



## Andromeda Unchained: Women and Erotic Mythology in Renaissance Art, 1500–1650

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### Towards a Gendered History of Reception

Between 1912 and 1914, advocates of the women's suffrage movement in the United Kingdom committed some fourteen attacks on artworks ranging from religious paintings to painted portraits to porcelain displays to mummy cases. The most infamous of these attacks occurred on the morning of 10 March 1914, when Mary Richardson positioned herself in Room 17 of London's National Gallery before Velázquez's supreme erotic mythology, the so-called *Rokeby Venus*. She began hacking at it with a meat cleaver, first shattering the glass and then repeatedly lacerating the canvas beneath it [fig. 1]. While under arrest, Richardson explained her motivation for destroying a valuable and famous painting in a public collection: she conceived of it as a political tactic that would attract wide attention and put pressure on lawmakers to enfranchise women. She and the other suffragettes deemed 'militants' by the British press used disruptive behaviour to demonstrate that women were not content with a voiceless existence.

Whereas the other iconoclastic acts committed in the name of women's suffrage have largely been forgotten, the *Rokeby Venus* attack alone has succeeded in capturing the interest of journalists as well as anthropologists, art historians, and cultural historians, all of whom have explored why Richardson targeted this particular painting.<sup>1</sup> Richardson herself seems to have explained her choice when describing how men looked at the painting with lubricious pleasure; many years later, she still recalled disapprovingly how 'men visitors to the gallery gaped at it all day'.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Richardson herself appreciated Velázquez's painting with an intellectualised aesthetic sensibility, seeing it as a 'picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history'.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between her own reaction to the artwork and the way that men viewed it suggests that she singled out this painting because of the particular way it affected men, catalysing a division among the audience of museum goers along gender lines.<sup>4</sup>

Whether spontaneous, imitated, or staged, men's unabashed indulgence in pleasurable arousal while looking at the *Rokeby Venus* in the setting of the museum vividly dramatised the

←  
Titian, *Diana and Callisto*  
(cat. 19 detail)

1\_ The author thanks Sheila ffolliott, Mary D. Garrard, Michael Cole, Alexander Nagel, David Kim, Christopher Richards, Alessio Assonitis, and Ian Verstegen for reading drafts of this paper and generously offering suggestions for its improvement. This essay is dedicated to Sheila ffolliott, with deepest gratitude for her unparalleled mentorship and continued inspiration.

Important theoretical treatments of this famous incident include Gell 1998, pp. 63–65; Freedberg 1989, pp. 410–11, 425; and Nead 1992, pp. 34–38.

2\_ Mary Richardson, in an interview given to the *London Star* published on 22 February 1952.

3\_ *London Times*, 11 March 2014, quoted in Nead 1992, p. 35.

4\_ In a letter of 18 September 1812 to Sir Walter Scott, Sir John Bacon Sawrey Morritt of Rokeby Park described the painting by Velázquez that he had purchased three years earlier as 'Venus's backside' and he indicated very clearly the different effects it had on men and women: 'I have been all morning pulling about my pictures and hanging them in new positions to make more room for my fine picture of Venus's backside by Velasquez [sic] which I have at length exalted over my chimney piece in the library. It is an admirable light for the painting, and shows it in perfection, whilst by raising the said backside to a considerable height the ladies may avert their downcast eyes without difficulty, and connoisseurs steal a glance without drawing in the said posterior as a part of the company'. According to Anthony Bailey (2011, p. 222), when the painting went on public view in London's National Gallery in 1906, it became known for causing sexual excitement in men, and displeasing women.

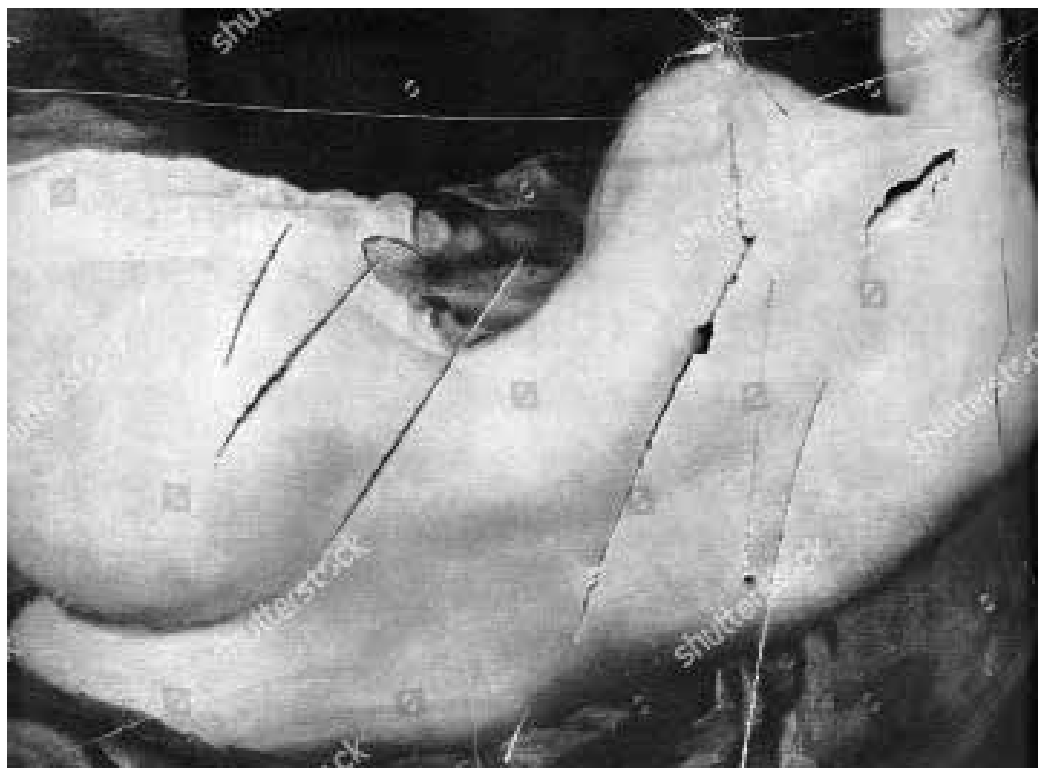


fig. 1  
Diego Velázquez's *The Toilet of Venus* ('*The Rokeby Venus*') after it was attacked by the suffragette Mary Richardson at the National Gallery, London, 1914

unpalatable ways in which their sex asserted privileged control over objects, spaces, and discourses in late Victorian society. Thus, when Richardson deposed the fetishised image that had been the cynosure for this (apparently) obscene display of male sexuality in the National Gallery, she not only gained mediatic attention for her specific cause, but she also exposed men's insidious appropriation of the museum's public spaces.<sup>5</sup> Her focus on this artwork gave a jolting immediacy to the suffragettes' decrial of the legal disparities between men and women, whereas the symbolic import of her sensational action struck perhaps even deeper than she had anticipated.

In the decades following Richardson's attack, there emerged new concern over images of women in the public sphere, from artworks displayed in museums, to commercial advertising, to popular cinema. The argument that Western images sexualised women or otherwise demeaned them in conformity with male idealisation was articulated in such influential works as John Berger's 1972 'Ways of Seeing' BBC television series and Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay on male desire in cinema in which she coined the term 'male gaze'.<sup>6</sup> By no coincidence, around the same time, feminists also began to voice outrage and organise public demonstrations in response to the systematic exclusion of women artists' works from private galleries and public museums.<sup>7</sup>

Taking her cue from both Marxist revisionist studies and feminism, Joan Kelly-Gadol galvanised academia in 1977 with her essay, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?' Her analysis indicted practically the whole of Renaissance culture for its patriarchy.<sup>8</sup> In the wake of Kelly-Gadol's essay, feminist art historians transposed such concerns to the study of Renaissance art. While uncovering masculinist bias and asymmetrical gender relations in nearly all aspects of early modern visual culture, they pinpointed the 'heroic' imagery of rape that is prevalent in the mythological subjects of Renaissance art to be the most objectionable expression of the period's anti-woman mentality.<sup>9</sup>

Before the close of the twentieth century, several historians of women would launch a nuanced push-back to Kelly-Gadol's conclusions, which they criticised as 'victim' history.<sup>10</sup> To correct a view of the Renaissance as an age of silenced, universally oppressed women, this successive crop of feminist historians gathered counter-examples of strong, self-defined female subjects (including female patrons and female artists) and they identified the social dynamics and institutions that enabled women to exercise agency. Among these more optimistic feminist views of Renaissance culture were studies that redeemed male artists, framing their attitudes towards, and representations of, women in more historically nuanced terms.<sup>11</sup>

At this juncture, Rona Goffen offered her feminist rejoinder to art history in the form of her book *Titian's Women*.<sup>12</sup> This 1997 publication had a two-pronged purpose. On the one hand, it aimed at giving depth to the Renaissance imagery of women through prosopographic research into women's social realities. On the other hand, it sought to salvage Titian, one of the male Old Masters most closely connected with scenes of mythological rapes, by portraying him as a sort of proto-feminist.<sup>13</sup> Goffen did this by comparing the Renaissance reception of Titian's *poesie* in terms of the *paragone* between *disegno* and *colore* to that era's discourse on gender. According to Goffen, the Renaissance critics who opposed Michelangelo to Titian were implicitly aligning Michelangelo's style with masculine characteristics and Titian's style with female characteristics, an interpretation that, according to Goffen, Titian himself consciously cultivated.<sup>14</sup> Presupposing the possibility of significant slippage in gender identification and in gendered experiences, Goffen also contended that all viewers of Titian's erotic paintings are made 'male' because his art provides scopophilic pleasure to nearly everyone, regardless of the viewer's gender identity.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Richardson would surely have resisted Goffen's late-twentieth-century theoretical position that gender differences are temporarily suspended as viewers contemplate Titian's images of women. By comparing these two twentieth-century feminists' starkly different positions on erotic mythologies, there arises the question of how women of Titian's own time responded to his *poesie*. As the initial step to reconstructing a gendered history of response to erotic mythologies, this essay will piece together evidence from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and from the geographic areas at the focus of this exhibition.

