

# TITIAN



LOVE ♦ DESIRE ♦ DEATH

Matthias Wivel is Curator of Sixteenth-Century Italian Paintings at the National Gallery, London.

Beverly Louise Brown is a Fellow of the Warburg Institute, London.

Jill Dunkerton is Senior Restorer at the National Gallery, London.

Paul Hills is Professor Emeritus at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

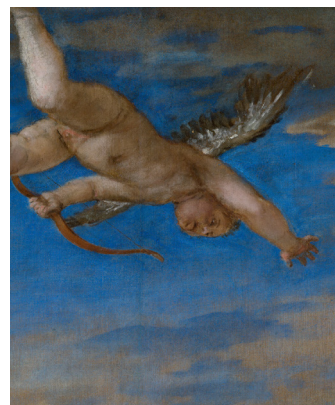
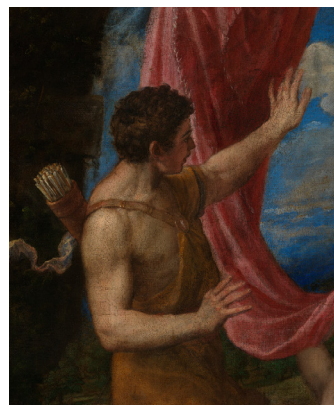
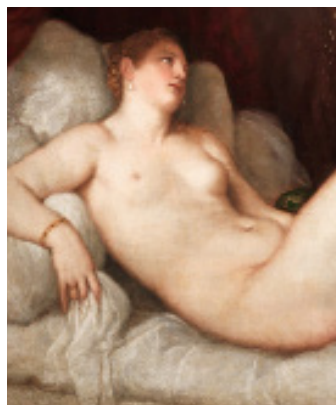
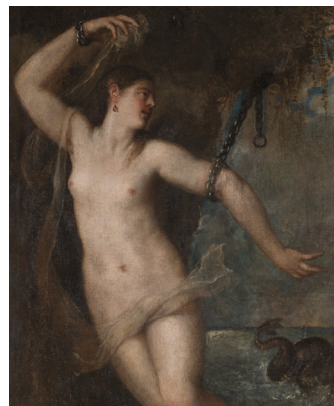
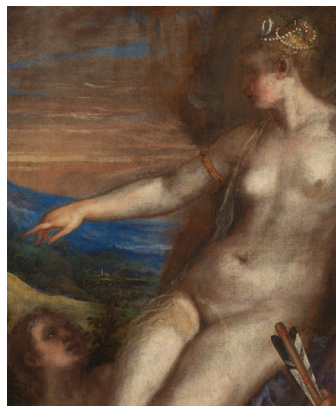
Lelia Packer is Curator of Dutch, Italian, Spanish, German and pre-1600 Paintings at the Wallace Collection, London.

Javier Portús is Head of Spanish Painting (until 1800) at the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

Nathaniel Silver is the William and Lia Poorvu Curator of the Collection at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

Aidan Weston-Lewis is Chief Curator, European Art, at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Titian (active about 1506; died 1576) produced a masterful group of paintings for Philip II of Spain, celebrating the loves of gods, goddesses and mortals. Depicting scenes from Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, Titian named them 'poesie' and considered the works as visual equivalents of poetry. This volume presents a detailed study of the complete series – *Danaë*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Perseus and Andromeda*, *Diana and Actaeon*, *Diana and Callisto*, and *The Rape of Europa*, as well as *The Death of Actaeon* – lavishly illustrated with details of these emotionally charged paintings. The book explores Titian's creative process and technique, in addition to his use of literary and visual sources and his correspondence with Philip II. The artistic legacy of the series for later European painting is also examined in the works of artists such as Rubens, Velázquez and Rembrandt. Offering the most comprehensive overview of these remarkable works, *Titian: Love, Desire, Death* is an indispensable resource for scholars and admirers of Renaissance painting.



