

«*LOS BORRONES  
DE TICIANO*». THE VENETIAN  
BRUSHSTROKE AND  
ITS SPANISH TRANSLATIONS  
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Tiziano Vecellio, *The Rape of Europa*, 1560-1562, oil on canvas,  
178 x 205 cm, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum,  
after conservation.

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«Se tiene por adagio cuando la pintura no es acabada, llamarla “borrones de Ticiano”»

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>2</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 undefined and unfinished form the generative potential of creation, invention, motion and life.<sup>3</sup> Since the seminal studies of Mario Socrate, *'Borrón' e la 'pittura di macchia' nella cultura letteraria del siglo de oro* (1966) and Gridley 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>4</sup> Nonetheless, the semantic shift that the process of translation from *macchia* to *borrón* enacted, 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>5</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 unveils the backstage of the original work. To what extent does the translation from *macchia* to *borrón* reveal the hidden side of Titian's *miracles*, as Pietro Aretino used to call his works, the secret of his *mystery*, as Eugène Delacroix defined his pictorial process?<sup>6</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, *traducir* and *transladar*, 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>7</sup> I would like to start our investigation with the Titian

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>8</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>9</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 Alcázar 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, 1655-1660),<sup>10</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>11</sup> In fact, Vasari refers to this very work when he describes the transformation from Titian's earliest more polished style to his mature one, characterizing the latter as a different way of painting (*modo di fare*), carried out in strokes (*condotte di colpi*), executed roughly (*tirate via di grosso*) and with blots (*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>12</sup>

For Titian, the representation of Europa must have posed a particular challenge after his friend Lodovico Dolce published his *Trasformazioni* – 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>13</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>14</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>15</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>16</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>17</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>18</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>19</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>20</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 breastplate on the battlefield and that Titian had repeatedly painted in their portraits in armor.<sup>21</sup> Europa's outfit also curiously embeds the evidence of Philip II's geographical dominion in its material texture, as the translucent red lake used to enhance the vermilion is likely no longer derived from the European kermes, but from the American cochineal, a recent novelty for Titian's technique.<sup>22</sup> Coming back to the comparison with the murdered wife in Padua, 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 rapture – as noted by Panofsky, «she might be called a Danaë seen from above»,<sup>23</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 tragi-comic accent of the myth is conveyed by the ridiculous aspect of Europa's indecorous position, parodied by the putto riding the dolphin.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, there is also a strong formal correlation between the early fresco of femicide and the late canvas of rape: as in the case of Europa, the murdered wife «is painted differently from the rest of the painting», 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 results in a slight relief in the area of the intonaco supporting her raised arm, when compared to the surrounding fresco surface [fig. 5].<sup>25</sup> This unprecedented detail – that is imperceptible at first sight but requires close scrutiny to detect – is absolutely fascinating because it contains *in fieri* 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 (*pace* 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>26</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>27</sup> At variance with Vasari's statement that Titian's «early works are executed with a certain finesse and an incredible diligence and can be viewed both from close up and

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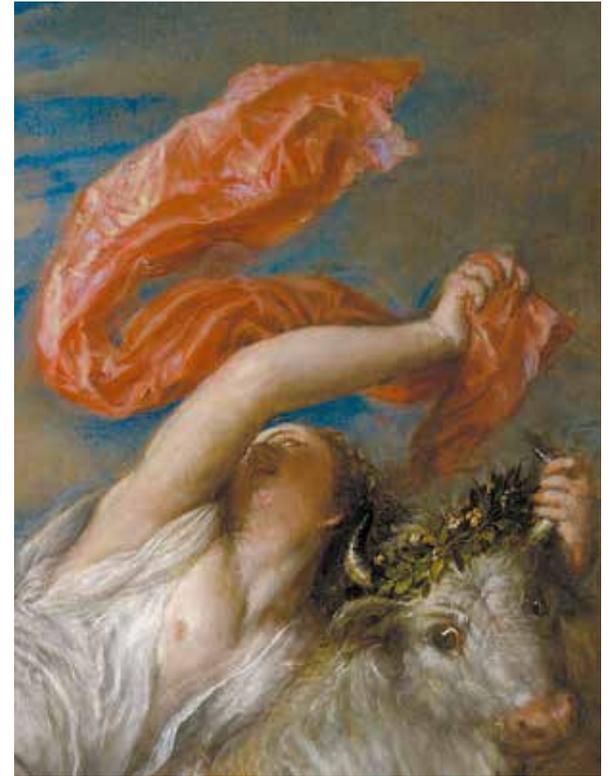


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Diego Velázquez, *Las Hilanderas*, 1655-1660, oil on canvas, 220 x 289 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

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Tiziano Vecellio, *The Rape of Europa*, 1560-1562, oil on canvas, 178 x 205 cm, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, after conservation, detail.

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Tiziano Vecellio, *Miracle of Saint Anthony: Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, 1510-1511, fresco, 327 x 183 cm, Padua, Scuola del Santo.

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Tiziano Vecellio, *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 frescoes, 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, daubing 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 Frari in Venice (1516-1518), the flesh of the putto playing the cornet in the glory of angels is highlighted by vibrant daubs of vermilion that animate the hand and cheek engaged in the musical performance, modeled 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 swirling stroke of lead white [fig. 8]. In the mature 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 *Liberation of Saint Peter* – but finished after 1557, in the same years as the *Poesie* for Philip II.<sup>28</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>29</sup> In Titian's nocturne *tour 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 relined face down without protection in the nineteenth century,) that part of the painting presents in fact severe damage.<sup>30</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>31</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 Delitala y Castelví would later say in praise of El Greco's nocturne fires.<sup>32</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 1550s, when the artist was working on the *Poesie* and finishing the *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* for the Crociferi. This first mention is attributed to Francisco Vargas, imperial ambassador in Venice from 1552 to 1559, who is said to have asked Titian about his singular style:

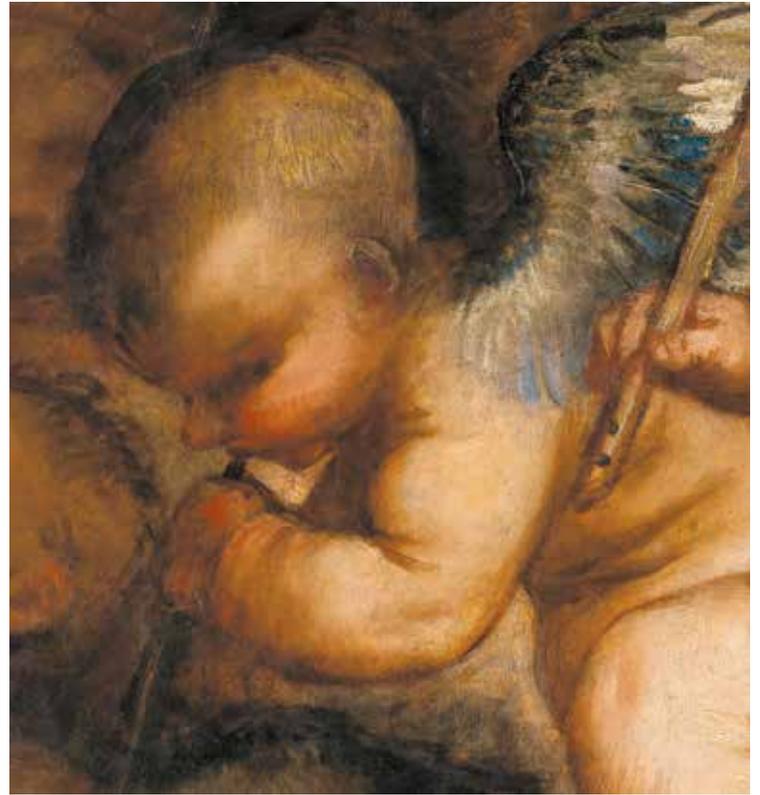
Why he had turned to that style of painting, so well-known of him, with broad brushstrokes (*de golpes de pincel groseros*) almost like careless *borrones* (*casi borrones al descuido*) (that *borrones* are what man has the faculty to paint, most of the time produced by natural inclination), and not with the sweetness of the brush of the great painters of his time.<sup>33</sup>

Titian answered that he did not want to be considered an imitator and decided therefore to open a «camín 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 diestro/ 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>34</sup> The theme of the *camín 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 Hortensio Félix Paravicino and Luis de Góngora.<sup>35</sup> It was present *in nuce* already in Vasari, when he describes Titian's rough mature style as a different *modo 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/ colpi* for strokes; *grosero/ tirati via di grosso* for the coarse, rough, unrefined aspect of the pictorial surface; and *borrones* as the equivalent of *macchie* 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 *abbozzato* and *bozza*, 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>36</sup> The

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Tiziano Vecellio, *Miracle of Saint Anthony: Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, 1510-1511, fresco, 327 × 183 cm, Padua, Scuola del Santo, detail.

