

«TINTORETTO IS VENICE, EVEN IF HE DOES NOT PAINT VENICE» Jean-Paul Sartre

The special project by the Pushkin Museum is devoted to the 500th anniversary of the great Venetian artist Jacopo Robusti, known as Tintoretto. The main protagonist of Tintoretto's works is the space. Not just a site for an artwork created, but an infinite universe embodied in his painting. Tintoretto's approach is revolutionary for his times and close to contemporary media artists: the idea of immersion into the space comes to the fore in his art. The artists, who have created four installations at the San Fantin church, follow the same principle.

The project by the Pushkin Museum also allows for the exploration of Venice by visiting places related to Tintoretto's biography and art. As Pavel Muratov wrote: «There is no more worthy goal in the walks in Venice than the quest for Tintoretto. For this one needs to visit many churches, go around the whole city from Madonna dell'Orto to San Trovaso and from San Zaccaria to San Rocco; one also has to go by gondola to the church on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. But first one has to visit the two-storey building of beautiful early 16th-century architecture, called Scuola San Rocco». We offer three routes that embrace hallmark places related to Tintoretto and the key themes of his work.

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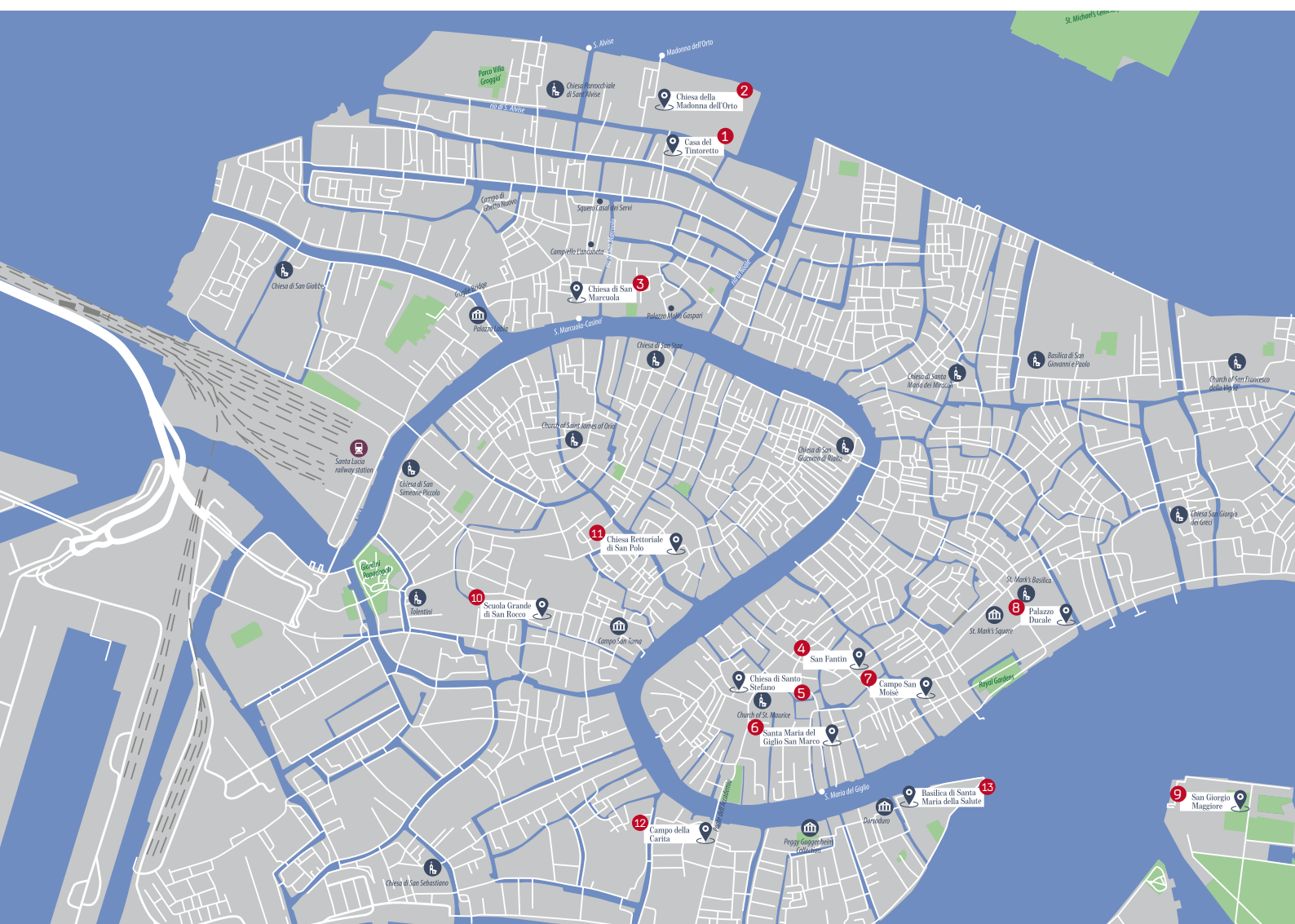


