

# DESCR VEDENDO

## **R09F** *The Finding of the Body of Saint Mark*

by Tintoretto

Room 9

### Formal description

*The Finding of the Body of Saint Mark* is the title of this work painted by Jacopo Robusti, known as Tintoretto, between 1562 and 1566. It is an oil painting on a very large and square canvas: it measures about 4 meters, both in width and height. The main figures, in the foreground, are slightly larger than real life and the subject is depicted in a realistic manner. Looking at this painting you have the feeling of being inside a stage and taking part in the scene. The picture describes an episode, datable around the year 825, in which Mark appeared to some Venetian merchants who were in Alexandria of Egypt, a city where he had been killed and buried in the 1st century. The merchants are depicted here as they uncover graves in search of the body of the saint, which they will then take to Venice. Saint Mark is portrayed twice in the canvas: one in the form of an apparition, standing; and a second lying down, as the corpse is finally found. The scene takes place in a dark interior, a large and rather deep place, where only some areas are illuminated. The shape and the size of this space recall the nave of a church. Several tombs are placed high and in a row, protruding between the pillars and another on the wall to the right of the observer, while the ceiling is curved and punctuated by a succession of barrel vaults. The floor is composed of square slabs arranged as on a chessboard, alternating black and brown. The main characters are all in the lower half of the canvas. To better describe the work, let's imagine it divided into 9 sectors of equal size, obtained by imagining three columns with three rows. In each sector, by convention, we give the numbering used in telephone keyboards. From left to right: 1, 2, 3 up; 4, 5, 6 in the middle; 7, 8, 9 below. Let's start with the description of what is closest to us.

The protagonist of the scene is the figure of Saint Mark who appears, physically imposing, standing in the foreground in sectors 4 and 7. He is in profile, and he has short hair and dark brown beard, his head is surrounded by a halo painted as a bright circle; he has his left arm extended forward and upwards, and his hand open in a determined gesture to stop the action around him. The whole painting revolves around this hand, which is located in the center of sector 4 and corresponds to the vanishing point of the perspective towards which all the depth lines of the scene converge. In this way in the composition there is a strong tension towards the left, which gives the observer the feeling of being dragged into the painting. Under Saint Mark's bent right arm there is a book, perhaps the gospel written by him; his hand is placed on his side to hold a blue cloak that leaves his shoulder uncovered; under this he wears a pink tunic, clinging very tightly to his chest and long enough to reach the ground. At the foot of the apparition of the saint, there is his corpse. He is lying on the floor on an Asiatic carpet, with his head resting on a light-colored pillow.

The body, of a cold white color, is naked and with well-delineated shapes. A thin light cloth covers the groin. Tintoretto paints the body, which seems shortened by the strong perspective, with the soles of the feet facing us. Between sectors 5 and 8, near the corpse of Saint Mark, is portrayed the patron of the painting, Tommaso Rangone, kneeling on the ground with his arms lowered and open as a sign of devotion: he has white beard and hair and is dressed in a long robe of copper gold, with very wide sleeves and a band, golden as well, which comes down from the left shoulder. Still in the foreground, but in sectors 6 and 9, we find a group of three intertwined figures: two men on their knees and a standing young woman.

Of the three, the standing woman is the closest to the right margin of the canvas; she is unbalanced towards us because of the man clinging to her legs, who is the center of the group and has his back to us; the other, on the opposite side to the woman, holds the first man around the waist from behind, to push him away from her. We recognize the man in

the center as possessed: from his mouth in fact we can glimpse threads of white smoke that come out and twirl to the ceiling to form the barely perceptible contours of an anthropomorphic figure facing downwards. The woman, turned towards Saint Mark, shows her left profile. She wears an elegant beige and amber dress and she follows with her eyes the demonic fumes rising upward. The man kneeling in the center wears a dark dress, while the one who restrains him twists his face towards Saint Mark and is wearing a yellow cloak, which leaves partially uncovered his chest and right shoulder.

