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TITIAN AND XIX CENTURY AMERICAN WRITERS

In this paper I will deal with Titian as he was seen by American artists and writers in the course of the XIX century, with a little excursion back into the XVIII century and forward into the XX century. The writings I will consider are mainly those by American artists and writers who travelled to Italy and to Europe, commenting on Titian's paintings in diaries, journals, letters, travel narratives, but using their impressions of Titian also in fiction and poetry.

I will limit myself to literary texts, of diverse nature; inevitably, however, in order to speak of the writers' impressions and descriptions of Titian's works, one enters different fields: the history of art collections, the importance of copies, theories of reader's responses to painting. Fascinating as these subjects are, I will limit myself to the strictly necessary references.

It is a well-known fact that the first American travellers to the museums, buildings, and ruins of Europe, were not the writers but the painters and sculptors: these were the "discoverers", as P. Baker and N. Wright have called them\(^1\), who came to Europe after inde-

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pendence, but in some cases also before.

One wonders how much these American "pilgrims" may have known of Titian - and of the "Old Masters" - before crossing the ocean, at the end of the XVIII century and at the beginning of the XIX century, i.e. at a time when the great American collections of the end of the century did not exist as yet, collections where one could find Titian's Rape of Europa, just to mention one example. One wonders which art treatises, which books on painters and painting, which copies of the paintings these travellers knew, while still at home in America, in a society often represented as necessarily more interested in enterprises different from the artistic ones. Enterprises that had to do with economics, finance, agriculture, not to mention

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


2 On May 10, 1896, Berenson offered the famous Titian to Mrs. Gardner: "Get the Europa, and if you decide to get her - by the way she is on canvas, 5 ft 10 high, 6 ft 8 broad, signed TITIANUS PINXIT - please do not speak of her to any one until she reaches you"; see The Letters of Bernard Berenson and Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1887-1924, with correspondence by Mary Berenson, Rollin Van N. Hadley ed., Boston, Northeastern U.P., 1987, p. 56; Berenson also offered the Amor sacro e amor profano to Mrs. Gardner, as "the key-stone to an arch to the building of which I had all along devoted my best energies", ibidem, p. 182, but she did not buy it. On the Europa see also B.B. Fredericksen, *Census of Pre Nineteenth Century Italian Paintings in North American Public Collections*, Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 1972, p. 201. On Mrs. Gardner, see also Morris Carter, *Isabella Stewart Gardner and Fenway Court*, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1925 and Louise Hall Tharp, *Mrs. Jack*, New York, Congdon and Weed, 1965.
war. One can quote the famous words of John Adams, writing to his wife Abigail from Philadelphia, on August 21st, 1776:

"I wish I had leisure and tranquillity of mind to amuse myself with those elegant and ingenious arts of painting, sculpture, statuary, architecture and music. But I have not".

The arts were not the prime necessity of the young country, as four years later, John Adams again wrote, while in Europe, in another famous letter:

"It is not indeed the fine arts which our country requires; the useful, the mechanic arts are those which we have occasion for in a young country as yet simple and not far advanced in luxury... I could fill volumes with descriptions of temples and palaces, paintings, sculptures, tapestry, porcelain, etc., etc., etc., if I could have time; but I could not do this without neglecting my duty... I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, porcelain".

For the future president of the United States the duty of good laws and government came first, with a New Englander’s sense of duty, in spite of his love for art. This was true of many Americans, simply too busy with “practical” occupations; on the other hand, studies such as K. Silverman’s have amply shown how rich in art the American cultural scene was in the XVIII century. There was quite a circulation of drawings by the Old Masters, books on the art of painting, music: Adams himself saw “some books upon the art of painting”, among them Sir Joshua Reynolds’s Lectures on Art, in the rooms of Charles Willson Peale at Philadelphia in 1776. In the list drawn up by Thomas Jefferson for Robert Skipwith in 1771 there is a section, “Criticism on the fine Arts”, which includes Burke’s Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), Hogarth’s Analysis of Beauty (1753), Lord Kames’s

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6 Familiar Letters of John Adams to His Wife Abigail Adams during the Revolution with a Memoir by Charles Francis Adams, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1875, p. 381.
(Henry Home) *Elements of Criticism*. One can say there was a cultural soil also for the arts, and one must remember that oil copies of the Old Masters circulated, in greater and greater numbers as one approaches the mid-XIX century, as documented by the *American Art's Index* in addition to engravings.

As early as 1729 there was a copy of a *Venus and Cupid* by Titian in the studio of John Smibert (1688-1751), a Scottish painter who settled in Boston, after emigrating to America with Bishop Berkeley, who intended to found a college in Bermuda. With the Titian, Smibert, who had studied in Rome, took to Boston copies of Raphael, Van Dyck, Poussin, a cast of the *Venus de' Medici*; in this "gallery", John Singleton Copley and John Trumbull (1756-1843) saw these copies: the studio was for a number of years, also after Smibert's death (his uncle kept it open), an important "art school" for many New England painters.

In the XVIII century another copy from Titian could be seen; it was a copy of the *Venus of Urbino*, displayed in the house of the

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4 *The National Museum of American Art's Index to American Art Exhibitions Catalogues from the Beginning through the 1876 Centennial Year*, compiled by James L. Yarnall and William G. Gerdtz, with the assistance of K.F. Stewart and C. H. Voorsanger, Boston, Hall, 1986, 6 vols. In spite of the title (*American art*) the index includes the Old Masters; exhibitions of American art were mostly a mixture of American and European paintings.


Pennsylvania Chief Justice, William Allen, in Philadelphia, certainly a city with a more open attitude to the arts than Puritan Boston. This copy had been sent to Mr. Allen by Benjamin West (1738-1820), in 1763, as a gift to a patron who had helped the young painter on his Grand Tour to Europe. In Mr. Allen’s house it was also admired by John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), the painter of A Boy with a Squirrel (1765) and of so many extraordinary portraits, who soon joined West in London.

The great Copley is in fact a clear example of how much an American artist in the 1770s knew about Titian before going to Europe. In his deservedly well-known letters to his half-brother, Henry Pelham (the “boy with a squirrel”), also a painter, Copley gave Henry epistolary “art classes” from his direct observations of the great masters while he was in Italy. On June 25th, from Parma, Copley wrote to Henry Pelham about the Venus he had just seen in Florence (these were dramatic times for America, as Copley had learnt there had been a “skirmish...at Lexington”, and he was dreading the “misery of war” for his family at home) (p. 328). What interests us here is the fact that Copley took for granted Henry Pelham’s knowledge of “the light and shadow, and outline, and disposition” of the Venus, because Pelham had seen “the print” and, as Copley presumed, “Mr. West’s copy” of the Venus. “So what remains for me to give – wrote Copley – is the colouring and pencil” (p. 333).

Mr. West’s copy, like all “Titian copies”, had “more of an Inamil’d look than the original...more white, read, black, blew”.

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Copley went on to describe to Henry Pelham the technicalities of the colouring, explaining his idea of what Titian’s process of painting had been: “Take a good Cloath, pass over it with Spanish’d White Mix’d with size, so rubed into the Cloath that all the pores are filled. Let it dry. than with your pencil draw your outline with Dark colour. this done, set your Pallet with Colours ground in oyl. ...dilute them with spirits of Turpentine... etc. (p. 334).