There is a beginning IN THE END...

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SAN FANTIN CHURCH,
Campo San Fantin



The Scuole Grandi represent an important page in the history of the Venetian Republic. These communities were similar to fraternities, guilds and charitable religious organizations, but the decisive factor in these unifications was a sort of affinity of souls. The Venetian scuola is something in between medieval guild, English gentlemen's club and contemporary NGO – that is, something truly original, specifically Venetian, and much defining in the history of Venice. It was a sort of social security system, independent of the republic's authorities.

The scuole were suppressed by Napoleon, but two of them still operate as charitable organizations, one of them – Scuola Grande di San Rocco. The Scuola di San Rocco, whose affiliate Tintoretto was for twenty years, helped common people, especially during the dark period of the outbreak of plague in Venice. The artist had to make a lot of effort to join the fraternity and to decorate the building. When he was finally called to take part in the competition for the decoration of Sala dell'Albergo, instead of presenting a preliminary drawing he managed to install the painting St. Roch in Glory in the center of the ceiling and donated it to the Scuola, which was an obvious trick, because the fraternity could not reject gifts. Thus an arrangement was established between Tintoretto and the Scuola, which was destined to produce the most extraordinary painting cycle in Venetian art.

«There was no other artist who would approach the topic of the Last Supper so many times and would provide such a deep and comprehensive interpretation of it as Tintoretto. He painted the Last Supper at least eight times in monumental compositions, with different variations of human relationships, revealing the complex contradictions of his creative quest»

Boris Vipper

Tintoretto places the classical biblical scene in the modest furnishings of his times and portrays the participants as ordinary people. It was for the first time that the Italian Renaissance art brought the mystical theme of communion to the fore, leaving the dramatic theme of betrayal behind. It is the scene of spiritual unity in the first place – and it is no coincidence that the artist took a lot of commissions from the religious confraternities and felt the urge to be part of them.

Tintoretto's approach to the composition of the Last Supper is truly innovative. Starting with classical frontal composition in the early work for the church of San Marcuola, he gradually reaches the dramatic dynamism of this scene. In The Last Supper from the church of San Simeone the table is skewed off the perspective projection; flickering artificial light adds a hue of mystery to the scene. This approach culminates in The Last Supper from the church of San Giorgio Maggiore: the dynamics of the composition makes the depicted scene uprush to the sky.

