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Love Me Tender: Figuring Out the Real Meaning Behind Titian's *Venus of Urbino*

BY KATIE SCHIEWETZ

Since its first day on the market, the purpose of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* has been a source of contention. There are three ways that critics tend to view the woman in the painting: as a Venetian courtesan, designed to seduce; as a representation of Venus, mythological goddess of love and beauty; or as a bride, celebrating married love. No matter what his true purpose was, no one could argue that Titian has not provided an overtly yet subtly alluring subject, both psychologically and physically. Titian has created, using space and color, a scene in which the viewer has no choice but to look at the woman, the subject of the painting. There is a huge difference between the foreground and the background, further relegating the actions of the background to the nether regions of the work; they are not to be focused on. The servants in the background and the boudoir furnishings are the landscape for Titian's not-so-sleeping Venus. Titian's lighting helps create the very distinctive spatial difference, as do the diagonals leading the viewer's gaze directly to the woman. She holds tight to the gaze of the viewer, inviting him to come closer. It is the intensity of her gaze that is a determining factor in the arresting nature of the work. My paper will attempt to answer the question, "Does the status of the woman really change the meaning of the work or the reaction to it?"

If one views the woman as a Venetian courtesan, the painting takes on a lascivious nature. *Venus of Urbino* can be seen as a courtesan mainly for the way the woman presents her body to the viewer. Courtesans, or court prostitutes, would more than likely be thought to be less ashamed of her body than a virginal member of a well-off family. Given the sexual nature of their jobs, courtesans would indeed have to know how to seduce a man; if they were not appealing to members of the court, they would lose their customers, and thus their livelihood. They would probably be used to suffering the gazes of potential clients, all the while having to appear sexually attractive. It is the way that the woman meets the gaze of the onlooker, not as if to challenge, but as though she was inviting him into her boudoir, that makes the strongest case for reading the woman as a Venetian courtesan. "Aware of the spectator upon whom she fixes her enigmatic gaze, she consciously and unashamedly presents her body for the

delectation of the onlooker” (Cole 116). It is this confidence, which for some reason Western culture associates with sexual deviation or promiscuity, which identifies her, for some critics, as a courtesan. *Venus of Urbino* has long been termed Renaissance pornography, as Rona Goffen points out. Wilhelm Heinse, in 1785, said the woman is “a charming young Venetian girl between seventeen and eighteen years, with languorous glance. ...Titian...did not wish to paint any Venus but rather only a courtesan” (Goffen 147).

The second interpretation, although not one typically accepted by critics, makes use of the title in forming an opinion. According to this interpretation, Titian was creating a Venus picture, following a long tradition of depicting Venus as a popular classical motif. If this is the case, then Titian could be seen as simply following Giorgione and all the other Venus painters who had preceded him, yet at the same time changing the woman to reveal his personal style. Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* had a great impact on Titian’s choices for *Venus of Urbino* as evinced by the obvious visual echo found between them. “Titian took from Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* both the pose and the gesture...The *Venus of Urbino* adds assertiveness to independence: fully sentient, cognizant, and self-aware” (Goffen 153). If Titian was following tradition, however, he altered that tradition somewhat. “Titian departed from the venerable prototype in two significant ways. ...Venus does not cover her breast with her right arm. ...The second variation[,]...unlike the ancient Venus pudica, she does not merely conceal, she caresses herself” (Goffen 152).

Few critics believe that the woman is actually intended to be a representation of the goddess Venus; Vasari, when he first saw the painting, apparently said “by the hand of Tiziano...a young recumbent Venus with flowers and certain light draperies about her, very beautiful and well-finished” (358). It appears that Vasari was the first to imbue the mythological element into *Venus of Urbino*; his influence through his book has named the woman Venus, and Venus she shall be to the world as long as art is around. Vasari more than likely believed the woman to be Venus for two reasons: she appeared much as previous Venuses had, and she holds roses, which are traditionally associated with Venus as goddess. Yet most critics find this evidence too flimsy to accept the woman as simply a Venus. Roberto Zapperi says that, “the painting...shows a nude woman lying on a bed, as her servant in the background attends to her clothes. In this everyday scene there is no reference to any known myth” (Goffen 147). It is precisely this lack of mythological presence that leads the majority of critics to see the *Venus of Urbino* as an allegory of marriage.