## CONTENTS

- 7 Joint Directors' Foreword
- 9 Acknowledgements

### Essays

- 13 INTRODUCTION  
**Matthias Wivel**
- 33 TITIAN'S TRANSFORMATIONS:  
COLOUR AND EMOTION  
IN THE *POESIE*  
**Paul Hills**
- 45 ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE  
FROM ANCIENT THINGS: THE  
LITERARY AND VISUAL SOURCES  
OF TITIAN'S *POESIE*  
**Beverly Louise Brown**
- 61 MODES OF PAINTING: TITIAN'S  
TECHNIQUE IN THE *POESIE*  
**Jill Dunkerton, Ana Gonzáles Mozo,  
Gianfranco Pocobene and Marika Spring**
- 91 THE ARTISTIC LEGACY  
OF TITIAN'S *POESIE*  
**Javier Portús**

### Catalogue

- 109 DANAË  
Duke of Wellington Collection,  
Apsley House, London  
**Matthias Wivel**
- 123 VENUS AND ADONIS  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid  
**Matthias Wivel**
- 133 PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA  
The Wallace Collection, London  
**Lelia Packer**
- 147 DIANA AND ACTAEON  
The National Gallery, London, and  
National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh  
**Aidan Weston-Lewis**
- 157 DIANA AND CALLISTO  
The National Gallery, London, and  
National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh  
**Matthias Wivel**
- 169 THE RAPE OF EUROPA  
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston  
**Nathaniel Silver**
- 181 THE DEATH OF ACTAEON  
The National Gallery, London  
**Matthias Wivel**

### Appendix

- 195 The correspondence between Titian and Philip II
- 204 Provenance and Selected Literature
- 207 Notes
- 216 Bibliography
- 220 Index
- 224 List of Lenders and Photographic Credits



ESSAYS



## TITIAN'S TRANSFORMATIONS: COLOUR AND EMOTION IN THE *POESIE*

The practice of oil painting shaped Titian's ways of seeing and imagining. By the time he embarked on the *poesie* for Philip II of Spain, more than five decades of working in oil on canvas had nurtured a special feeling for the transformative potential of painting and an understanding of how a picture might be developed, modified and coaxed into shape over time. In the stories of gods and mortals, given enduring popularity by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and recently translated into Italian as *Le Trasformazioni* by his friend and champion Lodovico Dolce (1508–1568), Titian found ideal subjects on which to exercise the transformative powers of his brush.<sup>1</sup>

Whether applying a scumble with lead white or floating a glaze of red lake over the thin gesso preparation, Titian feels with his brushes, ever conscious of the drag and touch of their soft hairs or harder bristles across the weave of the canvas. He is a supremely reflexive painter, whose actions and gestures are in some sense mirrored in his paintings. As facture becomes more visible, it becomes the sign of the painter's hand: the manner and matter of painting enter into partnership. Fifteenth-century writers on artistic practice, such as Cennino Cennini (about 1370–about 1440) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), rarely mention brushstrokes, whereas in the following century Pietro Aretino (1492–1556)

repeatedly praises Titian for the work of his divine '*pennello*' (brush), while Lodovico Dolce writes of his '*colpo di pennello*'.<sup>2</sup> Here the primary meaning of the Italian word '*colpo*', as 'strike' or 'blow' rather than 'stroke', is particularly apt. In the *poesie*, the violence that runs as a disturbing current through all the stories is matched by the violence of the painter's touch – the palpable hit of his brush. Palma Giovane (1544–1628), who had witnessed the aged Titian at work in his studio, reported to Marco Boschini that the master would lay in a painting with bold strokes, leave the canvas turned to the wall for several months, then examine it as if it were 'a mortal enemy', before attacking it with a few bold strokes.<sup>3</sup>

