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Titian's secret revealed

He was simply better than anyone else

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Titian, *Venus with an Organist and Cupid* (around 1555). © Photographic Archive. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

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Although their publication is separated by two years and an intervening volume dedicated to Joshua Reynolds, these two volumes on Titian's *Painting Technique* volumes—respectively covering his work up to and after 1540—of the *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* form a continuous text. In line with a welcome trend towards monographic issues, they contain technical studies of all the paintings by or currently attributed to Titian owned by the National Gallery, plus four others that have been examined in the National Gallery's laboratory: the Ashmolean's *Cupid* (originally rectangular but cut to a roundel); Longleat's small *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*; the Hermitage's very large *Flight into Egypt* (once the companion of Sebastiano's *Kingston Lacy Judgment of Solomon*); and Glasgow's *Christ and the Adulteress*.

These studies provide all the information techno-nerds might desire, but they are also required reading for techno-dorks because they establish clearly the artistic and expressive reasons for the executive decisions that they document.

Scientific investigation has proved the most productive approach to Titian's work in recent years and much of the credit for this must go to the National Gallery's scientific staff, directed by Ashok Roy, whose achievement is deservedly praised by Sir Nicholas Penny in his introduction to Volume 36. Developments in infrared technology have begun to establish the extent to which Titian used drawing when laying in his compositions. Thus, for example, it can now be seen how he thought and rethought the gestures and movement of Actaeon in his *Diana and Actaeon*.

Perhaps more surprising is the x-ray revelation that in his *Diana and Callisto* the nymph who draws up Callisto's garments was initially draped. "Celebrated as one of his most remarkable nudes," this nymph's small breasts, distended abdomen and jutting buttocks must record the impact of a specific young woman, whom Titian felt impelled to include even at the cost of blurring the story, for she now distracts attention from the exposure of Callisto's pregnancy. In the Vienna version, weakly executed but more coherent narratively, Titian reverted to his first idea.

In another case—the *Boy with the Bird*, extracted from a *Venus and Adonis*—x-ray and paint-layer analysis have shown that he covers a landscape composition, otherwise known now only in a woodcut after Titian. This landscape in turn covers what seems to be a passage of drapery excised from some abandoned project. Whatever the precise status of this little painting, technical examination has at least rescued it from the limbo of "early 17th-century pastiche".

Titian liked to paint on used canvases. They introduced an element of the arbitrary in tonal structure and surface relief that he found stimulating to play against or adapt. In the *Venus with a Mirror* in Washington, DC, for example, the final surface incorporates a fragment of drapery from an underlying double portrait.

Two minor criticisms might be levelled. One is that a few additional paintings not owned by the National Gallery, such as the *Halifax Portrait of a Man*, could have been included. Another is that more might have been said about related works: the *Vienna Diana and Callisto* is not illustrated and barely mentioned, while the entry on the National Gallery's studio version of *Venus and Adonis* could profitably have been complemented by reference to Dulwich's *Venus and Adonis*, another studio production and not, as believed until recently, a later copy.

I was also surprised by two omissions: that of Damiano Mazza's *Ganymede*, long attributed to Titian and probably produced under his aegis; and that of NG4222, acquired in 1926 as a *bozzetto* for Titian's *Gloria*, but now considered a much later confection, laid in following Cornelis Cort's engraving and revised colouristically from the painting. This judgment is probably correct, but there are contra-indications.

The individual entries, clearly and fluently written, are preceded by an overall survey by the main authors. Their account is estimable, although one might question the hypothesis that sharp-focus passages in *The Tribute Money* (comparable ones are seen in *Spain Coming to the Aid of Religion*) were executed not by an assistant but by a bespectacled Titian. Had Titian put on his glasses, he would have seen the whole surface with equal clarity and co-ordinated its parts appropriately. Surely such passages, obtrusively discrepant, are the work of the same dull hand. In contrast, detail in the Fitzwilliam's *Tarquin and Lucretia* of 1571, a painting not analysed here although it was loaned to the National Gallery for a long period, is perfectly integrated, without visual jolts.

Perhaps the single most significant conclusion reached by the authors is that Titian's pigments and methods do not differ notably from those of his contemporaries. Titian did not have a secret: he simply employed his materials more richly and sensitively. Great poets and weak poets have access to the same words: what counts is what they make of them.

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