### Women and Mythology

European women's interest in pagan mythology traces back at least to the late Middle Ages, when Boccaccio's *Famous Women* (*De mulieribus claris*) enjoyed enormous success. Written in 1362, this collection drew its stories of women worthies from both ancient history and mythology. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan, a poet and essayist at the court of King Charles VI of France, undertook her own book on women worthies: the *Book of*

5\_ In this context, one might consider the decision of Louis d'Orleans (1703–1752) to purge his art collection of all images of nudes, and particularly his knife attack on Correggio's *Leda and the Swan*; by destroying this image of an erotic myth, he apparently hoped to release himself (and other men too, presumably) from the painting's prurient effects; see Held 1963, p. 8; Freedberg 1985, p. 45, n. 47; and Ekserdjian 1997, pp. 288–89.

6\_ Berger's series was adapted into a book: Berger 1972; Mulvey 1975.

7\_ Barker 2020.

8\_ Kelly-Gadol 1977.

9\_ See, e.g., Carroll 1989, Even 1992, and Wolfthal 1999.

10\_ Spongberg 2002.

11\_ To cite just a few examples: King and King 1998, Johnson and Matthews Grieco 1997, Lawrence 1997, and Tinagli 1997.

12\_ Goffen 1997.

13\_ Goffen's project of dialing back the presumed totalitarian pollution of the male gaze and her notion of the malleability of gendered subjectivity were largely anticipated by Snow (1989); many thanks to Alexander Nagel for introducing me to this essay.

14\_ Goffen 1997, p. 10. Recent studies such as Campbell's (2019) have complicated Goffen's simple binomial assessment by addressing cases where Titian deliberately adopted a Michelangesque language.

15\_ Goffen 1997, p. 158; cf. p. 136.

the *City of Ladies* (*Livre de la Cité des Dames*). For her compilation, she, too, drew liberally upon pagan mythology, placing Minerva, Ceres, Ops, Arachne, and Europa among her profiles of admirable female exemplars. Yet in contrast to Boccaccio, who had chosen to exclude Hebrew and Christian women from his compilation, Christine sought to underline continuities between virtuous heroines of Antiquity and those of her own era.<sup>16</sup> She achieved this historiographic unification by retelling pagan fables and harnessing them to allegorical readings that reflect Christian morality as well as her own proto-feminist aims.<sup>17</sup> Mirroring this textual moralisation, the illustrations in an early manuscript of the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* show deities like Diana and Minerva dressed in conformity with a fifteenth-century readership's ideals of female modesty [fig. 2]. The success of Christine's approach was confirmed in the following century, when, in order to give Boccaccio's old book a new sheen, editors like Giuseppe Betussi copied her strategy of adding modern figures to the original cast of female paragons.<sup>18</sup> Thus, by the sixteenth century, it had become standard practice in the exemplarist writings designed for female audiences to euhemeristically merge mythological and historical women's lives into a single genealogy of gynocentric emulation.

Conditioned by popular exemplarist writings to identify the heroines of pagan myths as personal role models, noblewomen of the sixteenth century frequently stylised themselves as female mythological figures. This was particularly evident in their cultural patronage activities. In Italy, Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, preferred to be seen as a Muse,<sup>19</sup> whereas Eleonora de Toledo, Duchess of Tuscany, associated herself with the mortal mythological figure of Penelope, as well as the deities Cybele and Juno.<sup>20</sup> Queen Elizabeth I wished to be seen as Astraea as well as Juno and then Diana.<sup>21</sup> In France, Diane de Poitiers, too, styled herself as Diana.<sup>22</sup> Later, Queen of France Maria de' Medici exploited musical ballets to elide her identity, as well as that of her daughter Élisabeth, with the figure of Minerva.<sup>23</sup> While living in Spain, Empress Maria of Austria also made use of musical ballet for this kind of fashioning; her particular aim was to compare her niece Isabel Clara Eugenia with Daphne.<sup>24</sup> As Princess of Portugal, Juana of Austria cultivated an identification with Psyche.<sup>25</sup> Although Psyche was mortal, not divine, this identity suited her because her younger husband was just fourteen years old when they married, and



fig. 2

Christine de Pizan, *Épître d'Othéa*, 1407–9  
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fr. 606, fol. 30r

16\_ Phillipy 1986, p. 170; and Brownlee 1995, pp. 245–46.

17\_ Delany 1990, p. 82; and McLeod 1992, p. 38.

18\_ Caputo 2008.

19\_ San Juan 1991, p. 71. The valences of these mythological avatars mattered a great deal to Isabella, who excoriated a court poet for comparing her to the nude and adulterous Venus in Mantegna's painting.

20\_ For the connection with Penelope, see Galdy 2002. For Eleonora's Junonian symbols, see Cox-Rearick 2004. On links with Juno as well as Cybele and Ceres, see Edelstein 2004.

21\_ The classical study is Yates 1975. Important expansions and corrections to Yates's study are in Doran 1995. It is revealed that Elizabeth associated herself also with male figures from mythology and ancient history in Marcus 1986.

22\_ Wellman 2013, pp. 185–223, and Ruby 2007.

23\_ Marrow 1982, particularly pp. 57–58; Cohen 2003; and Crawford 2004, pp. 62–64, 79.

24\_ Ramos López 1995.

25\_ Sebastián Lozano 2004, pp. 90–91; and Falomir 2020, p. 107.

26\_ Jordan Gschwend 1994, p. 46.

27\_ Rosenthal 1992, pp. 108–9. Historical rather than mythical, the figure of Lucretia was an avatar for at least two Renaissance women: in Italy, the unidentified woman holding a drawing of the nude Lucretia in Lorenzo Lotto's *Portrait of a Woman inspired by Lucretia* (1530–33, London, National Gallery), and in France, Jehanne de Montal, the patron of a window frame decorated with the figure of Lucretia (1523–34, Philadelphia Museum of Art).

28\_ See Sebastián Lozano 2004, p. 164.

29\_ *Ibid.*, pp. 108–9. Unlike noble women, lowborn women could have seen erotic imagery in taverns and other such sites; see Tinagli 1997, pp. 129–31.

their marriage evoked the union of Psyche with her juvenile Olympian lover Eros. As Queen of Portugal, Catalina of Austria took on the role of Juno in a tapestry from the Spheres series now at the Escorial.<sup>26</sup> As it turns out, even a low-born woman could adopt a mythological avatar: the poet and courtesan Veronica Franco used the myth of Danaë and Jupiter in her sonnets dedicated to Henri III of France, drawing upon a myth that would help to naturalise her unequal dalliance with a prince of the blood.<sup>27</sup>

### Women, the Nude, and Erotic Art

Although noblewomen of Titian's era were clearly familiar with the erotic fables of pagan mythology, they left behind exceedingly little in the way of written responses to artistic representations of these same subjects. This can be attributed to two interrelated factors. On the one hand, they may have chosen not to write about prurient imagery so as not to appear immodest or to be associated with the vice of lust.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, elite women may have had less access to the spaces where erotic paintings were typically kept.<sup>29</sup> As an exception to this general rule are the marriage chests known as *cassoni*. Given to a bride upon her wedding and frequently decorated on their exteriors with mythological imagery, *cassoni* were sometimes painted on their

inside lids with a nude Venus.<sup>30</sup> This tradition is charmingly invoked in Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, where women in the background open a *cassone* lid and seemingly give rise to a domestic epiphany of the goddess in the foreground.

