# Tintoretto's Genesis

## Large Print Labels

# Tintoretto's Genesis

In the early 1550s, Jacopo Tintoretto (1518–1594) made a series of paintings depicting scenes from the Judeo-Christian Bible's Book of Genesis for the Scuola della Trinità, a charitable organization in Venice. Painted in the early years of the artist's mature career, these canvases display a fusion of Michelangelo's forceful conception of the figure, Titian's renowned colorism, and Tintoretto's own uniquely vigorous brushwork and dynamic compositions. The paintings mark the beginning of Tintoretto's rise as the powerhouse of Venetian Renaissance painting. Across the next four decades, he would paint thousands of square feet of canvas for the most powerful patrons and prestigious institutions in Venice.

Over the past year, a research and conservation project undertaken by the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, and supported by the Foundation for Italian Art and Culture and the Cincinnati Art Museum, has yielded a new understanding of

how Tintoretto made the three best preserved and most compelling of the Trinità paintings, and how the artist and his patrons intended for them to be displayed. It has also breathed new life into the artworks, reviving the complexity of their compositions and vibrancy of their colors.

*And it came to pass after many days, that Cain offered, of the fruits of the earth, gifts to the Lord.*

*Abel also offered of the firstlings of his flock, and of their fat: and the Lord had respect to Abel, and to his offerings.*

*But to Cain and his offerings he had no respect: and Cain was exceedingly angry, and his countenance fell.*

…

*And Cain said to Abel his brother: Let us go forth abroad. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and slew him.*

**Genesis 4:3-5, 8**
(Vulgate Bible, Douay-Rheims translation)

**Jacopo Tintoretto** (Italian, 1519–1594)

**Cain Slaying Abel**
1550–53

oil on canvas
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice
cat. 41

Tintoretto conceives this dark episode in gruesome and humanizing detail, as Abel topples backward from an unexpected blow that has opened a wound on his head and spattered blood on his back. Cain has drawn back to strike again. Tintoretto adjusted the complex tangle of bodies several times while working on the painting to achieve maximum drama and action. A lush landscape, which in the *Temptation of Adam and Eve* evokes the Garden of Eden, here instead becomes a thicket of sin—jealousy and fratricide.

Probably because of damage, the painting was cut down on the right side at some point after 1720. The figure of God once hovered over the small figure of Cain, fleeing in the background, protecting him as "a wanderer and fugitive on the earth" (Genesis 4:14), to whom God will always offer a chance of redemption and salvation.

*But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of paradise, God hath commanded us that we should not eat; and that we should not touch it, lest perhaps we die.*

*And the serpent said to the woman: No, you shall not die the death.*

*For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened: and you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil.*

*And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat, and fair to the eyes, and delightful to behold: and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave to her husband who did eat.*

**Genesis 3:3-6**
(Vulgate Bible, Douay-Rheims translation)

**Jacopo Tintoretto** (Italian, 1519–1594)

**The Temptation of Adam and Eve**
1550–53

oil on canvas
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice
cat. 43

As we enter the pictorial space of this unusual and highly successful composition, we first encounter Adam, whom we see entirely from the back. With her arm wrapped around the tree trunk, and offering its fruit, Eve echoes the serpent above. Adam recoils, so that the two figures, in complementary poses and carefully distinguished flesh tones, pivot around the forbidden tree. (As with the other paintings on view here, Tintoretto uses the vertical tree trunks as a compositional device.)

Adam and Eve sit on masonry pedestals, which stage the figures like sculptures. The pedestals also mimic altars, alluding to the couple's role in prefiguring Christ and his sacrifice. To the right, we see an angel enveloped in light banishing the couple from Eden.

*And God created the great whales, and every living and moving creature, which the waters brought forth, according to their kinds, and every winged fowl according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.*

*…*

*And God said: Let the earth bring forth the living creature in its kind, cattle and creeping things, and beasts of the earth, according to their kinds. And it was so done.*

**Genesis 1:21, 24**
(Vulgate Bible, Douay-Rheims translation)

**Jacopo Tintoretto** (Italian, 1519–1594)

**The Creation of the Animals**
1550–53

oil on canvas
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice
cat. 900

Tintoretto was known to have used sculptural models as compositional aids. Here he may have used a mannequin suspended from the ceiling of his studio to help him define the dynamic pose of God. The emphatically horizontal composition accords with the biblical sense of impetus and momentum—the "bringing forth" of all the creatures. God and many of the animals move decisively from right to left across land, sea and sky.

Although Tintoretto devoted most of his creative energy in this painting to the figure of God, the description of different species of fish and waterfowl remind us how closely connected Venetians were to the other inhabitants of their lagoon.

## Tintoretto & the Trinità

The Scuola Santissima della Trinità, a Catholic charitable brotherhood, was founded in 1418 in a monastery complex on the Grand Canal near the tip of the Dosoduro *sestiere* (neighborhood) of Venice. The organization began a significant decoration campaign for their building in 1547, which included the commission of paintings to Francesco Torbido (1486–1562) and Tintoretto, along with painted and gilded wood paneling. The Scuola relocated several times in the 1600s before disbanding in the late 1700s.

