CICERONI
TRAVEL

Titian, *The Rape of Europa*, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

TITIAN'S *POESIE*

LOVE - DESIRE – DEATH

TOM DUNCAN

Titian, *Danaë*, Wellington Collection, Apsley House, London

The National Gallery's much anticipated exhibition **Titian – Love, Desire, Death** opened on Monday, 16 March and I was lucky enough to see it the following day. It closed on the Wednesday of that week, together with the Gallery's permanent collection, due to the Coronavirus crisis. A remarkable display, the most ravishing small-scale exhibition I have ever seen, the official closing date is 15 June, so if the Gallery reopens before then, please try to see it.

The exhibition is due to continue at three of the other four art galleries whose generous loans have made this ground breaking art historical event possible: Edinburgh's Scottish National Gallery, 11 July – 27 September; Madrid's Prado Mueum, 20 October – 10 January; and Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 11 February – 9 May next year. So, should we not be able to feast our eyes on these spectacular works in London, we must hope for the opportunity elsewhere. The catalogue for the London, Edinburgh and Boston versions of the exhibition, also titled **Titian – Love, Desire, Death** is, given the closure of normal booksellers, widely available via Amazon or similar web suppliers: the ISBN number is 978 1 8570 9655 2 and costs £25. The Prado will publish a separate catalogue.

As you may know, we have a Study Day in connection with the exhibition scheduled for 13 May and we very much hope that this may still be possible? Meanwhile, by way of anticipation I have written this short review of the exhibition, which I hope you will find of interest?

Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, Prado Museum, Madrid

The exhibition represents a series of amazing 'firsts'. For example, it brings together for the first time since about 1579 six paintings by Titian painted for Philip II of Spain. Titian described them as *poesie*, simply put they are the visual equivalent of poetry. They celebrate the loves and anger of gods, goddesses and mortals, each scene taken from Ovid's great poem, *Metamorphoses*, adapted by Titian to suit his own painterly purposes.

The series opens with *Danaë*, painted about 1551 to 1553 and continues over nine or so years with, in succession, *Venus and Adonis*, *Perseus and Andromeda*, *Diana and Actaeon*, *Diana and Callisto* and finally *The Rape of Europa*. The London version of the exhibition includes another allegorical painting from the Gallery's own collection, *The Death of Actaeon*, intended by Titian to be the final, promised part of the series, but never delivered to Philip, a painting which may still have been in Titian's studio on his death in 1576, and was perhaps finished by others?

Another ‘first’ is the decision taken by the Trustees of London’s Wallace Collection to loan *Perseus and Andomeda*. It was only recently that the Wallace Trustees were able to depart from the long tradition of not lending anything from the collection, thus this generous loan has helped transform the exhibition.

Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, Wallace Collection, London

Of even more importance is the loan from Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum of its greatest treasure, *The Rape of Europa*, thought by many to be the finest Old Master painting in the Americas.

The Prado has lent *Venus and Adonis* and the Duke of Wellington his version of *Danaë*. The remaining two in the series, *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto,* were sold in recent years from the collection of the Duke of Sutherland to London and Edinburgh’s National Galleries, an unprecedented ‘joint’ purchase.

When Titian began this commission about 1551, he was at the summit of his powers. Born about 1487/90 he is thought to have trained with both Gentile and Giovanni Bellini and the influence of his older contemporary, Giorgione, was significant. After Giorgione's untimely death in 1510, Titian rapidly established himself as the natural successor to the younger of the two Bellini brothers, Giovanni, excelling in both religious painting and portraiture.

Titian, *Self Portrait,* Prado Museum, Madrid

Titian worked principally in and around Venice but his reputation was such that first in Italy, and thereafter throughout Europe, he was in great demand. Of his princely patrons, none were more important than the Habsburg Emperor Charles V, and his son, King Philip II of Spain. Indeed, the relationship between the painter and these two powerful men led to the creation of some of the most important, not to say ravishing, works of art, particularly the series of allegories which are the focus of this exhibition.

It was from the sophisticated world of 'courtly' culture that allegorical painting emerged as a genre in its own right. Themes taken from classical sources were already popular in late 15th century Florence, such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, while Raphael pioneered this genre in Rome with his *Triumph of Galatea* painted in 1512 for Alessandro Chigi.

Raphael, *The Triumph of Galatea*, Villa Farnesina, Rome

By the early to mid 1500s artists such as Correggio were producing series of paintings on themes charged with erotic significance, such as the four *Loves of Jupiter* painted in the early 1530s for Federico II Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua intended as a gift for the Emperor Charles V. Indeed, Titian had already begun to produce works of this type, for example the National Gallery's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, painted for Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, in the early 1520s.

Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, National Galleries of London & Edinburgh

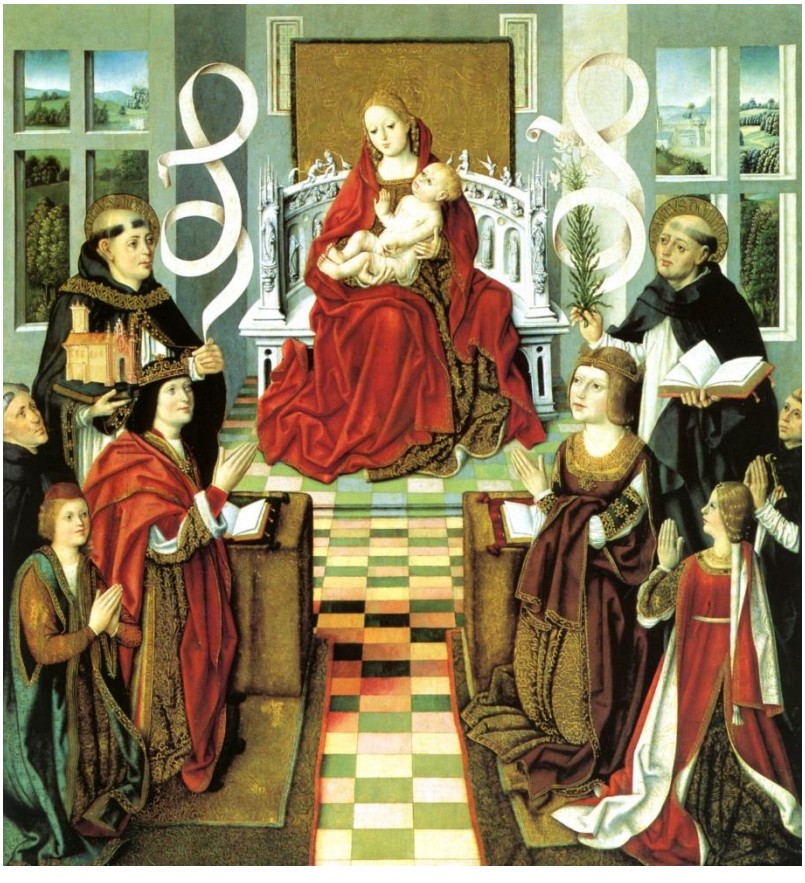
Titian, *Diana and Callisto*, National Galleries of London & Edinburgh

The combination of classical themes and eroticism was particularly suited to Titian given his Venetian background, Images of Venus, often posed erotically, had begun to appear in Venetian art in the early 16th century. Here too, the heavy hand of Catholic orthodoxy was not so onerous as in other parts of Italy and Europe. What is surprising is that it was that most orthodox of Catholic monarchs, Philip II, who commissioned these far from sacred paintings.

Titian, *Philip II* (detail), Prado Museum, Madrid

Philip II was born in 1527 in Valladolid, the son of Charles I of Spain (known elsewhere in Europe as the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V) and Isabella of Portugal. His family lineage, the territories over which he ruled and the material possessions which he both inherited and commissioned were extraordinary, even by the standards of his day. However, it was Spain that was the bedrock of his power and interests. If his life is largely unknown to you, there is no better introduction that the extraordinary biography, *Imprudent King – A New Life of Philip II* by Geoffrey Parker, published by Yale University Press in 2014, with an updated paperback edition in 2015, the ISBN number of which is 978 0 300 21695 0.

Philip II's father, Charles, began the process of welding together the once independent kingdoms of medieval Spain. This was made possible via a complex web of inheritance through the marriage arranged between Joanna 'the Mad', the daughter of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon on the one hand, and on the other Philip 'the Handsome', the son of the Emperor Maximillian of Habsburg and Mary of Burgundy.



Anonymous Spaniard, *The Virgin of the Catholic Monarchs* (Isabella, Ferdinand & their eldest children), Prado Museum, Madrid

In 1504 on the death of Isabella, she was succeeded as Queen of Castile by her daughter Joanna, where her husband ruled jointly (and very briefly) with his wife, *de jure uxoris*, as King of Castile, where he was known as Philip I. Philip had already succeeded as ruler of his Burgundian possessions in the Low Countries on his mother's death in 1482, though his father Maximillian ruled on his behalf until he came of age in 1494. Indeed it was these scattered and rich territories in northern

Europe over which he ruled, and which were vital for Spanish trading interests, which made him such a promising match. Similarly, from the Burgundian/Habsburg side, the value of a potential dynastic link with the houses of Castile and Aragon with their possessions in Spain, Italy and now the 'New World', were of paramount importance, all part of Maximillian's great plan to advance his family into the first rank of European rulers, a strategy in which he was spectacularly successful.

