

IN RENAISSANCE VENICE, TITIAN WAS PRINCE OF PAINTERS

And he still is: an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art shows why he is revered as a master whose works go straight to the heart

By **Bennett Schiff**,
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Venus of Urbino 1538

This is how, on a good day, they order things in "La Bella Italia." When an exhibition of the works of Titian opened in Venice this past spring the entire nation rejoiced. The opening was front-page news everywhere in the country. A thousand people in a contagious celebratory mood gathered in the courtyard of the Doges' Palace, itself a work of art. The day was perfect. The sun shone. Venice glittered, as it can, in its magical confectionary splendor. The President of the Republic spoke.

And this was for an artist who, for very nearly half a millennium, has never been entirely out of the Italian eye and mind and, witnessing the reception, the Italian heart. It was not art auction news. It was human news; an emotion, a feeling.

It isn't often that things happen this way. But it is as it should be. Because in the garden that is the paradise of the grandest painters of the Western world, a glorious patch is reserved for Tiziano Vecellio—called Titian. Leonardo is there, Michelangelo, Velazquez, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Goya, Cezanne, Van Gogh. They are all there, and others; each of them for a time—and perhaps forever—is the greatest painter of all time. Who is the single greatest painter of all time? All of these, of course.

They have a way of lasting. For more than 400 years, without deflection and without defection of taste, Titian has been given his due. Unlike so many others, whose reputations faded—Vermeer, for example, who was entirely out of sight for roughly 200 years and had to be rediscovered and resurrected—Titian has remained in the very forefront of the public's two divergent eyes, one popular, the other scholarly. Everyone's painter, you could say. There is something there for all. With the masters it can even be the same thing.

His is one of those magical stories. From the moment he picked up a pencil, then a brush, it was clear that he was extraordinary. He never faltered. He was acclaimed from the beginning, then revered. The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, the story goes, bent to pick up a brush Titian had dropped. It may even have happened. It was said of him by that other genius Giorgione, with whom he probably had studied, but whom he certainly knew, that he was an artist while still in his mother's womb. Some doubt that Giorgione actually said it, but you can be fairly certain, after some of the young Titian's work was mistaken for his, that he thought it.

In any event, and this is a major event, an exhibition entitled "Titian, Prince of Painters" is on view from October 28 through January 27, 1991, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., having made the trip from the Doges' Palace in Venice. It is, as these shows can go, not immense. There are about 50 paintings. (What, only 50 Titians?) And they are very special Titians, carefully chosen, expertly courted from among the world's foremost museums and private collections.

Titian, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 1515



A number of the canonical masterworks are missing, but it is nevertheless very much a choice show. It celebrates the quincentenary of Titian's birth, and it is the first major showing of his work since 1935, more than half a century ago, also in Venice. It is by far the largest ever to be seen in this country. In fact, remarkably, it is the only significant one-man showing of his work ever to have been mounted in the United States.

He was perfectly poised at that juncture in the Italian High Renaissance when the artist's station in society was raised from craftsman to creator. Titian was superbly endowed to take advantage of the moment. And never was there anyone more willing to run with the ball. He was sought by and painted emperors (Charles V), kings (Philip II of Spain), queens (Mary of Hungary), popes (Paul III), dukes and their duchesses, more ordinary nobles, and merchants who in that Venetian republican society were as powerful as anyone. He moved easily enough among them. He was his own kind of aristocracy.

He was born in Pieve di Cadore, a village in the Alps, on the other side of the Austrian Tirol, about 70 miles north of Venice, in what is now accepted by authorities to be sometime between 1488 and 1490. For many years it had been thought he was born ten years or so before that. He came from a family of lawyers and soldiers. He was one of five children. We can assume he had a comfortable childhood. An early biographer says he painted a Madonna on the side of his house with the juice of crushed flowers. It's a pretty story, and we can choose to believe it as easily as not.

