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**Danae.
Bagliori del mito**

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Danae.

Bagliori del mito

a cura di

Maddalena Bassani e Alessandra Pedersoli

direttore

monica centanni

redazione

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maddalena bassani, elisa bastianello,
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edizioni@engramma.it

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Centro studi classicA luav
San Polo 2468 | 30125 Venezia
+39 041 257 14 61

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Titian. Love, Desire, Death

Review of the exhibition at The National Gallery (London, The National Gallery, 16 March 2020 - 17 January 2021)

Simona Dolari



1 | *Titian. Love, Desire, Death*, The National Gallery of London (2020-2021).

After more than four centuries apart, the wonderful 'poems' or 'poesie' created by the great Titian for Philip II of Spain, are now back on display together, at the National Gallery of London.

Four hundred and fifty years is a very long time, but maybe a necessary amount to finally have the privilege of seeing together once again perhaps the six most incredible, extravagant, cruel and wonderful paintings ever made in the history of Western painting. These are the six 'poems' that the portentous Titian creates for the young Philip of Habsburg, future king of Spain since 1556, in a period of time that goes from 1553, the date of delivery of the first work, *The Danaë* – the version here exhibited comes from the Wellington Collection in Apsley House, considered by Paul Joannides and Miguel Falomir as the most authentic if compared to the more erotic and sensual version of the Prado Museum – to 1562 date of the last canvas, *The Rape of Europe* (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston). Alongside those works, *Venus and Adonis* (1554, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), *Perseus and Andromeda* (1556, The Wallace Collection, London), *Diana and Actaeon and Diana and Callisto* (1559 co-owned by the National Gallery of London and the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh) and *The Death of Actaeon* (1559-1575, The National Gallery, London) which was never sent to the king, are the protagonists of this exhibition organised by the National Gallery of London, *Titian. Love. Desire. Death* (16 March 2020 - 17 January 2021).

It seems almost an unreal spectacle: the seven canvases representing mythological subjects mostly based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* stories, follow one after the other, telling complex and tragic events and capturing the viewer in a multisensory and poly-semantic experience. Entering into room VI of the main gallery, where natural light offers the best condition to enjoy the paintings and the dark red walls perfectly interact with the works of art, one perceives the value of the extraordinary undertaking: a large number of female bodies almost of natural dimension – mostly naked or skimpy – which follow one another in different attitudes and poses, protagonists of various and articulated stories. They are, in fact, the fairy tales or figurative poems, as Titian himself called them, whose protagonists are all women, Diana, Venus, Andromeda, Danaë, Callisto, Europa and the nymphs, with the exception of Perseus, Adonis and Actaeon: the last two destined to a miserable end, the first killed by a wild boar during a hunt, the other torn to pieces by his own dogs once transformed into a deer. Present in disguise, first as the golden shower that will fertilise Danaë and then as the false and courteous white bull that will take away tender Europe – it seems almost a foreshadowing of what will soon happen with Brexit – it is also the insatiable and unstoppable Jupiter, responsible for the sad fate of his victims.

We have before our eyes young and beautiful women, with sensual and soft bodies, seen from the front, but also from the back, lying in a bed or intent in ablutions at the fresh source after a hunt or captured and torn away by a bull apparently harmless but guilty. They show discordant expressions, for a serene Danaë waiting for her 'out of the ordinary visit', the other girls appear, incredulous, inquisitive, shocked, confused or pleading, and sometimes satisfied in the awareness of being able to decide the fate of others as in the case of Diana and perhaps also of Philip. Many of them are victims of the anger or greed of superior creatures, poor Callisto was not only deceived by Jupiter who disguised himself as Diana and abused of her body, but in the scene depicted she also becomes the object of vilification of the female assembly when her body violently naked, and not naked like the other chaste nymphs, reveals her pregnancy as the proof of her guilt for which she deserves to be punished. For those who have made a mistake, there is no forgiveness even if they are victims of bullying actions acted from higher spheres or of random errors such as

for Adonis, guilty of having come across the harem of Diana and her maids.

The understanding of these paintings is never univocal and never simplistic. This is demonstrated by the many interpretations made over the years by eminent scholars starting with Panofsky with his *Problems in Titian. Mostly Iconographic* (1969) who applied all sorts of interpretations to understand the complex iconological meaning of the entire series. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Titian. Love. Desire. Death* curated by Matthias Wivel, aims to make an overall sum of the studies to date, proposing a vision of the works that is very inclusive and not very breaking.

It is clear that the works on display still today offer infinite food for thought and many different interpretations, especially when viewed all together as conceived by the artist's mind. This is also demonstrated by the conference organised – strictly via zoom given the circumstances caused by the pandemic – by the National Gallery, “Poetry in paint: Titian's Late mythologies”, which was held over three different days in which specialists from various disciplines, from art historians to anthropologists and political scientists have considered poems from very discordant point of views. The questions we ask ourselves today are probably even more numerous than yesterday, the answers are always varied and discordant: they are masterpieces that stimulate feelings and reactions of various kind, but never indifference.

It is a continuous journey that calls into question intellect and senses, it is a complex game in which knowledge but also sight, hearing and touch are called to participate, inviting the viewer to ‘feel’ the soft and fluffy flesh as well as the clear waters in which Diana and her entourage refresh themselves. It is Titian at his best, and the culmination of an artistic career and technical research that is always in constant evolution. It is the most complex creation of a mature painter, he is in fact over sixty years old when he begins to elaborate the poems, and he knows very well his patron in his early twenties with whom he shared a long period of time in the 1548 when together with the artist Leone Leoni they made what is known as “felicissimo viaje” in the European possessions of Emperor Charles V.

