Ever since 1815, when it was discovered by Count Leopoldo Cicognara in the attic of a palace in Ferrara, the picture has attracted controversy with regard both to its attribution and to its subject. [1] Cicognara, a renowned antiquarian and connoisseur, had been commissioned by the Duchess of Sagan to find works by Titian for her, and he was convinced that his discovery was autograph. His friend Stefano Ticozzi agreed, and went on to identify the figures as Alfonso d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, and his mistress (later wife), Laura Dianti, partly on the basis of the Ferrarese provenance, partly on a supposed resemblance of the male figure to known portraits of Alfonso, and partly on the report by Giorgio Vasari that Titian had painted a portrait of Laura. [2] With these credentials, Cicognara sold the picture (together with Titian’s Self-Portrait now in Berlin) to Lord Stewart, British ambassador to the imperial court in Vienna and lover of the Duchess of Sagan. But Stewart was advised by the Milanese dealer Gerli that both pictures were copies, and he accordingly had them sent to Rome to be appraised by the Accademia di San Luca. The academicians pronounced the Self-Portrait to be authentic, but because of the presence of retouching (“alcuni ritocchi”) on the other picture, they
were unable to decide between Giorgione and Paris Bordone. Since he was only
interested in authentic works by Titian, Stewart insisted on returning the picture to
Cicognara, who subsequently sold it to Count Pourtalès-Gorgier in Paris. [3]

In Paris the picture could be compared with the compositionally similar Woman
with a Mirror in the Louvre [fig. 1], previously known as La maîtresse de Titien, but
which on the basis of Ticozzi’s identification was now also accepted as a double
portrait of Alfonso and Laura. By the mid-19th century it was further widely believed
that the Washington picture was the earlier, since the nudity of the female figure
implied that she was still merely the duke’s mistress, while the Louvre picture, in
which the female figure is clothed, was seen as dating from after her marriage. [4]

But a certain skepticism toward both the traditional attribution and the title was
already expressed by Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle in
1877, and then more emphatically by Carl Justi and Seymour de Ricci; [5] and by
the time that the picture came to America around 1922, Ticozzi’s romantically
fanciful title was becoming increasingly discredited. Wilhelm R. Valentiner, while
still accepting the possibility that the male figure represents a portrait of Alfonso,
interpreted the picture rather in terms of mythology and called it the Toilet of
Venus. [6] Valentiner continued, however, to support the attribution to Titian and
retained an early dating to circa 1518. Subsequent adherents to this view have
included Adolfo Venturi, Lionello Venturi, Wilhelm Suida, and Günther
Tschmelitsch, [7] and the picture retained its attribution to Titian when it entered
the National Gallery of Art in 1939. But postwar 20th-century critics have
increasingly tended to see the picture as a later workshop variant of the
unquestionably autograph Louvre Woman with a Mirror of circa 1515, and this view
has been supported by the emergence of a number of other variants, likewise of
less than autograph quality. Two of the best of these (Museo de Artes Decorativas,
Barcelona; National Gallery, Prague) [8] show the female figure clothed, as in the
Louvre original; but as pointed out by Alessandro Ballarin, another nude version,
apparently by a Netherlandish hand and possibly copying another lost variant by
Gallery’s picture “Follower of Titian,” disassociating it even from Titian’s workshop,
and Harold Wethey downgraded it still further, calling it “Sixteenth-century
Venetian School.” [10]

The very poor condition of the painting and the presence of extensive overpaint
and discolored varnish make such negative judgments understandable. The
generally thin and bland application of the paint, without any of Titian’s
characteristically expressive brushwork, certainly argues against his personal involvement in the execution, at least of the upper layers. However, the evidence of extensive pentimenti, and the fact that the original composition was even closer to that of the Louvre Woman with a Mirror, suggests that the executant had access to Titian’s designs, and hence that he was at least a member of Titian’s workshop, and not an independent imitator. The man’s costume is of a fashion dating from at least a decade after the Louvre picture: the doublet, with its short, pleated skirt, resembles that worn by Federico Gonzaga in Titian’s portrait of 1529 (Prado, Madrid); [11] and the pleated collar and cuffs of the shirt, and the cut of the hair and beard, are similarly of a style that did not become fashionable until the mid-1520s. Probably, therefore, the painter adapted Titian’s design, perhaps in the form of an underdrawing begun circa 1515–1520, and completed it at some date in the 1530s. In doing so, he changed the dynamic composition of the underdrawing, in which the man appears to have just arrived, into the more static image of the completed work.

