

Titian

Tiziano Vecelli or **Vecellio**, known in English as **Titian** (c.488/1490 – 1576), is considered the most important member of the 16th-century Venetian school. He was born in Pieve di Cadore, near Belluno, and at the age of about ten to twelve was sent with his elder brother to an uncle in Venice to find an apprenticeship with a painter. They entered the studio of the elderly Gentile Bellini, from which they later transferred to that of his brother Giovanni Bellini. At that time the Bellinis, especially Giovanni, were the leading artists in the city. There Titian found a group of young men about his own age, among them Giorgio da Castelfranco, nicknamed Giorgione.

He was one of the most versatile of Italian painters, equally adept with portraits, landscape backgrounds, and mythological and religious subjects. His painting methods, particularly in the application and use of colour, would exercise a profound influence not only on painters of the Italian Renaissance, but on future generations of Western art.

During the course of his long life, Titian's artistic manner changed drastically but he retained a lifelong interest in colour. Although his mature works may not contain the vivid, luminous tints of his early pieces, their loose brushwork and subtlety of tone are without precedent in the history of Western painting.



While it is known that he painted a number of independent **self-portraits** in various formats, this was painted before he left for Rome in 1545, and is the earliest of only two known to survive. Both share a sombre and reserved pallet, although this example is richer in tonal variations and colour harmony. It is unfinished, with his left hand and areas of his clothing only sketched in. It has been suggested that the canvas is a modello, or study for a lost work. Another theory is that it was painted as an aid to memory for his family after he died.

Thematically and stylistically it can be associated with his 1545 **Portrait of Pietro Aretino**, painted possibly for Cosimo I de Medici.



Titian joined Giorgione as an assistant, but many contemporary critics already found his work more impressive—for example in exterior frescoes (now almost totally destroyed) that they did for the Fonaco dei Tedeschi (state-warehouse for the German merchants). Their relationship evidently contained a significant element of rivalry. Distinguishing between their work at this period remains a subject of scholarly controversy. A substantial number of attributions have moved from Giorgione to Titian in the 20th century, with little traffic the other way.



A Man With a Quilted Sleeve is an early portrait, painted around 1509. The painting comes from a crucial period in the development of the Italian Renaissance portrait, which was then being led by Venice.

Placing a parapet, a low wood or stone sill or ledge, between the subject and the viewer is a common feature of early Renaissance Italian portraits, as a useful way of solving "the principal compositional problem" of portraits at less than full-length, how "to justify the cutting of the figure". By having the large sleeve project slightly beyond the parapet, Titian "subverts" the usual barrier effect, bringing the picture space into "our space" as viewers. The turning pose, with the head slightly a tilt and an eyebrow appearing raised, exactly halfway across the composition, adds life and drama. The sleeve is beautifully painted, and the "merging of the shadowed portions of the figure with the grey atmospheric background ... is one of the most innovative and influential aspects of the painting".

Rembrandt borrowed the composition for two of his self-portraits.

Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap (c1510) exemplifies the luminous lyrical painting style of Venetian artists of the sixteenth century. Masterful paint handling creates the illusion of soft fur, gold satin, and the red fabric (possibly felt) of the sitter's fashionable cap. With dark eyes that seem to look into the distance the young man wears an expression that signals a deep, reflective interiority. One gloved hand lingers on the hilt of his sword. His features are particular but also idealised, and with his pensive countenance, he epitomises the Renaissance ideals of poetic male beauty.



The painting of **Salome With the Head of John the Baptist** (c1515) is set in a dark room, with, on the right, an arch surmounted by a sculpted angel, opening to a blue sky. It depicts Salome holding the head, helped by a young assistant.

The woman, an example of idealized beauty, was portrayed by Titian in numerous other works of the period.



Sacred and Profane Love (c1514) measures 118 cm × 279 cm. Like many other famous paintings of the Venetian Renaissance the subject matter of the “Sacred and Profane Love” remains a mystery. The painting is presumed to have been commissioned by Niccolò Aurelio, a secretary to the Venetian Council of Ten (so identified because his coat of arms appears on the sarcophagus or fountain in the centre of the image) to celebrate his marriage to a young widow, Laura Bagarotto. It perhaps depicts the bride dressed in white, sitting beside Cupid and being assisted by Venus in person.

Art critics have made several analyses and interpretations, among them are: Ingenious Love and Satisfied Love; Prudery and Love; the wise and foolish virgins; the dressed Aphrodite Pandemos (left) opposite the nude Aphrodite Urania. or that it contains a coded message about Bagarotto's father's innocence. Nadia Gaus notes that while the title might at first lead one to view the left hand woman as the sacred one, further thought leads to the opposite interpretation: the well dressed woman is Profane Love while the nude woman is Sacred Love. The title itself of the painting is uncertain: in 1693 it was listed as *Amor Divino e Amor Profano* (Divine love and Profane love).

