



Nichols, Tom. Titian and the End of the Venetian Renaissance

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Nichols, Tom.

Titian and the End of the Venetian Renaissance.

London: Reaktion Books, 2013 / distributed by the University of Chicago Press.
Pp. 255 + 164 b/w and colour ill. ISBN 978-1-78023-186-0 (hardbound) \$79.

Reading Tom Nichols book, *Titian and the End of the Venetian Renaissance*, I was reminded of André Félibien's famous repetition of Poussin's pronouncement about Caravaggio, that he had come into the world "to destroy painting." That trope, of course, found its justification in contemporary reservations about Caravaggio's untempered naturalism in religious painting, and it was also prompted by a general distaste for the painter's unsavoury character. Nichols's discussion of Titian as a destroyer of "Venetian painting" is similarly rooted in careful and thought-provoking re-readings of what Titian's contemporaries really thought about his painting, and the rather deafening silence that greeted the news of his death in Venice in 1576. Unlike Michelangelo, whose body was reclaimed from Rome so it could be put to rest with great pomp and

circumstance in Florence, and therefore consolidate and perpetuate the eternal flame of “Florentine” painting commemorated in Vasari’s *Lives*, Titian’s passing was barely heralded in Venice and no such contemporary claims were made for him as the canonical symbol of “Venetian” painting. Preoccupation with the general ravages of the plague is generally cited as the reason for this public silence, but Nichols attributes it equally to a “local resistance to the promotion of Titian as the father figure of the Venetian artistic tradition” (12). This book is a careful exposition of the various ways that Titian’s oeuvre, even from its very beginnings, worked against the grain of established Venetian tradition, most notably the workshop of the Bellini, where Titian most certainly trained before coming under the influence of Giorgione (one wonders, of course, if Giorgione was a typical “Venetian” painter). From there, Titian went on to achieve international acclaim, an acclaim that responded to an increased internationalism in the development of his highly personal style.

Nichols’s book offers the kind of free-flowing and deeply intelligent analysis of a painter’s career that can only be produced after long study and intimate familiarity with his subject. It is beautifully written and generously illustrated, and you feel both Nichols’s and Titian’s minds working at every turn. Nichols’s intention is to make us re-examine our trademark reverence for the “Titian” that we think we understand to be the apex and exemplar of the Venetian tradition of painting. At the heart of the debate over a typology of Venetian painting, and Titian’s role in symbolizing such a typology is, of course, the classic comparison of Venetian painting to Florentine painting, a debate already being waged while Titian and Michelangelo were both still alive. At the heart of the comparison of the two painters was Michelangelo’s allegiance to Florentine *disegno* and Titian’s adherence to Venetian *colore*, supposedly diametrically opposed attitudes towards picture-making. This is a well-worn trope that is found in most introductory art history courses and plays its way out of the Renaissance into the later Academic debates between the Rubenistes and Poussinistes and thence into Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism. The Venetians are seen as exuberant proponents of composition in pigment, virtuosi of spontaneity born of pure paint. The Florentines, by contrast, are measured, intellectual architects of composition, offering clarity that builds to narrative climax while the Venetians riff with jazz-like improvisational abandon. Or something like that. While this is a useful binary for exposition in the classroom, it doesn’t really hold true in any carefully considered history of art, and Nichols effectively dismisses it—in

fact, any innate “Venetian-ness” is really a trick of the discipline of art history, and both Vasari writing about Michelangelo in Florence and Ludovico Dolce writing about Titian in Venice already knew that. Instead, Nichols proposes a different paradigm, suggesting that Titian’s destruction of Venetian painting was due to his deliberate flaunting of Venetian artistic traditions grounded in republicanism, civic-mindedness and legislated self-effacement, which he abandoned in favour of flagrant originality, self-expression, and individualism.

Nichols points out that this virtuoso “self” was partially constructed through Titian’s self-articulated *paragone* with Michelangelo—beginning with his quotation of the figure of Eve from the Sistine chapel in his fresco depicting the *Miracle of the Jealous Husband* from the Scuola di Santo in Padua, and concluding with the late *Pietà* of the Frari, which can be read as a meditation on Michelangelo’s late great sculptural *Pietà*s. The crucial difference, of course, is that Titian transforms Michelangelo’s columnar, agonized compressions of melting flesh into a poetic painterly paean of grief, muddy, and tear-soaked.

It is indeed hard to remain unmoved by this *Pietà*, intended for Titian’s own tomb in the Frari, just as it’s hard not to recoil in the face of his bloody, savage *Flaying of Marsyas*, now in Kroměříž. And here’s where I depart slightly from Nichols because, like in the *Miracle of the Jealous Husband* and the *Pietà*, I see Titian working his preoccupation with Michelangelo in this *Flaying*. If the resigned Midas, who watches the pitiless, bloody, and remorseless picking apart of Marsyas by Apollo can be read as a disguised self-portrait of Titian (which Nichols asserts), then, I think, it can be balanced against Michelangelo’s disguised self-portrait in the form of the flayed skin of St Bartholomew at the centre of the Sistine *Last Judgement* fresco. Both works are focused on the evisceration of art and artists in the face of judgment, aesthetic and eternal, material and psychic, human and divine. The difference is that Titian/Marsyas presides over this aesthetic metaphor, whereas Michelangelo’s own late religiosity made him a victim of it. Despite Nichols caution that we must “beware of making too simple a binary opposition” (131) between Michelangelo and Titian, it seems clear that Titian himself never tired of alluding to exactly this comparison.

In his conclusion, Nichols alludes to the various geopolitical forces in the late sixteenth century which signalled the end of “Venetian” painting—Imperial expansionism and European fragmentation. In fact, such forces also led to the dissolution of many key “Italian” collections that had defined the map of the “Renaissance” typically used to construct the history of art of the period; the

sale of the vast Mantuan collections, the break-up of other city-states of the Italian peninsula, the waning of the Medici dynasty in Florence. To say that Titian was responsible for destroying “Venetian” painting is to acknowledge, I think, that the world of painting, as it had once been defined, had changed and that “art history,” as a history of regional styles, is an extremely utilitarian illusion, but an illusion nonetheless.

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