

TITIAN'S
PIETRO ARETINO



FRANCINE PROSE
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APPARITIONS

Titian's Portrait of Pietro Aretino

Francine Prose

"I should like to paint portraits which would appear after a century to people living then as apparitions."

—Vincent van Gogh to Wilhelmina van Gogh, June 5, 1890

One: The Docent

When the handsome, good-humored docent tells the museumgoers from Dallas that they are looking at Titian's portrait of the writer Pietro Aretino—a poet, art critic, essayist, journalist, and playwright—he fears, having learned from experience, that their interest will be, at best, polite.

So instead, the docent (a postdoc researching the restoration of Renaissance masterpieces) says, "This is Titian's portrait of the famous blackmailer Pietro Aretino."

A blackmailer. Now that's something. Two of the women emit little murmurs of excitement and vague apprehension, and the tourists inch toward the painting, as if to inspect, at no risk to themselves, a certified Renaissance criminal.

The docent could have said, "This is Titian's portrait of his best friend, who during his lifetime was an immensely popular and influential author whose collected letters gained him an international reputation. A loudmouth, a shameless flatterer, an egomaniac, and a pornographer, a man gifted or cursed with prodigious talents and energies, with uncontrolled libidinous appetites." But that might have pushed things too far, dialed the frisson up to a shock and caused the visitors to edge away from the painting.

The young man explains that Aretino had a talent for uncovering and monetizing the secrets of the powerful and rich. Given the era's penchant for

political assassination, revenge murders, and public executions, it's surprising, he says, that Aretino lived long enough to have his portrait painted.

The docent might have added that the delight Aretino took in outraging princes and popes is thought to have motivated an attack by a man by the name of Achille della Volta who stabbed him in the chest. And he could have mentioned (but doesn't) that Aretino is said to have died laughing, that is, died of excessive laughter—a fact or myth that these cheerful men and women, so eager to learn and laugh themselves, would probably never guess about the dignified man in the portrait. Anyway, the docent knows enough to move fast, to keep everyone alert and engaged, as he guides them across the gallery to the Holbeins.

If the docent had said nothing, if the Texans had never heard of Aretino, if only Titian's name appeared beneath the portrait, what might they have thought?

The long beard, the rapt expression, the gaze tilted toward the heavens, the blaze of the soul shining through the eyes and the forehead would likely have made them think of (and even glance back at) Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*, which they have just looked at. On the day the docent is shepherding his group through the gallery, Bellini's wilderness hermit, captured in a moment of ecstatic transport, is Aretino's nearest neighbor on the museum wall.

Without the docent's guidance, the tourists might have concluded that they were looking at Titian's painting of a Renaissance saint, in the company of fellow saints. Much better dressed than St. Francis but no more or less elegant than Holbein's Sir Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell. Between them is El Greco's gaunt, bearded St. Jerome. It's a community, one might say. But the saints know better.

As a boy, the docent believed that the Old Masters were reanimators and that their portrait subjects were the reanimated, that the spirits of the sitters lived on in the paintings, awaiting the right moment to emerge. That childish belief has remained his secret, the secret reason (of course not the only or even the main reason) for his becoming an art historian: to know more about the ghosts and apparitions who (or so he used to imagine) haunt the museum, after it closes.

Still he wonders what the ascetics, Francis and Jerome, and the devout Sir Thomas More feel about sharing eternity (minus the inevitable absences and substitutions occasioned by rearrangements and restoration, which after all

are the docent's subjects) with a Renaissance writer whose books include two erotic dialogues, *The Secret Lives of Nuns* and *The Secret Lives of Courtesans*, and who himself is the subject of a book titled *Renaissance Porn Star: The Saga of Pietro Aretino, the World's Greatest Hustler*. A bisexual libertine who wrote that "a man prolongs his life precisely in proportion to the extent that he satisfies his desires," Aretino claimed to fear for his health if he had fewer than forty lovers a month: more than one a day.

Titian's first portrait of Aretino, now in Basel at the Kunstmuseum, was presented to the Marquess of Mantua, with a letter that, according to Titian's biographer, Sheila Hale, was "signed by Titian but surely composed by Aretino." The letter "compares Aretino to St. Paul, an Apostle, and therefore infallible. . . . He hopes that the portrait of Aretino will please him 'because I know how much you love your servant for his many virtues.'"¹ Aretino's tribute—his gift—was a picture of himself, painted by a master.

Two: Friendship

Titian knew who his friend was, the chemistry of virtue and vice that constituted his character. So what are we to make of the artist's willingness to write (or at least sign) this sanitized, nearly unrecognizable version of Aretino as St. Paul, the enemy of physical pleasure, and as the reliably loyal servant of the Mantuan marquess?

The relationship between Aretino and Titian seems to have been among the most harmonious and productive of artistic friendships, the perfect union of like-mindedness, mutual admiration, and personal ambition, a bond cemented by a shared taste for pleasure, food, and fun. Aretino has been referred to as Titian's press agent, his publicist, his propagandist. He composed a sonnet about Titian's work. Writing about the artist, he bordered on hyperbole, if one can be hyperbolic about Titian. But everyone knew that subtlety was not Aretino's style, that he had to ramp up the pitch of praise in communicating with Titian's patrons and potential patrons. The two men appear to have exchanged ideas on religion, philosophy, and esthetics. Both lived in Venice, where neither was born and where one wasn't a proper Venetian unless one's lineage went back to the city's founding.

