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About Titian

Titian is considered to have been the greatest 16th-century Venetian painter, and the shaper of the Venetian coloristic and painterly tradition. He is one of the key figures in the history of Western art. Titian, whose name in Italian is Tiziano Vecellio, was born in Pieve di Cadore, north of Venice, by his own account in 1477; many modern scholars prefer to advance the date to about 1487. In Venice, he studied with Gentile Bellini and then with Giovanni Bellini, but only the latter left a lasting imprint on his style.

The first documented reference to Titian dates from 1508, when he was commissioned to paint frescoes, with the Venetian painter Giorgione, on the exterior of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi (the German Exchange). Unfortunately, the frescoes survive only in ruined fragments. Scholars disagree as to which paintings dating from the first decade of the 16th century were actually painted by Titian. Among the most important of the disputed works are the Allendale Nativity (n.d., National Gallery, Washington, D.C.), still assigned to Giorgione by most writers, and the world-famous Concert Champêtre (circa 1510, Musée du Louvre, Paris), once universally considered Giorgione's but now increasingly thought to be by Titian or a work of collaboration between the two. Scholars unanimously ascribe the so-called Gypsy Madonna (circa 1510, Art History Museum, Vienna) to Titian. This painting is an adaptation of a composition of Giovanni Bellini's, but the Virgin is an earthier type, and the colors and textures have a discreet opulence that foreshadows Titian's later work.

In Padua, in 1511, Titian executed frescoes of three Miracles of St. Anthony for the Scuola del Santo. These narratives demonstrate his power to imbue his ample figures with a convincing sense of anguished, impulsive life, as he set realistically conceived events within vividly and rather impressionistically realized landscapes. In later paintings of this decade Titian progressively enriched Giorgione's idyllic style. Bodies and fabrics took on an increasingly sensuous density and splendor, landscape settings became more resonant, colors deep and intense but harmonious—as in The Three Ages of Man (circa 1513, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) and Sacred and Profane Love (circa 1515, Galleria Borghese, Rome). The progression culminated in three bacchanals that Titian painted for a room in Duke Alfonso d'Este's palace in Ferrara between 1518 and 1522 (Worship of Venus and Bacchanal of the Andrians, both now in the Prado, Madrid; and Bacchus and Ariadne, now in the National Gallery, London). These, among the most famous and influential paintings of the Renaissance, transformed the Giorgionesque Arcadian idyll into Dionysiac celebrations. They are based on Roman literature and adapt figures from ancient sculpture and from Michelangelo, but render these vividly sensuous and contemporary, uniting them with an equally powerful and beautiful natural world.

The dynamic vibrancy of these works is paralleled in Titian's religious paintings of the same period. First among these is the mighty Assumption of the Virgin (1516-18) over the high altar of Santa Maria dei Frari in Venice. Its strong colors, golden light, and massive, gesticulating figures, designed to be seen from afar, nevertheless remain plausible in terms of ordinary human experience. Its unveiling in 1518 provoked a sensation. In another painting for this church, the Madonna of the House of Pesaro (1519-26), Titian effected a crucial change in Renaissance sacre conversazioni (paintings of the Virgin enthroned among saints) by placing the Virgin, traditionally at the composition's center, halfway up its right side, and by painting behind her in diagonal recession two giant columns that soar out of the picture's space. This new scheme was widely adopted by later artists, such as Paolo Veronese and the Carracci family, and, with its evocation of movement and infinity, it opened the way to the baroque style. The most dynamic of all Titian's paintings of this period was the huge Death of St. Peter Martyr (1530, now destroyed), in which the violent action was echoed in the convulsion of trees and sky.

These paintings, both secular and religious, give evidence of Titian's awareness of contemporary High Renaissance achievements in Rome and Florence. Known to him only through prints and drawings (before his visit to Rome in 1545-46), they served as a stimulus and an aid in creating a Venetian counterpart: a High Renaissance style equally complex, monumental, and dynamic, but one which made full use of the traditional Venetian resources of color, free brushwork, and atmospheric tone.

