



Assistant of Titian, possibly begun by Gian Paolo Pace

Titian

Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576

Gian Paolo Pace

Italian, 1528 - 1560

## *Irene di Spilimbergo*

c. 1560

oil on canvas

overall: 122 x 106.5 cm (48 1/16 x 41 15/16 in.)

Inscription: lower right on base of column: SI FATA / TVLISSENT (If the fates had allowed)

Widener Collection 1942.9.83

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### ENTRY

The portraits of the sisters Irene and Emilia di Spilimbergo, presumably painted as a pair, remained in the possession of the Spilimbergo family and their descendants until 1909, when they were sold under controversial circumstances to Duveen and exported from Italy to America. Much of the controversy stemmed from a persistent local tradition that the portraits were by Titian. An engraving of the *Irene*, for example, had served as the frontispiece of Count di Maniago's influential account of the history of art in Friuli of 1819. [1] From about 1930, however, most critics have seen them rather as by a close follower, perhaps identifiable as Gian Paolo Pace.

Emilia (1536–1585) and her younger sister Irene (1538–1559) were the daughters of the Friulian nobleman Adriano di Spilimbergo and Giulia, daughter of the wealthy Venetian citizen Zuan Paolo da Ponte. According to Giorgio Vasari, Titian painted the portraits of the members of three generations of the family: "Among the portraits by Titian is one . . . of Paolo da Ponte, whose beautiful young daughter Giulia (who was a confidante of his) Titian also portrayed, as he did the lovely Signora Irene, a young woman well versed in literature and music who was studying design. When she died about seven years ago she was honoured by nearly every Italian writer." [2] At least part of this information is certainly correct, as has been shown with the recent rediscovery of Titian's portrait of Zuan Paolo da Ponte, together with references in the latter's *Memoriale*—a manuscript journal in five volumes covering the years 1520 to 1562—which show that this portrait and that of Giulia were commissioned from the painter in 1534. [3] And in his last remark

about Giulia's daughter Irene, Vasari is clearly referring to a volume of nearly 400 Latin and Italian poems, including contributions by Torquato Tasso and Lodovico Dolce, which was published in 1561 by Dionigi Atanagi, in honor of the gifted young woman who had died at such a tragically early age. [4]

Atanagi's biography of Irene, together with further modern research, provides considerable information about her personality and accomplishments. [5] After the death of their father in 1541, she and her sister were educated under the supervision of their maternal grandfather, who actively encouraged their interest in the arts, and who in about 1555 brought them to Venice. Irene was remarkable in her ambition to excel, and stimulated by the example of Sofonisba Anguissola, she persuaded Titian, as a family friend, to allow her to copy his works and to give her tuition as a painter. But her very determination apparently led to overexertion and hence to illness and early death. Much less is known of Emilia, who was born in 1536, married in 1561, and died in 1585. But three of the poems in Atanagi's volume praise her as the image of her sister, and two years later she was the dedicatee of Anton Maria Amadi's edition of one of Petrarch's *Sonnets*. [6]

On June 28, 1560, a few months after Irene's death the previous December, her grandfather noted in his *Memoriale* that a portrait of her—and presumably also one of her sister—had been begun two years previously by Gian Paolo Pace, but that this painter had sketched it so poorly that the patron asked Titian to complete it. [7] If begun in 1558, the portraits had as their original function, as observed by Elsje van Kessel, some probable relation to the sitters' prospective marriages: either to present two highly eligible, aristocratic young woman to prospective husbands; or, given their character as balancing pendants, as permanent souvenirs for their family after they were married. [8] With the premature death of Irene, however, the function of her portrait was suddenly changed to become an elegy for what might have been, in a way analogous to the volume of poems. [9] A number of details are certainly consistent with this change of function, notably the inscription ("If the fates had allowed"). Although there is no particular reference to her activity as a painter, the laurel crown in her hand presumably alludes to her achievements in the arts in general, and the evergreen palm to her everlasting fame. Another obvious symbol is the unicorn in the left middle ground, which as already pointed out in 1819 by Di Maniago, refers to her perpetual virginity. [10] The column with its base further invests Irene's portrait with a grandeur not present in that of her sister. Too little information exists about Emilia's biography to know for certain why the seascape to the right shows a storm-tossed ship; but since the portraits were almost certainly