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Tiziano Vecellio, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 151-1519, oil on panel, 690 × 360 cm, Venice, Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, detail during conservation.

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Tiziano Vecellio, *The Pesaro Madonna*, 1519-1526, oil on canvas, 488 × 269 cm, Venice, Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, detail after conservation.

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Tiziano Vecellio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, c. 1546-1559, oil on canvas, 493 × 277 cm, Venice, Church of the Jesuits, detail after conservation, from NICOLA, 2013, fig. 79.

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>37</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 «fa parere vive le pitture e fatte 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 Baldassare 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>38</sup> The same association is to be found in Antonio Pérez's letter with the expression *borrones al descuido*. If *descuido* means careless, negligent, the expression *al descuido* implicates a simulated negligence.<sup>39</sup> With *desprecio*, *descuido* is one of the terms chosen by Juan Boscán to translate Castiglione's Italian *sprezzatura*,<sup>40</sup> and whose relation to art will be made explicit later by Lope de Vega's oxymoron *descuido artificioso*.<sup>41</sup> *Borrones al descuido* is an expression that somehow anticipates what the Venetian *trattatisti*, such as Carlo Ridolfi and Marco Boschini, will call later in the seventeenth century *colpo sprezzante*. While, for Boschini, the *sprezzante* brushstroke (*colpo sprezzante del pennello*) is the expressive means of the Venetian *tratto pittoresco*,<sup>42</sup> Ridolfi uses it to describe Titian's late *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>43</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 [his pictures] are remade, and that he returned to them with his colors repeatedly» (*si conosce che sono rifatte, e che si è ritornato loro addosso con i 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 (*ultimi ritocchi, finimenti*) directly with his fingers (*un striscio 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 hermeneutics

of its corporeality.<sup>44</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>45</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 *Pala Pesaro*,<sup>46</sup> traces of Titian's fingers have been observed extensively in one of his more refined works of the 1540s, the *Ecce 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>47</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 unprecedented composition such as the *Rape of Europa*, the substantial effect of Titian's *colorito* is based on surprisingly thin layers of paint.<sup>48</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 *borrones*: the fascinating correspondence in which the Marques of Ayamonte, governor of Milan, and Don Diego de Guzman, Spanish ambassador in Venice, discuss the capacity of the old artist to paint as rumors say that his hands were trembling, in 1575, one year before Titian's death.<sup>49</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».<sup>50</sup> 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>51</sup> Late 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 inchoate shape, they are the very essence of painting that, even if left unfinished, possess the illusionistic power of animated 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

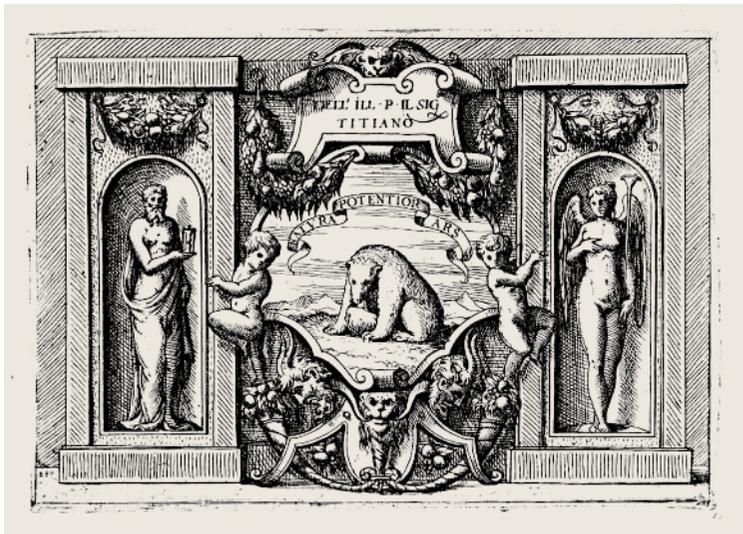
carefully to complete its shape, just as the painter has to polish his imperfect material to bring it to figure and life [fig. 10]. This emblem, the origin of which can be traced in classical sources, has been much discussed.<sup>52</sup> Associated with the motto *Natura potentior Ars* – «art more powerful than nature» –, it was probably conceived by the artist himself in conversation with his *litterati* friends, such as Lodovico Dolce. Yet, it has not been noticed that this troubling piece of living flesh, «blood coagulated and thick» according to Horapollo, is very close to what the sixteenth century named *mola*, 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 breastfeeding (*Discorso del lattare i figliuoli dalle madri*).<sup>53</sup> The inchoate shape of the *mola* would suggest parallels with the imperfect and spontaneous literary draft, as an equivalent of *bozza* and *borrón*. The Flemish physician Levinus Lemnius, in his obstetrical treatise *Occulta naturae miracula* (Antwerp, 1559), the Italian translation of which was printed in Venice in 1560, two years before the publication of Titian's *impresa* by Battista Pittoni, was to elaborate upon this idea. He describes the *mola* as «some pieces of flesh that wriggle and palpitate, and show the beginning of an imperfect work, like the sketches (*bozze*) of painters and sculptors».<sup>54</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 life generated by the inchoate form of Titian's *borrones*.

Despite the shared connection to the *bozza*, as sketch and sketchy, *borrón* is not the exact synonym of *macchia*. According to the first edition of the *Vocabolario 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».<sup>55</sup> «I stupidly made this stain (*ista macula*) on the first of December 1482» wrote a disappointed annotator near a constellation of red ink blots 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 *macchia* and *mancha* also have the negative figurative sense of something that corrupts and dishonors, as «mancha en un linaje (a stain in a lineage)». *Borrón* – from *borra* (rough wool) and *borrar* (to cancel) – is instead a very specific stain: since Antonio de Nebrija's first Latin-Spanish dictionaries (1492-1495), the *borrón de escriptura* is associated with the Latin *litura*, both erasure and ink stain due to erasure. As Covarrubias will specify, *borrón* is «la señal de tinta que cae sobre lo que se escribe (the trace of the ink that falls on what one writes)». Even in its figurative sense, *borrón* is a negative moral stain that

