

The Life and Art of Titian



An adamant school of thought has maintained over several centuries that the apogee of painting in Europe—the sublime summit of achievement—was the Italian High Renaissance, and that the foremost artists responsible for that triumph were Raphael and Michelangelo in Rome, and Titian in Venice. Even during his lifetime, Titian was recognized as the most gifted and influential painter of the

Venetian school and the only genuine rival to Apelles, the renowned painter of ancient Greece.

Titian, who was born Tiziano Vecellio (c. 1488/90–1576), was preeminent in every branch of painting, from religious subjects and portraits to allegories and scenes from classical mythology. Unlike his competitors in Florence and Rome, he painted in oils rather than in fresco or tempera. He learned this technique as a student of Giovanni Bellini (1430/36–1516), the founder of the Venetian school. Oil paint produced much deeper and richer coloring, softer tonal transitions and more spontaneous brushwork. It was the means by which Titian attained the unprecedented sensuous effects of light, color, and texture that are the hallmarks of his style and the goal of his followers.

In 1518 Titian secured his supremacy among Venetian painters with the completion of his twenty-two-foot altarpiece, the *Assumption of the Virgin*, for the main altar of the Frari Basilica. The extraordinary dynamism of the multi-tiered composition, the scale of that work, the fiery movement of the



figures, and the brilliant palette were revolutionary in the history of Venetian painting. Commissions from the wealthy and powerful soon multiplied as Titian's reputation spread throughout Europe.

The apex of Titian's worldly success was the series of commissions he received from the all-powerful Hapsburg dynasty, initially from Emperor Charles V, and then from

his son, King Philip II of Spain. Philip II and Titian formed exceptionally close ties, with the monarch essentially agreeing to purchase all the paintings Titian might choose to send him after 1550. The artist remained free to select themes that particularly fired his imagination. Patronage on such terms was unusual for the period and resulted in several of Titian's greatest masterworks, including *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto*.

The Diana Paintings

Titian dedicated much of the final two decades of his life in the service of King Philip II of Spain, the most powerful monarch in Europe. Regarded among Titian's finest achievements is the series of six large, mythological pictures painted for the Spanish king, which the artist described as *poesie* (poems). The highly erotic poesie series, derived principally from the writings of the Roman poet Ovid, commenced with *Venus and Adonis* and *Danaë* in 1553. *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto* followed in 1559, after three years of the artist's labor. *Perseus and Andromeda* and the *Rape of Europa* were both delivered to Philip II in 1562.

During the Italian Renaissance, the most popular poem from antiquity was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A mock-epic history of the world from its origins to the reign of Caesar, it recounted the loves and foibles of the Olympian gods and the disasters befalling any mortal who angered them. Titian had earlier plumbed this source for a series of bacchanalian scenes commissioned by the Duke of Ferrara. Ovid's narratives furnished Titian the opportunity to fully exploit the idea

of the female body as the supreme form of beauty. The artist was especially revered for his realistic painting of the female nude. As his contemporary biographer Giorgio Vasari noted, Titian's soft, sensuous flesh was almost palpable, seeming to "pulse with life and blood." The intensely dramatic poesie series also represents the commencement of Titian's late style, with its breadth of summary brushwork fusing light, naturalistic detail, and vivid color into unified compositions of dazzling pictorial force.



Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, c. 1538, oil on canvas, Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Photo: Art Resource, NY

Patronage and Private Lives

In the 1500s the Venetian nobility commissioned art as a symbol of their status. Portraits and allegorical paintings functioned as displays of a noble family's lineage and social standing.

Although works commissioned for public spaces such as



Paolo Veronese, Italian, 1528–88, *Portrait of Countess Livia da Porto Thiene and her Daughter Porzia*, c. 1551, oil on canvas, Walters Art Museum

churches and confraternities were generally restricted to religious themes, works intended for the sumptuous private *palazzos* (palaces) were often radically different, their subjects reflecting the social realities of the time. Works created for private consumption were often made for pleasure and regularly included themes of seduction and sensuality. This Venetian indulgence led to a popularization of classical Roman mythology, in which such themes abound.

Venice

In the sixteenth century, Venice was one of the richest, most powerful cities in the world. Uniquely situated in the northern Adriatic, right in the middle of Europe and with prime access to the Mediterranean Sea, Venice was a dominant force in trade between Europe and the East. This geographic location made possible extraordinary prosperity for the distinctively cosmopolitan city-state, filled with merchants and merchandise from all over the world: spices, glass, carpets, precious metals, silks, and dyed textiles. Venetian merchants traveled to such cities as Constantinople, Alexandria, Damascus, and Rhodes to conduct their business, returning home not only with foreign goods but also with sophisticated tastes. The population flourished, growing to nearly 200,000 inhabitants. War and pestilence intermittently drove numbers down, as with the plague of 1576, which claimed about 50,000 residents.

