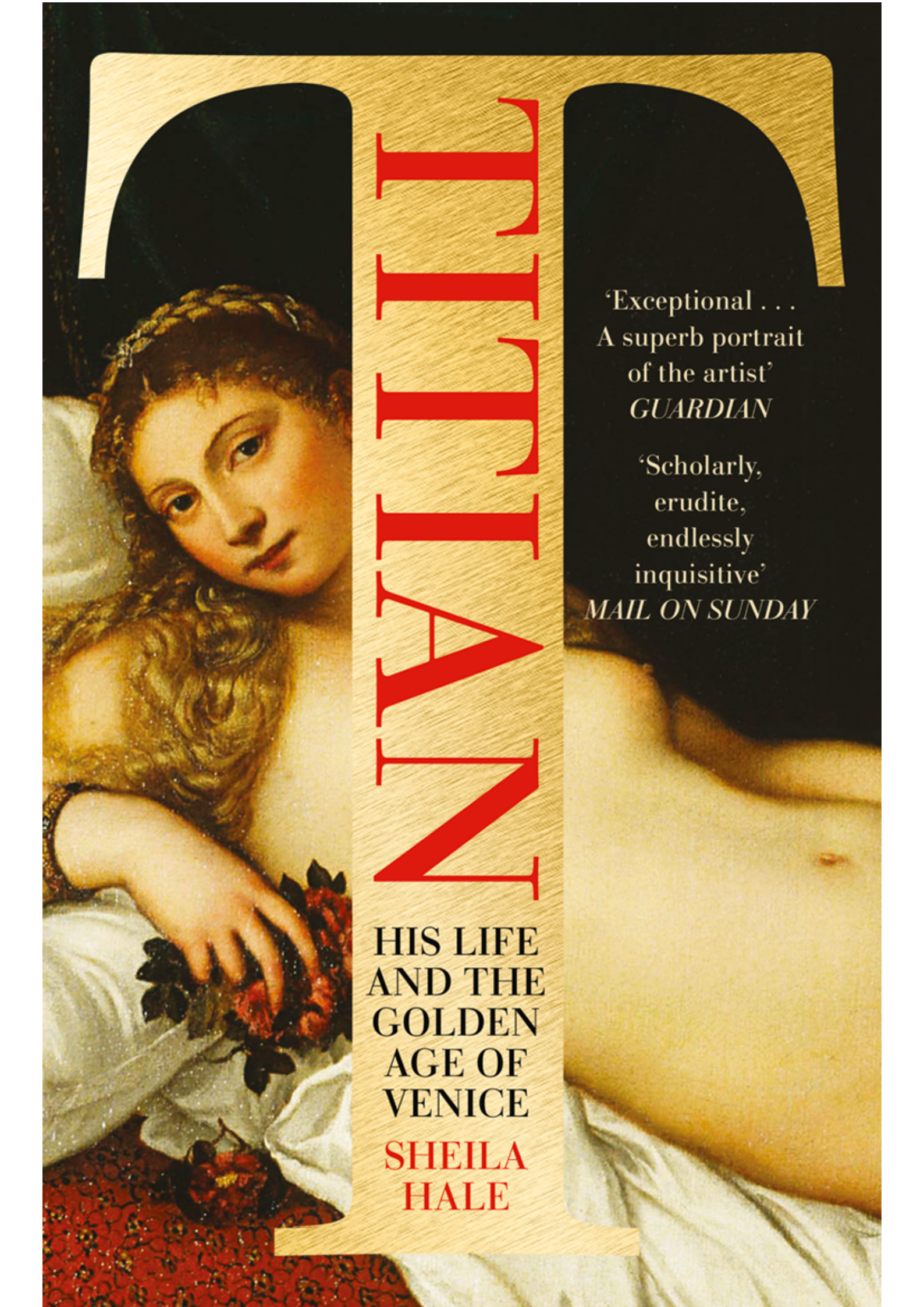




TITIAN

HIS LIFE
AND THE
GOLDEN
AGE OF
VENICE

SHEILA
HALE

‘Exceptional . . .
A superb portrait
of the artist’
GUARDIAN

‘Scholarly,
erudite,
endlessly
inquisitive’
MAIL ON SUNDAY

Sheila Hale

**Titian: His Life and the
Golden Age of Venice**

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Titian: His Life and the Golden Age of Venice / S. Hale —
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Devoted father and loyal friend, Titian was notorious for disregarding authority and was an international celebrity by his late fifties. He was famously difficult but his stubbornness and horrendous timekeeping did nothing to deter his patrons who included the Hapsburgs, the Pope and his family and Charles V. During his career, which spanned more than seventy years, Titian painted around five or six hundred pictures of which less than half survive. His work has been studied by generations of great artists from Rubens to Manet and he is often seen as having artistically transcended his own time. Sheila Hale not only examines his life, both personal and professional, but how his art affected his contemporaries and how it influences artists today. She also examines Venice in its context of a city at the time of the Renaissance, overshadowed artistically by Rome and Florence and growing into the famous historical city it has become. This is an astonishing portrait of one of the most important figures in the history of Western art and a vivid evocation of Venice in its 'Golden Age'.

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Titian
His Life and the Golden Age of Venice
SHEILA HALE



[Dedication](#)

In memory of John

[Epigraph](#)

Titian was the sun amid small stars not only among the Italians but all the painters of the world.

GIOVANNI PAOLO LOMAZZO,

IDEA DEL TEMPIO DELLA PITTURA, 1590

A work of art is an act of cooperation, often of reluctant cooperation like an awkward marriage, between the author and the kind of society he lives in. When we know something of the character of this aggravating partner, that which was once stiff and monumental becomes fluid and alive.

V. S. PRITCHETT, IN MY GOOD BOOKS, 1942

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[INTRODUCTION](#)

Any style involves first of all the artist's connection to his or her own time, or historical period, society, and antecedents: the aesthetic work, for all its irreducible individuality, is nevertheless a part – or, paradoxically, not a part – of the era in which it was produced and appeared.

EDWARD S. SAID, ON LATE STYLE, 2006

Titian lived and painted in tremendous times. In the decades before he was born, in a remote province of the Venetian Empire, the invention of movable type in Germany had unleashed an unprecedented and unstoppable spread of ideas and information across Europe and beyond.

Columbus' maiden voyage from Spain to the new world in 1492, when Titian was a small child, changed the European consciousness of the size and shape of the planet; and the bullion imported from the Americas brought with it massive inflation and eventually shifted the balance of trade and wealth from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. In 1513, when Machiavelli published *The Prince*, the first modern work of political philosophy, Michelangelo had recently completed the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Raphael was at work on the four Stanze in the Vatican, and Leonardo da Vinci was an old man living in Rome. Four years later in the German town of Wittenberg Martin Luther, reacting against the sale of indulgences by Pope Leo X, posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the castle door. Few at the time predicted the consequences. Luther himself had not envisaged a split with the Catholic Church, and the word Protestant was not used until 1529. But by 1563 when Titian was in his early seventies and the Council of Trent sat for the last of the three sittings that set the agenda for the Catholic Reformation, northern Europe was irredeemably divided between Catholics and Protestants; and Venice, which had been the most independent of all the Italian city states and the least prescriptive about matters of religion, began to pay heed to the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church.

When Titian died in Venice in 1576 he was in his late eighties, and the Most Serene Republic had begun its long slow decline as a great trading power and artistic centre. He had spent the whole of his working life there, travelling as little as possible and only twice outside the Italian peninsula for two short visits to Germany. He had produced some 500 or 600 paintings of which about half survive.¹ They are now scattered around the globe, most of them in public galleries from New York to California and Brazil; and across Europe from St Petersburg to Vienna, Berlin, Florence, London and Madrid, to mention only the largest collections. Despite frequent temporary exhibitions of his pictures it would be difficult for any one person to see all the originals and follow the extraordinary transformation of Titian's style from the radiant, minutely realized masterpieces of his youth to the more freely painted works of his middle years, to the dark, tragic, sometimes terrifying visions of his last years.

More has been written about Titian than about any other Renaissance artist apart from Michelangelo. There were two biographies of him in his own lifetime: the Venetian writer Lodovico Dolce's *L'Aretino* published in 1557 and Giorgio Vasari's 'Life of Titian' in the second, 1568, edition of his *Lives of the Artists*; two more in the next century by an anonymous writer who may have been a distant relative (1622) and by Carlo Ridolfi in his *Marvels of Art* (1648), as well as numerous letters written to, by and about him. Over successive centuries writers and artists have explored and described his paintings and the spell they cast. This book, however, is the first documented attempt since the pioneering Anglo-Italian art historians J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle published their *Titian: His Life and Times* as long ago as 18772 to chart Titian's stylistic development through the story of his life and of the century in which he became the most famous artist in Europe, painter to its most powerful rulers.

Since Crowe and Cavalcaselle, art history has been taught in schools and universities as a specialized subject, and Titian Studies have become something of an academic industry. Archives in Venice and elsewhere have yielded much more evidence than was available in the nineteenth century, so that we now know more about Titian's personality, family, friends, finances and relationships with his patrons than we do about most other Renaissance artists. Modern scientific techniques, furthermore, have enabled painting conservators to follow Titian's working methods by looking beneath the surface of his paintings.³ Nevertheless, since no one person can do justice to an artist as great, protean and complex as Titian, I have allowed some of the many voices that have explored, praised – and very occasionally doubted – his genius to have their say.

I have tried where possible to correct errors of fact about Titian that have been repeated so often that they've become almost canonical. There are, however, still blanks in our knowledge. Perhaps some will be filled as new evidence and paintings thought to have been lost are discovered. Nothing, however, will diminish the sheer visceral pleasure, the shock of recognition that we are looking at a

kind of truth that few other painters have communicated, that has fascinated Titian's admirers and followers for more than five centuries.

A NOTE ON MONEY

Most European currencies after Charlemagne's reform of the monetary system were accounted in pounds, shillings and pence: £ s d, or 1 lira = 20 soldi = 240 denari, like the British pound sterling before it was decimalized in 1971. Every country, and every one of the numerous Italian states, used its own silver-based coins for everyday transactions such as buying food or paying wages. Different countries also issued gold coins, which were the currency of international trade and were used for reckoning wealth on paper. During Titian's lifetime the Venetian gold ducat and the Spanish gold scudo were of equal value, each worth six lire and four soldi.

It is not possible to give modern equivalents of purchasing power in the sixteenth century for reasons that may be apparent from the following examples. A standard tip given by grandees for small services was one ducat, which was approximately the weekly wage of a master carpenter, but in the 1530s could buy twenty-eight chickens, ten geese or fifty kilos of flour. A university professor earned something between 100 and 140 ducats a year, a senior civil servant about 250. A Venetian with an income of 1,000 ducats would have been considered prosperous.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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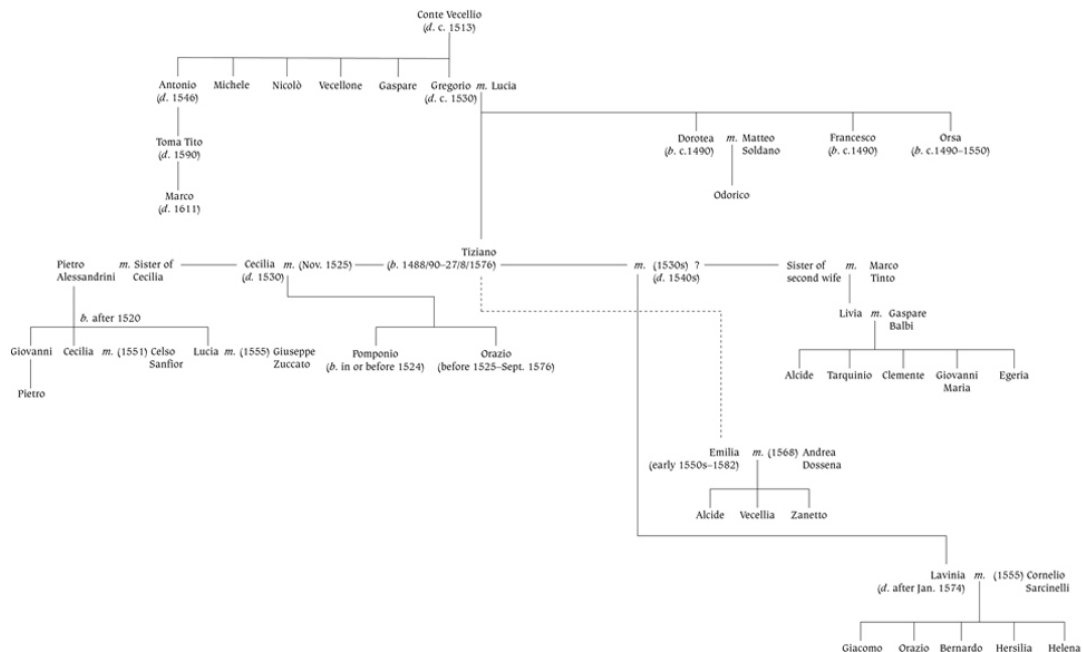
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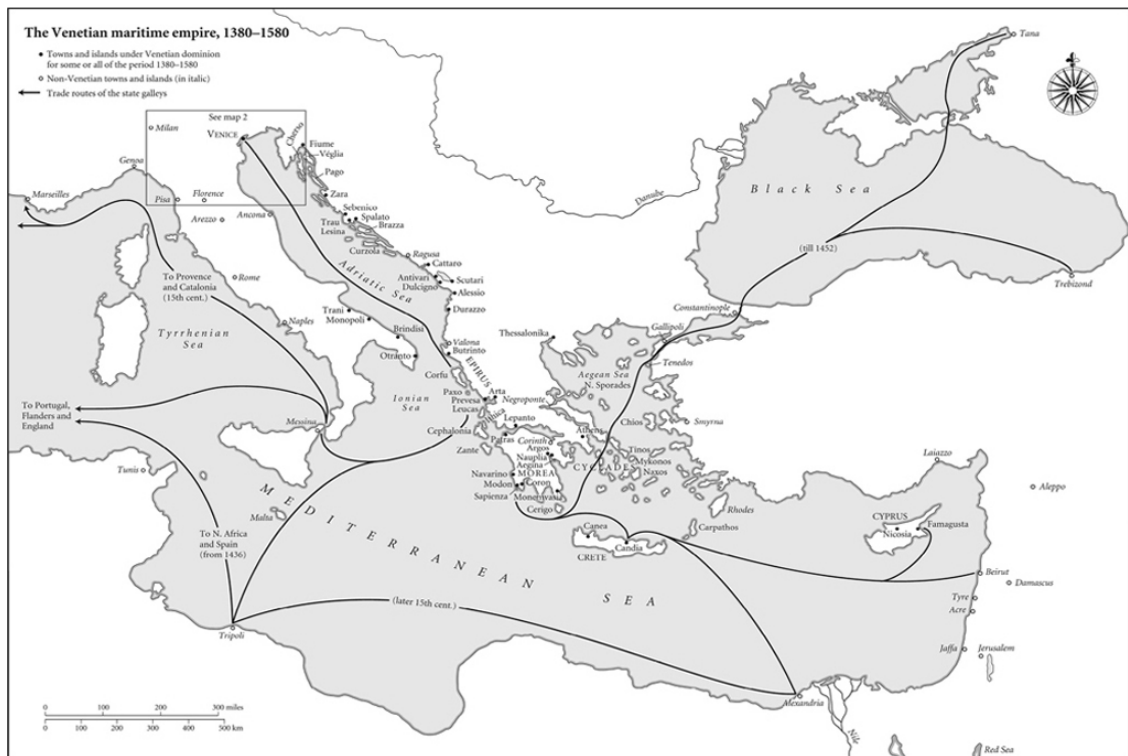
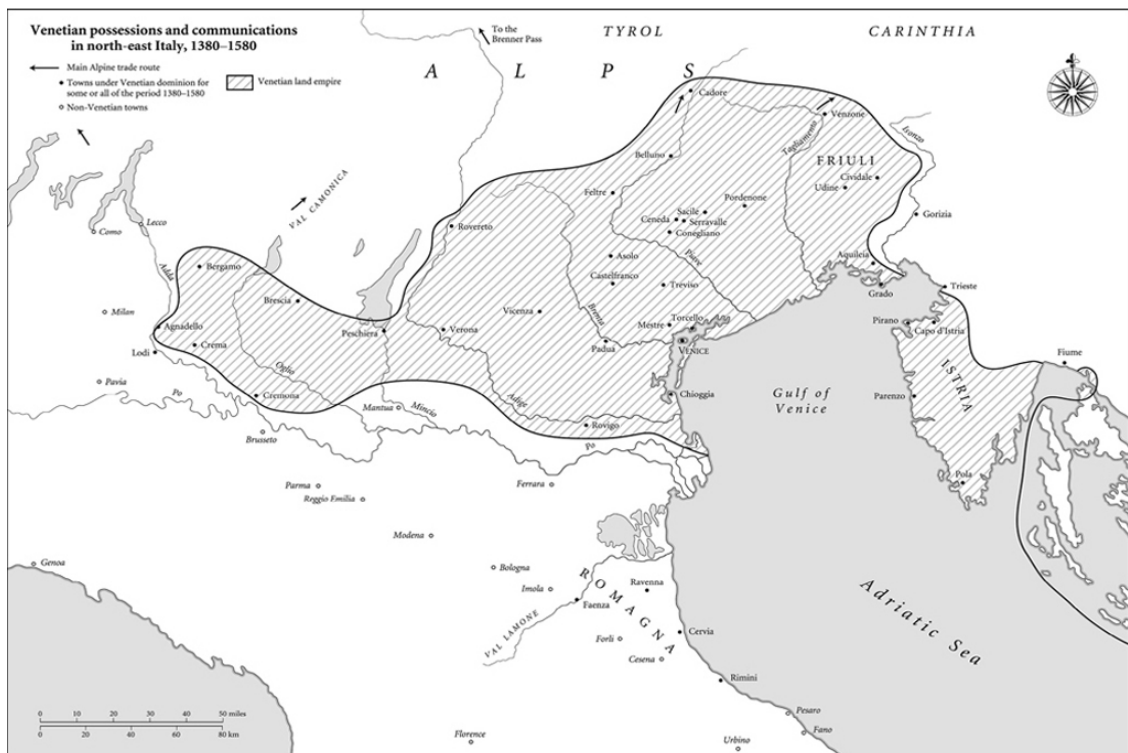
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Titian's Family Tree