The craft, or skills, of painting, as E.P. Richardson has clearly pointed out, were not very well known in America (or in England) in the XVIII century and the secret of Titian’s coloring was in turn supposedly discovered by Benjamin West (while he was in Venice, in 1762), by Copley himself, according to his son, and by William Page, often called “the American Titian” 13.

In addition to the two Venuses, West also copied a Venus and Adonis and probably a Danae 14.

These XVIII century cases were, it is true, fairly isolated examples, and one also wonders whether a copy of the Venus of Urbino would have been exhibited as openly in a New England home, as it was in Philadelphia. But copies were certainly to be found, and if not first-hand copies, there were copies of copies: Benjamin West’s Venus was copied by Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), the founder of the “Philadelphia Exhibition” (1781) and of the Philadelphia Museum (or Peale’s Museum, 1786), and Charles’s brother, John Peale, in his turn, copied Charles’s copy of West’s copy ... 15

13 At the Royal Academy in London the presumed discovery of Titian’s secret caused quite a commotion (information due to Dr. Tilton’s paper, delivered at the Pieve di Cadore Titian Conference, July 1990). On Copley’s “discovery” see Copley Jr.’s letter to Mrs. Greene, Aug. 9, 1802: “My father has discovered the Venetian (secret) – ‘the true Venetian’ – more precious than the philosophers’ stone”, quoted in JULES DAVID PROWN, John Singleton Copley cit., vol. II, p. 363. On Page, see JOSHUA C. TAYLOR, William Page, The American Titan, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957, p. 132. Browning translated a passage on Titian’s colors from Italian into English, for Page, taking it from BOSCHINI’s La carta del navigate pitoresco...” (1660): I owe this information (and the letter) to Philip Kelley, the editor of the Brownsings’ letters, who has kindly sent me a copy of the unpublished letter belonging to the Smithsonian.


14 For the Danae, see The Paintings of Benjamin West cit., p. 448, n. 3, and for Prown’s interpretation of a letter on the subject, see J. D. PROWN, John Singleton Copley cit., II, p. 252.

In the first half of the XIX century, Americans could look at a *Danae and the shower of gold* (called “Diana”) at the Columbian Gallery, in New York, as early as 1802, at a *Scouring of Christ*, exhibited at 221 Broadway in the collection of Mr. Paff in 1812, at a *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1816. There were a *Danae* and a *Diana and Actaeon* at the Boston Doggett’s Repository of Art in 1820, an allegorical painting at Mrs. Jumel’s Auction House in New York, in 1821. But paintings, obviously copies even when listed as “Titians”, were not only to be seen in Philadelphia, in New York, in collections such as the Paff Collection of the 1810s or the Clark Collection of the late 30s and early 40s, or at the American Art Union, in the 50s, and in Boston: Titians could be seen in New Orleans (at the American National Gallery, 1847), at Charleston, South Carolina (1857-8), at Louisville, Kentucky (1834), at Troy, New York (1859), at Halifax, Nova Scotia (1831), at the Chicago Exhibition of Fine Arts (1850); in galleries or auction firms, but very much also at fairs and bazaars: at the Boston Sailors’ Fair (1864), in the Firemen’s Hall in Detroit, Michigan (1853), at the St. Louis, Missouri, Agricultural and Mechanical Association (1860), at the Babies’ Hospital Relief Bazaar in Rochester (1863), or at Ransom’s Iron Store at Albany (1858), not to mention the Cincinnati Industrial Exposition (1873).

In the first half of the nineteenth century obtaining commissions for copies was, in fact, one way to fund an American painter’s European Grand Tour. Copies were made by well-known American painters, by anonymous painters, by painters with Italian names, by ladies who make one think of Henry James’s lady copier, Mlle Nioche, in the Louvre (copying a Murillo Madonna, in *The Ameri-

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References are from Yarnall and Gerds, *op. cit.: Diana (sic) receiving the golden shower: 89910

The Scouring of Christ: 89952

The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence: 89929

1 From the above quoted index it is clear that these galleries, in addition to Mrs. Jumel’s Auction House (New York) and Doggett’s Repository of Art (Boston), must have had some importance in the first three decades of the century.

2 For the Paff Collection, see *ibidem,* 89916, 89948, 106280; for the Clark Collection: 89898, 89906, 89907, 89964, 89965, 89966, 89967, 89969, 104368 and others.

For the American Art Union: 89935.

New Orleans: 89961; Charleston: 104417; Louisville: 89922; Troy: 103549; Halifax: 89924; Chicago: 89934; Boston Sailors’ Fair: 94938; Firemen’s Hall, Detroit: 8153; St. Louis Agricultural and Mechanical Association: 62344; Babies’ Hospital: 66030; Ransom’s Iron Store: 89963; Cincinnati Industrial Exposition: 89974
can), or of the young ladies at their easels in Morse’s famous Pan-
nini-like painting of the Louvre (1833) 19. We find copies of Titian
by Rembrandt Peale, who copied the famous Flora, while he was in
Florence in 1829, to exhibit it two years later in Philadelphia in
1831; copies by Thomas Sully, Samuel B. Morse, the painter turned
inventor, who exhibited a Portrait of Titian at New Haven in 1858.
There are a Flora, a Bella, a Duke of Urbino, a Venus of Urbino, a
Titian Self-Portrait, by William Page, “the American Titian”; at least
one so-called Titian’s Mistress by James De Veaux, not to speak of
Washington Allston, who was strongly influenced by Titian in his
paintings, both as regards composition (as one can see quite clearly
in The Sisters) and colouring; his Titianesque Adoration of the Magi
is very well-known 20.

19 On Morse’s wish to be “a Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian”, and his good
coloring, see E.P. Richardson, Painting in America cit., p. 154. See also A New
World cit., pp. 220-221.

20 Rembrandt Peale quotes his own copying of the Flora in “Titian and Giorgi-
gione”, in The Crayon, August 29, 1855, p. 127. Rembrandt Peale’s name appears
in the lists of permits granted by the Director of the Uffizi to copy the Flora, see
Tiziano nelle gallerie fiorentine cit., p. 346. This is a very good catalogue, but
Rembrandt Peale appears as “not identified”.

On Thomas Sully’s copy of a Danae, see William H. Gerdts, The Great
American Nude, London, Phaidon, 1974, p. 51. On the Danae, but also on the copy
of The Assumption, The Flagellation of Christ, and other paintings, see also Edward
Biddle and Mantle Fielding, The Life and Works of Thomas Sully, New York,
Da Capo, 1970 (1921), items 2218, 2098, 2241, 2438, 2602, 2603.

Samuel B. Morse copied two heads in Florence, one by Titian and one by
Rubens, “from the portraits of themselves”, as he wrote in a letter from Florence,
May 12, 1831; see Samuel B. Morse, His Letters and Journals, edited and supple-
mented by his son Edward Lind Morse, Boston, Houghton and Mifflin, 1914,
vol. I, p. 390. For Titian’s Self-Portrait see Tiziano nelle Gallerie fiorentine cit., n.
78 or 79 (XVII century copy).

On Page’s copies see Joshua C. Taylor, William Page cit., pp. 106-107, items
25, 26, 27, 28. A friend of Page, the American painter Abel Nichols, also copied the
Flora twice; on Nichols see Miles ChapPELL, “Abel Nichols, Titian and Raphael”,
paper read at the European Association for American Studies, April 10, 1990,
London.

