

Titian: Women, Myth & Power at the Gardner Museum in Boston: The great Renaissance painter comes in for “moral scrutiny” from the New York Times

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Titian: Women, Myth & Power at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Massachusetts, August 12, 2021—January 2, 2022

The paintings may be over 450 years old, but the exhibition *Titian: Women, Myth & Power* at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (until January 2) must be counted as one of the most significant art shows today. As we will see below, however, this has not prevented Titian from coming under attack by the *New York Times* for his supposed “immorality.”

The exhibition unites six mural-sized paintings by Titian (c. 1489—1576), one of Renaissance Italy’s great artists, for the first time since they were commissioned by King Philip II of Spain from 1551 to 1562. Because of the challenges involved in bringing the fragile and highly valuable paintings together, this is the last venue of the tour that began at the National Gallery in London and moved to the Prado in Madrid before coming to the Gardner. It is unlikely that they will be reunited again in the foreseeable future.

Titian’s six “poésies”—so called because they depicted mythological episodes as recounted in first century AD Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—are among the highest artistic achievements of the 16th century, a century with no shortage of achievements. Painted when Titian had reached the height of his painterly powers, they display a virtuoso handling of the then-relatively new medium of oil paint, combined with dynamic compositions, to communicate the high drama of the mythological episodes.

“Flesh is the reason oil paint was invented,” Abstract Expressionist painter Willem de Kooning remarked four centuries after Titian, and this certainly is evident in the “poésies.” With its fluidity, transparency, and vibrant color, oil paint was able to render the translucent quality of human skin far better than the flat egg tempera paint that had hitherto primarily been used for frescos and other religious paintings. For an accomplished oil painter of the 16th century, not only skin, but silk and fur, fruit and flowers, silver and gold, even light itself could be made to shimmer with life. Artists and their workshops could produce paintings for their wealthy patrons which were not only more life-like but more opulent in every way.

And no one handled it better than Titian. His *Sleeping Venus* (1510), painted while still under the tutelage of Giorgione (c. 1477-1510), and his *Venus of Urbino* (1532) would have amply recommended him to the young Prince Philip of Spain, who commissioned the “poésies” as a series beginning with the sumptuously seductive “Danaë” in 1551. Titian’s stature was such that Philip would give him an annual stipend and creative freedom, an unprecedented arrangement for a patron at the time.

Whether it was the impulse of a young prince to choose the erotic and irreverent poetry of Ovid, or enjoyment of such paintings wasn’t

incompatible with his religious piety, after being moved from one to another of his many royal residences, the “poésies” would be installed together in the imperial palace in Madrid. Either way, the irony that Spain’s staunchest defender of Catholicism should have commissioned such groundbreaking artwork, is just one indication of the contradictory transition underway by the later Renaissance.

By the 16th century, not only the Pope in Rome, but the increasingly wealthy merchant class in the several Italian kingdoms, or city-states, dominated by powerful families such as the de Medici in Florence, the Borgias in Rome, the Sforzi in Naples, commissioned art. The re-interpretation of classical mythology provided a wealth of stories other than the Bible for these commissions. At a time when increasing mastery of the natural world through science and technology encouraged a sense of god-like power in mortals, Greco-Roman mythology, especially as recounted in Ovid, suited the tastes of these patrons for exciting drama, sumptuously executed in oil paint, cloaked as cautionary tales.

By hanging them together as intended, the exhibition makes it possible to appreciate the thematic interrelationships Titian established between the paintings, remarkable particularly because he (and his workshop) did not work on them at the same time. The paintings relate in pairs that echo and contrast with each other. In “Danaë” (1551-53), the princess who has been locked in a tower by her father in the hopes of circumventing a prophecy that she would bear a son who would kill him, reclines in a posture that is entirely receptive, even mesmerized by the invisible presence of the god Jupiter—or Zeus, as he was known to the Greeks—as he impregnates her with a shower of gold coins.

In “Venus and Adonis” (1553-54), the scene is reversed. In this case, the goddess, pricked accidentally by her son Cupid’s arrow, is desperate to prevent her lover Adonis from departing for the hunt. Seen from behind, the elongated back of the goddess is as taut as Danaë’s torso is yielding. And love that is in one case welcomed if unexpected, in the other, is clung to and rebuffed.