PART I

1488/90–1518

Titian may be said to have remodelled the language of painting, just as Dante established the language of Italy; there remains also the richness of emotion which expresses the man behind the work.

CHARLES RICKETTS, TITIAN, 1910

ONE

Mountains

Might not this 'mountain man' have been something of a 'canny Scot' or a 'shrewd Swiss'?

JOSIAH GILBERT, TITIAN'S COUNTRY, 1869

On a clear day in Venice when the wind blows the mist from the lagoon, you can see the distant mountains 110 kilometres to the north where Titian Vecellio was born into a large and locally prominent family in the little township of Pieve di Cadore, close to the border with Habsburg Germany. It was remote, sparsely populated country whose inhabitants were necessarily tough, hard working and used to rationing and penny-pinching. In summer and autumn there was plenty of milk, cheese, butter and fruit from the lush pastures and orchards. But the thin mountain soil did not produce enough grain to last through the long winters, when supplies had to be hauled up through snow-covered valleys on sleds drawn by horses either from Germany or from the fertile Venetian plain. The communal grain stores were closely supervised by the local authorities, who controlled prices for the poor.

A loyal outpost of the Venetian land empire since 1420, the region of Cadore was divided for administrative purposes into *centurie* or 'centuries'. And the location of Pieve, where an escarpment rises sharply above the then navigable River Piave, was important to Venice as a control point for one of the trading routes between its overseas dominions in the Levant and transalpine Europe. Convoys of pack animals and carts drawn by oxen or horses, one behind to act as a break when descending steep hills, criss-crossed the surrounding valleys. Merchants from the Habsburg Empire, the German kingdoms, Poland, Hungary and Bohemia carried silver, gold, copper, iron, sheets of tin, metal products, hides, worked leather, furs, coarse cloth and minerals to Venice, where the German exchange house, the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*, 'would by itself', so it seemed to one Jerusalem pilgrim in Venice at the turn of the fifteenth century, 'suffice to supply all Italy with the goods that come and go'.¹ Produce from the north was traded at the *Fondaco* for luxury goods made in Venice – glass and mirrors from Murano, refined soaps, richly worked and dyed silks and satins – or imported into Venice from the Levant: preserved fruits, molasses, wine and olive oil; seed pearls, ivory; and the products known as spices, a term that covered a wide range of goods from peacock feathers, fine-spun Egyptian cottons and the ingredients of pigments used by artists and dyers to flavourings (cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, pepper, saffron, frankincense, myrrh) that were also essentials as the bases of the only drugs available in Renaissance Europe.

Timber and to a lesser extent iron mining were the principal local industries. Wood in this densely forested area was a precious export commodity, not to be wasted unnecessarily on domestic fires. Venice depended for its very survival on a steady and copious supply of wood from its hinterland, which was imported in vast quantities for building and fitting out the war and trading galleys; for the small boats that plied its waterways; for dykes, palisades and the pilings on which the foundations of its buildings rested; for stoking industrial furnaces and for the unusually numerous domestic fires. Venetians, as we can see from the multitude of conical chimneys in contemporary paintings, liked to keep their houses warmer than those in other northern cities.

Timber was in Titian's blood. He inherited ancestral sawmills near Perarolo, where the River Boite joins the Piave, and later in life ran a timber business in partnership with his brother Francesco and his son Orazio. Rough-cut trunks of larch, red and white fir, beech, birch and alder from the forests of Cadore were floated downriver to Perarolo. Here they were sorted, milled, lashed together as rafts, sometimes loaded with iron ore, wool and hides, and transported downriver to Venice where they were parked along the *Zattere* – the 'rafts' as the quays along the *Giudecca Canal* are still called – before the wood was sent on for unloading and storage in the timber yard on the northern lagoon, next to the church of San Francesco della Vigna, which the Venetian government, in recognition of the importance of its wood, had granted to Cadore in 1420. It was a privilege that would cause Titian

to fall out with the local government later in his life. Cadore supplied Venice with wood into the early twentieth century; and even today you can occasionally hear the buzz of saws in Cadore, in the Parco Rocciolo – the park of rough-cut timber – at the base of the castle hill, just above a little piazza, then as now called Piazza Arsenale after an antique arsenal.

Titian was born in this piazza, probably some time between 1488 and 1490 in a house facing a spectacularly jagged fringe of mountains known as the Marmarole, and he spent his early childhood here with his father Gregorio Vecellio, his mother Lucia and their three younger children: Dorotea, born around 1490, Francesco, born not long after 1490,² and Orsa, the youngest born around 1500. A modest cottage of a kind that has now mostly disappeared, it was rediscovered behind a later extension in the early nineteenth century by scholar detectives who identified it from its description in a sale document of 1580.³ The ground floor, now a little museum, was originally used for storage and in winter for stabling farm animals, whose bodies acted as under-floor heating for the rooms above. The living space on the first floor consists of four small rooms including a kitchen with a flagstone floor and a stove for cooking and heating which would have been kept lit at all times. The other three rooms are wooden boxes, entirely lined with pine for insulation – some of the original ceiling panels cut from giant pine trees are as much as one and a half metres wide. All the windows are small, and the only staircase is external to save space indoors and to act as a fire escape.

Surrounded by dense forests, and guardian to one of the gateways into Italy, the province of Cadore was inevitably subject to frequent fires and to skirmishes with the German and Turkish armies that threatened the borders of the Venetian state. It must have been during one of the sieges by the Habsburg emperor Maximilian I in the years between 1508 and 1513 that the parish register of births, baptisms, marriages and deaths was lost, leaving posterity with no certain evidence of the date of birth of Titian, his siblings or indeed anyone else born in Cadore in the previous decades. Titian scholars have been searching without success for this book for at least two centuries. Unfortunately, since Titian in his later life exaggerated, or perhaps forgot, his age, it is unlikely that we will ever have certain evidence of his exact date of birth. Like many people at the time Titian may not have known or cared exactly when he had been born (neither did Giovanni Bellini or Giorgione, or if they did they left no record of their ages). It would have suited him to exaggerate his age when he was a young artist seeking work in Venice, and again later in life when extreme old age was a rare achievement that commanded great respect. His two earliest biographers, Lodovico Dolce and Giorgio Vasari, both of whom knew him personally, imply that he was born in the late 1480s, and something between 1488 and 1490 is the date that is now, after long and heated controversy, accepted by most authorities. However, his seventeenth-century biographers – an anonymous writer commissioned by a distant relative of Titian⁴ and Carlo Ridolfi – gave 1477, a date which, like so much misinformation about Titian's life, remains to this day in some of the literature.⁵

Apart from the dramatic mountain scenery and the house where he was born, there isn't much left of Titian's Cadore. The parish church of Santa Maria Nascente where he hoped to be buried and for which he designed a set of frescos towards the end of his life was torn down in 1813 when remains of the old castle were used to build the bulky neo-Renaissance replacement you see today. The life-sized bronze statue of Titian in the main square, Piazza Tiziano, was erected in the late nineteenth century after Pieve had become part of the newly united Italy. He glares down from his pedestal displaying the gold chain presented to him by the emperor as the insignia of his knighthood, the cap that probably concealed a bald spot⁶ and the fiercely down-turned mouth,⁷ and wielding palette and brushes like a protective shield against inquisitive posterity. He looks about fifty, still lean and tough, although one can imagine that the rough mountain edges of his voice and manners have been smoothed away. Titian by this time has painted most people of consequence in the Europe of his day. He has a kind of Olympian wisdom, a detached view of the world unencumbered by any particular political or religious agenda (unlike his hero and rival Michelangelo) and a profound understanding of people and how they work. He is regarded almost as a demi-god, an Atlantis, or a reincarnation of

Apelles, painter to Alexander the Great. It's hard to imagine him smiling, but on the rare occasions when he does turn up the corners of his mouth it must seem like a gift to the men, and of course the women, he charms with his wit and his self-assured good manners.

If the emperor Charles V really did pick up Titian's paintbrush as Ridolfi tells us,⁸ perhaps he was being rewarded for one of those smiles. Both of his contemporary biographers described his charm. 'In the first place,' says Dolce:

he is extremely modest; he never assesses any painter critically, and willingly discusses in respectful terms anyone who has merit. And then again he is a very fine conversationalist, with powers of intellect and judgement that are quite perfect in all contingencies, and a pleasant and gentle nature. He is affable and copiously endowed with an extreme courtesy of behaviour. And the man who talks to him once is bound to fall in love with him for ever and always.

But elsewhere Dolce uses the verb *giostrare*, to joust, to indicate a competitive streak. Vasari, who as a Tuscan had reservations about the Venetian way of painting, described him as 'courteous, with very good manners and the most pleasant personality and behaviour', an artist who had surpassed his rivals 'thanks both to the quality of his art and to his ability to get on with gentlemen and make himself agreeable to them'. An anonymous biographer writing in the seventeenth century described him as of a pleasing appearance, circumspect and sagacious in business, with an uncorrupted faith in God, loyal to the Most Serene Republic (a courtesy title given to other European states but most often to Venice, which was widely known as *La Serenissima* in its strongest period) and especially to his homeland of Cadore. He is candid, open-hearted, generous and an excellent conversationalist. 'Titian', wrote his other posthumous biographer Carlo Ridolfi, echoing Vasari, 'had courtly manners ... by frequenting the courts, he learned every courtly habit ... People used to say that the talent he possessed was a particular gift from Heaven, but he never exulted in it.' Yet Ridolfi gives us a hint of rough edges to the polished surface of his subject's character. Titian, he tells us, was dismissive of lesser talents, and the highest praise he could bestow on a painting he admired was that it seemed to be by his own hand. What none of his early biographers mention is the lifelong loyalty and devotion to friends and family, the capacity for enjoying himself in company or the dry sense of humour, which must have been one of the qualities that made him such agreeable company. None of them – perhaps because they were all, apart from Vasari, themselves Venetians – says how typically Venetian he was: good humoured, thrifty to the point of stinginess, sweet-tempered but manipulative when necessary for his own ends, and very much his own man.

If you spend a day or two in Cadore you will see Titian's features again: the long bony face, the slightly hooked nose, the fierce gaze. Natives of Cadore are the first to tell you that they look like Titian, and a surprising number bear the name *Vecellio* – there is a trend in small isolated communities for surnames carried on the male line to increase over centuries. By the time Titian was born, the *Vecellio* were already one of the largest and most distinguished old families in Cadore. Vasari described the family as 'one of the most noble', a word that was used in the annals of the *Vecellio*, although no member of the family was of the patrician class and none before Titian himself actually received an imperial title. But his upbringing as a member of a prominent family proud of its long lineage and history of public service might go some way towards explaining the social confidence and the ease with which he acquired those pleasing manners, which were unusual if not unique for an artist at that time.

The *Vecellio* of Cadore can be traced back to the second half of the thirteenth century. Most were notaries who occupied important positions in the local government. To qualify as a notary it was necessary to be nominated by a count palatine, a man given that title by the emperor, then to satisfy the local authorities, many of whom were also notaries, of competence by delivering before them an eloquent dissertation in Latin in the style of the great Roman advocate Cicero. Notaries were therefore

by definition reasonably well connected and educated men. In remote communities like Cadore they fulfilled the roles of attorney, accountant and broker. Their signatures on wills, inventories, powers of attorney, dowry agreements and sales of property gave such documents, theoretically at least, international validity. One of them, a certain Bartolomeo, was also a timber merchant who owned sawmills at Perarolo that Titian would later inherit. Titian's grandfather, known as Conte and one of the most remarkable of the Vecellio clan, must have made a strong impression on the young Titian. He was a shrewd businessman who knew how to manipulate the price of imported grain and a forceful diplomat who on one occasion managed to persuade the Venetian government to lift from Cadore a punitive tax imposed on outlying regions to finance a war against the Turks. From 1458 until his death around 1513 at what must have been a very advanced age he served the local administration as court auditor nineteen times, and often as delegate to Venice. As well as these and other high public and military offices he led the local militia in skirmishes on the north-east borders of the Venetian Republic, as captain against the Turks and as commander in chief in a war between Venice and Austria.

Conte owned a group of properties in Piazza Arsenale, including the house where Titian was born, which he either gave or loaned to Titian's father Gregorio. Although one of Conte's least successful sons,⁹ Gregorio seems to have been a nice man whose 'goodness of soul did not yield to a sublime intellect', as a relative put it long after his death.¹⁰ Unlike most of the family he did not qualify as a notary, and his municipal jobs – overseer of the corn stores, councillor, superintendent of the castle repairs, inspector of mines (the latter appointment given him by the doge of Venice as a favour to Titian) – were honourable but minor positions. But as captain of the militia of Pieve he fought bravely in the Battle of Cadore in 1508, and it was as a soldier in armour that Titian painted his portrait (Milan, Ambrosiana) shortly before his death. Virtually nothing is known about Titian's mother Lucia, aptly named, according to an oration given long after her death by a Vecellio relative, because as the mother of Titian and his brother Francesco she cast a radiant light (luce) on herself and her homeland. It has been suggested, without the slightest documentary foundation, that she was a servant from Cortina d'Ampezzo, and the model for the old egg-seller who sits on the steps in Titian's *Presentation of the Virgin* and/or for the *Old Woman* attributed to Giorgione (both Venice, Accademia).