This glorious maritime empire, however, had humble beginnings. The first settlers to the swampy lagoon came in the sixth and seventh centuries to escape barbarian invaders storming the mainland. The remote islands and shallow network of tidal channels offered safety to those prepared to navigate them. Seafaring was essential for survival and became the sustaining feature of Venice's progress toward civilization. By 828, local merchants had managed to spirit away St. Mark's relics from Egypt in a legendary theft that reflected the community's early and impressive reach into the eastern Mediterranean. In 1200, about seventy parish churches existed on the small islets and reclaimed land that is now the floating city of Venice.



Affectionately called *La Serenissima* (short for “The Most Serene Republic”), Venice was ruled by a powerful nobility, with as many as 2,500 patricians who served on the Great Council through birthright. This body governed Venice and its vast territories and elected the Doge (head of state), Senate, and small ruling councils that enacted laws and enforced order. With commerce and national security tightly intertwined, the government controlled many aspects of trade, from its superior naval force and active foreign embassies to complex trade logistics. Legislators oversaw merchant shipbuilding, trade routes, shipping insurance rates, and even the timing and makeup of the convoys that traveled in and out of the city. Despite all this watchfulness, Venice's golden age came to an abrupt end in the late sixteenth century when the Age of Exploration expanded world trade. Portugal, Spain, Genoa, and the Netherlands all established new trade routes, surpassing the Mediterranean as the dominant hub of commerce.

The Art of Drawing in Venice

For artists in Renaissance Italy, drawing was a fundamental skill. Much of an artist's lengthy apprenticeship focused on mastering *disegno* (drawing and invention), considered essential for the creation of any work of art. Yet the Venetian approach to drawing is curiously distinct from other Italian schools. Venetian painting is known for its color, pictorial effects, bravura technique, and dazzling play of light and shadow, and Venetian drawing reflects these qualities. By contrast, central Italian artists had a more academic approach, systematically mapping out compositional sketches, figure studies, presentation drawings, and even full-scale cartoons before pulling out their paints. The Venetian method was much less regimented and more intuitive.

Venetian artists produced remarkably fewer drawings than their counterparts in central Italy. Titian exemplifies this trend. Just three dozen drawings survive from his lengthy and prolific career.