The conventional title is only a nickname, but it is probably accurate that the picture almost certainly comprises an allegory of two antithetical but complementary aspects of sexual love....the figures consist of a woman wearing a magnificent robe of lilac silk, with rich accoutrements, and a female nude whose sensuous beauty is enhanced by the equally magnificent cloak of red silk that billows beside her.

Panofsky found the source of the painting in Neo-Platonic humanism, and pointed out that the nude represented a higher order of being:

In fact the title of Titian's composition should read: Geminae Veneres. It represents the 'Twin Venuses' ...The nude figure is the 'Venere Celeste' symbolizing the principle of universal and eternal but purely intelligible beauty. The other is the 'Venere Volgare,' symbolizing the 'generative force' that creates the perishable but visible and tangible images of Beauty on earth;...Both are therefore, ... 'honourable and praiseworthy in their own way.'

Titian's famous Magdalens were all completed after the "Sacred and Profane Love." Another interpretation is that in this early rendition of the Magdalen he separated her into her two guises. The clothed woman is the courtesan contemplating the error of her ways. The semi-nude woman is the newly converted Magdalen who, according to the apocryphal legends, would spend the last 30 years of her life fasting and mortifying herself in a desert outside of Marseilles.

Finally, in her left hand she holds aloft the jar of oil that is the single most recognizable symbol of Mary Magdalen. Anna Jameson noted that practically every depiction of her includes this element.

On the fountain/sarcophagus at the centre of the picture: the Fountain Cyane - is mythologically located between Olympus and Tartarus. Hades - otherwise known as the realm of the dead - is actually this terrestrial globe which is positioned halfway between the celestial realm of Olympus and the 'geographic' opposite of Tartarus. This is to say that esoterically, this terrestrial globe - this planet Earth - is actually the 'underworld' to that incorruptible spiritual (causal) world of Enna (Eden).

The sulfurs: White is the fixed sulfur and Red is the volatile sulfur and primarily these colours are apportioned to Proserpine and Ceres respectively. Proserpine's gown is white and so represents White (sulfur) with a splash of Red (sulfur) at the sleeve and at the flash of red slip at the hem of the dress. Ceres is predominantly surrounded by red fabric and this represents Red (sulfur) with a splash of White (sulfur) across her lap. Mercury's arm playfully swirls the (mercurial)water within the fountain and this shows that the White and Red sulfurs are being mixed in the Athanor. All of this is indicated by the mixed primary colours of the women's clothing. Again, this painting represents the mystical form of Hermetics understood as alchemy.

Noli me tangere ('touch me not') is the Latin version of a phrase spoken, according to John 20:17, by Jesus to Mary Magdalene when she recognized him after his resurrection. The biblical scene gave birth to a long series of depictions in Christian art from Late Antiquity to the present. The original Koine Greek is better represented in translation as "cease holding on to me" or "stop clinging to me", i.e. an ongoing action, not one done in a single moment.

Noli me Tangere is (c1514) one of the earliest works by Titian in the National Gallery's collection. Its high-key colours and the way the figures are set in a natural landscape echo the style of Giorgione. Titian had already succeeded in uniting figures with the landscape five years earlier in *The Holy Family with a Shepherd*, but here he has done something more subtle and sophisticated – the hills, trees and shrubs play a part in the drama. The intersecting lines of the tree and the hillside draw attention to the line of eye contact between the figures.



The figure of Christ is in a graceful and entirely believable sinuous, twisting pose which reveals Titian's increasing understanding in this period of the nude and its dynamic potential. This must partly have been due to his study of prints of and drawings after works by Raphael and Michelangelo, who each in their way made the articulation of the nude figure and the study of antique sculpture central to their practice.

The group of buildings on the right appears in reverse in Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* as well as in his *Sleeping Venus* of around the same time. The rendering of *Noli me Tangere*, however, is particularly evocative in its observation of the tumbling mists and play of light across the fields as dawn breaks. We also see the expressive brushwork and interest in the textural possibilities of paint that became the hallmark of Titian's mature and late styles. The whites of Mary Magdalene's veil, of Christ's flowing burial shroud and his loincloth are subtly differentiated, each rendered with dragged brushstrokes of lead white that catch the texture of the painting's canvas.

X-ray images reveal that Titian made numerous changes to the landscape during painting but he never seems to have shown the empty tomb or Calvary – the hill on which Christ was crucified – included by almost all other artists painting this subject.



The ***Assumption of the Virgin*** or ***Frari Assumption*** is a large altarpiece painted in 1515–1518. It remains in the position it was designed for, on the high altar of the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari church in Venice, and the largest altarpiece in the city, with the figures well over life-size. It marked a new direction in Titian's style, that reflected his awareness of the developments in High Renaissance painting further south, in Florence and Rome, by artists including Raphael and Michelangelo. The agitated figures of the Apostles marked a break with the usual meditative stillness of saints in Venetian painting, in the tradition of Giovanni Bellini and others.