On James De Veaux, see Robert W. Gibbes, A Memoir of James De Veaux, of
Charleston, South Carolina, Columbia, S.C., 1846, p. 30. The copy was purchased by
“Doctor Arrott of Philadelphia”. At Florence, De Veaux was unable to copy the
Madonna della Seggiola and the Fornarina, because they were booked for the next
two years. The most famous paintings had long waiting lists. Among them was the
Flora, in front of which the Director of the Uffizi decided, in 1824, there should be
no more than 4 painters working at the same time, see Tiziano nelle Gallerie
fiorentine cit., p. 344.

On Allston’s The Sisters and its relation to Titian’s Girl holding a Jewel Casket,
then “in the collection of the Countess de Gray and formerly in the Orleans
collection”, see W. H. Gerdts and T. H. Stebbins, A Man of Genius, The Art of
James Russell Lowell saw Page in Florence, in the Uffizi, “copying Titian as he was never copied before”, copies which, according to Lowell, could be seen side by side with the originals; William Cullen Bryant as well saw Page while he was “analyzing the manner in which Titian produced his peculiar coloring, and reproducing some of his heads in excellent copies...”. Bryant also saw Henry Peters Gray in Rome (1845) rendering a Titian Madonna and Child “with all the fidelity of a mirror”.

Even if these paintings certainly were copies, and probably some of them pretty bad copies, or even copies of paintings perhaps incorrectly attributed to Titian or his followers, — collections of those “wretched imported daubs” which Melville’s Pierre visits in New York, — it is a fact that Americans could know Titian’s paintings, at least his subjects and compositions, even while they were in America. And while the major American collections of European Art belong to the second half, or even the end of the XIX century, to continue in the XX century, it is true that something was already at work in American society in the first half of the XIX century, with the collections we mentioned, and the better known collections of Luman Reed (1832), of that Mr. Bryan of Philadelphia who opened the “Bryan Gallery of Christian Art", entrance ticket 25 cents per person, in 1853-64: it was the Bryan Collection which Henry James was taken to see, as a boy, by his parents, at night, and he remembered it, many years later:

“...It cast a chill, this collection of worm-eaten dyptichs and tryptichs, of angular saints and seraphs, of black Madonnas and obscure Bambinos, of such marked and approved ‘primitives’ as had never yet been shipped to our shores...”


Henry James, A Small Boy and Others in Autobiography, F.W. Dupee ed.
Even the great Henry James seems to have suffered from the common prejudice against the paintings of the Duecento and Trecento; shortly after the famous collector James Jackson Jarves, influenced in his purchases by Ruskin’s new theories and taste, was unable to sell is collection of early Florentine masters, and left it to Yale in 1867.

American painters, writers, travellers who went to Europe in the XIX century did have, therefore, some idea of Titian, and their knowledge of the old masters is quite evident if one looks at their declared purpose in going to Europe: they were finally going to see “the real thing”, i.e. the originals, not just the copies. Emerson in Naples in 1833 seems to gloat over the fact that he is seeing “five genuine Raffaelles and Guido and Titian and Spagnoletto each of which you may really admire without risk of its being a copy”.

One must not forget that for the young American artists and writers it was not, in fact, so easy to go to Europe: not only because they needed funds for the expenses of their Grand Tour, but also because, if Europe was the world of art, it was also for a long time, for Americans, the world of moral corruption, as famous American novelists such as Hawthorne or Henry James have shown in some of their works. Against the European Grand Tour Thomas Jefferson thundered from Paris in 1785, with words that are very similar to those of an English doctor of divinity of 1617, Joseph Hall. According to Jefferson the young American going to Europe would learn “drinking, horse-racing, boxing...” and he would acquire “a fondness for luxury and dissipation”. And yet, Jefferson was a passionate collector of works of art, as his Monticello house proved, with its copies of Guido, Van Dyck, Leonardo.


Most American travellers who left descriptions of the beauties of Italy had mixed feelings, to say the least, about the Old World, as is well-known: the admiration for art was always mingled with a sense of Puritan revulsion against the corruption of a false, and Roman Catholic, country, a sense of deep horror for a country where tyranny was the rule. The lack of moral consciousness of the Old World weighed heavily on the scale of the American traveller, even if the Old World was the world of art.

The words of Mrs. Sedgwick, the popular XIX century novelist, and a great admirer of Italian art, seem to summarize a widespread attitude: “I begin to feel the danger ... of forgetting the actual in the painted world” \(^{26}\). “The painted world”, the world painted by artists, can only be looked at with suspicion in a society founded on Puritan soil, because the artist replaces God in creating works of art, substituting himself for the Creator, as so many short stories by Hawthorne show.

It is therefore by means of the self-evident Puritan imprint that one can explain the wary, suspicious attitude of some American writers towards art, and towards the female nude in painting, a subject which appears to epitomize the moral corruption of the Old World. The reaction to Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, in the Uffizi, in Florence, is emblematic of this attitude, which is not merely “Victorian” \(^{27}\).

We can look at the way Nathaniel Hawthorne described in his *Notebooks* his approach to the room called the Tribune \(^{28}\), where

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\(^{27}\) Nineteenth century English travellers do not seem to react to the nude Venus-es as much as Americans: Mrs. Jameson, for one, does not seem to resent nudity in paintings. English travellers do recognize the erotic quality of some of Titian’s paintings, without pronouncing any moral judgement on them. Even an XVIII century writer such as Mr. Richardson, the author of the famous *Account of Statues, Bas-Reliefs and Drawings in Italy, France, etc.* (London, Browne, 1754) talks about the Venus being “always kept cover’d with a curtain” (p. 184). Lady Blessington – certainly a different personality from Sophia Hawthorne – recognized in the Venus “a violent contrast to its celestial-looking neighbour” adding “This glowing picture is all of earth, its beauty being wholly voluptuous, unredeemed by any expression of intelligent refinement. Titian should have painted the Cupid Anteros by her side, to indicate that hers is the beauty that enchains the senses only; yet, on reflection, this allegorical indication is not necessary, for the whole picture explains it, breathing an atmosphere of sensuality. The Venus de Medici must always charm women, the Venus of Titian, men”, The Countess of Blessington, *The Idler in Italy*, London, Colburn, 1839, vol. II, p. 10.

\(^{28}\) The Tribune was one of the most famous rooms in the Uffizi: we can imagine
both Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* and the famous statue of the *Venus de’ Medici* were exhibited.

The narrator describes himself wandering along the rooms and corridors of the Uffizi Gallery, unable to find “the mystery and wonder of the gallery”, the statue; but he admits to being “pretty well contented...not to find the famous statue”, lest he should be disappointed in it (“for I somewhat apprehended the extinction of another of those lights that shine along a man’s pathway, and go out in a snuff the instant he comes within eye-shot. My European experience has blown out a great many such”) 29. Is Hawthorne afraid that the statue may not live up to the myth, or is he afraid that the naked statue might prove too sensual for him to appreciate it?

“I could not quite believe that I was not to find the Venus de Medici; and still, as I passed from one room to another, my breath rose and fell a little, with the half-hope, half-fear, that she might stand before me.”