This is the beginning of that strong artist-patron union which will continue until the painter's death in 1576 and which will lead to the creation of almost thirty works in total, with a very varied excursus in stylistic and typological terms. Titian, who for Charles V had essentially painted religious and propagandistic works in the previous decades, fully understands the political and cultural needs of the young and future ruler and he also knows his frivolities and greed as a man for hunting and for women while being gifted with a profound and serious humanistic education.

The artist has the expertise and knowledge – abandoned for long time is the hypothesis of the illiterate painter – to be able with extraordinary freedom to ‘invent’ his poems that show the rich cultural and literary environment in which he moves but that are also witnesses of the different historical and contextual situations of the years in which they are made. It is clear that in the ten years between *The Danaë* and *The Rape of Europe*, without taking into consideration *The Death of Actaeon* – which in some way represents the culmination of all this creation but which was never sent to Philip even if repeatedly mentioned in the correspondence – political and cultural situations change and with these also the mood of the painter who sees his end ever closer, fears more and more the new generation of painters active in Venice, especially Tintoretto, and complains constantly in his letters with the sovereign or his agents, the non-payment for the works sent and for the promised pensions. Between the first and the last painting we can read the evolution of a style that becomes more and more complex and articulated in the composition of the images and in the way of working with colours that are more material and dense, while the figures become less defined to what many have erroneously circumscribed with the term “un-finished”.

If in the paintings depicting *The Danaë* and *Venus and Adonis* the figures are still characterised by a thin painting with light colours and with a limited number of figures arranged in the foreground, the later paintings, in particular the two scenes of Diana, which are wonderfully displayed in the show on the same wall – in the way Titian had surely thought of them as confirmed by details such as the landscape in the background, the river in the foreground but also the direction of the light –, are almost the expression of a theatrical scene with many characters depicted on

different planes and in various attitudes, but each involved in the same drama that is about to come true. The decidedly darker colours, especially in the background, come apart and recompose themselves thanks to a material consistency never seen before among Renaissance painters. They are tragic paintings as Puttarfaken wrote in his book *Titian and Tragic Painting*, highlighting the theatrical nature of the compositions, in which men and women appear victims of an unstoppable and hopeless fate in which gods and fate are active and unstoppable executioners from which it is possible to escape. They are pictures of rupture and also of personal crisis as Gentili wrote in his beautiful *From Titian to Titian*, which acts as a true testament to an entire career.

They are for various reasons the alter-ego of the only other mythological cycle created by the Venetian artist almost thirty years earlier between 1518 and 1525 for the 'alabaster camerino' of Duke Alfonso d'Este of Ferrara. Also in this case we are talking about large and complex works but elaborated following a detailed program conceived by the Duke himself with the help of the humanist Mario Equicola for an intimate and well-defined space to be dedicated to study and *otium* in a moment of great historical optimism for the Italian courts and for the painter himself. The three paintings in question, *Homage to Venus* (1518-1519, Museo del Prado, Madrid), *The Bacchanal of the Andrii* (1523-1525, Museo del Prado, Madrid: on the iconography see the essay of Monica Centanni in engramma n. 163), *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1520-1523, National Gallery, London), depict Dionysian stories in which pleasure and love are exalted as a privileged condition for those chosen, human beings and gods who know how to enjoy the power of abandonment and leisure as the god Bacchus wants. In the paintings for Filippo II, made by Titian without any idea of the space to which they are destined, because the sovereign for years moves from residence to residence and with him the same paintings, Apollo has taken over and the stories of love and desire become stories of tragic events that can end in death or that deserve a penalty or long suffering even for those who will be saved like Andromeda. The path of life for human beings, says Titian, is always complex and love no longer seems to be able to save anyone, the time is now far away when Neoplatonic thought promised a privileged condition to those enlightened by art and knowledge. Rational reason has taken over and Diana is ready to

shoot her arrow at Actaeon who took the courage to open the curtain of mysteries.

Unfortunately, there is no trace of all the complex interpretations in the information posters throughout the exhibition, which are instead very detailed on the history of the provenance over the centuries. Although we are aware that iconology can lead sometimes very far from reality, we still consider too important the attempt to understand and read works of art through the cultural and political context of the time in which they were made. Unique works of art such as the ones now in display, which in a truly exceptional way have been brought together for the first time after so many years, need to be explained, introduced and appreciated even by those who have not had the opportunity to read in depth about them to reveal the complexity of this creation. Adonis, almost unnoticed, opens the curtain and discovers a reality not intended for him and for this he will pay with his life as shown by the deer skull on the column that foreshadows his end. However, the path to knowledge can and must be seductive and challenging and it is with this feeling that we would like to continue to interrogate ourselves about the deep meaning of these paintings. The aim is to question what lies behind the mysteries of these works of art, which fortunately continue to interest a great deal number of people in spite of all those who would like to keep us out of the curtain.

English abstract

The text is a review of *Titian. Love, Desire, Death* (London, The National Gallery, 16 March 2020 - 17 January 2021), an exhibition of six 'poems' created by the Venetian painter for the young Philip of Habsburg, future king of Spain. The canvases on view are mostly based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and represent mythological subjects; they are 'poesie' (figurative poems) whose protagonists are predominantly women - Diana, Venus, Andromeda, Danaë, Callisto, Europa and the nymphs. The understanding of the paintings is never univocal, never simplistic: they represent Titian at his best, the most complex creation of a mature painter who, at sixty years old, knows his patron, and his patron's passion for women and hunting, well.

keywords | Exhibition on Titian; Titian; Ovid's *Metamorphosis*; myths, Philip II of Spain.



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