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PRESENTATION

The work of Jacopo Tintoretto, one of the giants of Venetian painting, has always been the object of attention, study and in-depth examination, as well as of dispute and mockery. A series of writings – starting with quotations from Giorgio Vasari and Carlo Ridolfi and ending with the recent studies produced by Francesco Valcanover and Astrid Zenkert – allow us to grasp the quality and the message in his vast collection of oil paintings. The innovations in the fields of composition, perspective, light, color, movement and technique do not only indicate the maturation of figurative expression, which matured through his art in Late Renaissance Venice, but also bear witness to the new and dramatic representation of the human being that would go on to distinguish the Baroque era.

This maturation of Tintoretto's style, as a sign of existential anxiety, can especially be seen in the narrative cycle that covers the walls and ceilings of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, where dozens of "*teleri*" (canvases) created in what seems to have been a period of solitude and compulsive work lasting more than twenty years (1564-1587), depict the episodes of the Old and New Testaments. It is a thorough illustration of biblical events, unique in its completeness, stateliness and systematic nature, rendered opportune by the regulations promulgated earlier by the Council of Trent with the aim of giving a unitary structure to the theological foundations of the Roman Catholic Church.

These are the causes and reasons that determined the cycle's composition and that gave it homogeneity and coherence. The exegetic depth and the symbolic precision of the paintings, arranged in cinematic sequence on the walls of the Scuola, imply that the artist may have been assisted by a "*consultant*".

Though Benedetto Croce's methodology in the field of art criticism, which throughout the 1900s stressed the aesthetic approach, ended in eclipsing the content and nexus of an artwork, especially the religious ones, in the case of the San Rocco cycle it was precisely the content and nexus that were fundamental for both the client, a charity confraternity, and the painter, a profound believer. In fact, to understand the dramatic sequence of the biblical episodes depicted by Jacopo Tintoretto's feverish brushstroke at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, it was considered sufficient to allude to the tempestuous political climate of the second half of the 16th century in Venice, Italy and Europe in general, which were ravaged by plagues, famines, interdicts, wars (with the Protestants, the Ottomans and other kingdoms and

empires), as well as to the economic and social decadence of the Venetian Republic.

The relationship between form and content, an old dilemma, was crucial in the history of figurative expression in the great monotheistic religions, which feared idolatry and therefore tended to prohibit figuration, confining it to calligraphy, geometry, decoration, or even limiting its typological development, as in the case of the Byzantine icons after the iconoclastic interdiction had been overcome.

It is the Catholic Church, instead, that turns to the language of images with the intention of promoting the integration of story and figure, aware that the word, limited by linguistic babel and alphabetic diversity, can find its universal complement only in form, which is comprehensible directly, even without any particular cultural mediation.

From the fresco narration, such as the “*Biblia pauperum* (Pauper’s Bible)”, which has existed for many centuries on the walls of sacred buildings, we move on, through the Renaissance, to a greater complexity in the representation, which, after the Council of Trent, was given the task to evoke sentiments, to involve the spectator, to reproduce the reality of the moment.

This is the revolution, in its religious and figurative implications, that was created by the artists of the 16th century.

Although Tintoretto often contextualizes the biblical story in historical events, it does not mean that his great compositions will not dedicate a main scene to Moses, the Prophets or Christ himself. For they are key figures of the salvation. They are the ultimate protagonists.

The current volume wishes to fill the gap between form and content, that is, to reconstruct, even if only through mere divulgation, the meaning of the single paintings and to reestablish their relationship, emphasizing the pictures’ message and reproducing, if possible, the original texts that inspired them.

The Renaissance city that Tintoretto evokes becomes a home for the entire biblical itinerary, from Genesis to the Resurrection. The Mysteries and the Prophecies, just as the Truth and the Dogmas, thus constitute the essence of the pictorial representation, even within the context of the contemporary “*Babel*”.

This approach, largely unusual and innovative, engendered unexpected discoveries and unthought-of interpretations, which were made possible not only through textual research in the theological field, but also by reinterpreting the epoch’s cultural crises,