More than an encounter with a statue, the narrator seems to describe the possibility of an encounter with a woman, causing accelerated breathing, and he becomes almost aware of it, or wonders about it, as he writes: “Really, I did not know that I cared so much about Venus, or any possible woman of marble”. Finally he “caught a glimpse of her”, through a door, and he entered the famous octagonal room. The long description of the statue that follows seems to express Hawthorne’s relief at being able to like the statue, described more as a chaste and modest woman than as a statue. He likes her it as shown in Zoffany’s painting, started in 1771: Zoffany painted it for Queen Charlotte, and was allowed by the Grand Duke of Florence to have the paintings taken down from the walls (as Titian’s Venus was); he added paintings and objects to make the Tribune more precious, and put into the painting a number of English and Scottish gentlemen who had been in Florence (see *Treasures from the Royal Collection*. London, The Queen’s Gallery, 1988, pp. 41-44). Or we can think of it as described by N.H. Carter: “This superb little temple in the form of an octagon, 20 feet in diameter, with a pavement of splendid mosaic, walls lined with crimson velvet, and a dome inlaid with pearl, has been selected, on account of enjoying a better light, as depository of the most precious articles in the Gallery”, *Letters from Europe, comprising the Journal of a Tour through Ireland, Scotland, France, Italy and Switzerland, in the years 1825, 1826, 1827*, New York, Carvill, 1827, vol. II, p. 122.

29 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The French and Italian Notebooks*, ed. by Th. Woodson, Ohio State U.P., 1980, p. 296. For a very similar analysis of this passage, focussed more on the statue, see the recent books by William L. Vance, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 206-7. Even the texts chosen are almost the same (with the exception of Mrs. Hawthorne’s book), as is probably inevitable in dealing with American travellers in Italy. See also P. Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
because, thanks to the hue of the marble “mellowed by time”, the Venus can be “an inmate of the heart as well as a spiritual existence” (p. 298). Hawthorne concludes his (long) remarks on this Venus, by expressing openly his idea – or his relief? – “I am glad to have seen this Venus, and to have found her so tender and so chaste” (p. 298). He then continues:

“On the wall of the room, and to be taken in at the same glance, is a painted Venus by Titian, reclining on a couch, naked and lustful” (p. 298-299).

This is the only comment Hawthorne makes on Titian’s Venus: the brevity of the passage – two lines, as opposed to the page-long description of the other Venus, the chaste Venus, the statue – indicates, together with the final adjective (“lustful”), Hawthorne’s total rejection of the painting. Hawthorne censures his own looking at, and writing on, Titian’s Venus. There is no indulging of the eye or the pen on this Venus: a “painted Venus by Titian”, rather than a “Venus painted by Titian”, where the position of “painted” seems to imply a fake beautifying of the subject (a woman) by painting (herself), rather than merely the act of painting by an artist.

If one turns to Mrs. Hawthorne’s journal, one finds explicitly expressed all that Hawthorne removes from his eye and his pen: to the good, but very limited Sophia Hawthorne, “Titian’s Venuses... were really intolerable, positively disagreeable... – nay, really indecent; for they are not goddesses – not womanhood – not maternity – not maidenhood, but nude female figures” 30.

Sophia Hawthorne’s enthusiasm is never for Titian, and she rhapsodizes, rather, on the “divine Guido”’s Aurora or Beatrice 31 (like many other XIX century travellers), on the adored Raphael 32 or Perugino; not even on the Flora, which was so generally admired. Sophia does admire her complexion (“her complexion is very fair and luminous”), but finds that her face is “disagreeable, like many of Titian’s ladies’ faces” (p. 374). If she finds Titian’s La Bella “rich in color, with a neck and bosom of exquisite beauty”, she remarks also on the lack of “spirituality” of the whole Venetian school. “It is all

31 “And now we sat down before Beatrice Cenci! At last, at last! after so many years’ hoping and wishing. This is a masterpiece which baffles words”, ibidem, p. 212.
32 On Raphael’s importance in America in the XIX century, see DAVID ALAN BROWN, op. cit.
sense, with whatever sense can manifest of magnificence and sumptuousness – not one ray from heaven, however, by any chance” (p. 357). For the Bella, Sophia uses a simile which seems to have been taken from her husband’s literary world: “Transmute a superb eastern jewel or a gorgeous flower into a woman and you have the Bella Donna” (p. 263) (The Zenobia of Blithedale Romance?). It is as if Titian’s sensual and opulent women, their “sumptuous earthly beauty” (Sophia, p. 263) were too much for the New England morals of the Hawthornes.

Hawthorne seems to be unable to accept the old masters, because they were

“just as ready, or more so, to paint a lewd and naked woman, and call her Venus, as to imagine whatever is purest in womanhood, as the mother of our Saviour” (Rome, Feb. 1858, at the Borghese Collection, p. 111)

It is the “general apotheosis of nakedness” of mythological subjects by the old masters that Hawthorne cannot stand, or “Calypso and her nymphs, a Knot of naked women by Titian” (Diana and Callysto), which Hawthorne finds “as objectionable as any” (Rome, April 1858, at the Academy of St. Luke), just as he finds Sir Peter Lely’s “lewd women” obviously unbearable.

Hawthorne’s repressed sensualism seems to erupt suddenly only in a few cases, as in the description of the Uffizi Magdalene:

“Titian’s Magdalene, the one with the golden hair clustering round her naked body. The golden hair, indeed, seemed to throw out a glory of its own. This Magdalene is very coarse and sensual, with only an impudent assumption of penitence and religious sentiment, scarcely so deep as the eyelids; but it is a splendid picture, nevertheless, with those naked, lifelike arms, and the hands that press the rich locks about her, and so carefully let those two voluptuous breasts to be seen” (Florence, June 1858, p. 334)

Hawthorne’s language seems to become explicitly erotic when the subject allows it: the Magdalene is a “fallen woman”, a subject belonging to a well-defined category in XIX century society, therefore language can be explicit and the eye and the pen can dwell on “those two voluptuous breasts”. The passage, in fact, continues with an ironic exclamation on the repentance of Magdalene:

"She a penitent! She would shake off all pretence to it, as easily as she would shake aside that clustering hair and offer her nude front to the next comer."

Concluding:

"Titian must have been a very good-for-nothing old man", with a typically XIX century identification between "corrupt" subject and "corrupt" painter of the subject.

Hawthorne seems to like only some of the portraits – of properly dressed ladies – such as the Bella Donna; but the great enquirer into the human heart may also have been interested in Titian’s psychological study of his subjects:

"...the most striking picture in the collection (at Palazzo Sciarra), I think, is Titian’s Bella Donna. The only one of Titian’s works that I have yet seen, that makes an impression on me corresponding with his fame. It is a very splendid and very scornful lady, as beautiful and as scornful as Gainsborough’s Lady Lynedoch... (Rome, March 10, 1858, p. 124) 34.

Other American travellers shared the Hawthornes’ prejudices against art, and particularly against the Venus.

Nathaniel H. Carter (1837) found both Titian’s Venuses (there were two in the Tribune) “gross in person, attitude, and expression” 35. Joel T. Hadley (1845) found the two Venuses by Titian in The Tribune “admirably painted, but to me disgusting pictures from their almost beastly sensuality”, adding “I should think Titian might have conceived the design of them when half drunk, and took his models from a brothel!” 36.

Some other traveller such as Grace Greenwood (1854) admitted to the beauty of the paintings: “here is voluptuousness, gorgeous, undisguised, yet subtle, and in a certain sense poetic and refined.” But Greenwood feels compelled to express a moral censure immediately after: “For all the wonderful beauty of this picture, I cannot like it, I cannot even tolerate it” 37.

