

# «LOS BORRONES DE TIZIANO», THE VENETIAN BRUSHSTROKE AND ITS SPANISH TRANSLATIONS

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1 Titiano Vecellio, *The Rape of Europa*, 1560-1562, oil on canvas, 178 x 206 cm, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, after conservation.

\*Se tiene por adagio quando la pintura no es acabada, llamamla "borrones de Ticiano".<sup>10</sup>

According to Francisco Pacheco's treatise *El Arte de la Pintura*, completed in Seville in 1638, *borrones de Ticiano*—literally the stains of Titian, is an expression commonly used to name an unfinished style of painting. The stain is indeed associated with Titian from the early descriptions of his pictorial language onwards—Giorgio Vasari, in the second edition of his *Vite* (1568), famously talks about *macchie* (stains) to define Titian's mature style, and the *macchia* progressively becomes the heart of the poetic of Venetian *colorito*, which uses sketchiness, the vibrant unfinished aspect of loose, painterly brushwork, as an expressive means.<sup>11</sup> In Italy as in Spain, the early modern artistic vocabulary of painterly brushwork has at its core the very idea of the stain, with all its negative semantic connotations of something dirty, accidental, careless and rough, as opposed to clean, refined, careful and polished. But this vocabulary of failure also carries positive values, since Leonardo da Vinci had recognized the suggestive power of the open imperfect shape of the casual stain and had identified in its undified and unfinished form the generative potential of creation, invention, motion and life.<sup>12</sup> Since the seminal studies of Mario Socrate, *Borroni: e la pittura di macchia nella cultura letteraria del siglo de oro* (1966) and Grifone McKim-Smith, *Examining Velázquez* (1988), scholars have carefully investigated the occurrence and recurrence of *borrones* in Spanish literature and artistic discourse, as an aesthetic category conveying Titian's fortune at the Spanish Hapsburg court and his legacy in Spanish painting.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the semantic shift that the process of translation from *macchia* to *borron* entailed, as well as its formal and technical implications, has not been directly questioned. Through the voice of Don Quixote, Cervantes compared translating from Italian to Castilian to viewing a Flemish tapestry from the reverse, «for although you see the figures, they are full of obscuring threads so that you do not see them with the smoothness and color of the front side».<sup>14</sup> Besides the criticism of the limitations of rendering one text into another language, this parallelism suggests that the act of translation, by changing one's perspective, questions and unravels the backbone of the original work. To what extent does the translation from *macchia* to *borron* reveal the hidden side of Titian's *macchia*, as Pietro Aretino used to call his works, the secret of his *pietery*, as Eugène Delacroix defined his pictorial process?<sup>15</sup> What threads of the texture of Titian's painting appeared visible to a Spanish gaze from the western side of the Mediterranean?

From their Latin etymology, *traductor* and *traductor*, the two Castilian words for translation, convey the idea both of a displacement in space and a shift in language, this latter textual process being associated with copying and interpreting as stated by Sebastián de Covarrubias in his foundational dictionary, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana* (1611).<sup>16</sup> I would like to start our investigation with the Titan

painting that was most eloquently submitted to the process of translation in all its multiple dimensions, a painting that also happens to be one of the most magnificent examples of the Venetian artist's late figurative language: *The Rape of Europa*, today at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (fig. 1).<sup>17</sup> The canvas was translated from Venice to Madrid in 1562 as the last Ovidian *poesie* Titian painted for Philip II. The *Europa* that the artist described as «the seal of the many other» paintings previously received by the king<sup>18</sup> was to become emblematic of the artist's reception in Spain which was essentially conveyed by late works, in the seventeenth century, it was among the most prized paintings in the royal collections of the Alcazar of Madrid. Rubens copied it during his second trip to the court of Spain in 1628-1629, while Velázquez quoted it as the mythical masterpiece of Arachne in the narrative of *Las Hilanderas* (Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 1657-1660),<sup>19</sup> reinterpreting it in the medium of a tapestry—the Cervantesque metaphor of translation (fig. 2). Significantly, the *Europa* is also emblematic of a crucial turning point in Titian's pictorial language towards the free use of the loose brushstroke as an expressive tool. It is a key work, therefore, if not a proper manifesto of Titian's authorial agency.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Vasari refers to this very work when he describes the transformation from Titian's earlier more polished style to his mature one, characterizing the latter as a different way of painting (*quala di fare*), carried out in strokes (*condotte di colpi*), executed roughly (*tratte via di grosso*) and with bobs (*e con macchie*), such that it imposes a remote viewing distance on the beholder. The full appreciation of this pictorial revolution has long been compromised by the poor lighting conditions of the historical display at the Gardner Museum. We may be confident that the restoration work undertaken in the Titian Room will contribute to bringing the recently conserved *Europa* back into the light and will allow viewers to perceive *in situ* something of the joyful orgy of painting experienced by Isabella Stewart Gardner when she received the canvas in 1896. As she described in a letter to Bernard Berenson: «I am breathless about the Europa... after a two days' orgy. The orgy was drinking myself drunk with *Europa* and then sitting for hours in my Italian garden at Brookline, thinking and dreaming about her. Every inch of paint in the picture seems full of joy».<sup>21</sup>

