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Italian Paintings of the Sixteenth Century

image not available

Workshop or Follower of Titian
Italian 16th Century

Titian
Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576

Anonymous Artist

Titian
Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576

Venus Blindfolding Cupid

c. 1566/1570 or c. 1576/1580

oil on canvas
overall: 122.4 x 97.3 cm (48 3/16 x 38 5/16 in.)
framed: 142.9 x 122.1 x 12.1 cm (56 1/4 x 48 1/16 x 4 3/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.12

ENTRY

The composition corresponds closely to the left side of Titian's *Venus Blindfolding Cupid* in the Galleria Borghese, Rome [fig. 1], universally regarded as an autograph masterpiece and usually dated to circa 1565. Apart from the obvious differences of costume, with the figure of Venus in the present work wearing a costume and jewelry more closely related to contemporary fashion, the main iconographical difference is that the blindfolded Cupid here holds one of his arrows across his mother's lap. But there are good reasons to suppose that the format of the Gallery's picture, which is cut at the right, likewise originally consisted of a broad rectangle and included two more figures in the lost section, in addition to the fragmentary third figure, whose disembodied arm holding up a silver dish survived the mutilation of the painting. Mid-18th-century inventories describe the picture as representing "the Elements (or the Graces) offering Tribute" to Venus, implying that

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a total of three figures are now missing, [1] and the x-radiograph of the Borghese picture has revealed that it, too, was originally intended to have a third figure, between the Venus group on the left and the nymphs on the right. [2] The pose of this figure, subsequently canceled by the artist in the Borghese version, corresponds closely to that of the fragmentary figure in the Gallery's picture.

When at Stowe the painting was considered to be an autograph Titian, and soon after its arrival in America, this traditional attribution was upheld by Wilhelm Suida, [3] who argued furthermore that the work preceded the Borghese version by a decade. Rodolfo Pallucchini likewise regarded the present picture as autograph and datable to the mid-1550s. [4] The x-radiograph of the Borghese version, which reveals the cancellation of a figure still present in the Gallery's version, might appear to support this opinion. But as first indicated by Paola Della Pergola in 1955, with the subsequent concurrence of a majority of critics (including Francesco Valcanover, Fern Rusk Shapley, and Harold Wethey), [5] the style and technique of the Gallery's picture indicate rather that it postdates the qualitatively superior Borghese version and was executed by a shop assistant or follower. The anonymous compiler of the 1961 catalog of paintings in the Art Institute of Chicago suggested that the picture was by the same hand as the Chicago *Allegory* (no. 1943.90; now *Allegory of Venus and Cupid*), which was at that time attributed to Titian's pupil Damiano Mazza. [6] Although sharing some compositional motifs, however, the two pictures are not particularly close stylistically; and in any case, too little is known of Mazza's independent style for either of the two to be attributed to him with any conviction. [7] Definitely unconvincing is the attribution of the Gallery's picture by Federico Zeri to Lambert Sustris, whose personal style, despite the mystery that still surrounds his later career, [8] remains relatively recognizable, with its fluid handling of paint and pale color schemes. To some extent, as implied by Wethey, the bright, variegated colors and the luxurious accessories are closer to Veronese than the late Titian, whose preference for a duskier, more monochrome palette is more faithfully represented by the Gallery's version of *Venus and Adonis*. The evidence of the x-radiographs of the Borghese picture indicate, nonetheless, that the executant of the present work must have been a member of Titian's studio, since he clearly had direct access to the master's designs. Yet the x-radiographs of the present picture [fig. 2] reveal that the executant made a number of less radical changes of his own, changing, for example, the position of Venus's left forearm, as well as a number of details of her costume, and incorporating a jeweled chain very similar to that in the *Salome* of circa 1560–1570 (Koelliker collection, Milan). It remains difficult to decide whether

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the work was painted simultaneously with the Borghese version; immediately after it, but still directly under Titian's supervision; or after his death and in imitation of his unfinished late works, circa 1576–1580. [9]