Some women went out of their way in order not to have any exposure to erotic imagery, particularly male nudes. Élisabeth of France, for instance, did not wish to see the indecent painting kept by Philip IV in the Alcázar – not even by accident – and so before she walked into the halls where they were kept, the paintings of nudes had to be scrupulously covered with curtains.<sup>31</sup> According to Paolo Giovio, the rampant nudity of the male mythological figures painted in the loggia of Agostino Chigi's villa in Rome provoked a 'bella gentildonna' to register her disapproval with Chigi, who then had Raphael cover up Polyphemus's oversized genitalia.<sup>32</sup> The extreme regard for female chastity in early modern societies meant that even the nudity encountered in religious imagery could present problems, as in the case of the nude Crucifix sculpted by Benvenuto Cellini [fig. 3]. According to Francisco Pachecho, despite the fact that this work inspired Philip II with great piety, the king nonetheless punctiliously covered the sculpture's loins whenever his daughters were present so that they would not be 'discomfited by its indecency'.<sup>33</sup>

Avoiding nudity in Renaissance art galleries was certainly no easy matter for women. Isabella d'Este was understandably incensed when at first Perugino flouted her explicit instructions to clothe the Venus in his painting of *The Combat of Love and Chastity* (Paris, Musée du Louvre).<sup>34</sup> Even Spain's Queen Élisabeth of Valois and her ladies-in-waiting (among whom was Sofonisba Anguissola) were subjected to an indignity of this nature, since a feminine space of El Pardo known as the *aposeno de la Camarera* had been decorated by Philip II's painter Gaspar Becerra between 1562 and 1568 with frescoes recounting the myth of Perseus, and among these images was a risqué depiction of Danaë that has survived to this day [fig. 4].<sup>35</sup>

As Elizabeth Cropper has explained with regard to sixteenth-century art, 'the image of the woman was [...] an epitome of painting itself'.<sup>36</sup> Thus, a vainglorious desire to show off their skill to both other artists and the cultivated *cognoscenti* could explain Perugino's and Becerra's indulgence in lascivious female nudes, despite the fact that their artworks were designated for aristocratic women. Isabella d'Este, in fact, remarked on this, astutely observing that Perugino had disobeyed her by painting Venus completely nude because he was eager to 'show off the excellence of his art'.<sup>37</sup> During Perugino's and Becerra's lifetimes, the nude emerged as the foremost arena for professional competition among artists, affording painters and sculptors a welcome opportunity to display their knowledge of anatomy, their understanding of beauty, and their ability to imitate the appearance of flesh.<sup>38</sup>

Men do not seem to have welcomed women's attempts to voice their judgments regarding the relative merits of artistic renditions of the nude. Two vignettes from semi-fictionalised Renaissance memoirs of the sixteenth century show that when women entered into discussion

30\_ On the use of imagery in the nuptial chamber for procreation and magical and apotropaic effects, see Tinagli 1997, pp. 22, 27, 58; and Musacchio 1999. On the Venuses painted on the lids, see Camille 1998, p. 163.

31\_ As noted by Cassiano dal Pozzo during his visit of 1626; see Checa 1994, p. 143; and Portús 1998, pp. 91–92.

32\_ Giovio, *Lettere*, 1560, fols. 14v–15r.

33\_ 'sacó un pañizuelo y cubrió las partes que se debían cubrir del Santo Cristo, porque sus hijas no se ofendiesen de su indecencia'; Pacheco: 737, cited in Sebastián Lozano 2004, p. 164. As pointed out to me by Michael Cole, Duchess Eleonora de Toledo praised this same statue; see Cellini,

*The Life*, ed. 1906, vol. 2, pp. 484–85; and Cellini, *La vita*, ed. 1866, pp. 487–88.

34\_ San Juan 1991, p. 68.

35\_ Mariás 1989, pp. 141–42; Tovar Martín 1995, p. 78; and Sebastián Lozano 2004, pp. 109–11.

36\_ Cropper 1995, p. 190.

37\_ Quoted in translation in Tinagli 1997, p. 126.

38\_ With respect to Perugino and the nude in particular, see Barker 2007, pp. 111–17.

fig. 3

Benvenuto Cellini, *Crucifix*, 1562  
Marble, figure 184 × 149 cm  
(Christ); 274 × 169 cm (cross)  
Patrimonio Nacional, Real Sitio  
de San Lorenzo del Escorial,  
10034884

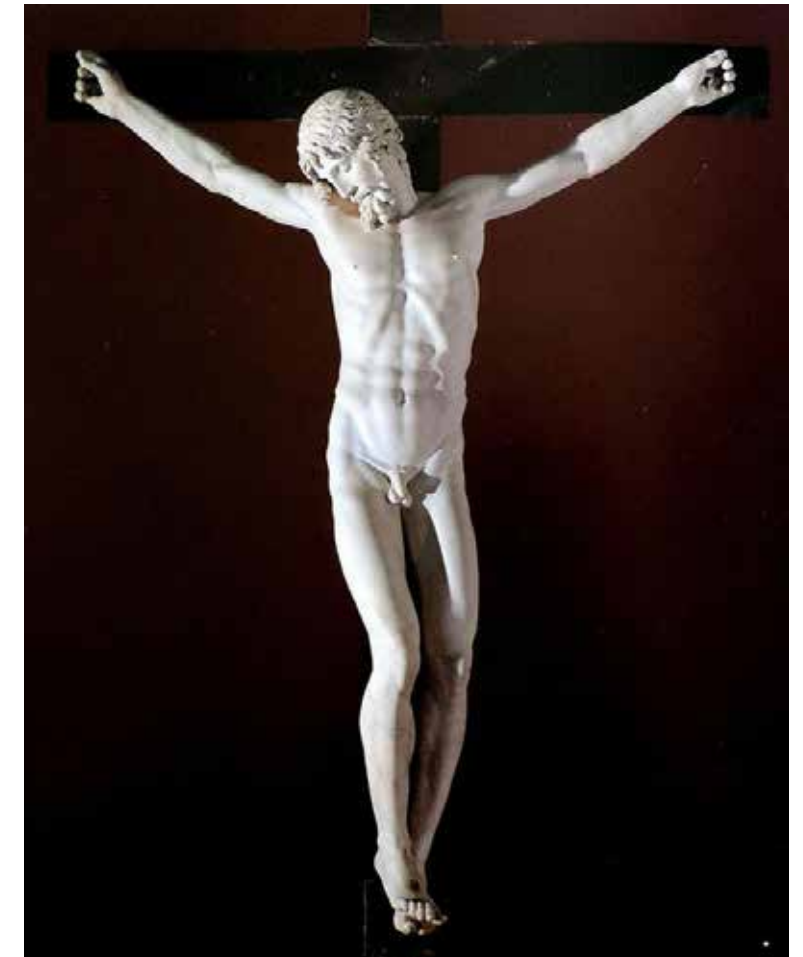
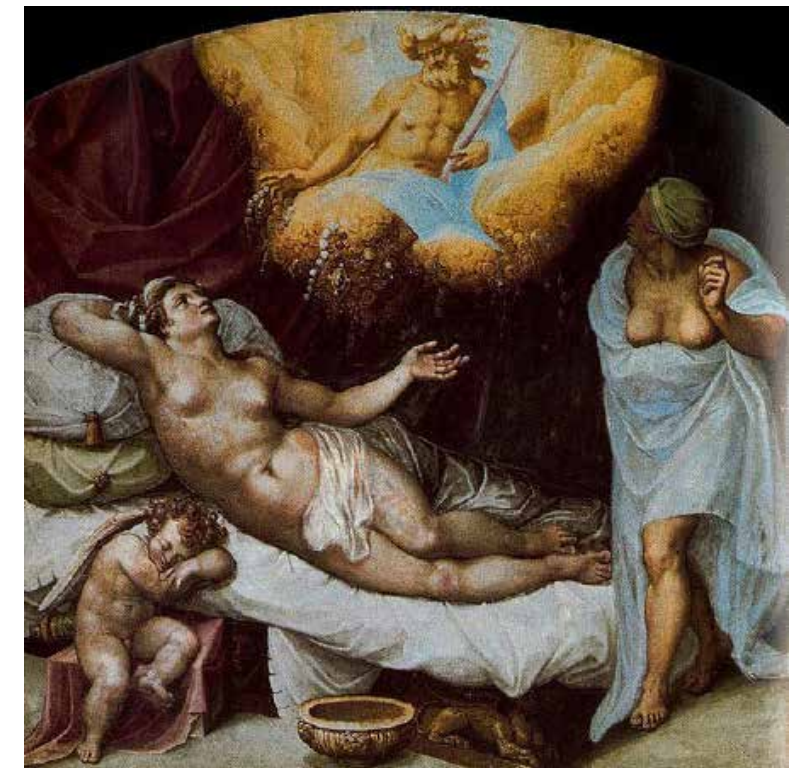


fig. 4

Gaspar Becerra, *Danaë receiving the Shower of Gold*, scene in the roof of the Perseus room, 1563–68  
Fresco  
Patrimonio Nacional, Palacio  
Real del Pardo



with men in the critical assessment of artistic nudes, they were swiftly punished with humiliation. The first of these encounters was focused on Cellini’s maquette for a sculpture of Jupiter, which he presented to King Francis I in order to win a commission. During the judging of the maquette, the king’s mistress, Anne de Pisseleu d’Heilly, Duchess of Étampes, pointed out that a veil on Jupiter’s lap might conceal the statue’s faults. She, like all the others present at this sculpture critique at Fontainebleau, believed that the perfect representation of the nude body was the litmus test of artistic excellence. Despite the presence of several ladies of the court, the umbraged sculptor violently snatched away the veil, ‘uncovering the handsome genital members of the god’ (‘scoprendo quei bei membri genitali’), and ripped it to shreds to show his anger at being challenged by a woman regarding this detail of all things.<sup>39</sup> Again from Fontainebleau comes another story about a woman punished with humiliation for having opined on the artistic merits of a nude sculpture. As told by Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur de Brantôme, in his *Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies (Vies des dames galantes)*:

One day at Court looking curiously at the great bronze Hercules in the fountain at Fontainebleau, as she was a-walking with an honourable gentleman which did escort her, his hand beneath her arm, did complain that the said Hercules, albeit excellently well wrought and figured otherwise, was not so well proportioned in all his members as should be, forasmuch as his middle parts were far too small and out of proper measure, in no wise corresponding to his huge colossus of a body. The gentleman replied he did not agree with what she said, for ’twas to be supposed that in those days ladies [referring to their genitalia] were not so wide as at the present.<sup>40</sup>