“Diana and Actaeon” (1556-59) and “Diana and Callisto” (1556-59), painted together over the same years, most clearly relate to one another. Not only does a stream along the bottom of one painting continue across into the other, both depict Diana, the goddess of the hunt, surrounded by her nymphs in complex compositions of multiple figures. The drama of each hinges on an unintended exposure with tragic consequences. The first focuses on the moment Actaeon stumbles upon the goddess in the privacy of her sylvan bath. He seems as caught off guard by his predicament as the nymphs, one of whom laughs at him from behind a column. However, he will be severely punished for his blunder. The denouement, when he is turned into a stag and set upon by his own hounds to be shot by the divine

huntress, is the subject of a seventh painting by Titian, possibly an addition to the series, but that was left unfinished at his death in 1576.

In the second painting, the unwitting pregnancy of the nymph Callisto is exposed to the wrath of Diana. This myth is if anything more cruel. Callisto, whose name in Greek means “most beautiful,” in consecrating herself to Diana, pledged to remain a virgin. However, Jupiter seduces her not in a shower of gold, but by assuming the form of Diana herself—a subject treated in several homoerotic paintings, one of them by Titian’s near contemporary and would-be competitor, the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens in 1613. Subsequently reflecting the taste of an increasingly decadent aristocracy, the subject would become a particular favorite of the French Rococo period when Jean-Honoré Fragonard, in 1755, and Francois Boucher in 1744 and 1759, painted versions of the lovers in their Arcadian bower for the French King Louis XV.

The final pair of paintings take up the myths “Perseus and Andromeda” (1554-56) and “Rape of Europa” (1559-62). In these stories, the sacrifice of a young woman to an enraged or enamored god is the price paid for human beauty that rivaled the divine. While “Perseus and Andromeda” preceded the two Diana paintings, Titian intended it to be paired with a painting of Jason and Medea. However he scrapped this idea, and paired it instead with the story of Europa and the Bull (1659-62), as the sixth “poésie” was originally called. The painting was not referred to as the “Rape of Europa” till several decades after it was completed.

Again, the paintings are connected by theme, composition, and setting. The figures of both Andromeda and Europa find themselves threatened on all sides: from the danger of succumbing to the waves, with sea monsters in the depths, and demi-gods or cupids tumbling out of the sky. The twisting figures in both paintings form a visual circle: Andromeda, her body viscerally naked against the rock to which she is chained, leans away from her rescuer Perseus (the son of Danaë and Jupiter, aka golden coins) even as her arms and half-shadowed face reach back and towards him.

The figure of Europa is perched even more precariously on the back of Jupiter, this time in the form of a snow white bull, as he plunges unexpectedly with the Phoenician princess into the waves. Holding on by just one horn, her legs awkwardly splayed, she looks back to her attendants helpless to save her on the shore. In both paintings, a fluttering cloth in scarlet completes the visual arc, while serving as a distress signal. In both paintings, Titian has visually realized the most highly dramatic moment in each myth with unprecedented skill and innovation, which despite the removal in time makes them still vibrant and disturbing to look at.

It is both necessary and appropriate to appreciate the paintings’ complex aesthetic, technical and thematic achievements within the historical and social conditions of their time. While the subject is ostensibly Europa’s rape (actually abduction), the painting would seem sympathetic to the woman being dragged away, not reveling in her plight. Furthermore, the tumult depicted in the paintings may speak more broadly to the convulsive character of the 16th century.

A number of the paintings treat the encounter of an ordinary mortal with a god. If one takes this to be a metaphor, consciously or not, regarding the contacts between “commoners” and the (socially) exalted, the consequences are not surprising. Such encounters would tend to be dangerous and often fatal during such a period.

We are told by one art historian that Titian had “relations with all the princes and prelates of his day—Alfonso d’Este at Ferrara (1516), Federigo Gonzaga at Mantua (1524), Francis I of France, the [Holy Roman] Emperor Charles V, ... Pope Paul III.” This was remunerative and valuable, on the one hand, but, on the other, the painter no doubt had first-hand knowledge of the brutal manner in which the powerful held sway over the population.