Conte's generosity extended to his grandchildren. He provided Dorotea with a handsome dowry on her marriage to Matteo Soldani, a notary, in 1508. We know the details of Dorotea's marriage settlement from a rare document that survives from 1539, by which time Dorotea was widowed and there was a claim against the estate of her late husband. Two-thirds of the value of dowries were by law required to be returned to wives after the death of their husbands. But the notarized evaluation of Dorotea's dowry had been lost during one of Maximilian's invasions. Titian, fearing that without evidence of its value, on which his sister depended for her living, it might be considered part of the contested estate, arranged for three witnesses who had been present on the day of Dorotea's marriage to testify before a notary. The document opens a precious window on the domestic life of the Vecellio. The witnesses agreed that the dowry was worth between 700 and 800 lire. One of them, who identified himself as a nephew of Vendramin Soldani, a parish priest and archdeacon with whom Matteo Soldani had been living before his marriage, visited Conte's house on the day of the wedding. He described the scene.

I saw many moveable furnishings, a bed, blankets, many sheets, clothing of all sorts as well as other requirements of a woman, which seemed to me a very fine dowry.

Later that evening I asked my uncle what he thought it was worth. He replied that it was certainly a beautiful dowry, worth more than 700 lire, more than you would have thought ... I'm sure there was a notary taking notes, but I don't remember who he was. When I saw the things being evaluated there were only the two old men present, that is the priest messer Vendramin and ser Conte, as well

as the notary whose name I don't recall. It's true that I also saw ser Gregorio, the son of ser Conte and father of the bride, who was walking back and forth, up and down, but he never stood still.¹¹

Gregorio was evidently restless, as any father might be on his daughter's wedding day. But the fact that it was Conte who was presiding over the evaluation of the dowry is one of the clues that suggest that he was the head of the family. Was he, as Titian would be, an overbearing father capable of crushing the spirits of his weaker sons?

Two of Titian's biographers¹² tell us that he was educated under his father's roof. Ridolfi wrote that he attended a local school for well-born boys, in which case he didn't profit much from it because Ridolfi also said that Titian 'was not well versed in literature'. Titian's sister Dorotea was illiterate, and so in all likelihood were Orsa and their mother. Judging from his few extant autograph letters and from other documents written in his hand Titian was not more than adequately literate, about average for an artist at that time. A nineteenth-century scholar, after examining one of Titian's receipts for payment, commented that the grammar and syntax of the artist who handled a paintbrush like a god was more like that of a man who was less than a boy.¹³ Nevertheless, although most of his mature correspondence would be composed and penned by friends and secretaries, he was more than literate and numerate enough to manage his own and his family's business affairs with dedication and acumen. And his handwriting, although he rarely used it, was confident, steady and legible.

Although everyone heard the mass in Latin, it was not formally taught to boys under the age of ten or twelve, the age at which Titian, like most artists, began his apprenticeship. Later in life Titian picked up a smattering of what Ben Jonson, referring to Shakespeare's lack of formal education, called 'small Latin and less Greek'. He gave his sons the classical names Pomponio and Orazio, and in the 1530s favoured the Latin spelling Titianus for his signatures – everyone from popes, princes and noblemen down to town councillors and soldiers liked to see their names in Latin. But the assertion, usually made by scholars who have themselves enjoyed a classical education, that Titian must have read the original texts of the Latin or Greek stories he immortalized in paint fails to take account of the way artists actually worked. No Renaissance artist, with the exception of Andrea Mantegna, was able to read or write Latin. Leonardo da Vinci (who also came from a family of provincial notaries) tried to learn Latin as an adult but without success, as did Isabella d'Este, who was one of the great Renaissance patrons of artists and a collector of classical manuscripts. Mythological imagery was disseminated not by texts but by artists inspired by the antique sculptures that were being unearthed from Italian soil, and from the translations of classical texts that were increasingly available in print from the late fifteenth century. When Dolce dedicated to Titian a volume of classical texts he had translated into Italian, he wrote in the preface that he had done so because Titian would not have been able to understand the originals.¹⁴

Titian's earliest visual education was limited to the art he saw in the churches and public buildings of Cadore: fourteenth- and fifteenth-century frescos and crude Alpine altarpieces by the German artist Hans Klocker – there were two paintings by Klocker in the parish church of Pieve – and by Gian Francesco da Tolmezzo. Antonio Rosso, whose few surviving paintings¹⁵ look like uncertain attempts to combine fifteenth-century northern European and Venetian influences, was born around 1440 in Tai, a village only a few kilometres from Pieve. He painted altarpieces in and around Pieve, where a street is named after him today. Scholars in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries liked to imagine that it must have been Rosso who spotted and nurtured the young Titian's talent. If so, there is nothing in what little we know about Rosso's style that looks like Titian's early paintings.

How then did it come about that a half-educated boy from an isolated mountain community, born into a family of notaries, soldiers and public servants with no time or inclination, as far as we know, for artistic pursuits, was sent to Venice to study painting? Within fifty years of Titian's death an answer to this question was provided by the anonymous biographer who had evidently visited Cadore and may have been repeating a family tradition: the boy had astounded everyone by painting an image

of the Madonna on a wall using as his colours the nectar of flowers. The tale of the untutored child artist who demonstrates God-given skill has roots that go back at least as far as classical antiquity. The most famous example is Vasari's account of Cimabue's discovery of Giotto drawing sheep on a rock. Vasari applied the same story to the childhoods of Pordenone, Beccafumi, Andrea Sansovino and Andrea del Castagno. Ridolfi credited Giorgione and Tintoretto as well as Titian with the same precocity. The legend was later applied to Poussin, Zurbarán, Goya and the self-trained eighteenth-century Japanese artist Okyo Maruyama.¹⁶ The story about Titian was later taken seriously enough for some earnest believers to imagine that a damaged fresco, painted some time in the sixteenth century on the wall of a villa behind Titian's family cottage, might have been his very first essay.

Like all persistently recurring fables the one about artistic genius as a birthright works on a number of levels. It fills vacuums in our knowledge. It satisfies a psychological need to believe that the achievements of remarkable men and women are predetermined, whether by divine right, fate or genetic predisposition. The legend of Titian's precocious Madonna is persuasive because children, after all, do draw on walls. A child deprived of coloured pencils or paints might well try to squeeze colour from flowers. Genius, even at a very early age, often has an urgent need to express itself, and Titian may well have shown enough talent for his family to make the unusual decision to send him to Venice, as the anonymous biographer tells us, 'so that he could learn from some skilled master the true principles and bring to perfection the disposition he had demonstrated to practise the noble calling [of painting]'.

Titian set off for Venice shortly before the end of the fifteenth century, possibly with Francesco or joined by him soon after. The journey – now a matter of two hours at most by road or railway, both of which span the deepest valleys – took several days. Although the route was well travelled the beaten tracks were often churned up by heavy rain or the gun carriages of armies. Titian's contemporaries – not least the peripatetic Erasmus of Rotterdam, 'citizen of the world ... stranger to all' – sometimes groaned about the discomforts of travelling anywhere in Europe at a time when the choice was between riding a horse or mule or having one's bones shaken in a carriage with no springs for long distances over uneven ground.

Nevertheless, the journey to and from Cadore was one Titian would make over and over again throughout his life. He was not the only great Renaissance artist to emerge from a remote rural background, but no others remained as attached to their homeland as Titian. Cadore and his extended family remained the two constants of his personal life. Il Cadorino, as he is still often called in Italy, would sign paintings, letters and receipts for payments 'Titianus di Cador' or 'Titianus Cadorinus'. He would marry a girl from Perarolo, where the family timber business had started. When, in the 1520s, he repainted the landscape of Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* he 'signed' it with an escarpment that looms over the composition just as the castle hill of Pieve dominated his native town.

He never really identified as much with Venice and rarely set his paintings in the city apart from a now lost history painting for the doge's palace. But two haunting views of the distant skyline survive. In the first, completed in 1520 for a merchant in Ancona and often known as the *Gozzi* altarpiece (Ancona, Museo Civico), Venice is silhouetted at sunset against a gilded sky from which the Ascending Virgin looks tenderly down on her specially favoured city. Three years later he painted the fresco that still survives in the doge's palace of the gigantic figure of St Christopher, patron saint of travellers, who wades through the lagoon with the Christ child on his shoulders, towering over a ghostly view of the bell tower and domes of San Marco and the doge's palace with the craggy mountains of Titian's homeland in the far distance.

Even in the most demanding times when he was behind with fulfilling important commissions, he escaped to Cadore for a holiday or on family business. The house in Venice on the north-east lagoon where he lived the last forty-five years of his life commanded a view of his mountains and was always full of members of his extended family. He adapted one of the greatest and best known of his last paintings, the autobiographical *Pietà* (Venice, Accademia), to fit the high altar of the parish

church of Pieve,¹⁷ where the chapel dedicated to his patron saint, San Tiziano, had been financed by his great-great-grandfather, and where he would have been buried had circumstances at the time of his death been different. Titian would so often repeat the journey he first made as a boy of ten or twelve that he could relive it with eyes closed, recalling every twist and turn of the road, every valley and vista of the Venetian plain to the south and the mountains of his homeland to the north rinsed in the azurite distance, every farmhouse, copse of trees, cluster of wild flowers. A nineteenth-century traveller in what he called 'Titian's Country'¹⁸ counted 400 different species of indigenous flora in his paintings. Scholars today are at loggerheads about whether or not Titian stopped to sketch as he travelled. If so, very few of his undisputed drawings survive.

He travelled down the Piave Valley to Perarolo, the last place before Venice where you can see majestic Antelao and the two peaks of the Pelmo, the other presiding mountain of his Dolomites, which they call the Throne of God or the Doge's Hat. The locals say the mountains turn red at sunrise and sunset and blue – as Titian painted them – after a storm. Through the pass at Longarone, so narrow that it could not be negotiated by carts or carriages; then a few miles east to the lakes and the gorge that leads to the gentle Cenedese Hills, the 'footstool of the Alps',¹⁹ where the less hospitable Dolomites finally give way to the soft, lush landscape of the Venetian lowlands. It was here that the boy Titian had his first sight of the Venetian plain with the Euganean Hills above Padua to the west and the Piave, now in the far distance, snaking its way towards the lagoon. The party would have stopped to feed and water the animals and spend their last night at Serravalle, then a staging post for travellers and merchant convoys on their way to and from Venice, now united with its neighbouring town Ceneda and renamed Vittorio Veneto. Many years later Titian would become attached to this area by numerous family links. He would build himself a holiday villa in the Cenedese Hills, paint an altarpiece in the church of Serravalle and marry a daughter to a gentleman farmer whose handsome house still stands there. Then on down to the lagoon by way of Conegliano and Treviso, birthplace of the first painter who would take him as an apprentice in Venice, through fields planted with vines, mulberries and Indian corn, past jutting rocks, wooded glades, flashing streams, grazing sheep, castellated farm buildings and the bell towers of small parish churches sounding the hours.

Titian mastered the art of painting landscapes early in his career, before he was entirely confident with the human figures he placed in them. But his landscapes are not so much literal views as accumulations of the features and contours of the countryside he knew so well; they record the pleasure of seeing a landscape modelled by light and shadow.²⁰ Stimulated by Flemish and German examples,²¹ by his first Venetian rival Giorgione of Castelfranco, by the pastoral literature being published in Venice when he was still an apprentice, and perhaps by Leonardo, whose notes are full of discussions about landscape painting, he conjured out of the Cenedese Hills an Arcadia inhabited by Madonnas and saints, lovers and pagan deities, where fleeting shafts of golden light on green meadows, shadows cast by passing clouds and trees tossing in the wind act like choruses, setting the mood and enhancing the drama. Titian's brush describes the weather, forecasting how it will change as the day goes on and his models, sumptuously dressed in silks and satins, the ultramarine of the Madonna's cloaks echoed by azure mountains and skies, have moved on to another place.

In the Holy Family with a Shepherd (London, National Gallery), and more obviously in the later Three Ages of Man (Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland), the sun rises above the plain where the Piave winds downstream towards the lagoon in the far distance. In remoter parts of the Veneto there are still clusters of homely farm buildings very like those Titian liked to incorporate in his landscapes, often reusing the same group of buildings for different paintings. Those in the background of Tobias and the Angel Raphael are the same as the buildings in the Baptism of Christ (Rome, Pinacoteca Capitolina) and similar to those in his woodcuts of the Triumph of Christ and Submersion of Pharaoh's Army in the Red Sea. The buildings in the Sleeping Nude in a Landscape (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie) reappear in the Noli me tangere (London, National Gallery) which Titian set on

a plateau overlooking the plain. The two landscapes in Sacred and Profane Love (Rome, Galleria Borghese) evoke the same place in the golden light of sunset with the same buildings in reverse order, looking north, back towards the lakes and Alpine foothills above Serravalle and Ceneda.²²

Titian's landscapes inspired a succession of artists from Poussin and Rubens to Constable and Turner, as well as writers trying to explain or capture their magic in words. Constable, who sometimes improved his compositions by borrowing Titian's trees, saw 'the representative of nature' in every touch of his landscapes. The Milanese painter and writer Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo wrote that Titian, so loved by the world, was hated by jealous nature.²³ Ridolfi began his biography of Titian with praise for his 'conquest' of nature,

who had before considered herself insuperable, was now conquered and gave in to this man, receiving laws from his industrious brush, with the appearance of new forms in his work that rendered the flowers more beautiful, the meadows more brilliant, the plants more delightful, the birds more charming, the animals more pleasing, and man more noble.

The concept of great art as triumphant over nature was a borrowing from Vasari, who had in turn borrowed it from Aristotle, and was one of the commonplaces of Renaissance critical theory. We may have more sympathy with the early nineteenth-century essayist William Hazlitt who used the word 'gusto' to evoke a quality of Titian's landscapes that impressed him: 'a rich taste of colour is left upon the eye, as if it were the palate, and the diapason of picturesque harmony is felt to overflowing. "Oh Titian and Nature! Which of you copied the other?"' And he added: 'We are ashamed of this description, now that we have made it, and heartily wish somebody would make a better.'²⁴

Perhaps the most successful translation of Titian's painted landscapes into words was written in the early 1540s by his closest friend and most sensitive critic, the writer, journalist and failed painter Pietro Aretino, in a letter about a visit he had recently made to an idyllic countryside. Although the place he had visited was actually Lake Garda, the landscape he described could, as Aretino knew better than anyone, have been painted only by Titian, the greatest master of the alchemical art of transforming real, raw nature into high art. Aretino painted in words the abundance of flowers, the trees, songthrushes escaping from their branches 'to fill the sky with harmony', racing rabbits, a church, a wine press, the ring of a lake 'fit to be worn on the right hand of the world ... I walked for miles, but my feet didn't move, behind hares and hounds, around clumps of mistletoe and netted partridges. Meanwhile I thought I saw something that I might have, but did not, fear: beyond the dense undulating mountains, and hills full of game, were a hundred pairs of spirits obedient to the power and magic of art.'²⁵

TWO

The Most Triumphant City

The city is about 7 miles in circumference; it has no surrounding walls, no gates which are locked at night, no sentry keeping watch as other cities have for fear of enemies; it is so very safe at present, that no one can attack or frighten it. As another writer has said its name has achieved such dignity and renown that it is fair to say Venice merits the title 'Pillar of Italy', 'deservedly it may be called the bosom of all Christendom'. For it takes pride of place before all others, if I may say so, in prudence, fortitude, magnificence, benignity and clemency; everyone throughout the world testifies to this. To conclude, this city was built more by divine than human will.