Such coarse and detectably misogynistic attitudes towards women who articulated opinions about erotic nudes can be lain even at the feet of Raphael, the artist-courtier *par excellence*. In Giovio’s recounting of the abovementioned incident regarding the covering of the nude parts of the mythological deities depicted in the frescoes of the Loggia at Villa Chigi at a gentlewoman’s request, we learn the backstory about how she was ridiculed:

Raphael of Urbino said to a beautiful gentlewoman, who by chance one morning entered the garden of Agostino Chigi, where the aforementioned was painting the portico and here had made many figures of divinities and the graces. And among the former was an enormous Polyphemus and a Mercury shown at the age of thirteen, like the one of marble that still today can be seen in the loggia of Leone. And as the gentlewoman was looking at them and praising them – for she was one who made a show of being a brilliant intellectual – she said, ‘Certainly all these figures are most excellent, but I would

prefer that for the sake of modesty you would paint a pretty rose or a grape leaf over the shameful parts of that Mercury’. At this point Raphael smiled and said, ‘Forgive me my Lady, for not having given this consideration’, and then he added, ‘But why did you not ask me to do the same to Polyphemus, for which you earlier praised me so much?’ And at these words everyone that was present burst out laughing, except the gentlewoman, who although considered to be very smart, and in fact even today she is a witty and lively old widow, tends to have a sharper judgement and a better eye for the big things rather than the little ones.<sup>41</sup>

The tendency of men to ridicule and shame the women who expressed opinions on the nude in public can be understood more clearly if we recall that the ultimate proof of an artist’s attainment in the representation of the nude occurred when the artwork triggered lust in the viewer, just as if it were a real body.<sup>42</sup> Thus, when Giulio Romano reported to Vasari that Correggio’s nudes ‘appear to be flesh not paint’, he was giving the artist supreme praise.<sup>43</sup> Lodovico Dolce, when writing to art collector Alessandro Contarini about Titian’s Prado *Venus and Adonis*, employed similar terms to describe the rendering of the nude female, ‘which is of flesh, which is beauty itself, which seems to breathe’, and confirmed its ability to confuse men’s judgment and to stir their bodies: ‘there is no man so acute of vision and of judgment who, seeing her [Venus], does not believe her to be living; none so chilled by years or so hard of complexion that he does not feel himself warmed, softened, and all the blood coursing in his veins’. Dolce went on to compare the power of Titian’s Venus to the power of Praxiteles’s carving of a marble statue of Aphrodite, a work that, according to Pliny, excited a male viewer so much that he left his stain on it.<sup>44</sup> Renaissance readers like Dolce were likewise familiar with the equally shocking anecdote in Terence’s *The Eunuch* (later repeated in St Augustine’s *City of God* and Gregorio Comanini’s sixteenth-century art treatise, *Il Figino*), in which a Greek youth felt justified in raping a virgin because he had been inspired by a painting of the Danaë myth.<sup>45</sup>

Although the majority of anecdotes revolve around male viewers, women of Titian’s era were also susceptible to carnal thoughts when looking at a beautifully rendered nude. The above mentioned Brantôme recalled how a circle of ladies was brought to look at a selection of artworks representing erotic myths as the guests of a Florentine named Ludovico di Ghiaceti. As Brantôme recounts, one of them was so inspired by lust as a result of seeing the art, that she immediately withdrew taking Ghiaceti with her for an adulterous escapade. These socially disruptive arousals of female libido could also occur in response to religious artworks. For instance, there is the famous incident from the early sixteenth century when some female parishioners found themselves captivated by the beauty of Fra Bartolomeo’s altarpiece of a nude St Sebastian (now known only through a copy).<sup>46</sup> As a result, their thoughts were ‘corrupted by the graceful

39\_ Cellini, *The Life*, ed. 1906, vol. 2, p. 240; and Cellini, *La vita*, ed. 1866, p. 360.

40\_ ‘une grande dame, un jour à la Cour regardant et contemplant ce grand Hercule de bronze qui est en la fontaine de Fontainebleau, elle estant tenue sous les bras par un gentilhomme qui la couduisoit, elle lui dit que cet Hercule, encore qu’il fust très-bien fait et représenté, n’estoit pas si bien proportionné de tous ses membres comme il falloit, d’autant que celui du mitan estoit par trop petit et par trop inegal, et peu correspondant à son grand colosse de corps. Le gentilhomme luy respondit qu’il n’y trouvoit rien à redire de ce qu’elle luy disoit, si-non qu’il falloit croire que de ce temps les dames ne l’avoient si grand comme du temps d’aujourd’huy’; Bourdeille, *Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies*, ed. 1922, vol. 2, seventh discourse, article II.3. For more on this saucy exchange, see Tinagli 1997, p. 125.

41\_ ‘Disse Raffaello da Urbino a una bella gentil donna, la quale a caso una mattina entrò nel giardino d’Agostin Ghisi, ove esso pingeva il portico et vi haveva fatto molte figure delle Dee & delle gratie. Et tra l’altre un Polifemo grandissimo et un Mercurio d’età di tredici anni in circa a similitudine di quello di marmo, il quale anchora oggidi vediamo ne la loggia di Leone: et mirandole et lodandole la gentil donna, come quella che faceva professione d’essere di svegliato ingegno, disse “Certamente tutte queste figure sono eccellentissime, ma desidererei che per honestà faceste una bella rosa, ovvero una foglia di vite sopra la vergogna di quel Mercurio”. Allhora Raffaello sorridendo disse, “Perdonatemi Madonna, che io non haveva tanta consideratione”, et soggiunse, “Ma perché non havete voi anchor detto, ch’io faccia il simile a Polifemo, il quale dianzi tanto mi lodaste?” Et a questa parola ognuno, che v’era subito rise, eccetto la gentil donna, la quale per haver nome di savia, come anchora, hoggi di la vediamo fresca et gioiosa

vedova, soleva havere più acuto giuditio et miglio’occhio alle cose grandi che alle piccole’; Giovio, *Lettere*, 1560, fols. 14v–15r.

42\_ Cropper 1995, p. 189; and Turner 2017, chapter one.

43\_ ‘non parevano colori ma carni’; cited in Nova 2014, p. 121.

44\_ ‘Vi giuro, Signor mio, che non si truova uomo tanto acuto di vista e di giudicio, che veggendola non la creda viva; niuno così raffreddato dagli anni, o si duro di complessione, che non si senta riscaldare, intenerire, e commuoversi nelle vene tutto il sangue. Nè è meravigliosa; che se una statua di marmo poté in modo con gli stimoli della sua bellezza penetrare nelle midolle d’un giovane, chi’egli vi lascio la macchia, or, che dee far questa, ch’è di carne, ch’è la beltà stessa, che par che spiri?’; cited in translation

from Goffen 1987, p. 692. Cf. Rogers 1992, pp. 116–19; Cropper 1995, p. 188; and Puttfarken 2005, p. 164. On the link between the viewer’s sight and sense of touch in the context of Titian’s *poesie*, see Arasse 1997. I thank David Kim for discussing the meaning of the term ‘macchia’ with me and pointing me to Cropper’s essay.

45\_ Comanini, *The Figino*, ed. 2001, p. 70.

46\_ On the copy, see Cornelison 2009.



fig. 5  
Tintoretto, *Veronica Franco*,  
c. 1575–94  
Oil on canvas, 61.4 × 47.1 cm  
Worcester, MA, Worcester Art  
Museum, Austin S. Garver Fund  
and Sarah C. Garver Fund,  
1948.22

fig. 6  
Titian, *Penitent Magdalene*,  
1531–35  
Oil on canvas, 85.8 × 65.9 cm.  
Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi,  
Palazzo Pitti, 1912 no. 67

and lascivious likeness of the living body, thanks to the skill (*virtù*) of Fra Bartolomeo', as reported by Giorgio Vasari.<sup>47</sup>

In the context of the present discussion, what is just as important as the question of who falls prey to art's erotic power is the question of how art acquires that power. Vasari quite clearly attributes the arousal of lust in female viewers of Fra Bartolomeo's nude saint to the great skill of the artist. By contrast, the Venetian poet Veronica Franco, who was well versed in artistic theory, wrote a letter to Tintoretto in which she suggested that the seductive power of his portrait of her was directly dependent upon her own beauty [fig. 5].<sup>48</sup> Specifically, she evoked the Ovidian myth of Narcissus falling in love with his own image, but then explained she had escaped Narcissus's fate because her beauty – as reflected in Tintoretto's portrait – was insufficient to inspire narcissistic self-love. In a sense, Franco's witticism, although self-effacing on the surface, also had the effect of removing art's erotic power from the male artist and reclaiming it for the beautiful women who were his subjects.

Three decades later, Artemisia Gentileschi revisited the topic of art's erotic power as she coquettishly warned her lover not to masturbate should he be aroused by her self-portrait: 'I would beg you with all my heart that before that portrait of me [...] you remember that you promised me you would not do that which perhaps your lordship does [...] which is a serious sin'.<sup>49</sup> Behind her feigned concern for her admirer's soul emerges a frank acknowledgment of her power – both as a beautiful woman and as a painter of women's beauty – to fill his body with passionate longing through the medium of art. More will be said further on about the remarkable position of a female maker of erotogenic images vis-à-vis her male audience.