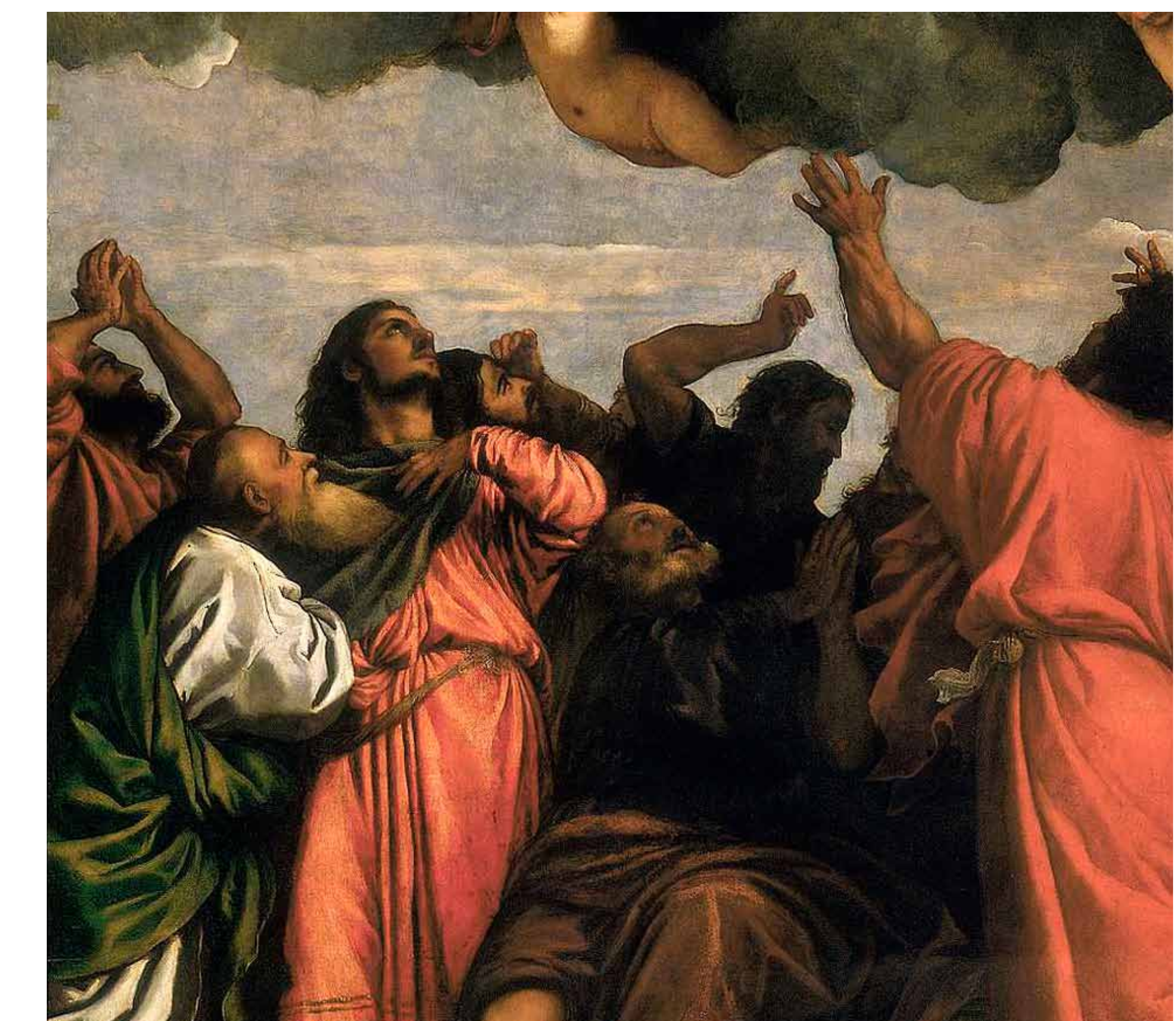
Drawing was, however, critical to Titian's process, as shown by the under-drawings on his canvases, which have been revealed by infrared reflectography (see inset). He composed on the canvas and made many last-minute changes while painting—here altering the apostles' arms and changing the clouds. Clearly, Titian exercised considerable creative freedom as he worked. In a 1568 biography, Giorgio Vasari praised Titian's

color and technique, especially his naturalistic depiction of flesh. Then Vasari famously disparaged Titian, writing, "It was a shame that in Venice they did not learn to draw well...if Titian had been assisted by art and design...then no one would have achieved more."

The selection of works here shows Titian was a superb draftsman and designer, as were other Venetian artists. But the central Italian emphasis was on *disegno* and the Venetian school was on *colore* (color) and *pittoresco* (the pictorial). Through their novel use of blue paper, crumbly black chalk, white heightening, and flickering wash, Venetian artists achieved rare pictorial effects that continue to shimmer and delight.



Infrared reflectogram of Titian's *Assumption* (detail)
Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin* (detail), 1515–18, oil on wood,
Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice.



Titian's Diana Paintings: Owners and Influences



Titian's *Diana* paintings have been celebrated and sought after since the day they were completed. Over the centuries, they have been the prized possessions of some of the most illustrious art collectors in Europe, pursued by kings, dukes, and

ambassadors. The Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, a great connoisseur and voracious collector, had to settle for a workshop copy of *Diana and Callisto*, still an esteemed work in his picture gallery, as seen here in David Teniers's depiction.