Five years before Titian embarked on the first of his *poesie* he spent six months in Rome where he saw many of the masterpieces of Michelangelo (1475–1564) at first hand and became more conscious than ever that it was Michelangelo, the presiding genius of the visual arts and supreme master of *disegno* (design/drawing), whom he needed to challenge. His response involved assimilation, defiance and wit. He assimilated the monumentality of Michelangelo's nudes by enlarging his figures and giving them greater weight and mass. In the first *poesie* delivered to Philip, the *Danaë* now in Apsley House (cat. 1) and the *Venus and Adonis* in the Prado (cat. 2), the figures bulk large, brought up close and almost within touch of the viewer. Titian defied Tuscan critics of Venetian *colorito* (or handling of the *matière* of pigment) by freeing his brushwork to attain qualities largely beyond the scope of sculptural *disegno*. Skies filled with the energy of billowing cloud or rent with explosions of light had long been prominent in Titian's pictorial armoury. In the late 1530s, prompted by Pietro Aretino's retelling of the Annunciation to Mary, he had envisaged the moment of Christ's conception in terms of a cosmic drama with a cloudburst of angels accompanying the descent of the dove of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> When the nuns who had commissioned the altarpiece refused to meet his fee, Titian sent the picture to the Spanish court as a gift for Philip's mother, the Empress Isabella. Later



VENUS  
AND  
ADONIS





the relative merits of the different arts common in Titian's artistic milieu – it seems probable that he was responding to such classically composed sculptures in his figure of Andromeda, whom Ovid himself had likened to a marble statue.<sup>18</sup> Titian imbued Andromeda with a sense of three-dimensionality; her fluttering, translucent veil and tearful gaze, however, assert the supremacy of painting over sculpture in its capacity to convey movement and emotion.

Moreover, it is likely that Titian had in mind his younger and daringly inventive contemporary in Venice, Jacopo Tintoretto, when he was painting this picture. Tintoretto excelled at painting monumental, action-packed narrative scenes filled with convincingly rendered airborne figures. His sensational *Miracle of Saint Mark freeing the Slave* (fig. 102), executed only a few years earlier for the Venetian Scuola Grande di San Marco, and which Titian would have found impossible to ignore, is a tour de force of dramatic foreshortening. Saint Mark convincingly descends from above, his

drapery billowing, creating an effective visual contrast to the naked, skilfully foreshortened slave on the ground below. Titian was likely competing with such pictures when rendering the flying Perseus, albeit less successfully.

After executing the first two *poesie* in a relatively straightforward manner, Titian's approach became freer and more experimental with *Perseus and Andromeda*, a subject he only treated on this single occasion. The composition underwent extensive revision in process, with Andromeda at one point placed on the right and significant changes made to the position of her arms and legs – both arms were originally raised, while her left leg was originally drawing away from her right (see figs 41, 42). As for Perseus, he seems also to have undergone major changes, although the relevant evidence is harder to interpret. It is clear, however, that once the final figure was established, Titian adjusted the position of his sword, left arm and shield.<sup>19</sup>

Fig. 102  
Jacopo Tintoretto  
(about 1518–1594),  
*The Miracle of Saint Mark  
freeing the Slave*, 1548. Oil  
on canvas, 416 × 544 cm.  
Gallerie dell'Accademia,  
Venice (Inv. 42)

Detail of Perseus from  
*Perseus and Andromeda*  
(cat. 3)





Detail of the cherub on a dolphin chasing after Europa, from *The Rape of Europa* (cat. 6)

Fig. 118  
Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), detail of the sketch sheet with *The Rape of Europa*, 1494–5. Pen and ink on paper, 28.8 × 41.3 cm. Albertina, Vienna (3062)



or *La métamorphose d'Ovide figurée* [1557] by Bernard Salomon), he transforms the sea into the principal compositional element and sets the viewer adrift.<sup>5</sup> A tiny ship (visible on the horizon above Europa's waist), whose fully inflated sails contrast with the stationary vessel at bare poles at the far left, solicits a parallel to Tatius' comparison of the maiden's billowing garments to those of an inflated ship's sail.<sup>6</sup> Titian also reduces Tatius' company of dolphins to a single creature bearing a cherub, a feature perhaps inspired by a lost fifteenth-century North Italian engraving of Europa copied by Dürer (fig. 118).<sup>7</sup>