Moreover, historian Arnold Hauser (in *The Social History of Art*) describes the devastation and subjugation of Italy by foreign powers,

France and Spain in particular, during Titian’s lifetime. “The French first occupied Naples, then Milan and finally Florence. They were soon driven out of Southern Italy again by the Spaniards, but for whole decades Lombardy remained the scene of conflict between the two great rival powers.”

Writing of the Holy Roman Emperor in 1525, Hauser comments that “Charles V now had Italy completely in his hands, and was no longer willing to submit to the intrigues of the Pope. In 1527 twelve thousand mercenaries moved against Rome to punish Clement VII. They joined forces with the Imperial army under the Constable of Bourbon, invaded the Eternal City and eight days later left it in ruins. They plundered the churches and monasteries, killed the priests and monks, raped and illtreated the nuns, turned S.Peter’s into a stable and the Vatican into a barracks. The very foundations of Renaissance culture seemed to be destroyed; the Pope was powerless, the prelates and bankers no longer felt safe in Rome.”

In *The Ugly Renaissance: Sex, Greed, Violence and Depravity in an Age of Beauty*, Alexander Lee points out, “Mercenaries and their commanders were violent, unpleasant human beings inured to war and accustomed to violence. Even among the ‘better’ condottieri, savagery was a way of life. Their campaigns were often waged with a brutality that went far beyond any strategic justification.” These are the circumstances in which Titian produced his masterpieces.

With this historical context in mind, one can only regard the treatment of “The Rape of Europa” by the *New York Times*’ Holland Cotter, in his article “Can We Ever Look at Titian’s Paintings the Same Way Again?,” with derision and contempt. Glancing at the headline, one’s first thought is that this is a piece in some satirical magazine. The author is pulling our leg, no one could be this stupid ...

In answer to the question in his headline, Cotter replies, essentially, “No, we cannot,” and then absurdly calls for Titian to be given the #MeToo treatment! “In fact, the whole cycle, with its repeated images of gender-based power plays and exposed female flesh,” Cotter writes, “raises doubts about whether any art, however ‘great,’ can be considered exempt from moral scrutiny.” What will this “moral scrutiny” consist of? Will it “cancel” or even destroy the paintings, which have survived the tumult of the Spanish wars of Succession and Independence as well the French Revolution, changing hands multiple times between aristocratic collectors in Europe, finally to be swept off across the Atlantic by new industrial fortunes like that of Isabella Stewart Gardner who could far outbid the old aristocracy for its treasures? Is it not ironically analogous to the painting’s subject—the seizure of an unwitting beauty as a trophy—that when Gardner acquired the “Rape of Europa” in 1896 for \$100,000, the equivalent of \$3.2 million today, it became the most expensive painting in the US, enhancing her status as a preeminent collector of European art.

Or would the likes of Cotter and the *New York Times*, who do not seem morally outraged by an ongoing and entirely preventable death toll of the pandemic, now entering its third year and claiming several thousand lives a day, have the “immoral” Greek and Roman myths censored?

In the present politically diseased situation, even though “The Rape of Europa” has been prominent in the Gardner Museum’s collection for a hundred years, the museum defensively included the disclaimer that “In presenting these exhibitions, the Gardner does not condone this violence, nor suggest that gender discrimination and sexual assault live in the annals of history alone. Rather, we ask audiences to consider what Titian’s paintings meant in their time and what they mean today, and to confront the persistent issue of sexual assault.” It then goes on to list the numbers of six (!) sexual assault hotlines.

However, the significance of Titian’s “poésies” can’t simply be canceled. Titian’s role in transforming art to be more vibrant, life-like and imaginative reflected the deeper historical processes involved in the transformation from the Renaissance to the beginnings of our modern era.

His influence can be felt in the work of his immediate successor, Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1644) and subsequently flowered in the Golden Age of Spanish art, most importantly with the work of Diego Velazquez (1599-1660), court painter to Philip II's successor, King Philip IV. Titian continues to be acknowledged as an inspiration by artists who strive to communicate what it is to be human through the unique medium of oil paint, from Abstract Expressionist artists of the 1950s and more recently as by the unparalleled British portraitist Lucien Freud. Few artists of the 17th century engage viewers on multiple levels as much as Titian, today no less than in his time, and the intervening four and a half centuries.



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