

TITIAN'S
MAN IN A RED HAT



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TITIAN'S PORTRAIT OF A MAN IN A RED HAT

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Titian's *Portrait of a Man in a Red Hat* was featured on the cover of *Life* magazine in August of 1947 (fig. 1), and in 1962 it appeared in one of Donald Judd's terse *Writings*, to name but two of the painting's many cameos outside The Frick Collection, where it has been on display for more than a century.¹ Of its many viewer reactions, possibly the most poignant is that on the back of a postcard of the painting sent by William Carlos Williams to his friend, the poet Louis Zukofsky. Dated February 21, 1952, the card reads: "This, at the Frick Museum, is for all time: annihilates time as far as poor mortals may."² Collapsing the difference between portrait ("this") and sitter ("poor mortal"), Williams's comment captures one of the portrait's salient qualities—its ability to conjure a human presence before one's eyes, to make us forget both the portrait's thingness and the world we live in.

Arresting and beloved as Titian's portrait may be, virtually nothing is known about it. Its dating is far from firmly established, its sitter remains unidentified, its attribution has been intermittently questioned, and its provenance has been the subject of much debate. On May 14, 1906, soon after an auction sale in London that included Titian's portrait, a journalist for *The Times* of London wrote:

By far the most important among the miscellaneous properties was a much-discussed good North Italian portrait of a comparatively young man to three-quarter length, standing, directed to front and looking to left, in dark cloak

Fig. 2
 Carlo Dolci
*St. Andrew Praying before His
 Martyrdom*, 1643
 Oil on canvas
 45½ × 36 in. (115.6 × 91.4 cm)
 Birmingham Museum and Art
 Gallery, Birmingham

the picture—so far, at least, as it can be verified—you will perhaps allow me to go into the matter shortly.

There can be little doubt that this picture, together with some of the Methuen diamonds, was in the possession of Gratiana, daughter of one of the numerous members of the Methuen family who received the name of Paul. The Paul Methuen I have in mind lived about 1670, and married Sarah Gould. Gratiana was their daughter and married Rev. J. Rogers: they had a son, John Methuen, and a daughter, Elizabeth, who became the wife of Captain Wilson. Captain Wilson's daughter Elizabeth was adopted by her uncle, the John Methuen Rogers just mentioned, and in time married Rev. E[dward] Edgell, Prebendary of Wells, who died April 2, 1860. At his death the picture lately sold passed to his eldest son, who sent it to Christie's and bought it in at 91 guineas, on June 24 (not May 2), 1876.

I may add that the information which I have got together during the last two or three years is in part derived from the "Pedigree of the Methuen Family," by W.H. Jones and J. Beddoe, while the correspondence and interviews which I have had with the descendants of the collateral branch of the Methuen of Corsham family who owned the picture down to 1906 affords confirmation. The other facts are now common knowledge.

I am, Sir, yours truly,
 Maurice W. Brockwell⁷

The next month, in the "Sale Room" section of *The Connoisseur*, the history of Titian's *Man in a Red Hat* was articulated further:

This work has a comparatively brief but eventful history. Mr. Maurice Brockwell has traced its possession to Gratiana, daughter of Paul Methuen—not, however, the well-known collector of that name. She married the Rev. John Rogers, through whose son it came into the possession of the niece of the latter. She married the Rev. Edward Edgell, rector of Rodden, Frome. The son of this gentleman, the Rev. E[dward] B[atenson] Edgell, late rector of Bromhead, sent the picture up to Christie's on June 24th, 1876, when it was bought in at £96 11 s[hillings]. After his death in 1904, it was placed with a firm of antique dealers in the country, who could obtain for it no higher offer than £30. It was brought to London, and sold at Christie's on May 12th, 1906, for £2,205, Sir Hugh Lane being the purchaser. The picture was generally accepted as a Titian, though it was also ascribed by various authorities to Giorgione, Sebastian del Piombo, Moretti [i.e., Moretto da Brescia], and other artists. Sir Hugh Lane sold the picture to Mr [Arthur] Grenfell for £30,000.⁸



