

Laura Lepschy

Review of

Sheila Hale, *Titian: His Life*, Harper Press, London, 2012, pp. xxi+832, £30
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When Sheila Hale's splendid guidebook to Venice appeared (first published 1984) it was rightly acknowledged as a classic, and Eric Newby wrote «we only use one guide book, Sheila Hale's *Venice*, for which she and the editors deserve a Nobel Prize.» Her intimate knowledge of Venice, and her effective style, was already present here; a brief quotation from the description of Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* in the *Frari* gives us an idea of the level of this guide book and prepares us for the volume under review. First Hale gives us a quote from Ruskin's *Modern Painters*: «The *Assumption* is a noble picture, because Titian believed in the Madonna. But he did not paint it to make any one else believe in her. He painted it, because he enjoyed rich masses of red and blue, and faces flushed with sunshine.» This is followed by Hale's own description: «The triangular composition of the painting, emphasized by the pattern of the colors, gives momentum to the upward sweep of the Virgin, who soars above the gesticulating apostles toward God the Father. The attendant angels «seem to be there only to sing the victory of a human being over his environment,» wrote Bernard Berenson. «They are embodied joys acting on our nerves like the rapturous outbursts of the orchestra at the end of *Parsifal*.»

The publication of Hale's biography of Titian coincided with other Titian initiatives in London, this summer's «Metamorphosis: Titian 2012», celebrating Titian in art, dance and music, at the National Gallery,

where three contemporary artists, Chris Ofili, Conrad Shawcross and Mark Wallinger, together with a group of choreographers, composers and poets, were invited to respond to three paintings by Titian: *Diana and Callisto*, *Diana and Actaeon*, and *The Death of Actaeon*. Their new work was presented in «Metamorphosis» alongside the Titian paintings and in three new ballets performed at the Royal Opera House.

Apart from these recent celebrations, one should remember that there has been no recent full biography of Titian since Crowe and Cavalcaselle's two volumed work of 1877 (with a reprint in 1881). Hale takes into account Crowe and Cavalcaselle's detailed analysis as well as the intervening bibliography, but has produced a completely new work based on her own original approach.

Her book, which came out in July, has been positively reviewed in the British dailies, which have however tended to expect a more traditional biography, with details about the subject's private life. Craig Brown for instance in *The Mail* on line appreciates that the book «successfully illuminates fascinating areas of European history, the rise of Protestantism, the clash of empires, the growth of Venice, the pursuit of beauty [...] But where is Titian? He can be spotted from time to time, but chiefly as a successful businessman, beavering to make money through his brush and paint, then using it to invest in land and property. Of his inner life – and much of his outer life too – we are left knowing nothing [...] This means many of the bit-part players are brilliantly vivid, while Titian himself, although onstage throughout, is doomed to lurk, dimly lit, in the background.»

It is interesting to read this «dimly lit, in the background» of Titian's presence in this biography; one could almost term it an «English» comment, as (to generalize) the English are well known for their love of biography and for their desire to be given all the intimate details possible. Hale realizes that

to put Titian in context is what matters most. She creates for us a brilliant picture which extends outside Venice to the rest of Italy and to Europe, giving us the historical, geographical background, populating it with the major figures of the time, ranging from Popes and Emperors to Titian's friends like Aretino and Sansovino, and naturally to his family, with the little that is known about them.

To give a feel of her approach, I shall limit myself to a few comments on the early chapters of her book, which deal with Titian's youth. The opening chapter is entitled «Mountains», which gives us the context of Pieve di Cadore, where Titian was born, his family background, his early education, until his move to Venice, dealt with in chapter 2 «The Most Triumphant City», which gives us an opening quotation from Sannazaro: «Great men built Rome, but Venice was built by gods.» Here we get a very skilled presentation of Venice, in its physical and cultural reality, with details about the importance of the Arsenal, early printing, the presence of scholars like Bembo, social life in Venice and its «erotically charged atmosphere.» Only in chapter 3 do we pass to «The Painter's Venice» and here, as well as comments on artists like the Bellinis, we get valuable technical details about the pigments used in paints: «it was the handling of pigments, not the use of brilliant colours, that set the greatest artists apart.» Chapter 4 «Myths of Venice» gives contextual information about Sanudo's records and passes to an examination of Venetian government, the social divisions in the city, the existence of the Scuole Grandi, as well as to an analysis of the international situation. This gives one an idea of the richness of the volume, which proceeds along these lines, situating Titian in a superbly presented context, realistically accepting that only so much has come down to us about his private life, and so concentrating on the circumstances of his various commissions and on the paintings produced. The volume closes with a comprehensive bibliography.

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