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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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“Can we ever look at Titian’s paintings the same way again?” asked Holland Cotter when he reviewed the reunion of the master’s *Poesie* paintings at Boston’s Stewart Gardner Museum for the New York Times back in August 2021. The show, which was on view in London and Madrid before coming to Boston (where it closed on January 2, making this an admittedly rather untimely *Abwechslung*) brought together, for the first time in over 400 years, all six works that the Spanish King Philip II had commissioned from Titian, then Europe’s most celebrated painter, in 1550 and which the Venetian master created over a period of ten years between 1551 and 1562.



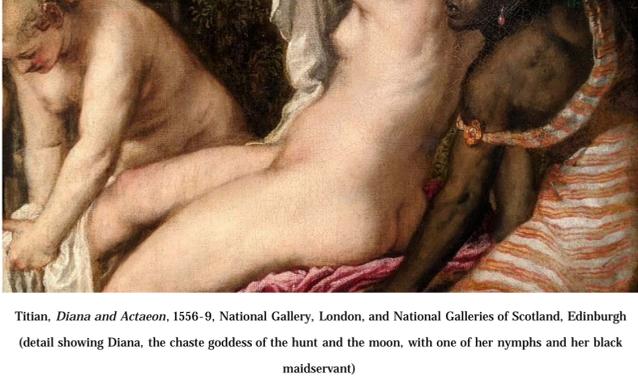
Titian: *Love, Desire, Death* at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, in December 2021

All show scenes from Greek mythology as recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* which Cotter summarizes, not incorrectly, as “repeated images of gender-based power plays and exposed female flesh.” Beyond this, the cycle is hardly coherent and Titian himself referred to these works merely as *poesie*—which reminds one of Dürer referring to his densely layered and ever-reinterpreted engraving *Knight, Death, and Devil* simply as the *Der Reuter* (the rider).



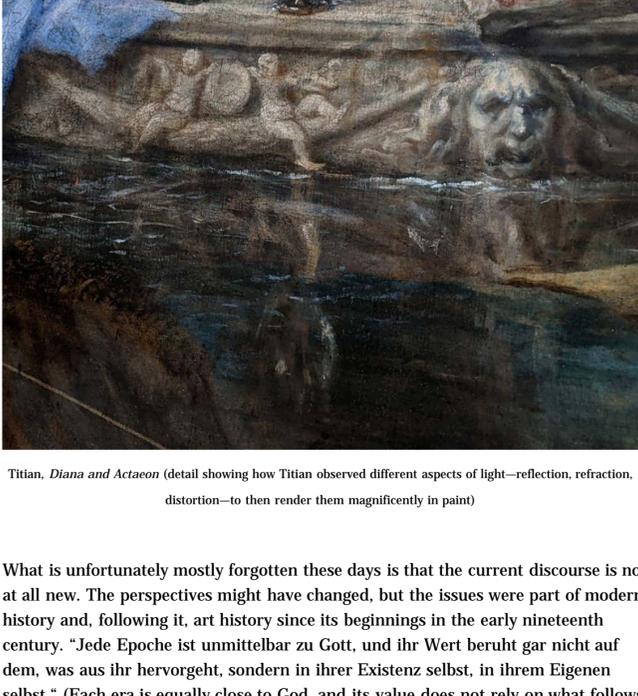
Titian, *The Rape of Europa*, 1559-62, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (detail)

Cotter observes “how, in art from the distant past viewed through the lens of the political present, aesthetics and ethics can clash.” The point is valid. Our current culture wars have laid open the urgent need to pay attention to questions of gender, race, sexuality, and other forms of difference. However, as the term “culture war” implies, these discussions are now all too often leading to the kind of polarization that has been pulling so many western societies apart over recent years. Both sides have staked their claims. For the cultural context this means on the one hand the belief that each artwork only deals with the time in which it was made, on the other the demand that all art is answerable to contemporary scrutiny.



Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-9, National Gallery, London, and National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh (detail showing Diana, the chaste goddess of the hunt and the moon, with one of her nymphs and her black maidservant)

What makes these issues especially relevant in the visual arts is their unique relationship with the viewer. Language changes over time. Any work of German literature written before Luther is difficult to understand for the modern German reader. *Althochdeutsch* (old high German), spoken between ca. 750–1050, is practically a foreign language; *Mittelhochdeutsch* (middle high German), in use until ca. 1350, is even more tricky since it often uses words that we are still familiar with but have distinctly different meanings. Literature in foreign languages needs translation. Then there is also the temporal aspect in the reception of other art forms: literature, translated or not, has to be read, music needs to be performed. Keith Moxey summarized this succinctly when he wrote: “The structural relation of art historians to the past seems markedly different from that of other historians.”