Fig. 12
 Hans Memling
*Portrait of a Man from the
 Lespinette Family*, 1480s
 Oil on panel
 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (30.1 × 22.3 cm)
 Mauritshuis, The Hague

of the masters who were working in Tuscany and were the creators of the modern manner [*maniera moderna*]. Giorgione had seen some things by the hand of Leonardo, very nuanced and terribly dark: and this manner pleased him so much that he was forever studying it as long as he lived, and imitated it greatly in the colors of oil painting.⁵⁸

Giorgione is also believed to have imparted to Titian the tools with which to become a great painter:

Titian, then, having seen the method and manner of Giorgione, abandoned the manner of Giambellino [i.e., Giovanni Bellini] although he had consumed much time with it, and attached himself to that [of Giorgione]; coming in a short time to imitate his [i.e., Giorgione's] works so well, that his pictures at times were mistaken for Giorgione's. . . . At the time when he first began to follow Giorgione's manner, not being more than eighteen, he made the portrait of a gentleman friend of his from the Barbarigo household.⁵⁹

This Leonardo–Giorgione–Titian genealogy, which seems confirmed by historical data, has long intrigued art historians. On the one hand, Leonardo was in Venice in the year 1500—having fled Milan, which had been invaded by the French—and likely had contacts with Venetian artists. On the other hand, Titian and Giorgione worked at roughly the same time on the frescoes of the facade of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, in Venice (mostly lost).

Scholars, however, have rightfully insisted that the Fondaco commission, for which Titian and Giorgione devised distinct iconographic programs, was awarded independently to the two artists.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Leonardo was just one among many foreign artists to bring about significant changes during sojourns in the city on the lagoon. Between 1490 and 1510, scores of artists of varied backgrounds (and standing) resided in Venice, including Perugino (1494–97), Albrecht Dürer (1494–95; 1506–7), Cristoforo and Andrea Solario (1492–95), Giovanni Agostino da Lodi (ca. 1495–1506), Mantegna (1506), Boccaccio Boccaccino (1506), and Fra Bartolomeo (1508). Moreover, works by Hieronymus Bosch and Hans Memling made their way into the collections of Venetian patricians during the same period.⁶¹ Against this background, a comparison between Giorgione's Terris portrait (see fig. 9), usually dated 1506, and a portrait by Dürer in Genoa of that same year (fig. 11) or an earlier portrait by Memling (fig. 12) suffices to illustrate the complexity of reciprocal influences.⁶²



Fig. 26
 Titian (Tiziano Vecellio)
*Federico II Gonzaga, Marquess
 of Mantua*, late 1520s (?)
 Oil on panel
 49³/₁₆ × 39 in. (125 × 99 cm)
 Museo del Prado, Madrid

However frequently swords may appear in portraits of the early Cinquecento in Italy, scholars have never pointed out that only little more than twenty of almost one hundred portraits of male sitters by Titian flaunt a sword. More important, with the exception of a couple of sitters as yet unidentified, the men carrying swords in Titian portraits all belong to the highest ranks of the Italian (and European) sixteenth-century aristocracy: emperors and kings, viceroys, heads of state, and offspring of princely families. Among them, only one seems to be Venetian—Gabriele Tadino, who ranked high among the republic’s military forces.¹¹⁷ This comes as no surprise because it was strictly forbidden to carry a sword in the streets of Venice.¹¹⁸ Although such strict rules probably existed precisely because they were largely ignored, it seems likely that Venetian patricians would still deem it inappropriate to be portrayed with a sword by their side. One may object that, as Giovan Paolo Lomazzo put it in his *Trattato dell’arte della pittura* (1584), “the merchants and bankers, who never saw an unsheathed sword, whom one would expect to see with a pen behind their ear, shrouded in their gown [*gonella*], their notebook before them, instead have themselves portrayed in full suit of armor, holding batons like those of generals—which is a most ridiculous thing.”¹¹⁹ However, as Johannes Wilde pointed out, this seems to be a much later phenomenon—a “bourgeois tendency” emerging at least after the Sack of Rome (1527).¹²⁰

The sitter of the Frick portrait must be an extremely high-ranking individual from a princely family—probably Italian, considering that at this stage Titian’s fame had not yet extended beyond the Alps, and presumably no foreign candidate of such distinction would call upon an (as yet) little-known painter. However, one candidate who was then within Titian’s reach was Federico II Gonzaga (1500–1540), the first-born son of Isabella d’Este and Francesco II, Marquess of Mantua.¹²¹

