The picture has been the subject of debate with regard both to its subject and its authorship. Titian and his Venetian contemporaries painted a large number of pictures representing beautiful young women in a portraitlike format, but it is often unclear whether such pictures are meant to be recognizable portraits of real members of contemporary society or idealized images of anonymous beauties—or, indeed, whether part of their allure lay in the very ambivalence of their status (see also Allegory of Love). Among Titian’s works of his midcareer, the Young Woman of circa 1546 in Naples (Capodimonte) and the Lady with a Fan of circa 1555 in Dresden (Gemäldegalerie) both appear to be portraits since both wear fashionable contemporary dress. Yet the sitter of the so-called Bella of 1536 (Pitti, Florence), who is similarly richly dressed in the height of fashion, was famously described by the picture’s first owner, the duke of Urbino, simply as “the woman in a blue dress”; [1] and the same model becomes even more anonymous—and eroticized—in the various versions of the Bella, in which she is shown in a state of undress, partly draped in a fur cloak (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Hermitage, Saint Petersburg). The present picture has been fancifully identified in the past as a portrait of Titian’s daughter Lavinia, or alternatively as Caterina Cornaro, or as Giulia Gonzaga. [2] While Fern Rusk Shapley rightly rejected these identifications as without foundation, she still implicitly accepted that the picture portrays a particular woman and retained the traditional title of Portrait of a Lady. [3] Yet as she also recognized, the fact that the figure is shown in semiundress, with loose, untied hair and sleeves, and a richly jeweled but obviously informal gown, invites comparison with a number of other compositionally related pictures by Titian and his workshop in which a female figure is shown in fancy dress or undress and

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holding an attribute-like object. Relevant examples quoted by Shapley include the Young Woman with a Vase (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden), the Young Woman in Turkish Dress (John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota), and the Young Woman with a Cat (in 1931 in a private collection in New York);[4] and to these several more examples have been added in a recent survey of the compositional type by Paul Joannides and Rupert Featherstone.[5]

Shapley, following Detlev von Hadeln,[6] considered that such pictures represent portraits of courtesans. As recent studies have shown, however, while Venetian “beautiful woman” pictures may frequently reflect courtesan culture of the period, there is no evidence that real courtesans had themselves portrayed in this way.[7] Rather, such pictures may be interpreted as idealized images of female beauty, designed to appeal to the romantic and erotic longings of a male owner. As pointed out by Philip Rylands with reference to a comparable portrayal by Palma Vecchio of a Woman Holding an Apple (private collection, Paris), the attribute of the fruit carries inevitable connotations of female sexuality,[8] which in the case of the Gallery’s picture are heightened by the figure’s state of undress and her responsive gaze out at the spectator. This is not to exclude the suggestion by Harold Wethey that the apple, together with the garland of flowers in her hair, is also meant to carry some mythological or literary significance.[9] Indeed, her costume and attributes correspond remarkably closely to the figure of one of the Three Graces in the foreground of an 18th-century copy in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, after a lost version of Titian’s Venus Blindfolding Cupid.

Critics have varied greatly in their assessment of the quality of the picture. Wilhelm Suida, Bernard Berenson, Rodolfo Pallucchini, and Francesco Valcanover all accepted it as an autograph work by Titian.[10] But Oskar Fischel assigned it to Titian’s workshop, while Hadeln and Wethey considered it to be a poor imitation of Titian by a later follower.[11] This last judgment is certainly too harsh, especially when the poor condition of the picture is taken into account and when it is compared with the similar, but weaker Titianesque images of women just mentioned. The recent reassertion, in fact, of the autograph status of the present work by Giorgio Tagliaferro, and by Joannides and Featherstone, may be accepted as fully justified.[12]

Although Tagliaferro suggested a dating of the picture to the later 1550s, the slightly earlier dating to circa 1550/1555 suggested by Suida, Pallucchini, and Valcanover is probably more accurate. Indeed, a dating for stylistic reasons to the later 1540s cannot be excluded,[13] especially since, as was pointed out by
Joannides and Featherstone, the ultimate prototype of the series was almost certainly Titian’s Portrait of a Lady as Saint Catherine of Alexandria. [14] Although this picture is now lost, it is recorded in a copy in the Uffizi, Florence, which is inscribed on the reverse with the date of 1542—a probably accurate record of that of the original. The composition of the Gallery’s picture follows that of the Saint Catherine quite closely, while anonymizing and eroticizing its model, and it is likely that it in turn became the prototype for the series of Belle executed by, or in collaboration with, the workshop. [15] There is good evidence to show that at least one of these pictures, A Young Woman Holding Rose Garlands (Wellington Collection, Apsley House, London), took the Woman Holding an Apple as its starting point, since technical analysis presented by Joannides and Featherstone has shown that the figure’s black overgown was painted over a lighter and looser green garment, exactly as in the Gallery’s picture. At the same time, the authors cautioned against concluding that the picture of the highest quality necessarily preceded all the other variants in the series, since it cannot be excluded that the master might on occasion decide to produce an autograph variant of a design previously realized in collaboration with his assistants.

Peter Humfrey
March 21, 2019

NOTES


[8] Philip Rylands, Palma Vecchio (Cambridge, 1992), 92. The writer convincingly identified the picture, which he dated to circa 1516–1518, with an item described in the posthumous inventory of Palma’s possessions (1528) as “1 quaero de un retrato de una d. de q.2 in ca., con vesta de veludo cremesin con un pomo in man.” Despite the figure’s respectable dress, and the description of the picture as a “retrato,” its status as a portrait of a particular woman must remain a matter of debate.