Titian's antecedents further inform his characterisation of both protagonists. The painter transforms his bull from a mere beast into a sensate being, investing Ovid's docile, clear-eyed animal with an almost comic expression of feigned innocence. Titian radically reimagines the authors' Europa, portraying her in a precarious state that reflects her dangerous situation and in a configuration even more unstable than Venus in his second *poesia*, who is pulled off balance by her attempt to restrain Adonis.<sup>8</sup> Departing from extant depictions of Europa astride the bull, Titian dramatises the 'side-saddle' pose described by Tatius with an explosive energy that finds precedent neither in ancient terracotta depictions of the recumbent noblewoman nor in modern illustrations such as Salomon's woodcut. Similarly, the painter recasts Europa's purple robe ('porpora veste') as her red distress signal and gathers her white shift ('bianchissima camicia') so tightly that its surface reveals the contours of her deep navel ('l'ombilico profondo').<sup>9</sup>

Thus Titian chooses to deliver a Europa of unprecedented dynamism and sexual availability. The helpless maiden can cling only to her attacker, her clothes in disarray, bare legs spread and mimicked in pose by the cherub who gazes up between them from his dolphin. He invites the viewer's anticipation of subsequent events and the inevitability of her imminent demise through subtle compositional choices: it has been argued that the green silk borne

aloft by the most distant cupid can be identified as Europa's girdle come undone, and that the shadow cast on her face by the gesture of her right arm is an illusion to her impending fate.<sup>10</sup> This gesture has, perhaps unnecessarily, been seen as an adaptation of the so-called *Toro Farnese*, the ancient Roman sculpture of a wild bull threatening a young woman, probably Dirce, who throws one arm back over her head in distress (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples).<sup>11</sup> Titian further seeks to excite the viewer by abandoning Europa's less revealing neckline and opening the white dress to fully expose her breast, as Bellini had done many years earlier with Apollo's nymphs in *The Feast of the Gods* (see fig. 5) for another celebrated cycle of mythological canvases.<sup>12</sup> After *Europa*, Titian subsequently repeated this procedure for Diana in *The Death of Actaeon*.

Although this canvas has been slightly cut down and lined, possibly in the late eighteenth century, the composition remains intact. Recent technical examination confirms the painting's fine condition, with the exception of the sky on the horizon and clouds at the upper right behind Europa's veil, and reveals fewer changes to the composition than the previous three *poesie* (cats 3–5).<sup>13</sup> The pink tint of the horizon, the result of canvas exposed by cleaning or lining at an unknown date, has been mistakenly interpreted as a sunset;<sup>14</sup> instead it originally depicted clouds of a more silvery hue.

