

Portraits - Seminar 3

Background Notes

Bernard Courtis - 4 December 2008

Portraits of Titian.

WAHG

Aide Memoire L03

A critique of Portraiture Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) 1485-1576

Titian is considered by many to be one of the greatest portraitists of Art History. The under mentioned extract makes many valid and interesting points about Titian's work in this genre.

THE PORTRAITS OF TITIAN

by Antonio Paolucci

"Almost sixty years separate Titian's *Portrait of a Man* (the so-called *Ariosto*) in the National Gallery, London, and his *Jacopo Strada*, now in Vienna, dated 1568. This broad span of time frames Titian's career as a portrait painter. About one hundred portraits are extant, making it possible to follow both the stylistic and human progress of the artist (the development of his art, but also the events, meetings and successes of his life) as well as the course of Italian and European history in the sixteenth century, exemplified through the images of the protagonists of political, religious and cultural power.



Ariosto

"This aspect - that of tracking Titian's portraiture as a historical reportage of the century - has always fascinated critics, and with good reason, for as Vasari himself stated, "*there was almost no famous lord, nor prince, nor great woman, who was not painted by Titian.*" Doubtless some of Titian's portraits are historical documents in the highest but also concrete sense of the word. The Capodimonte triple portrait of **Pope Paul III Farnese** with his nephews Alessandro and Ottavio illuminates the personality of that Pope and the politics of the Holy See in the mid-1540s further and better than any document or contemporary account written by some ambassador. In the same way **Charles V**, mounted on horseback in his armour, alone on the **Battlefield of Muhlberg**, presents us with a perfect image, eloquent in its frankness, as effective as any political manifesto of the concept of absolute monarchy predominant at that time at the Catholic court of the Hapsburgs.



"Behind his extraordinary gift as historian (as a witness and interpreter of the reality of his time, through the vehicle of his portraiture) lies Titian's sublime ability to penetrate the real character of his models, which was perhaps his greatest gift.

Aretino wrote of Titian's "*sense of things in his brush*". But for Titian the "*things*" to be understood and represented were not only the physical semblance or the psychological peculiarities of the sitter, or the various objects and props - clothes, jewels, armour which had their own role and meaning. One has the impression that for him the "*things*" to be depicted, to the same degree of intensity, included the social rank, cultural or political standing of the sitter and in a more general sense, the *Ideal persona* of the individual, the collection of all meanings that constituted the sitter's identity for us and also for himself.

"Thus Titian's *Pietro Aretino* at the Pitti is more than a veristic or psychological likeness "*which breathes, whose pulse throbs and spirit moves in the way I do in life,*" as Aretino himself wrote to the grand duke Cosimo de' Medici. It is also the terrible wonder of an intellectual and moral temperament implacably revealed: a personality, in this case, of emotional violence, of an irreverent and corrosive intelligence.

"Titian's portrait of *Francis I* of France, which he painted without having ever seen his model in real life, reveals a splendid image of pride and bursting vitality, while that of *Isabella d'Este*, painted in homage to a splendour already vanished, records forever the beauty of the Marchioness of Mantua (by then in her old age and certainly no longer beautiful), the *ideal* character of a haughty and intelligent loveliness with which she graced her century. Yet again, in one of the last portraits, that of Jacopo Strada, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna Titian captured the *Ideal* character of the antique dealer, that profession of intrigue, lies and prevarication, which is the high commerce of art. Titian seems truly to have caught his model in the act of choosing the opportune moment to insinuate himself into his client's trust, with an expression that amounts to an emblem of the trade."

"The huge success of Titian as a portrait painter in the high society of his time can be explained largely by his capacity to divine unerringly and represent vividly the *Ideal persona* of his sitters, without, however, distorting either the physical or the psychological likeness of the personage, but rather exalting and emphasizing the one and the other in equal proportion. And so one is justified in the belief that in Titian's portraits the Pope, the Emperor, Doge and the Marquis of Mantua, recognized themselves not only in the flesh, but also in the guise of all that they represented"



Paul III and his Nephews Alessandro and Ottavio Farnese

"Thus it could happen (and it is one of Titian's merits that he was too objective to flatter his sitters even in the most official circumstances) that the unmasking of the ideal character of the sitter could be so effective and unexpected as to risk brutality and so create some embarrassment. This is the case, for example in the famous canvas of *Pope Paul III Farnese* with his nephews and the Pierluigi Farnese: the latter is enclosed in his armour, his face devastated by disease but imprinted with fervent resolution, an image full of drama that is "almost Shakespearean in its intensity" (Pallucchini). On no occasion did Titian's portraits fail in verisimilitude, even when pitilessly testifying to a reality not just physical and psychological but also spiritual and ideal.

"However to be drawn into the *things*, that is inside the skin and even the emotions and thoughts of his sitters, was as nothing

compared to Titian's marvellous capacity to place himself at the same time and without contradiction on a plane that was completely detached from them.