It helps to put the times in perspective to consider that Titian was about 4 when Columbus stumbled onto the Americas. Titian got to Venice (in which he continued to live until his death in 1576) when he was 9 or 10, in order to take up an apprenticeship as a painter. In that place in those days there was no nonsense of parental objection to art as a career. As a parent you might consign a son to an artist's workshop as readily as you might attach him to a furniture maker. Titian was sent to live with a relative in Venice and went to work in the shop of the mosaicist Sebastiano Zuccato.

He proceeds then from one master to another, according to his contemporary biographers, Lodovico Dolce and Vasari, the indispensable, but not always dependable, Boswell of the scintillating galaxy of Renaissance painters. From Zuccato to Gentile Bellini, to his brother, the master Giovanni Bellini, to Giorgione, the dreamy and poetical genius who was lost in the plague of 1510 while still in his mid-30s. He apparently doesn't stay that long with any of them. He shops around. At a very early age he is out on his own, already rich in talent and inflexible in purpose.

Venice at the turn of the 16th century was still at the height of its powers, a unique republic in a region dominated by principalities, where a well-allied pope commanded from Rome. Founded, according to legend, in the marshes in A.D. 421, it had lasted for more than a thousand years, a wealthy and proud society, a colonial power, the fulcrum for trade between East and West.

Called a republic, it was in fact an oligarchy. Curiously known as *la Serenissima* (Most Serene City), it was the scene of almost constant warfare and labyrinthine intrigue. In the 13th century it had limited membership of its Great Council to the patrician families of the city, who in turn elected the Senate, the policy-making organ of the government. There was a Council of Ten, a sort of KGB, which looked after state security. An elected doge from within the ruling body commanded all.

By 1508 Titian had received a commission to paint one side of the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*, the important German trade center. The other side had been painted by Giorgione. Both walls have been largely destroyed, but some remnants by Titian are presented in the show, shadows of heroic figures, of interest to the many Titian scholars for the new sense of monumentality they present and in which the presence of Giorgione, as mentor, is discernible.

These are Titian's early years. He has learned about presenting reality from Giovanni Bellini. About form and shading and emotiveness from Giorgione. About color from both. And to all he has added the unique genius evident from the beginning, a vibrancy that inhabits every square inch of a painting and that can startle you.

By 1513 Titian is ready to make a bid to become the chief painter of Venice. Bellini is in his 80s. Giorgione is dead. Titian addresses a petition to the Council of Ten to decorate a large wall in the Doges' Palace. He has received an invitation to go to Rome's Papal Court, he informs the mighty Ten, but would forgo it for the wall. He knows that such a commission would advance him to the position of principal painter of the republic, successor to the revered Bellini. He has "given" himself, he writes, "to learning the art of painting not so much for the desire to earn money as for the attempt to acquire a small fame; and being counted among those who currently make a profession of art." With smooth Venetian politesse, he points out that he is being "urgently pressed by His Holiness the Pope and other Lords to go and serve them: So desiring as a most loyal subject to Your Magnificences to leave some mark in this glorious City, I have decided, thinking thus, to be so bold as to offer myself to paint in the *Maggior Consiglio* and to place all my skill and wit that I have so far gained...." The implication is clear: if they don't take up his invitation, off to Rome he goes.



Titian *Man with a Glove* 1520

He got the job eventually and began work on the wall in 1516. Bellini had died that year and Titian had succeeded him as painter to the republic, a position he honored as Bellini had before him. After putting the project aside for 25 years, he completed it in 1538.

It is likely that what made him put off the Doges' Palace wall was a commission to paint the high altarpiece for Venice's largest church, *Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari*, known with affectionate familiarity as the *Frari*. He then proceeded to paint a stupendous work, one of the world's treasures, the "*Assunta*," or "*Assumption*." That work is not in the show, but those fortunate enough to have seen the exhibition when it was at the Doges' Palace could then walk through the city to the *Frari* to be graced by the "*Assunta*" (next page).