The broad composition of Titian's painting, with a group of apostles below a rising Mary, shown as alive, who moves towards a group of angels in heaven, follows earlier depictions in art, though such an imagined scene did not form part of the doctrine. The related scene of the Coronation of the Virgin in heaven had tended to be replaced by scenes showing the moment of the actual assumption, as here, which was often combined with it. Here the angel accompanying God the Father on the right holds out a crown, which he is about to place on her head.

The figures are in three zones, divided by spaces filled only with light. On the ground are the Apostles, tightly packed in a group and

in a variety of dramatic poses, most looking up at the unprecedented sight of the Virgin Mary rising to heaven. They are shown in a variety of poses, ranging from gazing in awe, to kneeling and reaching for the skies, "monumental figures ... massed in collective movement, united with shadow, heroic gestures are given a silhouette of unprecedented boldness".

In the centre zone, the Virgin Mary stands on clouds, wrapped in a red robe and blue mantle, and also makes a gesture of astonishment. Around her "throng of angels are melted into clouds irradiated by heavenly light". Above is God the Father, who is about to be handed a crown for Mary by the angel to the right.

Titian broke with tradition by omitting all landscape elements, although the blue-grey sky above the apostles shows the scene is set outdoors. The sky contrasts with the golden heavenly light in the upper zones, which recalls the golden ground traditional in mosaics.

The painting is signed "TITIANUS" on the sarcophagus below St Peter.

Bacchus and Ariadne (c.1520-23) is considered one of Titian's greatest works, now hanging in the National Gallery in London. It is one of a cycle of paintings on mythological subjects produced for Alfonso I d'Este, Duke of Ferrara,

Ariadne has been left on the island of Naxos, deserted by her lover Theseus, whose ship sails away to the far left. She is discovered on the shore by the god Bacchus, leading a procession of revellers in a chariot drawn by two cheetahs (These were probably modelled on those in the Duke's menagerie and were tigers in Ovid's original text). Bacchus is depicted in mid-air as he leaps out of the chariot to protect Ariadne from these beasts. In the sky above the figure of Ariadne is the star constellation Corona Borealis (Northern crown). There are two possible variations of the story both going back to Ovid. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid has Bacchus throw the crown of Ariadne into the sky where it becomes the constellation Northern Crown. In *Ars Amatoria*, Bacchus promises the entire sky to Ariadne where she then would become the constellation Northern Crown.



The composition is divided diagonally into two triangles, one of blue sky (using the expensive ultramarine pigment) and still but for the two lovers caught in movement, the other a riot of movement and predominantly green/brown in colour.



Mary Magdalen was commissioned in 1533 by the Duke of Mantua, to be a devotional image for the famous poet Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547), a learned and devout woman who was greatly inspired by the image of the Magdalen, even though she is very sensuously portrayed in Titian's depiction. The Magdalen's radiant appearance before a dark background, as if her light comes from within, caused Vittoria to believe that the Magdalen "is aglow with her burning passion for Christ".

The subject of the Magdalen as a sinner and fallen woman returned to the path of virtue by Jesus was very popular in the 16th century, allowing artists to combine eroticism and religion without courting scandal. Titian's version of the subject shows her at a moment of elation and deep repentance, with tears in her eyes (referring to her washing the feet of Jesus and drying them with her hair) and her gaze raised heavenwards. Erotic though it is, as Vasari notes, her nudity refers to the medieval legend that her clothes fell apart during the thirty years she spent repenting in the desert after the Ascension of Jesus.

Indeed, most of the many depictions of the subject in art showed the Magdalen with no clothing at all, or just a loose wrap, as in Titian's later treatment. According to popular works such as the Golden Legend she spent her last years naked and alone in a hermitage in the mountains of Provence, fed only by the singing angels who visited her daily. Thus her lack of clothing symbolises her abandonment of jewels, gold and worldly goods to her faith in Christ. Additionally, the Magdalen's golden hair, fleshy body, and full lips correspond with the Renaissance beauty standards at the time.

At the end of the Middle Ages a tradition grew up that she had grown a "suit" of hair all over her body except for her face, hands and feet. This is thought to have originated in liturgical drama [and](#) is often depicted in South German art. Titian's depiction achieves a similar effect and may well recall the German treatments. Donatello's sculpture of c. 1455 also depicts her as a haggard old woman covered in hair.

The ***Equestrian Portrait of Charles V*** (1548) is a tribute to Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, following his victory in the April 1547 Battle of Mühlberg against the Protestant armies. The portrait in part gains its impact by its directness and sense of contained power: the horse's strength seems just in check, and Charles' brilliantly shining armour and the painting's deep reds are reminders of battle and heroism. Titian recorded all of the foreground elements—the horse, its caparis—on, and the rider's armour—from those used in the actual battle. Both the armour and harness survive, and are kept at the Royal Armoury in Madrid.