#### Women and Titian's *Poesie*

As noted already, it is difficult to find direct testimony from Titian's female contemporaries regarding his paintings of erotic myths. There are, however, records of their opinions of his religious art. From these traces it is clear that female audiences very much appreciated Titian's ability to paint women whose beauty amplified the work's affective message, serving as an impassioning device. Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara, for instance, wanted her painting of St Mary Magdalene to be 'a beautiful painting by the hand of an excellent painter [...] a most beautiful one, as lachrymose as she can be'.<sup>50</sup> The resulting image [fig. 6], which received praise from Isabella d'Este,<sup>51</sup> inspired Colonna to write a sonnet that associates the Magdalen's beauty with that which is 'pleasing to the one true eternal beloved'.<sup>52</sup> In other words, for Colonna, the Magdalen's sensuous physical beauty served as an outward symbol of her spiritual perfection.

The first early modern female collectors of art tended to steer clear of blatantly sensual nudes, but that did not prevent them from indulging in the humanistic taste for mythological

47\_ 'corrotte, per la leggiadra e lasciva imitazione del vivo, datagli dalla virtù di Fra Bartolomeo'; Vasari, *Le vite*, ed. 1878–85, vol. IV, p. 188. Further considerations of this famous incident include Freedberg 1989, pp. 322, 346–48; Gaston 1995, pp. 250–51; Tinagli 1997, p. 125; and Barker 2007, pp. 114–15.

48\_ Letter of Veronica Franco to Tintoretto [sic], undated, in Franco, *Lettere*, 1580, pp. 38–40. On Franco's knowledge of art theory, see Land 2003.

49\_ 'Vi vorrei pregare con tutto core che su quel mio ritratto... sapete che mi promettesti di non fare quello che forse Vostra Signoria fa... che è uno grande peccato'; Artemisia Gentileschi to Francesco Maria Maringhi, 26 June 1620, in Gentileschi, *Lettere*, ed. 2011, p. 74. For a similar interpretation of these lines, see Cavazzini 2014.

50\_ Letter of Duke Federico Gonzaga to Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara, 11 March 1531, cited in translation in Goffen 1997, p. 177.

51\_ Goffen 1997, p. 178.

52\_ Colonna, *Rime*, ed. 1982, p. 145, n. 121.

53\_ There may be important exceptions to this general principle, particularly in the case of thalamic gifts. Mancini (1998, pp. 55–56) has hypothesised that Titian's painting of the *Pardo Venus*, now in Louvre, was given by Philip II to his sister Juana as a wedding gift when she married in 1551. For the two mythological *poesie* in the collection of Juana of Austria, see Sebastián Lozano 2004, p. 164, n. 243, and p. 189.

paintings.<sup>53</sup> Isabella d'Este set an important example in the early sixteenth century with her commission of a series of mythological allegories of a moralising nature from some of the leading painters of her age (Perugino, Mantegna, Lorenzo da Costa, and Correggio). Put on display in her *studiolo*, these paintings' themes defended her chastity and at the same time they displayed her humanistic learning, with special reference to her collection of statuettes from pagan Antiquity.<sup>54</sup> The pairing of these two functions was no accident. According to Rose Marie San Juan's explanation, Isabella had broken with the traditional model for the court lady when she adopted the male enterprise of acquiring mythological paintings and pagan antiquities. Because this masculine practice of humanistic collecting was already deeply associated with both learning and a neutral (or even positive) attitude to the erotic imagination, Isabella was compelled to assert that while she was as learned and sophisticated as her male peers, her interest in the knowledge of Antiquity had not attenuated her morality and honesty.<sup>55</sup>

Like Isabella d'Este, Mary of Hungary, Charles V's sister and Governor of the Habsburg Netherlands, used mythological art to communicate propagandistic ideas. In Mary's case, however, those messages promoted her family's glory and not just her own.<sup>56</sup> An ambitious patron of mythological art in the form of tapestries, Mary owned a twelve-piece set representing the *Story of Hercules* based on Bernard van Orley's designs, a second twelve-piece series representing the *Story of Psyche*, a similarly large series known as the *Story of Venus*, a series based on the *Vertumnus and Pomona* myth from 1546, as well as a six-piece set inherited from Marguerite of Austria whose subjects were all drawn from Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* (and which thus likely featured female mythological figures).<sup>57</sup> Additionally, Mary had Pieter Coecke van Aelst design five tapestries made around 1547–48 representing Ovidian myths; this series, known in early documents as *poesie*, included the *Perseus and Andromeda* tapestry now at the Palacio Real de La Granja [fig. 7].<sup>58</sup>

Although tapestries may have been Mary's preferred artistic medium, her boldest and most celebrated use of mythology to promote Habsburg interests was a painting commission: Titian's *Four Sinners* (or *Las Furias* as they are known in Spain). That commission, given to the artist in 1548, comprised the paintings of *Ixion*, *Sisyphus* [fig. 8], *Tantalus*, and *Tityus*, considered to be the four largest mythological canvases of the entire sixteenth century.<sup>59</sup> That this commission involved Titian is no accident, as Mary was his most important patron at the Habsburg court. In fact, she owned more of Titian's paintings than anyone else alive, including the chaste and highly unusual mythological subject of *Venus and Psyche*.<sup>60</sup>

The idea for the *Four Sinners* may have had one of its headwaters in one of Mary's early mythological commissions: a drawing of *The Fall of the Giants* made by Pieter Coecke van Aelst around 1540 [fig. 9]. Coecke's drawing was probably intended to serve as the basis of a tapestry; moreover, its theme of the rebellious giants punished by the Olympian deities surely reflected the humiliating defeat Mary and Charles had just dealt to the leaders of the Revolt of Ghent

54\_ San Juan 1991, pp. 72–74.

55\_ Ibid., pp. 68–73.

56\_ On the many aspects of Mary's patronage, see García Pérez 2020a.

57\_ On the Hercules series, see Laurelle 2020. On the *Psyche* and the *Venus* tapestries, see Falomir 2020, p. 107; on the *Vertumnus and Pomona* tapestries, see Paredes 2005; and on the *City of Ladies* tapestries, see Sánchez-Molero 2020, p. 140.

58\_ Paredes 2014. The series was referred to as 'cinco panos dellas que son de poesie' in December of 1556 by the agent that shipped them to Spain, Juan Diaz *tapicero* to Philip II (Archivo General de Simancas, Tesoro, inv. 24, leg. 561); see the document transcription in Buchanan 1999, p. 148.

59\_ Tischer 1994; Falomir 2014a; and Falomir 2020, p. 107. Cf. Jordan Gschwend and Eichberger 2018, p. 46.

60\_ On Mary as a collector of Titian's art, see García Pérez 2020b, p. 16. On the *Venus and Psyche*, see Falomir 2020, pp. 102–3.



fig. 7

Brussels manufactory after a design by Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *Perseus liberating Andromeda*, c. 1547–48  
Wool, silk, and precious-metal-wrapped threads, 356 × 406 cm  
Patrimonio Nacional, Palacio Real de La Granja de San Ildefonso, TA 19/2

fig. 8

Titian, *Sisyphus*, c. 1549  
Oil on canvas, 237 × 216 cm  
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, P426

fig. 9

Pieter Coecke van Aelst, *The Fall of the Giants*, c. 1540  
Pen and brown and grey ink, brush and brown ink, and white gouache over black chalk, 275 × 409 mm  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds, 1951, RP-T-1951-253



earlier that same year. Mary's return to the gigantomachia theme with her commission of the *Four Sinners* to Titian in 1548 was instigated by plans for the visit of her nephew Philip II to her castle at Binche in August of 1549 for the purpose of consolidating support for Charles's successor.<sup>61</sup> Amidst those festivities attended by courtiers, statesmen, and ambassadors, the *Four Sinners* – which at the time included Michiel Coxcie's painting of *Tantalus* to substitute for one that Titian still had not finished – issued a resounding warning to the Habsburgs' enemies; by the same token, the images would have reassured their allies of the strength of their position. The giants in Mary's Tartarean *poesie* not only recall the rebels Mary and Charles suppressed in Ghent in 1540, but even more vividly they evoke the Lutheran German princes of the Schmalkaldic League who had risen up against Charles before he vanquished them decisively at the Battle of Mühlberg, fought on 24 April 1547.<sup>62</sup>

While scholars have uncovered a great deal regarding the interpretations and aesthetic influence of the *Four Sinners*, much less consideration has been given to the cultural significance of a woman taking on the role of patron and owner of these four enormous canvases featuring hulking, naked males. Through them, Mary surely shored up her own status as a learned connoisseur, given that Titian's giants undertake the signal artistic challenges of showing the heroic male nude in motion and expressing intense pathos by means of patent references to the most famous sculptures of Antiquity.<sup>63</sup> If sophisticated contemporaries saw the nude male figures lined up in Mary's Great Hall in Binche as variations on the Falling Gaul, the Laocoön, the Torso Belvedere, as well as Michelangelo's drawing of Tityus, then perhaps her association with them was less indecorous than had they been painted by a lesser intellect.<sup>64</sup> Yet even taking this possibility into account, there can be no mistaking that with these terrifying and violent images of the torments of giant naked men, Mary had entered boldly into a masculine cultural realm, just as she had done with her horseback riding, her falconry, her hunting, her fortress building, her appearances on the battlefield, and above all, her political rulership; as summed up by her contemporary Brantôme, she was a 'sagacious Amazon, a female soldier that ruled like a man'.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, her commission of these towering, decidedly unerotic, mythological male nudes may just confirm Kelley Helmstutler-Di Dio's recent suggestion that Mary deliberately fashioned herself by adopting traits considered both masculine and virtuous.<sup>66</sup> In sum, her commission of Titian's *Four Sinners* confirmed her status as a mould-breaker and set her apart from the feminine ideals of her age.