MARIN SANUDO, THE CITY OF VENICE, 1493–15301

Great men built Rome, but Venice was built by gods.

JACOPO SANNAZARO, FROM THE OPERA LATINA, 15352

Titian had often heard about Venice from the men in his family who travelled back and forth on government business. Nothing, however, can have prepared a boy of only nine or ten³ who had never seen any city for the one that even today out-dazzles all others. He was met off the boat at the Rialto

by an uncle⁴ who had agreed to care for him while he served his apprenticeship. We can imagine a lanky boy, from a cramped house in a small village in the mountains, his provincial clothes creased from the long journey, taking it all in with that disarmingly hawkish gaze: the massive doorways to the Gothic buildings, the towering masts of ships, the women teetering by on their platformed shoes. And we can assume that the uncle was kind to him – it was a close family – and that when Conte was in Venice a year or two later he saw to it that his grandson lacked for nothing.

Venice in 1500 was the wealthiest, most glamorous, most sophisticated, most cosmopolitan, most admired – and most hated – metropolis in Europe, centre of the only empire since ancient Rome to be named after a city rather than a dynasty. After a century of successful conquests on the mainland, or *terraferma*, the Venetian land empire stretched nearly as far Milan to the west, across Friuli and the Istrian Peninsula, while the sea empire extended as far as Cyprus on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean. Copies of the bell tower in the Piazza San Marco, and images of St Mark, are still to be seen throughout the far-flung Venetian domains. The Venetian arsenal, the greatest industrial complex in the world, pioneered methods of prefabricated construction that, at its peak, could assemble galleys at the rate of one every few hours. The round-bottomed trading ships of the Most Serene Republic sailed to and from ports in the Levant, in the western Mediterranean, and through the straits of Gibraltar to Portugal, England and Flanders.

All commodities that passed through the Adriatic had to pass through Venice: pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger, sugar; drugs, dyes, pigments; wheat, fortified wines, raisins, dates, oil, meat, caviar, cheeses; slaves as well as falcons, leopards and other exotic animals; wax, linen, leather, wool, raw and finished silk; iron, gold, silver, jewels; precious marbles and antique sculptures. Venetian long-haul trade, according to a late fifteenth-century estimate, brought in on average a 40 per cent return on investment. Since the middle of the fourteenth century the Venetian gold ducat had been the most stable, in value and weight, and most welcome currency in the Mediterranean basin. Imitated all over the world from Europe to India, its appearance remained unchanged until the fall of the Republic; and the treasury of San Marco in the Palazzo dei Camerlenghi at the foot of the Rialto Bridge was so famous that it was a priority for visiting VIPs on sightseeing tours. Venice, floating in its protective ring of shallow water at the head of the Adriatic, was the entrepot of the world.

A French diplomat, Philippe de Commynes, who was in Venice in 1494 as the envoy of the French king, left us with one of the most famous of the many descriptions of the city as Titian first saw it. The worldly Commynes was as amazed as any modern tourist to see ‘so many steeples, so many religious houses, and so much building, and all in the water ... it is a strange sight to behold so many great and goodly Churches built in the sea’. He added:

I was conducted through the principal street, which they call the Grand Canal ... It is the fairest and best-built street, I think, in the world, and goes quite through the city. The buildings are high and stately, and all of fine stone. The ancient houses are all painted, but the rest that have been built within these hundred years, have their front all of white marble ... and are beautified with many great pieces of Porphire and Serpentine ... In short, it is the most triumphant City that I ever saw ... governed with the greatest wisdom, and serving God with the greatest solemnity.

Although encomiums of great cities were standard Renaissance rhetoric, Venice was the most described and praised of all, not least by its own propagandists. And no Renaissance city was portrayed in such detail or on such an enormous scale as Venice in a map published in 1500, which invites us to explore the streets and waterways of the city that Titian knew as a boy. The map was made by a Venetian painter and printmaker known as Jacopo de’ Barbari, ‘of the barbarians’, a name he seems to have adopted even before he started working for patrons north of the Alps. The publisher of his map, a German merchant by the name of Antonio Kolb, was not exaggerating when he boasted, in his application to the government for permission to print, of ‘the almost unattainable and incredible

skill required to make such an accurate drawing' on this enormous scale, 'the like of which was never made before ... and of the mental subtlety involved'. Printed from six blocks, which are preserved in the Correr Museum in Venice, the de' Barbari map measures some 2.75 metres by 1.20. It is inevitably used to illustrate books about Venice, and you can buy scaled-down facsimiles in Venetian bookshops. But to enjoy this remarkable portrait of Venice on the eve of the most artistically dynamic period of its history you have to examine it in its original proportions.

The de' Barbari map of Venice.



De' Barbari imagined himself floating above the city from a fixed point to the south and several hundred metres into the sky. Nearly every building that could be seen from this perspective is recorded: houses large and small complete with windows, timber roof terraces and conical chimney pots designed to catch sparks from domestic fires; well heads in private courtyards and public campi; the square bricks that paved some of the larger campi; many churches facing every which way and their bell towers. It is still primarily a Gothic city, although some of the newest buildings have rounded windows, and some brick bridges have already replaced the old wooden fire hazards (although the wooden Rialto Bridge, which had been rebuilt in 1458, was not replaced with the stone bridge until after Titian's lifetime). Around the perimeters of the city there are orchards, vineyards, long open-sided sheds for drying dyed cloth, and large monastic houses with their herb gardens.

De' Barbari took special care with the details of the two great preaching churches, the largest in Venice and, as usual in Italian cities, at opposite ends of the city. The Franciscan Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, for which Titian would paint two of his most innovative altarpieces, stands to the west of the Rialto; the Dominican Santi Giovanni e Paolo, where his *Death of St Peter Martyr* was his most admired and famous work before it was destroyed by fire in the nineteenth century, is on the edge of the north lagoon, with some timber yards just to the east. De' Barbari even managed to squeeze into his drawing of the campo the equestrian monument to the mercenary soldier Bartolomeo Colleoni and the illusionist façade of the Scuola di San Marco, both completed only a few years before his map was published.

The focal point of the map is of course Piazza San Marco, the religious and political hub of the empire and the only open space in Venice that was and is called a piazza rather than a campo. The bell tower, which had been struck by lightning in 1489, has a flat top in the first edition, but a second state printed in 1514 shows the restored spire. The west end of the piazza is closed by the church of San Geminiano, replaced in the early nineteenth century by the neoclassical Napoleonic wing that now houses the Correr Museum. The clock tower framing the entrance to the Mercerie

had been completed just in time for the mid-millennium, but the Procuratie Vecchie, the arcaded terrace that extends along the north side of the piazza, which was let out by the procurators as shops and offices, was rebuilt in a similar style after a fire in 1514. On the south side you can make out the jumbled roofs of the procurators' old residences and of some hostelrys of dubious reputation, which were gradually replaced by the present Procuratie Nuove from the 1540s and not completed until after Titian's death.

Meanwhile de' Barbari did his best to dignify the moneychangers' booths and bakers' shops and the web of narrow alleys that hemmed in the base of the bell tower. He cleared away from his bowdlerized portrait of the Piazza and the adjoining Piazzetta a notoriously disgusting latrine, the cheese and salami shops on the lagoon side of the old mint, the gambling tables and food stalls between the great granite columns facing the harbour, a stone-cutter's yard, the stalls of the notaries and barber-surgeons who conducted their business under the portico of the doge's palace; and the last of the trees and bushes, vestiges of an old monastic garden, which were cut down a few years later to make way for the three bronze flag stands in front of the basilica. Rowing boats and sailing boats of all sizes and shapes make their way up and down the Grand Canal. In the distance, towards Torcello, men in small boats are out fishing or hunting duck. On the outlying islands of Murano and Giudecca you can see the façades of the delizie, summer residences where wealthy Venetians escaped from the heat of the city centre to enjoy themselves on warm evenings. A regatta just disappearing from view on its way to the Lido ruffles the water.

Although you could still find your way around Venice with de' Barbari's neat black and white map, his perspective inevitably distorts the scale of some areas of the city. Nor could any map convey the strange beauty, the pungent odours and the sounds – the footsteps, the clip-clop of horses' hooves and the shouts of merchants and gondoliers – echoing in the narrow streets, that assaulted the senses of new arrivals. The façades of palaces, frescoed in bright colours like stage sets or inlaid with precious marbles, were reflected in canals that served as open sewers – and sometimes for the disposal of human and animal corpses – their stench mixing in the humid air with the fragrant odours of spices in the markets and the musky perfumes of inviting women. The palaces had glazed windows – a luxury more common in Venice than anywhere else in Europe – which were lit up during the late-night parties for which Venice was famous by torches and by Murano chandeliers hung from gilded ceilings.

The patrician diarist Marin Sanudo tells us that house prices were 20,000 ducats downwards on the Grand Canal, but most cost between 3,000 and 10,000. Elsewhere in the city:

there is an infinite number of houses valued at upwards of 800 ducats, with rooms having gilded ceilings, staircases of white marble, balconies and windows all fitted with glass. There are so many glass windows that the glaziers are continually fitting and making them (they are manufactured at Murano as I will tell below); in every district there is a glaziers shop. Many of these houses are rented out to whoever wants them ... some for 100, some for 120 and more ducats a year.⁶

The wealthy rode around the city on horseback or by boat, the most fashionable means of transport being the gondola, recently made comfortable and private with the addition of the covered cabin, or felze, that you see in paintings by Canaletto but were then a novelty. Gondolas, Sanudo tells us,

are made pitch black and beautiful in shape; they are rowed by Saracen negroes or other servants who know how to row them ... There is such an infinite number of them that they cannot be counted; no one knows the total ... And there is no gentleman or citizen who does not have one or two or even more boats in the family ...⁷

The sky was periodically darkened by smoke from fires and industrial explosions. Fires set off by an overturned lamp, a spark from a chimney, a foundry or baker's oven skipped from roof to roof, floated on oil slicks down the canals, feeding on wooden beams, bridges and timber stores. Visitors commented on the night skies lit by fireworks, torches, bonfires on church towers: beautiful fire hazards. The worn-out sails of boats were set on fire. And in the arsenal it took nothing more than the spark from a hammer or the iron shoe of a horse to ignite a store of gunpowder. Titian did not invent his dramatic, fiery skies, but he was the first artist to paint skies that Turner would describe as 'rent by rockets'.⁸

In an age at least as obsessed by material consumption as our own, visitors to Venice were most astonished by the shopping. Titian's Venice was the 'Renaissance emporium of things'.⁹ If you wanted to buy the finest damasks, velvets, satins, coloured silk sewing threads, the sweetest-smelling beeswax candles, the best-quality white soap, or choose from the largest selection in Europe of printed books, dyes and artists' pigments, you went or sent for them to Venice. It was worth the cost of the trip because once such luxury items were re-exported the price rose. Over 75 per cent of the population were artisans or shopkeepers, and no neighbourhood was without its warehouses, shops and markets – one of the biggest markets was held on Wednesdays in Campo San Polo near the house where Titian lived in the 1520s. Even boats tied up at quays were rented out as shops. And Venice was a major art market, especially for ancient Greek sculptures, which were collected by the very rich or imported from the overseas dominions for resale. A Milanese priest stopping in Venice in 1494 on his way to a pilgrimage in the Holy Land was nearly at a loss for words:

And who could count the many shops so well furnished that they also seem warehouses, with so many cloths of every make – tapestry, brocades and hangings of every design, carpets of every sort, camlets of every colour and texture, silks of every kind; and so many warehouses full of spices, groceries and drugs, and so much beautiful white wax! These things stupefy the beholder, and cannot be fully described to those who have not seen them.¹⁰

The goods were weighed, passed through customs, sold in the markets or stored in great warehouses and hangars. Iron, wine and coal – ferro, vino, carbon – had their own dedicated wharves, and are still named after them. Merchants from all over the world congregated at the Rialto – 'the richest spot in the world' according to Marin Sanudo – where passengers and goods from the mainland and continental Europe were disembarked and unloaded, where the trade banking houses were located, and where anything from slaves (price 40–50 ducats for females) to exotic animals and trading galleys was bought and sold at auction. The food halls further upstream were like gardens where caged birds, a Venetian delicacy then as now, sang among the fruit and vegetables, while an abundance of silvery fish fresh from the lagoon glittered on marble slabs in the pescheria. Across the bridge the Merceria, the shortest pedestrian route to the Piazza San Marco, was lined with drapers' shops, high-fashion boutiques selling women's clothes and accessories, picture galleries, shops selling books and prints. 'Here', Sanudo exclaimed, 'is all the merchandise that you can think of, and whatever you ask for is there.'

The basin of San Marco was the harbour for goods and passengers from overseas. Bales, sacks and crates were loaded on to wharves in front of the doge's palace. There was another customs house here, and more warehouses. The mint, where the gold and silver coins of the Republic were struck, was in the Piazza, as were the banks that managed long-term deposits of state and private capital. It was also the venue of a regular Saturday market and an annual trade fair in May that attracted shoppers and merchants from all over Europe and the Levant. Bewildered visitors from overseas alighting on what Petrarch had called 'San Marco's marble shore' were greeted by pimps, cardsharps waiting at gambling tables, and tourist guides offering a boat trip up the Grand Canal, a tour of saints' relics and body parts stolen from the Holy Land, or a visit to the glass factories on Murano.

Other amusements on offer included brothels to satisfy all sexual tastes, jousting, bull baiting, musical entertainments of all kinds. Venice – itself ‘the most splendid theatre in all Italy’, as Erasmus wrote in 1533 – was famous for its theatrical productions and pageants, which, like its prostitutes, outclassed and outnumbered those to be seen in any other city. The vibrant theatricality of Titian’s paintings must have been encouraged by the spectacular performances he saw as a boy in Venice.

Some 100,000 residents, nearly twice as many as today, were crammed into the water-bound city where domestic accommodation competed for space with industrial and mercantile buildings. Many, perhaps as many as half of the population at any one time, were foreigners. Some came from Europe – Germany, England, France, Flanders, Spain, and other parts of the Italian peninsula. Greeks formed the largest immigrant community in the sixteenth century, but there were also large numbers of Turks, Slavs, Armenians and Jews. Some black slaves were imported from Africa, as we can see, for example, from the smartly dressed black gondolier in Vittore Carpaccio’s delightful painting of the Rialto Bridge (1494). But most immigrants came of their own free will to find jobs, to seek fortunes or to take refuge from less tolerant regimes. Early sixteenth-century Venice, like nineteenth-century New York, another great port city floating on islands free from the mainland, welcomed into what was something akin to a globalized economy foreigners whose primary allegiance if they had one was often to their homeland. The state was generous to them in the interests of maintaining public order and because immigrants provided useful labour. Those who came as refugees were often successful in petitions to the Senate for public offices or military commissions, licences to trade or compensation for lost goods or property. But refugee women, who had fewer opportunities for work, were often left destitute by the system.