Art historians have found numerous reasons to see *Venus of Urbino* as a marital allegory. The most basic of these reasons is the presence of the chests, or *cassoni*, in the background of the piece. The servants are actively going through the *cassoni*, presumably to find clothing suitable for the woman to wear. The *cassoni* are indicative of a marital theme because “*Cassoni* were traditionally commissioned by the bridegroom or his kinsmen on the occasion of his wedding and intended for the storage of clothing, particularly his wife’s trousseau” (Goffen 146). In addition to the *cassoni*, a dog sleeps

on the bed at the woman’s feet. Dogs, being symbolic of fidelity, were often included in paintings to make a point about the nature of the relationship. Symbolism aside, the viewer should be asking the question, “Why is the dog sleeping?” If the woman is gazing seductively at a male, and this male can therefore be theoretically placed in the confines of her bedroom, the dog should have sensed the man’s approach and reacted to it. Generally, when strangers enter a dog’s vicinity, the dog is automatically on alert. The woman’s dog, however, does not even perk up an ear. According to Goffen, “Such a dog can sleep peacefully because the person who has just entered is not an intruder; he is master of this household” (146). These two are the most obvious proofs that the *Venus of Urbino* was intended to be read as an allegory of marital love.

A seemingly ironic proof of the allegory reading is found in the woman’s left hand. It sits, fingers curled, as though she were caressing herself. This can be seen as marital evidence due to the theology and medical practices of the day. It was believed that “the woman’s emission (orgasm) was...essential for conception” (Goffen 152). Supposedly, went the theory, if the woman did not emit her own form of sperm through her orgasm, creation of life would not result from the coupling. “Female masturbation was deemed acceptable, and sometimes necessary...to...encourage gestation” (Goffen 153). That the woman may be masturbating can be seen as proof that she wants to conceive a child, and therefore would be in a married situation, as unwed mothers at that time were generally mistreated by society as a whole.

The historical context of the piece would also seem to indicate the painting’s intention as allegory. It may have been created in order to celebrate the consummation of the marriage of Guidobaldo della Rovere to Giulia Varano, who was only ten at the time of their wedding. Typically in the Renaissance, marriages would commence early in life, whereas consummation would wait until the bride reached fourteen years of age, which was judged to be the time womanhood was attained. “It is almost inconceivable—both biologically and socially— that their union could have been consummated at [the time of their marriage]. Such a marriage, involving an underage bride and a groom compelled to delay his sexual possession of her – and hers of him – could well explain the quirks of Titian’s composition” (Goffen 155). It is highly probably that this piece was in commemoration of the time when Giulia could, in fact, become the woman in the painting for Guidobaldo.

The varying ways in which the viewer can read the *Venus of Urbino* change the way the viewer typically reacts to the piece. If the onlooker sees the woman as a courtesan, the painting can take on a pornographic or naughty quality, much like *Playboy* magazine. In that case the woman is designed to arouse whoever is looking at her, and may seem somewhat ‘dirty’ to Western culture, as Westerners tend to look down on sexually promiscuous women, especially those who accept money for their actions. The connotation of the woman as a courtesan will lead a Westerner to read the painting as a form of pornography in the style of the Italian Renaissance. If the viewer chooses to believe that Titian was following tradition and depicting a classical Venus, he will likely not be as bothered by the inherent sexuality of the woman. Venus, as understood

by Western culture, was the goddess of love and beauty, and has become associated with all things relating to sex. It would seem less “wrong” to a Westerner, to become aroused by a picture of Venus than by the same picture of a common whore. Venus is not real; she is an ideal and therefore perfectly acceptable to fantasize about, according to Western standards. If the observer sees the piece as an allegory of married love, then the sexual nature of the woman and her position becomes almost sacred, in that she is lavishing all her attention and efforts on her husband, the man to whom she owes her status. In this way, the piece becomes less about ogling a naked woman and more about celebrating the act of love, making it “ok” for us as Westerners to accept the openly sexual nature of the woman and thus the work.

Through Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, one can see how changing the basis or meaning of a piece can completely alter the way it is understood by modern day culture, even though the same piece may have meant something completely different to those who were around when it was painted. Whether the woman is a courtesan, a goddess, or a bride, Titian has gifted her with the ability to be uniquely sexual and assertive of her own character. “Her forceful gaze is assertive but not brazen. The eyes have it: Venus’ eyes, which irresistibly hold our own, assert her character, her intellect, and her power to choose” (Goffen 157).

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