For Titian, the representation of Europa must have posed a particular challenge after his friend Ludovico Dolce published his *Trasgionamenti*—the successful translated adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* versified in *ottava rima*, which was first printed in Venice in 1553, with a dedication to Emperor Charles V. In this augmented version of the Ovidian text, Dolce describes the unparalleled beauty of Europa such as «never painted by Zeuxis or Apelles, nor by Titian or another perfect painter».<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Dolce named that initially anonymous perfect painter in the revised editions of his book that were successively published in the same years in which Titian was working on his *Poesie*:

«never did Zeuxis or Apelles nor Raphael or Titian paint so rare an object»<sup>4</sup> To face the competition with the greatest ancient painters as well as the modern Raphael, Titian rendered the poetic tension between eroticism and pathos conveyed by the textual sources of the myth,<sup>5</sup> not only through the dynamic and unbalanced pose of the maiden, but also by means of the textural qualities, both optical and tactile, of the painted surface. «She is painted differently from the rest of the painting, more directly» – noted David Rosand, who recognized this difference in the «dimpled surfaces [that] seem to record the impress of the modeling fingers as much as the deliberated application of the brush».<sup>6</sup> This idea of the artist modeling his figure with his brushes and fingers in order to animate it, to make it emerge from the pictorial surface and to bring it closer to the viewer, obviously echoes Palma il Giovane's famous report quoted by Marco Boschini about old Titian's late technique, when he gave life to his figures painting them more with his fingers than with the brush.<sup>7</sup> The recent technical examination and conservation of the painting have not revealed the artist's fingerprints but have confirmed the promptness of execution: the figure is modeled out from darker contours drawn in places with the brush, built up with thin layers of progressively lighter paint and animated by vibrant blobs of vermilion, such as those on the fingers holding the bull's horns.<sup>8</sup> The accuracy and depth of David Rosand's observation will appear even more clearly as we now turn to consider the technical experimentation practiced by Titian from his early years.

Let us focus on the expressive climax of the drama, the unusual gesture of the right arm that not only hides part of the maiden's head, thrown back in a graceless foreshortening, but also casts a shadow on her face, disfiguring it (Fig. 3). The apparent disorder of the pose is related to textual descriptions of Europa looking back desperately to the shore, overwhelmed by fear, as she understood that the tenderly seductive white bull was bringing her across the sea. This intense and dramatic gesture is generally related to the tragic model of the Sacrifice of Dirce in the Farnese Bull, the huge marble group discovered some years before in 1546, when Titian was in Rome. But we find it already in one of Titian's most violent compositions, the early fresco of the *Miracle of the Jealous Husband* in the Scuola del Santo in Padua (1510-1511), where the woman, unjustly accused of adultery, who is thrown back on the ground and already wounded, tries to stop her man's lethal stroke with her unarmed right hand (Fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> The gesture of Europa maintains something of this violent struggle, but in a lighter key: she tries to defend herself not from a mortal threat but from the arrows of love. Her arm is raised not to divert the trajectory of the blade of the dagger, but to grasp her red veil blown away by the wind. The detail of this magnificent piece of fabric plays a crucial role in the composition, as an accessory of movement proper to the *pathosformeln* that emphasizes the drama of the action,<sup>10</sup> and as an iconographic motif that implies the loss of virginity. But it also places