Charles specifying how he wished to be presented. The emperor was very aware of the importance of portraiture in determining how he was seen by others, and appreciated not only Titian's mastery as a painter, but also the artist's manner of presenting him as a ruler.

Titian came to know Charles V personally, and had painted a number of portraits of him by this time. A highly intelligent man, Titian was quick witted, humorous and easy company. He had developed such a strong friendship with Charles by the time of this portrait that the emperor's courtiers were uneasy at the extent that a lowly painter was allowed into his confidence.

Titian creates a tension between the emperor's age and physical frailty, and his reputation as a forceful and determined, dynamic leader. This is most apparent in the fact that Titian portrays Charles heroically, but places him in a calm dawn setting in which there are no signs of battle. Charles' frailty is underlined by the dark overhead clouds, his weary facial expression and weak jaw (his lower jaw protrudes beyond the line of the upper part), though this is subverted so that it instead conveys his resolve. Charles further suffered from gout, and in reality was carried to the battle in a litter.

The skyscape is considered Titian's best, and has been described as "flaming and shadowed, with gold light fighting with blue, deathly clouds set against a landscape [which] suggests the immensities of space that Charles dominates and the brooding, inner landscape of the soul."



The **Venus of Urbino** seems to have been begun in 1532 or 1534, and was perhaps completed in 1534. It depicts a nude young woman, traditionally identified with the goddess Venus, reclining on a couch or bed in the sumptuous surroundings of a Renaissance palace. The figure's pose is based on the *Sleeping Venus* traditionally attributed to Giorgioni. In this depiction, Titian has domesticated Venus by moving her to an indoor setting, engaging her with the viewer, and making her sensuality explicit.

Interpretations of the painting fall into two groups; both agree that the painting has a powerful erotic charge, but beyond that, it is seen either as a portrait of a courtesan, perhaps Zaffetta, or as a painting celebrating the marriage of its first owner. This disagreement forms part of a wider debate on the meaning of the mainly Venetian tradition of the reclining female nude, established some 25 years before with the *Dresden Venus* of around 1510–11. For British art historian Charles Hope, "It has yet to be shown that the most famous example of this genre, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, is anything other than a representation of a beautiful nude woman on a bed, devoid of classical or even allegorical content." Even the indefatigable finder of allegories drawing on Renaissance Neoplatonism, Edgar Wind, had to admit that in this case "an undisguised hedonism had at last dispelled the Platonic metaphors".

A recent theory by Polish art historian Józef Grabski suggests that the painting represents an allegory of marital love between famous Italian poet Vittoria Colonna and her deceased husband, Fernando d'Avalos. Grabski supports his theory through analysing various visual clues and symbols, the most prominent being the classic column in front of the trees in the window in the right half, a small detail on the painting that imitates the Colonna Family coat of arms.

The Venus stares straight at the viewer, unconcerned with her nudity. In her right hand she holds a posy of roses whilst she holds her other hand over her genitals. In the near background is a dog, often a symbol of fidelity. In a different space in the background two maids are shown rummaging through a *cassone* chest, where clothes were kept.

The Venus of Urbino was one of the inspirations for Édouard Manet's 1863 *Olympia*, in which the figure of Venus is replaced with the model Victorine Meurent.

Venus and Organist and Little Dog was painted c.1550. Titian painted five images of Venus and music, but those five variations on a single theme were not made for the same client, nor intended to be exhibited together. Set in a villa, they show Venus reclining before a large window. At her feet, an organist or a lutenist play their instrument as they contemplate the goddess's nudity. Meanwhile, she looks away, distracted by the presence of a dog, or of Cupid. The paintings of Venus and music have been the object of diverse interpretations. Some historians consider them manifestly erotic works with no deeper meaning. Others assign them considerable symbolic content, interpreting them as allegories of the senses from a neo-Platonic perspective that considers sight and hearing the means of knowing beauty and harmony.



The **Pardo Venus**, completed in 1551, appears to show the story of **Jupiter and Antiope**, from Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and is also known by that name. It is Titian's largest mythological painting, and was the first major mythological painting produced by the artist for Philip II of Spain. Art historians have struggled somewhat in trying to find a coherent meaning for the disparate elements.

The painting is very large, and the figures somewhat disconnected, the composition divided into two by the tree at centre. In the right foreground we have a scene that would have been familiar to well-educated Renaissance viewers as Jupiter, having taken the form of a **satyr**, creeping up on the sleeping nymph Antiope, and lifting her drapery to view her naked. He will shortly rape her. Scenes of satyr voyeurism or sexual assault, given titles such as *Nymph Surprised by a Satyr*, are found in art, mostly later than this, but only a very rash satyr would treat the goddess Venus in this way.