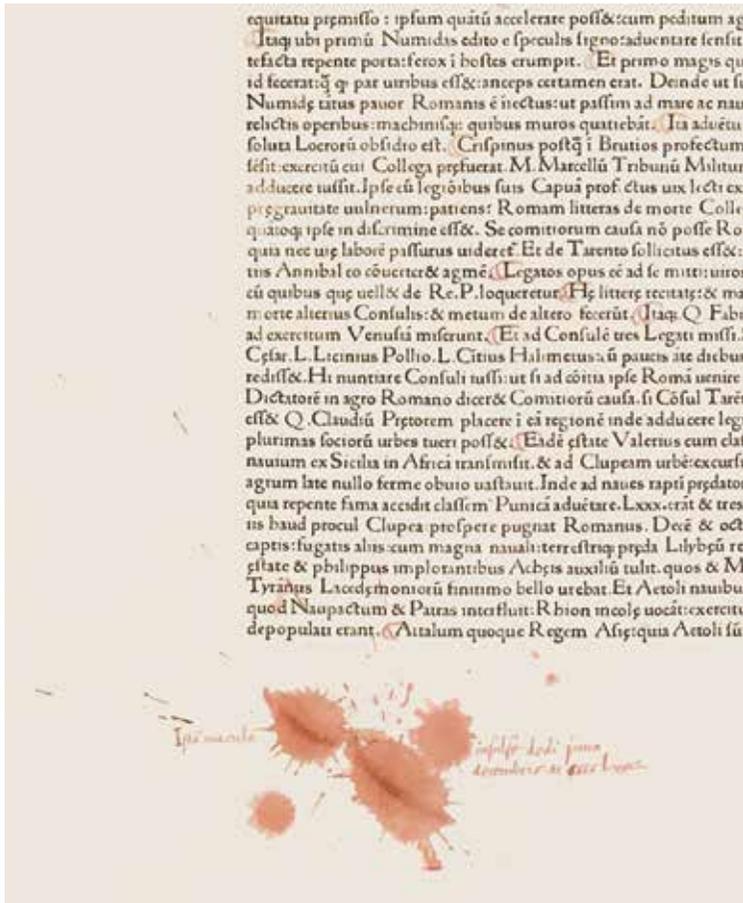
obscures the preexisting good qualities of a man. Therefore, if the *macchia* is a stain that transforms a neutral surface, the *borrón* is a stain made over something already done, which cancels or obliterates what is underneath. A beautiful example of such a *borrón* is the black ink stain that crosses out Titian's printed portrait in the volume of Vasari's *Lives* from El Greco's library, which expresses the Cretan painter's acrimony not against the Venetian master but against his biased biography written by the Tuscan Vasari (Madrid, Biblioteca nacional de España; fig. 12).<sup>56</sup>

The etymology of *borrón* 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 *Hilanderas*. As *borra*, from which *borrar* and *borrón* 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>57</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>58</sup> as described by Covarrubias under this entry. Relating the subsequent entry *borrar*, which also includes *borrón*, to *borra* required contorted explanations by the lexicographer who based his arguments on the process of erasure. *Borrar*, meaning «undo, or obscure what is written or painted on paper, canvas, panel or another material», comes from *borra* «because serving for fiber or sendal of the inkwell, it dyed equally what they did not want to be read or understood».<sup>59</sup> Covarrubias here refers to the material culture of writing, the process of which included both inscription and erasure:<sup>60</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'imparare a scrivere*).<sup>61</sup> Palatino recommends the use of silk or cotton, and Covarrubias specifies furthermore that «to cancel (*borrar*) something in a very appropriate way, usually one takes all the cottons and fibers of the inkwell and rubs them over». *Borra* therefore stands for the modern equivalent of the Carthaginian sponge (*punica spongia*) that the ancients used to cancel their *lituras*, as immortalized by Martial in his epigram *Ad Faustinum*, quoted by Covarrubias. According to the etymology reconstructed by Covarrubias, *borra* is thus the instrument of erasure, *borrar* its action and *borrón* the trace of that gesture. Besides its quality of a stain covering something underneath, the *borrón* therefore has a

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Descrizione dell'opere di Tiziano da Cadore Pittore.

**T**ESSENDO nato Tiziano in Cadore piccolo castello, posto in sulla Piauca, e lontano cinque miglia dalla chiesa dell'Alpe l'anno 1480, della famiglia de' Vecelli, in quel luogo delle più nobili, peruenuto all'età di dieci anni, con bello spirito, e protezione d'ingegno, fu mandato a Venezia in casa d'un suo zio Cittadino honorato. Il quale ueggendo il putto molto inclinato alla pittura, lo pose con Giambellino pittore, in quel tempo eccell. e molto famoso, come s'è detto. sotto la cui disciplina attendendo al disegno, mostrò in brieve esse re dotato dalla natura di tutte quelle parti d'ingegno, e giudizio, che necessitate sono all'arte della pittura. E perche in quel tempo Giambellino, e gli

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Battista Pittoni, *Titian's impresa: 'Natura potentior ars'*, engraving, 15,5 x 22 cm, in id., *Imprese di diversi principi, duchi, signori, e d'altri personaggi et huomini letterati et illustri. Con alcune stanze del Dolce che dichiarono esse imprese*, Venice, s. n., 1562, n. 51.

11

Titus Livius, *Ab Urbe condita decadis primae*, Venice, Vindelino de Spira, 1470, Cambridge University Library, Inc. 1.B.3.1b, cc4 v, detail: red ink blot, dated 1st December 1482.

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Portrait of Titian, woodcut and black ink blot, in Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, Florence, Giunti, 1568, vol. III, formerly in the library of El Greco, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, R/41691, p. 805

13

Jacopo 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>62</sup> Interestingly, Lorenzo Franciosini, 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 *borrón* both with «stain of ink over the writing» and *scarbocchio* or *scarbozzolo*, the terms of the gestural scribble.<sup>63</sup>

From the late sixteenth century, theologians and preachers participated importantly in the progressive transformation of the scriptural *borrón* 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 *borrón* as a material and moral stain that obscures, darkens, crosses out, but also refer to the gestural dimension of its making. The Augustinian Pedro de Vega, in his *Psalmos penitenciales* (1599), establishes the following correspondence: «How many are the sins that we have, there are as much *rayones* (crossings-out) and *borrones* of hell in our souls». <sup>64</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>65</sup> Here we encounter the lasting criticism of the *borrones* for their deceptive unsubstantiality and Pedro de Vega insists on the idea of imperfection in his definition – probably the first – of the *pintura en borrón* as *fea y por acabar*: painting in *borrón*, ugly and to be completed – where *borrón* is to be understood both as sketch and sketchy. <sup>66</sup> Another significant passage for understanding the negative perception of the pictorial *borrón* 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 *borrón* of color that happened to fall on a panel? For which retablo is more pleasing and beautiful than this world?» <sup>67</sup> He later describes the pictorial process of the *borrón* in a manner that anticipates Jackson Pollock's dripping technique and the philistine criticism that it will encounter: «Because it would be a great insanity 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>68</sup> This severe condemnation of the *pintura en borrón* 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 *macchia* and a more superficial *borrón*, first explored by Chiara Gauna, <sup>69</sup> becomes perceptible in the criticism levelled at the followers of Titian's *camín 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 «perfect» paintings and believing they were done «senza fatica» (without effort), imitate them only superficially, obtaining «goffe pitture» (clumsy paintings). Those are the characteristics of what Vasari defines (in his life of Battista 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>70</sup> Vasari was thinking particularly of Tintoretto, who he criticized because: «He had left sketched paintings as finished works (*lasciato 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>71</sup> We can see some traces of what Vasari presented as a mode of working by chance, nearly mocking art (*quasi mostrando che quest'arte è una baia*) 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 reverberation 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>72</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>73</sup> The criticism of Tintoretto for his excess of *prestezza*, 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>74</sup> with careless imitation, Tintoretto did not achieve the depth of the several layers of painting and retouching 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>75</sup> The *macchia*, 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 *colorito* with mystery, rendering its rough structure too visible – revealing «the instruments of the experienced executor (*pratico esecutor*)» as Roberto Longhi will sharply comment later. <sup>76</sup>