Europa under the colors of the Spanish Hapsburgs, the red scarf that they wore, tightly cross-body over their brassiere on the battlefield and that Titian had repeatedly painted in their portraits in armor.<sup>11</sup> Europa's outfit also curiously evokes the evidence of Philip II's geographical dominion in its material texture, as the translucent red lace used to enhance the vermilion is likely no longer derived from the European kerries, but from the American cochineal, a recent novelty for Titian's technique.<sup>12</sup> Coming back to the comparison with the murdered wife in *Adamo*, Europa's facial expression is not an agonizing scream – the mouth is less open, the lively eyes are still visible even if only partially – but something between angst and surprise, rape and rupture – as noted by Panofsky, «she might be called a Danaë seen from above».<sup>13</sup> A further variation of Titian's research into the female body seen from multiple viewpoints. While the twenty-first century's cultural perspective tends to emphasize issues of gender domination, sexuality and violence in this tale of abduction, the sixteenth century perception of the tragic-comic accent of the myth is conveyed by the ridiculous aspect of Europa's indecorous position, parodied by the putto riding the dolphin.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, there is also a strong formal correlation between the early fresco of femaleid and the late canvas of rape: as in the case of Europa, the murdered wife is painted differently from the rest of the paintings, she is modeled with more material substantiality such that she emerges from the pictorial surface. Titian in fact devoted one full *giornata* to shape her dramatic gesture, which rests in a slight rictus in the area of the inmanous supporting her raised arm, when compared to the surrounding fresco surface (Fig. 5).<sup>15</sup> This unprecedented detail – that is imperceptible at first sight but requires close scrutiny to detect – is absolutely fascinating because it contains *in pectus* the essence of Titian's lifelong pictorial research.

The substantiality of Titian's mature *colorito* has been associated with the notion of distance since Vasari: the distance of the beholder's viewpoint that is necessary for the achievement and perception of the painting's perfect illusion. As David Rosand claimed instead in another striking observation, Titian's painterly brushstrokes call in fact for a double proximity: the proximity of the figure to the pictorial surface, and the proximity of the viewer, who is invited (*quer* Vasari), not to stand back and squint until a focused illusion is obtained, but rather to approach, to respond to the tactile appeal of articulated stroke and surface.<sup>16</sup> This provocative interpretation of the Renaissance gaze has the merit of stressing the limits of Vasari's statement about Titian's style and its perception: based on the classical literary trope of proximity versus distance, which finds its origin in Horace's *Ut pictura poesis*, Vasari's assertion certainly simplifies the complex materiality of Titian's painting and the variety of visual experiences that it offers.<sup>17</sup> At variance with Vasari's statement that Titian's emphatic words are executed with a certain finesse and an incredible diligence and can be viewed both from close up and



2 Diego Velázquez, *Las Hilanderas*, 1655-1660, oil on canvas, 220 x 289 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



3 Titian, Venetian, *The Rape of Europa*, 1600-1602, oil on canvas, 78 x 203 cm, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, after conservation, 1938.



4 The Venetian, *Miracle of Saint Anthony, Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, 1510-1511, fresco, 327 x 183 cm, Padua, Scuola del Santo.  
5 Titian, Venetian, *Miracle of Saint Anthony, Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, 1510-1511, fresco, 327 x 183 cm, Padua, Scuola del Santo, detail under raking light.



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from afar», they frequently reveal the presence of loose brushstrokes when viewed up close, which is often associated with his experimentation with different supports. For example, in the Paduan fresco, where Titian treated a rough plaster as if it were a coarse canvas, the dramatic shadows of the disheveled yellow gown and white handkerchief of the assaulted wife fallen on the ground are rendered with broad, dabbing strokes of red, visually expanding the drip of blood that already stains her white shirt at the level of her breast (fig. 6). In the monumental *Assunta* at the Frati in Venice (1516-1518), the flesh of the panto playing the corno in the glory of angels is highlighted by vibrant dabs of vermilion that animate the hand and cheek engaged in the musical performance, modulated from darker to lighter paint with short brushstrokes (fig. 7). In the *Pala Pesaro* of the same church (1519-1526), where Titian smoothed the canvas with thick plaster preparation as if it were a panel, the white sleeve of Jacopo Pesaro is highlighted with a swifiting stroke of lead white (fig. 8). In the marble works, that according to Vasari «are carried out with strokes, executed roughly and with blots, in such a manner that they cannot be looked at closely but from a distance appear perfect», the brushstrokes are in fact often perceptible directly from afar. One of the most striking examples is the fire of the nocturne *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* for the church of the Crociferi in Venice (fig. 9), an altarpiece commissioned in 1546—once Titian returned from Rome where he had seen Raphael's magnificent nocturne of the *Libertion of Saint Peter*—but finished after 1557, in the same years as the *Psyche* for Philip II.<sup>54</sup> As Alonso de la Vera Cruz would later comment, «paintings that want to imitate nighttime with the artifice of the brush, covering what fog covers, and uncovering what sight discovers, are the most difficult and require a superior knowledge of art to be understood».<sup>55</sup> In Titian's nocturne *How de force*, a bouquet of strokes that animates the flames and their reflection on the iron grill, associated with the signature of the artist, acts as a pictorial manifesto, clearly discernable from a distance. The effect today is somewhat artificially enhanced by the current viewing conditions of the recently restored painting: on the altar of the chapel of the Gesuiti church, the canvas is lit from below by a powerful spotlight that highlights the detail of the fire. As a result of the humidity of the chapel and a dramatic conservation history, (layers of color ended up glued to the floor when the canvas was rolled face down without protection in the nineteenth century) that part of the painting presents in fact severe damage.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, the later version at the Escorial, which suffered fewer losses, is also very worn in that zone, because of the heat and the smoke of the candles that once burned on the altar.<sup>57</sup> The original lighting conditions were therefore already emphasizing Titian's pictorial manifesto, in both the Venetian altarpiece of the Crociferi as well as in his later replica for Philip II, with a more modulated and vibrant effect than that of the modern dazzling spotlight. The «artifice of

