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Note

New Findings in Titian's Fresco Technique at the Scuola del Santo in Padua

Sergio Rossetti Morosini

Among Titian's very few surviving frescoes, the well-preserved group painted in 1511 in the Scuola del Santo representing three miracles of Saint Anthony is his earliest work in this medium still in its original setting.¹ In one of the scenes of this fresco cycle, *The Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, Titian places the most dramatic action of the story, the scene of a murder of a wrongly accused woman by her husband, in the foreground of the painting.² It is only in the background of the scene that the miracle, which occasioned the fresco, appears; there, the repentant husband kneels before Saint Anthony begging forgiveness. By thrusting the disturbing, violent action of the stabbing toward the forefront of the painting, Titian makes the viewer a direct witness to the murder. This dramatic effect is reinforced by the extraordinary presence of the large foreground figures, the glowing color that suffuses the entire composition, and the impressive three-dimensional modeling of the volumes.

Surprisingly, a close examination of Titian's description of volume in the figures reveals a passage where volume is actually sculpted in relief rather than described illusionistically. Clearly visible in a photograph taken in raking light (Fig. 1), the right arm of the figure of the wife is shaped by a building up of the intonaco as much as two inches from the wall surface, thus causing it to cast a real shadow onto its adjacent surroundings. In addition to describing the volume of the cylindrical part of the arm, this modeling even details the slight protuberance of the bones of the elbow and wrist. Close observation of this area of the fresco reveals no suture in the intonaco where the arm meets the torso, indicating that the intonaco of the three-dimensionally modeled arm and of the head and torso of the figure constitutes a continuous layer of plaster applied at one time.³

The use of relief details in panel and fresco painting was, of course, a common and undisguised device for accenting gilt costume details and suggesting divine light. Disk-shaped haloes, for example, built up abruptly from intonaco surfaces with strongly modeled, gleaming edges, function as an effective means of catching the light, calling attention to the religious figures they frame. But nowhere else in the corpus of fresco painting is the illusion of a three-dimensional figural form created by a concealed actual relief modeling of the surface of the painting.

In *The Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, Titian raised the three-dimensional volume of the arm gradually from the surface, avoiding obvious edges.⁴ The illusionistically painted



1 Titian, *The Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, detail, 1511, fresco. Padua, Scuola del Santo (photo: author)

volumes and the actual relief form of the arm are so cleverly matched that the real volume is perfectly camouflaged among the painted ones. Real volume and painted illusion of volume confront one another in the same painting and prove visually indistinguishable. Titian needed only to view the results to realize that his fictively represented volumes were as illusionistically effective as the actual volume of the arm of the wife in this experimental fresco; thus, he would have felt no need to return to relief modeling in his subsequent frescoes of figural

form. In his later works, generally considered his more successful frescoes, the artist achieved a persuasive three dimensionality and spatial illusionism through painting alone.

Titian's contemporary female portrait known as *La Schiavona* (ca. 1511–12, National Gallery, London) is related to the technical experimentation of *The Miracle of the Jealous Husband*.⁵ *La Schiavona* also gives clear evidence of Titian's concern at this time in his career for the creation of visually convincing volumetric forms. The woman depicted holds an *all'antica* sculpted profile bust of herself in relief. This painting functions as Titian's essay on the *paragone*, a demonstration of the characteristic quality of paint—here, paint alone on the two-dimensional support—to render the illusion of real volumetric form, a conclusion perhaps derived in part from the modest (and, until now, unnoticed) experiment in *The Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, which itself turned into a dead end. By juxtaposing pictorially represented three-dimensional effects with actual relief in the fresco, Titian demonstrated, perhaps only to himself, that his painted description of volume could be made indistinguishable from a real one.⁶

The remarkable experiment in three-dimensional modeling in the fresco of *The Miracle of the Jealous Husband* at the Scuola del Santo brings fresh insight into the young Titian's thinking. It confirms the experimental spirit reported in early sources regarding the Fondaco dei Tedeschi frescoes painted in 1508⁷ and affords conclusive evidence for Titian's interest in relief sculpture, which has been suggested by modern writers.⁸

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Notes

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1. The fragmentary remains of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi frescoes of 1508 (today at the Galleria Giorgio Franchetti, Cà d'Oro, Venice), the frescoes of the Scuola del Santo in Padua of 1511 (*The Miracle of the Reattached Foot*, *The Miracle of the Jealous Husband*, and *The Miracle of the Speaking Babe*), and the *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* and the *Saint Christopher* of 1523, still in situ in the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, make up Titian's entire extant oeuvre in this medium.

2. For the story, see Antonio Morassi, *Tiziano: Gli affreschi della Scuola del Santo a Padova*, Collezione Silvana, vol. 16 (Milan: A. Pizzi, 1956), 7–10.

3. The brushwork in the area is consistent with Titian's fresco technique as analyzed by Morassi (as in n. 2), 27, and with the analyses of the *Saint Christopher* at the Palazzo Ducale offered by Giovanna Nepi Scirè, "Recenti restauri di opere di Tiziano a Venezia," in *Tiziano*, exh. cat. Palazzo Ducale, Venice, 1990, and National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1990–91 (Venice: Marsilio, 1990), 109–31.

4. For other examples of illusionistic decorations in the Veneto, see Diana Gisolfi, "Two Oil Sketches," *Art Bulletin* 64 (1982): 397; and idem, "Veronese and His Collaborators at La Soranza," *Artibus et Historiae* 15 (1987): 91–97.

5. I am indebted to John Paoletti for bringing this association to my attention.

6. Titian may then have seen his main artistic challenge to be the standards of three-dimensional representation set by artists in Florence and Rome, most famously exemplified by Michelangelo's decoration of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which was being carried out at the same time and in the same medium. By 1511, Titian would have known the new decoration of the Sistine Ceiling only through descriptions and copies. For this period, see *Tiziano* (as in n. 3), passim; *Leonardo e Venezia*, exh. cat., Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1992 (Milan: Bompiani, 1992), passim; and *Le siècle de Titien: L'âge d'or de la peinture à Venise*, exh. cat., Grand Palais, Paris, 1993 (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Grand Palais, 1993), passim.

7. See Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori . . .*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (1878–85; reprint, Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1906), vol. 7, 430–31.

8. See Creighton Gilbert, "Some Findings on Early Works of Titian," *Art Bulletin* 62 (1980): 36–75; Sarah Wilk, "Titian's Paduan Experience and Its Influence on His Style," *Art Bulletin* 65 (1983): 51–61; and Wendy Stedman Sheard, "Titian's Paduan Frescoes and the Issue of Decorum," in *Decorum in Renaissance Narrative Art*, ed. Francis Ames-Lewis and Anka Bednarek (London: Birkbeck College, University of London, 1992), 89–102.