painted contemporaneously as pendants, the motif probably alludes to the turbulent state of her emotions on the loss of her sister. Such an allusion, and such a close linkage with Irene, would perhaps have been less appropriate after Emilia's marriage in 1561. On circumstantial evidence, therefore, the pair of portraits—like Atanagi's celebratory volume—is likely to have been completed in the immediate aftermath of Irene's death in 1559.

The traditional attribution of the portraits to Titian, based on the account of Vasari, and also on the very similar one by Carlo Ridolfi, was still unchallenged at the beginning of the 20th century. [11] Only Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle had expressed doubts about their quality, but they attributed any shortcomings to damage and repaint. [12] In 1904, when they were in the possession of Count Niccolò D'Attimis Maniago, a descendant of the Spilimbergo and Da Ponte families, they were listed in an Italian government catalog as works of "sommo pregio" (the highest value), implying that they were by Titian. In 1908, however, Count Enrico D'Attimis Maniago applied to the Italian commission on the export of works of art for a downgrading of the status of the portraits, and hence for permission to sell them abroad. In 1909 the commission agreed that they were not by Titian, and an export license was granted; within the same year, they passed through the hands of the dealer Elia Volpi and were acquired by Joseph Duveen. [13] It was clearly now in Duveen's interest to revert to the traditional attribution, and this case was greatly aided by the discovery of Zuan Paolo da Ponte's *Memoriale* in 1910, and the publication in 1911 by Ferruccio Carreri of the passages referring to Titian's involvement (see Entry note 7). In 1949 doubts about the authenticity of these passages were raised by Michelangelo Muraro, who having examined the original manuscript, noted first that the two relevant pages were now missing, and second that the name of Titian does not appear in the index to the volume. Muraro observed that the publication of the two passages coincided closely with the controversy surrounding the sale of the portraits from the Spilimbergo family to Duveen, and suggested that they had been fabricated to prove Titian's authorship of the *Irene*. [14]

In the absence of the original document, it is difficult to assess the reliability or otherwise of the passages published by Carreri; yet it seems likely that even if they were tampered with, they were not, after all, complete fabrications. It is true that in terms of their aesthetic quality neither of the Spilimbergo portraits can be accepted as the work of Titian, even in part; and although a case has sometimes been made for seeing the *Irene* as superior to the *Emilia*—for instance by the Tietzes, Harold

Wethey, and Fern Rusk Shapley [15]—the two works are perfectly homogenous in terms of their style and handling. Yet in these respects, as well as in their compositions, they are undeniably Titianesque, and the suspicions about the authenticity of the documentation do not disprove the obvious inference that they are products of Titian's workshop. At this stage of his career, the master himself would have been devoting his best efforts almost exclusively to King Philip II of Spain, and when undertaking what he could only have regarded as an unwelcome chore at the request of a former patron, it is hardly surprising that he should have delegated it to one of his various studio assistants.