the brush» was taking advantage of the trembling reflections of the candlelight to animate the coarse, open and loose vermilion and lead yellow strokes of the fictive fire—«the mendacious fire burns the canvas», as José Delgado y Castelví would later say in praise of El Greco's nocturne fires.<sup>58</sup>

Significantly, one of the earliest uses of the Spanish term *borrón* to designate Titian's loose brushstrokes can be connected to the same years and the same group of paintings— the late 1520s, when the artist was working on the *Psyche* and finishing the *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* for the Crociferi. This first mention is attributed to Francesco Vargas imperial ambassador in Venice from 1552 to 1559, who is said to have asked Titian about his singular style:

Why he had turned to that style of painting, so well-known of him, with broad brushstrokes (*de golpes de pincel grossos*) almost like careless *borrones* (*cast borrones al descuido*) that *borrones* are what man has the faculty to paint, most of the time produced by natural inclination), and not with the sweetness of the brush of the great painters of his time.<sup>59</sup>

Titian answered that he did not want to be considered an imitator and decided therefore to open a «camin nuevo», a new path that would make him famous, just as the other masters—such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Correggio and Parmigianino—were famous for their own paths. It is impossible to establish to what extent this dialogue is authentic or whether it is the fruit of a recreation by Antonio Pérez who recalls it in a later letter, published around 1598-1603. In that period, references to pictorial *borrones* were already common in Spanish literature—notably in Lope de Vega's *La Corona Mercada* (1603), in which the verse «O ymagen de pintor destroz/ que de cerca es un borrón» (O, image of a skilled painter/ that from close sight is a *borrón*) refers most likely to Titian.<sup>60</sup> The theme of the *camin nuevo* was to become a successful trope in seventeenth-century literature: the dialogue mentioned by Pérez was directly quoted or adapted, to defend or criticize the stylistic rupture of painters such as El Greco and Velázquez, or poets such as Horrenso, Edix Paravicino, and Luis de Góngora.<sup>61</sup> It was present *in nuce* already in Vasari, when he describes Titian's rough manner, style as a different *manera di fare* compared to the earliest smoother paintings. In fact, the Vargas-Titian dialogue shows many similarities with Vasari's famous passage on Titian's technique and the same vocabulary is used to define the painterly brushwork of Titian: *golpes colpe* for strokes; *grosso/ trauti sia di grosso* for the coarse, rough, unrefined aspect of the pictorial surface; and *borrones* as the equivalent of *macchia* for stains or blotches. It is to be noted that in Vasari's *Lives*, the term *macchia* is ambivalent. It may be used to define a sketchy way of painting or a sketched canvas, an equivalent of *abbrezza* and *lazza*, related to the idea of the first invention that may be potentially contained in a stain, but also to the unfinished state of a definitive painting.<sup>62</sup> The



<sup>6</sup> Titiano Vecellio, *Miracle of Saint Anthony: Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, 1510-1511, fresco, 327 x 183 cm, Parma, Scuola del Santo.

<sup>7</sup> Titiano Vecellio, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1517-1518, oil on panel, detail during conservation.

<sup>8</sup> Titiano Vecellio, *The Pesaro Madonna*, 1519-1526, oil on canvas, detail after conservation.

