

TITIAN MADE VISUAL POETRY OF EROTICISM AND POWER

By *Maria H. Loh*

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Titian: *Danaë*, ca. 1554–53, oil on canvas, 45 by 75 3/4 inches.
WELLINGTON COLLECTION, APSLEY HOUSE, LONDON

With all that has transpired in the world since the beginning of the year, what can the Old Masters possibly tell us about our own lives now? As lockdown measures are eased and museums and galleries begin the cautious process of reopening to the public, one of the cultural highlights now on view is the National Gallery exhibition in London of “[Titian](#) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/titian/>): Love, Desire, Death,” which reunites the mythological cycle known as the *poesie* (<https://www.artnews.com/t/poesie/>). These “poetical pictures,” as Titian described them, were part of a series of monumental paintings commissioned from the Venetian Renaissance painter in the 1550s by the powerful Habsburg ruler, Philip II.¹ Based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the works are titled: *Danaë*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Perseus and Andromeda*, *Diana and Actaeon*, *Diana and Callisto*, and *The Rape of Europa*. Across the expanse of these towering, multi-figural compositions, bursting with color and light, gods and mortals alike are alternately seduced, abandoned, savaged, destroyed, and transformed: Danaë is struck by Jupiter

in the guise of a storm of gold coins; Venus clings to Adonis, who will die in the hunt; a princess being sacrificed to a monster awaits her airborne savior; a Theban prince unwittingly witnesses something he shouldn't have in the woods; a nymph's pregnancy is pitilessly revealed by her companions; and a Phoenician princess is conned by a bull.

Titian: *Venus and Adonis*, 1554, oil on canvas, 73 1/4 by 81 1/2 inches.
MUSEO NACIONAL DEL PRADO, MADRID

The first two paintings (*Danaë* and *Venus and Adonis*) were new versions of previous compositions Titian had made in the 1540s for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, and all six works figure among Titian's most ambitious and moving inventions. In London, these canvases are accompanied by the *Death of Actaeon*, which was conceived as part of the initial series, but remained in the artist's studio in Venice at the time of his death in 1576, and is now part of the permanent collection of the National Gallery. Titian was in his sixties when he received the commission in 1551; he was an old man by the time the final painting reached his patron in 1562. The National Gallery exhibition brings together Titian's *poesie* for the first time in three centuries, since the series was broken up and sold from the Spanish royal collection.

"This project is a dream that is suddenly happening," announced Matthias Wivel, curator of sixteenth-century Italian paintings at the National Gallery.² It is, indeed, a formidable triumph for Wivel and the three institutions where the exhibition will appear: the National Gallery, London; the Museo del Prado. Since the show was forced to shut a few days after it debuted this past March and did not reopen until July 9, its run at the National Gallery has been extended to January 17, 2021.

Interested readers can also watch the [insightful documentary short](https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/titian-love-desire-death/framing-titian)

(<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/titian-love-desire-death/framing-titian>)

produced by the National Gallery about the artworks' gilded neo-Renaissance frames, which were custom built for the show. Made from poplar wood sourced in Northern Italy and based on the complex period design that frames Titian's late *Pietà* (1576, unfinished) in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, the nearly 164 feet of carved molding was crafted for the most part following period techniques (Titian would have been pleased, given that his father was a timber merchant, among other things). In the National Gallery, the newly commissioned casings help give the series an immediate sense of coherence. Rather than independent episodes excerpted from a literary text, the works now read as a sustained meditation on the chaos that pervades an uncertain world.

The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition provides in-depth information about the seven pictures. For painters, in particular, there is an excellent essay by the National Gallery's Jill Dunkerton and a team of conservators from the participating institutions about Titian's technique, detailing the transfer process he used on the first two paintings, the numerous *pentimenti* and surface adjustments evident on the other canvases, and the invisible archaeology of viscous layers and translucent glazes that are revealed only through expert analysis of paint cross-sections.³

Titian: *The Death of Actaeon*, 1556-59, oil on canvas, 72 5/8 by 77 7/8 inches.
THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

Thomas Dalla Costa's translations of the letters exchanged between Titian and Philip II give us insight into the complexities of negotiating with a royal client who was prone to pay his artists only after great delay (if at all). In one instance, we hear Titian asking, like an anxious art student eager for feedback, whether "His Majesty cherishes and likes" the *Venus and Adonis* that the painter sent to him in London. In another suite of letters, he denounces Leone Leoni (a sculptor in Philip II's employ who tried to rob and kill Titian's son Orazio) as a "wicked soul," a