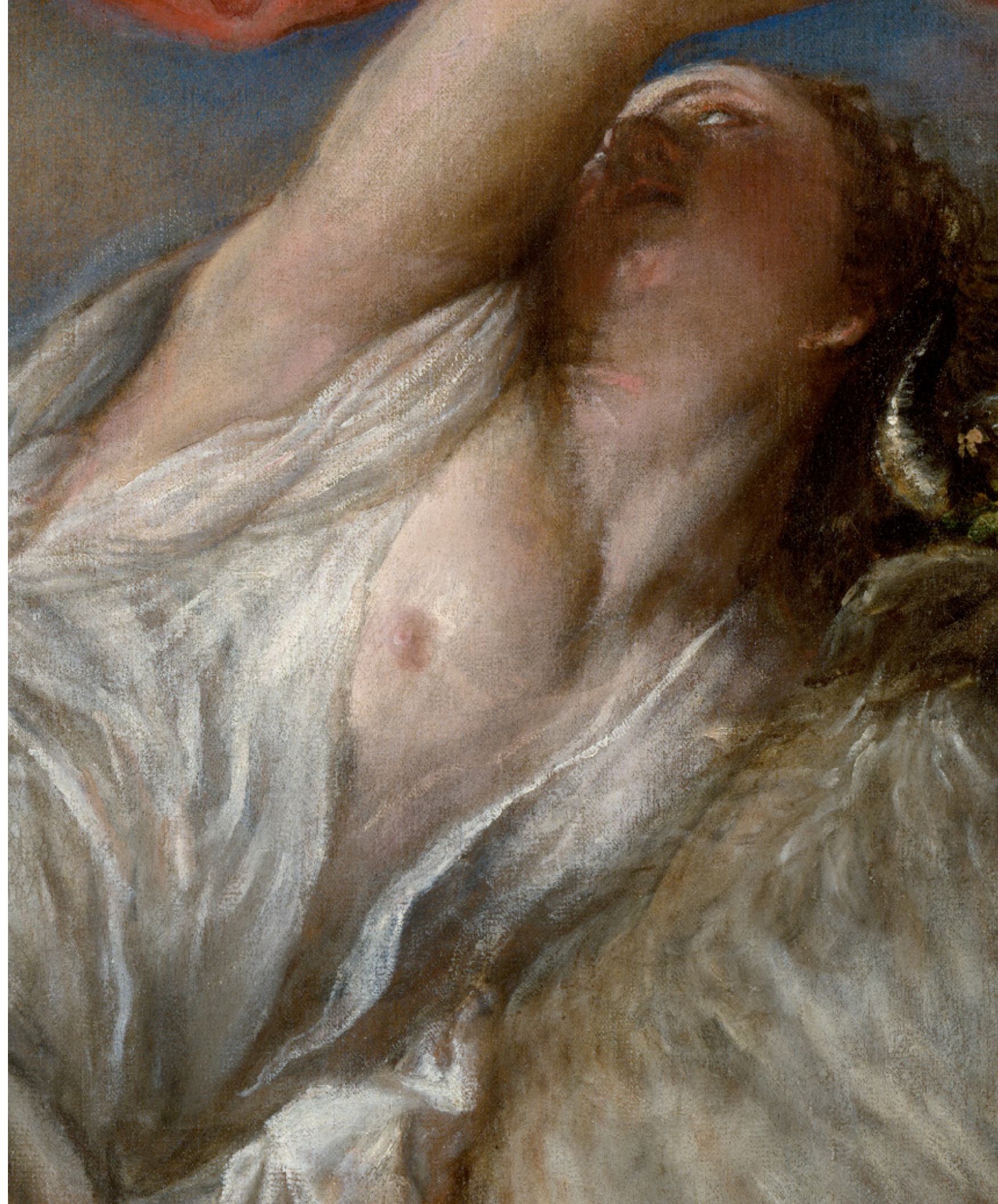
Titian's own changes beyond those mentioned above include his experiment with at least two similarly curving positions of the bull's tail. He ultimately extended it outwards over the pursuing cherub and added a ripple of energy near the tail's base, emphasising the animal's dynamic thrust forward. That he tried out the dolphin's tail in a similar way, but in reverse, suggests an abandoned idea to echo the billowing curve of Europa's red sash. Close examination of the paint surface reveals Titian's fine-tuning as he refined and enhanced the contours of the figures. For example, in the sky's underlayer of smalt the painter left reserves for the airborne cherubs, presupposing the existence of carefully worked-out drawings for at least these two complex poses. That he subsequently returned to the most acrobatic one, on the right – depicted from below, looking up, and turning outwards towards the viewer – to rework its contours as well as the angle of its bow, points to the difficulty of this cupid's pose and perhaps the intention that it respond Perseus in the painting's pendant *poesia*. By contrast, the novel figure of Europa shows almost no change, with the exception of a slight adjustment to the contour of her right leg.

Drawing, whether on paper or on canvas in a liquid medium, was fundamental to the preparation and completion of this painting.<sup>15</sup> For example, Titian experimented at a preparatory stage in a liquid medium with multiple forms for the mountainous landscape. His technique is neither predicated on a 'devaluation of drawing' nor a concealment of the contours of his figures – as has also been argued in an attempt to draw a misleading distinction between Venetian and Florentine painting.<sup>16</sup> Instead he strengthened contours in the final stages of execution. Titian emphasised that of Europa's left calf by exposing an underlayer of dark pigment, creating a black outline that enhances the distinction between the nymph's leg and the bull's rump. He also reinforced contours directly on the painting's surface. For example, he dragged a fine line of black paint along the white edge of Europa's rolled-back right sleeve, further

delineating skin from clothing, and did the same with a thicker stroke for the flying cherub on the right, articulating the transition between leg and body and ensuring the visibility of this pose at a distance.