Titian's paintings of the 1530s are marked by relative quiet, pictorial subtlety, and coloristic refinement, as exemplified by the Venus of Urbino (1538-39, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, a revision of Giorgione's Sleeping Venus (circa 1510, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden). A new surge of energy is seen in the turbulent Battle of Cadore (circa 1540, once in the Palazzo Ducale, Venice; now known through copies) and in three grandiose ceiling paintings (1543-44, Santa Maria della Salute, Venice), in which drastic foreshortenings and titanic figures bespeak Titian's knowledge of the Mannerist style.

Titian's most important innovations in the years from 1530 to 1550 were made in portraiture. In 1516 he had been named official painter to the Venetian state; thereafter he worked at the courts of Ferrara and Mantua. In the 1530s and ‘40s he traveled to Bologna to paint the Emperor Charles V and Pope Paul III, and at the pope's behest he visited Rome and met Michelangelo. He joined the court of Charles V at Augsburg, Germany, in 1548 and 1550. As a result of this connection, he obtained a multitude of portrait commissions.

Titian's portraits, initially like Giorgione's, soon took on a greater expansiveness and more overt authority to become compellingly

beautiful images of idealized masculinity (Man with a Glove, c. 1520, Musée du Louvre) or femininity (Flora, c. 1515, Galleria degli Uffizi). In the 1520s and ‘30s, however, they changed.

Aristocratic impersonality and restrained opulence, as in the portrait of Federigo Gonzaga (circa 1526, Museo del Prado), became the dominant tone. The neutral atmospheric backgrounds of the earlier portraits might be replaced by cannily disposed elements of setting, such as a column, a curtain, or a view into landscape. These elements, and the patterns in which Titian arranged them, remained staples of formal portraiture into the 20th century. In general, these court portraits are images of command rather than explorations of personality. In some portraits of the 1540s, however, such as Pietro Aretino (Frick Collection, New York) or Pope Paul III (1543, Capodimonte Museum, Naples), Titian used his unsurpassed skills as a visual dramatist to compel the viewer's participation in the sitter's inner life.

After 1550, when Titian had returned to Venice, his style again changed. In a series of superb mythological paintings for Philip II of Spain, beginning with the Danaë (circa 1553, Museo del Prado) and including the Rape of Europa (circa 1559-62, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston), forms gradually lose their solidity, partially dissolving into hazy paint textures and vibrant brushstrokes, while color becomes more intense, so that a universe seems to be on the verge of disintegrating into flame. A climax is reached in the ferocious Death of Actaeon (circa 1561, National Gallery, London) with its bronzy tonality and phosphorescent textures. Still more profound are the Flaying of Marsyas (circa 1570-76, Kromèrí", Czech Republic) and the Nymph and Shepherd (circa 1574, Kunsthistorisches Museum). Here colors are more subdued, but the turbulence of the brushwork, hardly matched again until 20th-century painting, almost submerges the form entirely. These late mythological paintings, which Titian called poesie (poems), stand among the most formidable statements ever made of the irresistible, elemental powers of nature. These works are paralleled by a sequence of impassioned religious paintings in which the same progressive dissolution of form into color and light takes place. Often nocturnal in setting, they include the stupendous Annunciation (1560-65, San Salvatore, Venice) and Crowning with Thorns (circa 1570, Alte Pinakothek, Munich). In such paintings Titian used this dematerializing style to convey a state of being that transcends the physical. This late style, an astounding phenomenon in the context of Renaissance art, had its final manifestation in the Pietà intended for Titian's own tomb chapel; the work was left unfinished at his death and is now in the Accademia in Venice.

Titian died in Venice on August 27, 1576. His work, which permanently affected the course of European painting, provided an alternative, of equal power and attractiveness, to the linear and sculptural Florentine tradition championed by Michelangelo and Raphael; this alternative, eagerly taken up by Peter Paul Rubens, Diego Velázquez, Rembrandt, Eugène Delacroix, and the impressionists, is still vital today. In its own right, moreover, Titian's work often attains the very highest reach of human achievement in the visual arts.

Original Lithographic Bookplate

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