As pointed out by Robert Wald, a close reflection of the original composition of the Gallery's picture is probably provided by a low-quality, perhaps 18th-century painting in the stores of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna [fig. 3]. [10] Although Venus is dressed differently in the latter, the owner of the arm upraising the dish is present; and apart from the change of the sex of the figure on the far right, the figures in the Vienna picture correspond well to the "Graces offering Tribute to Venus" recorded in Stowe inventories of the 18th century. [11] Thus, all three figures in the Vienna picture seem to bear attributes of the goddess of love: the foremost female holds apples in the folds of her skirt, the figure at the right holds up a dove in a basket, and the silver dish held up by the figure at the center perhaps contains flowers. On this evidence it may be that the Vienna picture represents a more or less literal copy of a lost autograph painting by Titian, which preceded the Borghese picture, and which provided the basis for the Gallery's variant. [12] All three of the figures included in the now-missing section of the Gallery's picture then reappear, together or individually, in numerous variants painted by Titian and his workshop during the 1550s and 1560s. [13]

The partly contemporary and courtly character of the costume, together with the more worldly, less classicizing character of her features compared with those of the Borghese picture, led Suida to suppose that the figure was intended as a portrait. In keeping with this supposition, the picture is still entitled *Portrait of a Young Lady as Venus Binding the Eyes of Cupid* in Shapley's catalog of 1979. [14] But the features are still highly idealized and the costume is fanciful, and there is every reason to suppose that like the Borghese version, the Gallery's picture is intended as a mythological allegory. Despite the plausible assumption that it once represented the Three Graces bringing gifts to Venus, the precise significance of the allegory—like that of the Borghese picture, in which the Graces are replaced by two nymphs with the attributes of huntresses—remains unclear. The two most detailed interpretations of the Borghese picture, both in a moralizing, neoplatonic vein but with differing results, have been provided by Erwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind. [15] Panofsky pointed out that the two cupids represent Eros and Anteros, both sons of Venus, but symbols of contrasting aspects of love, the blind and sensuous, and the clear-sighted and virtuous. According to Panofsky, the work should be seen as a marriage picture, in which Venus is shown choosing between

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the two, opting for virtuous and reciprocal love, and about to remove Eros's blindfold. Wind emphasized rather the need of the goddess of love to combine perspicacity and passion, and by deliberately sending Eros out into the world blindfolded, the virtuous love advocated by his brother can attain a higher joy. The interpretation of the picture as a *Domestication of Cupid* by Walter Friedländer is closer to that of Panofsky than of Wind, but the author identified the main figure not as Venus but as Vesta, goddess of the hearth and domestic chastity, who is concerned to protect the world from the harm caused by Eros. [16] Rona Goffen, who unaccountably identified the blindfolded cupid as Anteros and his standing brother as Eros, suggested that the meaning is deliberately ambiguous, evoking the teasing uncertainties of love. [17] More recent scholars have tended to side with Panofsky in interpreting Venus in this context as a tutelary deity of marital love and conjugal chastity; [18] and in this case, the Gallery's picture may be assumed similarly to have been painted (or at least, acquired) to celebrate a marriage. As noted by Miguel Falomir, [19] however, the arrow here gives the message an ironic twist and reminds its viewers that the blind passion of Eros represents an ongoing threat to marital bliss.

Peter Humfrey

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

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fig. 1 Titian, *Venus Blindfolding Cupid*, c. 1565, oil on canvas, Galleria Borghese, Rome. Scala / Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY

fig. 2 X-radiograph, Workshop or Follower of Titian, *Venus Blindfolding Cupid*, c. 1566/1570 or c. 1576/1580, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

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fig. 3 After Titian, *Venus Blindfolding Cupid*, possibly 18th century, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © KHM-Museumsverband

