



TITIAN'S DANAË
FROM THE CAPODIMONTE MUSEUM, NAPLES

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON



Titian (c. 1488/90–1576), *Danaë*, 1544–1545, oil on canvas, Capodimonte Museum, Naples

THIS FRANKLY SENSUAL depiction of Danaë is one of numerous canvases in which Titian (Venetian, c. 1488/90–1576) established a new genre in Western art, that of erotic mythologies. Two of these mythological paintings by Titian in the collection of the National Gallery of Art—*Venus and Adonis* (fig. 1) and *Venus with a Mirror* (fig. 2)—are displayed nearby in gallery M-23.

In Venice, Titian found little opportunity to paint such subjects. It was only when he began to work for a series of princely patrons in the 1520s that he added this major



Fig. 1 Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1560, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection



Fig. 2 Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*, c. 1555, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

new dimension to his art; the loves of the gods, in particular, were a favorite theme. During the course of his long career Titian became the greatest and most influential interpreter of these amorous episodes, drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other literary texts. Similar in format and scale to his other canvases, the Naples picture is essentially a celebration of the recumbent female nude. Here a curtain is drawn back

to reveal Danaë, reclining in bed and about to receive Jupiter, the king of the gods; lured by reports of the maiden's beauty, he appears to her in the guise of a shower of gold coins. Danaë's languorous pose and rapturous gaze offer a sharp contrast to the startled reaction of Cupid, turning away at her feet.



Fig. 3 Titian, *Portrait of Alessandro Farnese*, 1545–1546, oil on canvas, Capodimonte Museum, Naples

Commissioned by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (fig. 3), grandson of Pope Paul III, the *Danaë* was completed during a visit Titian made to Rome in 1545–1546 in order to obtain a lucrative benefice for his shiftless son, Pomponio. Wealthy and worldly, Alessandro Farnese was both a distinguished patron of the arts and a notorious womanizer. Three years earlier the poet Pietro Aretino had urged his friend Titian to paint Alessandro's younger brother Ranuccio (fig. 4), then a student at the University of Padua. Titian's charming



Fig. 4 Titian, *Portrait of Ranuccio Farnese*, 1542, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

portrait of the boy, also now in the National Gallery of Art, marks the beginning of his association with the powerful Farnese clan, whose patronage resulted in a variety of portraits of the pope, his family, and their circle. The *Danaë* was already underway in September 1544, when it was mentioned in an amusing letter written to the cardinal by the papal legate to Venice, Giovanni della Casa. Della Casa describes the painting as so shocking it would “make the nude that Your Reverence saw in the dwelling of the duke of Urbino in Pesaro look like a nun by comparison.” He further jokes that Titian will paint in the face of Alessandro's mistress (a courtesan named Angela) if the patron so desires.

The second female nude referred to in the letter is the famous *Venus of Urbino* (fig. 5), painted by Titian in 1536–1538 for Guidobaldo of Urbino, now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. And, in fact, x-rays (fig. 6) have demonstrated that Titian's original concept for the *Danaë* placed the subject in a comparable domestic setting with a landscape view out a window, as in the Uffizi picture. At the time, ecclesiastics everywhere were under fire for their



Fig. 5 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1536–1538, oil on canvas, Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Fig. 6 X-radiograph of Titian, *Danaë*, 1544–1545, Capodimonte Museum, Naples



licentious and corrupt ways, and Cardinal Alessandro (or Titian) found it prudent to transform the all-too-contemporary courtesan into a mythological figure whose nudity was sanctioned by classical precedent. Accordingly, the little dog and the maidservants seen in the background in the x-radiograph were replaced by the god of love. The comfortably furnished interior in the first version became the tower in which Danaë, according to legend, had been confined by her father, the king of Argos, to foil a prophecy that he would be killed by any son of hers. (Perseus, Danaë's son by Jupiter, did eventually kill the king.)

In handling erotic subject matter, discretion was required, so not only the composition but also the subject of the picture was altered to excuse the woman's nudity. (Not long afterward the nudes in Michelangelo's huge *Last Judgment* fresco were discreetly draped so as not to offend public morality.) Further ensuring the respectability of Titian's Danaë, the figure also had a classical source—an ancient cameo (fig. 7) once owned by an earlier pope and later in the Medici collection. Now in the National Archaeological Museum,



Fig. 7 Third century AD, *Leda and the Swan*, cameo, National Archaeological Museum, Naples

Naples, this precious object, depicting the related theme of Leda seduced by Jupiter in the form of a swan, was also known to Michelangelo (1475–1564); his lost painting of the recumbent Leda was familiar to Titian and other Venetian artists in the form of copies (fig. 8), including several that Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) made and brought to Venice in 1541. The reclining position of Michelangelo's and Titian's protagonists and their common source are all closely related.

