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Primary Literary Sources:

Integrating the writings of an Artist and a Humanist from the Renaissance era to better contextualize the Master Painter Titian

It is a foolish thing to accept one historical account over all others when interpreting why an event occurred as it did and, though one source might prove more insightful, we as art historians must look to integrate multiple interpretations of an artist's life and their work to reconstruct lost context and to continue shaping the most objective judiciary treatment of art that is possible. It is with these enduring duties in mind that I will found the necessity of analyzing primary literary sources left by both artists and humanists when contextualizing great master painters of the past. More specifically I will demonstrate this necessity for the integration of these two sources by highlighting the biography of Tiziano da Cadore (Titian) in the writings *Lives of the most excellent painters, sculptors and architects from Cimabue to today*, by the painter-writer Giorgio Vasari as translated by Gaston Du C. de Vere, and *Arentino, or, Dialogue on Painting*, by the painting-theorist and Venetian Humanist Ludovico Dolce in the annotated translation made by Mark W. Roskill. Being mindful to note individual insights, I will flesh out exactly how these two writers address the development of Titian's design, his notable skill for colour, how his inventiveness situates the breadth of his work in history amongst his contemporaries. Ultimately I will work to communicate that Vasari's history provides a more

cumulative context whereas Dolce poetically romanticizes a cultural context from the specific view point of a Venetian Humanist.

An expansive range of methods exists when judging the quality of an artist's design, colour and invention and it is in surveying subjective judgments and historiographical accounts that it becomes apparent the requirement for a sound integration of these spectral views. Without boldly veering onto this grander scale of judgement, I will come back to my two exemplary sources beginning with the account of Titian's development of design as written by Vasari. Vasari begins Titian's biography stating his place of education in Venice at the age of ten under the discipline of Gian Bellini and later, under that of Giorgione da Castelfranco. It is within Vasari's account of Titian's transition between disciplines that we can note the benefits of this documentation being in the words of an artist, in that, Vasari recognizes more objectively the manner in which these teachers painted and likewise taught Titian. Vasari retrospectively labels Bellini's manner as "dry, crude and laboured" and attributes fallible design to the inaccessibility of perfect works of great antiquity like those found in Rome.¹ Vasari then moves to discuss Giorgione's break from Bellini's laboured manner in favour of softness, graceful beauty and natural colour. Vasari further outlines Giorgione's stress on repetitive drawing such that an artist could render from memory as from life and improve upon it as he sees fit. As an artist himself, Vasari knows that in sourcing Titian's foundations for design, he can better support his judgment of Titian's work as it lacks in the aforementioned field - a judgement supported in remarks made

¹Vasari's opinion of Venetian painters could have in part something to do with his birth in Tuscany, but one should not assume such as he was also friend to Titian and other artists of patriotic differences. See citation 2 for examples of Vasari's comments on Titian's fallible design.

by both Fra Sebastiano del Piombo and Michelagnolo.² Also in documenting this passage of mentors, Vasari guides his reader on the path which Titian, while growing in age, had also grown in practice and judgment, thus being able to formulate his own recognized style and unmatched talent for colour.

Dolce's dialogue by Arentino also recognizes the lineage preceding Titian's great talent, but provides a path that is less concerned with the foundations of design for one more embellished by romantic anecdotes to which Titian's divine inventiveness and judgment can be ascribed.³ Dolce quickly dismisses the work of Gentile⁴ and Giovanni Bellini as being far too

G, Vasari. "Tiziano Da Cadore." p 174: "This method has been the reason that many, wishing to imitate him...to play the practices master, have painted clumsy pictures; this this happens because, although many believe that they are done without effort, [the images], deceive themselves, for it is known that they are painted over and over again, and that he returned to them with his colours so many times, that labor may be perceived. And this method, so used, is judicious, beautiful, and astonishing because it makes pictures appear alive and painted with great art, but conceals the labour.