Evidence of women's interest in sensual nudity comes from a very distant segment of early modern European society. Indicative of both the proliferation of picture galleries and the vertical expansion of the art market in the seventeenth century, courtesans were among the first women

61\_ Marie Tanner (2018, p. 25) speculates that Mary was trying to anticipate Philip II's taste with these four Rebellious Giants that would eventually enter into her nephew's possession. That seems unlikely, though, since these images are very unlike the beguiling depictions of the Olympian gods' loves that Philip II later commissioned from Titian. But even if Mary did intend from the start for these canvases to pass to Philip, that would not exclude the interpretation of their political significance that is given here, and which is drawn largely from Falomir 2014a, pp. 25–62.

62\_ On Mary's patronage of these works and their political allegory in relation to the Battle of Mühlberg, see Tischer 1994, p. 134; Falomir 2014a, pp. 25–62; and Falomir 2020, p. 102. The latter essay treats the extent and significance of Mary's patronage of Titian, which also included two paintings of religious subjects.

63\_ As shown in Falomir 2014a.

64\_ As noted in Sebastián Lozano 2004, p. 164, and before that in Checa 1994, pp. 263–65, these paintings were probably not intended to be erotic like Titian's *poesie* for Philip II.

65\_ Brantôme's quotation is taken from Jordan Gschwend and Eichberger 2018, p. 40. See also Jordan Gschwend 2018, p. 57, and Helmstutler-Di Dio 2020, pp.120–22.

66\_ Helmstutler-Di Dio 2020, p. 122.

67\_ See Sluijter 2006, pp. 144–46; Storey 2008, pp. 194–202; and Cavazzini 2014, pp. 130–31.

68\_ Cust and Cox 1911, p. 280.



fig. 10

Angelo Caroselli, *A Man playing Draughts with a Courtesan or Blind Love*, c. 1600–14  
Oil on panel, 47 × 78 cm  
St Moritz, Robilant+Voena

to engage in the collecting and display of erotic mythological imagery. Not only is this attested to by inventories of the art collections of wealthy female prostitutes in Holland and Italy, but it is also evident in genre paintings that represent the interiors of courtesans' houses, such as Angelo Caroselli's view of a prostitute's parlour in *A Man playing Draughts with a Courtesan* [fig. 10].<sup>67</sup> Paintings of amorous subjects from mythology presumably were used by these women to impress their clients with a gloss of humanistic erudition and to set the mood for their professional activities.

Some highborn women of the seventeenth century – particularly those with their own incomes and a husband to guarantee their honour – were emboldened to add erotic mythologies to their cabinets. One of these was Alethea Howard née Talbot, Countess of Arundel, an independently wealthy English collector married to Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, an equally avid collector of antiquities and Hans Holbein's portraits. She travelled around Italy first in 1613–14 with Inigo Jones in tow, and again in 1620–22 in the company of Anthony van Dyck; from 1641 to 1654 she lived on the continent, mainly in Amsterdam. During her second voyage to Italy, spent primarily in Venice, she became enthralled with Venetian painting and at this time an anonymous life of Titian was inscribed with a dedication to her by the painter's great-nephew Tizianello.<sup>68</sup>

Inventories of Alethea Howard's residences evince her clear penchant for mythological themes, some of which were surely sensual or even libidinous. The 1641 inventory of her London



villa, Tart Hall, included a painting of *Europa and the Bull* by Andrea Schiavone, an unattributed painting of *Hercules and Antaeus*, and unattributed frescoes of *Aurora*, *The Fall of Phaeton*, *Diana and Acteon*, and *Niobe*.<sup>69</sup> By the time of her death in Amsterdam, her collection also included a *Venus and Cupid* and a *Satyr and Cupid*, both by Parmigianino; a *Venus and Cupid*, a *Sleeping Venus*, and a *Bath of Diana*, all by Titian; *Hylas and the Nymphs* by Giulio Romano; *King Midas* by Correggio; *Apollo in his Chariot* by Mantegna; *Venus and Cupid* by Sebastiano del Piombo; *Ganymede* by Michelangelo; *Leda* by Leonardo da Vinci (to be identified with the painting by Cesare da Sesto at Wilton House); *Bacchanalia with Putti* by Marten van Cleve; *Achelous and Hercules* by Giorgione; *Acis and Galatea* by Perino del Vaga; a copy of Jacob Jordaens's *Nymphs and Satyrs* (now known as *Allegory of the Bounty of the Earth*; Brussels, Musée des Beaux Arts); *The Birth of Hercules*, *Iola and Hercules*, and *Venus and Cupid*, all by Veronese; *Latona and the Lycian Peasants* by Adam Elsheimer; and an anonymous *Atalanta and Meleager*.<sup>70</sup> While at least some of these paintings were formally acquired by Alethea's husband (such as the Elsheimer), the purchases were likely carried out with her funds if not also at her explicit command. The extraordinary stand Alethea Howard took with her racy art collection was no less bold than her strong allegiance to the Catholic Church, her departure from England in the train of Maria de' Medici in 1641, and her decision to raise her sons in exile.

### The Poesie of Women Artists

If owning paintings of erotic mythologies was a strong statement about a woman's self-possession, making such pictures was an even stronger one. Humanistic literature, although it spoke with admiration of women artists, also brought warnings about the boundaries they were to observe. Boccaccio, for instance, praised the Greek painter Marcia (Iaia of Cyzicus) for refusing to paint images of nude men, whereas Ovid had shown that the mythical weaver Arachne brought Athena's anathema upon her because she portrayed the shameful stories of gods like Jupiter, Apollo, Hades, and Poseidon who used force and deceit to ravage mortal women.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, some women artists chose to defy these deeply rooted taboos.<sup>71</sup> On the one hand they may have been driven by a desire to vaunt their artistic skills in the same arena as their male peers, while on the other they may have had a pragmatic interest in appealing to a full range of clients. One of the first women artists to embark in this direction was a reproductive engraver, Diana Scultori (also known as Diana Ghisi). Several of her engravings of stories from Antiquity feature male and female nudes, such as *A Battle near the Dead Body of Patroclus* and *Amphion and Zetus tying Dirce to the Horns of a Bull*. The latter, based on the ancient sculpture group known as the *Farnese Bull* (Naples, Museo Archeologico) and signed DIANA MANTVANA INCIDEBAT ROMAE, 1581, shows a frontal female nude and male nudes from front and back. Skilful as they are, these other engravings cannot compare in terms of either size or audacity to an engraving she made in Rome, based on Giulio Romano's designs for the frescoes in Palazzo Te. This engraving, known as *The Feast of the Gods* [fig. 11],<sup>72</sup> is a courageous foray into a territory heretofore controlled by men. It shows a panoply of nude

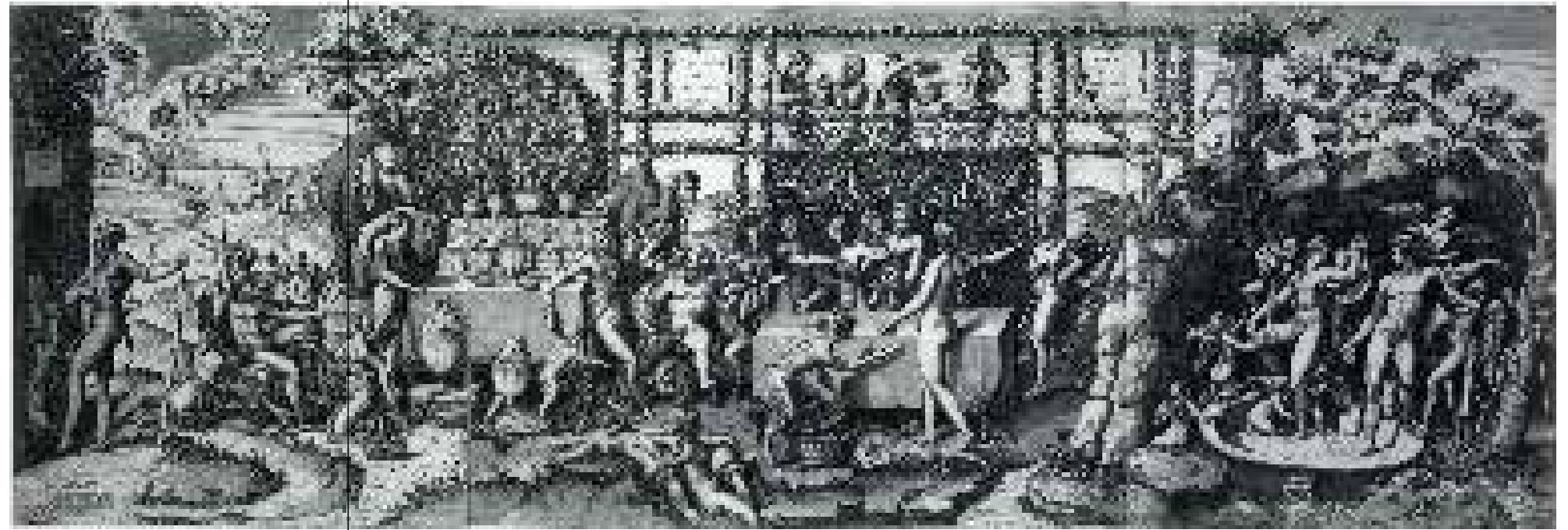


fig. 11

Diana Scultori after Giulio Romano, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1575  
Engraving (3 joint prints),  
377 × 1125 mm  
London, The British Museum,  
V,8.64

gods taking part in a wedding banquet, while in a nearby grotto Mars and Venus share a bath, amorously locking eyes in an instance of pure, gratuitous sensuality outside of any redeeming narrative context.