Before Titian personally delivered the *Danaë* in Rome at the end of 1545, Michelangelo went to see the newly



Fig. 8 After Michelangelo, *Leda and the Swan*, after 1530, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London, Presented by the Duke of Northumberland, 1838

created masterpiece in the painter's studio in the Vatican. As reported in a famous passage in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1568), the great Florentine painter, sculptor, and architect praised his rival's gifts as a colorist—but, out of earshot, complained that Titian and his fellow Venetians “had never learned how to draw!” For Michelangelo, Titian's figure, however lovely, lacked the basis in *disegno*, or drawing, that underpinned all the arts. And yet, the *Danaë*, no doubt with a nod to Michelangelo, has a sculptural solidity quite different from the painterly freedom



Fig. 9 Titian, *Danaë and the Shower of Gold*, 1551–1553, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

of a second version (fig. 9) of the subject that Titian painted for a later patron, Philip II of Spain. In this work, now in the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, winged Cupid has been replaced by an old nursemaid, who greedily gathers the gold coins raining down from above. Also on a humorous note, Titian has reintroduced the sleeping dog from the *Venus of Urbino* and, heightening the eroticism of the Prado picture, removed the white sheet that partly covered Danaë's thigh in the earlier version of the theme.

Over the centuries the *Danaë* in Naples has continued to enthrall beholders. In a

kind of perverse tribute to its enduring beauty, the painting was looted by German troops on behalf of Field Marshal Hermann Göring during the Second World War and was discovered afterward in the Austrian salt mine at Alt Aussee. The canvas was brought to the Munich Central Collecting Point by the so-called Monuments Men in 1945 and returned to the Italian government two years later. Its presentation in Washington marks its second appearance at the National Gallery of Art, where the *Danaë* was exhibited in the Titian retrospective of 1990–1991. Since that time the painting has been cleaned and restored to splendid effect.

Photography Credits *Danaë* (full and details), figs. 3 and 6: Courtesy of the Photography Department of the Superintendency of Cultural Heritage for the City and the Museums of Naples and the Royal Palace of Caserta/Luciano Basagni, Fabio Speranza; fig. 5: Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali/Art Resource, NY; fig. 7: Alinari/Art Resource, NY; fig. 8: © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY; fig. 9: © Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

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Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all its programs is free of charge unless otherwise noted.



The exhibition celebrates the occasion of Italy's Presidency of the Council of the European Union from July 1 through December 31, 2014.

It is organized by the National Gallery of Art and the Embassy of Italy, Washington, together with the Capodimonte Museum, Naples, and the Superintendency of Cultural Heritage for the City and the Museums of Naples and the Royal Palace of Caserta.

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HISTORY OF THE FARNESE COLLECTION



Capodimonte Museum, Naples, Italy

THE CAPODIMONTE MUSEUM, like other great Italian museums, began as a large family collection. In this case the collection, assembled between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century by the Farnese family, is considered one of the most important

in Europe. The museum itself was a sumptuous palace inhabited by rulers from the eighteenth century to the first decades of the nineteenth century. Capodimonte took on national status only in 1957 and is now home to, among much else, a rich collection of Neapolitan paintings from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, brought together from local churches; the collection of the Bourbon rulers of Naples; and contemporary works by artists from Alberto Burri to Andy Warhol.

The Farnese Collection came to Naples following the turbulent dynastic succession of the Duchy of Parma, the northern Italian city ruled by the Farnese. To prevent a potential succession crisis, the leading powers of the period (France, England, Spain, and Austria) selected as heir Charles of Bourbon, the son of Elisabetta Farnese, who had wed King Philip V of Spain. Charles would become king of Naples upon the death of Antonio Farnese, the dynasty's last scion, thus beginning a long reign of two kingdoms: Naples, from 1734 to 1759,

and Spain, after the death of Philip V, from 1759 to 1788.

The founder of the Farnese Collection was Alessandro Farnese (1468–1549), better remembered as Pope Paul III (1534–1549), who acquired existing works and commissioned new ones from the greatest artists of the time. The collection is very extensive, spanning all of the arts. Of great note are many revered masterpieces, including Michelangelo's cartoon for the *Cappella Paolina*, Raphael's *Moses before the Burning Bush*, Sebastiano del Piombo's *Madonna of the Veil*, Lorenzo Lotto's *Portrait of Bishop Bernardo de' Rossi*, and Annibale Carracci's *Hercules at the Crossroads*. Last but not least are ten extraordinary paintings—including *Danaë*—by Titian, whom the Farnese patronized while the artist was in Rome in 1545 and 1546.

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