"Indeed we could say that *"his exceptionally acute and profound perception"* of the upper classes and of high culture was possible, as Zeri has written, by the fact *"that the painter had no illusions about his own status, he was perfectly aware of his position as an outsider."* Although his profession obliged him to frequent the great of this earth and even for long periods the court of the Emperor, the culture and habits of such elevated circles remained foreign to his mentality, which was that of a skilful artisan, a pragmatic bourgeois. It should be recalled that we would not have his portrait of ***Pope Paul III Farnese*** with his Nephews, perhaps the most extraordinary and revealing political document that has come down to us in Western art (more important even, as Pallucchini has observed, than Goya's *Portrait of the Family of Charles IV*) had Titian not journeyed to Rome. He was attracted there no longer by the fascination of the antique, nor by the fame of the *divine* Michelangelo, but by the hope of obtaining an ecclesiastical benefice for his son Pomponio. And yet it was exactly this sense of being an outsider - in the mediocre and jealously guarded arena of family affections and economic interests, in the diversity of habits and cultural interests - that allowed Titian to observe his sitters with detached curiosity and total objectivity, which allowed him to produce an uninterrupted series of masterpieces.

"In fact the qualitative level of Titian's portraits is consistently high. This indisputable fact should serve as a fundamental instrument for those who would try their skills on attributional questions, an understandably crowded and dangerous field. Perhaps the various crises (of mannerism and of the counter-Reformation) that Titian triumphantly overcame in his long life may have caused some

moments of uncertainty, some partial relaxing of tension among the many works of his vast catalogue, but this was manifested (if at all) in the history paintings, sacred or profane, and never in his autograph portraits. It is worth repeating that these always maintained an exceptionally high level of expressive felicity whatever cultural influences were in fashion at that time and whatever the consequent changes of style.

"If one were to attempt a synthesis, necessarily rapid and touching only upon the salient episodes of Titian's portraits, it is useful to return to Vasari. After a meeting with the elderly painter in Venice in 1566, Vasari was convinced of two things: that Titian began his career as a portrait painter, and that he was, at the beginning, in this genre, almost a twin of his master Giorgione. The attribution to Titian of the famous *Concert in the Pitti* is no longer doubted, nor is the attribution to Giorgione around 1500 of the equally famous Pitti *Three Ages of Man* (an attribution resoundingly confirmed by recent conservation as well as by Mauro Lucco's thorough essay published for the occasion). This lends weight to Vasari's affirmation and illustrates the way Titian opted to break with the Giorgionesque mood.

"Indeed he did so from the beginning, deploying an extraordinary spiritual energy. It is enough to observe the fervent sensibility and compassion which lights the face of the pianist in the Pitti Concert (c. 1510). *"In place of Giorgione's pathos, Titian countered with an almost conscious excess of realism."* From the first portraits he tended to construct, as Burckhardt claimed, *"grandiose beings."* If we want to identify the exact point at which the sublime and absorbed vagueness of Giorgione gives way to the fearless affirmation of pure realistic energy, we should refer to the altarpiece of the sacristy of the Salute (c. 1516) and compare the two saints on

the right with those on the left - already "*natural portraits*," as Vasari observed.

"The portraits painted by Titian in his youth follow this same pattern: the *modern* protagonists of the frescoes of the Scuola del Santo, the *Ariosto* and the *Schiavona* in the National Gallery, London, up to the *Knight of Malta* in the Uffizi, datable to c. 1515, to the *Violinist* of the Galleria Spada, Rome, the Halifax *Man with a Glove* and the *Officer* in the Frick Collection, New York, the last two datable soon after 1515. The Giorgionesque composition, together with the psychological and sentimental atmosphere that derives from it, is still substantially present (the *Knight of Malta* illustrates this exactly) but with an increasingly decisive affirmation of the individuality of character and spirit of the sitter.

"As Ballarin has noted, *Titian, in these early works, was trying to represent a momentary inertia within a movement, offering us the figure with the maximum openness and candour*:"the space of the painting is the space created by the expansion of the chromatic planes which compose the human figure, from the breathing of the skin, the folds of a shirt, or the way the hair falls. In this view, (we can cite the *Ariosto* or the *Schiavona* in London) the vitality of the sitter becomes the dominant element in the portrait, freed from the romantic Giorgionesque manner and asserting itself with an unashamed authority.

"The so-called *Doctor of Parma* in Vienna of c. 1518, "built up from a few gradations of colour between the shade and the light shining on the grey plumes, in which the psychological expression is rendered more intense," is perhaps the last tribute to the introspective and melancholy mood of the Giorgionesque tradition. Gradually Titian did away with the usual iconographic props (perspective framing, parapets, etc.), the portrait now takes up the entire field,

giving it strength in both a formal plastic sense as well as in a chromatic one.

"From the Louvre *Man with a Glove* (c. 1523) to the Pitti *Vincenzo Mosti*, to the *Gentleman with the Falcon* in Omaha, and *Federico Gonzaga* in the Prado (1528), the portraits of the 1520s are evidence of the progressive conquest of what would be the most admired quality of Titian's portraits and the most important reason for his resounding success among the high society of his age. I refer to the splendid *disinvoltura*ⁱ of his portraits, to the harmonious naturalness with which the figures occupy the space and present themselves to the spectators.