Titian's paintings, portraits, mythological subjects, nudes, scenes and stories from the Bible and classical literature, are epic productions, works of a prodigious talent. Come into a darkened room, with the light just right as it was in the Doges' Palace, and as it is in the National Gallery, and the paintings blaze out with reality and presence and magic too. One masterpiece after another confronts you: "Man with a Glove"; "Francesco Maria della Rovere", Duke of Urbino; the duke's wife Eleonora; "Pope Paul III"; "Doge Andrea Gritti"; a self-portrait.

No sense of color being applied

There is no simpering religiosity in his paintings from the Bible. His angels, Madonnas, saints, prophets, Christs, are presented in dignity and a profound humanity. It is Titian's majesty that, in the end, is so calming. The show is subtitled "Prince of Painters." Well, it's alliterative. But, it doesn't signify his regal ranking. He needs to be raised a notch or two.

He is a supreme colorist. There is no sense of color being applied. It never shouts, doesn't obtrude. It seems to flower out of the surface, making shapes, making volumes, growing out of itself, blooming. There is a reddish-gold hair color that has come to be known as "Titian." But, it is his use of orange that is most compelling; a muted orange, it is almost always present somewhere, from entire backgrounds to a trace, sometimes turning to gold, sometimes suggesting a tinge of earth. There is something elemental in this kind of painting, a profound and basic discovery of what a man can do to project a force.

His nudes (how innocuous Playboy is in comparison) are naked. They languish. They lure. They live. They conquer. They seem perfect for what they are and are meant to be.

What is perfect, of course, is the art of Titian's painting, as in the Frari, looking at the "Assunta." It is the nobility and monumentality of the work that makes it so different from a grand-opera curtain. It could, of course, serve as that, but it is so very much more, as a revolutionary work for the time and as a continuing world masterpiece of dazzling virtuosity and emotional grace.

A Titian painting is an announcement, a pronouncement, an event. There is emotional grandeur, stature, spaciousness, an Olympian presence. And yet his approach to almost 70 years of steady production (he sometimes had four paintings on easels at the same time) was at bottom pedestrian. No businessman, no merchant, no accountant, was more precise in keeping his accounts and seeking payment than Titian. Living in the most tempestuous times, rubbing elbows with the rulers of the day, some of the most colorful, devious and even murderous personages of the time, Titian remains somewhat remote, a kind of anxious tradesman.



Titian, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-18

His correspondence is stunningly dull, sycophantic and even, in the manner of the time, groveling when he addresses Charles V, his son Philip II of Spain, his sister, Mary, Queen of Hungary; a pope or any of the various dukes, their children and consorts he memorialized for the ages, significant today for being painted by Titian rather than for who they were then.

Veiled by the distance of time

There is a great deal of Titian's correspondence intact, none of it interesting, except to the many scholars who, through the ages and still, have made an industry of analyzing and speculating on his work. The man himself is veiled from us, perhaps even more because much of the writings may not be his; his transcribers and advisers seem to have contributed material for Titian's signature.

A good deal of the time he is imploring his mighty clients to pay their bills. The remainder of the time he spells out projects in hand that they might be interested in buying. He asks for a job for a wayward son. He kisses their hands. He is reverential of their very magnificent beings. He gets along. He sells many paintings. He receives many commissions. In 1548 he travels to Augsburg, Charles V's current seat of government in Bavaria. He spends six months living in the Vatican, painting the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the pope and his nephews.



Titian, *Charles V*

He travels to the main cities and courts of Italy, painting the ruling families: the d'Estes of Ferrara, the Gonzagas of Mantua, the della Roveres of Urbino. He receives at home, a gathering place for intellectuals, poets, writers, publishers (in the last five years of the previous century, a quarter of all books printed in the world were printed in Venice). He is married to wife Cecilia. He has two sons: Pomponio, a priest and a scoundrel, frequently in debt or in trouble; Orazio, dutiful and good; and a daughter, Lavinia, who is beautiful and loving. Orazio is a model son who helps his father in the studio and acts as business manager.