To counter Hawthorne’s negative comment one may quote Melville’s opposite reaction (March 16, 1857: “Not pleased with the

34 The painting Hawthorne saw in the Palazzo Sciarra was not Titian's La Bella, although until 1853 it was commonly called so. It was a portrait by Palma il Vecchio, now in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection. See PHILIP RYLANDS, Palma il Vecchio, L’opera completa, Milano, Mondadori, 1988, p. 217. I am very grateful to Charles Hope for this indication.


37 GRACE GREENWOOD (Clara Lippincott), Haps and Mishaps of a Tour in Europe, London, Bentley, 1854, p. 315.
Venus de Medici... but... charmed with the Venus [of Urbino]”) 38; it is true, however, that the Hawthornes’ censures are more indicative of a basic attitude of XIX century Americans towards art, which can be epitomized in the famous and often quoted passage by Mark Twain:

“Titian’s Venus in the Tribune is grossly obscene – it is wholly sensual – the <ex> face, the expression, the attitude– not a relieving refinement about it anywhere – she is purely the Goddess of the Beastly (Bestial) – (One can’t describe in print what an artist is permitted to display to the eye unmasked)...

... V. is thinking <em>bestialities</em>. She inflames & disgusts at the same moment... Young girls <em>m</em> can be <em>defiled</em> by looking at V...”

The language of eros and the language of censure are laid side by side on the page (she “inflames” and “disgusts”), in a passage that represents the first rendering of an impression: this quotation comes in fact from Twain’s diary, although it is re-elaborated along the same lines, and even more explicitly, in <em>A Tramp Abroad</em>. Here the Venus is described as “the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses”, as “Titian’s beast”, which was “probably painted for a bagnio and it was probably refused because it was a trifle too strong” 40. The fight for realism in literature, which is at the core of Twain’s comments, and the irony of the last sentence do not take anything away from the moral indignation of the passage.

These negative comments by American XIX century writers express an explicitly censured vision of the naked Venuses, seen as women, not as mythological subjects. We can easily smile at the indignation of Hawthorne or Twain, but their explicit censures might be a support for a possible “erotic” reading, on our own part,


Some years earlier, Rev. William Berrian, assistant minister of Trinity Church, in New York, had also admired Titian’s Venus, comparing it, as most travellers did, with the statue: “The Tribune... contains the wonder of the world, the Venus de Medici, and another that divides its admiration, the Venus of Titian. In one, the artist, it is thought, must have followed the ideal beauty of his own imagination, for he could have no model. In the other, we see the perfection of imitative power”, <em>Travels through France and Italy in 1817 and 1818</em>, New York, Swords, 1821, pp. 99-100.


40 Mark Twain, <em>A Tramp Abroad</em>, in <em>The Works of Mark Twain</em>, New York, Gabriel Wells, 1923, p. 244. Twain’s polemic with what is not permitted in literature but is allowed in Art is explicitly discussed at the beginning of the chapter dealing with the <em>Venus</em> in <em>A Tramp Abroad</em>. 

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of Titian’s goddesses: maybe contemporary art historians obliterate — by not mentioning nudity at all — the possibility of an erotic response to Titian’s paintings, as Charles Hope has suggested 41; or has the perception of eroticism changed so much that Titian’s nude goddesses no longer look like nude women to us?

In the course of the second half of the nineteenth century there was a change in the evaluation of art, a change that regarded both the question of which artists should be considered first rate, and a general upgrading of the world of art: the first change was that brought about mainly by Ruskin, causing, as is well-known, a reevaluation of “the primitives”: the American art journal The Crayon resounded with the debate over this important change in taste, popularizing Ruskin’s theories, and with debates over a Titian, a Danae exhibited as a real Titian, in Boston, sold by Jarvis to John Neal, and charged with being a copy by other critics 42.


On the nude in art and American reactions to it, see also William Gerds, The Great American Nude cit.; see also K. Clark, The Nude, Penguin, 1956.


42 The Crayon, "Journal Devoted to the Graphic Arts and the Literature Related to Them", started in 1855, in New York, was fundamental in spreading and debating Ruskin’s ideas in America. For a wonderful recreation of the change of tastes brought about by Ruskin’s writings, see the story False Dawn, collected in Old New York, by Edith Wharton, where the purchases of Beato Angelico and other “unknown” painters by a young American given plenty of money to buy old masters by his rich father are not understood by the family. See also R. B. Stein, Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America: 1840-1900, Cambridge, Harvard U.P., 1967. The debate went on in July and August 1855. Titian’s Danae was exhibited as a real Titian in Boston: James Jackson Jarves wrote that he had attracted J.R. Tilton’s attention to it in Florence (Letter of July 5, 1855, p. 41). John Neal, Paul Akers, William Page all participated in the debate. Detailed analyses of the subject, the meaning of mythology, the execution of the painting tried to prove that it was, or was not, by Titian.

On the state of art and artists in America at mid-century, see also Andrea Mariati’s discussion of Henry Tuckerman’s Artist-Life and Book of the Artists in
This evolution or change in taste, does not seem to displace Titian from his position as an "old master"; but it must be stressed that Titian was not especially admired in the XIX century and that for many American travellers and writers of that century the name of the great Venetian painter came along in a string of names which did not vary too much:

"Raphael, Andrea del Sarto, Salvator Rosa, Titian and the Carracci" 43, "Guido, Claude, Rubens, Murillo, Raphael, Titian" 44, "Correggio, Guido, Raphael, Rosa, Titian", "Domenichino and Titian" 45.

It was Raphael who was always recognized as the master, following Sir Joshua Reynolds's, and Vasari's preferences: the Madonna of the Chair was the most sought-after copy, the one that every collector must have. For Dr. Morgan, for Copley, for Trumbull or Page, for every traveller, the adored painter was Raphael, with some side ecstatics for the divine Guido and perhaps Salvator... 46.

Titian was, however, a "must" in the Grand Tour, and the paintings observed and admired by American (and English) travellers tended to be always the same, also because travellers used the same (English) guidebooks, Mariana Starke's or Murray's or Black's, or Mrs. Jameson's art books 47, as popular as Ruskin's for part of the

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43 Fanny W. Hall, Rambles in Europe, New York, French, 1839, p. 21.
44 Grace Greenwood, op. cit., p. 205.
45 Margaret Fuller, At Home and Abroad or Things and Thoughts in Europe, ed. by Arthur B. Fuller, Boston, Crosby and Nichols, 1856, vol. II, p. 223.


On the subject see also P. Baker, op. cit., p. 141.


47 Mrs. Jameson was the best known art historian before Ruskin. She wrote a long piece on "The House of Titian", and his paintings, dated from Venice, September 1845 (published in Memoirs and Essays, London, Bentley, 1846). Also her
century (and now totally forgotten), while an American minister, the Rev. Roswell Park 48, who could not find any American guidebook, decided to write his own, basing it on the English books and his own experience.

In Venice, all travellers went to the church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, where Titian's Peter Martyr was to be seen, until a fire destroyed it in 1867, after the painting had survived Napoleon's plunder and had come back safely from Paris, where artists had gathered to discuss it. James De Veaux wrote words of infinite admiration, struck as he was with the grandiose composition of the painting, which reminded him of the power of Michelangelo 49. James Fenimore Cooper reminded his readers that Sir Joshua Reynolds had "pronounced it a wonder", but found that the painting was badly lit, and moreover, found it "not... a pleasant subject", adding "All martyrdoms are a nuisance on canvass. Like the statues of men without skins, they may do artists good, but an amateur can scarcely like them. The better they are done, the more revolting they become" 50.