In addition to Tintoretto's three paintings on view here, two others from the series survive in compromised condition: *Admonition of Adam and Eve*, now in the Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, and *Creation of Eve*, recently rediscovered in a German private collection. Tintoretto made several paintings of other subjects for the Scuola that are now lost.

The project team's reinterpretation of archival documents and the paintings' compositions have led to a new proposal for the original location of the paintings in the main meeting room of

the Scuola. Torbido's four lost paintings, that we know depicted the first acts of creation from the Book of Genesis, would have hung on the north wall; Tintoretto's paintings would have continued the narrative with the *Creation of the Animals* on the (east) entry wall, and his four other surviving paintings with scenes of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel progressing along the south wall.


Jacopo de' Barbari, *View of Venice*, 1500, woodcut

Visualization of Roberta Battaglia's 2025 reconstruction
of the Sala dell'Albergo, Scuola della Trinita

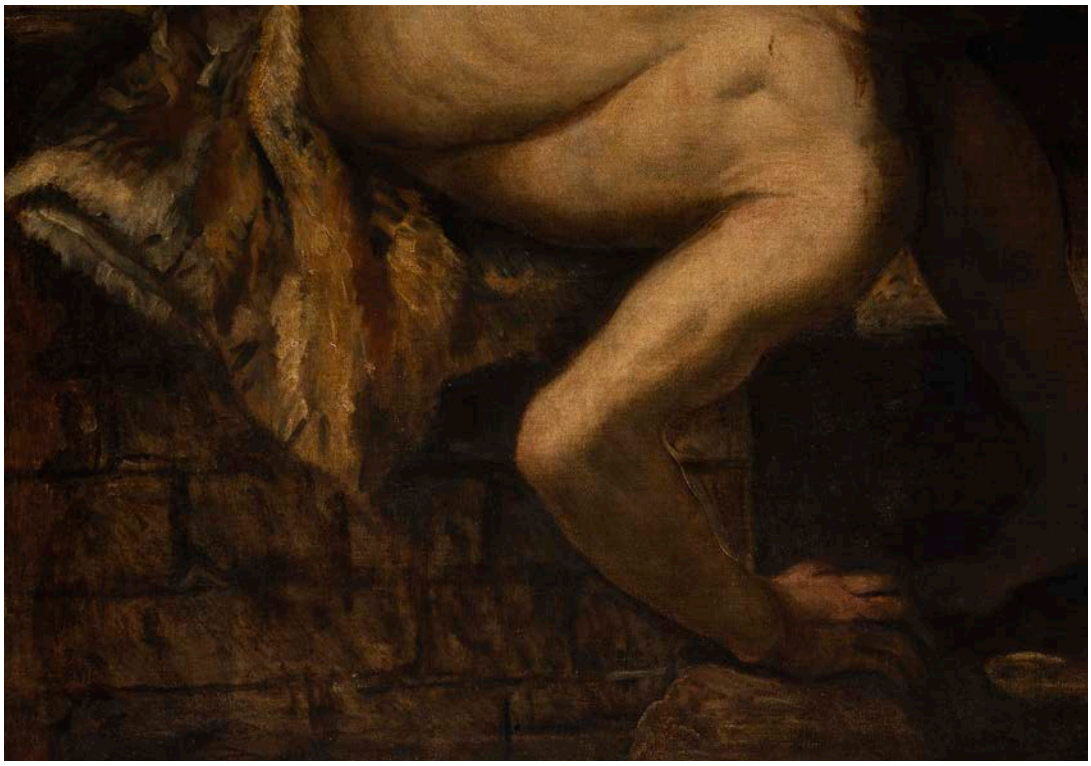
## The Life of a Painting

Archival documents and museum records indicate the paintings were relocated at least four times and underwent restoration treatments six or seven times from as early as 1661 to 2011. Many of these interventions' effects and indicators became apparent as the 2024 conservation treatment progressed. This information complements findings from archival documents and scientific imaging and analysis, all adding up to a surprisingly full history of these paintings across their 475-year life.