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

shadow of Titian. The broadly negative reception of his *borrones* is also attested by a wide range of literature, in which they are used as rhetorical figures to express a lack of substance or a deceptive artifice. In the *Tratado de República y Policía christiana* published in 1615, one year after El Greco's death and dedicated to Philip III, the royal chaplain Fray Juan de Santa María discusses the danger of being a sovereign only of external representation (*representación exterior*): «Like a painting from the hand of El Greco, which placed high, and seen from a distance, seems very good and represents much, while from close sight everything is stripes (*rayz*) and *borrones*. The canopy and the great majesty, properly considered, are nothing more than a *borrón* and a shadow of the king». <sup>77</sup> The negative value of this comment must be understood in the light of the debate about current political practices at the court of Spain where an increasing part of the royal authority was delegated to the prime minister. <sup>78</sup> It was reversed ten years later in a famous sermon given in the presence of Philip IV by his chaplain Fray Hortensio Félix Paravicino, a great admirer of El Greco who had painted his portrait. But in the context of the royal chapel, the positive transformation of the argument was to be resolved in favor of Titian, in order to correspond to the artistic taste of the king. Commenting on the verse *Ego sum lux mundi* (John, 8, 12), on the basis of the analogy between created world and painting, he compares «las acciones de los lienzos humanos (the actions of the human canvases)» that have to be seen in the light of Christ in order to be visible and to be judged, to a painting by Titian that must be seen «in its own light» (*a su luz*) in order to reveal its «admirable and skillful union of colors», because otherwise it seems to be nothing more than a «battle of *borrones*, a stroke of badly shadowed glowing clouds». <sup>79</sup> The *topos* of the distant vision, commonly associated with the perception of *borrones*, is here refined by considerations on lighting conditions that more properly echo the viewing experience shared by the king and his court in Madrid. In these words, the old advice that Philip IV's great-great-grand-aunt, Mary of Hungary, had given to Mary Tudor in 1553 about the correct way to appreciate Titian's paintings, still resonates: she explained that they should be seen «in their own light and from a distance (*à leur jour et de loing*) [...] as from close sight they are not recognizable». <sup>80</sup>

When associated with El Greco's pictorial language, the term *borrón* always retains its negative value. The most eloquent and famous example is the criticism of his brushstrokes elaborated by Francisco Pacheco who defines them as «aquellos crueles borrones». <sup>81</sup> Pacheco was indeed one of the strongest opponents of *borrones* and the most passionate defender of the «pintura acabada», finished, polished painting, best represented according to him by the art of Pablo de Céspedes. He could certainly not attack Titian's *borrones* directly since the artist was the paradigm of the nobility of painting in Spain because of his privileged relationship with the Spanish Hapsburgs. To save Titian, Pacheco included him paradoxically in the category of *pintura acabada*, because even if his works were not detailed

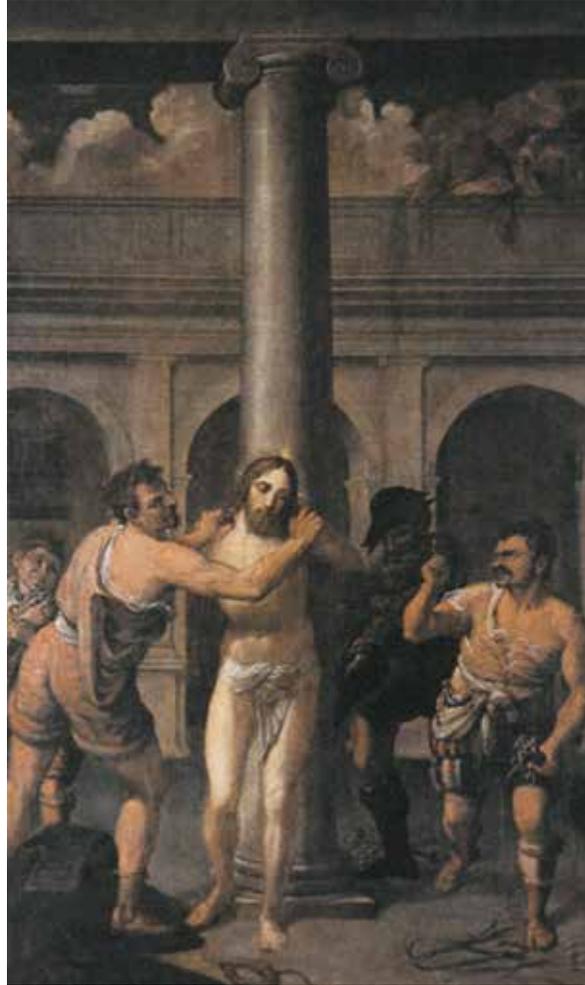
in the particulars, they achieved the canonically tripartite rules of art in general—*dibujo*, *colorido*, *buena elección*. <sup>82</sup> Moreover, Pacheco stated that despite the common expression *borrones de Ticiano*, the brushstrokes of the Venetian painter were not really *borrones* «for it would be better to say brushstrokes (*golpes*) placed in an appropriate place, with great dexterity». <sup>83</sup> Pacheco, like Vasari before him, therefore concentrated all the criticism on Titian's followers, and among them, El Greco became the personification of the most negative aspects of *borrones*. The question appears in the chapter dedicated to oil painting technique, when Pacheco discusses the two different ways to make a sketch (*bosquexo*), *alla prima*, his favorite way, followed by Pablo de Céspedes, or with retouches, as used by Titian. In this context, he condemns those painters who, after having made their sketch, finish the painting by applying *borrones* to give the illusion of dexterity and ease (*destreza y facilidad*), while in fact they are using this artifice (*artificio*) to dissimulate a very laborious process. And here comes the negative example of El Greco: «who would believe that Dominico Greco kept his paintings often close by, to retouch them from time to time, in order to leave the colors distinct and disunited and to apply those cruel *borrones* to simulate valor (*afectar valentia*)?» <sup>84</sup>

This criticism of *borrones* as rough brushstrokes added to a finished painting to obtain a titianesque effect of dexterity and ease, would more appropriately describe the works of Juan Fernández de Navarrete, known as El Mudo. Remarkably more acclaimed than El Greco in the Spanish discourse on art, this court painter of Philip II, who travelled in Central Italy to study art in the late 1550's, worked first as a careful copyist of the early Netherlandish paintings which were so valued by his king. <sup>85</sup> He later became such an esteemed imitator of the Venetian style that he earned himself the nickname of «Spanish Titian», probably in order to respond to Philip II's initial project to have a titianesque decoration for the basilica of San Lorenzo de El Escorial. <sup>86</sup> His works were actually painted more in a Tuscan-Roman mode, with the inclusion of some Venetian motifs, such as rustic figures borrowed from Bassano, and the careful elaboration of Venetian effects. Those were obtained through the use of coarse canvases, that the king ordered woven on purpose, <sup>87</sup> and the addition of disunited and heavily loaded brushstrokes of bright color (*Flagellation of Christ*, ca. 1572-75, San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Real Monasterio; [fig. 14-15]). Applied in relief upon the pictorial surface, those highlights were intended both to grasp the light and to attract the gaze of the connoisseur as a titianesque signature. In their superficial and ornamental character, they are somehow similar to the experiments that Baltasar de Echave Orío, the Basque painter established in Mexico, was making in the early seventeenth century in his *Martyrdom of Saint Ponciano* (Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Arte; [fig. 16-17]), where the flames of the torches held by the executioners are dramatically worked out in relief above an extremely polished pictorial surface. <sup>88</sup> The technique of contrasting a smooth surface with the roughness

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Juan Fernández de Navarrete, called El Mudo, *The Flagellation of Christ*, 1575, oil on canvas, 371 × 232 cm, Patrimonio Nacional, Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, detail.

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Juan Fernández de Navarrete, called El Mudo, *The Flagellation of Christ*, 1575, oil on canvas, 371 × 232 cm, Patrimonio Nacional, Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

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Baltasar de Echave Orio, *Martyrdom of Saint Panciano*, c. 1600-1622, oil on panel, 267 × 160 cm, Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Arte, detail.

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Baltasar de Echave Orio, *Martyrdom of Saint Panciano*, c. 1600-1622, oil on panel, 254 × 160 cm, Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Arte.

of relief, and the vibrant effects that results from it, suggests a distant legacy of the gilded ornaments and refinements that animated the surface of gothic panel paintings.