*Visits and Sketches at Home and Abroad* (London, Saunders, 1834) and her *Sketches of Italy* (Frankfurt, Juleg, 1841) contain discussions of Titian.

48 Rev. Roswell Park, President of Racine College, Wisconsin, wrote a *Handbook for American Travellers in Europe* (New York, Putnam, 1853), because he had found there were no guidebooks to be bought in the U.S., not even in New York (see his Preface).

49 R.W. Gibbes, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-158. Grace Greenwood was terribly disappointed because the painting "was being copied for the Emperor of Russia and could not be seen", *op. cit.*, p. 338. Rev. Roswell Park announces in his guidebook that the painting is "ranked by some the third best painting in the world", *op. cit.*, p. 185. C.P. Cranch, of all the paintings he saw in Venice, named only "Titian's *chef d'oeuvre*, The Martyrdom of St Peter", **Leonora Cranch Scott**, *The Life and Letters of Christopher Pearse Cranch*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1917, Letter of September 13, 1860, from Venice, p. 246.


Cooper also refers to a painting attributed to Titian by the good but ignorant fisherman Antonio, in *The Bravo*. Although one of the Senators denies that the picture was painted by Titian, Cooper has no character saying by whom the painting is. Cooper refers to a painting now at the Accademia, interpreting it in an odd way, maybe to connect it with the plot of the novel. The painting, in the novel, is said to represent a fisherman giving back to the doge the ring which had been thrown into the sea, on the occasion of the marriage of the Republic to the sea. In fact Cooper is misreading the painting by Paris Bordone, ordered by the members of the Scuola di San Marco, that represents the following legend: the ring the fisherman is giving to the doge is the proof of the story he is telling him. Three gentlemen have asked him to row them out from St Mark's to the port, in a terrible storm: they meet a dark ship, manned by devils. A sign of the cross makes it sink and Venice is saved from the storm. The three gentlemen were St Mark, St George,
Everybody went to see (and described) the great Assumption and the Presentation to the Temple in the Scuola della Carità (Accademia), but also The Sacrifice of Isaac, Cain killing Abel, David and Goliath, in the church of the Salute, and the Martyrdom of St. Lawrence, at the Gesuiti 11.

Venus at her mirror, then in the Palazzo Barbarigo, excited N. Carter’s enthusiasm, because “her limbs are modestly veiled: the moment she discovers the luxuriance of her charms she presses a scarf upon her bosom, with the agitation and blush of female delicacy” 12. Quite a limiting comment for such a splendid painting (but Carter was the one who had not appreciated the Florence Venuses).

Comments regarded more the feelings of the viewers than the paintings as such; and if the Magdalene was viewed with some perplexity because of her nudity, the “feeling” excited by her upturned eyes seemed to prevail over any other. Mrs. Sedgwick admiringly observed that the Magdalene, “a voluptuary by nature and a saint by grace” revealed “the secret of the soul”. Quite different was Ruskin’s opinion of the painting; with his idiosyncratic and truthful eye, Ruskin underlined the very bad state of the picture (“it is now destroyed”), where only

“a few folds of the hair, here and there, a shadow of the flesh, and the alabaster box with Titianus’ in brown letters on it are all that remain. In consequence the hair looks like a brown mat or like that of a rough Blenheim spaniel; the mass of it, without the slightest grouping or arrangements, is like the pictures of Circassians on the signs of Barbers at Bishopgate within. The fleshy and shapeless body is nearly as disgusting. The face of the grossest possible type, and the eyes turned up...are the crowning sin” 13.

Several passionate (but exhausted) pilgrims described their experience of European museums and paintings as an undistinguishable immersion into acres of canvases or “square leagues of pictures”

St Nicholas. For the legend, see A. ZORZI, La repubblica del leone, Milano, Rusconi, 1979, pp. 174-175. A reproduction of the painting is published in I Dogi, ed. by G. Benzonì, Milano, Electa, 1982, p. 89, n. 74.

11 Rembrandt Peale, for instance, admired the “astonishing vigour of composition and coloring” of The Death of Abel in the Salute, in Notes on Italy written during a Tour in the Years 1829 and 1830, Philadelphia, Carey and Lea, 1831, p. 288.


13 Mrs. SEDGWICK, op. cit., vol. II, p. 104.

(Henry Adams)\footnote{The Letters of Henry Adams, ed. by J.C. Levenson, E. Samuels, C. Vandersee, V. Hopkins Winner et al., Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., 1982, Letter from Venice, April 8, 1860, vol. I, p. 117; later, in 1879, in Madrid, Adams was finally enchanted by Titian: “As for the gallery here, I can’t deny that it knocks all my expectations flat. Never did I dream such Titians” (Madrid, 24 October, 1879), vol. II, p. 379.}, just too many of them, so many that the viewers were a prey to what Hawthorne called “the icy demon of weariness”. Even the most gorgeous Titian could be just another painting.

If, as we mentioned, the XIX century viewer registered the subjective feeling elicited by the viewing of the paintings, some travellers dwelt on more technical matters, such as the good or bad condition of the pictures and the restorations. George Ticknor, for instance, saw the Assumption immediately after it had been restored (in August 1817) and cleaned from the “coat of black varnish” caused by “three centuries of tapers ...and incense”. The cleaned picture impressed him as only Raphael’s pictures seemed to have done, and for the young Ticknor

“this immense picture with its various subjects and groups becomes one work and seems united in all its parts, as if the artist had breathed it upon the canvas by a simple volition of the will. After standing before it above an hour, I knew not which most to admire, – the poetical sublimity of the invention, or the boldness of the execution, and that magic and transparency of coloring in which Titian has no rival” \footnote{The Life, Letters and Journals of George Ticknor, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1909, vol. I, p. 164. Ticknor of course saw the Assumption at the Accademia.}.

Some other writers, such as W.D. Howells or F.M. Crawford, described their visits to Titian’s house in Venice \footnote{W.D. Howells, Venetian Life, Boston, Houghton and Mifflin, 1907, pp. 212-215.}, Charles Eliot Norton dealt with the “master” of Titian, and his sons, the painter and the mosaic makers Francesco and Valerio Zuccato, telling of the trial against the two brothers, who were supported by Titian (a subject that George Sand had treated more romantically in Les Maîtres Mosaistes) \footnote{F. M. Crawford, “Titian and His Friends”, in Gleanings from History, London, MacMillan, 1901, pp. 551-560.}.

It took American writers some time – and a gradual change which is slow even in the great Henry James – before any suspicion
against Europe should disappear, before the world of art should not seem stained with a suspicion of corruption, before the world of art should become the only real one, the only important one, not just "a painted world" which made one risk to lose "the actual" one. A world that could condition, instead, any perception of reality, as it was, for instance, for the later Henry James 58 or for Edith Wharton.

"One must know Titian and Giorgione to enjoy the intimacy of the Friulian Alps, Cima da Conegliano to taste the full savour of the strange Euganean landscape" 59, wrote Edith Wharton.

In spite of his "suspicion" of European morals, there is no doubt that Henry James was absolutely fascinated by Titian, in England and in Italy, in 1869. At the National Gallery, in London, James saw the Bacchus and Ariadne, and wrote about it to his artistic mentor, John La Farge:

"Then they have their great Titian – the Bacchus and Ariadne – a thing to go barefoot to see; as likewise his portrait of Ariosto. Ah, John! What a painter. For him, methinks, I'd give you all the rest" 60.