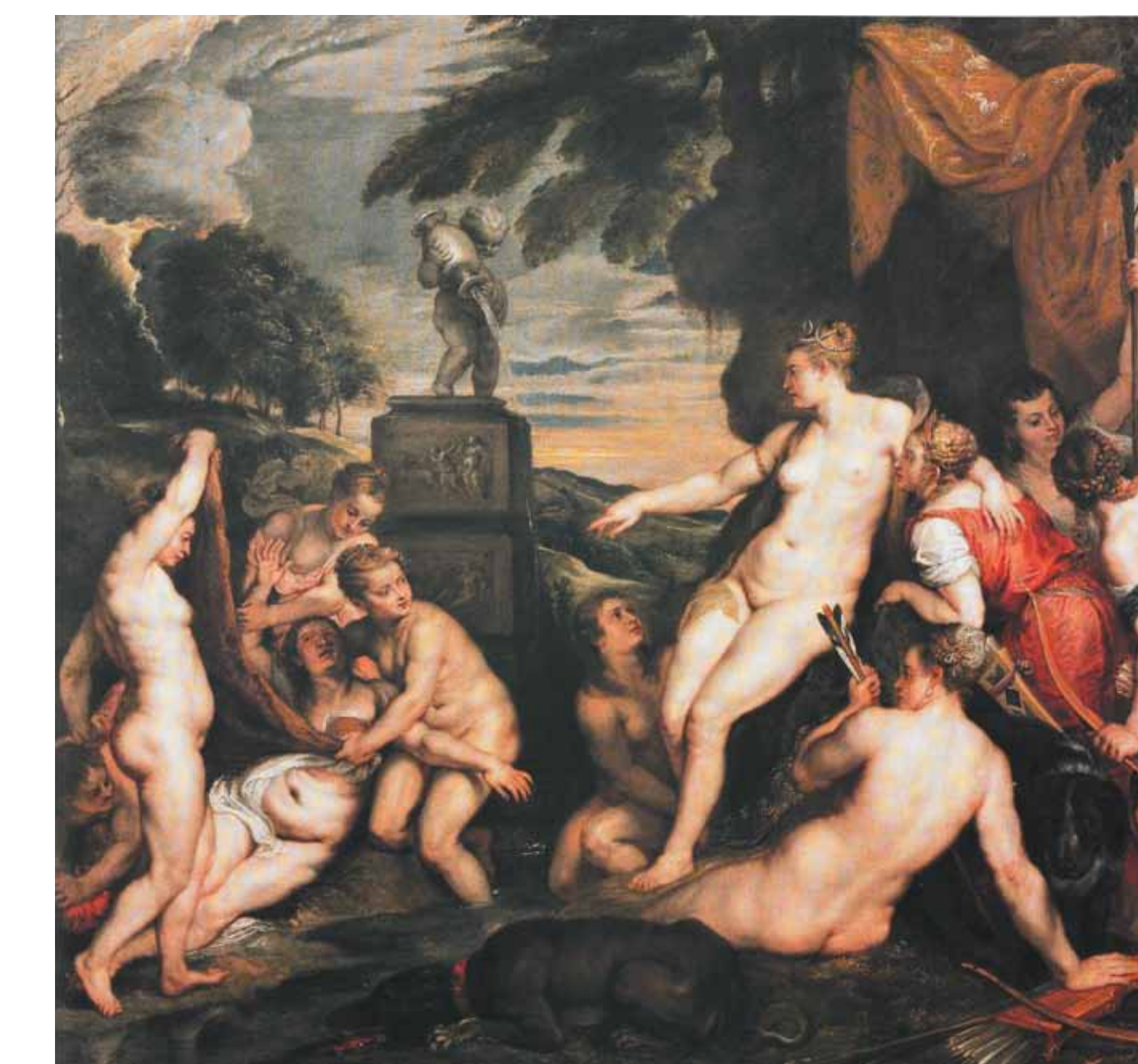
King Philip IV of Spain deployed *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto* in a high-stakes game of international diplomacy. To entice the future British King Charles I to marry Philip's sister, Maria Anna, the Spanish king offered Charles the coveted Titians. Refusing to convert to Catholicism, the art-loving Charles was forced to turn down both the paintings and the Spanish Infanta.

The *Diana* pictures were copied and studied endlessly, and artists could scarcely approach the popular subject of Diana without Titian's paintings in mind. The novel, titillating, and humanizing presentation of the female nude—rendered in virtuoso brushwork—caused a sensation wherever they went. Their influence ripples through art history, inspiring such towering figures as Rembrandt and Velazquez.

Here is a snapshot of where these seminal works traveled, and some of the artists whose lives they touched.

SPAIN, 1559–1704

Originally executed for Philip II, Titian's paintings were shipped in 1559 from Venice to Spain, where they became gems in the Hapsburgs' unrivaled painting collection. During the reign of Philip IV, they were in special rooms at the Alcazar, where "his Majesty retires after lunch," and later re-installed in the so-called "Vaults of Titian." In 1704, Philip V, King of Spain (but French by birth), gave the paintings to the French ambassador at his court.



Peter Paul Rubens, *Diana and Callisto*, 1628–29, oil on canvas, private collection, England

Rubens painted full-scale copies of Titian's *Diana* paintings during his diplomatic mission to Madrid. The Baroque artist's later technique emulated Titian's loose, bold brushwork, resulting in part from this intimate experience with the *Diana* paintings. Rubens's copies brought the highest sums at his estate sale in 1640, purchased by Philip IV for 1,800 florins each.