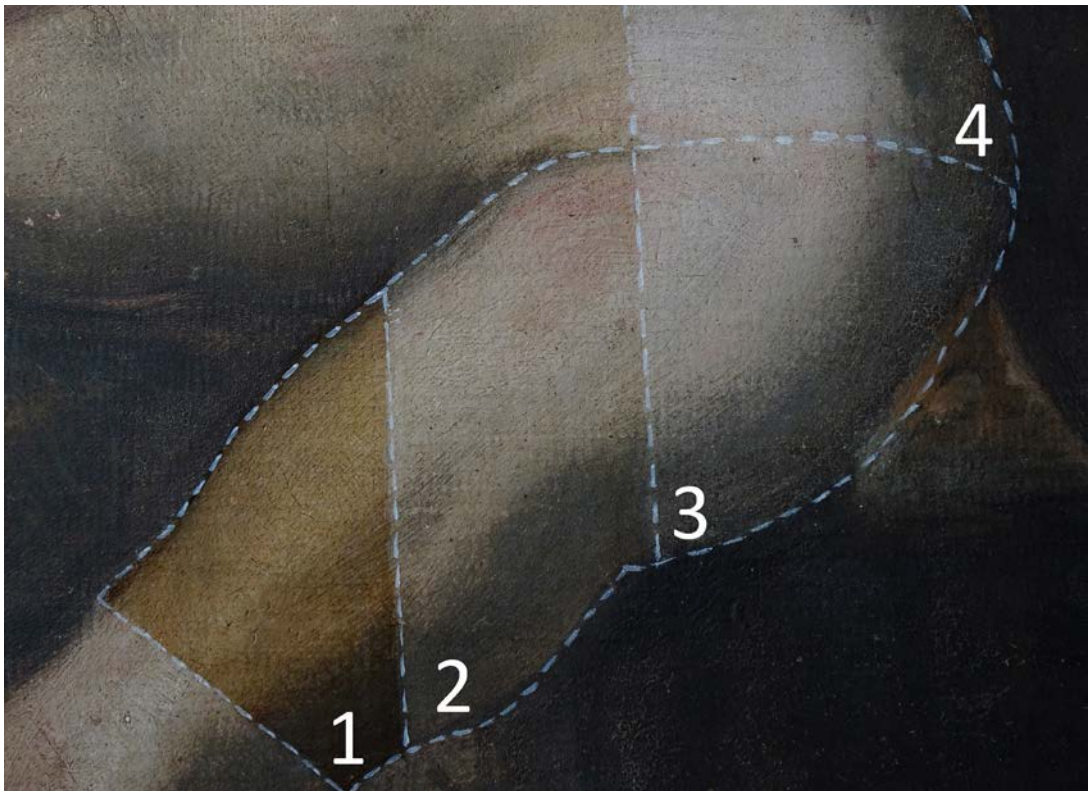
## The Recent Conservation Treatment

In 2024, conservators removed up to six non-original layers from the surface of the paintings, including dust, degraded and discolored varnishes, adhesive residues, gesso fills, and old retouching and glazes. The detail with Abel's upper arm show several successive phases of cleaning. The treatments transformed the paintings. Instead of appearing dark and yellow-tinged overall, the bright colors and cooler palette the artist intended are now visible. Tintoretto's masterful ability to suggest the volume of bodies and trees and the illusion of recession into space are apparent once again.

*Cain and Abel*, after treatment



Before treatment




During treatment

Canvas inserts and gesso fills had been introduced in the past to restore damaged areas of the paintings. Conservators removed or reshaped these fills to better match the texture of the paintings' surface.

In some cases, fills or overpainting had obscured original parts of the painting. For example, the conservation treatment revealed the original form of a fish in the lower left of the *Creation of the Animals* that had been dramatically changed by later overpainting.

With subtle and reversible inpainting, conservators integrated the areas of loss with the surrounding original material, pulling each painting together as a visual whole.

*Creation of the Animals*, after treatment

Before treatment

After treatment

## Scuole

*Scuole*, literally translated as "schools," were lay brotherhoods that developed in northern Italy in the late medieval period. In Renaissance Venice, *scuole* provided important social, religious and charitable structures. Primarily organized by middle-class (male) citizens, the groups provided direct support—like food and dowries—to the city's poor.

To conduct their charitable works and governance, and to increase their prestige, the *scuole* built and decorated their meeting rooms and associated churches, providing a significant source of work for Venetian artists in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Tintoretto's career was shaped by *scuole* commissions—from his break-out 1548 success with the *Miracle of St. Mark* for the Scuola Grande di San Marco, to his comprehensive decoration of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, a twenty-five-year undertaking. Since their creation, these works have been required viewing by visitors to Venice, and were often reproduced in prints, several of which are on view here.

**Timothy Cole** (American, 1852–1931),
after **Jacopo Tintoretto** (Italian, 1519–1594)

**The Death of Abel**
**The Miracle of St. Mark**
1892

wood engraving
Cincinnati Art Museum
Museum Purchase, 1892.293, .292

Among the foremost reproductive wood-engravers of his time, Timothy Cole was commissioned by *Century Magazine* to reproduce masterpieces in the major European museums. These two prints reproduce paintings by Tintoretto that Cole would have seen after they had left their original contexts. From the 1810s, they were in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, and among the state collection's most prized Renaissance paintings. The print above reproduces *Cain Slaying Abel*, which is on view in the adjacent gallery.

The print below reproduces the *Miracle of St. Mark* (also known as the *Miracle of the Slave*), Tintoretto's groundbreaking 1548 painting. It depicts the moment St. Mark rescues an enslaved

man—who had disobeyed his enslaver by making a pilgrimage to the saint's tomb—by shattering the tools of his imminent torture. The twisting bodies, compressed action, bold and rhythmic colors, steep foreshortening, and strong lighting were unlike anything Venetians had seen before. Cole's control of tonal values communicates much of this, even without color.

*NEW TO THE COLLECTION*

**John Baptist Jackson** (British, 1701–1780), after **Jacopo Tintoretto** (Italian, 1519–1594)

**The Crucifixion**
1741, published 1745

chiaroscuro woodcut (4 colors)
Cincinnati Art Museum
The Albert P. Strietmann Collection, 2024.113

In 1739, the British consul, Joseph Smith, commissioned John Baptist Jackson to create seventeen woodcuts after the most famous Venetian paintings of the 1500s. He published the series in 1745 as a bound album that became a popular souvenir for wealthy Grand Tourists.