Some well-born and wealthy immigrants from the imperial domains married into patrician families. For the less privileged, manual labour, although not well paid – a master shipwright in the arsenal, which employed some 4,000 specialized workers, earned no more than fifty ducats a year¹¹ – was easy to find, and food was usually inexpensive, although prices could spiral out of control in wartime. Foreign workers were needed for domestic and hard labour, to serve in the army and navy, to assemble the galleys and build new buildings. The more talented brought with them useful skills and improved technologies for the manufacture of everything from wool and silk to gun carriages and printing presses. Mauro Codussi, the great idiosyncratic architect of the first Venetian Renaissance, was born near Bergamo. The architect and sculptor Pietro Lombardo, who introduced the Tuscan Renaissance style to Venice and Padua, came, as his name suggests, from Lombardy. Later, the Flemish composer Adrian Willaert, as choirmaster of San Marco’s, would make Venice the European centre of polyphonic music. Without the Flemish painters who introduced oil paint to Venice in the 1460s, without Giorgione of Castelfranco, Titian of Cadore, his two great Tuscan friends the architect Jacopo Sansovino and the writer Pietro Aretino, his younger contemporary Paolo Veronese – and many other foreign artists and artisans who have never been identified – there might not have been a ‘golden age’ of Venetian art.

And the government never made the mistake of expelling Jews for long. Jews, as Sanudo put it, were ‘as necessary as bakers’. After 1516, when refugees from wars in northern Italy had inflated the Jewish population, they were confined in the first of all ghettos (named after an abandoned iron foundry on the site). Nevertheless, Jews continued to arrive from all over Europe and the Levant. Some, who did not wish to be recognized as Jewish, were successful in petitions to release them from the obligation to wear the Jewish hat. Many of the most illustrious Venetian doctors, philosophers and printers were Jews; and some German Jews made small fortunes in the antiques and second-hand trade after they were granted the exclusive privilege of furnishing all ambassadorial apartments. Those who converted to Christianity were nevertheless regarded with suspicion, less because of their race than because being polyglot their identities were difficult to fix. But, in a city whose wealth depended on trade with the Muslim Levant and which accommodated so many non-Christian inhabitants, attitudes

to religious practice were on the whole more relaxed than elsewhere in Europe. The journey between Venice and Constantinople was the most described of all voyages in the Renaissance, and many Venetians who made it recorded their admiration for the cleanliness, order and beauty they found in the Ottoman Empire. Some converted to Islam and occupied high positions in the sultanate.

The art of printing was introduced to Venice by German, French and Syrian immigrants, some of them Jews, who built presses in the late 1460s, only two decades or so after the invention of movable type by Johannes Gutenberg, and soon produced the first printed editions of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and of the erotic love poems of Catullus, making them widely available to those who could read Latin and afford the price of a book. By 1500 about half of the books produced in Italy, and a sixth of those in Europe, were printed in Venice, perhaps as many as 1,125,000 volumes.¹² With something between one and two hundred print shops in early sixteenth-century Venice¹³ the prices went down while the quality of woodcuts and engravings improved. The educated classes from all over Europe came to Venice to buy their books and prints, while the printing trade enriched the population mix by creating a demand for literate workers who could edit, commission, proofread, translate or plagiarize. Some were inevitably hacks, but others were intellectuals who encouraged the development of a high humanistic culture of the kind that had flourished in central Italy and the university town of Padua for more than half a century.

The Venetian presses produced the first printed editions of everything from musical scores, an exposition of double-entry bookkeeping, manuals about sewing and lace making to the Koran, while Venetian woodcuts of mythological subjects provided artists and craftsmen north and south of the Alps with ideas for the design of every kind of object, from hatbands and wedding chests to garden statues and easel paintings. Entrepreneurial publishers also commissioned single woodcuts, impressions of which were sold in large editions on the international market as decorative objects, to be mounted on canvas or pasted directly on the walls of houses. (It is likely that Jacopo de' Barbari's enormous map, which is far too large to be carried round the city as a guide, was intended for display in this way.) The young Titian was more widely known for his woodcuts¹⁴ than for his oil paintings.

Italian translations of classical texts, some of them free interpretations or conflations of more than one original story, made them accessible to people who could not read Greek or Latin. Ovid's enjoyable tales of lustful gods and goddesses and terrible punishments had been told and depicted since the Middle Ages, but it was not until 1497 that the first Italian translation of the *Metamorphoses*, published in Venice as a prose paraphrase and illustrated with fifty-three woodcuts, enabled artists with no classical languages to read the stories for themselves. Contemporary writers evoked their own idealized versions of a pastoral antiquity.¹⁵

Aldo Manuzio, a publishing genius who came to Venice in the 1490s from a small village near Rome, set up shop in Campo San Agostino in 1502 and made his Aldine Press the most commercially successful as well as the most scholarly of some 500 editorial houses in the city. Venetians – despite the elite taste for collecting ancient Greek sculptures and the presence in the city of educated Greek refugees after the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453 – had until then shown little interest in the Greek literature, science and philosophy that made one of the most significant contributions to the mindset of the European Renaissance. Humanists read the work of the ancient Greek mathematician Pythagoras, who had discovered that the intervals in the Greek musical system could be measured in space, and the account by his follower Plato¹⁶ of the rational order of a divinely created universe. Both of these influenced not just architects but also, it has been suggested,¹⁷ the compelling intervals and rhythms of some of Titian's paintings. Nevertheless, the fate of a great library of ancient Greek manuscripts left to the Venetian state in 1468 by the Greek cardinal John Bessarion testifies to the intellectual provincialism of the Republic at a time when Roman and Florentine scholars had been reading Greek texts for at least two decades. Although one of the conditions of Bessarion's bequest was that the library should be open to the public, the codices were left in crates in a hall in the doge's palace where some were damaged and some 'borrowed' and sold without anybody noticing. It was

not until 1530 that Pietro Bembo, the newly appointed librarian of St Mark, began promoting the idea of a purpose-built library, which was begun seven years later but not finished until the end of the century. Meanwhile Aldo, who launched his press with a Greek grammar, published some of the Bessarion manuscripts, and soon became the leading European publisher of Greek texts. Aristotle and Plato had been available in Latin translations since the early fifteenth century, but Aldo was the first to publish them in the original Greek. By the time he died in 1515 he had printed twenty-eight editions of Greek classics, including the complete works of Aristotle in five volumes, and the first complete editions of the tragedies of Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus, as well Erasmus' translation into Latin of Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Although Titian was unable to read Greek or Latin, Manutius stimulated a new interest in Greek tragedy, and staged performances in Italian would exercise a profound influence on his treatment of mythological subjects.

The Aldine classics were printed in beautiful deluxe or affordable pocket editions – the pocket classic was Aldo's invention. His contemporary list was no less impressive. Some of the ablest humanist scholars of the day came to Venice to see their books through the Aldine Press. Erasmus of Rotterdam, the most brilliant and later most influential leader of northern European humanism and Catholic reform, was in Venice in 1508 supervising the Aldine publication of his *Adagia*, the book that made him famous. He became a family friend – although he complained about the food in the Manutio household – and a friend, too, of the patrician Venetian writers and humanists Andrea Navagero and Pietro Bembo. Bembo was the greatest Venetian writer of his day and the only one who is still read outside academic circles. His use of Tuscan, the language of Dante, which he claimed made a sweeter sound than his native Venetian, established the norm for literary Italian for centuries to come. He also edited famous editions of Dante and Petrarch for the Aldine Press. Petrarch, who celebrated the ideal of a woman who is both chaste and an object of male desire, was especially popular, and Bembo, who greatly admired him but who was a relentless womanizer, resolved the paradox of chaste desire with a Neoplatonic interpretation that excuses carnal love as a first step on the ladder to the sexless Platonic ideal. His *Asolani*, published by the Aldine Press in 1505 at a time when he was suffering from disappointment in love, is set in Asolo, the hill town north of Venice, at the court of Caterina Cornaro, the deposed Queen of Cyprus. Its protagonists, six fictitious young Venetians, three men and three women, enjoy the *dolce far niente* – the sweetness of doing nothing – while they discuss the philosophy of love.

Bembo and the Latin poet and patrician Andrea Navagero were among the founding members of the Aldine Academy, where meetings conducted in Greek were attended by learned members of the ducal chancery, some of whom worked part time for the press. But Aldo took his logo, an anchor intertwined with a dolphin, from an illustration in his first book in Italian, which he hoped would be a bestseller. The *Hypnerotomachia Polifili* (*The Dream of Polifilo*) is a coffee-table-sized book by Francesco Colonna, a Dominican monk from Treviso, which was published in 1499. Set in the Veneto in the 1460s and illustrated with 174 superb woodcuts, some explicitly erotic, the *Hypnerotomachia* is a weird stream-of-consciousness novel revolving around a passionate love story between Polifilus and Polia. Full of digressions, codes, riddles, bizarre episodes and passages in obscure ancient languages, it may have been intended, or partly intended, as a satire of pedantic humanism. (A favourite joke of one Venetian senator was to dismiss long-winded verbiage as 'words of Polifilo'.) Although the first edition seems not to have been a commercial success the author's obsessions with architecture, gardens and above all sex (in one episode Polifilo makes love to a building, to their mutual satisfaction) had an impact on Renaissance thinking,¹⁸ and the woodcut of the naked, reclining Venus, who blesses the love of Polifilo and Polia, anticipates the naked Venuses that became familiar subjects of Venetian painting.¹⁹

Venus, the incomparably beautiful goddess of sex and the third brightest planet in the night sky after the sun and the moon, was inextricably interwoven with the legendary foundation of Venice.

Like Venice she had been born from the sea, and, so the poets liked to say, she gave her name to the city. She was usually portrayed naked – and never more enticingly than by Titian – or was used as an excuse for paintings of naked women that bore none of her attributes. The classical sources are confused about whether to condemn her nudity as that of a serial adulteress and founding mother of prostitution or to approve of it as representing the unadorned truth, either about the joys of uninhibited sexual love or about the higher, purer and more enduring love that follows marriage. Plato, in the *Symposium*, had resolved the dilemma by positing two Venuses, one heavenly and chaste, the other earthly and lustful. So she became, as well as the patron goddess of virginal Venice, the patroness of both whores and brides. The dualism, well suited to the Venetian predilection for having things both ways, reflected an ambivalent attitude to sex. Physical beauty was celebrated and its sexual consequences condoned by the intellectual elite. According to the medical wisdom of the day passionate sex leading to simultaneous orgasm produced the best babies. But the science, as it was thought to be, clashed with a deep-seated fear of sex outside marriage, which upsets the order of society, and with the teaching of the Church, which dictated that passion should be reserved for the worship of God.

Nevertheless, in a port city frequented by tourists, foreign merchants and pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land, who often had to wait for a month or more for the tide to carry their galleys on their ongoing journeys, prostitution flourished. From the middle of the fourteenth century the government had decreed that prostitutes were entirely necessary to the state and founded a public brothel near the Rialto. Prostitution soon employed a significant proportion of the population – if we include pimps, innkeepers and servants as well as the whores themselves.²⁰ Most street prostitutes were poor young working-class women for whom the oldest profession was more profitable than domestic service or making sails for the arsenal for a salary of twelve ducats a year. But some went about so well dressed that they were confused with respectable ladies. Occasional legislation to force them to wear distinguishing marks, to ban soliciting on the streets or from gondolas and to forbid cross-dressing, a favourite technique of seduction, was half-heartedly enforced by a government that was concerned less with moral questions than with protecting its own members from syphilis, the ‘French disease’ that had invaded Italy with the armies of Charles VIII. ‘Our praiseworthy prostitutes’,²¹ as a frank official called them, were recognized as a necessary outlet for bachelors, good for the tourist trade and a *douceur* that could be offered to visiting dignitaries. Red-light districts were under the control of the state, and there was no move towards suppressing a – possibly tongue-in-cheek – tariff of whores printed in 1535 that gave the names, addresses, prices and specialities of 110 prostitutes. Prostitution, however, is always a dangerous job, and women who took money for sex had no recourse to the law if they were hurt or maimed. Angela Zaffeta, the most beautiful courtesan in Venice, was, according to a pornographic fantasy written in the early 1530s,²² taken to an island in the lagoon and raped by a succession of patricians in order of their social position.

The distinction between common whores and high-class courtesans – some of the latter educated and talented women kept by rich men – was first established at about the time Titian was making his name as a young painter. The most successful courtesans dressed and decorated their houses in the same fashion as wealthy married women. Some had been brought to Venice by their fading prostitute mothers from less sexually tolerant cities. Some were talented singers, actresses or poets. A few came from respectable Venetian families. Some courtesans became the long-standing mistresses of married noblemen. Marin Sanudo recorded a wedding between a widowed nobleman and a certain Cornelia Grifo, ‘a most beautiful and sumptuous widowed prostitute’:

She is rich and has been publicly kept by Ser Ziprian Malipiero, and for a while she belonged to Ser Piero da Molin dal Banco, and to others, who have given her a dowry of [blank] thousand ducats. The wedding was held at the monastery of San Zuan on Torcello and has cast great shame on the Venetian patriciate.²³

Shortly after that the Council of Ten, one of the most powerful of the government committees, clamped down on such intrusions into the patrician bloodline with a law requiring the registration of all noble marriages within one month of the ceremony.

Prostitutes and courtesans nevertheless continued to serve the needs of the large percentage of Venetian men who remained unmarried. The population, which had tripled in the previous hundred years, was also proportionately younger, but competition for wives was intense, and men rarely married until they had inherited from their parents or established careers, by which time they were likely to be at least in their forties. Until the Counter-Reformation marriage was a secular arrangement, not celebrated in church but established by contract between families whose only considerations were financial and social. Those able to provide a daughter with a large dowry could be selective about the social status and wealth of the groom. But dowry inflation, which was rampant throughout the sixteenth century, meant that even well-off families could not necessarily afford to marry more than one daughter. It was a problem for all Venetian fathers who hoped to marry their daughters well, one that the Senate tried to control in the case of patrician families because it transferred a high proportion of their wealth, which might otherwise have been spent on investment and mercantile activity, to daughters, who were sometimes left so dowry-rich after the deaths of their husbands that they were in a position to lend back to their brothers and fathers.

Unmarried girls, who were on the shelf by twenty-five at most, were often placed in convents, some of which had reputations as high-class bordellos. Titian's friend Pietro Aretino, who occasionally wrote pornography, described a convent²⁴ where the abbess presided over group orgies, the walls were frescoed with erotic scenes, and the nuns were pleased by lusty young friars and supplied with baskets of dildos made of the finest Murano glass. Although this was, of course, another fantasy (and was deliberately set not in Venice but in Rome), young nuns, often with the support of their families, did resist attempts to curtail their freedom of behaviour. One disapproving member of government identified more than fifteen convent-brothels, and recommended burning them to the ground along with the nuns, 'for the sake of the Venetian State'.²⁵

In the oriental tradition passed down from the city's Byzantine past, respectable women were supposed to be kept at home or closely chaperoned on permissible outings. Some of the sequestered women must have led very boring lives. The two sulky ladies on a terrace in Carpaccio's famous painting, which is now thought to portray a bride and her companion, might have looked less miserable had they been the courtesans they were once thought to be. In the upper panel their men are enjoying a day out duck hunting in the lagoon. Even the shopping for groceries was done by the men of the household, who could be seen strolling or riding on horseback through the markets, judging value for money with the trained eyes of professional merchants, while their housebound women supervised the cleaning or did it themselves; although there were fewer domestic servants than one might expect in a wealthy city, foreigners commented on the sparkling cleanliness of Venetian houses. When they did go out, perhaps to church or to attend a wedding or to shop for clothes and accessories in the boutiques on and off the Merceria, they teetered along on their zoccoli, the ridiculously high-platformed clogs that restricted their pace and emphasized their vulnerability, making them look like dwarfs on stilts and requiring the support of servant chaperones: the longer the train of servants the higher the status of the woman.²⁶

Venetian women's addiction to the latest bizarre fashions may in some cases have been a compensation for otherwise dull lives, but it would be anachronistic to infer that the displays of breasts and jewels were primarily intended to brand women as their husband's sexual property. Their dowries, the larger part of which was returned to them as pensions on the death of their husbands, meant that wives and widows enjoyed a high degree of economic independence. It says something about their literacy and the respect accorded them by their husbands that women were increasingly designated as executors of their husbands' estates; and since their husbands were usually at least twenty years older,

there were a good many rich Venetian widows. Some women discovered along with their freedom a talent for investing in property and made money on their own account. Venetian women of all classes, although certainly not 'liberated' in our sense of that condition, were more active in business than women in other cities. Despite a dictate issued by the Council of Ten in 1506 imposing penalties on husbands who permitted their wives to dine out and attend theatrical entertainments alone, there were at least some independent-minded wives who defied the sanctions against appearing unchaperoned in public. Foreigners were surprised to see women dining out alone. And as early as 1487 a German guest at the monastery of Santi Giovanni e Paolo was astonished to observe elegantly dressed young women moving openly in and out of the dormitories and cells of the monks.