Bernhard Strigel, *The Emperor Maximillian & Family*, Academy of Fine Art, Madrid

On Philip I's unexpected, early death in 1506, his wife Joanna went into steep decline leading to mental instability and it was their eldest son, Charles, who in turn would succeed his parents in Castile and eventually his Spanish grandfather, Ferdinand, in Aragon. In effect this initiated a process of Spanish semi-unification, in which territories he was known as Charles I. He also succeeded his father as ruler of the Burgundian territories, his grandfather Maximillian as ruler of the traditional Habsburg lands, and finally he secured election to succeed Maximillian

as Holy Roman Emperor, outmanoeuvring (and outbidding) both Francis I of France and Henry VIII of England, the latter of whom was, incidentally, married to Charles's aunt, Catherine of Aragon. Thus is power consolidated!

Titian, *Isabella of Portugal*, Prado Museum, Madrid

In 1526 Charles I and/or V (depending on where he was at any given time) married his first cousin, Isabella of Portugal, and their eldest child, Philip, was born the following year. Untypically for royal marriages of the period, it was a true love match and when Isabella died in 1539, the King/Emperor was inconsolable and never remarried. Indeed it is said that is why he wore black for the rest of his life, which is how we see him painted by Titian on many occasions.

It was inevitable that Titian and the Emperor would be drawn to each other and in early 1548 he was invited to join the imperial court, then in Augsburg, where he

spent almost nine months. His original Habsburg patron was the Emperor's sister, Mary of Hungary, who commissioned several family portraits, not least the extraordinary image now in the Prado known as *The Mühlberg Portrait*, which is for many the finest equestrian portrait ever painted. This was memorably described by Charles Hope in the catalogue of the National Gallery's earlier exhibition on Titian of 2003, 'without any hint of triumphalism or bombast, it provides the most compelling and sympathetic image of Charles's conception of his imperial role, as a responsibility to be borne with courage and a sense of duty…'

Titian, *Charles V on Horseback (The Muhlberg Portrait)*, Prado Museum, Madrid

Titian's role as *de facto* court painter to the Habsburgs was by now established and he continued to produce a series of wonderful images of the Emperor. He also supplied to him a series of moving religious works, some of which Charles took with him when he abdicated in 1555 and retired to the monastery at Yuste in Extremadura, dying there in 1558.

Titian returned briefly to Venice from Augsburg but almost immediately he travelled to Milan, where he met the future Philip II, then a young man of 21, coming to the end of his formal education in preparation to succeed his father in some, (though not all) of his territories. He painted a full-length portrait of the young prince in armour, almost certainly the picture now in the Prado.

Titian, *Philip II in Armour*, Prado Museum, Madrid

Titian again met Philip when he retrune to Augsburg and where he spent the winter of 1550 – 1551, and it was at this time that the commission to produce a series of allegories based on Ovid's Metamorphoses was probably developed. We are not sure precisely when Titian painted the first of the sequence, an unprecedented type of picture commissioned by his young patron, one of *Danaë*, but it was with Philip

by the end of 1553. It was a subject which he had already painted for another patron, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (grandson of Pope Paul III) which is now in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples.

Titian, *Danaë*, Capodimonte Museum, Naples

Over the succeeding nine or so years, five further paintings were added to the original *Danaë*. The first was *Venus and Adonis*, now in the Prado. It was sent to England where Phillip was in residence with his new wife, Mary Tudor, and presumably either left with him when he returned to the continent or, was despatched to Spain once the marriage proved fruitless. The other paintings followed at regular intervals and remained in Philip's possession as a set until *Perseus and Andromeda* left the collection by 1579, it is thought as a gift. Over the succeeding decades and centuries the six canvases were dispersed in different directions (full details of which can be found in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition) until their recent arrival in London.

The physical presentation of the exhibition in London is ideal. The paintings are hung together in a single room and are explained via a series of accompanying panels, the tone of which presumes intelligence without specific knowledge of the paintings or their themes.

However, the physical condition of the paintings on display is a different matter. This varies from *Perseus and Andromeda*, the least well preserved of the group, and *The Death of Actaeon* where, for example, much of the original blue used for the sky has faded into a series of murky, brownish, half-tones to, in contrast, the amazing range of colours preserved on some of the other canvases.

