

# DOMENICO TINTORETTO

(Venice 1560 - Venice 1635)

## *Portrait of a Venetian Senator, Bust-Length*

oil on canvas  
45.5 x 40.4 cm (17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 15<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in)

**T**HIS STRIKING BUST-LENGTH PORTRAIT SHOWS a Venetian senator resplendently arrayed in the sumptuous red robes of his office. He faces the viewer directly and his neatly cropped hair and moustache is lightly flecked with grey. There is a great sense of professional austerity in this portrait as the knowing eyes of the established and, given his status, influential senator gaze intently through the picture plane to engage with the viewer.

The Most Serene Republic of Venice or *La Serenissima* was one of the most important political centres and international trading routes from the early Middle Ages until the late eighteenth century. As a considerable economic and maritime power, Venice attracted the rich and powerful in great numbers. Princes both sacred and secular, scholars, musicians, and men of letters visited important artists such as Domenico Tintoretto when they were in the city to commission their portrait.<sup>1</sup>

The son of the famed Venetian Mannerist Jacopo Tintoretto (c.1518-1594), it is often argued that Domenico's greatest contribution to the history of painting is to be found in his exceptional portraiture. Domenico accepted many commissions for private portraits, particularly as a young artist, as they brought him into contact with men of importance, and enabled him to extend his social network in the city. Official portraits, such as *Portrait of a Venetian Senator* were of particular value to Tintoretto as these works provided him with a regular income in between securing larger, more lucrative commissions.<sup>2</sup> In a society where ancestral representation in the Venetian government was of supreme importance and fostered fierce ambition, these portraits often show bureaucrats proudly attired in their official dress.

By carrying out such works, Tintoretto was able to consolidate any personal contacts with powerful officers of state who might award profitable and prestigious commissions in the future. Amongst others the artist was awarded major commissions for the decoration of the Doge's Palace and the library of the Scuola di San Marco.

<sup>1</sup> Domenico was also called away from Venice, for example to Ferrara in 1592 to paint a portrait of Margaret of Austria, later Queen of Spain.

<sup>2</sup> Tintoretto produced a number of portraits of Venetian government officials. See for example, *Portrait of a Procurator of St. Mark's* (1580-1583, National Gallery of Art, Washington).



Domenico Tintoretto, *Portrait of a Man*, between 1586 and 1589, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Museum of the Academy of Arts, Petrograd, 1922 (Figure 1)

The extant examples of his portraiture attest to the popularity he enjoyed in the upper echelons of Venetian society, and another example of his work is held in the Hermitage (fig. 1). This portrait, possibly of his contemporary - the artist Francesco Bassano (see cat. no. 15) - is equally splendid and sartorially elegant. Wearing a fashionable white ruff and with one hand on his waist the gentleman looks confidently out towards the viewer. Though he wears a simple black bodice, his social status is subtly evident in his bold stance and piercing stare.

