

# The Worldly Painters of Venice

by Gail Leggio

The emblematic figure of the artist is the painter at the easel, holding a palette loaded with oil paints and confronting a stretched canvas. (The novelist pounding away at an old-fashioned typewriter—with the satisfying clackety-clack of the keys on the soundtrack—similarly retains its iconic hold on our imaginations, whatever the changes in the technology of the creative process.) The prevailing image of the painter can be dated to a specific time and place, sixteenth-century Venice, and to the three artists examined in “Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice,” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. During the four decades when their careers overlapped, they developed the craft of oil painting, fully celebrated the thriving culture of pagan humanism and shrewdly played the art-scene game, competing to market themselves to patrons while enjoying a notable degree of creative autonomy.<sup>1</sup>

Special circumstances in Venice contributed to these developments. The damp climate was unsuitable for fresco painting. Canvas paintings, executed in the studio, were portable. Pictures could become collectible as examples of a master’s work, and connoisseurship flourished. There were many patrons, some outside the centralized establishments of the Venetian church and state. In his introduction to the catalogue, Frederick Ilchman gives two examples of



Giovanni Bellini and Workshop, *Virgin and Child with Saints*, 1505–08

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK CITY

how the system could be manipulated. First, Titian (c. 1480–1576) had a long-standing relationship with the Spanish court and chose his own subjects for paintings delivered to his patron, Philip II. Second, the *scuoli*, or lay confraternities, of Venice expanded the pool of patrons. For a competition to decorate the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Tintoretto (1518–94) outflanked his rivals by installing a completed painting while the other finalists were presenting drawings, as requested by the judges. The series of paintings Tintoretto executed cover the floors and ceilings of the two-story Scuola and are too big to travel. Anyone wanting to understand the full glory of Tintoretto must go to Venice. The paintings, executed 1565–88, have been inspiring rapture since El Greco called Tintoretto's *Crucifixion* (1565) the greatest painting in the world. John Ruskin was awed by the "stupendous developments of the imagination" in Tintoretto, "the distinction of the imaginative verity from falsehood, on the one hand, and from realism, on the other." (*Modern Painters*, Vol. II, Part III, Section II, chapter III)

Henry James picked up the same theme, calling Tintoretto "almost a prophet." "Before his greatest works," James writes, "you are conscious of a sudden evaporation of old doubt and dilemmas, and the eternal problem of the conflict between idealism and realism dies the most natural of deaths." Tintoretto applies paint in "a flash of inspiration...that he committed to canvas with all the vehemence of his talent."<sup>2</sup> Here, the language of paint-handling seems almost proleptic of Abstract Expressionism. Tintoretto is one of the heroes of James Elkins's book *What Painting Is*. He writes:

Shimmering layers and evanescent tints are the stuff of painting: they are entirely and insistently paint, and yet at every moment they seem to deliquesce and melt into thin air. The paint...will leave the canvas behind and become what Tintoretto needed it to be—a robe in a painting of the Golden Calf....When I say that painting is at its best when it pushes towards transcendence, but does not escape from itself, this is what I mean.<sup>3</sup>

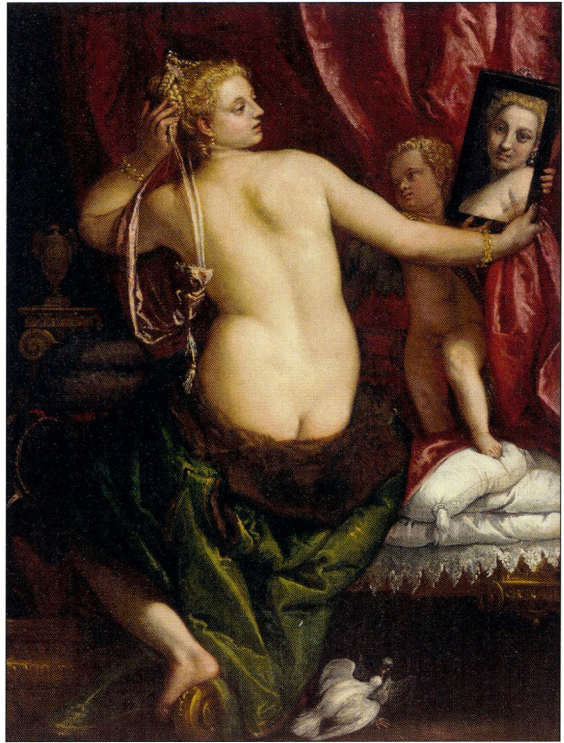
The difficulty of presenting Tintoretto in reproduction is obvious. The Boston show, with fifty-seven works by three different masters, gives a glimpse of Tintoretto's genius. A 2007 retrospective at the Prado had the advantage of juxtaposing the Venetian with his admirers El Greco and Velázquez.<sup>4</sup>