² G, Vasari. "Tiziano Da Cadore." On two account Vasari mentions Titian's contemporaries noting his lack of good design and attributing it to a lack of present antique masterworks. P.162 "I remember that Fra Sebastiano del Piombo, conversing of this, said to me that if Tiziano had been in Rome at that time, and had seen the works of Michelagnolo, those of Raffaello, and the ancient statues, and had studied design, he would have done things absolutely stupendous, considering the beautiful mastery that he had in colouring, and that he deserved to be celebrated as the finest and greatest imitator of Nature in the matter of colour in our times, and with the foundation of the grand method of design he might have equalled the Urbinate and Buonarroti" and p.171: "Michelagnolo and Vasari, going one day to visit Tiziano in the Belvedere, saw in a picture that he had executed at that time a nude woman representing Danaë, who had in her lap Jove transformed into a rain of gold; and they praised it much, as one does in the painter's presence....Buonarroti commended it not a little, saying that his colouring and his manner much pleased him, but that it was a pity that in Venice men did not learn to draw well from the beginning, and that those painters did not pursue a better method in their studies. For, he said, if this man had been in any way assisted by art and design, as he is by nature, and above all in counterfeiting the life, no one could do more or work better, for he has a fine spirit and a very beautiful and lively manner. And in fact this is true, for the reason that he who has not drawn much nor studied the choicest ancient and modern works, cannot work well from memory by himself or improve the things that he copies from life, giving them the grace and perfection wherein art goes beyond the scope of nature, which generally produces some parts that are not beautiful."

³ Roskill, Mark W. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." *ACLS Humanities E-Book*. University of Michigan Library, 25 Sept. 2012. Web. 30 Mar. 2013. <http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Dolce_s_Aretino_and_Venetian_Art_Theory.html?id=1y67pA8gxOQC>. Examples on pages 187-189: Arentino accounts of Titian's time with Gentile and Gian, and later how his talents exceed those of his last teacher Giorgione

⁴ Vasari omits any education provided by Gentile

“dead and cold”⁵ to satisfy Titian and, being “propelled by nature as he was to greater heights and the perfecting of his art”⁶, Titian left the brothers for the guidance of Giorgione. Here too, Dolce provides little detail to the hand of Giorgione other than regaling that of which Titian was quickly able to imitate and ultimately surpass.⁷ Though Dolce’s Arentino intriguingly accounts Titian’s quick and natural talent, he is only able to assert the artist’s abilities in statements like,

“...for truly it is in Titian alone (and let the other painters take my saying this in good part) that one sees gathered together to perfection all of the excellent features which have individually been present in many cases. Both in terms of invention and in terms of draftsmanship, that is, no one ever surpassed him.”

Dolce fails to (in any qualitative depth) detail Titian’s foundation for such profundity, and does not cross-examine his admirations with any errs Titian’s work may be vulnerable to.⁸ His reverence of Titian’s talent as a natural progression brought on by the artist’s own ability to discern what was worthy of imitation reads with strong Venetian pride. Dolce’s romantic account is less informative than Vasari’s noted progression of guidance but does- when read acknowledging the assumed amount of pride- supply an important cultural context surrounding Titian’s work as it would have been received by his countrymen. Dolce’s writing must not be dismissed entirely though, for it is in the discussion of Titian’s colour and treatment of form that he excels in his Humanist fervour.

⁵ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.187

⁶ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.187

⁷ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." Example P.187, Giorgione and Titian paint different parts of Fondaco di Tedeschi, Titian’s façade mistaken for the improved hand of Giorgione

⁸ Arentino asserts Titian’s greatness over Michelangelo, not opening his view point to similar discernment like that of Vasari re: Titian and lack of foundation for design. See citation 1.