Whether or not this assistant was Gian Paolo Pace is another matter. Again, the mention in the *Memoriale* that he was responsible for making a start at least on the portrait of Irene may be regarded as reliable, since no unscrupulous historian or dealer would have had any interest in inventing a story about a painter who was almost entirely obscure. Since 1911 Pace has, in fact, been widely accepted as the author of the portraits, in whole or in part, including by Corrado Ricci, the Tietzes, Ettore Camesasca, Wethey, and Giorgio Tagliaferro. [16] Recently, however, Mattia Biffis has again minimized Pace's involvement, following his demonstration that, contrary to previous assumptions, this painter was never an assistant in Titian's workshop, but rather an autonomous master based in Padua. [17] Further, Biffis provided good reasons for thinking that the most reliable touchstone for his own personal style is neither the Titianesque portrait of Giovanni delle Bande Nere (Uffizi, Florence) [fig. 1], nor the Spilimbergo portraits, but the Gallery's own, stylistically very different, portrait of Alessandro Alberti. If Biffis is correct, then Pace may indeed have begun both portraits, making studies of the faces from life and blocking out the compositions on their canvases; but then the upper layers would have been executed by an assistant in Titian's workshop. Unfortunately, the evidence of the x-radiographs [fig. 2] does not provide a clear solution to the attributional conundrum.

Sometimes associated with the pair is a stylistically and compositionally similar *Portrait of a Woman*, formerly in the Quincy Shaw collection, Boston, and the Peterkin collection, Andover, Massachusetts. Since it is smaller than the pair (72 × 48 cm), Lionello Venturi suggested that it was Titian's autograph *modello* for the *Irene*. [18] The Tietzes identified it instead as Titian's much earlier portrait of the sisters' mother, Giulia da Ponte, recorded in Zuan Paolo's *Memoriale* and by Vasari. [19] But Francesco Valcanover was certainly correct in rejecting the attribution to Titian; and his own attribution to Cesare Vecellio is more in keeping

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with the later style of the costume. [20] Crowe and Cavalcaselle recorded a 16th-century copy of the *Irene* in the possession of Signor Gatorno, San Vito del Tagliamento. [21] Linda Borean drew attention to a picture formerly in the Brownlow collection, in which the composition of the *Irene*, complete with unicorn in the background, is re-elaborated as a *Saint Catherine*. [22]

Peter Humfrey

March 21, 2019

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Workshop of Titian (Gian Paolo Pace), *Giovanni delle Bande Nere*, c. 1545, oil on canvas, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Su concessione del Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo



**fig. 2** X-radiograph, Assistant of Titian, possibly begun by Gian Paolo Pace, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, c. 1560, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

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## NOTES

*Irene di Spilimbergo*

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- [1] Fabio di Maniago, *Storia della belle arti friulane* (Udine, 1819), frontispiece. See Caterina Furlan, “Tiziano nella storiografia artistica friulana tra Sette e Ottocento,” *Studi Tizianeschi* 3 (2005): 92–95.
- [2] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists: A Selection*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth, 1965), 459–460; Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi (Florence, 1987), 6:167–168: “La signora Irene, vergine bellissima, letterata, musica et incaminata nel disegno, la quale, morendo circa sette anni sono, fu celebrata quasi da tutte le penne degli scrittori d'Italia.”
- [3] See *Tiziano ritrovato: Il ritratto di messer Zuan Paulo da Ponte* (Venice, 1998). The portrait of Zuan Paolo, which in 1998 was with the dealer Pietro Scarpa in Venice, carries the inscription on the reverse: +ZAN PAULO DA PONTE+/ SPILINBERGO. The picture appears to be in poor condition but authentic. Zuan Paolo's *Memoriale* is reputedly in a private collection in Venice and is not easily accessible.
- [4] Dionigi Atanagi, *Rime di diversi nobilissimi et eccellentissimi autori in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo* (Venice, 1561).
- [5] Dionigi Atanagi, *Rime di diversi nobilissimi et eccellentissimi autori in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo* (Venice, 1561), under “Vita della Signora Irene,” unpaginated; see also Ruggero Zotti, *Irene di Spilimbergo* (Udine, 1914), 22–28. A useful recent biographical sketch of Irene is provided by Anne Jacobsen Schutte, “Irene di Spilimbergo: The Image of a Creative Woman in Late Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 44 (1991): 42–61.
- [6] Dionigi Atanagi, *Rime di diversi nobilissimi et eccellentissimi autori in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo* (Venice, 1561), 114, 146, 165; Anton Maria Amadi, *Ragionamento di M. Anton Maria Amadi: Intorno a quel sonetto del Petrarca . . .* (Padua, 1563). For Emilia's marriage see Anne Jacobsen Schutte, “Irene di Spilimbergo: The Image of a Creative Woman in Late Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 44 (1991): 44.
- [7] The first passage, dated June 28, 1560, reads as follows: “Mandai a messer Tutian per l'opera per lui fata nel retrato della nostra già benedetta memoria d'Irene abozata assai malamaente da Ser Zuan Paulo de Pase et lassata imperfetta per dui anni si che rimase ben che la poverina andò a miglior vita. Ma Messer Tutian per sua gratia si tolse il cargo de volerlo finir et conzata talmente che si può dir per certo che se fusse sta presente meglio non si poteva desiderar. Gli mandai ducati 6 viniciani et per sua cortesia se a contenta che mertia assai più” (I sent for Messer Titian to undertake the work he did on the portrait of our Irene of blessed memory. This had been begun very badly by Gian Paolo Pace two years before the poor girl went to a better life, but was left unfinished by him. But Messer Titian graciously assumed the burden of completing it, making her appear as if really present,