Venus, or Antiope, sleeps as yet undisturbed, not only by the voyeur, but a hunting scene above her, where hounds have brought down a stag, and immediately left of her, a satyr or **faun** with the legs of a **goat** seated on the ground, in conversation with a lady in contemporary dress. Immediately beside them stands a hunter, with large dogs, and at far left another huntsman blows a horn.

Over Venus' head, Cupid perches in a tree, with an arrow in his bow, apparently pointed at Jupiter. In the middle distance a naked couple, apparently both women, talk or kiss on the banks of a river. The river has a wide waterfall above the stag, and presumably then flows above the conversing couple before perhaps circling round behind the viewer to create the water behind the Jupiter/satyr, but this is not shown clearly, which is rather typical of Titian. To the right, the landscape includes a contemporary farmhouse at the top of the rise, and a distant settlement dominated by a church tower and steeple. Distant mountains complete the view, which like many Titian landscapes reflects the country between Venice and his hometown of Pieve di Cadore in the mountains, though he does not seem to have closely depicted specific locations.

Danaë and the Shower of Gold (1544-46) is from a series comprising at least five oil-on-canvas paintings, completed between 1540 and 1570. The works are based on the mythological princess Danaë. According to Ovid she was isolated in a bronze dungeon following a prophecy that her firstborn would eventually kill her father. Although aware of the consequences, Danaë was seduced and became pregnant by Zeus (in Roman mythology Jupiter), who, inflamed by lust, descended from Mount Olympus to entice her as a shower of gold.

This is the earliest version, in Naples, which shows Cupid on the right. In all other versions he was replaced by a figure of an old woman catching the shower of gold in a cloth or basin.



This detail shows the warm, tenderness of Titian's technique, characteristic of Venetian painting; and his skill in rendering palpable the softness of flesh.

According to Kenneth Clark, the pose is "clearly based on drawings of Michelangelo, and is in fact similar to that of the *Night* from the Medici Chapel, reversed and opened out.... At every point Michelangelo's grandiose invention has been transformed from an embodiment of spiritual malaise into an embodiment of physical satisfaction".

In the Saint Petersburg ***Danaë*** of 1553-54 an elderly maid holds out a cloth to catch the gold coins spilling down, representing Zeus or Jupiter - whose face can be seen in the clouds, from an explosion of colour in the sky. The old maidservant (retained in later versions though changing in pose, appearance and action) allows "a series of sophisticated counterpoints:

youth versus old age; beauty versus loyalty; a nude figure versus a dressed figure". Her undoubted unattractiveness, pronounced in some versions, draws attention by comparison to the beauty of Danaë. In at least some versions, she also matches the conventional appearance in art of a "procuress" or brothel-keeper. The left side of each canvas is an interior, although sometimes showing a distant landscape view.

While the series freely describes desirable flesh in an overtly sexual manner, Titian transforms the motifs of courtesans and carnal desire into the more highbrow



realm of classical myth.

The works have been highly influential and affected the work of many artists including Rembrandt, Anthony van Dyck and Gustav Klimt, who all painted versions of the scene.



Diana and Actaeon (556-59) portrays the moment in which the hunter Actaeon bursts in where the goddess Diana and her nymphs are bathing. Diana is furious, and will turn Actaeon into a stag, who is then pursued and killed by his own hounds, a scene Titian later painted in his *The Death of Actaeon*. Diana, on the right, is wearing a crown with a crescent moon and is being hurriedly covered by a dark skinned woman who may be her servant or slave. The nymphs display a variety of reactions, and a variety of nude poses.

Diana and Actaeon is part of a series of seven famous canvases, the "poesies", depicting mythological scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* painted for Philip II of Spain.

Diana and Calisto (1556-59) portrays the moment in which Diana, virgin goddess of the hunt, discovers that her favourite maid Callisto has become pregnant by Jupiter, king of the gods, who noticing her beauty disguised himself to seduce her. Titian has painted the moment Diana forces Callisto to strip and bathe after hunting and discovers her pregnancy. The drama is heightened by Titian's free and expressive brushwork. The contours of the figures dissolve as the thinnest of dragged brushstrokes are swept over the surface of the canvas, contributing to the sense of dynamism and movement.



Titian painted *Diana and Callisto*, another of the "poesies, and *Diana and Actaeon* for his most powerful patron, King Philip II of Spain. The pictures, based on the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, were designed to be displayed together and have remained together throughout their history. The stream runs from one painting to the other and elements and poses are echoed, creating a rhythm across both canvases.

It is co-owned by the National Gallery and the National Galleries of Scotland, and is displayed with *Diana and Actaeon* since 1912 on a rotating basis in London and Edinburgh.



