THE EARLIER WORK OF TITIAN

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The Earlier Work of Titian by Claude Phillips

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CLAUDE PHILLIPS

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By

CLAUDE PHILLIPS

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INTRODUCTION

THERE is no greater name in Italian art—therefore no greater in art—than that of Titian. If the Venetian master does not soar as high as Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo, those figures so vast, so mysterious, that clouds even now gather round their heads and half-veil them from our view; if he has not the divine suavity, the perfect balance, not less of spirit than of answering hand, that makes Raphael an appearance unique in art, since the palmiest days of Greece; he is wider in scope, more glowing with the life-blood of humanity, more the poet-painter of the world and the world's fairest creatures, than any one of these. Titian is neither the loftiest, the most penetrating, nor the most profoundly moved among the great exponents of sacred art, even of his time and country. Yet is it possible, remembering the *Entombment* of the Louvre, the *Assunta*, the *Madonna di Casa Pesaro*, the *St. Peter Martyr*, to say that he has, take him all in all, been surpassed in this the highest branch of his art? Certainly nowhere else have the pomp and splendour of the painter's achievement at its apogee been so consistently allied to a dignity and simplicity hardly ever overstepping the bounds of nature. The sacred art of no other painter of the full sixteenth century—not even that of Raphael himself—has to an equal degree influenced other painters, and moulded the style of the world, in those great ceremonial altar-pieces in which sacred passion must perforce express itself with an exaggeration that is not necessarily a distortion of truth.

And then as a portraitist—we are dealing, be it remembered, with Italian art only—there must be conceded to him the first place, as a limner both of men and women, though each of us may reserve a corner in his secret heart for some other master. One will remember the disquieting power, the fascination in the true sense of the word, of Leonardo; the majesty, the penetration, the uncompromising realism on occasion, of Raphael; the happy mixture of the Giorgionesque, the Raphaelesque, and later on the Michelangelesque, in Sebastiano del Piombo. Another will yearn for the poetic glamour, gilding realistic truth, of Giorgione; for the intensely pathetic interpretation of Lorenzo Lotto, with its unique combination of the strongest subjective and objective elements, the one serving to poetise and accentuate the other. Yet another will cite the lofty melancholy, the aristocratic charm of the Brescian Moretto, or the marvellous power of the Bergamasque Moroni to present in their natural union, with no indiscretion of over-emphasis, the spiritual and physical elements which go to make up that mystery of mysteries, the human individuality. There is, however, no advocate of any of these great masters who, having vaunted the peculiar perfections in portraiture of his own favourite, will not end—with a sigh perhaps—by according the palm to Titian.

In landscape his pre-eminence is even more absolute and unquestioned. He had great precursors here, but no equal; and until Claude Lorrain long afterwards arose, there appeared no successor capable, like himself, of expressing the quintessence of Nature's most significant beauties without a too slavish adherence to any special set of natural facts. Giovanni Bellini from his earliest Mantegnesque or Paduan days had, unlike his great brother-in-law, unlike the true Squarcionesques, and the Ferrarese who more or less remotely came within the Squarcionesque influence, the true gift of the landscape-painter. Atmospheric conditions formed invariably an important element of his conceptions; and to see that this is so we need only remember the chilly solemnity of the landscape in the great *Pietà* of the Brera, the ominous sunset in our own *Agony in the Garden* of the National Gallery, the cheerful all-pervading glow of the beautiful little *Sacred Conversation* at the Uffizi, the mysterious illumination of the late *Baptism of Christ* in the

Church of S. Corona at Vicenza. To attempt a discussion of the landscape of Giorgione would be to enter upon the most perilous, as well as the most fascinating of subjects—so various is it even in the few well-established examples of his art, so exquisite an instrument of expression always, so complete an exterioration of the complex moods of his personages. Yet even the landscape of Giorgione—judging it from such unassailable works of his riper time as the great altar-piece of Castelfranco, the so-called *Stormy Landscape with the Gipsy and the Soldier*[1] in the Giovanelli Palace at Venice, and the so-called *Three Philosophers* in the Imperial Gallery at Vienna—has in it still a slight flavour of the ripe archaic just merging into full perfection. It was reserved for Titian to give in his early time the fullest development to the Giorgionesque landscape, as in the *Three Ages* and the *Sacred and Profane Love*. Then all himself, and with hardly a rival in art, he went on to unfold those radiantly beautiful prospects of earth and sky which enframe the figures in the *Worship of Venus*, the *Bacchanal*, and, above all, the *Bacchus and Ariadne*; to give back his impressions of Nature in those rich backgrounds of reposeful beauty which so enhance the finest of the Holy Families and Sacred Conversations. It was the ominous grandeur of the landscape in the *St. Peter Martyr*, even more than the dramatic intensity, the academic amplitude of the figures, that won for the picture its universal fame. The same intimate relation between the landscape and the figures may be said to exist in the late *Jupiter and Antiope* (*Venere del Pardo*) of the Louvre, with its marked return to Giorgionesque repose and Giorgionesque communion with Nature; in the late *Rape of Europa*, the bold sweep and the rainbow hues of the