His approach to the execution of this painting – which unites objects carefully described with those only sketchily suggested – points to the role of the *poesie*, and this work specifically, in the artist's own stylistic development as it was understood by contemporary critics.<sup>17</sup> For example, Titian lavished attention on describing the arrows' fletches, capturing their texture with meticulous brushwork to simulate every imperfection in their vanes. Like the resplendent jewel in Diana's crown (cat. 5) or the glistening gem in Andromeda's earring (cat. 3), this passage invites further scrutiny of the paint surface, hinting at the availability of more for the trained eye to discover. By contrast, the fingers of Europa and the cherubs, barely suggested through combinations of flesh tones and terracotta highlights, resolve into hands only at a distance. In 1568 Vasari linked Titian's 'descriptive' mode of painting to his early career and characterised his sketchy modelling of forms with bold brushstrokes 'dashed off with a broad or even coarse sweep [blotch] of the brush' ('tirate via di grosso con macchie') as a recent development.<sup>18</sup> Vasari's remarks categorise these two approaches chronologically and situate the *poesie* on the cusp in between.

With the juxtaposition of highly polished and minimally characterised passages, Titian's *poesie* offer a bravura display of technical range and achievement that reward an informed viewer attuned to the possibilities of oil paint. Contemporary evidence attests to the fact that even his knowledgeable Hapsburg clientele, closely familiar with the painstakingly detailed brushwork of their northern court painters but far removed from the most recent painting developments in Venice, required some preparation. Titian's 1553 portrait of Philip II for his future bride came with instructions from the king's aunt that it should be hung in daylight and 'viewed at a distance, as Titian's paintings were not always decipherable from close up'.<sup>19</sup>



Detail of Europa's exposed breast and neckline, from *The Rape of Europa* (cat. 6)



Published to accompany the exhibition:

## TITIAN LOVE ♦ DESIRE ♦ DEATH

The National Gallery, London  
16 March – 14 June 2020

National Galleries of Scotland,  
Edinburgh  
11 July – 27 September 2020

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum,  
Boston  
11 February – 9 May 2021

© National Gallery Company Limited  
2019

First published in 2020 by  
National Gallery Company Limited  
St Vincent House  
30 Orange Street  
London WC2H 7HH  
[www.nationalgallery.co.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.co.uk)

Front cover:  
Titian, *The Rape of Europa*, 1559–62

### Specification

£30 / €33 / \$40 hardback  
280 × 230 mm / 9 × 11 in  
224 pages  
200 illustrations approx.  
60,000 words approx.

ISBN 978 1 85709 655 2

### Further information

[charlotte.stafford@yaleup.co.uk](mailto:charlotte.stafford@yaleup.co.uk)  
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7079 4900

[jessica.holahan@yale.edu](mailto:jessica.holahan@yale.edu)  
Telephone: +1 203 432 0971

Distributed by  
Yale University Press  
[www.yalebooks.co.uk](http://www.yalebooks.co.uk)  
[www.yalebooks.com/art](http://www.yalebooks.com/art)

### Orders

UK  
John Wiley & Sons Ltd,  
Customer Services Department  
European Distribution Centre  
New Era Estate, Oldlands Way  
Bognor Regis  
West Sussex PO22 9NQ  
Telephone 01243 843 291  
Freephone 0800 243407  
[trade@yaleup.co.uk](mailto:trade@yaleup.co.uk)  
[cs-books@wiley.co.uk](mailto:cs-books@wiley.co.uk)

USA  
TriLiteral  
100 Maple Ridge Drive  
Cumberland, RI  
02864-1769  
Telephone +1 800 405 1619  
[sales.press@yale.edu](mailto:sales.press@yale.edu)  
[customer.care@triliteral.org](mailto:customer.care@triliteral.org)