Titian, *Pope Paul III w His Nephews* detail

Titian would have made his way into the households of the nobles in any case. But the path was made much easier by the intervention of Pietro Aretino who, having fled Rome at about the time that it was sacked by Charles V in 1527, took up his fortunes in Venice, where he soon perceived Titian's remarkable genius.

Aretino, son of a cobbler, was a brilliant satirist, polemicist, poet, dramatist, wit, sensualist, a colorful rogue of genuine talent. His pen was so feared, and his information so accurate, that many of the mighty paid to keep him from going public. Until his death in 1556, he remained a close and trusted friend of Titian's.

Within three months of his arrival in Venice, Aretino had his portrait painted by Titian and arranged for the painter to send it to a former patron, the Marquis of Mantua, Federico Gonzaga, along with a portrait of Charles V's ambassador to Venice, both free of charge

and accompanied by an adoring letter signed by Titian. All sorts of commissions followed and, in time, an introduction to Charles V.

In time Titian's house in Venice became the center for a good deal of the city's intensive intellectual life. Aretino was often there, as was another refugee from Rome, the architect and sculptor Jacopo Sansovino. In 1540, the Latinist Priscianese, who had come to Venice to publish a book, was invited to Titian's house. Aretino and Sansovino were there and the historian of Florence, Jacopo Nardi. The Latinist appended a letter to his book, describing the scene.

"There were assembled with the said M. Tiziano, as like desires like," Priscianese wrote, "some of the most celebrated characters that are now in this city, and of ours chiefly M. Pietro Aretino, a new miracle of nature, and next to him as great an imitator of nature with the chisel as the master of the feast is with his pencil, Messer Jacopo Tatti, called il Sansovino, and M. Jacopo Nardi, and I; so that I made the fourth amidst so much wisdom." The guests wandered through the house looking at paintings "of which the house was full," and discussed the beauty and charm of the garden. And then, sitting in the shade of the garden as the light faded, they watched as the gondolas came out on the lagoon "adorned with beautiful women, and resounded with the varied harmony and music of voices and instruments, which till midnight accompanied our delightful supper."

By all accounts, and they are many and not always in agreement by any means, Aretino and Titian were perfect progenitors for the Odd Couple. The painter, not that articulate, at least with the language, anxious, an obsessive worker and worrier, stickler for tradition in all matters—excepting art, of course, which his genius radicalized. The writer, a polychromatic extroverted freewheeler in permanent overdrive, whose house was a favorite gathering place for various of the celebrated courtesans of Venice. Several of them were given the collective noun of Aretine as a title, and at least one may have been the model for Titian's indelible and life-enhancing nudes, prime examples and elucidators of that basic subject, it seems, for all time.

Prostitutes were a prominent fact of life in 16th-century Venice. According to Marino Sanudo, a patrician of the city who kept a meticulous daily diary of life there that comes to 58 volumes, there were 11,654 prostitutes in Venice in the early 16th century among a population of about 115,000, or a little more than 10 percent. Sanudo attributed this proportion not only to a general loosening up of morals but to the arrival of refugees from the mainland due to one scourge or another of the time. And the government was also inclined to leniency, it was said, because of the traditional fear local husbands had of being cuckolded by single men.

Aretino's life was continually eventful. Following a luscious banquet at Titian's house—Titian's banquets often featured delicacies sent to the painter by his admirers on the mainland—Aretino acknowledges receipt.

He addresses one benefactor as "most kind, most dear and most gracious Messer Niccolo ... Because it seemed most ungrateful to Titian who gives life to color, and to Sansovino, who imbues his marble with breath, merely to thank you for the gift of pickled fennel and spice cakes, they, together with myself and the other witnesses of their appetites ... declare how much they are beholden to you."