Tintoretto's 1565 *Crucifixion* for the Scuola Grande di San Rocco was among the most ambitious of Jackson's subjects. He devised a three-part woodcut to reproduce the monumental painting. Jesus on the cross is in the central panel; chief priests and members of the Sanhedrin are seated in a landscape in the left panel; and Roman soldiers witness the scene in the right panel.

Color chiaroscuro (light and shade) woodcuts were the earliest form of printed color images. Jackson claimed to achieve ten tints by overlapping transparent oil-based inks, and used the white of the paper for highlights. He also used a wide range of lines and tones to capture the effects of color and light in the painting, striving to recreate its visual impact without fussy adherence to detail.

**Guiseppe Camerata II** (Italian, 1718–1803),
after **Jacopo Tintoretto** (Italian, 1519–1594)

**La Probatica Piscina (Christ at the Pool of Bethesda)**
18th century

engraving
Cincinnati Art Museum
Gift of Mrs. A. Howard Hinkle, 1924.486

In 1559, Tintoretto painted this scene in two sections for the doors of a large cabinet that held liturgical silver in the Church of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. This print was made after the two canvases were joined in 1674; the painting still hangs in the church.

The scene recounts an episode of Christ healing a man who had been paralyzed for decades. This episode echoes the miraculous cures ascribed to St. Roch *(San Rocco)*, to whom the Scuola and its church were dedicated. (Tintoretto's first painting for the church—and the first of over 60 paintings he made for the brotherhood—was *Saint Roch Cures the Plague Victims* 1549.) The pool, the site of Christ's miracle, is barely visible in the space tightly packed with onlookers, invalids, and columns.

**A National Gallery of Art film presentation**

**Tintoretto: Artist of Renaissance Venice**
2019

Narrated by Stanley Tucci
Produced by Carroll Moore
Directed and edited by David Hammer
Runtime 29 mins

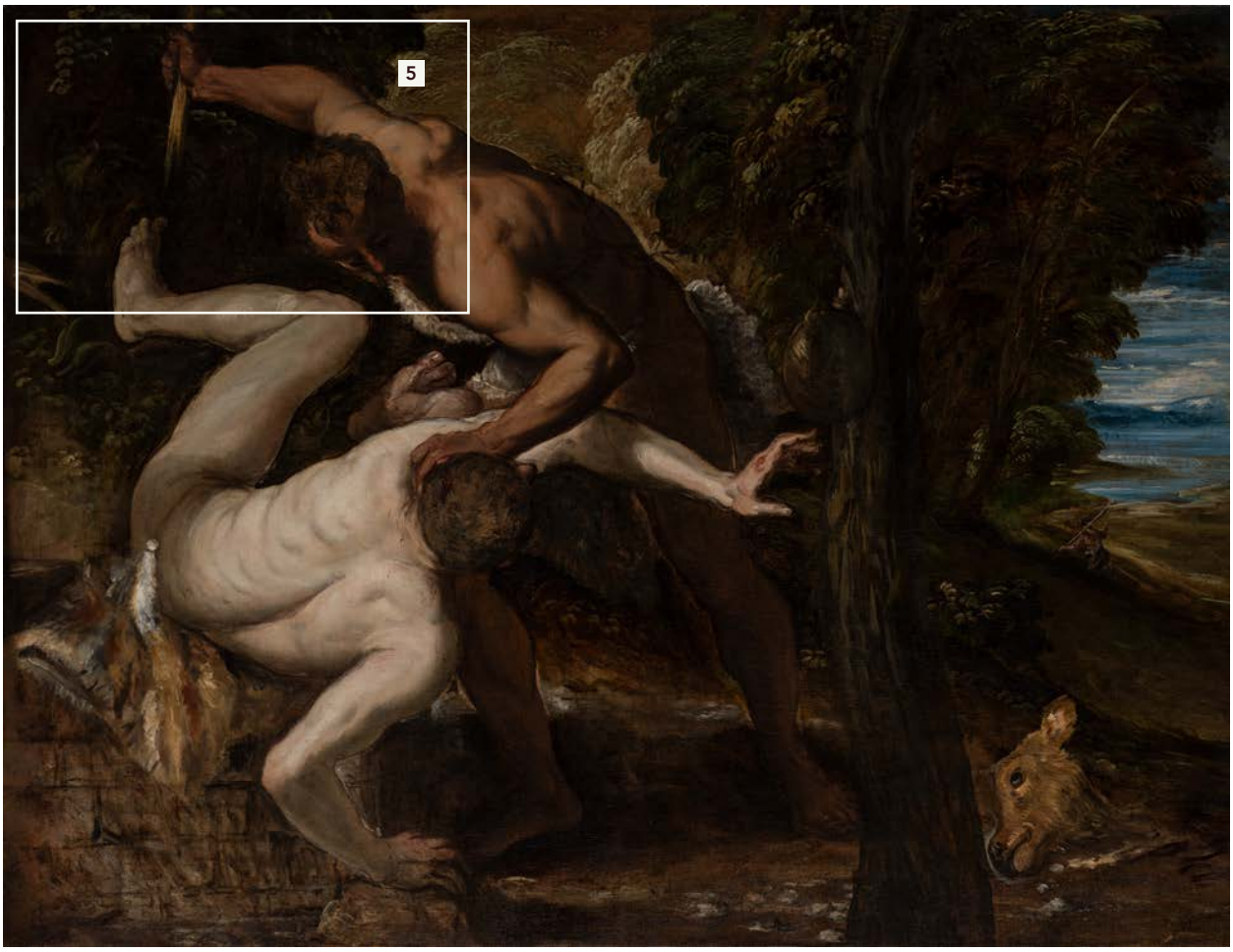
This documentary includes original footage of Tintoretto's works in the churches and palaces of Venice and interviews with leading art historians. The film was produced by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in conjunction with their exhibition *Tintoretto: Artist of Renaissance Venice* (March 24–July 7, 2019), organized with the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia and with the special collaboration of the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of Tintoretto's birth.