in a way that was better than one could possibly have hoped for. I sent him six Venetian ducats, which he courteously accepted, although his work was worth much more). The second passage reads: “Il qual M. Tutian per haver nella mente la sua effigie l’a finita e fata si che se l’havesse avuto presente non l’haveria potuto far meglio” (Titian had retained her likeness in his mind, and when finishing her portrait he made her appear as if present, in a way that could scarcely be bettered). See Ferruccio Carreri, “Report in *La Difesa*, 17–18 August 1911,” *L’arte* 14 (1911): 394, repro.; Michelangelo Muraro, “Il memoriale de Zuan Paolo da Ponte,” *Archivio veneto* 79 (1949): 83.

- [8] Elsje van Kessel, *The Lives of Paintings: Presence, Agency and Likeness in Venetian Art of the Sixteenth Century* (Berlin, 2017), 145.
- [9] Elsje van Kessel, *The Lives of Paintings: Presence, Agency and Likeness in Venetian Art of the Sixteenth Century* (Berlin, 2017), 137, 146–150.
- [10] Fabio di Maniago, *Storia della belle arti friulane* (Udine, 1819), 88–90.
- [11] For Vasari, see Entry note 2; Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell’arte, ovvero Le vite de gl’illustri pittori veneti, e dello stato*, ed. Detlev von Hadeln (Berlin, 1914), 1:194.
- [12] Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *Titian, His Life and Times* (London, 1877), 2:301–303.
- [13] For these events, see Corrado Ricci, “Ritratti ‘tizianeschi’ di Gian Paolo Pace,” *Rivista del R. Istituto d’Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte* 7 (1929): 257–258. The rejection of the traditional attribution to Titian is recorded by Oscar Ulm, “I ritratti d’Irene ed Emilia di Spilimbergo erroneamente attribuiti a Tiziano,” *Emporium* 31 (1910): 126–135.
- [14] Michelangelo Muraro, “Il memoriale de Zuan Paolo da Ponte,” *Archivio veneto* 79 (1949): 82–84. See also Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat, “I ritratti Spilimbergo a Washington,” *Emporium* 67 (1953): 99–107.
- [15] Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat, “I ritratti Spilimbergo a Washington,” *Emporium* 67 (1953): 99–107; Harold Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian* (London, 1971), 2:178, 198; and Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian Paintings* (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:500–503.
- [16] Corrado Ricci, “Ritratti ‘tizianeschi’ di Gian Paolo Pace,” *Rivista del R. Istituto d’Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte* 7 (1929): 257; Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat, “I ritratti Spilimbergo a Washington,” *Emporium* 67 (1953): 99–107; Ettore Camesasca, ed., *Lettere sull’arte di Pietro Aretino*, comm. Fidenzio Pertile (Milan, 1960), 3:397; Harold Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian* (London, 1971), 2:178, 198; Giorgio Tagliaferro in *Le botteghe di Tiziano* (Florence, 2009), 168–172. Shapley, however, suspicious of Carreri’s document, rejected the attribution to Pace, and gave the picture to an anonymous follower of Titian. Berenson retained the attribution to Titian he had adopted in 1894, 1916, and 1932. See Fern Rusk Shapley, *Catalogue of the Italian*

