A STUDY BY TINTORETTO AFTER MICHELANGELO

By CLAUS VIRCH
Assistant, Department of Paintings

Few works of art have had the fame and the fateful influence of the Medici tombs in San Lorenzo in Florence. Generations of artists have drawn inspiration from them and have studied them and copied them—with varying results. Incomplete as they are, fragments only of Michelangelo’s original plan, they met with immediate success, from the day they emerged from the marble block. As if to see a miracle, every foreigner who came to Florence went to visit the sacristy of San Lorenzo, wrote Vincenzo Borghini in 1563. The four figures personifying the times of day on the tombs of Lorenzo and Giuliano were especially praised as the summit of sculptural art and became key words in the vocabulary of forms used by Michelangelo’s followers.

In fact, these figures became so popular that casts and models in clay, gesso, and bronze were made and were in great demand all through the sixteenth century. Vasari writes that as early as 1535 Tribolo, who helped Michelangelo with the execution of some minor marbles for the chapel, made clay models, one of which, the Night, was treasured in Vasari’s own collection in Arezzo. Pietro Tacca also made models; so did Pietro della Barga, Vincenzo Danti (1573), and Daniele da Volterra (1557), Michelangelo’s admiring and loyal friend. They found their way into the collections of connoisseurs and the studios of painters as well as sculptors. Tintoretto, according to his first biographer, Ridolfi, painted himself with a model of the Evening in an early self-portrait, now lost. Artists, like saints, aristocrats, and other personages, were often shown with their traditional attributes—for instance, Veronese portrayed the sculptor Alessandro Vittoria in a picture in this Museum (Bulletin, Summer 1946, p. 7) holding one of his own statuettes. Tintoretto’s recorded early self-portrait might have looked somewhat like this. But how much more significant an attribute, almost a confession, was the model of Evening in his hands. Here the Venetian painter paid tribute to the Florentine sculptor.

There is a legend that Tintoretto had painted on the walls of his studio the slogan “Titian’s color and Michelangelo’s draughtsmanship,” which, though oversimplified, expresses the synthesis he achieved in his mature style. It is true that Titian had succeeded in expressing himself fully in terms of color, the most painterly medium, thus bringing the Venetian tradition to a glorious triumph of which there could be no further development. The younger generation

therefore sought to find line and form again, which he had neglected, in the formal strength of the art of Central Italy, especially through studying Michelangelo. And Tintoretto studied Michelangelo intensely. There are obvious proofs of this, not to speak of the untraceable indirect benefits. Like many others he fell under the spell of the figures on the Medici Tombs. He did not hesitate to reproduce Evening and Dawn in his early frescoes on the Palazzo Grimani Gussoni, known to us now only through engravings by Zanetti. There are also a number of drawings after Michelangelo’s sculpture, some of which Zanetti saw in Tintoretto’s old studio in 1760 and summarily described, sheets with studies on both sides in black chalk heightened with white.

The Museum recently had the rare opportunity of acquiring a hitherto unknown drawing by Tintoretto, which turned up in England and obviously belongs to this group of studies. A masterpiece of draughtsmanship, it presents on one sheet of paper a highly interesting meeting of two great artists, allowing us to see Michelangelo through the eyes of Tintoretto. Our drawing shows the figure of Day from San Lorenzo, but not as it was thought of by Michelangelo or as it reclines on Giuliano’s tomb. It is seen from behind. Michelangelo left the back, which was turned to the wall, in rough outline, as he did in many of his works, and this treatment, in comparison with the other, more finished, figures gives us reason to believe that it was one of the last sculptures he worked on before abandoning the Medici project in 1534 and devoting himself to the gigantic tasks awaiting him in Rome.