<sup>9</sup> Titiano Vecellio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, c. 1546-1558, oil on panel, detail during conservation, from Nicotri, 1973, 150-151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.

same ambivalence is to be found in the term *borrón*, which not only describes a sketchy way of painting, but is also used to designate incomplete paintings, listed for example in inventories.<sup>47</sup>

Vasari associates Titian's sketchy manner with the idea of *sprezzatura*, meaning the art that conceals art, when he concludes that carried out this way «la pintura vive le pintura e fante con grande arte, nascondendo le fatiche (the pictures seem to come alive and are executed with great art, concealing the effort)». He was probably drawing upon the first association between the Venetian *colorito* and Baldassarre Castiglione's neologism of *sprezzatura*, introduced by Lodovico Dolce in his *Dialogo di Pittura* in 1558, two years after he had curated a new edition with indexes of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*.<sup>48</sup> The same association is to be found in Antonio Pérez's letter with the expression *borrones al decado*. If *decado* means careless, negligent, the expression *al decado* implicates a simulated negligence.<sup>49</sup> With *desprezar*, *decado* is one of the terms chosen by Juan Boscan to translate Castiglione's Italian *sprezzatura*,<sup>50</sup> and whose relation to art will be made explicit later by Lope de Vega's oxymoron *decado artificioso*.<sup>51</sup> *Borrones al decado* is an expression that somehow anticipates what the Venetian *praticisti*, such as Carlo Ridolfi and Marco Boschini, will call later in the seventeenth century *colpo sprezzato*. While, for Boschini, the *sprezzato colpo sprezzato* (*colpo sprezzato del pennello*) is the expressive means of the Venetian *pinto pittore*,<sup>52</sup> Ridolfi uses it to describe Titian's line *Saint Nicholas* in the Venetian church of San Sebastiano (1563) saying that the artist painted the figure «only with strokes (*colpi*) and with a marvelous *sprezzo*», achieving nonetheless a face so vivid (*vivace*), that it were «come se l'anima gli infondesse il movimento (as if the soul was instilling him with movement)».<sup>53</sup>

Vasari's passage highlights a specific, fundamental characteristic of the Italian *macchia*: its substantial, structural aspect. According to him, Titian's painting process, which appears to be done quickly, *alla prima*, is in fact the result of several repaints, retouches, layers and layers of color suggesting a material thickness and depth of the *macchia*: «we can see that this picture/are remake, and that he returned to them with his colors, repeatedly (si conose che sono rifatte, e che si riformano) (we address con 1 colori tante volte)». This statement recalls the famous testimony by Palma il Giovane, reported by Boschini, of the long hand-to-hand struggle that the old Titian had with his canvases: leaving his paintings turned to the wall and later returning to them again and again, progressively adding layers of colors until he applied the final touches (*ultima ritocchi, finimenti*) directly with his fingers (*un artificio delle dita*) to bring his animated figures (*animate figure*) to perfection: an operation that evokes the modeling of the human figure by the divine Creator, as Boschini commented. The materiality of Titian's brushstroke has been the object of several important studies in recent decades that have investigated the hennements

of its contemporaneity.<sup>54</sup> The understanding of Titian's technique has been notably clarified thanks to the work of conservators who have contributed to reassessing the validity of Vasari and Boschini's descriptions of Titian's mature pictorial process, based on different workshop practices.<sup>55</sup> Titian's fingerprints are not necessarily related to the roughness of late paintings: they testify more commonly to the refinement of blending colors or blurring outlines, a technique already found in the polished works of fifteenth century painters such as Giovanni Bellini or Leonardo. Besides the five fingerprints of the right hand left accidentally on the sky of the *Madonna Pesaro*,<sup>56</sup> traces of Titian's fingers have been observed extensively in one of his more refined works of the 1540s, the *Exec Homo* painted for Charles V on slate, an unusual support that encouraged the artist to model the flesh tones directly with the tips of his fingers (Madrid, Museo nacional del Prado, ca. 1546-1547).<sup>57</sup> If Titian was in fact not painting *alla prima*, the superposition and thickness of the layers of his painting are remarkably variable from case to case. It would depend for example on whether he used preliminary drawings or traced figures from previous works, whether he changed the composition directly on the support in case of new inventions or if he reused a previously painted canvas. Even in an apparently unprepared composition such as the *Rape of Europa*, the substantial effect of Titian's *colorito* is based on surprisingly thin layers of paint.<sup>58</sup>