## The Artist at Work

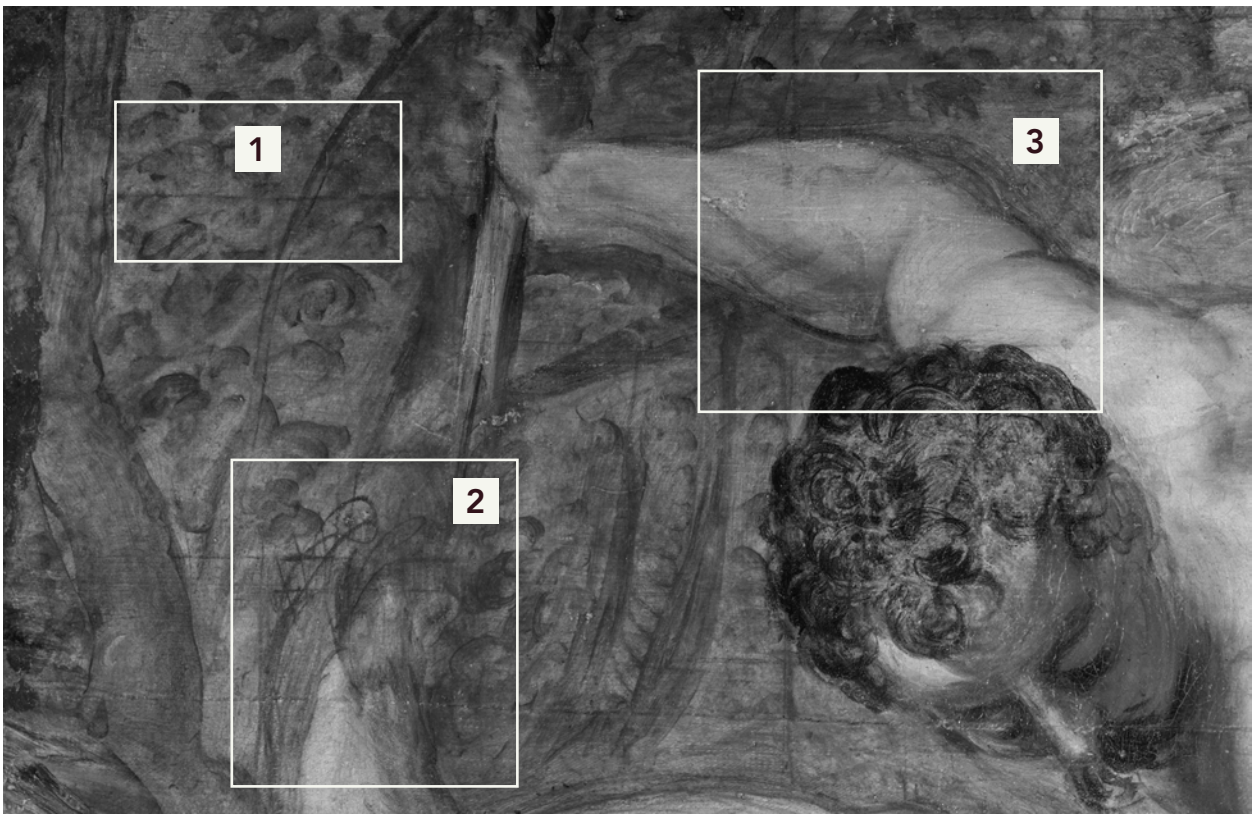
With advanced imaging technology and deep expertise, the conservation, curatorial and scientific staff at the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, were able to understand and describe the thin layers of different materials with which Tintoretto made each painting, and see through them to varying degrees.

This technical study allows us to look back in time and retrace the artist's process as he and his workshop constructed and prepared the canvases, transferred preliminary ideas onto them with charcoal and washes, revised those ideas in drawing and sometimes even after beginning to apply paint, and finally brought the works to life through color and shading.