The Milanese priest who had described the shopping opportunities, and who evidently had a practical mind, wondered how the women kept their dresses from falling off their shoulders. But if the older generation of Venetian patricians disapproved of the bizarre fashion for veiled faces and bosom-revealing bodices worn by women whose bodies, perfumed with amber, musk and civet, could be scented from a distance, sumptuary legislation failed to make much difference to their showy dress sense, and there was no law against décolletage until 1562. Sanudo was impressed by the size and value of women's jewellery:

The women are truly very beautiful; they go about with great pomp, adorned with big jewels and finery. And ... adorned with jewels of enormous value and cost, necklaces worth from 300 up to 1000 ducats, and rings on their fingers set with large rubies, diamonds, sapphires, emeralds and other jewels of great value. There are very few patrician women (and none, shall I say, so wretched and poor) who do not have 500 ducats worth of rings on their fingers, not counting the enormous pearls, which have to be seen to be believed.²⁷

The erotically charged atmosphere in early sixteenth-century Venice is almost palpable in the paintings by Giorgione, Giovanni Cariani, Palma Vecchio, Titian and others of women whom we can no longer identify but whose inviting eyes and bared breasts leave no room for doubt about their availability. Titian was not the first artist to paint naked women, but he was the first to use live models, and to paint them lying down. Lightly draped or naked, Titian's anonymous women, as real to us today as when his contemporaries thought they saw the blood pulsing beneath their trembling flesh, display an overt sexuality that had never been seen before in painting.

On his map of Venice Jacopo de' Barbari enlarged the scale of the arsenal to emphasize its importance. But there are fewer warships than would have been present at a time when Venice was at war with the Ottoman Turks. At the top of the map Mercury, god of communications and commerce, emerges from a cloud. Neptune, god of the sea, rides on his sea monster among trading galleys that are coming and going, riding at anchor, preparing to unload passengers and goods on to lighters. But a third tutelary deity of Venice, Mars, god of the wars fought in order to expand and maintain its trading empire, is absent. De' Barbari's black and white dolls' city is at peace with itself and the world, serene, silent and inhabited only by a few stick people to indicate the scale of the buildings.

The true situation was very different. The mid-millennium, when soothsayers all over Europe were predicting the end of the world, was actually a troubled time for the Most Serene Republic. In 1498 reports had reached the Rialto of Vasco da Gama's exploratory voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, and three years later the worst fears were confirmed by news that twelve Portuguese ships had been spotted in Aden and Calicut. The threat to the Venetian monopoly of the spice trade, which had already been disturbed for several years by the disruption of overland routes during wars in northern Italy and Turkish wars in Persia, had been followed in 1499 by a series of bank failures, which ruined some of the wealthiest patrician owners of the trading galleys.

It was in that same *annus horribilis* that one of the largest war fleets ever prepared in the Venetian arsenal suffered a catastrophic defeat by the Turks. Two Venetian gunships were blown up and the Turkish cavalry invaded the Friuli as far as the River Isonzo (where Titian's grandfather Conte took part in the defence). 'Tell your government that they have done with wedding the sea,' the Turkish vizir gloated to the Venetian ambassador in February 1500, adding that it was the sultan's turn now to be the bridegroom in the annual symbolic ceremony of the doge's marriage to the sea. The Turk – 'signor tremendo' as Marin Sanudo dubbed the increasingly militant Ottoman Empire – had been harassing Venetian trading convoys since the Turkish conquest of Constantinople half a century earlier. It had been mostly a cold war, but now flared up into four years of fighting, during which the Venetians lost more essential naval bases in Greece and Albania, and it led to a temporary halt of Venetian trading in the Levant.

The setback to overseas trade was not the mortal blow that some historians have made out. Revenues from the *terraferma* – 'the most delightful, populous, and fertile part of Europe ... the flower of the world', as it was described by a Vicentine nobleman in 1509²⁸ – were about twice those from the sea empire. Nevertheless, taxation and customs duties on the oriental spices that passed through the mainland accounted for a large proportion of the state income, and the interruptions to overseas trade were at the time cause for deep concern. The reaction was swift and dramatic. All but the most profitable of the shipping lanes – those that went to and from Beirut and Alexandria – were abandoned. The ruling class relinquished its long-cherished exclusive right to own and profit from the trading galleys, and more of the merchant noblemen who had formerly spent much of their lives at sea stayed at home and spread their risks by investing in manufacturing, and in agriculture, property, mining and other industrial enterprises on the mainland. Venetians made new fortunes from expanded industries: the weaving and dyeing of silk and wool, the manufacture of fine soaps, leather working and sugar refining, all profitable commodities in the home and export markets. The fine-spun Venetian glass produced by forty or so furnaces on Murano was increasingly exported to the rest of Italy and the Levant and as far as Portugal, Spain and the Indies. Nevertheless, the diarist Girolamo Priuli was pessimistic about the shift from overseas trade to agriculture and industrial production: 'In losing their shipping and their overseas Empire, the Venetians will also lose their reputation and renown and gradually, but within a very few years, will be consumed altogether.'²⁹

But the economy recovered. The seriously rich indulged themselves in ways that rivalled the behaviour of our most outrageously ostentatious twenty-first-century hedge-fund managers. At a wedding in 1507, a total of 4,000 ducats, which was only part of the bride's dowry, the bulk of which was in property, decorated the banqueting table in six basins, one containing gold coins, the rest silver.³⁰ By the 1560s more pepper and cotton was being re-exported from Venice than in the early fifteenth century.³¹ And in 1605, a little more than a century after the wide-eyed Milanese priest had marvelled at the goods on offer in the greatest of all emporia, the political commentator Giovanni Botero wrote a nearly identical account in which he described Venice as 'a summary of the universe, because there is nothing originating in any far-off country but it is found in abundance in this city'.

Titian arrived in a Venice that was enjoying what has been called its first Renaissance.³² There was an awakening appetite for learning and art. A small elite of connoisseurs began to collect cabinet paintings from avant-garde artists – almost all of Giorgione's paintings and Titian's earliest portraits were private commissions. Oak piles were being driven into the bed of the lagoon to make the foundations for new buildings that would gradually obliterate inner-city fields, orchards, vineyards and gardens recorded by de' Barbari's map. Sanudo described the building materials piled up in campi and on quays: bricks, terracotta and mortar from Padua, Treviso and Ferrara; sand from the Brenta or the Lido; wood from Cadore and around Treviso; hard white stone for foundations and façades from the Istrian Peninsula; fine marbles from Verona, Greece, Egypt and India.

The population was rejuvenated thanks to milder than usual plagues in the late fifteenth century, which had spared the babies and young children who were the usual first victims. The old certainties

were called into question by new men facing up to new economic, political and religious challenges, new patterns of trade, new ways of thinking about a world that had grown larger after the discovery of the Americas, the rounding of the Horn of Africa, and invasions of Italy by other European powers. The younger generation, which had a different perspective of its place in the world, thumbed its nose more often at the values of the old, seafaring empire-builders, whose philistinism and puritanical ideas about moderation clashed with a growing tendency to enjoy life, display wealth and collect works of art.

Titian would spend his entire professional life, travelling as little as possible except for frequent trips to Cadore and his mainland properties, in this growing, changing Venice. The population of the city increased in his lifetime from around 100,000 at the beginning of the century to around 175,000, with some two million inhabitants of the terraferma. With inflation rampant all over Europe official dowry limits set by the Venetian government had to be raised from 3,000 ducats in 1505 to 5,000 in 1551, and by 1560 sometimes reached 25,000. In those years Titian invented a way of painting pervaded by a sense of excitement and daring that reflects the dynamism of the Venice in which he lived and worked. His genius transcends time and place, but he could not have painted as he did in another time or place. That is the paradox that confronts all biographers of great artists. We are at least fortunate that the Venice he knew by heart has survived so well that we can still follow his footsteps along the calli, across the campi and canals, past the same churches, grand palaces and little houses. We can imagine him striding along sumptuously attired, wearing his signature cap and gold chain, his mind full of stories, figures and images, and marvel with him at the shifting Venetian light that he distilled and trapped between the layers of his paint.

THREE

The Painter's Venice

One should know how to simulate the glint of armour, the gloom of night and the brightness of day, lightning flashes, fires, lights, water, earth, rocks, grass, trees, leaves, flowers and fruits, buildings and huts, animals and so on, so comprehensively that all of them possess life, and never surfeit the admirer's eyes.

LODOVICO DOLCE, L'ARETINO, 1557

However much talent he may have demonstrated as a child in Cadore, Titian had much to learn before he would be experienced enough to collaborate with a master or turn out paintings in the style of that master's studio. And so, Dolce tells us, an uncle took Titian along to the workshop of Sebastiano Zuccato, and asked him 'to impart to Titian the basic principles of art'. Sebastiano was a minor painter from Treviso,¹ where the Vecellio men stopped on their journeys between Venice and Cadore and may have got to know the Zuccato family. Sebastiano's two sons, Valerio and Francesco, later became the leading mosaicists of Venice.² Although they were a generation younger than Titian, who didn't stay in their father's studio for long, they became lifelong friends. Valerio, who was a talented actor in staged comedies, married Polonia, the pre-eminent Venetian actress in the 1530s. He also designed women's hats and clothes, which he sold in a boutique off the Merceria.

Like most Venetian artists Sebastiano Zuccato probably lived and worked in the same premises in the vicinity of the Rialto, in a campo or on a quay where pictures could be set out to dry, and with easy access to a canal to facilitate taking delivery of supplies and dispatching paintings.³ Some artists' workshops used slave labour for unskilled jobs, but most employed boys who worked in return for instruction and a small wage. Sebastiano Zuccato would have taught Titian the basics: how to prepare a panel and stretch canvas; how to size the support with a thin layer of gypsum mixed with warmed rabbit glue; how to grind pigments, clean the grinding stones, wash brushes with lamp oil. Although Sebastiano was probably too limited an artist to teach the new techniques of painting with oils, Francesco and Valerio affected Titian's artistic development by inspiring an interest in the art of mosaic. He would design some of the cartoons – which would have been on paper, to scale and in colour – for their mosaics in the basilica of San Marco. And his understanding of mosaics, which

had to be seen in dim, flickering light, was to be useful when he came to compose paintings for difficult locations. Later in his career it may have affected the impressionistic technique – which Vasari described as ‘executed ... in patches of colour, with the result that they cannot be viewed from near by, but appear perfect from a distance’.

But, in his first months with Sebastiano Zuccato, just running to the shops to buy supplies was an education in itself for a fledgling painter. Venice offered the most various and least expensive selection of high-quality artists’ materials in the world. Linen canvas was available in a variety of weights and weaves – fine, heavy, twilled or herringbone – from specialist shops that also supplied the sail-makers in the arsenal. Canvas, which was beginning to be used as a support for large-scale works, particularly in Venice where fresco deteriorated rapidly in the damp climate, encouraged painters to experiment with the rough texture it could contribute to their works. Gradually it would be used in preference to panel because if primed with a flexible gypsum it allowed paintings to be rolled for transport. The mineral, vegetable and insect ingredients of pigments and dyestuffs, which were essential for the manufacture of glass, ceramics and textiles as well as for painters, were imported into the city in industrial quantities from the Levant, from northern Europe and later in the century from the new world. Venetians experimented with more intense colours, like the brilliant orange produced when realgar was mixed with orpiment, new paint mixtures such as red lakes with copper-green glazes and orange mixed with blue paint. Visiting artists took advantage of the pre-export prices to stock up with colours, which were sold, not by apothecaries as elsewhere in Italy, but by specialist colour sellers, the *vendecolori*,⁴ whose shops were also meeting places where artisans and artists exchanged information and ideas about the uses of new and familiar materials. The *vendecolori* also stocked linseed and walnut oil, glue, brushes, cloth for cleaning rags, and the gums and resins used as varnishes or to refine or manufacture pigments, as well as unusual substances, such as the pulverized glass or sand some painters used to add vibrant reflections, to speed up drying time and to enhance transparency.

The air of the dark, dusty, busy colour shops was spiced with warmed vinegar in which lead and copper were steamed to produce lead white and verdigris. Their shelves and backrooms were piled with dried insects, herbaceous perennials, metals and minerals: yellow orpiment and orange realgar, which was also used for making fireworks; cinnabar and the tiny bodies of female insects imported from India that produced the finest crimson glazes; malachite from Hungary; earth colours from Siena and Umbria; softwood pitch, a by-product of charcoal making, used for brown glazes. Of the pigments manufactured locally, Venice was well known for its vermilion, its lead-tin yellow and especially its lead white, which was exported to England in such quantities that it was known there as Venetian white. Venetians used it as a priming coat, greyed or browned by the addition of particles of charcoal or lamp black, for modelling or impasto highlights, or mixed with other pigments to intensify their colour and enhance their reflective properties.

The most precious pigments were sold by the ounce or half-ounce. Venice had a virtual monopoly on lapis lazuli. The most expensive artists’ material after gold, lapis lazuli was mined in the mountainous caves of Badakhshan (in present-day Afghanistan), which were accessible for only a few months in the year. The extraction of ultramarine – *oltremare di Venezia* – from lapis lazuli was a laborious procedure, which involved hammering and kneading the ground stone with wax, resins and oils, which was then soaked in water for several days until the precious pigment floated to the surface. Lapis was sometimes used in combination with azurite, which was known as German blue because the best-quality crystals were mined in Germany, where they were ground and graded before export to Venice to be made into pigment, some of which was returned across the Alps.

Dyestuffs used for glass and textiles coloured the lakes, which, applied over lighter opaque layers of pigment, act like coloured filters, enriching tone and adding to the sense of light emerging from within the painting. Many years after Titian had run errands for Sebastiano Zuccato he sent to Venice from Germany, where he was working on a portrait of the emperor Charles V, for half

a pound of red lake, 'so fiery and splendid in its madder colour that by the side of it the crimson of velvet and silk become less beautiful'. (Titian, in other words, would outshine the most precious fabrics by painting with the same dyestuffs – madder was one of the most costly – in which they had been dipped.) By mid-century there were some twenty vendecolori, some of them also providing ready-mixed colours, in and around the Rialto. It is possible that Titian's fine portrait of a man with a palm and a box of colours (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie), dated 1561,5 is one of them, displaying the high-quality ready-to-use pigments that they increasingly prepared in their shops.