"In this sense the portrait of *Federico Gonzaga* constitutes the point of departure for the great production of the following years and decades. In the easy elegance with which the Marquis of Mantua presents himself before our eyes is revealed the ideal character of Federico at that period: the tranquil dominion of legitimate power, a lively yet harmonious nature, an amiable gravity, a promising and pleasure-seeking youth, not, however, without a sense of responsibility and quiet determination.

"As we have already noted, the official recognition of the role of Titian as a painter of the powerful dates from 1533 after Charles V, having posed for him at Bologna in a famous canvas that today hangs in the Prado, bestowed on him various honorary titles and above all entrusted him with the political image of himself, his family and his Court. How Titian fulfilled this exacting role can be seen in the imperial portraits painted partly in Italy, and partly on his visits to Augsburg in 1548 and 1550-51. From the already mentioned portraits of Charles V and his dog, the prototype of that series of court

ⁱ confidence

portraits that Antonio Moro after the middle of the century would preserve forever in his emblematic abstraction," to the Emperor on Horseback on the Battle Field of Muhlberg (1548), to Philip II in Cincinnati and in the Prado (1551), the Imperial portraits interpret the ideology of power with such vividness that even today we cannot invent an iconography that better explains Catholic authority in Europe in the sixteenth century.

"However, it is the same painter who, describing the family of the Emperor, or that of the Pope (the famous Farnese paintings were executed between 1542 and 1546), knew how to interpret his century with the unflinching objectivity of a great historian who also has that capacity to produce images of his contemporaries which seem almost to have been painted to give him and us pure visual pleasure, something our senses can enjoy. These include the *Cardinal Ippolito de'Medici* (c. 1533) a dandy, elegantly satisfied with himself in his purple velvet Hungarian costume, highlighted with touches of gold and red; the Pitti *La Bella* and the *Young Girl* of Vienna (c. 1533-37) whose poetic flavour lies in the contrast between female nudity, painted with an affectionate naturalness, and the warmth of the fur....

"Modern historians cannot refer to the intrigues of Pope Paul III without citing the Capodimonte painting, or recall the horrors of religious wars without visualizing the tragic figure of Charles V, victorious at the Battle of Muhlberg. Without the Pitti *La Bella*, without Aretino, or the *Young Englishman*, or the *Votive Portrait of the Vendramin Family* in London (c. 1550), our aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual image of this great Italian century would be deprived of its fundamental symbols. We have already stated that all of Titian's portraits were of extremely high quality. The mannerist crisis that caused the uncertainty and unresolved tensions in other genres of his artistic production served only to make his portraits

more successful. We can even say that the new language of Titian developed and became more refined in his portraits of the 1540s. In effect, in the portraits the formal structure of Salviati's mannerism is stripped of its ornamental aspects resolving itself into a quality of dynamism which is felt as the spiritual energy, of the sitter himself, while there was an increasing tendency, from the time of the Farnese portrait on, to favour an impressionistic quality of painterliness effected with rapid and insistent brushstrokes in which the form is devalued in favour of light."

"During the 1550s Titian continued regularly to portray great men; amongst these were *Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo* (1552) in the museum of Sao Paulo, the papal legate *Beccadelli*, today in the Uffizi (1552), *Doge Francesco Venier*, magnificent for the crackling quality of its chromatic impasto (1555, Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, Lugano). However a new class of sitters began to appear more frequently, requiring a less severe image, lending itself to a more cordial confidentiality, suitable for unconventional presentation.

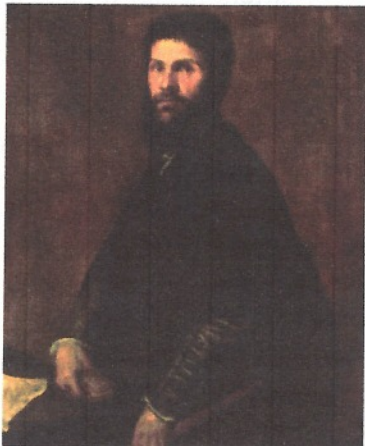
"On the other hand the loose and dramatic paint of Titian's late period, the luminous, colouristic *flagellation* with which he feverishly assaulted the plastic forms, cast in the role of the suffering and the subservient, were better adapted to a more impressionistic portraiture. In these later years Titian painted some of the greatest portraits of all time: *Fabrizio Salvaresio*, Vienna (1558), the *Portrait of a Man* in Baltimore (1561), *the Gentleman with a Flute* in Detroit (1561-62), *Jacopo Strada* (1567-68) in Vienna, *the Self-Portrait* in the Prado (1570) that Adolfo Venturi has described splendidly as "*a specter, shadowy and stiffened in his inner life of a seer.*" These works seem to leap across an entire century and stand comparison with the very best portraits by Rembrandt."



Fabrizio Salvaresio



Jacopo Strada



The man with a Flute



Titian Self Portrait