ROUTE 1

TINTORETTO'S HOUSE AND WORKSHOP¹ – THE CHURCH OF MADONNA DELL'ORTO² – THE CHURCH OF SAN MARCUOLA³

Jacopo Robusti was born in the district of San Polo, where his father had a cloth-dyeing workshop – hence the nickname of Tintoretto, little dyer. Since childhood Tintoretto spent time at the dyeing workshop, and when his father noticed his artistic bent, he took him to the studio of Titian. However, in ten days maestro sent him away for good. «According to the legend, he became jealous of a student who demonstrated so much talent. We do not know where he eventually studied; he worked for the lower strata of the Venetian society for modest fees. He painted a lot for churches which still have his works. His natural talent allowed him to create pieces swiftly, so the artist left many works. He always followed the customer's requests» (Victoria Markova).

Tintoretto opened his own workshop in the district of Cannaregio, on FONDAMENTA DEI MORI(1). He spent his whole life in this remote neighborhood, keeping away from the high society. At home, he would host musical concerts with participation of his daughter Marietta who was herself a portrait painter. Not far from this place there is the church of MADONNA DELL'ORTO(2). Tintoretto was a member of this church; there he was buried by the side of his favorite daughter Marietta; his son and heir of his studio Domenico was buried near them. Tintoretto's studio lasted for more 60 years after Jacopo's death – unlike the studio of Titian, which broke up almost immediately.

In his approach to space Tintoretto is akin to contemporary artists: his paintings are, in today's terms, site-specific, i.e. created specifically for a particular place, while within the compositions, the space conveys semantic and emotional message. In 1555, the artist executed the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple on the organ's hatch in the church of Madonna dell'Orto. A little girl is clambering towards the priest along a daring diagonal of a steep staircase, attracting gazes of all the witnesses. The dizzying perspective angles and the diagonal lines convey a special dramatic feeling to the scene.

«The effulgence over the girl's head makes her look like a candle – she burns and prays, a redeeming candle; and when looking at her, the nightmares leave the soul, merciless fear releases its claws, and analgesic peace – like living water – infuses your weary body with strength» (Arcadiy Ippolitov). This mystical radiance of light and the musicality of Tintoretto's compositions underlie the installation by Gary Hill within the exhibition in the church of San Fantin.

The inscription over Tintoretto's studio – «Michelangelo's drawing and Titian's color» – demonstrates his personal ambition and competitiveness with two great masters. In 1560-1562, the artist painted for the church of Madonna dell'Orto two enormous works (almost fifteen meters high) – the Last Judgment and the Worship of the Golden Calf. The first one was a genuine move to dare Michelangelo. In the second, the artist depicted himself and fellow artists, including Veronese, constructing a golden calf – thereby posing a question about idolatry and spirituality. «The very idea to bring together these two scenes is extravagant, yet Tintoretto did it so tremendously well that Effie Gray, the tender spouse of John Ruskin, dragged by the great aesthete to the church of Madonna dell'Orto, got scared of the Last Judgment and ran away from the church, aghast» (Arcadiy Ippolitov).

Moving towards the Grand Canal, one can stop by another church – SAN MARCUOLA(3) – that has one of Tintoretto's Last Suppers. This is an early work (1547) and Tintoretto's style is not yet fully developed here, but due to his special mastery of light he already manages to drag the viewer inside the depicted scene.

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ROUTE 2

SAN FANTIN⁴ – SAN STEFANO⁵ – SANTA MARIA DEL GIGLIO⁶ – SAN MOISÈ⁷ – DOGE'S PALACE⁸ – SAN GIORGIO MAGGIORE⁹

The church of SAN FANTIN(4) that hosts the special project of the Pushkin Museum was completed in the 16th century, while the first religious buildings on this site date back to the 10th century. It has been closed for renovation for a long period of time, and this exhibition is the first project to open it for the wide audience. Back in 16th century the church belonged to one of the scuole – called della Buona Morte (of the Good Death), it provided assistance to prisoners condemned to death. Scuola di San Fantin was suppressed by Napoleon, like most of scuole at that time, and the church became the university property. Inside, there were several paintings by old masters, including the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth by Tintoretto.