El Greco had a deeper and more direct knowledge of Titian's technique than El Mudo, thanks to his long and formative stay in Venice between 1567 and 1570. He may have spent some time in the old master's workshop as well as perhaps in Tintoretto's.<sup>89</sup> The criticism of his *borrones* as a superficial titianesque artifice seems therefore less appropriate, particularly from Pacheco who had the opportunity to meet him and see him painting in Toledo in 1611. In El Greco's work, even in those late years of his life, we find specific quotations of Titian's pictorial process, for example in the recurrent manifesto-objects associated with the artist's signature, displayed in the foreground of compositions such as the burning bush blooming from the sewing basket in the *Annunciation* for the retablo of the Colegio de la Encarnación in Madrid (1597-1600, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado) or the bouquet of roses and lilies in the *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception* for the Oballe chapel in the church of San Vicente in Toledo (1607-1613, Toledo, Museo de Santa Cruz; [fig. 18-19]): from afar, they seem to be still-lives pieces of perfect precision, while from up close they reveal all their macular structure.<sup>90</sup> It is nonetheless true that the Venetian painting technique that El Greco brought to Spain was transformed by his background as a Cretan icon painter. One of the most visible differences between his pictorial process and Titian's concerns the small broken strokes of tempera mixed with oil that he used as final touches to refine the highlights and half-tones,<sup>91</sup> reminiscent of the graphic lighting (*scrittura di luce*) of byzantine painting that was absorbed into the *maniera levantina*—the eastern Mediterranean style—as Longhi defined it.<sup>92</sup> These refinements are particularly well preserved in the early altarpieces for Santo Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo (1577-1579; [fig. 20]), where on the margins of the canvases, hidden behind the frames, the master's brush trials offer a deconstruction of his painterly brushwork [fig. 21]. These fascinating brush trials are in fact a constant in El Greco's working process as they can be found on the margins of several later canvases that were removed from the frames of the original retablos, such as the already mentioned monumental retablo of the Colegio de la Encarnación in Madrid, or the smaller altarpiece of the parish church of Saint Nicholas of Bari in Toledo (Museo de Santa Cruz; [fig. 22]) that El Greco was painting in the period of Pacheco's visit. What becomes visible when the paintings are removed from their frames reveals the extent to which the contours of the painting's surface are uneven and open, allowing a fluid circulation between the margins and the composition. The brush trials can sometimes overlap and merge with the brushstrokes of the painting proper: the painting here is not conceived as the delimited window or *quadro* of the Albertian Renaissance tradition, but as a transfiguration of pictorial materials.

Significantly, according to Pacheco's criticism, the *borrones* of El Greco are not only lacking the structural dimension of Titian's *macchia*, but they also have nothing to do with the unfinished sketchiness resulting from Tintoretto's *prestezza*: on the contrary, they are an artifice, a superficial element applied at the very end of the process of painting, to conceal the laborious work underneath. Even from a different perspective, Vicente Carducho, in his earlier *Diálogos de la Pintura* (1633), reached a similar conclusion. Paradoxically, this heir of mannerism and opponent of naturalism was a strong supporter of the *borrones* when compared to Pacheco.<sup>93</sup> In the sixth dialogue of his book, discussing the different styles of painting (*De la diferencia de modos de pintar*), he recalls the origins of this «modo de bizarre y osado (bizarre and daring mode)» in the art of Titian who first painted «acabadissimo» and later «made admirable things with *borrones*», followed by all the Venetian school.<sup>94</sup> Carducho defends the use of *borrones* in paintings made to be seen from a distance (*pintura para distancia*), to give more strength to the representation. Colors will therefore be applied «purer and more distinct from one another», which could seem a «colorido full of *borrones* and colors badly placed» to an ignorant beholder but is instead the result of a prudent and artful construction and a *docto artificio*—a learned artifice.<sup>95</sup> This idea was already expressed in Vasari, in his famous comparison between the more finished sculpted choir of Luca della Robbia, and the more sketchy one by Donatello: but while in Vasari the use of the *bella bozza*, the beautiful sketch, justified by distant vision, is related to the inner *furor dell'arte*, the very first moment of creative inspiration, the essence of artistic invention,<sup>96</sup> the *borrones* of Carducho are redefined as an exterior and learned artifice, an abbreviated ornament that achieves the effect of painting from a distance. Just as the etymological *borrón* is a gestural ink stain that partially covers the surface of the writing; the pictorial *borrón* is a gestural color stain that partially covers the surface of the painting.

This statement becomes highly suggestive if it is connected to what we know about Velázquez's technique from literary sources and technical analysis. According to his biographers, from Pacheco to Palomino, Velázquez was extremely engaged with Titian's mode, in order to construct his own social and artistic dynasty as royal court painter.<sup>97</sup> He contributed significantly to rehabilitating Titian's *borrones* in the Iberian practice and discourse of art, and to returning the illusionistic effect of life and truth to portraiture.<sup>98</sup> We may in fact wonder whether Pacheco when, in his discussion of Titian, he described *borrones* that were not properly *borrones* but brushstrokes placed with judgment and dexterity, was not also thinking of defending his own son-in-law and pupil Velázquez who had adopted a similar pictorial language. This very calibrated and skillful tracing of *borrones* will be evoked several times by Antonio Palomino in his *Museo pictórico y escala óptica* (1715-1724), who describes Velázquez painting with long brushes—the brushes that were

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Domenikos Theotokopoulos, called El Greco, *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*, 1603-1613, oil on canvas, 348 x 175 cm, Toledo, Museo de Santa Cruz, detail.

19  
Domenikos Theotokopoulos, called El Greco, *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*, 1603-1613, oil on canvas, 348 x 175 cm, Toledo, Museo de Santa Cruz.

20  
Domenikos Theotokopoulos, called El Greco, *St John the Evangelist*, 1577-1579, oil on canvas, 212 x 78 cm, Toledo, Santo Domingo el Antiguo, detail, from Véliz, 2007, fig. 12.

21  
Domenikos Theotokopoulos, called El Greco, *The Resurrection*, 1577-1579, oil on canvas, 210 x 128 cm, Toledo, Santo Domingo el Antiguo, detail, from Véliz, 2007, fig. 18.

22  
Domenikos Theotokopoulos, called El Greco, *Saint Francis*, 1595-1600, oil on canvas, 139 x 55 cm, Toledo, Museo de Santa Cruz, detail.

commonly used by fresco painters – in order to integrate the judgment of the distant vision into his pictorial practice.<sup>99</sup> This idea was already present in the *silva El Pincel* of Francisco de Quevedo (1629), who praised Velázquez for his ability to animate painting and reach truth instead of simple likeness through his «distant blots» – that he terms «*manchas distantes*» in order to evacuate all possible negative connotations carried by *borrones* and to determine the uniqueness of Philippe IV's court painter.<sup>100</sup> If Baltasar Gracián, elaborating upon the trope of the *camín nuevo*, defines this unprecedented pictorial language as «pintar a lo grueso» in the manuscript of *El Héroe* – the abrupt roughness of which would be nuanced in «pintar a lo valentón», a terminology that includes the idea of skill, in the edited book of 1637,<sup>101</sup> Juan Francisco Andrés de Uztároz, in his *Obelisco histórico* (1646), more appropriately describes it as an abbreviated mode of painting that is the result of a perfect command of *sprezzatura*: «With subtle dexterity and few strokes, he demonstrates what art, expression and rapid execution can do».<sup>102</sup>