# Refining the Composition




*Cain and Abel*, after treatment

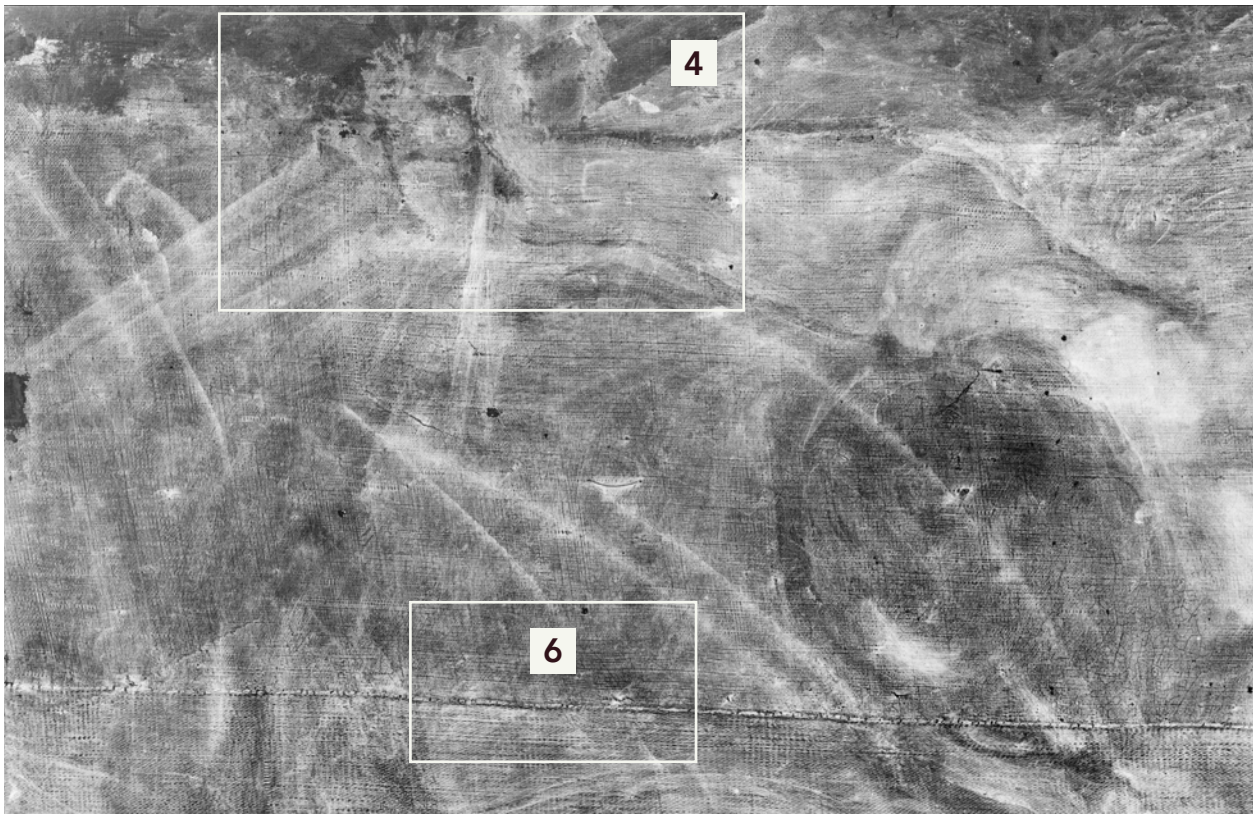



Infrared reflectograph

**1** During the underdrawing phase, Tintoretto used a grid to transfer his initial idea for the complex arrangement of Cain and Abel's bodies onto the canvas.

**2** While still drawing, he tested alternative positions for some elements, like Abel's left foot.

**3** Tintoretto initially drew Cain's right arm almost straight back behind his head, holding his weapon in an overhand grip.




X-radiograph

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**4** He then moved the arm forward to be seen more in profile, the weapon still gripped overhand.

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**5** As we see in the finished painting, Tintoretto finally settled on the arm partially extended and the weapon in an underhand grip.