The Death of Actaeon (1559-75) is a sequel to *Diana and Actaeon*, showing the story's tragic conclusion, which approximately follows the Ovid's account. After Actaeon surprised the goddess Diana bathing naked in the woods he flees and, stopping to drink at a stream, discovers from his reflection that Diana has turned him into a stag. Titian shows Actaeon in the process of transformation. At Diana's order he is torn to death by his own hounds.

Most of Titian's work on this painting possibly dates to the late 1560s, but with touches from the 1570s. Titian seems never to have resolved it to his satisfaction, and the painting apparently remained in his studio until his death in 1576. There has been considerable debate as to whether it is finished or not, as with other very late Titians, such as the *Flaying of Marsyas*.

Ovid's account does not include Diana herself pursuing Actaeon, or shooting at him, though in some other classical accounts she does chase him. She seems to have just loosed an arrow, but there is no sign of the arrow in the painting, nor is the bowstring visible. The goddess does not have her attribute of the small crescent in her hair that Titian depicts in two other of the *poesie*, an omission which was troubling to one early critic.

There were ancient reliefs and engraved gems showing either Diana hunting with dogs, or Actaeon

being attacked by his dogs, and a few Renaissance works, but the subject was rare, and "it may be that Titian had never seen another painting or other representation of the subject."

In Greek mythology Europa was the mother of King Minos of Crete, a woman with Phoenician origin of high lineage, and for whom the continent Europe was named. The story of her abduction by Zeus in the form of a white bull was a Cretan story; as Kerényi points out "most of the love-stories concerning Zeus originated from more ancient tales describing his marriages with goddesses. This can especially be said of the story of Europa".

Titian painted his version of the **Rape of Europa** between 1560-62. In the myth, the god assumed the form of a bull and enticed Europa to climb onto his back. Once there, the bull rode into the sea and carried her off to Crete, where he revealed his real identity. Europa became the first Queen of Crete, and had three children with Zeus.



Although the source of Titian's inspiration is thought to have been based on the scene from Book II in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a more direct influence might be a description of a painting of the rape of Europa found in Achilles Tatius's novel, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, which was translated into Italian and printed in 1546 in Venice, only a few years before Titian was thought to have painted his version. Tatius's description of the dolphins, Europa's scarf, a Cupid, Europa's covering, and "her position on the back of the bull—not with a leg on each side but with her feet on the bull's right side and her left hand on his horn" is echoed in Titian's portrayal of the same scene.

Titian is unequivocal about the fact that this is a scene of rape (abduction): Europa is sprawled helplessly on her back, her clothes in disarray. The painting depicts the event just off the shore of Europa's homeland. Although the act of sexual violence is not depicted in the painting, it is implied through Europa's open-legged posture and her expression of fear as she is dragged off by Zeus. Her danger is also implied by her waving a red silk scarf and by the sea monster in the foreground of the painting. In other parts of the painting, two putti in the sky chase after Europa, and one rides on a dolphin in the sea.

Yael Even has theorized that Titian could have created this painting not due to any particular attachment to the subject, but in order to assert his abilities as a painter.



The **Self-Portrait** dating to about c.1560 to 67, when Titian was at least 70 years old, is the latter of two surviving self-portraits by the artist. The work is a realistic and unflattering depiction of the physical effects of old age, and as such shows none of the self-confidence of his earlier self-portrait. He looks remote and gaunt, staring into the middle distance, seemingly lost in thought. Still, this portrait projects dignity, authority and the mark of a master painter to a greater extent than the earlier surviving self-portrait.

The artist is dressed in simple but expensive clothes. In the lower left corner of the canvas he holds a paintbrush. Although the presence of the paintbrush is understated, it is the element that gives legitimacy to his implied status. This is one of the earliest self-portraits in western art in which the artist reveals himself as a painter. Titian's influence was such that the work led to numerous self-portraits by later generations of artists.

The Flaying of Marsyas (c.1570-76) is Titian's last completed work. The painting shows the killing by flaying or skinning alive of Marsyas, a satyr or silenus (companion to Dionysius) who rashly challenged the god Apollo to a musical contest. The choice of such a violent scene was perhaps inspired by the death of Marcantonio Bragadin, Bragadin, commander of Famagusta in Cyprus, who was flayed by the Ottomans when the city fell in August 1571, causing enormous outrage in Venice.

Titian follows the account in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, which covers the contest very quickly, but describes the flaying scene at



relative length, though with few indications that would help to visualize it. Marsyas cries out "Why do you tear me from myself?".