Diana Scultori's unabashed confidence in placing her name prominently on each printed copy of *The Feast of the Gods* was surely reinforced by the protection she enjoyed from Pope Gregory XIII Boncompagni (r. 1572–85), whose name also appears on the print. Similarly, the favour that the painter Lavinia Fontana enjoyed under both Pope Clement VIII Aldobrandini (r. 1592–1605) and Pope Paul V Borghese (r. 1605–21) might explain her own bold and ingenious activity in the arena of erotic *poesie*. In her youth, Fontana had focused her professional activity on portraits and devotional works. Nudes appear in her early oeuvre only incidentally, such as in the Uffizi's *Self-Portrait in a Studio* of 1579, where she depicts herself engaged in the study of two nude statuettes, one male and one female.<sup>73</sup> However, when Fontana was in her forties and living in Rome, she began making small-scale mythological images of seductive female nudes on both canvas and copper supports. With works such as the *Galatea and Cherubs riding the Stormy Waves on a Sea Monster* of about 1590 (private collection), the *Mars and Venus* of about 1595 [fig. 12], and the *Nude Minervas* of 1605 and 1613 (Bologna, Collezione Pavirani, and Rome, Galleria Borghese), Fontana became the first female artist to paint erotic nudes in original compositions of her own design.

69\_ Cust and Cox 1911, pp. 99–100; and Rabe 2016, p. 193.

70\_ Ibid., pp. 282–86.

71\_ Because this essay focuses on secular art, I will not deal with Properzia de' Rossi, whose sculpted depiction of *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* from the first quarter of the sixteenth century could very reasonably be considered an erotic treatment of a religious history.

72\_ It is inscribed IULIUS / ROM. / INVENTOR. / DIANA F. and D. GREGORII P.P. XIII / PRIVILEGIO AD DECEN. / ROMAE MDLXXV, and bears a dedication to Claudio Gonzaga.

73\_ I thank Michael Cole for drawing my attention to the self-portrait.

Other women artists followed. One of them was Claudia del Bufalo, a Roman noblewoman who painted as a dilettante in the same period when Lavinia Fontana was active in Rome. The Del Bufalo family's inventories attribute to her a painting of *Andromeda chained to the Rocks*, which, if it could be found, would certainly include a nude Andromeda.<sup>74</sup> Knowing that Del Bufalo did not paint such an image for profit, and considering the fact that it was displayed in her family's palace, we might reasonably conclude that this mythological subject served as a statement about her artistic achievement, her skill in painting anatomy, and the breadth of her humanistic learning.

Similar motives seem to have underlain the choice of Magdalena van de Passe – a German-born reproductive engraver as well as a devout Mennonite – to make a series of prints after paintings with Ovidian themes. She dedicated these prints to the cultural figures she admired, adding to the images moralising Latin inscriptions of her own composition. To Peter Paul Rubens she dedicated her engraving of *Cephalus and Procris* [fig. 13] after Adam Elsheimer's painting of *Apollo and Coronis* (Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery). That print bears Van de Passe's cautionary inscription: 'The woman who is tormented by the ravaging plague of jealousy, that malicious Fury, may learn to be more sensible through this, our misery. When I found my deceitful husband, I, Procris, perished through my own fault, through my mistrust.'<sup>75</sup> To the poet Jacob Cats she dedicated her 1623 engraving of *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* after a painting of the same subject by Jacob Pynas [fig. 14]. The inscription Van de Passe added below the image chastens those who would ogle the scene of carnal coupling without searching for its symbolic meaning: 'Youngsters, don't laugh lasciviously at this scene. This print does not depict the disgraceful ardor aroused by impure fire. It is the representation of the virtuous marriage, in which man and woman are united in harmony'.<sup>76</sup> Thanks to these verbal additions to her images, Van de Passe was able to assert her unimpeachable honour while displaying proudly to the literate men of her age her enthusiasm for both mythological paintings and the erudite humanistic culture that enveloped them.

Artemisia Gentileschi painted mythological subjects throughout her career, always with an eye to her professional reputation for creative *invenzioni* and for mastery of the female nude. Her first recorded work in the category of mythological subjects is the *Diana at her Bath* painted in 1619 for Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici, which featured 'several nymphs and life-size nude women' according to an inventory.<sup>77</sup> She painted the same subject for Charles I around 1638, and yet another version in 1650 for the Sicilian nobleman Don Antonio Ruffo, this time including Acteon among its eight figures and two dogs. That same painting, in fact, was the basis for her complaint to her patron about the high cost of hiring nude female models:

The expenses are great on account of having these female nudes... the expenses are unbearable because fifty [female models] might take off their clothes and barely one of them makes the cut. In this painting I need more than just one model because there are eight figures and it is necessary to do various kinds of beauty.<sup>78</sup>

All of these canvases showing Diana and her nymphs as embodiments of 'various kinds of beauty' were at least 2 metres high. Yet larger still was the lost *Diana and Acteon* she made for the

74\_ Cavazzini 2008; on the mythological scene, see Spezzaferro 1985, p. 72.

75\_ 'Quam zeli perversa lues mala vexat Erynnis. / Hic nostro poterit cautor esse malo: / Infelix Procris fallacem nacta maritum / Muneribus perij suspiciosa meis'; translation cited from Veldman 1990–91, p. 132, n. 29.

76\_ 'Parcito lasciva hanc tabulam ridere juventus, / Non hic impuro turpis ab igne calor: / Verum coniugij specimen amplectitur aptum / Iungunturque animo vir mulierque pari'; translation cited from Veldman 1990–91, p. 131.

77\_ 'più ninfe e donne ignude al naturale'; cited in Bissell 1999, p. 363.

78\_ 'le spese son molte per occasione di tenere queste femine igniude... le spese sono intollerabili per che se ne spogliano cinquanta e apena gine bona una. In questo quadro non mi posso servire di un modello solo per che sono otto personaggi e bisogna far varie bellezze'; Bissell 1999, p. 364; Cf. idem, pp. 363–66.



fig. 13  
Magdalena van de Passe after Adam Elsheimer, *Cephalus and Procris*, 1617–34  
Engraving, 212 × 232 mm  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, F.G. Waller Bequest, 1936, RP-P-1936-241

fig. 14  
Magdalena van de Passe after Jacob Pynas, *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, 1623  
Engraving, 204 × 231 mm  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, on loan from the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, 1979, RP-P-2014-34-34

fig. 12  
Lavinia Fontana, *Mars and Venus*, c. 1595  
Oil on canvas, 140 × 116 cm  
Madrid, Fundación Casa de Alba, P.104

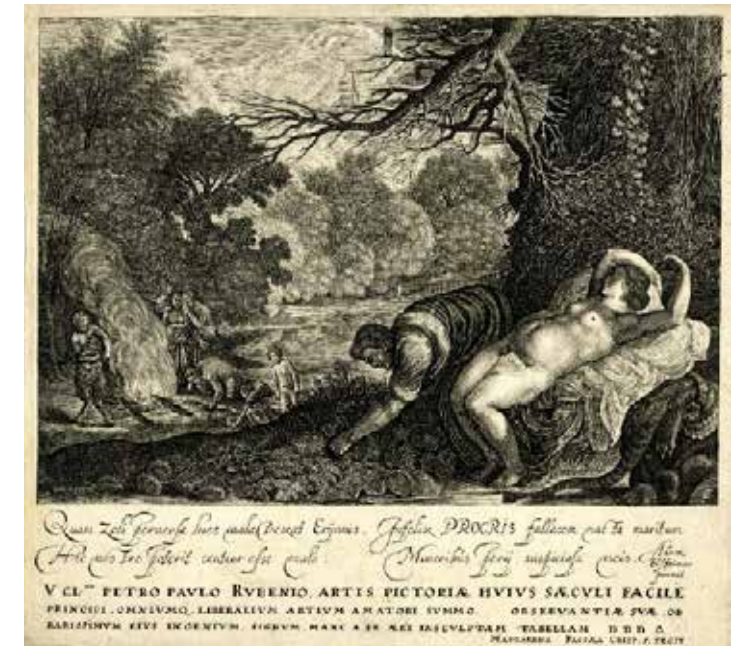




fig. 15  
Artemisia Gentileschi, *The Triumph of Galatea*, also known as *The Triumph of Amphitrite*, c. 1649  
Oil on canvas, 196.9 × 254.5 cm  
Italy, private collection

fig. 16  
Artemisia Gentileschi, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1625–30  
Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 143.8 cm  
Richmond, Va., Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2001.225