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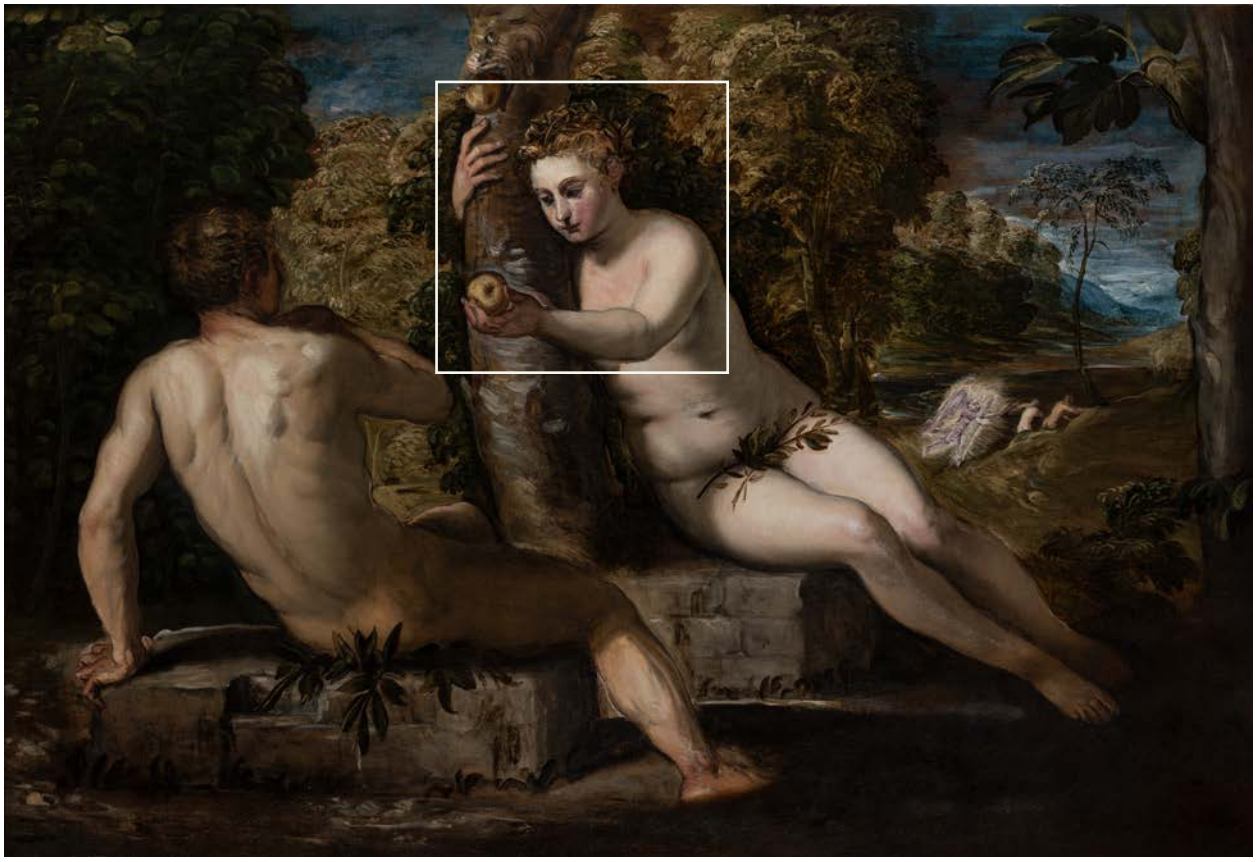
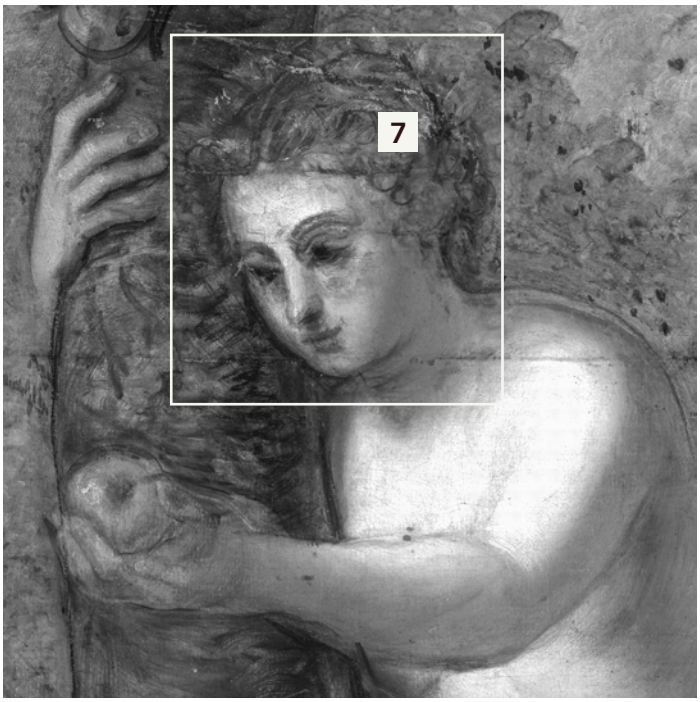
**6** Here we can see a canvas seam (the artist joined two or three pieces of canvas to make the right size support for each painting).



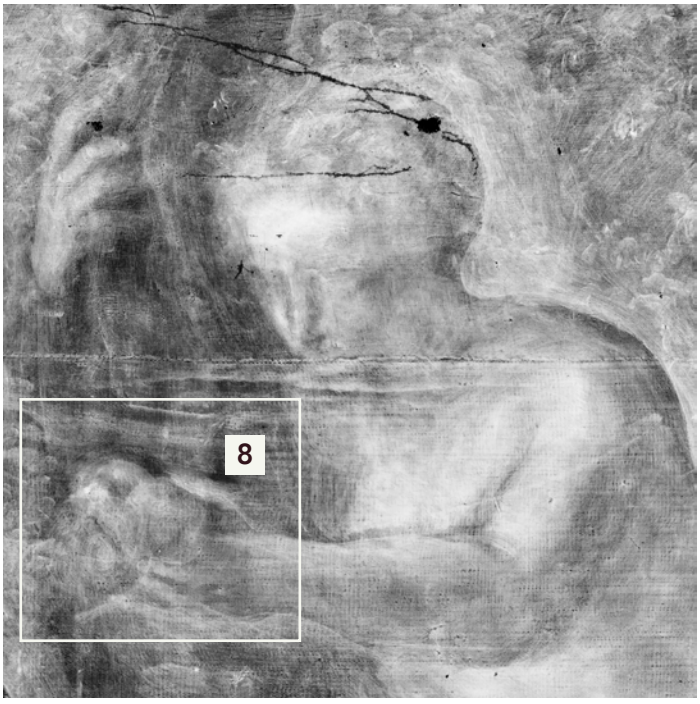
*Adam and Eve*, after treatment




Infrared reflectograph

**7** Tintoretto originally placed Eve's eyes lower on the canvas, indicating a more downward turn of her head.

*Carbon-rich materials like charcoal and washes applied with a brush, often used in underdrawings, absorb infrared light and so appear dark in the reflectograph.*