“counterfeiter,” and even as a “Lutheran.” There is also a short dispatch from 1574, two years before Titian’s death, in which Philip is bluntly given a list of fourteen works for which, like “all the many others I do not remember,” the artist was awaiting payment. If it seems brash for Titian to prod the king in this manner, the salutations remind us of the grossly uneven power dynamics that bound the painter to his royal patron—“your humble Titian kisses Your Highness’ feet,” “I kiss your hand all the way from here,” “Your Catholic Majesty’s most humble and devoted servant,” etc.⁴ (#_edn4) Renaissance artists may have risen from being “mere” artisans (as traditional art historical narrative insists), but this transformation was not without its share of new problems.

The exhibition itself is small: a handful of paintings accompanied by a video featuring interviews with art historians, conservators, and classicists. A skeptical viewer with little interest in Ovid, the Renaissance, or a series of paintings portraying terrible things happening mostly to women might even protest, “Why should I care?” So in an effort to make the *poesie* relevant to the concerns of twenty-first-century visitors, the National Gallery has tried to frame the cycle first as upscale pornography for the elite and then as images that prompt a discussion about sexual violence. “Sexy.” “Erotic.” “Naked ladies.” “Passion.” “Orgasm.” “Flirtation.” “Sex workers.” “Penetration.” “Rape.” “Ejaculation.” “Naughty.” “Buttocks.” “Bottoms.” “Aroused.” “Ecstasy.” These are just some of the provocative terms used to describe the paintings.

Viewing art nowadays is very different from what it was only four months ago. While museums and collections across the world quickly pivoted to online formats and other digitized means of content delivery, representation is simply not the same as reality. To hunch over a minuscule image glowing from the screen of a laptop, tablet, or smartphone is incommensurate with the experience of standing before a canvas measuring nearly 6 by 7 feet, much less being in a room surrounded by seven such paintings.

Even as the physical nature of museum experience has altered, so, too, has the way we receive and interpret imagery. The schizophrenic swing between frivolity and violence in the exhibition’s presentation led one critic to equate Philip II with Harvey Weinstein, but that joke isn’t funny anymore. While the initial pitch for the show sounded like “Girls! Girls! Girls!,” now the sensationalism of trying to make Titian’s nudes seem “sexy” and Philip II “a playboy” falls flat. Don’t get me wrong, there is everything in these paintings to arouse a puerile viewer—at least nineteen naked women are depicted across the seven canvases, and a letter by Titian’s friend Lodovico Dolce describes with much pleasure the view of the goddess’s butt in *Venus and Adonis*.⁵ The enduring power of the *poesie*, however, extends beyond being sexy pictures created for the eye of a highborn male. To fixate on the erotic while ignoring the stark realities of mid-sixteenth-century European geopolitics is to overlook the profound pathos and philosophical depth embedded in these scenes of domination and, in several instances, tragedy.

Titian: *The Rape of Europa*, 1560–62, oil on canvas, 70 by 80 3/4 inches.
ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

These paintings are not, strictly speaking, about “love”; nor are they about “rape culture” in the contemporary sense of the term, despite what the video accompanying the show at the National Gallery suggests. Connections to today’s moral issues are not explored in any sustained manner, and to simply raise such questions without providing any answers is a pity. There are many problems with referring to the women in these paintings as “rape victims.” From a contemporary perspective, the mythological encounters do not compare with the traumatic experiences of actual targets of sexual violence. From a literary point of view, such facile rubrics misrepresent the Ovidian cosmos where men, women, boys, and girls are destroyed equally, with indiscriminate brutality. Such false analogies muddle the more nuanced significance of corporeal metaphors in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—an epic poem about the merciless forces that govern the natural world, written after the end of the Roman Republic, in the shadow of the first emperor, Augustus. Failing to carefully define “rape culture,” the exhibition also forgoes the kind of historical analysis that could move critical discussion of the *poesie* beyond the standard accounts of visual sources, iconography, and provenance, which art historians have been rehashing for decades now.