There is nonetheless another important and relatively overlooked source on late Titian's painterly brushwork, a source which is also a foundational text for the terminology of pictorial language: the fascinating correspondence in which the Marquis de Ayamonte, governor of Milan, and Don Diego de Guzman, Spanish ambassador in Venice, discuss the capacity of the old artist to paint as numbers say that his hands were trembling. In 1575, one year before Titian's death,<sup>59</sup> From Venice, the ambassador declared: «There is no doubt that Titian's old age is such that he cannot make more than *borrones*, but those [...] give life to what his assistants may complete, particularly his son who does well». In another letter, he specified to Ayamonte, who was wondering about the merits of commissioning new paintings to the artist, that even made in this way they would nonetheless be Titian's works, because even if the bodies will not be of his hand, the souls will be entirely, which is what will give life.<sup>60</sup> Like Titian's *borrones*, if failing to represent the bodies, were still able to paint the souls, instilling movement in the figure, as Ridolfi would later say. The *borrones* are here the equivalent of the *macchia*: in their indistinct shape, they are the very essence of painting that, even if left unfinished, possess the illustrative power of a finished life.

The generative potential of life and figure contained in the formless, imperfect, materiality of the stain therefore lies at the heart of Titian's painting. Significantly, indeterminacy is also at the heart of Titian's *impresa* in the image of a formless newly born cub that the she-bear must lick

carefully to complete its shape, just as the painter has to polish his imperfect material to bring it to figure and life (fig. 10). This emblem, the origin of which can be traced in classical sources, has been much discussed.<sup>61</sup> Associated with the motto *Natura pariter ars* – «art more powerful than nature» –, it was probably conceived by the artist himself in conversation with his *liberati* friends, such as Lodovico Dolce. Yet, it has not been noticed that this troubling piece of living flesh, «blood congealed and thick» according to Horapollo, is very close to what the sixteenth century named *mula*, the imperfect embryo resulting from a miscarriage – «a certain animated flesh (*una certa carne animata*) that has no shape», as explained by Sperone Speroni in his discourse on preceeding *Discorso del latte e i figliuoli dalle madri*.<sup>62</sup> The inchoate shape of the *mula* would suggest parallels with the imperfect and spontaneous literary draft, as an equivalent of *borra* and *borron*. The Flemish physician Levinus Lemnius, in his observational treatise *Oratio naturae humanae* (Antwerp, 1559), the Italian translation of which was printed in Venice in 1560, two years before the publication of Titian's *impresa* by Battista Pitroni, was to elaborate upon this idea. He describes the *mula* as «some pieces of flesh that wriggle and palpitate, and show the beginning of an imperfect work. Like the sketches (*bozza*) of painters and sculptors».<sup>63</sup> Levinus Lemnius's language in this passage, or more exactly that of his anonymous translator, is not dissimilar to the language used by the ambassador Don Diego de Guzman to describe the fluttering of the generated by the inchoate form of Titian's *borrones*.

Despite the shared connection to the *bozza*, as sketch and sketchily, *borron* is not the exact synonym of *macchia*. According to the first edition of the *Vocabulario degli Accademici della Crusca* (1612), *macchia* which comes from the Latin *macula* (literally stain or defect, figuratively shame), is «the trace that liquor or dirt leave on the surface that they touch or on which they fall». «I stupidly made this stain (*stain macula*) on the first of December 1482», wrote a disappointed annotator near a constellation of red ink blotches fallen on the white margin of his incunabulum of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* (Cambridge University Library; fig. 11). *Macchia* is therefore closer to the Spanish *mancha*, also derived from *macula*, a trace which operates a transformative effect on the surface that «muda y estraga su propia color (changes and ruins its own color)», according to Sebastián de Covarrubias's *Tesoro de la lengua Castellana* (1611). Both *mancha* and *mancha* also have the negative figurative sense of something that corrupts and dishonors, as «mancha en un traje (a stain in a lineage)», *Borron* – from *borra* (rough wool) and *borrar* (to cancel) – is instead a very specific stain: since Antonio de Nebrija's first Latin-Spanish dictionaries (1492-1493), the *borron de escarpina* is associated with the Latin *filina*, both erasure and ink stain due to erasure. As Covarrubias will specify, *borron* is «la señal de tinta que se sobre lo que se escribe (the trace of the ink that falls on what one writes)». Even in its figurative sense, *borron* is a negative moral stain that

obscures the preexisting good qualities of a man. Therefore, if the *macchia* is a stain that transforms a neutral surface, the *borron* is a stain made over something already done, which cancels or obliterates what is underneath. A beautiful example of such a *borron* is the black ink stain that crosses out Titian's printed portrait in the volume of Vasari's *Lives* from El Greco's library, which expresses the Cretan painter's animosity not against the Venetian master but against his biased biography written by the Tuscan Vasari (Madrid, Biblioteca nacional de España; fig. 12).<sup>64</sup>