NOTES

[1] For the "Elements," see Provenance, note 1; the Stowe inventories up to 1780 (see Provenance, note 3) describe the picture as "Venus binding the eyes of Cupid, and the Graces offering a Tribute." By the time of the 1797 inventory, the picture is described rather as "Titian's mistress (as Venus)," implying that the mutilation took place between these dates. As suggested by Colin Anson (see Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings* [Washington, DC, 1979], 1:504, 505–506 n. 4, and correspondence in NGA curatorial files), the picture was probably cut to make room for newly acquired pictures on the same wall. In the 1740 sale of Jervas's pictures (see Provenance, note 1), the dimensions are given as 5 feet 7 inches by 6 feet 6 inches. Since this height is clearly much greater than that of the Gallery's picture, it must be that the recorded dimensions include a frame of c. 19 inches (48.3 cm) wide. In that case, the original dimensions of the picture (c. 118.5 cm × c. 175.3 cm) would have been close to those of the Borghese picture (118 cm × 185 cm).

[2] See Paolo Spezzani, in *Tiziano: Amor sacro e amor profano*, ed. Maria Grazia Bernardini (Milan, 1995), 441.

[3] Wilhelm Suida, "Miscellanea Tizianesca," *Arte veneta* 6 (1952): 36–38.

[4] Rodolfo Pallucchini, *Tiziano: Lezioni di storia dell'arte* (Bologna, 1954),

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2:113–115; Rodolfo Pallucchini, *Tiziano* (Florence, 1969), 1:169–170, 180, 310; Rodolfo Pallucchini, *Profilo di Tiziano* (Florence, 1977), 55.

[5] Paola Della Pergola, *Galleria Borghese: I dipinti* (Rome, 1955), 1:132; Francesco Valcanover, *Tutta la pittura di Tiziano* (Milan, 1960), 2:71; Francesco Valcanover, *L'opera completa di Tiziano* (Milan, 1969), no. 410; Francesco Valcanover, in *Le siècle de Titien: L'Âge d'Or de la peinture à Venise* (Paris, 1993), 619; Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools, XV–XVI Century* (London, 1968), 188–189; Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings* (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:503–506; Harold Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian* (London, 1975), 3:85–86, 207–208.

[6] *Paintings in the Art Institute of Chicago: A Catalogue of the Picture Collection* (Chicago, 1961), 307.

[7] For Mazza, see M. Roy Fisher, *Titian's Assistants during the Later Years*, PhD diss., Harvard University, 1958 (New York, 1977), 138–139; Enrico Maria Dal Pozzolo, "La 'bottega' di Tiziano: Sistema solare e buco nero," *Studi Tizianeschi* 4 (2006): 79–80.

[8] Federico Zeri, "Review of *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: Italian Schools XV–XVI Century* by Fern Rusk Shapley," *The Burlington Magazine* 111 (1969): 456. For the late Sustris, see Robert Echols, "Tintoretto, Christ at the Sea of Galilee, and the Unknown Later Career of Lambert Sustris," *Venezia Cinquecento* 6, no. 12 (1996): 93–149.

[9] Giorgio Tagliaferro, in *Le botteghe di Tiziano* (Florence, 2009), 239, favors the first interpretation; Nicholas Penny (letter to Peter Humfrey of Nov. 17, 2001, on file) inclines toward the last.

[10] Robert Wald, "Titian's Vienna *Danaë*: Observations on Execution and Replication in Titian's Studio," in *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, ed. Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (Venice, 2008), 133 n. 48.

[11] See Entry, note 1, and Provenance, note 1.

[12] The existence of a lost autograph prototype was already hypothesized by Rona Goffen, *Titian's Women* (New Haven and London, 1997), 144; and Miguel Falomir, in *Tiziano*, ed. Miguel Falomir (Madrid, 2003), 265, 402.

[13] The female figure, seen in three-quarter view from the back, turning her head to face the spectator and raising a silver dish above her head, corresponds, for example, to the *Salome* of c. 1555 (Prado, Madrid); the figure also holding up a container, and with its face seen in sharp foreshortening, reappears in the Vienna version of the *Danaë* (Kunsthistorisches Museum) and elsewhere. The evolution of Titian's composition, from the so-called *Allegory of Alfonso d'Avalos* of c. 1531–1532 (Louvre, Paris) to the Borghese *Venus Blindfolding Cupid*, is analyzed through their many variants by Kristina Herrmann Fiore, "L''Allegoria

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coniugale' di Tiziano del Louvre e le derivazioni, connesse con 'Venere che benda Amore,'" in *Tiziano: Amor sacro e amor profano*, ed. Maria Grazia Bernardini (Milan, 1995), 411–420; and Jaynie Anderson, in *Tiziano: Amor sacro e amor profano*, 435–436.