David Teniers the Younger, *Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in His Picture Gallery*, c. 1650, oil on copper, Museo del Prado, Madrid

FRANCE, 1704–1791/97

Titian's *Diana* paintings resided in Paris for most of the 18th century. Brought from Madrid by the French ambassador, Antoine, Duc de Gramont, they soon became the possession of the powerful art collector Philippe, 2nd Duc d'Orleans, nephew of Louis XIV. They remained in the Orleans picture collection, at the Palais Royale, until the French Revolution. The collection was sold to a viscount in Brussels, and subsequently to a consortium of English collectors.

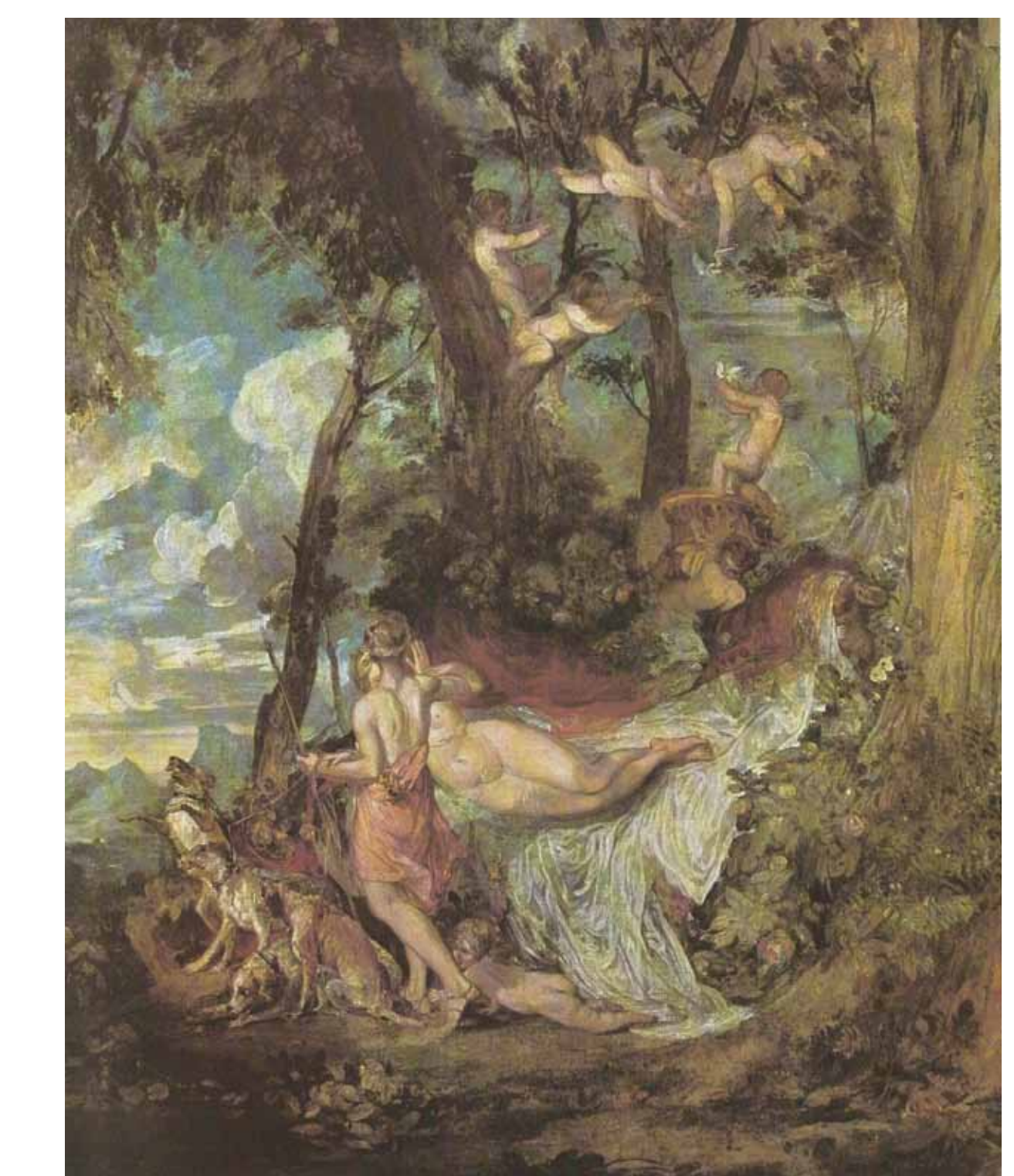


François Boucher, *Diana and Callisto*, 1740s, black chalk, private collection

Titian's erotically charged paintings and celebration of the female nude found an enormous following among French artists and the court. Rococo painters couldn't resist adding some cheer to Titian's solemn world, creating lighter, more amorous interpretations of the mythological trysts. François Boucher's chalk drawing reflects his close study of Titian's *Callisto* painting, but he omitted any suggestions of the hunt, removing Diana's dogs and bows and arrows. He instead substituted frolicking putti, who lend a jovial spirit to the languid goddess.