In Venice, in the wake of Ruskin, it was Tintoretto, with his tragic mastery, who struck James deeper, in his first Venetian sojourn, and Titian somehow was a background figure: "Titian was assuredly a mighty poet, but Tintoret – well, Tintoret was almost a prophet". In fact, Titian in Venice was "altogether a disappointment; the city of his adoption is far from containing the best of him. Madrid, Paris, London, Florence, Dresden, Munich – these are the homes of his greatness" 61.

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58 It is not possible to give here an exhaustive bibliography on Henry James, suffice it to indicate that my work is heavily indebted to the work of Leon Edel, and in Italy, of Agostino Lombardo and Sergio Perosa. Three essays by these three authors were recently published in The Sweetest Impression of Life, the James Family and Italy, J.W. Tuttleton and A. Lombardo eds., New York U.P., 1990; these essays are highly relevant to my paper. See also BARBARA and GIORGIO MELCHIORI, Il gusto di Henry James, Torino, Einaudi, 1974.


60 HENRY JAMES, Letters 1843-1875, ed. by Leon Edel, London, Macmillan, 1974, Vol. I, Letter from Glion, June 20th (1869), p. 121. On the Bacchus and Ariadne and the Ariosto, see also The Middle Years, in Autobiography cit., p. 569. James remembers admiring the Titians in the presence of Swinburne. See Leon Edel, HENRY JAMES, The Untried Years: 1843-1870, Philadelphia – New York, Lippincott, 1953, p. 289. The fact that the Ariosto portrait is no longer considered to represent the Italian poet is not relevant to our analysis of James's impressions.

61 HENRY JAMES, "Venice", in Italian Hours, New York, Grove Press, 1979, p. 18. On James's dependence on Ruskin, in addition to Edel, see the essays by J.
But in Florence Titian’s portraits were “sublime” (Nov. 7, 1869), and in the Florence of Florentine Notes two portraits have a central position. It is a well-known fact that James wrote a number of essays on painting: the description of the two Pitti portraits shows a writer who is interested in Titian’s psychological rendering of his subjects, and at the same time a writer who further elaborates, on his own, Titian’s psychological studies. The first portrait described in Florentine Notes is that which James refers to as the portrait of Charles V:

“that portentous image of the Emperor Charles the Fifth. He was a burlier, more imposing personage than his usual legend figures, and in his great puffed sleeves and gold chains and full-skirted over-dress he seems to tell of a tread that might sometimes have been inconveniently resonant. But the purpose to have his way and work his will is there – the great stomach for divine right, the old monarchical temperament”.

James may well have mistaken the portrait of Philip II for that of Charles V, but his analysis of power (“divine right”) seems to carry one step further Titian’s rendering of the psychology and power of a great monarch.

For the Virile portrait James seems to continue Titian’s psychological study of the young man, this time “imagining” the untold story of the portrayed subject:


63 There does not seem to be a portrait of Charles V corresponding to James’s description in Florence, not even in the XIX century. At Palazzo Pitti there was a Portrait of Charles V in armor, which, as the title indicates, represents the emperor “in armor”, not in his “civilian” clothes. (This was a XVI century copy from Titian, see Titian nelle Gallerie fiorentine cit., n. 14, pp. 78-80). At the Pitti James probably saw the Portrait of Philip II, whose clothes correspond to his description: the “chains” may refer to the Toison d’or (Ibidem, n. 3, pp. 42-46). James’s description might match the portrait of Charles V with his baut at the Prado (see Wethey, op. cit., vol. II, n. 55) but James mentions the Pitti explicitly, in an essay on Florence.

64 Henry James, “Florentine Notes” (1874), in Italian Hours cit., p. 290-291.
“that formidable young man in black, with the small compact head, the delicate nose and the irascible blue eyes. Who was he? What was he? ‘Ritratto virile’ is all the catalogue is able to call the picture. ‘Virile!’ Rather! you vulgarly exclaim. You may weave what romance you please about it, but a romance your dream must be. Handsome, clever, defiant, passionate, dangerous, it was not his own fault if he hadn’t adventures and to spare. He was a gentleman and a warrior, and his adventures balanced between camp and court. I imagine him the young orphan of a noble house, about to come into mortgaged estates. One wouldn’t have cared to be his guardian, bound to paternal admonitions once a month over his precocious transactions with the Jews or his scandalous abduction from her convent of such and such a noble maiden” (p. 291).

It is almost a story that James weaves out of his looking at this portrait.

In Rome, James had noticed next to a “Correggio of heavenly merit”, “a Titian of earthy” (is this an echo of Hawthorne’s? Nov. 21, 1869); it was probably the Amor sacro e l’amor profano, a painting carefully described in a story published one year later, Travelling Companions.

Travelling Companions (1870) testifies to the impact of both painting in general and of one specific picture on James’s imagination. The love story that gradually develops between a young American woman, who seems to resist the attraction of the land of art and love – Italy – and an American who has lived for many years in Germany, is entirely played out among paintings and places full of art, and “helped” by the presence of a supposed small Correggio which the protagonist buys. It is a story told in the first person by the protagonist, who seems very often more of an essay writer on art than the narrator of a story, as long descriptive passages – small essays in themselves – are present in the story. The first meeting of the protagonists takes place in front of a painting, Leonardo’s Last Supper in Milano; the story ends in front of Titian’s L’Amor sacro e l’amor profano, in the Galleria Borghese, in Rome. Both paintings are somehow functional to the development of the story, particularly Titian’s, as it is in front of the “sacred and the profane love” – a painting whose symbolic significance has originated a good deal of discussion – that the love story does come to a happy end. The picture is described by the narrator as follows:

“The picture is one of the finest of its admirable author,—rich and simple and brilliant with the true Venetian fire. It unites the charm of an air of latent symbolism with a steadfast splendor and solid perfection of design. Beside a low sculptured well sit two young and beautiful women: one richly clad, and full of mild dignity and repose; the other with unbound hair, naked, ungirdled by a great reverted mantle of Venetian purple, and radiant with the frankest physical sweetness
and grace. Between then a little winged cherub bends forward and thrusts his chubby arm into the well..." 66

The precision of the description 66 shows how careful James's eye must have been in observing the picture; the function of the painting – to allow all reserves and barriers to fall between the young woman who has refused marriage and her suitor – is "explained" by the protagonist himself:

"They call it, 'I answered ...' a representation of Sacred and Profane Love. The name perhaps roughly expresses its meaning. The serious, stately woman is the likeness, one may say, of love as an experience, – the gracious, impudent goddess of love as a sentiment; this of the passion that fancies, the other of the passion that knows..."

The relation between the symbolism of the painting and the plot is worked out with no excessive refinement, more like a mathematical formula, but the detailed description of the painting and the use of it to solve the plot testifies to the importance of art for the young James, and, more specifically, to the importance of Titian.