Titian *Bacchanal* 1518

Aretino died in 1556, reportedly during an apoplectic seizure of laughter upon hearing a salacious joke about his sister. No doubt the story is made up, a Venetian joke, exactly the sort Aretino himself was justly famous for. He could have written his death scene himself.

Titian's daughter had married and left the house the previous year, and was to die a few years later. His wife had also died. Titian, more than ever, threw himself into his work. The days of lavish parties had ended.

Titian was a perfectionist. Describing his technique to a biographer, a student of Titian's said that Titian "used to turn his pictures to the wall and leave them there without looking at them, sometimes for several months. When he wanted to apply his brush again he would examine them with the utmost rigor, as if they were his mortal enemies, to see if he could find any faults; and if he discovered anything that did not fully conform to his intentions he would treat his picture like a good surgeon would his patient, reducing if necessary some swelling or excess of flesh ... and if a foot had initially been misplaced correcting it without thinking of the pain it might cost him. . . ."



Titian *Madonna of the House of Pesaro* 1519-



Titian, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, 1573-75

Filmy veils and thick, fatty layers of paint

In his last years Titian created some of his most moving paintings with an ever evolving technical mastery and an unassuaged appetite for new ways of dealing with a flat surface. He had taken the very substance of painting, oil, a comparatively new way of painting introduced in Venice the previous century from Flemish artists, and had advanced it as far as it would ever go. It was Titian, wrote John Canaday, "who brought oil into its full development. Its fluidity, its adaptability to application in a filmy veil or in thick, fatty layers, in a smooth surface or a rough one, and in combinations where one form of application was played against others—its variety of texture, full range of color, and the freedom it allowed the brush, transforming it into an instrument of drawing like an enlarged pencil or pen—all these characteristics of oil became with Titian an integral part of expression as the luscious materiality of his paint fused with the sensuousness of his imagery."

The late works are summations of the man's remarkable talent made efflorescent by the kind of radiant blaze that can come to the great creators in their final years. Titian attained this, wrote Bernard Berenson, "by the almost total suppression of outlines, by the harmonizing of his colors, and by the largeness and vigor of his brushwork."

The broad strokes of the brush had replaced contiguous planes of color. Even the colors, as the eminent art historian Johannes Wilde pointed out, had been "split up and dismembered, and have been distributed

in small particles all over the picture space.... Not the smallest point in it has been left neutral; and, potentially, every single brush stroke contains all the colors of the picture."

His late style was so energized that his retouching process "involved his moderating here and there the brightest highlights by rubbing them with his fingers...In the last stages he painted more with his fingers than his brushes."

All this is delivered in a stunning hammer blow to the solar plexus by Titian's "Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence (*right*), another late-period altar painting of overwhelming emotional impact borrowed from Venice's Church of the Jesuits for this exhibition. Agony, pity, the hope of heaven are all here in simplicity and in grandeur, shadowed, light-infiltrated, all condensed and yet flowing in one of the world's most profoundly moving and elemental masterpieces.

He had anticipated the Impressionists and the Post-impressionist Cezanne. And, he had been the master from whose works Nicolas Poussin, Rubens, Velazquez, Rembrandt, Goya, Delacroix and Renoir learned. As artistic genealogies go, this is one of the most formidable.

Two years before Titian's death, the new king of France, Henri III, came to Titian's home to pay his respects. It was at about that time that the venerable artist had asked the Brothers of the Frari for permission to be buried in a chapel of the church. In return for the favor he would paint a Pieta for the church. The work, which is as moving as any ever painted, was almost completed at his death. He died during the plague of 1575-76, which took the lives of 50,000 out of a population of 175,000.



He had painted two self-portraits in old age. In one he is a sort of priestly figure. In the other he is a kind of monarch. He was both.

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By Bennett Schiff

Bennett Schiff, who is a member of *SMITHSONIAN'S* Board of Editors, wrote most recently about artist Joseph Wright of Derby, in September 1990.