Nevertheless, although it was often said, by Leonardo among others, that colours are beautiful in themselves, it was the handling of pigments, not the use of brilliant colours, that set the greatest artists apart. Dolce objected to those who praised Titian as a colourist, pointing out that if that was all there was to him many women would be his equals. In the seventeenth century Marco Boschini, a Venetian poet, painter, engraver and art dealer, attributed to Titian the remark that a painter needs only three colours: white, black and red. But it takes time to understand how colours work together. The implication for those who knew their Pliny was that Titian was even more skilled at mixing colours than Apelles⁶ and the other ancient Greek painters, whose palettes were supposedly limited to four colours: white, black, red and yellow.

Titian's practice of superimposing over opaque body colour layer upon layer of transparent glazes and semi-opaque scumbles – veils of paint that create tonal unity, and a cool, hazy, subdued effect when painted over a darker underlayer – would intrigue and inspire some of the greatest painters of successive centuries. Unfortunately, however, glazes and scumbles are subject over time to discolouration, abrasion and often to clumsy restoration. In some cases cleaning has stripped away centuries of accumulated dirt to reveal something closer to Titian's original intentions. Too often, alas, he has been compromised to a greater or lesser extent by the loss of some of the paint that made his pictures, in the eyes of his contemporaries, not just stupendous but miraculous.

Once he had qualified as a master painter, probably around 1506, Titian joined the painters' guild and later served on its board. Membership of the guild, the oldest and most conservative of its kind in Italy, was compulsory; and although it was small and poor it controlled everything from technical standards and the size of studios to the length of holidays. It provided security for its members, who were expected to look after one another in difficult times, and was highly protectionist. Albrecht Dürer, although welcomed by Venetian society, was fined by the guild for practising painting in Venice. The guild did not represent figure painters alone but also textile designers, miniaturists, gilders and painters of playing cards, stage sets, furniture, shields, wheels, bulkheads and barges, saddles and banners (the gilding and painting of embossed leather was a highly prized speciality). A Venetian college of figure painters was not founded until the seventeenth century; nor, until the eighteenth century, was there a Venetian academy that represented both painters and sculptors. Renaissance Venice, unlike Florence, never produced a painter who was also a sculptor, possibly because Florentine artists often began their training as goldsmiths, which could take them either way, while Venetian painters developed in isolation from the other arts.

Painting in any case was the art that most appealed to the Venetian taste for surface decoration. 'Is there a man, finally,' asked Dolce, 'who does not understand the ornament that painting offers to any object at all':

For though their interior walls be dressed in extremely fine tapestries, and though the chests and tables be covered with most beautiful cloths, both public and private buildings suffer a marked loss of beauty and charm without some painting to ornament them. Outside, too, the façades of houses and palaces give greater pleasure to the eyes of other men when painted by the hand of a master of quality than they do with incrustations of white marble and porphyry and serpentine embellished with gold.

Decorative objects were usually more highly valued in inventories and wills than easel paintings, which are often identified in surviving documents by their subjects or by the value of their frames rather than by the names of the artists who painted them – a habit that has created difficulties for art historians searching for attributions and dates, and which may conceal the names of artists whose works are now hesitantly given to those painters whose names we do happen to know. The problem is exacerbated by the similarities between the paintings of Giorgione and those of the young Sebastiano Luciani and Titian, now the starring names of the first decade of the century, who may well have shared assistants. Artists better known today for their easel paintings and altarpieces were in any case not above turning their hands to decorative jobs. Several panels of scenes from Ovid, probably painted on domestic storage chests, have been attributed to the young Titian,⁷ although the only widely accepted candidate is the damaged but delightful Orpheus and Eurydice (Bergamo, Accademia Carrara). Frescoing the façades and courtyards of houses, sometimes for a special occasion such as a wedding or the visit of a foreign dignitary, offered painters, including Giorgione and Titian, the opportunity to work on a large scale and to proclaim their talents for all the world to see, at least for as long as the frescos lasted in the humid saline air of the lagoon, polluted as it was even then by industrial fumes.

Titian came to study painting in a Venice that was only just emerging, generations after the Florentine rediscovery of classical antiquity, from what has been described as ‘the last, stiff, half-barbaric splendours of Byzantine decoration’.⁸ Unlike the city states of central Italy, Venice had never had a princely or papal court or the equivalent of the Medici family to encourage rivalry and sophisticated innovation. While Florentine artists thrived on competition – Donatello, working in the Venetian university town of Padua, complained of the absence there of the artistic rivalry that sharpened the ambitions and talents of his fellow Florentines – Venetian studios were by and large run as family partnerships passed down from one generation to another. They were commercial enterprises that aimed to provide conservative patrons, whose minds were preoccupied with empire building and commerce, with familiar products rather than to challenge existing norms. The Vivarini family, which supplied Venice, the empire and beyond with religious paintings throughout the second half of the fifteenth century, worked in such similar styles that the hand of one Vivarini cannot always be distinguished from another.

In Florence – that small, brown, restless, cerebral, idealistic city dominated by the cranial shape of its cathedral dome – Leon Battista Alberti’s *Della Pittura* of 1436, the first modern theoretical treatise on painting, had provided painters with a framework of concepts and precepts about preparatory drawing and perspective. In Venice critical theory about painting lagged behind execution; painters painted without the benefits and constraints of written guidelines. The first fully articulated Venetian treatises on painting, written by Paolo Pino and Lodovico Dolce, did not appear until the middle of the sixteenth century, and did not so much prescribe as describe the qualities that distinguished the work of the greatest Italian painters.⁹ Dolce’s *L’Aretino*, into which his biography of Titian is incorporated, is a fictional dialogue between Titian’s most articulate admirer, Pietro Aretino, and a Tuscan grammarian, Giovanni Francesco Fabrini, who acts as spokesman for the Florentine point of view. ‘Aretino’, speaking for Venice, proposes three guidelines by which a painting should be judged:

The whole sum of painting is, in my opinion, divided into three parts: invention, design and colouring. The invention is the fable or history which the painter chooses on his own or which others present him with, as material for the work he has to do. The design is the form he uses to represent this material. And the colouring takes its cue from the hues with which nature paints (for one can say as much) animate and inanimate things in variegation.¹⁰

The ultimate goal of painting, he continues, is to astonish and give pleasure by rivalling the illusionist feats performed by ancient Greek artists (whose painted grapes were so lifelike that birds pecked at them, whose horses made real horses neigh, whose statues of Venus caused men to ejaculate, and so on) and which were routinely used to describe the sense of the real world evoked by Renaissance painters starting with Giotto, who was supposed to have painted a fly on one of Cimabue's figures so lifelike that Cimabue tried to brush it off.

The Aretino was intended as a riposte to the first, 1550 edition of Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, from which he had excluded living painters with the single exception of Michelangelo. While Venetians aimed to rival nature by imitating it, Vasari's anthropomorphic scheme placed art in its most mature phase – of which the greatest exemplars were Michelangelo and Raphael – as its own master, not reflecting but triumphant over nature. For him, as for all Florentines, the essential basis of all the high arts was *disegno*. *Disegno* – the word meant both draughtsmanship and design of a composition – was the father of the three arts of sculpture, architecture and painting. A painting was 'a plane the surface of which is covered by fields of colours ... bound by lines ... which by virtue of a good drawing of circumscribed lines defines the figure'. A good painting, in other words, was a good drawing filled in by colour; and young Florentine artists were not permitted to hold a paintbrush until they had learned to draw.

For Venetians contour lines were increasingly to be avoided because they were not seen in nature, which was more readily evoked by shading and blending colours applied directly on to the support, allowing the viewers to fill in lost outlines with their own imaginations, as we do in the real world. The dichotomy between Florentine and Venetian methods was of course exaggerated. Any figure painter must master both. But in an age when critical language about art was limited it was a useful and much used distinction. Vasari claimed that Michelangelo, upon seeing a painting by Titian,¹¹ had commented that it was a pity Titian had learned to paint in Venice where artists were not taught how to draw. Tintoretto posted a note in his studio reminding himself to rival 'the *disegno* of Michelangelo and the *colorito* of Titian'.

'The things obtaining to colouring are infinite,' wrote Pino, 'and it is impossible to explain them in words.' Modern art historians try to meet that challenge by employing a more sophisticated specialist vocabulary than was available to sixteenth-century critics, most of whom were trained to write about literature and tended to restrict their comments about paintings to generalizations, classical tropes and a simplistic binary device, the *paragone*, borrowed from literary dialogues and treatises, which compared the relative merits of painting or sculpture, painting or poetry, *colorito* or *disegno*, literature or the visual arts,¹² Florentine or Venetian art. But even today it is not possible to explain in words our visceral response to Venetian paintings, which are more about illusion than construction, about execution more than concept, and which speak more directly to the emotions and the senses – not only of vision and hearing but for some people of touch, even of taste¹³ – than to the intellect. We can criticize Titian for his lack of interest in deep space and linear perspective, but we are still dealing with a mystery, which Dolce called 'that whatever it is ... that fills the soul with infinite delight without our knowing what it is that gives us such pleasure'.

Venetian painters, many of whom were also musicians, seem to have been aware that colour like music can induce distinct moods. Vasari tells us that Giorgione played the lute 'so beautifully to accompany his own singing that his services were often used at music recitals and social gatherings'; and that Sebastiano Luciani, whose first profession was not painting but music, was an accomplished singer, adept at various instruments, especially the lute. Ridolfi wrote that Tintoretto played the lute 'and other strange instruments of his own invention'. In the 1540s Titian had a harpsichord made for his house in return for a portrait of the man who built it. In Veronese's *Wedding Feast at Cana*, painted in 1563 for the refectory of San Giorgio Maggiore, Titian performs on the *viola da gamba* in a string quartet with the other greatest Venetian artists of the time, Tintoretto, Jacopo Bassano and Veronese himself.

The enchanting musical angels perched on the steps of the Virgins' thrones in fifteenth-century paintings are among the most popular Venetian postcards. Titian's musicians are not so innocent. Their recorders, flutes and organs are charged with eroticism, sublime but transient like their music. Music, like feminine beauty and life itself, can exist only in time, while painting captures and fixes the momentary exaltation for ever. Titian's *Concert* (Florence, Galleria Palatina), whatever else its much debated significance may be, is about collaborative music making, as is the enigmatic *Concert Champêtre* (Paris, Louvre).¹⁴ His ruined *Portrait of a Musician* (Rome, Galleria della Spada) anticipates the Romantic conception of wild, self-forgetful genius by several centuries. Some people even today who are sensitive to Titian's works imagine that they can hear sounds within his paintings: his leaves rustling in the wind, the voices of his protagonists, and above all their music making, music being the art that since antiquity had been thought to reflect the harmony of the planets and the rational order of the universe.

Albrecht Dürer, who was in Venice in 1505–6, about the time Titian was emerging as an independent painter, heard some viola players who were moved to tears by the beauty of the music they were performing. Despite being fined by the painters' guild, having his prints plagiarized by Venetian publishers and suffering the accusation that his work was insufficiently cognizant of antique models, Dürer seems to have enjoyed himself in Venice, where the doge paid him a state visit in his lodgings in the German exchange house and where he was befriended 'by so many nice men among the Italians who seek my company, more and more every day which is very pleasing to me: men of good sense and knowledge, good lute-players and pipers, judges of painting, men of much noble sentiment and honest virtue; and they show me much honour and friendship'.¹⁵ Dürer's surprise at finding himself so warmly received in Venice suggests that the social status of artists was higher there than in his native Germany. 'Here I am a gentleman,' he wrote home to Nuremberg. 'At home I am a bum.'

Once he had taught him everything he could, Sebastiano Zuccato found Titian a place in the studio of Gentile Bellini, who was the foremost gentleman artist of Venice. The Bellini family were *cittadini*, a rank that was something like what we would call middle class but was more clearly defined; and Gentile, who was the first of the European diplomat painters before Rubens, was also the first Italian artist to be knighted, and not once but twice: in 1469 by the emperor Frederick III, and again a decade later by the Turkish sultan Mehmet II, 'The Conqueror', during a visit to Constantinople, where he had been sent by the Venetian government as a gesture of political goodwill, and where he painted the portrait of the sultan now in the London National Gallery. Gentile was a sociable man and well connected in Venice where, as a board member of the *Scuola di San Marco*, he was in frequent contact with the rich businessmen, civil servants, industrialists and merchants who were potential patrons. His studio was a good place for an ambitious young unknown from the provinces to make useful contacts and observe the intricacies of Venetian powerbroking.

Gentile and his younger brother Giovanni were the premier artists and teachers of Venice. By the time Titian entered their orbit, they had been active as independent artists for over forty years, and although their birthdates are unknown, they must by that time have been in their late sixties. The family practice had been founded in the 1420s or 1430s by their father Jacopo, whose remarkable and suggestive sketchbooks,¹⁶ which passed after his death to Gentile and then to Giovanni, contained drawings of classical fantasies and buildings decorated with antique statues and relief carvings, as well as religious subjects, textile designs, coins, animals, brooding landscapes and pastoral scenes with woods, barns and cottages. In 1454 their sister Nicolosia had married the Paduan painter Andrea Mantegna, whose interest in classical archaeology and the 'stony manner' (as Vasari described it) made more of an impression on the young Giovanni than on Gentile.

The brothers were apparently fond of one another. The worldly and sociable Gentile protected and cared for the more talented but retiring Giovanni, who eventually chose to be buried next to his

brother in the cemetery of the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo. They were, however, so different temperamentally and artistically that they seem to have made a conscious decision to maintain separate studios and to specialize in different types of painting. Although both Bellini supplied history paintings to the doge's palace (they were destroyed by a fire later in the century), and both painted portraits, it was Gentile who invented the large, painted descriptions of processions and ceremonies in the city. Carpaccio, who contributed fantasy to the genre, probably studied with Gentile, but it is hard to see what Gentile could have taught Titian, whose early paintings show no signs of his influence. It may, however, have been in his workshop that Titian saw his first examples of classical art, including a head of Plato and a statue of Venus ascribed to Praxiteles.¹⁷

Gentile is nowadays sometimes dismissed by academic art historians as a 'grand decorator'.¹⁸ Dolce called him 'that clodhopper', adding that Titian 'could not bear to follow that arid and laboured line of Gentile's. Instead, he made designs boldly and with great rapidity. When Gentile saw, therefore, that Titian was diverging from his own track, he told him that there was no prospect of his making good as a painter.' (Titian may have told Dolce this story years later when he was the most successful painter in Europe – it would have appealed to his well-developed sense of irony; or Dolce, always intent on emphasizing the superiority of Titian over all other painters, may have invented it.) Their artistic incompatibility, in any case, put an end to the relationship, and Titian moved on to study with Giovanni.

Giovanni Bellini was not only the greatest Venetian painter of his day, he was also the most generous teacher. His studio in the now rather forlorn Campo Santa Marina – which must have been a livelier square before its church was demolished by the occupying Austrians in 1820 – was the largest in Venice, probably in Italy. He had trained or influenced in one way or another all Venetian painters of his own and successive generations: Bartolomeo Montagna, Cima da Conegliano, Vittore Carpaccio, Marco Basaiti, Sebastiano Luciani (better known today as Sebastiano del Piombo) and Giorgione. Those of his students born a decade or so before Titian – Vincenzo Catena, Jacopo Palma ('il Vecchio'), Lorenzo Lotto – shared and may have stimulated his interest in artistic currents outside Venice. In his later years, some of his former pupils assisted him and relieved him of his teaching load even after they were established as independent artists: Carpaccio was in his forties when he worked as his assistant around 1507.