Marsyas was a skilful player of the classical aulos or double flute, for which by Titian's time pan pipes were usually substituted in art, and his set hangs from the tree over his head. Apollo played his usual lyre, which is here represented by a modern lira da braccio, an ancestor of the violin with up to seven strings. This is played by a figure of uncertain identity, who some scholars have said to be Apollo himself, perhaps appearing a second time, since Apollo is clearly the figure wearing a laurel wreath who is kneeling down and using his knife to flay Marsyas' chest. It has also been suggested that the musician is Orpheus, or Olympus, a devoted pupil of Marsyas, who Apollo later converts to playing the lyre. The mythical **King Midas** (detail left), the seated old man on the right, (possibly the artist's self-portrait) is gazing in a downward line at Marsyas, parallel to that of the musician looking up to the heavens on the other side of the painting.

Ovid avoids the question of who the judges of the contest were. In most Greek accounts the Three Muses took the role, but the story early became confused with another, the "Judgement of Midas", which has happened here. This was another musical contest, always with lyre versus pan pipes, but with Pan himself on the pipes. Of course Apollo won, but in some accounts King Midas preferred Pan, and was given the ears of a donkey as punishment, while Pan was merely humiliated. The seated figure at right wears a diadem and is taken to be Midas, though his ears seem unaffected. Both stories were set in Phrygia, in modern Turkey, where Midas ruled, which in the ancient world had various associations with music. The human with the knife wears a Phrygian cap.

Apollo is assisted by a sinister "Scythian" figure on the left, working on Marsyas' leg, and a satyr with a bucket behind Midas, perhaps to collect blood, or hold the removed skin, which in some versions of the story Apollo later had nailed up in a temple. A small boy, or boy satyr, restrains a large dog at right, while a much smaller dog is lapping at the blood that has fallen to the ground. As was typical in Titian's day, and especially in his works, the satyr is shown with the legs and feet of a goat, and inverting him emphasizes these, as well as giving him the position typical of mid-sized animals being slaughtered or skinned before butchering. Most of his body still seems un-flayed, but Apollo holds a large flap of detached skin in the hand not holding his knife. The detail shows the head of Marsyas inverted.



Compositionally, the "V" shape made by Marsyas's legs is echoed by the highlighted "V"s of the bent arms of the four figures nearest to him, all of whom are looking at him. Indeed, his navel is almost exactly at the centre of the canvas.



This detail shows the rough, almost coarse textured brushwork of his late work.

Many writers have attempted to capture the meaning of the "famously savage" painting, which, despite "the brutality of the treatment", has been found powerfully compelling by many, and described as "the most discussed, revered and loathed of all Titian's paintings". One common suggestion has been that the painting reflects ideas in Renaissance Neoplatonism about the "liberation of the spirit from the body", or the acquisition of higher insight or clarity. Such ideas are usually considered to be involved in another famous treatment

of flaying: the flayed skin carrying a self-portrait face of Michelangelo, held by Saint Bartholomew in the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel. One of Michelangelo's poems had used the metaphor of a snake shedding its old skin for his hope for a new life after his death.

In this spirit, Dante began his *Paradiso* with a prayer addressed to Apollo, who he asks to "Enter my breast, and so infuse me your spirit as you did Marsyas when you tore him from the cover of his limbs." In some other Renaissance depictions, Marsyas's furry legs appear human when flayed, so he "is redeemed from the animality that condemned him to this terrible fate".

The philosopher-turned-novelist Iris Murdoch was especially fascinated by the painting, which she

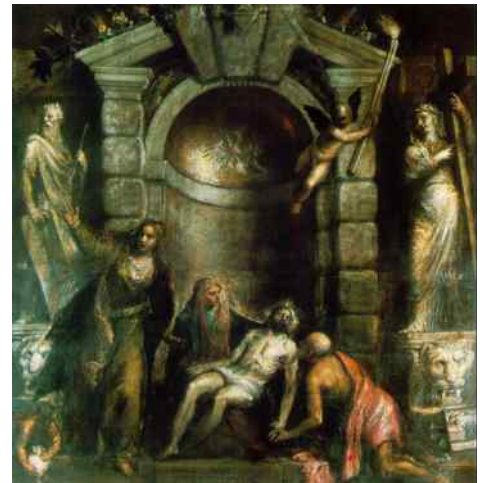
described in an interview as "the greatest in the Western canon". It is mentioned in three of her novels, and sometimes discussed by the characters. In her portrait for the National Portrait Gallery by Tom Phillips, a reproduction occupies most of the wall behind her head. She said it was "something to do with human life and all its ambiguities and all its horrors and terrors and misery, and at the same time there's something beautiful, the picture is beautiful, and something also to do with the entry of the spiritual into the human situation and the closeness of the gods ..."