The etymology of *borron* established by Covarrubias is worthy of closer analysis, not only to refine the semantics of the term, but also to clarify a slight but lasting misunderstanding, which is at the origin of one particularly suggestive reading of Velázquez's *Hilanderías*. As *borra*, from which *borrar* and *borron* come, is commonly translated in the literature as «rough wool», it has been proposed to recognize a *borra* in the bunch of rough wool hanging on the right wall of the spinning room in the foreground of Velázquez's picture, providing thus a key for a metaphor of painting in the same way that the rough wool of the *borra* is transformed into threads by the spinners to give origin to the mythological masterpiece of Arachne's tapestry in the background, so too Velázquez's *borrones* transform rough pigments into perfect painting.<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, the etymological edifice of this meta-pictorial interpretation is skewed in its foundation because the *borra* is a very specific rough wool that is not used for spinning. It is «the short hair of the sheep that cannot yet be sheared in fleece»,<sup>66</sup> as described by Covarrubias under this entry. Relating the subsequent entry *borrar*, which also includes *borron*, to *borra* required convoluted explanations by the lexicographer who based his arguments on the process of erasure. *Borras*, meaning «undo» or «obscure what is written or painted on paper, canvas, panel or another material», comes from *borra* «because serving for fiber or scudal of the inkwell. It dyed equally what they did not want to be read or understood».<sup>67</sup> Covarrubias here refers to the material culture of writing: the process of which included both inscription and erasure.<sup>68</sup> In that context *borra* defines pieces of textile used to cover the inkwell in order to protect the ink from dust that Giovan Battista Palatino describes in his handbook on calligraphy (*Libro Nuovo d'Insegnare a scrivere*).<sup>69</sup> Palatino recommends the use of silk or cotton, and Covarrubias specifies furthermore that «so called (*borras*) something in a very appropriate way, usually one takes all the corners and fibers of the inkwell and rubs them over». *Borra* therefore stands for the modern equivalent of the Carthaginian sponge (*poncia spongia*) that the ancients used to cancel their *litterae*, as immortalized by Martial in his epigram *Ad Fabianum*, quoted by Covarrubias. According to the etymology reconstructed by Covarrubias, *borras* is thus the instrument of erasure, *borrar* its action and *borron* the trace of that gesture. Besides its quality of a stain covering something underneath, the *borron* therefore has a



12



10  
Bartola Tritoni, *Titian's Impasse: Natura procreator ars? anagorathos d'artei peneologi et thrononni elevati et illuati. Con aliorum sanctorum dei Doyce che dechirono esse impressa*, Venetia, s. n., 1582, n. 91.

11  
Titianus, *Ab Urbe condita de rebus primis*, Venetia, Vindobinae de Spina, 1470, Cambridge University Library, Inc., 183, no. 24 v, detail: real ink blot, dated 1st December 1482.



12  
Portrait of Titian, woodcut and back the top, in Giorgio Vasari, *Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti*, Florence, Giunti, 1568, vol. II, (formerly in the library of El Greco, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, R/498), p. 805.

13  
Jacoopo Tintoretto, *The Washing of the Feet*, 1548-1549, oil on canvas, 210 x 533 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, detail.



gestural dimension that contributed to its fortune as pictorial technical term and an aesthetic category.<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Lorenzo Francosini, in his *Vocabolario italiano e spagnolo* (Rome, 1620), a book owned by Velázquez in his library, demonstrated a particular understanding of these nuances when he translated *bornin* both with “stain of ink over the writing” and *scarabocchio* or *scarabozzello*, the terms of the gestural scribble.<sup>66</sup>