Since the female figure is not accompanied by any of the particular attributes of a mythological deity, there is no good reason to follow Valentiner’s title of the Toilet of Venus, and still less convincing is the identification by Tschmelitsch of the two figures as Venus and Mars. Like its Louvre prototype, the picture clearly belongs rather to a category of erotic painting that hovers ambivalently on the borders of allegory, mythology, and genre, and which is much discussed in current art-historical discourse (see also Woman Holding an Apple and Venus with a Mirror).

In the Louvre Woman with a Mirror, Titian achieved a masterly balance between erotic suggestiveness, poetic idealization, and moralizing or philosophical reflection. [12] In the Washington picture, the eroticism has become more blatant—Goffen has rightly drawn attention to the shift in the erotic balance of power between the two figures [13]—and the mirror held by the man has lost any possible reference to the passing of beauty and time and, like the perfume jar on the parapet, has become merely an accoutrement of his beloved’s toilette. With more justification than its Louvre prototype, the picture may be regarded as belonging to the category of “courtesan picture,” of a type practiced in Venice from the 1520s above all by Paris Bordone. [14] Yet the generalization of the features and body of the female figure, and the fact that she is incongruously set not in a boudoir but against a landscape, suggest that she does not represent a particular courtesan, but an ideal mistress; indeed, her anonymity, as in other versions of the composition, remains central to her erotic allure. By contrast, and as in the other versions of the composition, the male figure, with his contemporary clothes and
particularized features, is much more portraitlike. Goffen expressed sympathy with the 19th-century tradition that he represents Alfonso d’Este; [15] although there is no substance in this identification, the figure may well represent a portrait of the original owner. Essentially constituting, therefore, a personalized erotic fantasy, the picture may nevertheless retain sufficient allegorical content to justify the present title of an Allegory of Love.

Peter Humfrey
March 21, 2019

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Titian, Woman with a Mirror, c. 1515, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris. © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Martine Beck-Coppola / Art Resource, NY
NOTES


[9] Alessandro Ballarin in *Le siècle de Titien: L’âge d’or de la peinture à Venise* (Paris, 1993), 363; the sale was Christie’s, London, May 14, 1971, no. 24, as a Flemish copy (98 × 74.9 cm). Formerly in the Pierre Bezine collection (sold Fievez, Brussels, June 14, 1927, no. 124) and in the collections of Prince Oursoff and Prince Menschikoff, as Paris Bordone. It is not clear whether this is the same as the picture that appeared in a sale at Christie’s, South Kensington, July 9, 2010, no. 45 (102 × 73.7 cm). Paul Joannides and Rupert Featherstone, “A Painting by Titian from the Spanish Royal Collection at Apsley House, London,” *Hamilton Kerr Institute Bulletin* 5 (2014): 73,
surmised that the latter is a copy after a lost Titian.


[11] As pointed out by Jane Bridgeman, this type of doublet was fashionable throughout the 1530s, but had become obsolete by c. 1540 (letter to Peter Humfrey, Sept. 11, 2000).


**TECHNICAL SUMMARY**

The support consists of four pieces of fabric sewn together. The largest piece is in the center, and most of the composition fits onto this piece. One strip of fabric was sewn to the length of the right side, and two shorter pieces of fabric were sewn together with a horizontal seam and then sewn to the left side of the large center piece of fabric. Although all of the fabrics are plain-weave, the center piece is much coarser and looser than the fine-weight additions. The support has been lined, and the tacking margins have been removed. Tack holes and lines of losses indicate that the painting was reduced in size at least once, possibly twice, and later
opened up again.