In his letter to Alessandro Contarini, Dolce eloquently details the rich colour and soft fleshy forms seen in Titian's *Adonis*, successfully weaving this excellence of color in a ruling position over design and invention without omitting the latter two from Titian's achievements.⁹

“...it [is not] possible to distinguish which of his parts is more beautiful. For each one separately and all of them together embody the perfection of art, and the coloring competes with the design...The man who is defective in this matter of coloring should not be called a painter. For it is not enough to be able to make the figures excellent in their design, if thereafter the tints of the colors, which should imitate flesh, partake of porphyry or of earth and lack that cohesion and softness and animation which nature effects in human bodies.”¹⁰

From this, Dolce continues to poetically outline the naturalism of movement displayed by the two Gods and impregnates his recipient with a pallet of flesh when noting that “every stroke of the brush belongs with those strokes that nature is in the habit of making...”¹¹ Greater still is this achievement of colour communicated in igniting a lustful vision of the beautifully painted Venus that, out of Superhuman discernment, Titian was able to conceive and give breath to.¹² Here I could have taken to reiterating an account of poetic metaphors expressing colourful vibrancy, but Dolce's communication of life reflected on canvas in the form of a sexually arousing female nude begs to communicate Titian's aptitude for colour greater than any other example could so provide. Dolce's discussion of *Adonis* also allows for the poetic inclination of

⁹ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.213

¹⁰ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.215

¹¹ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.215

¹² M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.217 “And no wonder; for if a marble statue could, with the shafts of its beauty, penetrate to the marrow of a young man so that he left his stain there, then what should this figure do which is made of flesh, which is beauty itself, which seems to breathe?”

his vocabulary to excel in that his words would not read as blasphemous or indecent (as if using the same manner to discuss an image of Christ or Madonna).

It is in this light that I would like to revisit Vasari and his notation of Titian's colour. It should be understood that Vasari did not make note of Titian's potential err in design without also highlighting the indisputably perfected treatment of colour in most all the descriptions of his artwork. Not only does he assert the beauty and naturalism of Titian's *Adonis* as previously mentioned by Dolce¹³, Vasari also demonstrates discernment for description, selecting certain paintings to elaborate upon over other obviously appealing forms. Recognizing this, one can look to how Vasari writes of Titian's painting *St. Sebastian* for the Church of Saint Niccolo. Vasari, without having to ignite a man's imaginative want for the female form, delegates *St. Sebastian* to be

“so portrayed from life and without any artifice that can be seen to have been used to enhance the beauty of limbs and trunk, there being nothing but what he saw in the work of nature, insomuch that it all appears as if stamped from the life, so fleshlike it is natural.”¹⁴

His account of this work continues my tone of colouristic integrity that needs not the saccharine metaphors of poetry, but rather an artistic appreciation that is perfectly communicated in statements like “no artifice and of being” and “stamped from life”. This image, like others treated in the same manner, carries forward into lists of altarpieces and portraits that only

¹³ P.173 “ He executed, also, a Venus and Adonis that are marvellous, she having swooned, and the boy in the act of rising to leave her, with some dogs about him that are very natural”

¹⁴ Vasari, Giorgio. "Tiziano Da Cadore." *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architect from Cimabue to Today*. Trans. Gaston Du C. de Vere, D. Vol. IX. London: Macmillan, 1912-15. P.165

enumerate these “life stamps” one is teased into imagining. By this example of colour technique, Vasari asserts his educated discernment for more universally accepted examples such that he can most successfully communicate the overall contemporary feelings of Titian’s artwork and the widely accepted appreciation of his colour.

It is here that I should not rest Titian’s story at a place of supremacy of colour falling short of design, for there is indeed inventiveness to his works communicated differently by both writers that work to raise Titian to the ranks of a Master. Dolce’s dialogue on Painting projects a wonton celebration of Titian’s work and life in a manner that is almost too spirited by friendship and Venetian pride to be accepted as the best account of the artist’s masterful invention. Dolce imparts Titian with invention that seems only natural to the chronology in which Titian emerged as an artist and, by divinity of good judgement; he was able to discern the best design, colour and compositions possible for his era. Dolce’s dialogue further conceives Titian’s inventiveness in a way that is only imaginable through the lengthy and beautiful poetic descriptions made of his artwork¹⁵. As much as these poetics express how Titian’s work related to those men whom would be patrons, viewers and admirers, it does not transcend Titian to the rank of masters on his own merits. In addition to construing beautiful descriptions of Titian’s work to impart feeling of