As Tintoretto’s sketch shows a completed figure, not the rough back of Michelangelo’s sculpture, it is evident that he did not draw from the original. It is not even known if he ever visited the Medici Chapel. Historians, however,
report that he owned quite a collection of models after Michelangelo, Sansovino, and Gian Bologna, as well as casts of the Medici Venus, the Belvedere torso, and busts of emperors, which served as standard study material for him and for his school. We cannot say with certainty whose models were used for the drawings of the Medici tombs, but it seems most probable that it was those of Daniele da Volterra (now unfortunately lost) that Tintoretto again and again took from the shelf and turned before him, exploring their complicated, twisted movements as an exercise in form and foreshortening.

In a drawing by Tintoretto in the Louvre the figure of Day is again seen from behind, from a little above, and at a slight slant, the left shoulder pointing towards us, a heap of over-foreshortened limbs. The reverse of this sheet shows the same figure at the same angle but drawn with the paper upright, which allowed room only for the towering back, a forceful bulk of muscles that looks rather like a fantastic geological formation. In a third drawing of Day, in Oxford (also with the same figure on the reverse), the whole length is foreshortened; leg, arm, and head diverge dramatically in contrasting directions within one massive lump, denying the clear and telling silhouette of the original. These three drawings are, of course, only a remnant of a series of studies of the figure in a wide variety of views, like the series after Michelangelo's model for Samson slaying the Philistine.

These studies by Tintoretto are important in the history of sixteenth-century art as actual evidence that Michelangelo was, as he has often been called, the father of Mannerism. They prove that the possibility of all these views is latent in Day as in most of Michelangelo's mature sculpture. But in his work the multiplicity of forms is forced into a rigid system of rectangular relations. The whole figure is conceived with reference to one frontal plane, in which it expresses itself fully, like a relief. It is part of the architectural scheme and is inseparable from its background; the part of the figure next to the wall is not even finished. Thus the front view was clearly intended to be the final and complete one.

Keeping the compact mass of Michelangelo's form, Tintoretto released the figure from its bonds, dissolving the isolating silhouette of the frontal view. He transformed it through the medium of the full round model into a figura serpentinata, a figure that revolves before the eyes, the ideal of mannerist sculpture. Freed from its co-ordinating surroundings, it seems to float in a vacuum, to turn constantly and expand. Rubens, who half a century later made a drawing of the Night (in The Hague), re-established Michelangelo's main view. His sketches from the side and back are also "rectangular" views.

It is easy to see why Michelangelo's clay model of Samson slaying the Philistine won the immediate acclaim of the mannerist art world. Whether it was intended for the Julius monument or as a companion piece to the David in the Piazza della Signoria, it is Michelangelo's
Studies of Day by Tintoretto (in the Louvre) and of Night by Rubens (Lugt collection, The Hague)
only free-standing group that offers a revolving view. Innumerable copies prove its popularity. The series of studies Tintoretto made after this model, of which about a dozen exist, shows how fascinated he was by the inexhaustible wealth of plastic values, the continually new, surprising, satisfactory, but never final, aspects it offered from every side.

The illusion of plasticity was what Tintoretto sought. He was no longer content with the traditional two-dimensional style of the Venetian school; he wanted the effect of the full round figure. This recalls a strange rivalry between the sister arts, painting and sculpture, in the sixteenth century, which was bound to be theoretical and as such typical of the self-conscious approach of mannerist art. Daniele da Volterra was once commissioned to make a terracotta model of a statue of David (probably Michelangelo’s) and then to copy it in a painting showing both front and back. Theorists like Paolo Pini recommended mirrors in paintings to reflect several views of a figure and represent its whole volume. The mirror device was used by Tintoretto in his early painting of Venus and Mars in Munich; in other pictures the movement of one figure was compensated by the reverse action of another.

Since Tintoretto’s drawings after sculpture are strictly studies rather then preparations for paintings, one might be inclined to place them early in his career. But they are certainly not the academic studies of a beginner; every line reveals the hand of a master. According to Borghini, Tintoretto occupied himself throughout his life in sketching sculpture. From time to time, even in his old age, he felt the need to refresh his experience of plastic values, and he never ceased to study. An approximate date for our drawing might be arrived at if we assume that he used Daniele da Volterra’s models, made in 1557, although he could have used other, earlier ones. The above-mentioned frescoes on the Palazzo Grimani, which should be dated in the late fifties, contribute some evidence of his preoccupation with the Times of Day in these years. And the Last Judgment in the church of the Madonna dell’ Orto in Venice, painted around 1560, has in its upper part the twisted

A study by Tintoretto for a figure in the foreground of the Adoration of the Golden Calf in the church of the Madonna dell’ Orto, Venice. Uffizi, Florence figure of a saint that is easily recognized as Day seen from above, but no drawing of this view has come down to us.