[14] Wilhelm Suida, "Miscellanea Tizianesca," *Arte veneta* 6 (1952): 36–38; Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings* (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:503.

[15] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (New York, 1939), 165–169; Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London, 1958), 76–77; Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic* (London, 1969), 129–136. These and other interpretations of the Borghese picture have been surveyed by Kristina Herrmann Fiore in *Titian, Prince of Painters* (Venice, 1990), 343, 346; and most recently by Andrea Bayer, in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Andrea Bayer (New Haven and London, 2008), 330–332.

[16] Walter Friedländer, "The Domestication of Cupid," in *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art Presented to Anthony Blunt* (London, 1967), 51–52.

[17] Rona Goffen, *Titian's Women* (New Haven and London, 1997), 144.

[18] See, for example, Kristina Herrmann Fiore, "Venere che benda Amore," in *Tiziano: Amor sacro e amor profano*, ed. Maria Grazia Bernardini (Milan, 1995), 389–409; Miguel Falomir, in *Tiziano*, ed. Miguel Falomir (Madrid, 2003), 264–265, 401–402; Andrea Bayer, in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Andrea Bayer (New Haven and London, 2008), 330–332.

[19] Miguel Falomir, in *Tiziano*, ed. Miguel Falomir (Madrid, 2003), 265, 402, developing a suggestion by Rona Goffen, *Titian's Women* (New Haven and London, 1997), 144.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, twill canvas has clearly been cut at the right, where there is no sign of the cusping distinctly visible along the other three edges. In addition, fracture damages in the paint indicate that at some time well after the painting was completed, the right edge was folded over to serve as a tacking edge, making the painted dimensions even smaller. At the time of the painting's last lining, this edge was opened out, and fabric inserts were added to the other three edges to extend them as well. All of the edges were filled and inpainted.

The support was prepared with a thin white ground. The x-radiographs [fig. 1] have revealed a number of alterations to the design, the most striking of which involved

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moving Venus's left forearm from a position more closely resembling that in the version in the Borghese Gallery [fig. 2]. There is also a suggestion of a different décolletage to Venus's dress, and her neck and shoulders have been worked over several times. The disembodied arm on the right is painted over an area that in the Borghese version is filled by the bow, hand, and, farther down, the sleeve of yet another figure. Traces visible on the surface of the paint and in the x-radiographs indicate that the Gallery's painting once included them as well. Since the hand of Venus travels over the red skirt, and paint from the gray sleeve can be detected on the tacking edge that was made after the painting was cut down, it is unlikely that the cropped figure is a later addition.

The painted surface of the disembodied arm is badly abraded, suggesting that it was overpainted when the canvas was cut and was rediscovered during a later restoration. The painting suffers from abrasion and wear overall. The blue paint in much of the sky has degraded, [1] resulting in the current patchy white and blue state. The painting was treated by Mario Modestini in 1948 and again in 1955.

Peter Humfrey and Joanna Dunn based on the examination report by Mary Bustin

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TECHNICAL COMPARATIVE FIGURES

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fig. 1 X-radiograph, Workshop or Follower of Titian, *Venus Blindfolding Cupid*, c. 1566/1570 or c. 1576/1580, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

fig. 2 Titian, *Venus Blindfolding Cupid*, c. 1565, oil on canvas, Galleria Borghese, Rome. Scala / Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] In 1989, the painting was analyzed with x-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF) by the NGA Scientific Research department (see report dated August 11, 1989), but the blue pigments in the sky were not included in this analysis.