X-radiograph

**8** Tintoretto repositioned the apple, moving it to the left and tilting it outward.

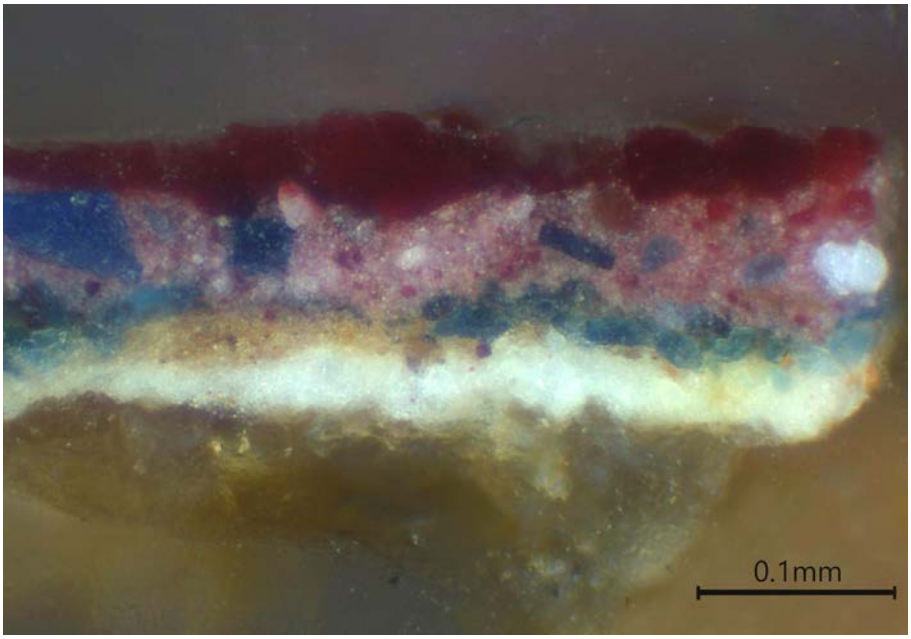
*Lead, a very dense material, is the main ingredient in the white pigment most often used by artists from antiquity through the 1800s. It absorbs x-rays and so appears white, as do bones in medical x-radiographs.*

# Manipulating Color & Light

*Creation of the Animals*, after treatment

In some places, Tintoretto meant the underdrawing washes to remain visible in the finished painting, for example, to create areas of shadow in God's robe.

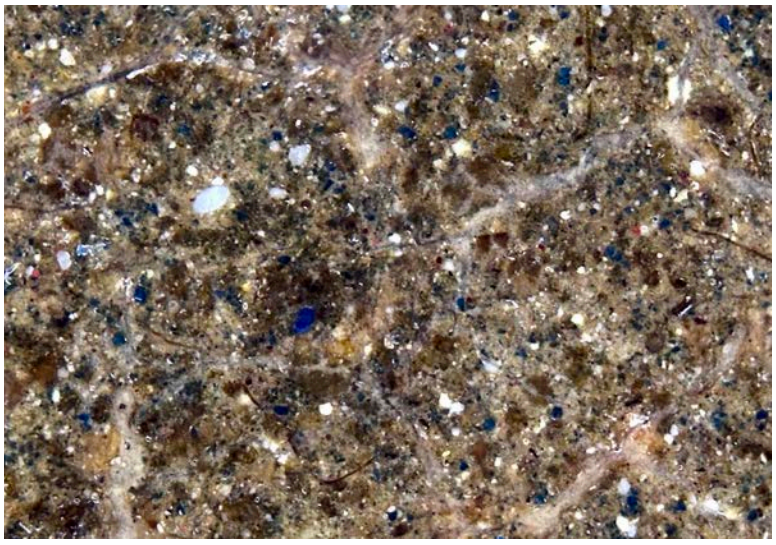
For the most part, however, the illusion of volume and naturalistic colors was created by building up layers of oil paint—some thick, others thin and translucent. Observing the paint surface and tiny samples in cross-section through a microscope allows us to understand his creative use of pigments.




*Creation of the Animals*, cross-section

In God's robe, Tintoretto used red lake pigment in two ways; he mixed particles of it with white and blue pigments, as we can see in the cross-section to create a red-purple used to define parts of the robe. He then used it as a bright, semi-transparent glaze at the surface of the painting to create the robe's rich color and depth of form.

*Adam and Eve*, after treatment



*Adam and Eve*, 60x magnification

High magnification reveals particles of azurite, a blue pigment, that were mixed into flesh-colored paint to create the shading we see under Adam's arm.

## Venice team

The conservation, imaging, research and analysis project that underlies this exhibition was directed by Roberta Battaglia with technical direction by Cristiana Sburlino of the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice (GAVe). The conservation treatments were carried out by Claudia Vittori with Barbara Bragato, Isabella Bellinazzo, Sofia Marchesin, Giulia Simbula and Alessandra Zambaldo in the Restoration and Diagnostic Laboratories of the Misericordia. Scientific analysis was carried out by Stefano Volpin and Silvia Salvini with Lucia Giorgi and Serena Bidorini, of the GAVe, and Davide Bussolari with Chiara Zironi and Maddalena Re, of Diagnostica per l'Arte Fabbri. The photographs were taken by Matteo De Fina and are provided courtesy of the Ministry of Culture.