Since rape—and indeed assault in all its forms—is first and foremost about power, about vicious force imposed by one body upon another without consent, we might well refocus our attention on Titian’s tremendous staging of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* with that uneasy dynamic in mind. Referred to also as *favole* (tales), a term like *poesie* that the painter used in his correspondence about the commission, these depictions of divine intervention and retribution are haunting allegories and admonitions that triggered the hopes and fears, the ambitions and anxieties, of viewers standing before them—or, at the very least, of their primary intended viewer, Philip II. Only a decade earlier, his aunt Mary of Hungary, governor of the troubled Habsburg Netherlands,

had commissioned from Titian four towering mythological paintings for her hunting lodge, depicting the cruel punishment of Tityus, Sisyphus, Ixion, and Tantalus; it was a series her nephew knew well.⁶ Both sets of mythological “fairy tales” can be read in the context of imperial Habsburg politics, for they thematize both the crushing power that comes with being part of the largest empire in the Renaissance and the shattering burdens that accompany that position. In this regard, Philip II might not always have identified with the aggressor.

As Titian aged a decade during the painting of the *poesie*, so, too, did his patron. In 1550, when he was twenty-three, Philip II had been called to the imperial city of Augsburg because his father, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, was angling to have him nominated as his successor. The inexperienced prince was eventually edged out by his uncle, Ferdinand I, but during that visit he met with Titian and commissioned the *poesie*. In 1553, Philip II was betrothed by his father to Mary Tudor; the Queen of England agreed to the union (the second of Philip’s four marriages), after seeing Titian’s portrait of the prince. Philip II was young, fashionable, and dashing in person as well. Mary, in contrast, was described by Spanish ambassadors as “in no way beautiful,” bearing “no eyebrows,” and “older than we were told.” There was no chemistry and it was reported that Philip II “acted in this like Isaac, letting himself be sacrificed to the will of his father.”⁷ [\(#_edn7\)](#) In his first year in London, however, he received *Venus and Adonis*. Although it was based on a painting made for a previous client, Philip II’s version is the most beautiful of the many iterations of this picture churned out by Titian’s workshop in the second half of the sixteenth century for princely collectors.

War was always on the horizon in the 1550s, and Philip II was often traveling back and forth between England and the Habsburg Netherlands to consult with the many branches of his family about military strategy and political alliances. Did the king see himself reflected in the young Adonis desperate to escape his mistress’s hold, but aware of the dangers that awaited him in the inhospitable world outside? Mary Tudor, it is said, stood by the window in tears whenever he would set off for the Continent, but she was no Venus.

Titian: *Perseus and Andromeda*, ca. 1554-56, oil on canvas, 72 by 78 1/2 inches.
THE WALLACE COLLECTION, LONDON

Between 1554 and 1556, Philip II was not only the King Consort of England, but also the King of Naples and Sicily, as well as his father's official representative in Spain and the Americas. In this last role, he found himself entangled in the intense *repartimiento* (distribution) debates with the Spanish settlers. Charles V had been opposed to the enslavement of Amerindians, but decades of war had emptied the royal coffers and the Habsburgs were in dire need of cash. Philip II conceded to the colonists the right to exploit Indigenous people as forced labor; they in turn sent him an astounding five million gold ducats. At about the same time, the importation of African slaves to Hispaniola began to intensify.⁸ It was also in these years that Philip received from Titian the painting of Andromeda rescued by Perseus.

While Titian was probably unaware of the king's larger-world concerns, we can imagine that the themes of captivity and deliverance in *Perseus and Andromeda* would have struck a chord with Philip II. The Ethiopian princess, described by Ovid as resembling a "marble statue," has been whitewashed here as a fair-skinned nude.⁹ The young royal was left as a propitiatory offering when her mother offended the sea gods. Did Philip II see himself as the high-flying, hero with winged sandals confronting a monstrous creature, or did he see himself as the princess, bound by her familial obligations, praying for salvation from an external force? Perhaps a little of both. These were messy, volatile times.