A couple of works in the Boston exhibition, however, suggest how complex an artist Tintoretto is and why his work appeals to viewers whose art historical experience includes modernism. Tintoretto's love of paint as a physical substance and bold, idiosyncratic brushstrokes are factors, as well as the psychological intensity of his off-kilter compositions. The catalogue authors devote a chapter to questions surrounding his *Nativity* (late 1550s, reworked



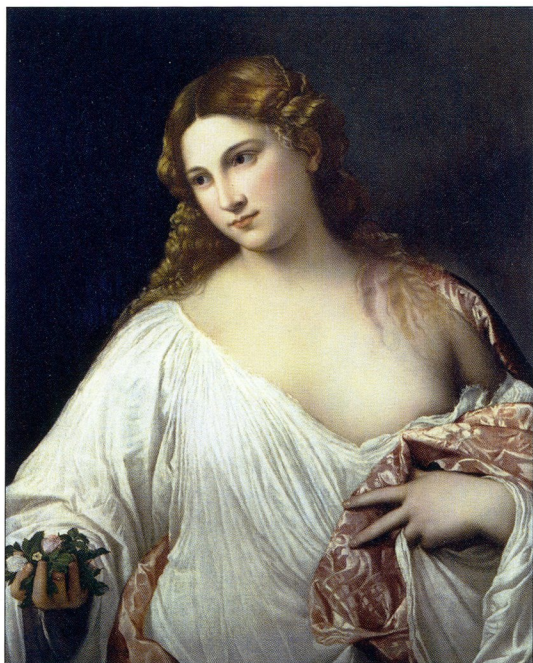
Paolo Veronese, *Venus with a Mirror*  
(*Venus at Her Toilette*), mid-1580s

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OMAHA, NEBRASKA



1570s or 1580s): the contribution of other hands, the evidence uncovered about paint layers during restoration, even the puzzling iconography. They tentatively identify a woman and man in the central figure group as Saint Anne and a shepherd.<sup>5</sup> What strikes the viewer is the dynamic surface. The composition is reasonably symmetrical, with the holy infant at the center, set off by white swaddling clothes. Flanking the manger scene are background incidents—the approaching Magi, on the left, and shepherds, on the right. But everything seems in flux. The figures half-stand, half-crouch, as if about to fall to their knees. The artist's brushwork is nervous, and the highlights on the drapery flicker with phosphorescence. The image is volatile, simultaneously theatrical and otherworldly.

Tintoretto's *Susannah and the Elders* (c. 1555–56) is a masterpiece. The nude, blonde, curvaceous Susannah is elegantly coiffed and jeweled, but the lunar pallor of her skin looks almost ghostly against the surrounding darkness. Elkins compares the dark backdrops of many Renaissance paintings to the alchemist's primordial matter: "Digestive darks are passages of incipient shapes, of colors about to come into existence, and other colors fading away."<sup>6</sup> The darkness in Tintoretto's picture becomes a bower—framed by a pool, a wall covered with vines and tiny pink roses, and a cluster of trees—that takes up most of the composition and presents Susannah like a pearl on jeweler's velvet. A bald-pated elder wrenches himself into a corner of the picture space, trying to get a peek. He is a ludicrous figure, unlike the insidious bullies who menace the vulnerable girl in Artemisia Gentileschi's 1610 *Susanna and the Elders*. Tintoretto's Biblical elders are simply outclassed by his surprisingly pagan Susannah. Her triumph is reinforced by the composition, as the angled wall slices the picture into unequal sections. The mirror in which she



Titian, *Flora*, 1516–18

GALLERIA DEGLI UFFIZI, FLORENCE

admires herself is foreshortened in a different direction, so it seems to float as an abstract shape. Tintoretto's paint-handling, like his spatial relationships, has a quicksilver energy, moving like an electric current just under the surface.