When the portrait was painted, about 1516–19, Federico would have been sixteen to nineteen years old, an age that aligns quite well with the sitter’s pubescent beard.¹²² Federico had brown eyes, like the sitter, and was often celebrated as the handsomest young prince of his time. Aged ten to thirteen, Federico had been part of Pope Julius II’s court in Rome, where he was forced to reside as a hostage in exchange for the liberation of his father from Venetian custody. Soon thereafter, he spent another three years as a hostage at the court of King Francis I of France. At the French court, he developed a taste for expensive clothing, encouraged by his mother, who understood that he could





Fig. 30
 Tullio Lombardo
Young Couple, ca. 1505–10
 Marble with traces of
 polychromy
 22 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 27 $\frac{5}{16}$ × 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.
 (56 × 71 × 20 cm)
 Kunsthistorisches Museum,
 Vienna

suitable example may be the famous couple by Tullio Lombardo (fig. 30).¹⁴⁴ But here, if the question of the identity of male *and* female sitters in works such as this was indeed irrelevant, that was because such sitters pursued the translation of their likeness into works that could be taken as antiques, as relics of an ancient, unknowable past. In other words, the point of classicizing portraiture was less ideal beauty (and the competition with poetry) than it was the cult of antiquity. On the contrary, there was no possibility of modern, early sixteenth-century portraits of a male sitter being idealized in the vernacular, either visual or literary. No unidentified male portrait of the Cinquecento can be said to be a beautiful representation made for its own sake. To see Titian's *Portrait of a Man in a Red Hat* as a portrait of ideal male beauty is to read it, if inadvertently, through the lens of romanticism. This is not to deny that contemporary viewers may have perceived a male sitter as beautiful nor that his representation might become an object of desire.¹⁴⁵ Quite the contrary. For the male Erotic, unlike the male Beautiful, was very much within the possibilities of vernacular painting.¹⁴⁶

“My Favorite Renaissance Sex Object”

A good friend of Titian's, Daniele Barbaro, once prescribed how a good painter should paint:

[One ought to] paint the contours with sweetness and *sfumato*, so that you can understand even that which is not there, instead of making the eye believe that it [only] sees what meets the eye, which [here] is a most sweet fugue, a tenderness in the horizon of our sight, something which is, yet isn't—and one can achieve this only with infinite practice.¹⁴⁷

Approaching the *Man in a Red Hat* at close range, one can still see the gold of the *saione* extending under the fur above the sitter's left hand. Similarly, an originally larger profile for the hat has left a red aura surrounding the sitter's head. Titian's pentimenti are left visible, and so is his every brushstroke. In the large spans of black, apparently providing an interval of rest to one's eyes, Titian plays with different levels of glossiness—a distinction that is lost even in the best reproductions.¹⁴⁸ The texture of the painting is further enriched by the grainy canvas, which catches light in its ridges and helps to articulate the structure of the beard. Involving the viewer in a haptic form of gaze, while also blurring the contours of the image, Titian's portrait prompts the viewer to feel “something which *is* yet *isn't*.”¹⁴⁹ On a psychological level, the portrait also half encourages, half frustrates the viewer's attempt to comprehend the sitter's *moti dell'animo*: because these *moti* are never quite knowable, the beholder ends up projecting their own emotions onto the picture. Ultimately, the *moti dell'animo* present in the portrait are as much the receptive viewer's as they are the sitter's.

There is a great deal of tension in the suspended moment chosen by Titian for this portrait, which toys more than most with the boundaries between absence and presence. Stirring the viewer's emotions vis-à-vis the sitter's, while also exciting tactile imagination, a portrait like the *Man in a Red Hat* stimulates sensuality and desire. As Marianne Koos has pointed out, the work at the Frick is not too different in this regard from the many Venetian portraits of women whose robes slide over their shoulders, among which Titian's roughly contemporary *Flora* (fig. 31) represents in many ways a parallel to the *Man in a Red Hat*.¹⁵⁰ Like the man's left collarbone that comes into view from under the shirt as he turns, her left nipple is nearly exposed. As the viewer's gaze travels along the breasts of the woman, vibrant juxtapositions of