GREAT BRITAIN, 1797–present

The display and sale of nearly 300 pictures from the spectacular Orleans collection in London in 1797–98 was a historic moment in British art and collecting. The most important paintings in the collection, including Titian's *Diana* paintings, were reserved for Francis Edgerton, 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, and were eventually installed in his family's London residence by his nephew and heir, Earl Gower, later the 1st Duke of Sutherland. During World War II, the artworks were transferred to the family's Scottish estate for safety. In 1945, the future 6th Duke of Sutherland lent many of the Bridgewater pictures to the National Galleries of Scotland, where they have remained on public display ever since.



J. M. W. Turner, *Venus and Adonis*, 1803, oil on canvas, private collection

Foremost among the many British artists who became enamored of the Bridgewater Titians was J. M. W. Turner. In its style of execution and its subject, his *Venus and Adonis* of 1803 derived entirely from his close study of Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* and other paintings by the Venetian master that Turner encountered in the Louvre during a brief Paris visit in 1802.

Venetian Painting 1550–1600

A formidable triumvirate of artists dominated Venetian painting in the second half of the sixteenth century: Titian (1488/90–1576), who remained active until his death; Jacopo Tintoretto (1519–94); and Paolo Veronese (1528–88). Tintoretto and Veronese had emerged in the 1550s as the leading artists of their generation, bringing exceptional talent to an already vibrant artistic milieu. Over the next decades, they would enrich the city's churches, confraternities, palaces, and public spaces with the glorious works that are famous today.

Distinct in temperament and style, Tintoretto and Veronese were fierce rivals. Tintoretto's art was pure bravura, and he was both praised and vilified for his unimaginably prolific output, his hasty technique, his daring compositions and bold foreshortening, and his unbridled ambition. A great storyteller, Tintoretto excelled at large-scale religious painting, creating dark, flickering pictures packed with drama and movement. Veronese, by contrast, created worlds of splendor and magnificence. A master of celebratory feasts and pageantry, Veronese painted sumptuous spectacles filled with noble, fashionable people in grand architectural settings. His luxurious scenes, refined technique,

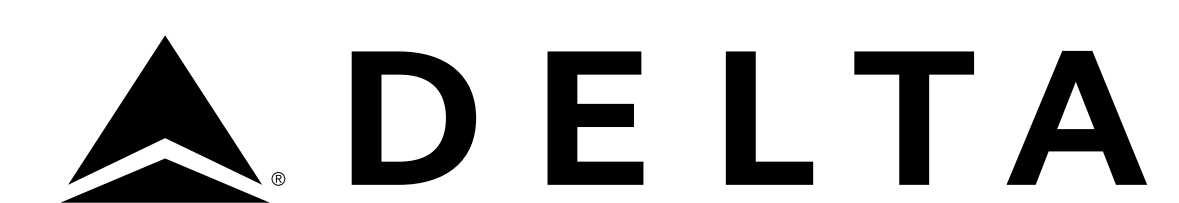
and bright palette found favor with the city's aristocracy. Tintoretto, despite being born in Venice (Veronese was from Verona), was more of an outsider. Yet his enterprising tactics led to great success. In one famous incident, for the commission of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Tintoretto brashly broke the patron's rules and prevailed. The confraternity held a competition and asked four artists to submit preliminary drawings. Tintoretto, in just a matter of weeks, executed and secretly installed a large-scale painting in the ceiling of the meetinghouse, which, to everyone's surprise, he unveiled at the competition. He was awarded the project—the most celebrated picture cycle of his career.

Venice's rich and sophisticated patrons continued to support extraordinary artistic projects as the century progressed. When Titian died in 1576, and a devastating fire struck the Doges Palace in 1577, destroying many important paintings, Tintoretto and Veronese, and others like Palma Giovane, found themselves in even greater demand. The artists rose to the occasion, creating the breathtaking works that conclude Venice's golden age of painting.

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