From the late sixteenth century, theologians and preachers participated importantly in the progressive transformation of the scriptural *bornin* into a pictorial term. It appears in their discussions of painting metaphors for divine creation, or of the soul as a *tabula rasa* and a painting which is yet to come into being, where they take advantage of the double meaning of *bornin* as a material and moral stain that obscures, darkens, crosses out, but also refers to the gestural dimension of its making. The Augustinian Pedro de Vega, in his *Palabras pontificales* (1599), establishes the following correspondence: “How many are the sins that we have, there are as much *negros* (crossings-out) and *bornins* of hell in our souls.”<sup>67</sup> Those sins are made by the hands of Satan whose painting process is described as a ruse: “He puts them in a bath of gold which brightens them up, he places highlights and red afterglows on his abominable drawings, and he paints it all in a loaded way so that some false shine gleams through, in order that his ugly paintings, do not seem so ugly.”<sup>68</sup> Here we encounter the lasting criticalism of the *bornins* for their deceptive unsubstantiality and Pedro de Vega insists on the idea of imperfection in his definition—probably the first—of the *pinura* or *bornin* as *fat y por acabar*: painting in *bornin*, ugly and to be completed—where *bornin* is to be understood both as sketch and sketchy.<sup>69</sup> Another significant passage for understanding the negative perception of the pictorial *bornin* is to be found in the *Introducción del símbolo de la Fe* (1583) by the Dominican Luis de Granada, commenting upon the perfection of the created world as a proof of the existence of God, the friar draws a parallel with a perfect altarpiece: “Who would say that a very large retablo of many and excellent colors and figures, was made by chance, with a *bornin* of color that happened to fall on a panel? For which retablo is more pleasing and beautiful than this world?”<sup>70</sup> He then describes the pictorial process of the *bornin* in a manner that anticipates Jackson Pollock’s dripping technique and the philistine criticism that it will encounter: “Because it would be a great misadventure to say that a retablo of very perfect and beautiful images was made by spraying, dipping a hyssop in different colors and shaking it over a panel, without any other industry.”<sup>71</sup> This severe condemnation of the *pinura* or *bornin* for its random making without art, nonetheless emphasizes the gestural process at the heart of the new way of painting.

In the discourse on art, the difference between a more substantial *maclucha* and a more superficial *bornin*, first explored by Chiara Gaietta,<sup>68</sup> becomes perceptible in the criticism levelled at the followers of Titian’s *amain nuevo*, especially if we

compare the reception of Tintoretto and El Greco. Vasari describes Titian’s mature technique as “poised on the threshold between excellent and bad painting. What is acceptable in the work of Titian is not acceptable in that of his followers who, not understanding the labor needed to obtain his ‘spetia’ paintings and believing they were done ‘senza fatica’ (without effort), imitate them only superficially, obtaining ‘goffe pitture’ (clumsy paintings).”<sup>72</sup> Those are the characteristics of what Vasari defines in his life of Bartista Franco, where he talks about Andrea Schiavone and Tintoretto) as “a certain way of painting used in Venice, made with stains meaning sketches (*di macchie ovvero bozze*) without being finished at all.”<sup>73</sup> Vasari was thinking particularly of Tintoretto, who he criticized because “he had left sketched paintings as finished works (*uscitate le bozze per finite*), still so rough that the brushstrokes may be seen, done more by chance and vehemence than with judgment and design.”<sup>74</sup>

We can see some traces of what Vasari presented as a mode of working by chance, nearly mocking art (*quasi mansueto che questare a una dita*) in the ironic way in which Tintoretto responded to the challenge of representing reflections of light in *The washing of the feet* (Madrid, Museo nacional del Prado, 1548-1549; fig. 13): on the pitcher held by saint John in the foreground, he aligned five little crosses that achieve a perfect effect of reorientation from a distance with brilliant boldness. The detail was particularly provocative if we consider how much importance Titian accorded to these reflecting objects that he often displayed in the foreground of his compositions and associated with his signature as demonstrative pictorial pieces.<sup>75</sup> Velázquez, close observer of Titian’s paintings, would later be in a good position to catch this visual pun when he installed Tintoretto’s large canvas, which he particularly esteemed in the sacristy of the basilica of San Lorenzo de El Escorial.<sup>76</sup> The criticism of Tintoretto for his excess of *parazzata*, leaving his paintings in the form of unfinished sketches, is a recurrent *topos* that we find during the artist’s lifetime in writings from Pietro Aretino to Francesco Sansovino,<sup>77</sup> with careless imitation, Tintoretto did not achieve the depth of the several layers of painting and reworking that brought Titian’s painting to perfection. This early negative reception is probably a response to the novelty of the abbreviated technique that Tintoretto developed in the wake of his experimentation with new modes of production, whereby he often painted on dark grounds with simple layers, in order to increase the expressiveness and rapidity of his painting process and to efficiently handle his large output of works on oversized canvases.<sup>78</sup> The *maclucha*, with all the promise of its generative potential, is still at the heart of his painting process, but it lacks the refinements that veil Titian’s *convito* with mystery, rendering its rough structure too visible—revealing “the instruments of the experienced executor (*pinata escultora*)” as Roberto Longhi will sharply comment later.<sup>79</sup>

As for El Greco, the seventeenth-century Iberian discourse on art presented him as the dark