Just behind these figures in the foreground, in the twilight between the apparition of Saint Mark and the patron, there is a man kneeling and leaning back who holds with his right hand a long and thin stick, while with his left he indicates his own face, perhaps his miraculously-healed eyes or the spot on his cheek from which a plague of leprosy has disappeared.

Behind this row of characters in the foreground, there is a wide space, in which we find other figures, of reduced size compared to those just described. In sectors 3 and 6, there are two men perched on ladders, on the sides of the first sarcophagus of the right wall, intent on lowering, using the shroud as a rope, a corpse to their companion on the ground, who grabs his arm; not far away, in sector 5, another man stands holding up a small candle, to illuminate the difficult operation. The same scene, but without the corpse, is repeated a little behind; it is just outlined and barely stands out in the general darkness. Finally, in sector 4, there are four other men searching: they raise the slab of a tomb to the floor and illuminate the interior with a torch.

The foreground figures are depicted as tangible bodies, including the apparition of the saint. Others, on the bottom of the nave, appear instead rather spectral, with faintly outlined contours and an almost transparent consistency. The scene is dark overall, but in the dark there are three sources of light: one, very strong, comes from a source outside the painting at two o'clock, and stresses the volume of the foreground bodies and the architectural elements; the second is the torch in the hands of one of the men at the bottom of the scene,

which illuminates the inside of the tomb, flush with the floor; the third is the dim candle in the hands of the man looking at the body lowered from the sarcophagus on the wall. The characters depicted in the foreground are predominantly in the tones of orange, red and yellow, and strongly contrast both with the dark colors of the background and with the waxy white of the corpse of Saint Mark.

### **R09A Art historical description**

With the skill of a great director, Jacopo Robusti, called Tintoretto, tells with a single image the adventurous events related to the discovery of the body of Saint Mark in Alexandria of Egypt. We are in what seems to be the nave of a church where a search for a body among the tombs is taking place. Among the searchers, there are the two Venetian merchants Buono da Malamocco and Rustico da Torcello, charged with exhuming the remains of the body of Saint Mark, martyred in the Egyptian city, and to bring them to Venice, where the saint was highly revered. The climax of the scene is fixed by the painter in the eloquent gesture of the character in the foreground, Saint Mark, who appears and who, raising his left hand, stops the search. The body has been found and lies, pale and lifeless, before his feet on an Eastern-style carpet, and is painted in a strongly foreshortened pose that strongly recalls the *Dead Christ* by Mantegna. The miraculous apparition of the saint is followed by the episode staged by the excited group of characters who, one clinging to the other, occupy the foreground to the right of the picture: a gush of smoke comes out of the mouth of one of the two men, the exorcism is accomplished, the man is freed from the devil thanks to the thaumaturgic power of the body of the saint just found. Kneeling in the center, the patron of the work, Tommaso Rangone, attends the scene wearing the long and precious tunic of "Golden Knight". It was 1562 when the doctor, astrologer and mathematician from Ravenna was appointed Guardian Grande of the Scuola di San Marco. Perhaps the work, which is part of a cycle of three canvases, was commissioned to Tintoretto to celebrate the event.

The cycle, dedicated to the life of the saint and his miracles, also included, together with the painting exhibited in Brera, *The Removal of the body of Saint Mark* and *Saint Mark saving a Saracen from shipwreck*, which today are at the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice.

The Venetian Scuole were important city institutions, having welfare and charitable purposes, and the most prestigious ones could afford beautiful locations, decorated by the most famous artists of the time. Jacopo had entered the list of these at least since 1548, when his extraordinary large canvas *The miracle of the slave* appeared, to decorate The Chapter House of the Scuola Grande di San Marco.

*The finding of the body of Saint Mark* is a crowded picture and it is permeated by a strong dynamism: everything is in motion, everything happens in the same moment. The architecture fully participates in this general sense of motion: a long, deep space without openings, probably the fruit of the vivid imagination of the painter, marked by the very fast perspective escape of the vaults and by the orthogonal lines of the checkerboard floor that converge towards the bottom. But looking closely, all the geometric lines of architecture are generated by the gesture of Saint Mark's hand; it is as if everything was built around it.