¹⁵ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." Consistent examples throughout the dialogue by Arentino and likewise made by Dolce in his Letters.

great invention, Dolce's dialogue discredits the work of irrefutable masters like Michelagnolo¹⁶¹⁷ to give more value to Titian's art. Conclusively, Dolce provides a marvelous example of Venetian pride, attributing some of Titian's fine inventiveness to learning to render from life and the diversified identities available in Venice. These examples provide great insight to the life and work of Titian, but not as objectively done as in Vasari's biography.

Vasari addresses inventiveness in Titian's later development of brushstrokes, stating that his last pictures are not executed with the delicacy and diligence that can be seen both from near and from a distance.¹⁸ Titian's last works are "executed with bold strokes... a broad and even coarse sweeping of the brush, insomuch that from near little can be seen, but from a distance they appear perfect."¹⁹ Vasari stresses the inventiveness and talent required by this new technique by making note of imitators who, not being skilled as the hand of Titian, end up muddling their colour.²⁰ Where one might think to discuss the inventiveness of variety and good composition (as

¹⁶ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.201-203, Arentino remarks "...as in the practice of letters, one must display restrained moderation." Arentino states the artist must work to match various levels of existence and not incessantly pursue the quest for foreshortening seen through the novel giant in the works of Michelagnolo.

¹⁷ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.109: "Subsequently Michelangelo saw this same portrait and admired and praised it beyond bounds, saying that he would not have believed that art could achieve so much, and that Titian alone deserved the title of painter." Arentino speaks of Michelagnolo's praise of Titian, without criticism as seen in Vasari's anecdote, see citation 2.

¹⁸ G, Vasari. "Tiziano Da Cadore." p 174

¹⁹ G, Vasari. "Tiziano Da Cadore." p 174

²⁰ G, Vasari. "Tiziano Da Cadore." p 174: "This method has been the reason that many, wishing to imitate him...to play the practices master, have painted clumsy pictures; this this happens because, although many believe that they are done without effort, [the images], deceive themselves, for it is known that they are painted over and over again, and that he returned to them with his colours so many times, that labor may be perceived. And this method, so used, is judicious, beautiful, and astonishing because it makes pictures appear alive and painted with great art, but conceals the labour.

when Dolce discusses Raphael²¹), Vasari expresses an inventiveness of technique that could only have been achieved by such a prolific painter masterfully skilled in the application of life-reflected colour. Vasari's full circle development of Titian's breadth of work allows for his biography to create the ideal understanding of Titian as a painter whose first artistic flame was kindled in a Venetian manner, whose lack of visual antiquity²² allowed for a pronounced treatment of colour (perhaps, too, inspired by the Venetian idyllic of reflection,) and ultimately culminating Titian's self-judge progression to the point where he was able to apply colour through such a technique and with such integrity that in this field he remains unequalled.

It is with Vasari's ideal of creating a fully fleshed identity of an artist's skill and work that I reassert the necessity for integrating multiple primary sources when looking to contextualize masters like Titian today. Though Dolce's dialogue on painting has been made out seem insubstantially informative, I do recognize the cultural insight he has provided into the life and work of Titian as seen from a Venetian Humanist's point of view. It is however, my ultimate belief that Dolce's writings read as romantic tales of Venetian achievement in comparison to the analytic propriety exercised by Vasari in his biography of Titian. The two, however, rely on one another to confirm anecdotal evidence and provide for us a clear context unto which Titian lived was received by his countrymen and those beyond the Venetian walls.

Works Cited

²¹ M.W. Roskill. "Dolce's Arentino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento." P.89, Michaelagnolo v. Raphael

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