Unlike Tintoretto and El Greco, Velázquez was never initiated into the secrets of Titian's studio, and his understanding of the Venetian master's process of painting could only be based on close scrutiny of the pictorial surface that, as Delacroix would later observe, jealously guarded the mystery of its perfection. Velázquez could analyze only the superficial effects, in other words how *impasto* color took advantage of the irregular surface of coarse canvases and was highlighted in the brightest parts of the composition by the visible relief of brushstrokes or lumps of pigment – in a way that is today still perceptible only in a canvas such as the spectacular portrait of Andrea Gritti (ca. 1546, Washington, National Gallery of Art), the pictorial surface of which has not been flattened by relining. Certainly, Velázquez benefitted from the experienced gaze of Rubens when the Flemish master, during his second journey in Spain in 1628-1629, took on the task of copying several Titians from the Spanish royal collections. Rubens had already practiced such an exercise in his youth, during his first trip to Spain in 1603: he was then mainly interested in reproducing compositions in their exact outlines and dimensions, while in 1628-1629 he paid great attention to the restitution of Titian's pictorial language through the precise rendering of his visible brushstrokes.<sup>103</sup> According to Pacheco, Rubens went to San Lorenzo de El Escorial together with Velázquez to study Titian's paintings and his careful lesson was to be determinant for the transformation of Velázquez's pictorial language. Thanks to technical and scientific analysis, we know that Velázquez, following his encounter with Rubens and the return from his first trip in Italy in 1629-1630, did not attempt to imitate the material structure of Titian's painting. Instead, he achieved an optical reconstitution of the titianesque visual effect, through an abbreviated, reduced process of painting, based on the fluidity of pigments, applied with very few layers, frequently wet on

wet, on a ground that often remained visible.<sup>104</sup> An eloquent example of this abbreviated process, analyzed by McKim-Smith, is the pointed hand of the Dutch soldier in *Las Lanzas* (1634-1635, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado; [fig. 23-24]), painted *en épargne* and highlighted with a few brushstrokes of flesh tones and lead white, that blur the outlines between the fingers and the white shirt underneath. Sometimes, even the brush trials left by El Greco on the margins of the canvas can be found directly integrated into the background, where they give a vibrant effect to the monochrome surface, as visible in the portrait of Don Pedro de Barberana (1631-1633, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum; [fig. 25]). While the paintings executed during his second trip to Italy in 1649-1650, and particularly a demonstration piece such as the portrait of Juan de Pareja (New York, Metropolitan Museum; [fig. 26]), show unprecedented care in the execution and thickness of the *colorito* – a challenge to Titian's model addressed to an Italian gaze –,<sup>105</sup> the most astonishing examples of the extreme economy of means reached by Velázquez are to be found in the later paintings made after his return to Madrid.

The fabric flower worn by the infanta Margarita on her white dress in *Las Meninas* (1656, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado; [fig. 27-28]) is in that sense an impressive detail: perfectly consistent and verisimilar from afar, as Velázquez, unlike the mature Titian, never overtly exposed his loose brushstrokes to the distant gaze, from up close it breaks up in a discernable and nearly countable number of strokes. The *descuido artificioso*, the *sprezzatura* that conceals art, is not attested here by superposed layers of material density, but by the precision and dexterity of the single prompt gesture. And the very last touches are the *borrones*: dense blotches applied in relief on the painting surface, sometimes just lumps of pigment that catch the light and give the illusion of a coarse canvas, even though Velázquez, differing from his Venetian models, used to paint on refined and smooth canvases. The last touches of Titian were made with his fingers, close to the canvas, directly modeling the painting material; the last touches of Velázquez were made from a distance, with his long brushes, in a detached and analytical way. With Velázquez, the structural depth of Titian's *impasto* painting became condensed in these last touches, as an achieved refinement of the *ultima mano*, a powerful ornament that gave brightness to the painting and animated its mute surface. In his translation of the *macchia veneziana* into *borrones*, Velázquez acted as an *orator* and not as an *interpreter*, according to Cicero's distinction:<sup>106</sup> he did not «render word for word» but preserved «the general style and force of the language», that is the illusionistic power to give life through painting.

23



23  
Diego Velázquez, *The Surrender of Breda*, c. 1635, oil on canvas, 307 × 371 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, detail.

24

Diego Velázquez, *The Surrender of Breda*, c. 1635, oil on canvas, 307 × 371 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, detail.

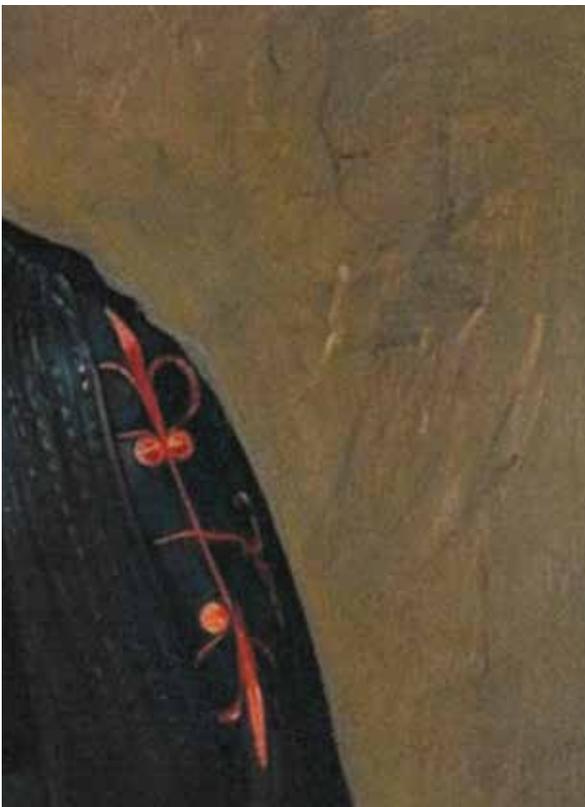
25

Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Don Pedro de Barberana*, 1631-1633, oil on canvas, 198 × 111 cm, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum, detail.

26

Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*, 1650, oil on canvas, 81 × 70 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, detail.

25



26



24



28



27



27  
Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, oil  
on canvas, 320,5 × 281,5 cm, Madrid, Museo  
Nacional del Prado, detail.

28  
Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, oil  
on canvas, 320,5 × 281,5 cm, Madrid, Museo  
Nacional del Prado, detail.

This paper is elaborated from talks first given in the conference Surfaces at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York, March 27th, 2015 and in the panel On the Agency of Streaks, Blots, and Traces, at the Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting, Boston, March 31st, 2016. They were later expanded in a lecture presented at the Italian Academy, Columbia University, New York, the Kunst-historisches Institut, Florence, and the Meadows Museum, Dallas. For the inspiring comments that I received in those occasions, as also for further discussions that contributed to my reflections, I am grateful to Andrea Bayer, Cammy Brothers, Noémie Etienne, Miguel Falomir, Dario Gamboni, Carmen García-Frías, Michael Gallagher, Stephanie Hanke, Alessandro Nova, Christopher Nygren, Edward Payne, Gianfranco Pocabene, Jeremy Roe, Mark Roglán, Philip Sohm, Nicola Suthor, Julia Vázquez. I am particularly thankful to Pier Mattia Tommasino and Carlos Hernando Sánchez for their help in interpreting the tricky excerpt of Antonio Pérez's letter on Titian's borrones; to Cleo Nisse for her thoughtful revision of the text; to Francesca Alberti for our lasting dialogue on the interrelations between pictorial borrones and graphic scribbles, as well as for many other things. This essay owes much to the generosity of Giulio Bono in sharing his work, experience and philosophy as a conservator of Renaissance Venetian painting; I cannot express enough my gratitude for our irreplaceable conversations looking at Titian on restoration sites.