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*Paintings* (Washington, DC, 1979), 1:500–503; and Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Venetian School* (London, 1957), 1:192.

- [17] Mattia Biffis, “Di Zuan Paolo Pace, chierico e laico,” *Studi Tizianeschi* 7 (2012): 55–56, 64.
- [18] As reported by Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat, “I ritratti Spilimbergo a Washington,” *Emporium* 67 (1953): 104.
- [19] Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat, “I ritratti Spilimbergo a Washington,” *Emporium* 67 (1953): 99–107.
- [20] Francesco Valcanover, *L'opera completa di Tiziano* (Milan, 1969), 138, no. 583.
- [21] Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *Titian, His Life and Times* (London, 1877), 2:303.
- [22] Linda Borean, “Il carteggio di Abraham Hume e Giovanni Maria Sasso,” in *Il collezionismo a Venezia e nel Veneto ai tempi della Serenissima*, ed. Bernard Aikema, Rosella Lauber, and Max Seidel (Venice, 2005), 328.
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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a medium-weight twill-weave fabric, which was prepared with a white ground followed by a thin dark brown imprimatura layer. The artist applied the paint wet-into-wet, often using a well-laden brush to produce impasto. The x-radiographs [fig. 1] show that the column was originally more gracefully rounded and shown from a lower viewpoint.

The support was lined and the tacking margins were removed, and although cusping is only apparent on the top and bottom edges, there is no indication that the painting has been reduced in size. The paint is now in poor condition, with the impasto disrupted by the cupped and crushed surface, and it is covered with thick, yellowed varnish and copious overpaint. The overpaint blurs the modeling in many places. The inscription has been reinforced, and only the first two words are visible in the x-radiograph.

Joanna Dunn and Peter Humfrey based on the examination reports by William Leisher, Mary Bustin, and Joanna Dunn

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**TECHNICAL COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** X-radiograph, Assistant of Titian, possibly begun by Gian Paolo Pace, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, c. 1560, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

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**PROVENANCE**

Commissioned by the Spilimbergo family, Spilimbergo, Italy; by inheritance to Count Giulio di Spilimbergo, Domanins, by 1819;[1] by inheritance to Count Niccolò d'Attimis Maniago, Florence, by 1904;[2] and Count Enrico d'Attimis Maniago, Florence, until 1909; Elia Volpi [1858-1938], Florence; sold 1909 to (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London and New York); sold October 1909 to Peter A.B. Widener [1834-1915], Elkins Park, Pennsylvania;[3] Inheritance from the Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park.

[1] Fabio di Maniago, *Storia delle belle arti friulane*, Udine, 1819: 201.

[2] Recorded in his possession by Oskar Fischel, *Tizian: Des Meisters Gemälde*, Stuttgart [u.a.], 1904: 195.

[3] Corrado Ricci, "Ritratti 'tizianeschi' di Gian Paolo Pace," *Rivista del R. Istituto d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte* 7 (1929): 257-258. The 1909 Duveen Brothers stock book for their New York office records this painting and NGA 1942.9.82 as "bt. Count Maniago, Florence." See Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: Series I.A. New York House, 1886-1960: sales, 1901-1910, p. 62, reel 4, box 5; stock book, 1909, p. 76, reel 5, box 6; copies in NGA curatorial files.

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