At the altar of the San Fantin church, artist Dmitry Krymov has created a performative installation based on Tintoretto's Last Supper (1565) from the church of San Trovaso. Tintoretto placed the sacred scene in the modest basement and portrayed its participants as common people surrounded by everyday details. The scene is filled with dramatic energy due to compositional effects: the usual perspective is broken, and the participants are involved in the dynamic circular flow of what is happening. «Through the design of the scenes, findings in the field of perspective, characters with recognizable faces of common people, the artist erases the distinction between the virtual space of the painting, the scene depicted on it and the context outside the painting, where the real liturgy takes place» (Don Gianmatteo Caputo). Krymov elaborates the multi-layered space of The Last Supper, places the scene in contemporary setting and combines cinema and performance in his work.

Not far from the church of San Fantin there is the church of SAN STEFANO(5), where one may find another Last Supper (1570), along with two later Tintoretto's works – Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and Christ Washing the Disciples' Feet. Nearby, there are two beautiful baroque churches – SANTA MARIA DEL GIGLIO(6) and the church of SAN MOISÈ(7). The first one has paired compositions of the Four Evangelists: Mark and John; Luke and Matthew (1552-1553). The artist placed their figures among dark clouds to emphasize the light emanating from the Gospel. In the painting Washing the Feet (1590) from San Moisè Tintoretto organized the composition in the same way as in The Last Supper from San Stefano: he placed the scene on a platform – as if it was a theater stage – thereby emphasizing the importance of the depicted scene.

After passing through the Piazza San Marco, we approach the DOGE'S PALACE (8). In 1577, Tintoretto, along with other architects and painters, took part in its restoration after the fire damage. He executed a cycle of mythological paintings based on Ovid's poems. They were part of a program to celebrate the good government of the Venetian Republic and to glorify Venice – the queen of the seas (Bacchus, Venus and Ariadne), its military powers (Vulcan's Forge), the wisdom of its diplomacy (Minerva Sending Away Mars from Peace and Prosperity), its wealth and beauty (Mercury and the Graces).

Here one may also find the spectacular Paradise – perhaps, one of the most controversial paintings in the eyes of Tintoretto's contemporaries. One of the world's largest paintings on canvas, despite its complex composition with a huge number of characters, retains clarity and integrity. However, to some it looked as crowded as a marketplace. The artist was most likely inspired by the images of Dante's Divine Comedy. A turbulent live mass and its heavenward movement inspired one of Irina Nakhova's video projections in the church of San Fantin.

Right in front of the Doge's Palace, in the lagoon, there is the SAN GIORGIO MAGGIORE(9) island. It is worth taking a vaporetto ride in order to admire Tintoretto's work in the church of the same name. There we find the master's latest works: The Fall of Manna, The Entombment of Christ and The Last Supper (1594). In the latter, Tintoretto's skill in rendering light communicates the divine plane of the scene and skillfully integrates it in the depicted event. Glowing haloes of Christ and the apostles illuminate all the surrounding space with divine light, making incorporeal angels visible. «The feverish, exalted, fluctuating light of Tintoretto can find greater evidence in the current varied expressive scenario» (Giuseppe Barbieri). Mystical glow that invites the viewer to the sacrament has been the main theme of Gary Hill's work for the exhibition at San Fantin. Like Tintoretto, he creates worlds out of this glow – tangible by all senses and transforming the space around.

ROUTE 3

SAN ROCCO¹⁰ – SAN POLO¹¹ – GALLERIA DELL'ACCADEMIA¹² – SANTA MARIA DELLA SALUTE¹³

The SCUOLA GRANDE DI SAN ROCCO(10) is called the Sistine Chapel of Tintoretto – for the scale of his work comparable to Michelangelo's. «The Scuola di San Rocco emanates powerful fumes of intense faith and passionate painting <...> the flocks of frantic angels will fly on you from all around» (Ekaterina Dyogot).