PROVENANCE

Charles Jervas (or Jarvis) [1675?-1739], London; (his sale, at his residence, London, 11-20 March 1739, 8th day, no. 543, as by Titian);[1] purchased by Richard Temple, 1st viscount Cobham [1675-1749], Stowe House, Buckingham;[2] by inheritance to

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his sister, Hester Temple Grenville, 1st countess Temple [d. 1752], Stowe House; by inheritance to her son, Richard Grenville-Temple, 2nd earl Temple [1711-1779], Stowe House;[3] by inheritance to his nephew, George Nugent-Temple-Grenville, 1st marquess of Buckingham [1753-1813], London and Stowe House; by inheritance to his son, Richard Temple-Nugent-Brydges-Chandos-Grenville, 1st duke of Buckingham and Chandos [1776-1839], London, Stowe Park, and Avington Park; by inheritance to his son, Richard Plantagenet Temple-Nugent-Brydges-Chandos-Grenville, 2nd duke of Buckingham and Chandos [1797- 1861], (Buckingham and Chandos sale, by Christie's at Stowe House, 15 September 1848, no. 422);[4] purchased by Peter Norton, London, who apparently sold the painting back to the Buckingham and Chandros family; the 2nd duke's son, Richard Plantagenet Campbell Temple-Nugent-Brydges-Chandos-Grenville, 3rd duke of Buckingham and Chandos [1823-1889], Stowe House; probably by inheritance to his daughter, Mary, 11th baroness Kinloss [1852-1944], Stowe House and Scotland; (Kinloss sale, at Stowe House, 5 July 1921, no. 1697,[5] apparently bought in by the family); probably by inheritance to her daughter, the Hon. Mrs. Thomas Close Smith [1886-1972, née Caroline Mary Elizabeth Morgan-Grenville], Boycott Manor, Buckinghamshire, by 1944.[6] (Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi [1878-1955], Florence and Rome); sold 1950 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York; gift 1952 to NGA.

[1] As “Venus hood-winking Cupid, the Elements offering Tribute," by Titian; see *A Catalogue of the Collection of Pictures, Prints and Drawings late of Charles Jarvis, Esq.*, London, 1740: 8th day’s sale, 18, no. 543. The sale catalogue identifies the deceased owner as the Principal Painter to Kings George I and George II, and explains that the nearly 600 pictures in his collection were “chiefly collected by him, in a series of Forty Years, in Rome, Lombardy, Venice, France and Flanders, and from the Cabinets of many of the English Nobility.” See also Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings, National Gallery of Art*, 2 vols., Washington, 1979: 1:506 n. 12, and the correspondence from Colin Anson in NGA curatorial files.

[2] See the MS copy of the Jervas sale catalogue in the National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (MSL/ 1938/ 867), f. 58, where the buyer is identified as Lord Cobham, and the price paid as £16.10s. See also *Lord Cobham’s Account Book, 1736-41*, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, Stowe Papers

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(H.E.H. ST130), entry for March 20, 1739?/1740: “To a large picture bought at Mr Jarvises Sale by Mr Squib as by Bill £17-1-0,” quoted by Shapley 1979, 1:506 n. 12, and in the correspondence from Colin Anson in NGA curatorial files.

[3] *Stowe: A Description of the House and Gardens*, London, 1763, and subsequent editions. As recorded by Colin Anson, “The Picture Collection at Stowe,” *Apollo* 97 (June 1973): 597 n. 2, the catalog of the Stowe collection went through fifteeen editions between 1759 and 1832, and had to be constantly revised to take account of the rehanging of the pictures. For the various rooms at Stowe in which the *Venus Blindfolding Cupid* is recorded, see Shapley 1979, 1:505-506 n. 4, and the correspondence from Colin Anson in NGA curatorial files.

[4] Henry Rumsey Forster, *The Stowe Catalogue*, London, 1848: no. 422, as by Titian.

[5] *Catalogue of the Ducal Estate of Stowe, near Buckingham*, Northhampton, 1921: no. 1697, as by Titian.

[6] For a general account of the formation and dispersal of the Stowe collection, see Anson 1973, 586-598; and Paul Whitfield, “Bankruptcy and Sale at Stowe: 1848,” *Apollo* 97 (June 1973): 599-604.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

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