Spatial setting no longer functions as an organizing grid or as a background of the composition as in the Renaissance, but it becomes a means of expression that excites and attracts the gaze of the viewer.

Light is also used by the painter in a strongly dramatic sense; in the twilight there are flashes and reflections of dazzling light, the origin of which is not always clear. In a continuous alternation of lights and shadows, the figures of the protagonists stand out, each of which is illuminated in a particular way. The light touches the side of the woman's body, it strikes in full the figure that holds the possessed man, left instead totally in the shadows. It reverberates on the precious clothes of Rangone and lingers on the cold pallor of the lying corpse. It profiles the sculptural figure of Saint Mark and it crystallizes his gesture. The figures are not posing, but they are always interrupted while they are performing an action

and the light fixes that brief moment. The scene of the miracle is not there to be contemplated, but it is happening before our eyes. Made in a mature stage of the artist's career, the entire cycle, of which this work is part, highlights the intent and peculiarities of his art: to realize a painting that is a fantastic vision, capable of upsetting and moving through the strong scenic sense with which his stories are permeated. The plastic vigor of the figures is enhanced by the chromatic and light contrast, and his ability as a designer proves to be able to bend figures and spaces according to the most daring views.

### **R09B Biography**

Known as Tintoretto because of the job of his father who was a cloth dyer (or "tintore" in Italian), Jacopo Robusti was born in Venice on an uncertain date, but according to his death certificate, it should be around 1519. He spent his whole life in the lagoon city, apart from some documented trips to Padua and Mantua.

Some sources report that he was sent to the workshop of Titian, but the Master, who was about thirty years older than him, once he realized the talent of the young Jacopo, fired him after a dispute. The episode, even if not true, gives us some indications about the life of the artist. His career took place, in fact, simultaneously and often in competition with that of Titian, the dominant personality in Venice at the time. His art was influenced as well as by the Venetian coloristic tradition of Giorgione and Titian, also by other artists of the same school, such as Bonifacio de' Pitati, Paris Bordon or Andrea Schiavone. Florentine and Roman artistic innovations such as, for example, Michelangelo's sculptures, which arrived in Venice thanks to the circulation of casts, drawings and prints, were further important contributions to Tintoretto's artistic training. We know that at the age of twenty, around the year 1540, the painter was an independent master, with his own workshop, and he already carried out important works such as the ceiling decoration of the residence of the banker

Vettor Pisani in San Paterniàn, with fourteen paintings focused on the theme of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

In 1548 he began his relationship with the Scuola Grande di San Marco for which he painted *The miracle of the slave*, a work that can be considered his first great masterpiece, and that stunned the whole city. From that moment his activity grew more and more; also his daughter Marietta and his sons Domenico and Marco worked with him in his workshop and he was involved in more and more important commissions. In fact, he continued his collaboration with the Scuola Grande di San Marco, for which he created the three big canvases depicting *Saint Mark saving a Saracen from shipwreck*, *The Removal of the body of Saint Mark* and *The finding of the body of Saint Mark* today in Brera. In these works of maturity his research preferred decentralized compositions, intense luminism and a drama very close to the art of theater. The "prestezza" (something like speed mixed with ability), with which he used to work and for which he was famous, is evident in the energetic and fast brushstrokes.

Always open to new experiments, around 1564 he began to work for the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, of which he was also a member. For this Scuola, in which he worked for about twenty years, Tintoretto painted an awesome cycle of over sixty canvases, with episodes of the Old and the New Testament.

Known among his contemporaries as "the furious", very prolific artist, in 1594, when he was over 70, Tintoretto still had the strength to dedicate himself to two great works for the Basilica di San Giorgio Maggiore, *The Jews in the desert and the fall of manna* and a *Last Supper*. He died on 31 May of that year and his son Domenico inherited the workshop.