Art enters fiction by the main door, in the XIX century, and stories beginning in front of a Titian, or regarding a Titian can also be found among the works of other writers, for instance Robert Herrick: his novel, The Gospel of Freedom (1898) deals with a Jamesian theme, the contrast between art (Europe) and money (Chicago). The story of a woman looking for freedom (as the title indicates), begins in Paris, in front of a Titian painting. The male protagonist, a painter, who represents the art and culture of Europe (and seems to have been modelled after Bernard Berenson), the one who can tell a real from a fake Titian, is opposed to the business man of Chicago: but the art of Europe, the knowledge of Titian and the great masters does not open the way to freedom: a suspicion of decay, of a lack of


66 James calls the sarcophagus a "well", quite obviously meaning a "fountain", or at least defining exactly its main symbolic function. On the function of "fountain" see E. Panovsky, Studi di iconologia, Torino, Einaudi, 1975, p. 211, but also E. Wind, Misteri pagani del Rinascimento, Milano, Adelphi, 1971, pp. 179-180, even if in disagreement on other subjects with Panowsky.
moral energy undermines in the story the glamour of European art. Again a painting supposedly “by Titian” is at the centre of a short story by Herrick, “A Rejected Titian” 67.

In James’s work references to paintings and painters are myriad, and it would be impossible to examine adequately all references to Titian and the Old Masters. But one could mention young James imagining himself to be “welcomed” back to Florence by Titian (“the lustrissimo Titian gave me a glorious welcome”) (Jan. 1, 1870) or one could remind the reader that Roderick Hudson, in Paris, hesitates between art and the theatre (or, even more, life), and art is represented by Titian:

“Roderick was divided in mind as to whether Titian or Mademoiselle Delaporte were the greater artists” 68.

One could also mention the reference to the “Titians and Turners” of the National Gallery of London where Milly Theale, in The Wings of the Dove (1902), can live “possible great moments”, or one can remember that Kate Croy, in the same novel, appears to Merton Densher “like a tempest painted by Titian” (p. 352) 69.

But one can also imagine, simply imagine – as there is no proof of it – that the Ariosto portrait mentioned by James in his letter to John La Farge in 1869, with that cri de coeur (“Ah, John! what a painter”) may have subtly worked on James’s imagination, together with the memory of other portraits, including the Pitti Virile Portrait, in James’s creation of the portrait of Ralph Pendrel’s ancestor in the late and unfinished novel, The Sense of the Past (1917) 70. That portrait

“prominent in its place over the mantel, depicted a personage who simply appeared to have sought to ignore our friend’s appeal by turning away his face... The gentleman in question here had turned his back, and for all the world as if he had turned it within the picture... the prodigy [was] that when one wasn’t there the figure looked as figures in portraits inveterately look, somewhere into the room, and that


this miraculous shift, the concealment of feature and identity, took place only when
one's step drew near..."

The portrait represents a young man who turns his back and
hides from the young American when the latter draws near, but
finally comes out of the painting and walks toward him, revealing
himself for the American's "double". Perhaps that movement ap-
parent in the Ariosto portrait has continued, in James's imagination;
the figure in the portrait has moved around a little more, turning
backwards and then forwards again, finally stepping out of the pic-
ture: an ancestor, in the novel, stepping out of the past to meet his
descendant; a great European writer – Ariosto – stepping out to
meet another great, American, writer...

This is certainly an "extravagant imagination", like Ralph Pen-
drel's in the novel, perhaps given a little substance by the reference
to the Renaissance painting used in the novel to describe Aurora
Coyne: "she was an Italian princess of the Cinque-cento, and Titian
or the grand Veronese might, as the phrase was, have signed her
image"; a princess with "her large calm beauty, low square dresses,
crude and multiplied jewels, the habit of watching strife from a
height" (pp. 7-8), perhaps La Bella, as Adeline Tintner has sug-
gested.  

If none of all this can be actually proved, it is a fact that the
experience of art – and also the reading of Titian's portraits, such
masterpieces of psychological searching – certainly was one of the
fundamental elements in the creative imagination of Henry James.

Leaving James's enchanted world, one could go backwards in
time and mention the presence of Titian in American writers who
never went to Europe: in Thoreau, who in his journal meditated on
real art, seen as a "human life, wherein you might hope to discover
more than the freshness of Guido's Aurora, or the mild light of
Titian's landscapes" 73, or in Emily Dickinson, whose tragic New
England sunset, dusk, and night cannot be rendered by the greatest
European artists:

How the old Mountains drip with Sunset
How the Hemlocks burn –

71 Henry James, The Sense of the Past, New York, Scribner's, 1945, p. 73-74.
72 See A. Tintner, The Museum World of Henry James, Ann Arbor, UMI
73 The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 1837-1846, ed. by B. Torrey and F. H.
How the Dun Brake is draped in Cinder
By the Wizard Sun –

....

These are the Visions flitted Guido –
Titian – never told –
Domenichino dropped his pencil –
Paralyzed, with Gold –  

One could go onwards in time and highlight the presence (and the meaning) of the *tableaux vivants* in Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, with a “Titian’s daughter”  

appearing in the symbolic past-timess of New York society  

, or mention the presence of Titian and his paintings in poets such as Ezra Pound or Robert Lowell. Pound focuses on Titian as an example of his repeated creed that art must not be disjoined from honesty (“Zuan Bellin’ not by usura”, Canto XLV) : in Canto XXV he tells the story of the *sensaria*, in the Ducal Palace of Venice, which Titian applied for, after the death of Zuan Bellin, in order to paint

...side toward the piazza, worst side of the room
that no one has been willing to tackle,
and do it as cheap or much cheaper

(signed) Tician, 31 May 1513

But Titian did not paint for over twenty years and the Venetian state obliged him to give back the ducats he had pocketed without working on the great *Battle*:

be it moved that the said
Tician de Cadore, pictor, be by authority of this Council
obliged and constrained to restore to our government all the moneys that he has had from the agency during the time he has not worked on the painting in the said hall as is reasonable

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75 The portrait of *Lavinia, or Titian’s Daughter*, is now indicated by critics as *The Girl with a fruit platter*, at the Berlin Museum (see F. VALCANOVER, *L’opera completa di Tiziano cit.*, n. 386, p. 125).

ayes 102, noes 38, 37 undecided
register of the senate
terra 1537, carta 136

Pound’s belief in the honesty of art, exemplified in the just decisions of the Venetian Republic, is given a special flavor of authenticity by his use of excerpts from ancient documents, Titian’s letter to the Council of Ten and the Council’s decrees.

Robert Lowell, rather than focussing on the figure of Titian, chose the great Prado portrait of Charles V on horseback (“Barreled in armor, more gold fleece than king”) to offer a meditation on the power of art, on the “painted world” which in the XX century is just as real as the “actual” world.

I would like to close with the words of Mary McCarthy, who described the last, sublime work of Titian, seeing the “tragic passion”, the “piercing, frenzied cry” of human grief in La Pietà, the painting by the “prince of colorists”, as Henry James called Titian, who, in his contemplation of death gave up even colour in his last painting.

This paper was delivered in a shorter form as one of the “Sunday Lectures” at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., on the occasion of the exhibition, “Titian, Prince of Painters”, on October 28, 1990.

78 Pound translated, verbatim, a passage from Titian’s letter to the Council of Ten, dated May 31st, 1513 (now in Tiziano, Le Lettere, Magnifica Comunità del Cadore, 1989, p. 5) and passages from the decrees, dated May 31 1513, Dec. 5 1516, June 23, 1537, published as items n. 337, 356, 462, in G. Lorenzi, Monumenti per servire alla storia del Palazzo Ducale di Venezia..., Venezia, 1868. It is very likely that Pound actually used Lorenzi as his source, during one of his Venetian stays, consulting it in the Biblioteca Marciana.