. Tintoretto, *The Fall of Manna*, 1592-94. Oil on canvas, 377 x 576 cm. Church of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice.



Fig. 3. Tintoretto, *Entombment of Christ*, 1592-94. Oil on canvas, 288 x 166 cm. Church of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice.