Duke of Frisa, which measured 343 × 211 cm. By comparison, Titian's painting of *Diana and Acteon* for Philip II measures 185 × 202 cm [cat. 18]. Clearly Artemisia wanted to make a big statement with her *poesie*, and to monopolise the attention of her male audience with alluring displays of nude virgins painted true to life and life-size. Confirming that the size of her *poesie* contributed to their appeal, in the early eighteenth century Bainbrigg Buckeridge observed that 'She recommended herself to the esteem of the skilful by many history-pieces as big as the life'.<sup>79</sup>

Among the artist's lost works are several other mythological subjects all large and artistically ambitious in their use of nude figures. These include the *Rape of Proserpina* that Filippo Baldinucci saw in the collection of Grand Duke Ferdinando II de' Medici, and which he described as being a large work containing many figures 'made in very good style'.<sup>80</sup> Artemisia's lost *Andromeda liberated by Perseus* of 1651 measured roughly 211 × 264 cm and was to serve as a pendant for Don Antonio Ruffo's *Galatea* from 1649 [fig. 15] revealing the abundant presence of male nudes, and with them, the artist's interest in various kinds of male beauty. She revisited the popular *Galatea* theme for at least two other Italian noblemen.<sup>81</sup> Artemisia undoubtedly interpreted her lost *Psyche and Cupid* of about 1624 as an erotic scenario, judging from her *Venus and Cupid* [fig. 16] and her *Danaë* (St Louis Art Museum).<sup>82</sup> Even the goddess of the dawn,

79\_ Buckeridge 1706, p. 432.

80\_ Bissell 1999, p. 377.

81\_ On the *Andromeda*, see Bissell 1999, pp. 356–57. On the pictures of *Galatea*, *ibid.*, pp. 287–92, 367–68.

82\_ On the *Psyche and Cupid*, see Bissell 1999, p. 360. Artemisia's lost picture of *Hercules and Omphale* (once at the Alcázar) and her *Hercules Spinning* (Sursock-Cochrane collection, Beirut) are not considered here because they are comical rather than erotic mythological works, similar to her large *Nymph and Satyr*; on these works see Bissell 1999, pp. 245–47, 370–71; and Buchakjian 1995, pp. 44–47. The lost *Apollo with the Lyre* (see Bissell 1999, p. 358) may have been a chaste, idealised portrait.



fig. 17  
 Michaelina Wautier, *The Triumph of Bacchus*, c. 1655  
 Oil on canvas, 270 × 354 cm  
 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, GG 3548

when treated by Artemisia, becomes sensuous and lusty: in her *Aurora* (Rome, Alessandra Masu collection), the celestial goddess has abandoned her station at the head of Apollo's solar chariot in order to tread the earth in search of her lover, Aeolides the hunter.

When Artemisia was a young woman, she had brazenly painted a nude female figure representing *Inclination* (Florence, Casa Buonarroti) with her own idealised facial features. The piquancy of her personalised nude was due to the fact that it referred to a flesh and blood woman easily recognised by its original audience and unafraid to appear unclothed in their presence. Though Artemisia's later nudes did not ever evoke her own likeness so directly, viewers must nonetheless have contemplated them with Artemisia's person and especially her gender in mind, since she 'was as famous all over Europe for her amours, as for her Painting', as attested by Buckeridge.<sup>83</sup>

The possibility of conflating Artemisia with her erotic nudes did not necessarily detract from early modern viewers' appreciation of their artfulness and technical virtuosity. We might recall in this context Rona Goffen's assertion that 'the subject of Titian's women is Titian himself', meaning that the more one enjoys the illusion of soft flesh, the more one admires the painter who created it.<sup>84</sup> When a female artist depicted erotic nudes in the early modern period, the artist herself was also on display: her technical skill, her creative mind, her learning, her gendered body, her comportment in society, her reputation, and ultimately her courage.

The courage – or better, the bravado – of early modern women artists who depicted erotic mythologies is nowhere more apparent than in *The Triumph of Bacchus* [fig. 17] by the Walloon artist Michaelina Wautier. A show-stopping masterpiece in the tradition of painted mythologies, it was made around 1655 for Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria in monumental dimensions (270 × 354 cm) that surpass those of Artemisia's largest mythological canvases. The work is notable for the abundance of male nudes that are clearly the result of the kind of life-drawing exercises that Michiel Sweerts would promote at the Brussels art academy for life drawing (an 'academie van die teeckeninghen naer hetleven') that he established the following year, in 1656. Shown in procession with these ten inebriated men are two adult female bacchantes, one of whom looks directly at the viewer and who is made in the artist's own comely likeness. With this audacious self-portrait, Wautier as subject facetiously takes part in the debauchery of the mythological drinking party, while Wautier as artist quite proudly takes ownership of the artistry and talent required to make the images of the nude men and children shown around her.

**Conclusion: Viewing Titian's Women in the Age of the Guerrilla Girls<sup>85</sup>**

In regard to Titian's erotic mythologies featuring nude women, Goffen questioned whether the male gaze objectified the painting's female subjects, or whether it objectified the viewer himself: 'Titian created the beautiful woman, who manipulates the viewer's senses and emotions through vision. In such evocative images of female sensuality, who is the object, and who the subject?'

83\_ Buckeridge 1706, p. 432.

84\_ Goffen 1997, p. 11.

85\_ The Guerilla Girls, a group of feminist activist artists, used the slogan, 'Do women have to be nude to get into the Met. Museum?' on a protest poster in 1989.

Who possesses whom?<sup>86</sup> In challenging us to consider the lustful viewer as an objectified and sexualised body, Goffen implies that the dominant figure is neither the beautiful woman in the image, nor the viewer. Rather, it is the artist who seizes control of the viewer's sensations and emotions through the vehicle of art. This conclusion accords with a notion found in mid-sixteenth-century theory and correspondence that held it to be normative and natural for viewers to experience sensual arousal at the sight of erotic images made by a talented artist.<sup>87</sup>

Goffen's point about the artist's power to objectify the aroused male viewer takes on an unexpected twist if the artist who controls the viewer's sensations and emotions is a woman. As we have seen in paragraphs above, Lavinia Fontana, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Michaelina Wautier all painted erotic nudes for an elite male clientele. As this male clientele took pleasure in the alluring female forms on the canvas, they found themselves surrendering to the artistic prowess of a woman, one whose skill and creativity were reconfirmed every time a viewer succumbed to her pictorial illusions. The Renaissance male viewer's temporary subjugation to a woman artist was surely a source of delight for him, and very possibly he experienced this subjugation as an iteration of the Petrarchan lover's blissful victimisation by his beloved's beauty, or perhaps as an iteration of the medieval fable of Aristotle's humiliation by Phyllis.

This essay has sought to show that early modern women paid serious attention to the artistic category of erotic myths. Be they queens or prostitutes, engravers or poets, Mennonites or English Catholics, women often took command of the use and display of such imagery. Some did so through suppression, consciously avoiding spaces where these images were kept and insisting that their nude parts be covered. Others did so through positive reinforcement, whether by commissioning and collecting them, or by using the paintbrush to create their own depictions of erotic myths.

It is no small feat to try to imagine how early modern female viewers might have responded to the present exhibition's artworks. Even with regard to early modern male viewers of Titian's *poesie* – including Philip II himself – there is no consensus among art historians as to the responses that these images provoked [cat. 12, 14, 16, 18, 19, and 21]. Competing theories range from Charles Hope's classification of these sorts of images as earthy 'pin-ups', to Marie Tanner's sublimated view of them as recondite astrological allegories regarding the Habsburg nation-state's destiny vis-à-vis its political rivals.<sup>88</sup> Adding to the challenge of reconstructing the early modern female perspective is the fact that, in our own era, rampant sexual imagery in both entertainment and advertising has dulled our sensitivity to the original effects of Renaissance-era representations of erotic myths containing seductive nudes. Moreover, contemporary viewing conditions are dramatically different from those in the Renaissance: early modern women would have encountered this exhibition's artworks in exclusive or private spaces that could only be visited with the express consent of the owner.

Now that nearly all of these artworks belong to publicly accessible institutions that receive government funding, they are regarded as the visible fruits of the values of inclusion and democracy. Yet some museum visitors might reasonably question whether values of inclusion and democracy could ever be transmitted by images of mythological rapes. What can museums do to

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86\_ Goffen 1997, p. 79.

88\_ Hope 1980b, p. 118; and Tanner 2018.

87\_ Turner 2017, chapter one.

mitigate these tensions? By shedding light on an artwork's history and using exhibition displays to shape its interpretive context, museums can lay bare the mechanisms that give art its power to persuade, to move, and to delight the viewer. This notwithstanding, museums do not hold a monopoly on the public's interpretation of, and reaction to, the objects on display within their walls. The public's reception of a work of art will hinge on many variables, including current discourses in the political, academic, and mediatic spheres. From this perspective, we all can, and perhaps we all should, take part in an open-ended dialogue about the ways that visual art conditions our beliefs, our emotions, our actions, our desires, and especially our passions.