Titian: *Diana and Callisto*, 1556-59, oil on canvas, 73 1/2 by 80 inches
THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

The next paintings in Titian's series were *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto*. The two images depict the goddess of chastity and of the chase unleashing cruel punishments upon a hapless nobleman and a duped nymph. When Actaeon makes the mistake of stumbling upon Diana at her bath in the woods, he is transformed into a stag and ultimately ripped apart and devoured by his own hunting dogs. Callisto, meanwhile, is impregnated by Jupiter, who appears to her in the guise of her mistress, Diana. Titian does not show us the scene of her entrapment, but of the vicious, nearly gleeful revelation by the other nymphs of her condition (on the left) as Diana casts her out with an imperial gesture (on the right). The two Diana paintings were begun in 1556 and delivered in 1559. While Titian spent much of this time writing to Philip II about his unpaid royal pension and about the attempt on Orazio's life, the king was preoccupied with other weighty matters. In England, the persecution of Protestants under "Bloody Mary" (as his wife was called by some) intensified as men and women were burned at the stake for heresy. In 1556, Philip II was officially named the King of Spain, and soon after, both Charles V and Mary Tudor died. Drastic changes were about to take place again.

Titian: *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-59, oil on canvas, 72 5/8 by 79 1/2 inches.
THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

By the time he received *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto* in Toledo in late 1560, the king had a new wife, Elisabeth of Valois, daughter of the French King Henry II and Catherine de' Medici. While the variety of figures, poses, gestures, and expressions make these two of the most beloved paintings in the series, they are also the most poignant. If Philip II's experience of the hunt for heretical enemies in Tudor England had not shaped the way he might read the pathos of Callisto's brutal exposure, the extremism of the Spanish Inquisition surely would have—and here we move from biopolitics to necropolitics. In the second half of the 1550s, Protestant cells were being uncovered throughout the kingdom. More than 1,300 heretics were burned, hanged, or drowned in the Spanish Netherlands alone, and terrifying autos-da-fé were staged as heretics faced the choice of orthodoxy or death.¹⁰ Between 1559 and 1561, Spain was also ravaged by poor harvests, food shortages, torrential rains, floods, poverty, and starvation.

In April of 1562, Titian wrote to the king to inform him that the *Rape of Europa* was finished and on its way. Philip II was undoubtedly relieved that the long-drawn-out cycle was finally complete, although by the time the painting was unrolled and re-stretched in Madrid later that year, he may have identified more with Europa than with Jupiter in the form of the white bull. He was facing internal and external forces threatening to tear Europe apart, from the massacre of the Huguenots at Vassy, which would launch the French Wars of Religion, to the advance of the Ottomans in the East, where their reach was increasing by the week under the rule of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Under these circumstances, the *Rape of Europa* could be seen as an appropriate and compelling metaphor for real-life events.

Those resistant to the possibility of political, personal, and other forms of allegorical readings in the “great masterpieces” of the past—especially in paintings seemingly made for “pleasure”—might look to Titian and his circle for answers. The same Dolce who praised *Venus and Adonis* was also responsible for one of the most successful translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which

was first published in 1553 and dedicated to the Holy Roman Emperor (Philip II's father). By the sixth edition, published in 1561 and dedicated to Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (Philip II's personal adviser), allegorical summaries were added to explain how the Ovidian tales could be converted into Christian parables. For instance, the death of Adonis and his metamorphosis into the perennial anemone is likened to the arrival of winter and the promise of new life in the spring. Actaeon becomes a cipher for the careless man who errs and is plagued by his conscience. It is worth keeping in mind that in the decade encompassing the start and finish of the commission, Philip II had gone from being a "playboy" to the ruthless monarch of a sprawling empire wracked across its expanse by sedition, financial disaster, slavery, and war.

Titian: *Religion Assisted by Spain*, 1572-75, oil on canvas, 66 inches square.
MUSEO DEL PRADO, MADRID

It also goes without saying that nudity is not always about eroticism; sometimes it seeks to move the spectator in other ways, for instance, as a devotional aid and even as propaganda. The complex political allegory *Religion Saved by Spain* (ca. 1572–75), one of Titian's final paintings for Philip II, provides a case in point. Here we find a teary-eyed female nude, a personification of Religion besieged by the Protestants (represented by the snakes of heresy on the tree stump to her right) and the Muslims (embodied by the small turbaned figure in the center). While she may be a beautifully rendered figure, her nudity signifies faith, truth, and virtue rather than anything erotic. She is a memento mori, a sign of vulnerability and of all that is at risk in the finite, fallible human body. Her savior on the left—a personification of Spain—arrives with an army of angels, holding the Habsburg coat of arms in her right hand. The political content is on the surface, but Ovid's

Metamorphoses and Titian's *poesie* instruct us that surfaces are liable to unexpected, precipitous, and oftentimes extremely violent change.