The general interpretation of the story of Marsyas was as an illustration of the inevitable disaster that followed hubris in the form of a challenge to a god. An idea of the contest reinforcing the general moral and artistic superiority of the courtly lyre, or modern stringed instruments, over the rustic and frivolous wind family was present in much ancient discussion, and perhaps retained some relevance in the 16th-century. Lawrence Gowing comments: "It was on behalf of order and the laws of harmonious proportion, which sound in the music of strings, that Apollo claimed victory over the chaotic and impulsive sound of the pipes." For Edgar Wind the contest determined "the relative powers of Dionysian darkness and Apollonian clarity; and if the contest ended with the flaying of Marsyas, it was because flaying was itself a Dionysian rite, a tragic ordeal of purification by which the ugliness of the outward man was thrown off and the beauty of his inward self revealed". Alternatively, there have been suggestions that the painting has a political meaning, either general or specific, and depicts the "just punishment" of hubristic opponents.

The 'three ages of man' are all represented (if satyrs are allowed to count), indeed on the right they are aligned diagonally. The boy or young satyr is looking rather vacuously out at the viewer, those in their prime are concentrating on their tasks with a variety of expressions, and Midas contemplates the scene, apparently with melancholy resignation, but making no further attempt to intervene.

The *Pieta* of c.1576 was among several paintings left unfinished in Titian's studio at his death. An inscription in the lower part of the picture records that it was finished by Palma Giovane, whose interventions seem to have been kept to the minimum necessary, and doing his best to match Titian's own style.

"The master of light here plunges into darkness, makes death's night visible. Glimmers of silvery torch and moonlight on the mosaic canopy above Christ, on the statues of Moses and the Sybil, most of all the pale glowing flesh of the body of Christ accentuate the terrible gloom; it is overwhelming, and extremely personal.....Titian's terror makes the Christian images of redemption (that flicker of heavenly gold on the half-dome, the prophetic figures, the vegetation on the stone pediment) anything but reassuring. While the painting pleads for salvation, the emotional texture is of fear and horror: the closeness of death. The stone oppresses the mind; the statues are bodies frozen into stone, like a corpse with rigor mortis; the atmosphere of the painting is thickened, as if the air were poisoned."



His brushwork in his late work becomes bold, but imprecise and impressionistic, and worked over many times. The distinction between forms and the space between them almost disappears, and "The forms emerge like wraiths out of the circumambient darkness, and mass is reduced to a flickering pattern of colour and light. In his last years only these elements had reality for Titian."

Behind the central figures there is now a large rusticated Mannerist aedicule or niche, flanked by statues standing on plinths carved with giant lion heads. Along the top of the broken pediment six flaming lamps give a dull light, with another half-hidden in the centre, with vegetation around them, perhaps "the fig leaves of the Fall of Man". A patch of dark sky can be seen at top left. Three massive keystone-like blocks in the centre drop below even the bottom of the pediment, a feature typical of the Mannerist architecture of Giuliano Romano and his followers. These three blocks have been said to represent the Holy Trinity or "Christ as foundation of the faith".

A figure who is either the Nicodemus of the gospels or, as usually thought today, Saint Jerome, approaches Christ on his knees, and reaches out to touch his hand. This is generally agreed to be a self-portrait of Titian. On the left, standing and completing a right-angled triangle of the human figures, is Mary Magdalene, who unlike other figures seems to be in motion. Whether she has just arrived on the scene, or is rushing away in horror is unclear.

In the bottom right corner a small *ex voto* picture is propped up against the base of the right-hand statue. It shows two men kneeling in prayer to a *Pietà* in the air. These are agreed to represent Titian and his son Orazio, probably praying to be spared from the plague that in fact killed them both, a full

year after it arrived in Venice. Behind the picture, and partly concealed by it, is a small shield with Titian's coat of arms. In the bottom left corner another young angel is picking up an urn, perhaps the Magdalene's attribute of a jar of ointment.

The two statues at the sides of the grand niche in the background are Moses on the left and the Hellespontine Sibyl on the right, both identified by inscriptions on their pedestals. The Sibyl was thought to have prophesied the coming of Christ and his crucifixion. A putto-angel with a flaming torch illuminates the scene, which is dark and evidently set at night. In particular his torch reveals the gold mosaic in the semi-dome of the niche, where in the centre a pelican feeds its young by pecking its own breast to draw blood, a phenomenon believed since classical times in traditional zoology, which had become a common visual symbol of the Passion of Christ and its redemptive effects for man.

For Tom Nichols (Reader in History of Art, University of Glasgow) "Titian's dramatization of the conflicting emotions of those who witness Christ's death lends his painting its bleakly expressive power. His focus effectively breaks up the usual formal unity expected of a *pietà*, isolating its protagonists from each other to undermine more abstract possibilities of aesthetic harmony or more resolved theological meaning."

According to Sidney J. Freedburg, an American art historian and curator, it "is less a painting about Christian death and tragedy than a splendid and impassioned affirmation of both art and life. Its true protagonist is the Magdalene, salient in a radiance of green against a gold-shot background, who walks out of the picture into the real world, shouting, palpable, magnificent, and one with us in life. She illustrates a cry of grief, but makes the effect of pronouncement of victory.