[12] Giorgio Tagliaferro and Bernard Aikema, with Matteo Mancini and Andrew John, Le botteghe di Tiziano (Florence, 2009), 266–267; Paul Joannides and Rupert Featherstone, “A Painting by Titian from the Spanish Royal
Painted on a single piece of fine-woven fabric, the picture measured 45 1/4 by 35 1/4 inches when in the Wilbraham collection (see the photographs in the catalog of the exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, 1915, plate 12, and in Wilhelm Suida, Tizian [Zurich and Leipzig, 1933], p. CXCVII). The present lack of weave distortion indicates that the picture has been cut down on all four edges; yet for visual reasons, it is most unlikely that the original canvas was much larger. Documentation from a treatment that took place in Paris in 1929, including photographs, indicates that strips from another painting, each four to five inches wide, had been added to all four edges. These additions were removed or reduced during the 1929 treatment. [1] The canvas retains extensions of irregular widths, which have a different preparatory layer structure from the original. These are probably remnants of the earlier additions. The painting’s exact original dimensions remain unclear.

The painting was prepared with a very thin layer of porous material, probably gesso, laid on the fabric; it barely fills the interstices of the fabric weave and cannot be seen on top of the threads. A layer of gray lies under the background and flesh tones, while white underlies the green gown. The picture has an incomprehensible, blocky form in a material that is opaque to x-radiography (probably lead white) at the top and a band of the same material at the bottom of the present composition. Although no underdrawing has been detected, in November 2015 a tracing of the composition was laid over the probably slightly variant version in the Wellington Collection at Apsley House, London,” Hamilton Kerr Institute Bulletin 5 (2014): 68, 72–73.

[13] Nicholas Penny (letter to Peter Humfrey of Nov. 17, 2001, in NGA curatorial files) has dated the picture to the 1540s.


Collection, Apsley House, London: *A Young Woman Holding Rose Garlands*, attributed to Titian and a collaborator. While the scales of the respective heads match closely, and the contours of the proper right side of the face correspond exactly, other contours show a much looser correspondence, as if the master had shifted some sort of simple tracing during the process of transfer. The paint layer is extensively damaged, with abrasion and loss throughout and a good deal of retouching. In addition to the 1929 treatment, the Samuel H. Kress Collection National Gallery of Art Condition and Restoration Record reports that Stephen Pichetto “relined, cleaned, and restored [the painting] in dry color and damar” in 1937–1939, and in 1955 Mario Modestini “revived color” and applied varnish. [2]

Peter Humfrey and Joanna Dunn based on the examination reports by Catherine Metzger and Joanna Dunn

March 21, 2019

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: Series II.A, Files regarding works of art, reel 158, box 303: Weyden, van der—Zurbarán, folder 7: Wilbraham Collection. This treatment was probably accomplished by Madame Helfer, because she restored many paintings in Paris for Duveen Brothers.


PROVENANCE

Probably Michel Particelli d'Hémy [1596-1650], Paris; by inheritance to his son-in-law, Louis Phélypeaux de La Vrillière [1599-1681],[1] George Wilbraham, M.P. [1779-1852], Delamere House, near Northwich, Cheshire, by 1829;[2] probably by inheritance to his son, George Fortescue Wilbraham [1815-1885], Delamere House, by 1883;[3] probably by inheritance to his son, Major Hugh Edward Wilbraham,

[1] As first pointed out by Christel Haffner in an unpublished dissertation of 1983, the picture is almost certainly identical with one listed as item 66 in the posthumous inventory (1650) of Particelli, Superintendent of Finance under Louis XIV of France: “Item une autre tableau du Tissien representant une dame venitienne plus qu’à demy corps tenant une grenade” (Another picture by Titian, representing a Venetian woman holding a pomegranate, longer than half-length). When it was inherited soon afterwards by La Vrillière, it was described as “portrait d’une femme tenant une pomme en ses mains ayant une guirlande de fleurs su sa tête” (portrait of a woman holding an apple in her hands, and with a garland of flowers on her head). See Mickaël Szanto, “Venise, Reni et la romanité. La collection de tableaux de Michel Particelli d’Hémery (1650),” in Venise & Paris 1500–1700: La peinture vénitienne de la Renaissance et sa réception en France, ed. Michel Hochmann, Geneva, 2011: 224, 259, 274.

[2] The painting was lent by G. Wilbraham to an exhibition at the British Institution in 1829.

[3] The painting was lent by G.F. Wilbraham to an exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1883.

[4] The painting was lent by H.E. Wilbraham to an exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1914.

[5] The painting was seen at Wilbraham’s by Duveen agents in 1927, per the Duveen “Scout book,” but at that time Wilbraham indicated he was not interested in selling his pictures. He had changed his mind by October 1928, and received the court order necessary to make the sale on 14 January 1929 (Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: Series I.D, General business records, reel 71, box 201: Scouts’ books, folder 1: England, "Things seen"; Series II.A, Files regarding works of art, reel 150,
EXHIBITION HISTORY

1829 British Institution, London, 1829, no. 161, as Titian’s Daughter.

1883 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and by Deceased Masters of the British School; including a special selection from the works of John Linnell and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1883, no. 191, as Caterina Cornaro, Queen of Cyprus.

1915 The Venetian School. Pictures by Titian and his Contemporaries, Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, 1915, no. 19, pl. XII.


1940 Italian Renaissance Portraits, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1940, no. 21, repro., as Presumed to be Portrait of Giulia di Gonzago-Colonna, Duchess of Trajetto.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


1941  *Preliminary Catalogue of Paintings and Sculpture*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1941: 197-198, no. 403, as *Portrait of a Lady (Giulia di Gonzaga-Colonna ?)*.

1942  *Book of Illustrations*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1942: 247, repro. 198, as *Portrait of a Lady (Giulia di Gonzaga-Colonna ?)*.


Woman Holding an Apple

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