In total, the artist executed more than fifty compositions for the Scuola Grande. Among them – the enormous Crucifixion. Here, light and lines set the dramatic rhythm of the tragic scene. Tintoretto depicts the moment just before the Christ's death on the cross – when he says «I thirst» and the Roman soldier brings him a sponge soaked in vinegar put on his spear – and when he already emanates the divine light. In this painting, the human and the divine collide, with a human mass boiling around much the same as the swirling thunderstorm clouds.

The incredible energy of Tintoretto's canvases is the result of his special painting technique. He used dark primers and often painted alla prima, i.e. directly on canvas, without preliminary studies, and did not waste time for the application of several layers of glaze, which lent his paintings an unfinished quality. This very technique allowed achieving greater contrast between light and shadow, which contributed to the compositional depth and intensity. At the preparatory stage, the artist would make wax figurines, suspend, illuminate and sketch them from below, which makes his approach close to theater design.

The composition of The Last Supper from the Scuola di San Rocco reminds a theater stage. It is interesting to compare it with another Last Supper – from THE CHURCH OF SAN POLO. Jesus distributes the bread, and the apostles, in turn, share their food with a poor man and his child. The idea of communion is central; the figure of Judas is outside the main circle and seems to be absorbed by darkness. «The distribution of bread becomes the symbol of self-denial and the establishment of a fraternal union for the benefit of all the suffering and the poor <...> Visible from the very doors of the church, it is intended for any poor man, for everyone who is eager for their daily bread, for all the people, all of humanity» (Boris Vipper).

One cannot go past the collection of Tintoretto's works in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice. The most remarkable of them is The Miracle of the Slave (1548), executed for the Scuola Grande di San Marco. After this canvas, entire Venice spoke about the artist. The reason for this was its unusual, strikingly dynamic composition: the crowd is depicted in a swirling movement, the figure of the saint swoops down from above, the slave lies down on the ground in the very center. A powerful whirlwind sweeps the whole scene and involves the viewer to feel the miracle. The Renaissance perspective receded into the past, and the emphatic perspective effects point the way to the Baroque. «In the eyes of an audience accustomed to abstract expressionism, to action painting, to arte informale, to the gigantic dimensions of certain contemporary art, the 'off-scale' of Tintoretto's art, its dynamism, its bold brushstrokes and a combination, often hallucinatory, of fantasy and ordinary life, does not stop pushing the boundaries of what painting can say» (Gabriella Belli).

The swirling rhythm of The Miracle of the Slave reverberates in the circle-shaped painting by Emilio Vedova, presented at the exhibition in the church of San Fantin. Tintoretto's main successor in Modernism, he creates the same dynamic universes in his art – in his case, reduced to abstraction.

The Galleria dell'Accademia is home to some Tintoretto's paintings on classical biblical themes: The Temptation of Adam (1552), The Assumption of the Virgin (1550), The Creation of the Animals (1552) (some of them are away for the Tintoretto exhibition in Washington, DC till mid-July). The moment of creation is depicted in a blaze golden light, which communicates the impulse to the newly created world. The similar state of agitation with the presence of supernatural forces is behind the media installation by Irina Nakhova.

It is well worth to finish this walk in the district of Dorsoduro by the magnificent building of the church of SANTA MARIA DELLA SALUTE(13). Here one may find the painting Marriage at Cana (1561) – which became one of the turning points in the understanding of space in painting. The architectural elements create the effect of spaciousness; the painting is full of people and details but somehow our eyes are led straight to Christ and Mary in the back of the room. There is no negative space – the composition lives in all directions. «Some scenes distinguished by bold – but always accurate – perspective and details represent a kind of space inside the space – not just an illusory environment but a means to engage believers in liturgical action» (Don Gianmatteo Caputo). In the documentary by Giuseppe Domingo Romano «Tintoretto. A Rebel in Venice», film director Peter Greenaway compares Tintoretto's approach to this scene with the film techniques of Orson Welles, the deep-focus cinematography in the first place.