

Joachim Kahl

**Titian's „Venus with a Mirror“ – Stoic-epicurean Self-perception before the Mirror,  
Rewarded with a Crown of Victory  
Philosophical Meditation on a masterpiece of the Italian High Renaissance**

We are looking at a major work of the Italian Renaissance painter Titian from 1555, known under the title of “Toilet of Venus” but also as “Venus with a Mirror”, measuring 106 by 136 cm, which can be viewed in original in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. Titian's particular fondness for the work is apparent in that he did not offer it for sale but kept it for himself in his Venetian villa.

**S. 2**

What do we see? I shall first sketch the picture's composition and idea. We see a moment of a happening – in the literal and metaphorical sense. We witness how Venus, goddess of love and beauty in the Greek-Roman pantheon, is sitting before her mirror and discovers her aging and thus her mortality. She accepts this disillusionment with a touch of surprise yet complacently, and for that she is rewarded by a chubby-cheeked angel with a crown of victory.

A vanitas picture of an exceptional sort. The transience of youth and beauty is not staged before a gruesome backdrop of skeletons and hourglass. Youth and beauty are also not religiously reduced to an everlasting salvation in heaven. Instead, she who nobly reconciles herself with her own decrepitude is praised and rewarded. Venus thus avoids false pride and adds to her beautiful body a beautiful soul. Enjoying life and accepting one's own mortality determine and permeate each other.

As a shapely eye-catcher – in the picture's centre – a semi-nude flaunts itself, the head turned to a three-quarter profile. The blossoming, blonde beauty with elegantly jewelled hair and body is draped in precious robes whose texture and colour substantially add to the pleasurable effect the picture has on the viewer. Venus is looking to the left, where a pudgy little angel, a cherub, is holding up a mirror. The mirror is a magical one that exposes the future: a noticeably aged Venus with sagging skin in her face and upper arm. It is precisely this Venus who is looking with one eye straight out at the viewer, almost

piercingly, and silently addressing us in this way. Nonverbally she is communicating to us: Not only she as a goddess, we too belong to the fated community of mortals who are subject to the unyielding cycle of blooming and wilting.

In the sitting figure of Venus before the mirror Titian did not paint an individual portrait but created a representative ideal of feminine beauty – a theme the male-dominated history of painting and sculpture has known for centuries. Venus is sitting before us on a throne-like, high-backed chair in the classic pose of “Venus pudica”, the modest Venus who attempts to cover her breast with one hand and her pubis with the other. The pose is not without coquetry. For, what is half-covered is also half-exposed. Here from Titian the precious fur trimming of her robe covers the pubis and at the same time allusively traces the arch of her pubic hair.

S. 3

Over the scene lies a warm, rich golden tone, drawn out especially by the deep red of the luxurious fur-trimmed and embroidered satin robe. This deep mahogany red is considered a coloristic signature of Titian’s and is therefore also referred to as titian-red. Titianesque is also the sensual pleasure of Venus’ opulent jewellery: chains, rings, bangles on her fingers and arms, pearls in her elaborately styled and plaited hair.

The picture’s theme “Venus with a mirror” is not an invention of Titian’s; it was established and he made his characteristic mark on it. Two maidservants or perhaps two cavaliers who hold the mirror become two cherubs. Rather than assisting her in vain self-reflection they perform the duty of deepening her self-perception. The winged boy to the right has more important things to do than to shoot his Cupid’s arrows. This is why his quiver lies full at his feet. He is busy with holding a black-framed mirror at Venus’ eye level and angling it to her field of vision. That he plans to surprise her with it is shown in the cloth slipping down in his left hand, which until then was covering the mirror.

At the next moment the second cherub-boy will also set a crown upon Venus’ head: a crown that is obviously *not* a laurel crown. For, a laurel crown with its unwithering evergreen leaves has since antiquity symbolised immortality, at least immortal glory. The Titian crown with its colourful blossoms instead rewards– in itself consistently – the acknowledgement that this expectation is deceptive.

S. 4 Titian's picture rejects the dream of eternal youth. Eternal youth would be eternal immaturity. The idea behind the picture is in its philosophical quality stoic-epicurean. Stoic is the calm acceptance of what is inalterable, here the law of nature that determines aging and dying. Epicurean is the conclusion derived from this to nevertheless take pleasure in all delights that life has to offer in its finitude. In contrast to the medieval Dances of Death and baroque depictions of death lurking behind the mask of beauty, Titian does not resort to fear mongering or threat. He relies on positive reinforcement and praises the acceptance of one's own impermanence. Sensuality is infused with wisdom. Beauty is defined from within and bestowed with intellect, without denying the lust for skin and hair, for fabrics and mirrors; without suppressing the delights of a fine, smooth, ornamental surface.

The picture radiates complacency and dignity. It conveys the comforting message that even goddesses are subject to the passage of time. In this respect it is not only a melancholy homage to feminine beauty but to human existence altogether. In one moment of time the transience of all things flashes out. Without words we are encouraged to reconcile ourselves with it. The warm, lush ambience coddles our senses and caresses our soul. In any home the picture would be an adornment, a worldly icon of self-reassurance. With each comprehending glance we take at it, our everyday affairs would gain an emotional depth.

Titian's emperor and papal portraits, his altar and Madonna paintings may be interesting primarily for art and cultural history. His work "Venus with a Mirror" speaks directly to us children of the twenty-first century. The picture's artistic composition and its ideational content convey a lasting principle to reflective people. Titian made this picture a present to himself. I give my attempt at an interpretation to ...