



Titian
Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576

Cupid with the Wheel of Time

c. 1515/1520

oil on canvas

overall: 65.9 × 55.3 cm (25 15/16 × 21 3/4 in.)

framed: 90.17 × 80.01 × 7.62 cm (35 1/2 × 31 1/2 × 3 in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.213

ENTRY

The picture was first published in 1931 by Wilhelm Suida, who rejected a previous, traditional association with Correggio in favor of Titian. [1] Suida's attribution has been generally but not universally accepted: Hans Tietze and Rodolfo Pallucchini omitted the picture from their monographs on Titian; [2] and Francesco Valcanover and Harold Wethey explicitly denied Titian's authorship. [3] Alternative attributions proposed by the skeptics include Romanino (Bernard Berenson, MS opinion, 1938); [4] Giulio Campi (Hans Tietze and Erika Tietze-Conrat, MS opinion, 1947); [5] and Follower of Veronese (Wethey). [6] But none of these have won any further acceptance, and Suida's much more convincing attribution is supported by his comparison of the figure of Cupid with the angels in Titian's *Assunta* (Frari, Venice) of circa 1515–1518. Another particularly relevant comparison, pointed out by Fern Rusk Shapley, is with the cupid on the far right in Titian's *Three Ages of Man* of circa 1513–1515 (Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, Bridgewater loan). [7] These close similarities of figure type (and also with the cupids in the Prado *Feast of Venus* of 1517–1518) further suggest that the picture is a relatively early work of circa 1515/1520. Consistent with such a dating is the fact that Cupid is standing on a foreground parapet parallel to the picture plane, a compositional device characteristic of Giovanni Bellini and the 15th-century tradition, and used by Titian only in his early career. Anjelica Dülberg suggested a later date of circa 1540–1560, without providing any particular reason. [8]

The doubts entertained by some critics regarding the attribution may stem from the fact that the picture is in several respects unique in Titian's oeuvre. Several of his

works include fictive reliefs in monochrome (for instance, the *Votive Picture of Jacopo Pesaro*, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp; the *Schiavona*, National Gallery, London; the *Sacred and Profane Love*, Galleria Borghese, Rome; and the *Clarissa Strozzi*, Staatliche Museen, Berlin); but such reliefs are all details of larger paintings, and are painted in imitation of marble sculpture. The present work, by contrast, is executed entirely in monochrome and with a much more fluid technique, in which the rapid handling of the brush is conspicuously evident. But this difference of treatment may in part reflect a different source of inspiration, since, as observed by Douglas Lewis, [9] the combination of Cupid, chariot wheel, and tree trunk derives from a 15th-century Roman plaquette [fig. 1]—in other words, a small-scale bronze *all'antica*.

In part, too, as observed by Dülberg, the technical characteristics of the *Cupid* are entirely consistent with the suggestion first made by Giuseppe Fiocco (MS opinion, 15 March 1935, in NGA curatorial files), and later by Alessandro Conti, that the picture originally functioned as the cover, or *timpano*, to a portrait. [10] Such complements to portraits were not uncommon in Venetian painting in the decades around 1500 (examples in the Gallery's collection include *Allegory of Virtue and Vice* and *Allegory*); and the fact that they became increasingly unusual after circa 1520 is again consistent with a relatively early dating.

Another element in favor of the supposition that the picture was painted as a cover is its allegorical subject, which, as was customary, presumably in some way reflected the personality, status, or philosophy of the sitter of the portrait beneath. An interpretation of the subject as an allegory of Fortune was outlined by Suida: Cupid (identifiable from his wings) symbolizes the triumph of Love, at least temporarily, over the rolling Wheel of Fortune and the inevitability of death (represented by the animal's skull suspended from the tree). [11] Elaborating on this interpretation, Edgar Wind identified the skull as that of an ox, and hence as a symbol of Patience, and saw Love as setting the Wheel of Chance into motion; for the writer, therefore, the picture was an allegory of the classical tag *festina lente* (make haste slowly). [12] Yet as Shapley rightly objected, the skull is not apparently that of an ox, and Cupid appears to be restraining the roll of the wheel rather than setting it into motion. [13] Dülberg accordingly proposed a somewhat different refinement of Suida's interpretation: Love holds a central position in human life and lends sweetness to the fleeting hours, even though the roll of time must in the end lead to death. [14] This reading is further supported by the writer's observation that Cupid is apparently struggling to maintain a moment of stability, despite the wind

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that makes his draperies flutter in opposite directions. While Patricia Fortini Brown agreed with Suida, [15] a similar interpretation of the subject as Love arresting the Cycle of Life was offered by Lewis, based partly on his interpretation of the Renaissance plaquette from which the central motifs derive. [16]

Although there is no obvious candidate for a surviving portrait by Titian for which the picture could have served as the cover, the field is limited by the fact that the majority of his portraits, and particularly those of his middle and later career, are considerably larger in their dimensions. The relative intimacy of scale, combined with the allegorical message, suggests that the sitter below, if a man, was a poet or philosopher and/or a friend of the painter, rather than a member of high society. But the themes of love and of the passing of time would also have been appropriate as complements to an image of female beauty, and in this connection it is worth observing that the dimensions of the picture correspond closely to those of the so-called *Violante* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; 64.5 × 50.8 cm), usually dated to circa 1515.