[1] Herr Franz Wickhoff in his now famous article "Giorgione's Bilder zu Römischen Heldengedichten" (*Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*: Sechzehnter Band, I. Heft) has most ingeniously, and upon what may be deemed solid grounds, renamed this most Giorgionesque of all Giorgiones after an incident in the *Thebaid* of Statius, *Adrastus and Hypsipyle*. He gives reasons which may be accepted as convincing for entitling the *Three Philosophers*, after a familiar incident in Book viii. of the *Æneid*, "Æneas, Evander, and Pallas contemplating the Rock of the Capitol." His not less ingenious explanation of Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* will be dealt with a little later on. These identifications are all-important, not only in connection with the works themselves thus renamed, and for the first time satisfactorily explained, but as compelling the students of Giorgione partly to reconsider their view of his art, and, indeed, of the Venetian idyll generally.

landscape in which recall the much earlier *Bacchus and Ariadne*. In the exquisite *Shepherd and Nymph* of the Imperial Gallery at Vienna—a masterpiece in monotone of quite the last period—the sensuousness of the early Giorgionesque time reappears, even more strongly emphasised; yet it is kept in balance, as in the early days, by the imaginative temperament of the poet, by that solemn atmosphere of mystery, above all, which belongs to the final years of Titian's old age.

Thus, though there cannot be claimed for Titian that universality in art and science which the lovers of Leonardo's painting must ever deplore, since it lured him into a thousand side-paths; or the vastness of scope of Michelangelo, or even the all-embracing curiosity of Albrecht Dürer; it must be seen that as a *painter* he covered more ground than any first-rate master of the sixteenth century. While in more than one branch of the painter's art he stood forth supreme and without a rival, in most others he remained second to none, alone in great pictorial decorations of the monumental order yielding the palm to his younger rivals Tintoretto and Paolo Veronese, who showed themselves more practised and more successfully daring in this particular branch.

To find another instance of such supreme mastery of the brush, such parallel activity in all the chief branches of oil-painting, one must go to Antwerp, the great merchant city of the North as Venice was, or had been, the great merchant city of the South. Rubens, who might fairly be styled the Flemish Titian, and who indeed owed much to his Venetian predecessor, though far less than did his own pupil Van Dyck, was during the first forty years of the seventeenth century on the same pinnacle of supremacy that the Cadorine master had occupied for a much longer period during the Renaissance. He, too, was without a rival in the creation of those vast altar-pieces which made the fame of the churches that owned them; he, too, was the finest painter of landscape of his time, as an accessory to the human figure. Moreover, he was a portrait-painter who, in his greatest efforts—those sumptuous and almost truculent *portraits d'apparat* of princes, nobles, and splendid dames—knew no superior, though his contemporaries were Van Dyck, Frans Hals, Rembrandt, and Velazquez. Rubens folded his Mother Earth and his fellow-man in a more demonstrative, a seemingly

closer embrace, drawing from the contact a more exuberant vigour, but taking with him from its very closeness some of the stain of earth. Titian, though he was at least as genuine a realist as his successor, and one less content, indeed, with the mere outsides of things, was penetrated with the spirit of beauty which was everywhere — in the mountain home of his birth as in the radiant home of his adoption, in himself as in his everyday surroundings. His art had ever, even in its most human and least aspiring phases, the divine harmony, the suavity tempering natural truth and passion, that distinguishes Italian art of the great periods from the finest art that is not Italian.

The relation of the two masters — both of them in the first line of the world's painters—was much that of Venice to Antwerp. The apogee of each city in its different way represented the highest point that modern Europe had reached of physical well-being and splendour, of material as distinguished from mental culture. But then Venice was wrapped in the transfiguring atmosphere of the Lagunes, and could see, towering above the rich Venetian plains and the lower slopes of the Friulan mountains, the higher, the more aspiring peaks of the purer region. Reality, with all its warmth and all its truth, in Venetian art was still reality. But it was reality made at once truer, wider, and more suave by the method of presentment. Idealisation, in the narrower sense of the word, could add nothing to the loveliness of such a land, to the stateliness, the splendid sensuousness devoid of the grosser elements of offence, to the genuine naturalness of such a mode of life. Art itself could only add to it the right accent, the right emphasis, the larger scope in truth, the colouring and illumination best suited to give the fullest expression to the beauties of the land, to the force, character, and warm human charm of the people. This is what Titian, supreme among his contemporaries of the greatest Venetian time, did with an incomparable mastery to which, in the vast field which his productions cover, it would be vain to seek for a parallel.

Other Venetians may, in one or the other way, more irresistibly enlist our sympathies, or may shine out for the moment more brilliantly in some special branch of their art; yet, after all, we find