Titian, *The Death of Actaeon*, The National Gallery, London

In the case of the *Perseus* canvas, this may result from its many journeys round Europe: it left Philip's collection as a presumed gift in 1579, was sold on and removed to Milan where it was apparently purchased by Anthony Van Dyck when he was in the city in 1623. It must have come with him to England when he arrived in London in 1632. After van Dyck's death, the painting was subsequently sold to France where it eventually came into the fabled Orléans collection, much of which ended up in British hands via the famous dispersal sales after the French Revolution. It was eventually purchased by the 3rd Marquess of Hertford and thus by descent to Sir Richard Wallace - so many changes of ownership cannot have helped preserve its presumed original brilliance?

Titian, *The Rape of Europa,* Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

By way of contrast the most ravishing of the paintings on display, both in a visual and literal sense, is *The Rape of Europa*, the final image in the original sequence of six. Lent by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, if you have previously seen this painting in situ in Boston, it was virtually impossible to see properly, given it was hung high on the wall and clearly needed restoration. Now restored, for this exhibition it has been hung at normal eye level and my, what a masterpiece it is? It was no surprise that in the exhibition it attracted the most attention from the small number of visitors who, given the circumstances of daily life at the time, took the chance to visit.

All these paintings are in a loose, painterly style, which marked a new stylistic departure for Titian and the most accomplished of them all is the Boston *Europa*. Unsurprisingly, of all the Titians in the Spanish royal collection, it was this painting which most impressed Rubens when he was in Madrid in the late 1620s, so much so that he made a remarkable copy of it, now in the Prado.

Rubens, *The Rape of Europa*, Prado Museum, Madrid

In the exhibition catalogue the essay by the specialist on colour in Venetian painting, Paul Hills, and another by Jill Dunkerton of the National Gallery (and co-written with her technical colleagues from the other lending museums), offer a wonderful series of insights into the technical processes of the artist, and indeed the restoration work carried out on them for the exhibition.

However, we also find ourselves confronted not only by the ravages and survivals of time, but by a major scholarly dispute concerning one of the paintings, the version of *Danaë* chosen for inclusion. Titian painted this subject on a number of occasions, the first for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, now in the Naples Capodimonte Museum. He then painted another version for Philip, replacing the putto in the Naples version with a servant woman who holds up a piece of cloth to capture the shower of gold falling upon Danae's naked and overtly sensuous form.

Titian, *Danaë*, The Wellington Collection, Apsley House, London

The difficulty is that until relatively recently, art historians have always believed that the version painted for Philip by Titian is *not* that exhibited in London, which comes from the Wellington Collection at Apsley House, but the painting which long remained in the Spanish Royal Collection and is now in the Prado.

The Wellington version was acquired by the 1st Duke as part of the war booty gifted to him in 1816 by Ferdinand VII. Thereafter it was thought to be one of several copies of the version in the Prado, these all painted with varying degrees of involvement by Titian, and in some cases with much studio assistance – an example of the latter being the version in the Hermitage in St Petersburg. The Wellington version was published by Paul Joannides in 2004, who suggested it was in fact the painting sent by Titian to Philip. After cleaning and restoration in 2014, it was exhibited in Madrid next to the Prado version, whose then curator, Miguel Falomir (now Director of the Prado) supported the Joannides reattribution, a view repeated in the catalogue of the present London exhibition.

Not all Titian specialists agreed and in 2007 the historian of Venetian art, Peter Humphrey, in his book *Titian*, rejected the reattribution. Two other Titian specialists, Charles Hope (most recently repeating his doubts in a letter published in this year's March issue of *The Art Newspaper*) who was one of those involved in the National Gallery's Titian exhibition in 2003 and the Gallery's then Senior

Curator, David Jaffé, have also rejected the primary status of the Wellington picture as that sent to Philip. Amongst other arguments, all three suggested that the relative quality of the Wellington version is not consistent with the quality of the other paintings in the series. They restate the view that the Prado version is still agreed by most to be by far the best version in existence (which I think it is, having seen the two paintings together when on show in Madrid some years ago), and as such is far more likely to have been the one sent to Philip.

Titian, *Danaë*, Prado Museum, Madrid

It is a matter of some regret that the London Gallery did not borrow the Prado version so that it could be hung, not only beside the Wellington version, but in company with the other paintings in the series. It is to be hoped that when the exhibition transfers to Madrid, this may be possible? And given that the Prado has the finest collection of paintings by Titian in the world, surely this is the stimulus needed to travel to Madrid, should we be able to do to.

Titian, *The Rape of Europa* (detail), Isabella Steward Gardner Museum, Boston