

The Titian Firm by Antonio Paolucci

When the young Titian painted his first frescoes at the basilica of Sant'Antonio in Padua with stories of the saint, the accounting documents recorded him as “depintor, or painter, one of the many who lent their work as esteemed artisans in the palaces and churches of Venice and the Dominion.

We are in 1511. Sixty years later, in the etchings that propagated The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence, a masterpiece of his old age, throughout Europe, Titian signed his name as “eques caesareus” or Knight of the Golden Spur. At that point, he was an imperial knight, a Count Palatine, who counted among his clients Emperor Charles V, the latter's brother King Ferdinand, Maria of Hungary the regent of the Netherlands, Maximilian the king of Bohemia, the electors of the German Empire, the Roman pope, the powerful banker Anton Fugger, and the doge and the oligarchies of the Serenissima Republic of Venice.

The painter from the mountain of Cadore, who had taken his first steps in the Venice of the old Bellini and the young Giorgione, had had in the course of sixty years a splendid career. He enjoyed the complete trust of Emperor Charles V and then his son Philip II. In 1547-1548 and then in 1550-1551 he was a guest of the Imperial Diet in Augsburg. His paintings were accessible in price only to the cream of Italy and of Europe.

Titian was also extremely rich at the zenith of his fortune. He had astutely invested the earnings from his profession, multiplied his commercial and financial interests, run a real pictorial industry. Only Picasso's golden old age can be compared to that of Titian.

From the Biri Grande house-atelier in Venice – residence, workshop, display space and office all in one – the painter wove and ran a close network of international relations that we can call the “Titian system”. We find this definition – a synthesis of the great painter's professional activities, critical fortune and market success during the 16th century – in a monumental volume curated by Giorgio Tagliaferro and

Bernard Aikema, together with Matteo Mancini and Andrew John Martin.

The volume is called *Le botteghe di Tiziano* (Florence, Alinari 24Ore, 2009, 270 pages, euro 90). It is correct to indicate them in their plural form because Vecellio's models, his "factory of images", have their main centres of production and distribution in the Venetian Biri Grande atelier and in the Augsburg one of the Imperial Diet. The workshops' influence reverberated through European painting of international Mannerism with artists such as Lambert Sustris, Hans von Aachen, Hendrick Goltzius, Cornelis van Harlem, Jan Stephan van Calcar, and Anthonis Mor.

But how did the "Titian system" actually work? It worked thanks to an exceptional and extremely efficient production organisation founded on the involvement of students, relations, collaborators. For over half a century, like planets around their sun, crowds of painters of different origin, type and schooling revolved around Titian. Some were continuous collaborators, others only occasional.

With the diffidence typical of mountain people, Titian trusted his family first and foremost, taken as a block of interests, like a business. Thus the name of his brother Francesco Vecellio, his son Orazio, his nephew Marco, and his cousin Cesare emerge over others. Names of known and recognisable artists stand together with them: Gian Paolo Pace, Girolamo Dente, and Polidoro da Lanciano. With many other collaborators it is impossible to arrive at the personal details.

Carlo Ridolfi, a 17th-century Venetian historian, wrote that when Titian would go out, he would "deliberately leave the keys in the salon where he kept his valuables and, during his absence, his disciples would work on making copies of the nicest works, keeping one of each as spare". Then, continued Ridolfi, upon his return to the studio, the master would finish them "by his hand".

Titian's atelier was almost like an assembly chain that under the company trademark licensed paintings of different and often minimal degrees of autography.

The "fine things", those that most interested merchants and collectors, were the canvases of mythological-erotic nature and therefore, they were the most convenient to copy. How many nude Venuses, how many Danaë impregnated by the golden seed

of Jupiter are there in Titian's corpus! Some are entirely autographed, others only partially, and many in which Titian's direct present drew close to zero.

The idea that the "factory of images", invented by Titian and spread throughout Europe from Madrid to Dubrovnik and Prague to the Flanders, was based on perfectly tested, efficient and flexible team-work is undoubtedly highly evocative. More than anything, it is true. On the other hand, in the past centuries, that is how the industry of figures was actually organised.

Giorgio Vasari's Lives has educated us towards a personal conception of artists' activities. The romantic culture with the exaltation of the inimitable "genius" did the rest.

This book by Giorgio Tagliaferro and Bernard Aikema allows us to understand the extraordinary importance of the atelier in the history of art. Titian's case is exemplary. If his images of the ascended Virgin, flogged Christ, Venus, and Danaë captured Italy and Europe's imagination, it is because a real "company" of pupils and copyists, who distributed those figure, perhaps reinterpreted or perhaps adapted them to the taste and figurative culture of the country of origin. This was certainly often the case of the foreign German and Flemish painters. If we examine the corpus of a great artist of the past (Raphael, Rubens, Rembrandt) in its entirety, we realise that it is the fruit of collective efforts, not of a sole solitary genius.

We would not have the Raphael of the Vatican Loggia without Giulio Romano and Perino del Vaga, without Polidoro da Caravaggio and Giovanni da Udine without Machuca and Marcillat or without all the others who depicted the ideas of the Urbino-born painter. The frescoes on the Vatican Loggia were never directly touched by Raphael's brush. Yet, are the Doni portraits or the Madonna della Seggiola, a painting acknowledged as being totally autographed by him, touched by his brush? At the same time, we would not have Titian's fortune, the acknowledgement of his central destiny in the history of the Venetian civilisation of colour, without the many artists who in different roles, at varying degrees of quality, in more or less engaging forms of involvement, contributed towards creating the corpus.

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