The support was prepared with a light ground, and the original paint appears to have been applied fairly thinly in the flesh areas, with soft modeling and blended brushstrokes. The costumes are painted with more visible brushwork, but apart from in small details, such as the jeweled ring, there is very little impasto. X-radiographs show no trace of Titian’s customarily vigorous undermodeling. However, x-radiographs and infrared reflectography at 1.5 to 1.8 microns [1] reveal several major changes in the composition, which originally much more closely resembled that of Titian’s Woman with a Mirror in the Louvre [fig. 1]. Originally, the man’s left arm was placed higher, presumably to hold a circular mirror above the woman’s left shoulder; traces of the red paint of the earlier sleeve are still visible to the naked eye. The man’s right hand held the rectangular mirror from the side rather than from below. A drapery hung from his right arm, his beard was shorter, and his white collar was wider and simpler in design.

The paint layer is very worn, with numerous scattered losses and discolored retouchings, and is covered with a thick accumulation of discolored varnish. Technical examination has revealed several campaigns of overpainting, the heaviest of which is in the upper right. Two losses below the man’s chin have been repaired with insets. The painting was last treated in 1937 by Stephen Pichetto, who lined and “slightly restored” it. [2]

Peter Humfrey and Joanna Dunn based on the examination report by Jane Tillinghast

March 21, 2019

TECHNICAL COMPARATIVE FIGURES
fig. 1 Titian, Woman with a Mirror, c. 1515, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris. © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Martine Beck-Coppola / Art Resource, NY

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.


PROVENANCE

Counts Benacosi, Ferrara;[1] on consignment 1815 with Count Leopoldo Cicognara, Venice; sold 1815 to Charles William Vane, Lord Stewart [1778-1854, later 3rd marquess of Londonderry], but returned 1816 to Cicognara;[2] sold after 1821 to Allegory of Love

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[3] The Paris branch of Duveen Brothers wrote to the New York branch on 29 December 1920, describing the visits of Henry Goldman (they spell the name Goldmann) to see "the Titian" and, after Goldman asked them where the picture "had turned up," their telling him "that Lazzaroni, who was an amateur and had been studying Titian for some years, having spent some years tracing it from the time it left the Pourtalès Collection, had found the picture in England" (Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: Series II, Collector's files, reel 312, box 457, folder 1 [Goldman #1, 1911-1925], copy in NGA curatorial files).

[4] Duveen records document their possession of the painting: it is entered under Lazzaroni’s name on 26 March 1920 in their Paris ledger, and the earliest date listed in the "X Book" entry for the painting is 30 September 1920, where it is described as "Painting by Titian, 'Lady at Toilet', ex Baron Lazzaroni" (Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: Series II, Collector's files, reel 312, box 457, folder 1 [Goldman #1, 1911-1925], copy in NGA curatorial files).


[6] The invoice for 24 paintings, including “An Oil Painting on Canvas representing Alfonso D’Este and Laura Dianti known as A Lady at a Mirror - by Titian,” is dated 9 March 1937. Payment was to be made in five installments, the last no later than 5 May 1938. (Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: Series II.I, Collector’s files, reel 329, box 474, folder 5 [Kress, Samuel Henry, c. 1936-1939]; copies in NGA curatorial files.)

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1924 Loan Exhibition of Important Early Italian Paintings in the Possession of Notable American Collectors, Duveen Brothers, New York, 1924, no. 33 as by Titian (no. 46, as The Toilet of Venus in illustrated 1926 version of catalogue).

1939 Classics of the Nude: Loan Exhibition, Pollaiuolo to Picasso, for the Benefit of the Lisa Day Nursery, M. Knoedler and Co., New York, 1939, no. 4, repro.

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3:no. 508.