With Titian, in contrast, everything is “luxe, calme et volupté,” to borrow the title of one of Henri Matisse's most

*symboliste* works (1904–05). Tintoretto's *Susannah* is seductive in her nakedness, but her flesh is cool. In *Venus with a Mirror* (c. 1555), Titian paints flesh that glows like an ember, and he sets off the warm ivory of the goddess's skin with a robe of embroidered ruby velvet and brown fur. Titian was a virtuoso at layering paint and glazes (mixes of thinned paint and varnish). This *Venus* is too confident to be coquettish. Another *Venus with a Mirror* (mid-1580s) in the exhibition, by Titian's protégé Paolo Veronese (1528–88), has many of the same elements—the putti holding the looking glass, rich drapery covering the legs yet showing off the rest of the body—but looks mannered and provocative, in comparison. Titian's *Venus* is serene, “subtly of herself contemplative.” The phrase is from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1867 sonnet “Body's Beauty,” written to accompany his painting of the Biblical seductress Lilith as an opulent blonde in the Venetian manner.<sup>7</sup>

Titian is the supreme sensualist of the Venetian cinquecento, but his works also have a philosophical gravitas. Love conquers all, and the line between sacred and profane love blurs, as we see in two works not in this exhibition but discussed in the catalogue. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (c. 1538, Uffizi, Florence) has a frank sexuality that seems anything but domestic, yet the background scene of two servants at a cassone, or wedding chest, suggests the image may be epithalamic. *Venus Blindfolding Cupid* (1560s, Galleria Borghese, Rome) can be read as a channeling of erotic passion into enduring love, a theme reinforced by the luminous yet modestly draped figure of the goddess.<sup>8</sup> One of the stars of the Boston exhibition is Titian's *Danaë* (1544–46), the version from the Museo



Nazionale di Capodimonte in Naples. The story of Danaë is taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Her father, Acrisius, fearful of a prophecy he will be killed by his daughter's child, locks her away in a tower. Jupiter circumvents this obstacle by appearing in a shower of gold. Leonard Barkan sees the picture as a cornerstone of the Ovidian Renaissance. The "mixed space" of boudoir and terrace "dramatizes the intrusion via metamorphosis of pagan nature into familiar domesticity, and the emblem of sensual beauty accounts for the power that can shine through walls and thus capture the desire of the god."<sup>9</sup> Danaë is both sensuous and serene. Her languid posture refers to models such as the Hellenistic *Sleeping Ariadne* and Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, an association reinforced by the presence of a cupid. Despite the implicit provocation of her spread legs, the painting transcends any notion of pornography. The layers of paint Titian builds up gives a golden luminosity to her flesh that outshines Jupiter's comparatively dull shower of coins. Danaë could be presented as the consort of a god. In medieval allegories, she was seen as a pagan prefiguration of Mary, miraculously impregnated. W.B. Yeats knows this tradition well, evoking Semele, Danaë and Leda, as well as an apocalyptic Annunciation in his poem "The Mother of God":

The threefold terror of love; a fallen flare  
Through the hollow of an ear;  
Wings beating about the room;  
The terror of all terrors that I bore  
The Heavens in my womb.<sup>10</sup>

Yeats's version of the myth reflects modernist anxieties; Titian's epitomizes Renaissance confidence, a celebration of the mother of the hero Perseus. Danaë, with her shower of coins, could also be seen as a courtesan, a theme Titian hints at in the *Danaë* (c. 1553) he executed for Philip II. The cupid has been replaced by an old maidservant, who spreads her apron to catch the coins, which are a harder, brighter shade of gold. Titian's principal subject in both is a moment of ripe physicality that inspires him as a painter and visual poet. Tintoretto's *Danaë* (late 1570s–early 1580s), executed with a studio assistant, doesn't have Titian's pagan poetry. Instead of reclining majestically, Tintoretto's Danaë sits awkwardly, drawing away from her fate. Her diagonal movement is echoed by the nurse extending her apron.

Tintoretto was more of a challenge to Titian in Biblical subjects, displaying a dark intensity and dynamism that won him many commissions. The anecdote about Titian dismissing the apprentice Tintoretto from his studio may be apocryphal, but it reflects the personality conflicts of the time. Titian blocked Tintoretto, wherever possible, and promoted the career of his protégé Veronese. The third master in the Boston exhibition may be the least intellectually substantial, but he is a marvelous painter. His palette is softer and

lighter than Titian's or Tintoretto's, and his approach to subjects, sacred or secular, is evenhandedly buoyant. When Veronese got into trouble over a Last Supper that featured dwarves and parrots, he nonchalantly changed the name of the picture to *Feast in the House of Levi* (1573), a less solemn Gospel subject.