## Notes

- 1 «When a painting is not finished, there is a saying that calls it «borrones de Ticiano»; PACHECO, 2001, p. 416.
- 2 «Con ciò sia che le prime son condotte con una certa finezza e diligenza incredibile, e da essere vedute da presso e da lontano; e queste ultime, *condotte di colpi, tirate via di grosso e con macchie*, di maniera che da presso non si possono vedere, e di lontano appaiono perfette. E questo modo è stato cagione che molti, volendo in ciò imitare e mostrare di fare il pratico, hanno fatto di goffe pitture: e ciò adviene perché, se bene a molti pare che elle siano fatte senza fatica, non è così il vero, e s'ingannano; perché si conosce che sono rifatte, e che si è ritornato loro addosso con i colori tante volte, che la fatica vi si vede. E questo modo si fatto è giudizioso, bello e stupendo, perché fa parere vive le pitture e fatte con grande arte, nascondendo le fatiche»; VASARI, 1976, VI, p. 166; see SOHM, 1991.
- 3 LEONARDO, 1995, p. 174; see GAMBONI, 2001, BAMBACH, 2015; NEW YORK, 2016, p. 18-41.
- 4 PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ, 1976; CHECA, 1994; GAUNA, 1998; MARÍAS, 2003; ALPERS, 2005; KNOX, 2009; PRATER, 2014; ROE, 2016.
- 5 «Es como quien mira los tapices flamencos por el revés, que aunque se veen las figuras, son llenas de hilos que las escurecen y no se veen con la lisura y tez de la haz», cit. in CHARTIER, 2005, p. 63; translation in ROBINSON, 2014.
- 6 ARETINO, 1957-1960, II, p. 30-31; DELACROIX, 1893-95, III, 15/01/1857.
- 7 COVARRUBIAS, 1611, p. 933; see CHARTIER, 2005, p. 62-66.
- 8 WIWEL, 2020, with the previous bibliography.
- 9 «Il soggetto delle mole altre»; letter dated April 26, 1562, in MANCINI, 1998, p. 289, n° 170.
- 10 HELLWIG, 2004; ALPERS, 2005; PORTUS, 2007; STOICHIȚĂ, 2018.
- 11 GEORGIEVSKA-SHINE, 2010.
- 12 Letter of September 19, 1896, in BERENSON, STEWART GARDNER, 1987, p. 65-66.
- 13 «Che bella potea dirsi oltra le belle/ Di persona così, come d'aspetto./ Ne tal dipinse mai Zeusi, od Apelle./ Titian, ne Pittor altro perfetto»; DOLCE, 1553, *canto V*, p. 56.
- 14 «Ne depinse giamai Zeusi, od Apelle,/ Rafael, ne Titian si raro oggetto»; DOLCE, 1555, *canto V*, p. 58; see FEHL, 1992, p. 88-103. In the second edition, published shortly after the first in 1553, the painter is named «Michel» for Michelangelo, while from the third edition, in 1555, to the sixth and last revised by Dolce, in 1561, he is named «Rafael». For the several editions of the text, see GUTHMÜLLER, 1997, p. 251-274.
- 15 Beside Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, also Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*; see ROSAND, 1972; GOFFEN, 1997, p.267-273.
- 16 ROSAND, 1981.
- 17 BOSCHINI, 1966, p. 712.
- 18 DUNKERTON, GONZÁLEZ MOZO, POCOBENE., 2020.
- 19 GOFFEN, 1997, p. 13-25.
- 20 WARBURG, 1990, p. 221-243; DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2002, p. 7-24.
- 21 BODART, 2011, p. 255-274.
- 22 DUNKERTON, SPRING, 2013; DUNKERTON, SPRING, 2016; DUNKERTON, GONZÁLEZ MOZO, POCOBENE, 2020. I am grateful to Cleo Nisse for bringing my attention to this technical aspect.
- 23 PANOFKY, 1969, p. 166.
- 24 PUTTFARKEN, 2005, p. 294-340.
- 25 COLALUCCI, 1991. The smooth relief of that outlined area – emphasized by photos taken in raking light – is caused by the separate drying of the layer of plaster frescoed in that workday (*giornata*), and not the result of a sculptural modeling as suggested by ROSSETTI MOROSINI, 1999. I am grateful to Giulio Bono for having examined and discussed this detail with me *in situ*.
- 26 ROSAND, 1988.
- 27 HOCHMANN, 2015, p. 271-308.
- 28 LONZI, PUPPI, 2013.
- 29 «Las pinturas que quieren remedar el tiempo de la noche, con el artificio del pinzel, el encubrir lo que encubre la niebla, y descubrir lo que descubre la vista: suelen ser mas dificultosas, y requieren para entenderse mayor conocimiento del arte»; DE LA VERA CRUZ, 1599, p. 384, cit. in HERRERO GARCÍA, 1943, p. 177. For a contrasting discussion of the evaluation of Titian's nocturne effect, see CAMPBELL, 2019, p. 260-263.
- 30 SARTI, 2013 particularly p. 182-183; NICOLA, 2013.
- 31 GARCÍA-FRÍAS CHECA, RODRÍGUEZ-ARANA MUÑOZ, 2003, p. 43; 70.
- 32 «El lienzo quema el mentiroso fuego»; DELITALA Y CASTELVÍ, 1672, p. 27, cit. in HERRERO GARCÍA, 1943, p. 34-35.
- 33 «Por qué había dado en aquella manera de pintar, tan sabida suja, de golpes de pincel groseros, casi borrones al descuido (que borrones es cuanto pinta el poder humano, caídos del apetito las mas veces), y no con la dulzura del pincel de los raros de su tiempo que borrones es cuanto pinta el poder humano, caídos del apetito las mas veces): respondió el Ticiano: Señor, yo desconfié de llegar á la delicadeza y primor del pincel de Micael Angelo, Urbino, Corregio y Parmesano, y que cuando bien llegase, sería estimado tras ellos, ó tenido por imitador dellos; y la ambición, natural non menos á mi arte que á las otras, me hizó echar por *camino nuevo* que me
- hiciese célebre en algo, como los otros lo fuéron por el otro que siguieron»; PÉREZ, 1603. See SOCRATE, 1966, p. 270; ANDERSEN-BERGOLL, MCKIM-SMITH, NEWMAN, 1988, p. 24-25; ROSAND, 1999, p. 127-128.
- 34 As proposed by SOCRATE, 1966, p. 264-266, contesting the identification of the painter with El Greco, supported by HERRERO GARCÍA, 1943, p. 148.
- 35 Particularly by Baltasar Gracián, Jeronimo de San José and Antonio Palomino: see VEGUE Y GOLDONI, 1928, MARAVALL, 1960, p. 79-80; SOCRATE, 1966, p. 271-272; ALPERS, 2005, p. 155-159, PALOMINO, 2008, n° 31-32.
- 36 GRASSI, 1957; CERASUOLO, 2014, p. 55-66.
- 37 For example, ATERIDO FERNÁNDEZ, 1994, p. 399.
- 38 DOLCE, 1960, p. 185; see also BURKE, 1995, chap. 3.
- 39 BRAVO, 1599, *sub voce*.
- 40 «un cierto desprecio o descuido con el qual se encunbra el arte»; CASTIGLIONE, 1534, 59; see BURKE, 1995, chap. 3; ALPERS, 2005, p. 155-159.
- 41 SOCRATE, 1966, p. 276-277.
- 42 BOSCHINI, 1966, p. 752-754.
- 43 RIDOLFI, 1924, I, p. 193.
- 44 SOHM, 1991; BOHDE, 2002; ROSEN, 2001; SUTHOR, 2004; CRANSTON, 2010; LOH, 2019.
- 45 LAZZARINI 1990; DUNKERTON, SPRING, 2013; DUNKERTON, SPRING, 2016; DUNKERTON, GONZÁLEZ MOZO, POCOBENE, 2020; SECCARONI, 2020. See the analysis of HOCHMANN, 2015, p. 271-308.
- 46 As uncovered by Giulio Bono during the conservation process.
- 47 MADRID, 2018, p. 122-130.
- 48 DUNKERTON, GONZÁLEZ MOZO, POCOBENE, 2020.
- 49 Published in MANCINI, 1998, p. 83-87; 378-424. About the contemporary discussion of the artist's old age, see SOHM, 2007, p. 83-104.
- 50 «No hay duda si no la vejes de el Ticiano es de manera que ya no puede hazer más de borrones pero estos... dan la vida a lo que pueden acavar las que lo ayudan specialmente su hijo que haze bien.»
- 51 «Aunque la obras no sean tales como yo querria digo lo que se ha de hazer de nuevo todavía seran tuyas, porque aunque no lo sean los cuerpos de todo lo serán las almás, que es lo que le dará vida».
- 52 GARRARD, 2003 (who discusses the alternative reading: *Nature, a more powerful Art*).
- 53 Published posthumously; SPERONI, 1604, p. 53.
- 54 «Certi pezzi di carne che si dibattono e (per dir così) palpitano, e mostrano un cominciamento d'una opera imperfetta, come sogliono essere le bozze de' dipintori, e de gli scultori»; LEMNIUS,