Peter Humfrey

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Roman 15th Century, after the Antique, *Bacchus and Ariadne on a Chariot*, mid-15th century, bronze with yellow-brown patina, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

NOTES

- [1] Wilhelm Suida, "Alcune opere sconosciute di Tiziano," *Dedalo* 11 (1931): 894–897.
- [2] Hans Tietze, *Titian: The Paintings and Drawings* (London, 1950); Rodolfo Pallucchini, *Tiziano*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1969).
- [3] Francesco Valcanover, *Tutta la pittura di Tiziano* (Milan, 1960), 1:96; Francesco Valcanover, *L'opera completa di Tiziano* (Milan, 1969), 141, no. 629; Harold Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian* (London, 1975), 3:209.
- [4] Annotations on the back of a photograph in Kress Collection files (copy in NGA curatorial files), referring to a letter of 2 August 1938 from Berenson's secretary, document the scholar's opinion. Subsequently, however, Berenson accepted the attribution to Titian; Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Venetian School* (London, 1957), 1:192.
- [5] MS in NGA curatorial files.
- [6] Harold Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian* (London, 1975), 3:209.
- [7] Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings* (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:481–482.

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- [8] Anjelica Dülberg, *Privatporträts: Geschichte und Ikonologie enier Gattung im 15. und 16 Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1990), 56–58, 295–296.
- [9] Douglas Lewis, *Renaissance Plaquettes at the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC, forthcoming); draft catalog entry of 2009 on *Bacchus and Ariadne on a Chariot (A Triumph, with the Torments and Resolution of Love)*, 1957.14.150, in NGA curatorial files.
- [10] Anjelica Dülberg, *Privatporträts: Geschichte und Ikonologie enier Gattung im 15. und 16 Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1990), 56–58, 295–296; Alessandro Conti, in *Firenze e la Toscana dei Medici nell'Europa del Cinquecento, vol. 2, Palazzo Vecchio: Committenza e Collezionismo Medicei*, ed. Paola Barocchi (Milan, 1980), 258.
- [11] Wilhelm Suida, “Alcune opere sconosciute di Tiziano,” *Dedalo* 11 (1931): 894–897; Wilhelm Suida, *Tizian* (Zurich and Leipzig, 1933), 70, 156.
- [12] Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London, 1958), 93.
- [13] Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XV–XVI Century* (London, 1968), 186; Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings* (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:481–482.
- [14] Anjelica Dülberg, *Privatporträts: Geschichte und Ikonologie enier Gattung im 15. und 16 Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1990), 56–58, 295–296.
- [15] Patricia Fortini Brown, *Venice and Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past* (New Haven and London, 1996), 230.
- [16] Douglas Lewis, *Renaissance Plaquettes at the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC, forthcoming); draft catalog entry of 2009 on *Bacchus and Ariadne on a Chariot (A Triumph, with the Torments and Resolution of Love)*, 1957.14.150, in NGA curatorial files.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a fine-to-moderate weight fabric. The painting has been lined and the original tacking edges have been cut off, but x-radiographs reveal slight cusping along the edges of the original fabric, indicating that the painting has not been cut down substantially. The ground consists of a moderately thin white layer. Infrared reflectography (Vidicon) [1] reveals some underdrawing executed in a liquid medium marking the contours of Cupid and the wheel. In the x-radiographs it is possible to see some of the rough brushwork originating from the ground and the background paint layers; the x-radiographs make the latter more apparent than does examination under normal light. There are no appreciable compositional changes, only some minor alterations of contour. Apart from some scattered small

losses, the worst damage is caused by abrasion, as is particularly evident in the area around the top right corner and generally in the background. The extensive inpainting, applied to pull together the areas of abrasion, dates mainly from the conservation treatments undertaken in 1936 and 1942, as the painting has not been treated since then. Although the inpainting has only discolored slightly, the varnish has discolored considerably.

Peter Humfrey and Joanna Dunn based on the examination report by Kate Russell

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TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Hamamatsu c/1000-03 Vidicon camera and a Kodak Wratten 87A filter.

PROVENANCE

(Angelo Bonelli, Rome), by 1803; (Bonelli sale by private contract [not an auction], No. 4 Duke Street [The Roman Gallery], London, 4 January 1803 and continuing until 15 December 1803, no. 65, as *A Genius trying to stop a Wheel* by Parmegianino[sic], not sold); (Bonelli sale, Christie's, London, 24-25 February 1804, first day, no. 24, as *A Sketch, very spirited* by Parmigiano[sic], bought in); (Bonelli sale, Farebrother, London [?], 2 May 1804, no. 42, as *An allegory, a beautiful sketch -- from the Altieri Palace at Rome* by Polidoro).[1] Viani, Rome. (Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi, Florence and Rome); sold October 1935 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York;[2] gift 1939 to NGA.

[1] The original catalogue for the 1803 sale is in the Woollcombe Library at Hemerdon near Plymouth in Devon, England. This information and the details of the Bonelli sales are in a 12 September 1989 letter from Burton Fredericksen of the Getty Provenance Index to Suzannah Fabing, in NGA curatorial files. See also Fredericksen's descriptions of the three sales in their records, Sale Catalogs Br-151-A, Br-241, and Br-257, the Getty Provenance Index databases, J. Paul Getty Trust, Los Angeles.

[2] The bill of sale for several paintings including this one, which is titled *Cupid with Wheel of Life*, is dated 10 October 1935, with payment received 23 October (copy in NGA curatorial files). See also The Kress Collection Digital Archive, <https://kress.nga.gov/Detail/objects/633>.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 57, fig. 18.

2000 Fortune: "All Is But Fortune", The Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C., 2000, no. 9.

2024 Hidden Faces: Covered Portraits of the Renaissance, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2024, no. 32, repro.

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- 1942 *Book of Illustrations*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1942: 246, repro. 197.
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