Veronese's *Virgin and Child with Angels Appearing to Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Paul the Hermit* (1562) is a typically skillful religious work. Originally made for the Benedictine church in San Benedetto Po, near Mantua, it is designed for a position above the altar, with a low point of view. The two hermit saints are foreshortened. Anthony's head is tipped back at an awkward angle, and his mouth is open in amazement. The saints get the immediate impact of the miraculous apparition, but only we viewers outside the picture enjoy the full lyrical beauty of the gracious Madonna and Child on her white cloud. The look of Venetian heaven, with its glowing, healthy saints and angels, and bright, clear colors, can be traced back to Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516). In this exhibition, *Virgin and Child with Saints* (1505–08), by Bellini and Workshop, exemplifies that aesthetic. There are several ways for an artist to combine different orders of being in the same pictorial space. The flat gold ground of many medieval images takes us to the alternate reality of hagiographic legend, while Caravaggio's angels erupt from Stygian darkness to relieve the realistic physicality of a martyrdom. Veronese negotiates the ontological shifts in two ways, through spatial organization and color. The hermits in the lower half of Veronese's picture are rough men in earth tones; the Virgin and her entourage, at the top, shimmer in silky blues, greens and golds. The rich blonde curls of the angels belong to a different world than the dirty white beard and matte dark hair of the hermits. Yet Veronese makes the encounter convincing.

Veronese's real strength, however, is as a pagan painter, as exemplified in this exhibition by his *Mars and Venus United by Love* (mid-1570s). The adulterous relationship between the two deities could be glossed in a variety of ways, including satiric scenes of the lovers surprised by the cuckolded Vulcan. Veronese offers a sensuous allegory, as the warrior bends to the civilizing influence of love and beauty. Mars is a muscular, bearded soldier, skin darkened by the sun, but he chivalrously pays homage to the slender, pearly-white Venus. A putto ties their legs together with a pink ribbon, and the drops of milk that fall from Venus's breast are a sign of fertility. Another putto restrains Mars's horse in the background. Venus has thrown her chemise—a wonderfully painted drapery study—over a garden wall, and a stone satyr supports a bit of classical ruin. The gods have been reborn into the Renaissance, and more specifically, into the richly colored glamour of the Venetian Renaissance. Veronese's special style as a colorist reaches a climax here. Titian and Tintoretto aim at overall tonalities, a pink-gold for Titian, an earth-tone amber for Tintoretto. Veronese emphasizes local color, areas that stand out vividly from their surroundings—Mars's satiny rose cloak and bronzey gold armor, a branch of big, flattened copper leaves, the pale gold of Venus's hair, the several shades of blue in the sky.



The Venetian Renaissance is a complex phenomenon, but one of its keynotes is love of the world. Ruskin, an unlikely partisan, coming from a background of Protestant evangelical fervor, acknowledged the power of beautiful faces and strong limbs, of “strange, fiery, fantastic energies, and...the splendor of substance.”<sup>10</sup> The three artists spotlighted in this exhibition are worldly in a pragmatic way, ambitious and successful, and they rejoice in the senses. But they are not frivolous. They understand the sacredness of physical beauty too well to trivialize it. Titian’s *Flora* (1516–18), painted more than half a century before Veronese’s *Mars and Venus*, sets the tone for this triumphal era. It’s a half-length depiction of the goddess, with loose red-gold hair and a handful of blossoms. Her white chemise suggests modesty but slips invitingly from her shoulder. The *Flora* in Botticelli’s *Primavera* (1479–81) is very different, pale and willowy, playing some obscure part in an esoteric pageant. Botticelli’s allegorical tableau calls out for iconographic exegesis. For Titian, *Flora* is not so much a mythological idea as an embodiment of voluptuousness—the pleasures of the flesh, the pleasures of paint. “Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice” is on view through August 16, 2009, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Avenue of the Arts, 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115. Telephone (617) 369-3448. On the web at [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org). The exhibition continues at the co-organizing institution, the Musée du Louvre, Paris, September 14, 2009–January 4, 2010.

#### NOTES

1. These issues are discussed by Frederick Ilchman and other scholars in the catalogue, *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2009).
2. Henry James, *Italian Hours*, ed., John Auchard (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 56–57.
3. James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How To Think about Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 190–91.
4. For an excellent analysis, see Andrew Butterfield, “Brush with Genius,” *New York Review of Books* (April 26, 2007), pp. 10–14.
5. *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese*, pp. 165–73.
6. Elkins, p. 139.
7. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed., Jerome McGann (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 161–62.
8. *Venus Blindfolding Cupid* was on view in the exhibition “Art and Love in Renaissance Italy,” which opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and traveled to the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.
9. Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 190.
10. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 244.
11. From *Modern Painters*, Vol. V, cited in *Ruskin Today*, ed., Kenneth Clark (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 200.