Titian, *Diana and Actaeon* (detail showing how Titian observed different aspects of light—reflection, refraction, distortion—to then render them magnificently in paint)

What is unfortunately mostly forgotten these days is that the current discourse is not at all new. The perspectives might have changed, but the issues were part of modern history and, following it, art history since its beginnings in the early nineteenth century. “Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott, und ihr Wert beruht gar nicht auf dem, was aus ihr hervorgeht, sondern in ihrer Existenz selbst, in ihrem Eigenen selbst.” (Each era is equally close to God, and its value does not rely on what follows out of it but on its own existence, its own self.) Thus wrote Leopold von Ranke, the nestor of German historians, in 1854, thereby stating not only the necessity to understand the past on its own terms, but also the belief in historicism’s ability to fully reconstruct any such past epoch in an objective way. Friedrich Nietzsche was among the first and most vehement critics of this view. In his second *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtung* (*Untimely Meditation*; *he, too, was Untimely ...*) of 1874, titled *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (*On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*—“On the advantage of history for life and its abuse in life” would be a more literal but less succinct translation), he differentiated between a monumental and an antiquarian type of history, both of which associated with historicism (erecting monuments; taking inventory), and the need for a critical history that queries the past and also has the right to judge and condemn.



Titian, *Diana and Callisto*, 1556-9, National Gallery London, and National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh (detail showing Diana and some of her nymphs carrying the goddess’s hunting gear)

Nietzsche’s starkly opposed positions feel familiar in today’s context, and this, I believe, is what is so worrisome. Critical reflection on these questions did not stop back in the 1870s. Many productive aspects of Nietzsche’s polemic influenced, for example, thinkers like Michel Foucault. Perhaps the most astute philosophical analysis of historicism’s *shortfalls* is Hans-Georg Gadamer’s study *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960, transl. *Truth and Method*, 1975). Somewhat more lucid than Foucault or many of the other French master thinkers, Gadamer points to the unattainability of historicism’s claim of an objective reconstruction of the past, reminding us that no later historian can ever deny her or his own time when looking back. Willingly or not, the later historian’s perspective is always informed by her or his own present and hence in one way or another prejudiced. Our own *Bedeutungshorizont* (horizon of interpretation) is unavoidably part of all our scholarly endeavors.



Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1554-6, The Wallace Collection, London (detail showing how the turbulent waves in which the sea monster approaches are rendered with brushwork that is akin to “pure painting”)

None of this, though, makes historical research superfluous. On the contrary, art historians like Michael Baxandall and, for that matter, Keith Moxey have shown the importance to understand “a work of art within the full complexity of its cultural and social relations” (Moxey) which will help us not only to “sharpen our perception of the pictures” but also “our perception of the society” in which they were made (Baxandall). Holland Cotter’s questions were therefore not wrong. However, the way they were presented gives the impression that they have never been asked before. What they imply is that only we, in our here and now, have not only the right questions but also the right answers, and that both transcend time and place. Is this self-assuredness really that different from that of Ranke once one substitutes “god” with “truth”? Or worse: one can’t help feeling that the insistence on strict contemporaneousness leads to a denial of even the possibility of historicization, transporting us back into some prelapsarian state when values could still be universal.

It is necessary, I believe, to stop pretending that we never before had tools for critical analysis, and that they had never been applied before. Historicism and its critics have taught us that “the past is a foreign country.” That we can perceive a painting, sculpture or print instantaneously by simply looking at it, without recourse to translation or performance, is part of visual art’s aesthetic power. Yet it is also a danger when we ignore what Moxey describes as the “structural” difference of the visual arts compared to other cultural creations. (In the specific case of Titian’s paintings, one should also remember that the artist’s title “*poesie*” suggests that he wanted them to be seen as visual equivalents of poetry.) One might argue, therefore, that art history’s role is especially urgent. We need the discipline to remind us of the distance and strangeness of any work of art, not despite but *because* of the unmediated aesthetic power it can hold over us even after the loss of its previous, historical determined functions. (The wall labels in the Boston show, by the way, did an excellent job of pointing out these complexities.)



Titian, *Danaë*, 1551-3, Wellington Collection, Apsley House, London (detail)

Seeing Titian’s paintings as “exposed female flesh” is naive, and “analyzing” them as “gender-based power plays” betrays a presentism that is—against its best intentions—uncritical and ultimately even ahistorical since it forgets that our current interpretations, too, can never be absolute but are as much subject to change as all others that came before.