Like most of Tintoretto’s drawings ours is done in charcoal on light blue-green paper. It is characteristic of his studies of sculpture that he drew on both sides of the paper. Here we find on the reverse an almost identical drawing of Day, which seems to be more rubbed and therefore by comparison slightly lacking in brilliance and contrast. Using the rich, painterly quality of the charcoal, with a variety of long and short, swelling and ebbing lines, drawn and driven strokes, energetic accents, and smooth transitions, Tintoretto built up a mountainous formation of barbaric power. What appears as a psychic state in Michelangelo’s Day becomes the heavy and fiery stirring of a pagan giant god. How civilized in comparison are Rubens’ clear and disciplined contours in his drawing of Night! But the supposed symbolic meaning of Michelangelo’s figure could hardly be more
dramatically interpreted: the day, the summer season, the element of fire, the choleric humor.

Short curved strokes compose a lively, undulating contour for the compact mass of the body, lighthanded, broken, and multiple where the light strikes, creating a luminous outline, stronger but still soft in the shadows. The long, parallel lines of hatching do not follow the sculptured form but fall straight down like heavy rain, sparser and light gray in the half-shades, velvety black and dense in the deep shadows. The approach is definitely that of a painter, despite the intention. The figure is seen as a pattern of dark and light planes. The feet are sketchily indicated so that only the bulk of the body speaks. The face is barely visible, veiled in deep shadow and set off as a contrast to the light, broad thorax, shoulders, and arms, which glitter with white highlights. The effect of these white touches which accentuate the rippling surface of bulging muscles, adding plasticity, seems to confirm Ridolfi's story that Tintoretto, indefatigable after a hard day's work, made these studies at night by candlelight.

It is this light and shadow and the resulting sculptural effect that set these studies apart from the rest of Tintoretto's rich output of drawings. For no other Venetian painter was drawing so important. Like all prolific artists Tintoretto worked with economy and organization. His working process was quite well known in his day and probably followed Titian's. He used to set up the composition of a planned painting on a diminutive stage with little figurines, modeled for the purpose. Thus he could arrange lighting and spatial relationships. Then he made a drawing of each individual figure after a living model, a quick sketch to make sure of movement and action. These drawings were squared according to a net of threads in front of the miniature stage, and corresponding squares were drawn on the canvas to facilitate the transmission.

In many cases we are able to relate a drawing to a figure in a painting. A beautiful and typical example of this kind of study and of Tintoretto's usual manner of drawing is the sketch for a female figure in the lower left part of the Adoration of the Golden Calf in the church of the Madonna dell' Orto. Tintoretto followed the Florentine habit of sketching most of his figures as nudes and draping them later, also often using male nudes for female figures. We know already the sensitive, nervous, or energetic ductus of his line. Here it moves loosely, almost ornamental; there it is drawn sharply; telling accents make seemingly vague lines significant. No hatching is used for the plastic effect. All modeling is done by the swelling and retreating, darkening and fading, undercrossing and breaking of the line. And with small means an extraordinary volume is achieved. Quickly and easily the charcoal follows the forms, suggesting rather than describing the anatomical details, developing before the living model the vibrating abbreviations that distinguish Tintoretto's handwriting.

These sketches are practical, but none the less beautiful, by-products of his standard working process. Apart from them stands our drawing of Day as a very personal document of Tintoretto's artistic aims and endeavors, and, moreover, as a powerful echo of Michelangelo’s greatness.

Detail from Tintoretto's Last Judgment in the church of the Madonna dell' Orto. About 1560