This April, Peter Schjeldahl asked:

(<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/13/mortality-and-the-old-masters>) “Why does the art of what we term the Old Masters have so much more soulful heft than that of most moderns and nearly all of our contemporaries?” His sense was that they possess “a routine consciousness of mortality.” In this fragile moment—when the sudden, uninvited touch of another person or of an invisible external force can cause alarm and distress, prompting us to ruminate on our own helplessness and mortality—we comprehend more than ever before not only why Titian's moving spectacles of tragedy and fate might have mattered so much to men such as Philip II, but why they still matter today. All good artworks are palimpsests of lived experiences. They are accretions of possibilities. The *poesie* are about Ovid and they're about Philip II, but like polyvalent verses, they are also about the instability, multiplicity, and simultaneity of form and meaning. In this, they are also like philosophy, for they challenge us, they make us feel uneasy, they force us to think outside our own finitude. Ovid opens the *Metamorphoses*, after all, with the declaration: “Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed into different bodies.”¹¹ ([#_edn11](#)).

Titian: *Noli Me Tangere*, ca. 1514, oil on canvas, 43 1/4 by 36 inches.
NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

The Old Masters matter now more than ever before, but then they always have. In the middle of World War II, the *Times* published a letter from a reader who lamented, “Because London's face

is scarred and bruised these days, we need more than ever to see beautiful things.” Moved by the suggestion, the director of the National Gallery, Kenneth Clark, retrieved Titian’s *Noli me Tangere* (ca. 1514) from the Welsh slate mine where it had been taken for safekeeping and put it on display for a war-weary public in 1942, as the first painting in a series known as the “**Picture of the Month.**” (<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/picture-of-the-month/picture-of-the-month-october-2019>) The devotional image spoke of resurrection but also of uncertainty. On one side, Christ’s body hovers between life and death, between heaven and earth, while on the other side we see the Magdalene’s desire to connect with it and be transformed. Given the social isolation and physical distancing of these extraordinary past few months, we are all like the Magdalene, full of desire, not necessarily for an erotic encounter in this instance but for a more profound connection that would make us feel bonded to something beyond ourselves.

It is both strange and comforting to think that those magnificent artworks hung in the silence of the shuttered National Gallery for three months. Once, they stood in Titian’s studio in Venice, then they were mounted in Philip II’s residence, awaiting his gaze to wake them from their slumber. In early March, they appeared bold and glorious when they were reunited in London after three hundred years apart, and now they again welcome visitors to breathe life into them. When one day we have all long since turned to dust, these paintings will persist. In 1562, the year in which Titian’s final mythological painting arrived in Spain, Giovanni Battista Pittoni published a collection of emblems. Featured among the formidable pantheon of illustrious men in the *Imprese di diversi prencipi, duchi, signori, e d’altri personaggi et huomini letterati et illustri* was Titian, whose motto read: NATURA POTENTIOR ARS. “Art,” he knew all too well, “is more powerful than nature.”

1 In addition to holding multiple other noble titles, Philip (1527–1598) was King of England and Ireland (1554–58), King of Naples and Sicily (1554–98), King of Spain and Sardinia (1556–98), and King of Portugal (1580–98).

2 Matthias Wivel, “Acknowledgements,” *Titian: Love, Desire, Death*, London, National Gallery, and New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020, p. 9.

3 Jill Dunkerton, Ana González Mozo, Gianfranco Pocobene, and Marika Spring, “Modes of Painting: Titian’s Technique in the *Poesie*,” *ibid.*, pp. 60–89.

4 Thomas Dalla Costa, “The *Poesie* in Correspondence,” *ibid.*, pp. 192–99.

5 Discussed in Matthias Wivel, “Divine and Fatal: An Account of Titian’s *Poesie*,” *ibid.*, p. 22.

6 See Miguel Falomir Faus, *Las Furias: Alegoría política y desafío artístico*, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2014.

7 Henry Kamen, *Philip of Spain*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997, pp. 58–59.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

9 The Classical tradition refers to Andromeda as being dark-skinned, but Ovid’s phrase “marble statue” was misinterpreted by subsequent generations to mean *white* marble statue. On this iconographical discrepancy see Elizabeth McGrath, “The Black Andromeda,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 55, 1992, pp. 1–18.

10 Kamen, pp. 75–81.

11 Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid: Twenty-Four Passages from the Metamorphoses*, London, Faber and Faber, 1997, p. 3.

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