Although Giovanni, like his brother, kept sketches and gessos of antique figures in his studio, he found a way of expressing in paint a sense of flesh-and-blood humanity and a response to the natural world that had not been seen before in Venice. In his studio gold grounds gave way to sunlit meadows, farmyards, plains and mountains; stiffly posed saints became real people. Giovanni was the first Venetian to paint a naked Christ child; the first to bring his Madonnas down from their thrones into a naturalistic countryside built by colour and light. The Madonna of the Meadow gazes down at the sleeping baby sprawled across her lap, as He will be in death, against a background of a muddy farmyard with cows, oxen, goats and sheep tended by a man in Levantine dress. The Madonna with Two Saints is poised above a landscape so abstract that it could almost have been painted by Cézanne. And yet, innovator though he was, Giovanni never entirely abandoned the neo-Byzantine sensibility that infuses his Madonnas with their iconic stillness. Between 1488, when he painted the jewel-like triptych for the sacristy of the Frari and 1505 when he finished his last sacred conversation,¹⁹ the Madonna and Four Saints for the church of San Zaccaria, Giovanni Bellini laid the foundations of an artistic revolution that Titian would complete. And yet both Madonnas are enthroned, in the Byzantine tradition, beneath gilded mosaic semi-domes; and both retain a transcendent spirituality that has not lost its power to soothe troubled hearts in our frantic, disillusioned age.

Giovanni was the first Venetian to recognize the full potential of oil-based paint and glazes. While northern European painters had bound their pigments with oil for centuries, Italians had on the whole preferred the drier, more precise finish of egg-tempera, which has to be applied with a soft brush in small strokes, and is suitable for filling in the drawn outlines preferred by Florentine painters.

In the 1460s and 1470s, Giovanni had been inspired to experiment with the oil medium by paintings imported from northern Europe; and the visit in 1475–6 of the Sicilian painter Antonello da Messina, the first Italian painter to adopt the minute oil technique favoured by Flemish painters, contributed to the refinement of his technique. The polished surface of oil mixed with pigments reflects natural light in a way that tempera does not. Diluted to varying degrees of transparency it allows the light to penetrate, giving an impression of depth, and encourages what we call atmospheric perspective or tonal painting by which the separation of pictorial elements is achieved by colour rather than line. Oil is also more malleable and slower to dry than tempera and therefore more forgiving. Mistakes can be scraped off or reworked. Colours can be blended and worked together directly on the support. In some paintings by Giovanni Bellini and Titian you can see where they have modelled the soft paint with fingers, palms, rags, scraped it with the handle of a brush, or swept across the damp surface with a dry brush. In the hands of Giovanni and his successors oil paint encouraged experimentation and an unprecedented freedom of gesture. It gave them the freedom, as Bembo once described Giovanni's way of working to Isabella d'Este,²⁰ 'to wander at will'; to create softer contours; to build naturalistic landscapes with light and colour; to create a rich range of blacks, and of pearly, buttery or iced whites; to imitate the textures and tones of textiles, glass, trees, sky, clouds, and the nuanced tones of 'the substance rather than the shape of flesh';²¹ to suggest detail with a flick of paint or well-placed daubs of impasto. Giovanni's portrait of the emaciated old doge Leonardo Loredan, 'all spirit and grand stature' as a chronicler described him after his election in 1501, is one of his masterpieces. His gold and white damask robe of state is an especially fine example of the use of heavily applied paint, in this case lead white and lead-tin yellow, to suggest rather than describe.

Early in his career Giovanni had mixed his mediums, sometimes establishing the composition in tempera and finishing it with oil glazes. The first work in which he fully exploited the potential of oil paint and glazes was the Coronation of the Virgin, a watershed in the history of Venetian painting commissioned by Costanzo Sforza, lord of Pesaro, probably between 1472 and 1475. The Resurrection, St Francis in the Desert and the Transfiguration from later in the decade show Bellini's increasing mastery of the technique, although the drying cracks that can be seen to a greater or lesser degree in many of his early oil paintings indicate that he was not yet entirely accustomed to the chemistry of the medium. When Titian joined Giovanni as an apprentice some three decades later no up-and-coming Venetian artist used anything but oil paint. So Titian had the advantage over his master of early training in a medium that was still new and exciting enough to invite further experimentation. Like many good teachers, Giovanni was as ready to absorb lessons from his best pupils as to impart them: it has often been said that the paintings of his later years show indebtedness to the examples of Titian, Giorgione and Sebastiano Luciani. The colouristic freedom of his St Christopher in the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo is so close to Titian that one Italian scholar²² has been tempted to speculate that Titian might have had a hand in it. The curtain behind Giovanni's Young Woman with a Mirror that divides her private space sharply from the landscape is a device Titian had used several years earlier.

By the time Titian came to him as a pupil Giovanni was something of a living national treasure. From 1479 until his death in 1516 he received from the state the much coveted *sanseria*, a sinecure in the form of an honorary tax-free brokerage in the German exchange house awarded by the government-controlled Salt Office to various individuals including a number of artists who supplied paintings to the doge's palace. More indicative of his status was an unprecedented exemption from membership of the painters' guild granted in 1480. It was a privilege that was not given again to any other Italian artist before Michelangelo sixty years later. Sought after by the foreign aristocracy and the small circle of Venetian patricians who were beginning to collect cabinet paintings, Giovanni was by no means unaware of his value.

His studio, like most Venetian studios, was run as a business. While he preferred to work on original paintings in private, his assistants were employed in turning out copies or variants of his

Madonnas, which were so greatly in demand that purchasers were either prepared to accept workshop versions or unable to recognize that they were not entirely by the master's hand.

Giovanni's usual practice seems to have been to provide cartoons as templates for the Madonnas – in some paintings the pounced marks from the transfer process can be detected by infrared imaging techniques – to be traced by assistants and then to paint the side figures and landscapes himself. Although there is not enough documentation to provide precise information about his prices there are indications that he charged something between 100 and 300 ducats for altarpieces. Isabella d'Este beat him down from 150 ducats to 100 for an allegory, and from 100 to 50 for a devotional painting for her bedroom. And yet, despite his genius and typically Venetian head for money, he remained a modest and essentially private man who was, as far as we can tell, universally liked. Dürer, who was treated badly by other artists in Venice, certainly liked and admired him. 'Everyone tells me what an upright man he is,' he wrote in one of his letters home in 1506. 'I am genuinely fond of him. He is very old, and yet he is still the best in painting.' Pietro Bembo, a close friend who described visits to his studio and had him portray his married mistress, Maria Savorgnan, referred to him affectionately as 'il mio Giovanni' – 'my Giovanni'.

He had had a good start working with his father, a fine draughtsman of original subjects but not an overshadowing genius as a painter, who must have recognized and encouraged his son's superior talent. But Giovanni's life had not been entirely untroubled. Since he was not mentioned in his parents' will, we can guess that he was illegitimate. A more serious stigma, if we are to believe the evidence of a Latin poem composed by a friend around 1507, would have been that he was apparently bisexual, although if the authorities knew about his homoerotic inclinations it would not have been the only time they chose to ignore that most heinous crime, as they saw it, in the case of a prominent and valuable Venetian. The poem, which was suppressed by a shocked librarian of the Marciana library in the early nineteenth century, was rediscovered and published in 1990 by an English scholar.²³ It describes him in bed with a boy whose body is compared to the marble of Greek sculptures, and was evidently not intended as a criticism, let alone an exposé or for circulation. Whatever the truth about his sexuality it had not prevented him from marrying well. His wife Ginevra Bocheta, a relative of the Zorzi family of dyers, had brought him the substantial dowry, for an artist at that time, of 500 ducats. They had one son, Alvise. Since the poem was written after his wife's death it is possible that he turned to boys only as an aged widower.

Some time around 1502 Giovanni bought a house on the mainland. But he was not a traveller and rarely left the Veneto unless tempted by irresistible commissions. The last of these came from Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, for whom in 1514, two years before his death, he painted the Feast of the Gods, his first and last major mythological painting, parts of which would later be repainted by Titian. Giovanni's last work, the Young Woman with a Mirror,²⁴ was completed in 1515. It was the year before his death when he was well into his eighties. He signed it 'Joannes bellinus faciebat M.D.X.V.' Signing a painting as though it were still in progress was a trope, used by other artists including Michelangelo and, later, by Titian, referring to Pliny who had written in the preface to his Natural History that great art was never finished and that the greatest artists did not claim that a painting was finished to their satisfaction.

The subject of a young woman seated at her dressing table with a mirror was, like the reclining nude, a Venetian invention. Giovanni may have seen Titian's Young Woman with a Mirror (Paris, Louvre).²⁵ The underdrawings of the woman's contours, which are unusually spare for Giovanni, suggest that he was experimenting with Titian's technique of painting with only summary guidelines, but his use of a textured layer of underpaint in the background was his own innovation. This beautiful painting has been described as an 'apotheosis of seeing' and as one of the purest expressions in Venetian art of idealized nudity.²⁶ The woman's expensive headdress probably indicates that she was married. Her torso, which is usually thought to have been conceived after a statue or fragment, lacks

the erotic appeal of Titian's clothed beauty, who wrings her long, loose golden blonde hair like a Venus rising from the sea.

Giovanni, supreme master though he was, lacked Titian's genius for drama and his penetrating understanding of human nature. His feasting gods for the Duke of Ferrara appear to be acting out rather than taking part in Ovid's story of an orgy and attempted rape. (Either on his own initiative or at his patron's request he lowered the necklines of the women in an attempt to make them more desirable.) His landscapes, enlivened though they are by charming naturalistic detail, have none of the poetry that Titian saw in distant mountains and lost horizons. Giovanni was essentially a religious painter, and the range of his subject matter, and of the emotions he conveyed, was narrower than those of his greatest pupil. And so it happened that Giovanni Bellini's reputation was eclipsed soon after his death by Titian's more sophisticated, dynamic and protean oeuvre. Vasari, whose sharp eye for quality was sometimes clouded by his commitment to Florentine painting and the Aristotelian theory of art as progressive, dismissed Giovanni for his 'arid, crude and laboured manner'. Titian's friend Pietro Aretino likened him to a poet who puts 'perfumes in his inks and miniatures in his letters'. He was not rediscovered until the late nineteenth century when Ruskin pronounced the Frari and San Zaccaria altarpieces to be the two best pictures in the world,²⁷ a judgement that encouraged Henry James's rapturous description of the Frari altarpiece:

Nothing in Venice is more perfect than this. It is one of those things that sum up the genius of a painter, the experience of life, the teaching of a school. It seems painted with molten gems, which have only been clarified by time, and it is as solemn as it is gorgeous and as simple as it is deep.²⁸

But Ruskin loved Giovanni for the wrong reasons, seeing him as the last of the pure, godly masters 'who did nothing but what was lovely, and taught only what was right', rather than as the founding father of the golden age of Venetian painting. If Giovanni Bellini struggled to keep pace with Titian, Titian could hardly have liberated himself immediately from such a master, whose example continued to haunt his early works; and to whom he would pay homage in his last painting, the Pietà, in which the Virgin cradles her dead Son beneath a mosaic semi-dome, which deliberately refers to the – by then archaic – neo-Byzantine settings of Giovanni's many depictions of the Virgin and Her Son.

Although the absence of documentation makes the chronology of Titian's earliest paintings notoriously impossible to establish – dating of the undocumented paintings was not even attempted until the late nineteenth century, when the invention of photography made stylistic comparisons feasible – Titian's votive picture of Jacopo Pesaro Presented to St Peter by Pope Alexander VII (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum) is traditionally supposed to be his first surviving work, possibly painted while he was still in Giovanni Bellini's studio or shortly after he left it. Jacopo Pesaro was a Venetian patrician and papal legate, who adopted the nickname Baffo after he was appointed Bishop of Paphos in Cyprus. The simulated all'antica reliefs on the podium of St Peter's throne seem to depict a story about Venus, to whom Paphos was sacred because after her birth from the sea she was blown on to its shore in the half-shell. The naval battle in the background refers to Pesaro's role as commander of the papal fleet in the recapture of the Greek island of Santa Maura (modern Lefkas) from the Turks in August 1502. He posed for Titian grasping a banner that bears the Borgia coat of arms while kneeling before St Peter – who resembles some of Giovanni Bellini's figures – to whom he is presented by the Borgia pope Alexander VI, who wears full papal regalia painted in an archaic manner that Titian would soon abandon.

Although the earliest record of the existence of this painting is a drawing of it by Van Dyck made in Venice in 1623 – and the inscription bearing Titian's name is later than the picture – no one has ever doubted that it is by his hand. The problem is not whether but when he painted it. It is unlikely to be earlier than 1503, when Alexander VI died. It could have been painted in or shortly

after 1506, when Jacopo Pesaro is first known to have returned to Venice. Pesaro was born in 1460, and this portrait looks like a man in his mid-forties, which fits a date around 1506.²⁹ There are some awkward passages – the perspective of the floor and sea doesn't quite work – that are understandable in an artist not yet twenty trying his hand at a complex and ambitious composition. But, for all its faults, it is a remarkable painting. Evidently it satisfied its patron who years later would commission from Titian another altogether more masterly celebration of the same victory over the Turks.³⁰

Another candidate for Titian's earliest painting is now, after a thorough restoration, the *Flight into Egypt*, which came to the Hermitage palace in the late eighteenth century, when it was subjected to one of the destructive treatments that were characteristic of the period. Although mentioned by Vasari as a commission from Andrea Loredan for his palace on the Grand Canal (now the Ca' Vendramin Calergi), the picture was dismissed by some modern scholars³¹ on account of the muddy colouring of its landscape and procession of awkward figures. The restoration³² in the Hermitage laboratory, which was completed in 2011, removed layers of discoloured varnish and insertions by other hands, reattached the paint layer where it had come loose from the primer and closed horizontal seams that had opened where the three pieces of the canvas support had been stitched together. The picture is now much easier to read, and many, but not all, scholars are convinced that it is a very early work by Titian, possibly painted even before he entered Giovanni Bellini's studio.

Exhibitions of Titian's paintings often begin with the *Gypsy Madonna* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), so called because of the young Virgin's dusky complexion, as the most striking example of Titian's debt to and liberation from the example of Giovanni Bellini. Technical investigations show that it started as an attempt to understand by imitation Giovanni's later way of treating the subject. Beneath the finished painting is a different Madonna, which is very close to Bellini's *Virgin and Child* of 1509 in the Detroit Institute of Arts. Titian cancelled that homage to his great master. His *Virgin and Child* are set against a landscape with a soldier and fortress in the far distance and a brand-new cloth of honour, its crisp folds indicating that it has just that minute been shaken out. Their faces are plump, as though modelled in low relief, while their lowered eyelids invite us to meditate on the humanity of the two central figures of the Christian story. Whereas Giovanni's Madonnas were usually carefully underdrawn, Titian in this painting used as his guidelines only summary strokes made with a fairly wide brush with thin wash shading applied at the underdrawing stage. He made changes as he painted: his first Madonna seems to have had a different face, and her hair was tied with a ribbon; the fingers of the Christ child were first stretched, then covered with the Madonna's red robe and repainted. The result looks like nothing that had been painted by the hand or studio of Giovanni Bellini. With the *Gypsy Madonna* Titian proved to himself that he had learned everything he needed from that source. By then he had fallen under the spell of a different Venetian painter, who became for a while his alter ego. Giorgione (the name means 'Big George') of Castelfranco, who was closer to Titian's age than Giovanni Bellini, introduced Titian to what Vasari called 'the modern manner', the style that, for want of a better adjective, art historians to this day call *Giorgionesque*.

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