- 1560, f. 19r. See NICCOLI, 1980; NICCOLI, 2005, p. 144-149.
- 55 «Segno, che lasciano i liquori, e le sporcizie nella superficie di quelle cose, ch'elle toccano, o sopra le quali caggiono».
- 56 DOCAMPO, RIELLO, 2014, p. 148-161.
- 57 KNOX, 2009, p. 73-74, with the previous bibliography.
- 58 «El pelo corte de la oves que aun no se puede esquilan en vellon».
- 59 «BORRAR, deshazer, escurecer lo escrito, o lo pintado en papel, lienço, tabla, o otra materia. Dixose de borra porque sirviendo porpelos, o cendal de tintero, teñian igualmente lo que no querian se leyesse o entendiesse. De aqui se dixo Borrón, la señal de tinta que cae sobre lo que se escribe: y por alusion lo mal hecho que escurece lo de mas bueno que en un hombre puede aver. Para borrar una cosa muy de proposito, suelen sacar todos los algodones, o pelos del tintero, y passarlos por encima. La esponja adereçada conserva la tinta, y usavase della antiguamente: y era tambien para el proposito dicho, como consta destes versos de Marcial, libro 4. epigr. 10 ad Faustinum». See MANNING, 2009, p. 246-250.
- 60 CHARTIER, 2005, p. 17-52.
- 61 PALATINO, 1540, «De gli strumenti»; see THORNTON 1997, p. 142-144.
- 62 SOCRATE, 1966.
- 63 FRANCIOSINI, 1620, *sub voce*. For Velázquez's library, which had also a volume of Nebrija's dictionary, see SÁNCHEZ CANTON, 1942.
- 64 «Que quantos pecados tenemos, tantos rayones, o borrones del infierno, están en nuestras almas»; DE VEGA, 1599, f. 143v.
- 65 «Tiene esse ardid, que las echa un baño de oro, con que los alegra, pone vislumbres, y arreboles en sus abominables dibuxos, todo lo pinta de gravado, que se trasluzgan unos resplandores falsos, porque no parezcan tan feas sus feas pinturas.», *ibidem*, f. 143v.
- 66 *Ibidem*, 1599, f. 34r.
- 67 «Quien dirà, que un retablo muy grande, y de muchos, y excelentes colores, y figuras se hizò a caso, con un borron de tinta, que acertò a caer sobre una tabla? Pues que retablo mas grande, mas vistosos, y mas hermoso que este mundo?»; GRANADA, 1583, p. 13. See MANNING, 2009, p. 247-248.
- 68 «Porque si seria gran locura dezir, que un retablo de imagenes perfectissimas, y hermosissimas, se hizo de una roziada, mojando un hisopo en diversas tintas, y sacudiendolo sobre una tabla, sin otra alguna industria»; GRANADA, 1583, p. 522.
- 69 GAUNA, 1998; see also DEMPSEY, 2006.
- 70 «Una certa pratica, che s'usa a Venezia, di macchie ovvero bozze, senza esser finita punto»; VASARI, 1976, V, p. 473.
- 71 «Ha costui alcuna volta lasciato le bozze per finite, tanto a fatica sgrossate, che si veggiono i colpi de' pennegli fatti dal caso e dalla fierezza, piuttosto che dal disegno e dal giudizio», *ibidem*.
- 72 BODART, 2008.
- 73 KNOX, 2009, p. 73-96.
- 74 On the critical fortune of Tintoretto, see LEPSCHY, 1983; FALOMIR, 2007, p. 417-450.
- 75 LAZZARINI, 1987; HILLS, 1993; PLESTERS, 1996; DUNKERTON, 2007.
- 76 LONGHI, 1946, p. 28-30.
- 77 «Un Rey vestido de purpura con grande magestad sentado en un trono, conforme a su grandeza, grave, severo, y terrible en la apariencia, y en el hecho todo nada. Como pintura de mano del Griego, que puesta en alto, y mirada de lexos parece muy bien, y representa mucho; pero de cerca todo es rayz y borrones. El toldo y magestad muy grande, y bien mirado, no es más que un borron y sombra de Rey», SANTA MARÍA, 1615, f. 14.
- 78 REDONDO, 1992, p. 11-14.
- 79 «Pues no mirada a su luz una tabla de Ticiano, no es mas que una batalla de borrones, un golpe de arreboles mal asombrados»; PARAVICINO, 1640, p. 161. See HERRERO GARCÍA, 1943, p. 103; SOCRATE, 1966, p.271; ROE, 2016, p. 287-289
- 80 Cit. in ROSAND, 1999, p. 127-128; BODART, 2011, p. 202.
- 81 PACHECO, 2001, p. 483. See KITAURA, 2009; HADJINICOLAOU, 2019.
- 82 On the Italian precedents of this tripartition, see LEE, 1967.
- 83 «Sus borrones no se toman en el sentido que suenan, que mejor se dirían *golpes dados en el lugar que conviene, con gran destreza*»; PACHECO, 2001, p. 417.
- 84 «Porque ¿quién creará que Dominico Greco traxese sus pinturas muchas veces a la mano, y la retocase una y otra vez, para dexar los colores distintos y desunidos y *dar aquellos crueles borrones para afectar valentía?*»; *ibidem*, p. 483.
- 85 GARCÍA-FRÍAS, 2015.
- 86 MULCAHY, 1999.
- 87 «[...] que los lienzos han de ser enteros, sin costura ni pieza alguna, y gruesos, haciéndolos texer a propósito para este efecto.», in ZARCO CUEVAS, 1931, p. 39; see GARCÍA-FRÍAS, 2017.
- 88 VICTORIA, 1994, p. 127-128.
- 89 MARÍAS, 2013, p. 51-78.
- 90 On the question of distance and proximity in El Greco painting, see HADJINICOLAOU, 2016.
- 91 VÉLIZ, 2007.
- 92 LONGHI, 1946, p. 29.
- 93 CARDUCHO, 1979; see GAUNA, 1998; ROE, 2016.
- 94 CARDUCHO, 1979, p. 260-267.
- 95 *Ibidem*, p. 266.
- 96 VASARI, 1976, III, p. 51-52.
- 97 PALOMINO, 2008; PACHECO, PALOMINO, 2018; see HELLWIG, 1999, p. 123-144. On the status of court painter at the Spanish Hapsburg court, see BROWN, 1978; BROWN, 1999, p. 33-49.
- 98 MARÍAS, 2003; BODART, 2011, p. 242-255.
- 99 PALOMINO, 1947, III, p. 905.
- 100 SOCRATE, 1966, p. 271-273.
- 101 MARAVALL, 1960, p. 79-80; PALOMINO, 2008, n° 31-32.
- 102 «El primor consiste en pocas pinzeladas, obrar mucho, no porque las pocas, no cuesten, sino que se executen, con liberalidad, que el estudio parezca acaso, i no afectación. Este modo galantísimo haze oi famoso, diego Velázquez [...] pues con sùtil destreza, *en pocas golpes, muestra quanto puede el Arte*, el desahogo, y la execución pronta», ÚZTÁRROZ, 1646, p. 106-107, cit. ANDERSEN-BERGOLL, MCKIM-SMITH, NEWMAN, 1988, p. 16-17.
- 103 VERGARA, 1999; WOOD, 2010.
- 104 ANDERSEN-BERGOLL, MCKIM-SMITH, NEWMAN, 1988, p.34-50; BROWN, GARRIDO, 1998; GALLAGHER, 2010.
- 105 STOICHIȚĂ, 2013.
- 106 *De Optimo Genere Oratorum*; see ROBINSON, 2014, p. 6-10.

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