Titian not only enjoyed his friend's lavish and generous hospitality, as well as the obvious benefits of his praise, but also used him as a model for his *Ecce Homo*, in the role of a handsome, beautifully dressed Pontius Pilate, standing

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When Titian's portrait of Pietro Aretino was exhibited at the Colnaghi Gallery in London in August 1905, the English art critic Roger Fry hailed it as a significant work of art.¹ Moreover, Fry stated, "It has been suggested that means should be found to acquire this magnificent work for the nation and already we believe an anonymous and public-spirited donor has offered a large sum towards the price. It is most sincerely to be hoped that others will come forward with the same generosity."² The portrait became a topic of conversation in the international art world, and other scholars, such as the German Georg Gronau, wrote enthusiastically about it.³ Whether or not the British government ever attempted to acquire the painting, as Fry wished, is unknown, as is the identity of the "public-spirited donor" to whom he referred. But while the Anglo-Saxon and German art historical worlds were united in their admiration for the portrait, a discordant voice came out of Italy. The well-known art historian Adolfo Venturi wrote an acerbic letter about the "much discussed portrait" in the magazine *L'Arte* on September 4 of that year, avowing that the "supposed portrait by Titian is an object that does not deserve the honor of the praise given to it by the English press or of the Italian press's lament for its departure."⁴ He described the portrait as "most miserable" and "unworthy of the storage of a gallery." "Everything in it," he said, "is ugly, forced, and false."⁵ With a touch of nationalism, Venturi scathingly concluded with the wish that his country should "always give similar masterpieces away to foreigners."⁶

Indeed, toward the end of 1905, the Titian portrait was offered to the American industrialist Henry Clay Frick, who that same year had moved from



Fig. 1
Living Hall with Titian's *Pietro Aretino*, 1927. The Frick Collection, New York

Pittsburgh to New York, where he took up residence in the opulent house of William H. Vanderbilt at 640 Fifth Avenue. Partly inspired by Vanderbilt's art collection, Frick began to purchase Old Master paintings with even greater enthusiasm, adding to the significant collection he had already assembled in Pittsburgh. The negotiation around the purchase of Titian's *Aretino* portrait must have occurred during the last months of 1905; on January 9, 1906, Frick paid \$90,000 to Knoedler, the dealer from whom he officially bought the canvas.⁷ Soon after the portrait crossed the Atlantic, Frick lent it—between April 12 and October 10—to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That same year, Roger Fry was appointed Curator of European Paintings at the Metropolitan; Fry had surely been instrumental in Frick's loan to the museum.⁸

In 1910, Frick lent the portrait for a second time, to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Soon after, he began to plan the construction of a mansion on Fifth Avenue, between 70th and 71st streets. Once the house was completed,

at the end of 1914, Titian's Aretino portrait was hung in the Living Hall, flanking Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*, and paired with another, earlier portrait of an unknown man by Titian (fig. 1), which Frick had acquired in that same year, as he was moving his family and collection into the house.

The Chigi Provenance

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Aretino portrait was “discovered” by the Italian art historian Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle. In 1891, Cavalcaselle wrote: “Some years ago, we found in Rome at Palazzo Chigi another portrait of Aretino, which is undoubtedly by Titian” (fig. 2).⁹ Cavalcaselle's enthusiasm was echoed by Giovanni Morelli, who, in a list of Titian's works in Roman collections, wrote of “the splendid portrait of Pietro Aretino in his advancing years, belonging to Prince Mario Chigi, which is of the greatest simplicity in both conception and representation.”¹⁰ By 1904, just before the portrait left Italy for good, it was illustrated—for the first time and in black and white—

Fig. 2
Palazzo Chigi, Rome, 1930



Fig. 3
 Jacob Ferdinand Voet
Cardinal Flavio Chigi,
 ca. 1670
 Oil on canvas
 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 17 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (61.3 × 43.3 cm)
 Palazzo Chigi Ariccia

by Georg Gronau, who rhapsodized about the work: “Titian seems to have suppressed all that was base, and to have brought out in the countenance its remarkable intellectual power. He [Aretino] stands as if deep in thought, his gaze, as it were, turned inwards.”¹¹

Cavalcaselle’s statement about his discovery in Palazzo Chigi was not exactly correct. By that time, the portrait was a celebrated work that had been in the Roman princely family for more than two hundred years. Already in a guidebook of 1725, the painting is described in Palazzo Chigi on Piazza Colonna as “the portrait of Aretino painted by Titian.”¹² A number of subsequent guidebooks to Rome mention the painting in the palazzo, and, in 1836, it was on view in one of the main rooms of the building, together with works by Jacopo Bassano, Pietro da Cortona, Guercino, Annibale Carracci, and Francesco Albani.¹³ The guidebooks mention it as one of the most important paintings in the Chigi collection. With the unification of Italy and the dissolution of the Papal States, in 1871 the Chigi family found itself in dire economic circumstances and began disposing of some of its belongings. In 1878, Prince Mario Chigi leased his palazzo to the Austro-Hungarian ambassador, and his son—Ludovico—sold it to the Italian state in 1916–18, during World War I. The palazzo first became the Ministry of Colonial Affairs, then the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and later, beginning in 1961, the residence and main office of the Italian prime minister.¹⁴ The Titian was part of Mario Chigi’s sales of his art collection in the early twentieth century.

The portrait is first documented in the collection of the Chigi family on May 1, 1692, in the inventory of the belongings of Cardinal Flavio Chigi (fig. 3), Pope Alexander VII’s nephew. It is listed among the cardinal’s possessions in his palazzo on Piazza Santi Apostoli (fig. 4)—present-day Palazzo Odescalchi—as “a painting on canvas of 4 *palmi*, with a frame all gilt and sanded, with a half-length figure or portrait of Pietro Aretino, by Titian.”¹⁵ How the cardinal obtained the painting—whether through purchase, gift, or inheritance—is unknown. A payment of April 26, 1664, suggests that he owned the portrait by then. On that date, the gilder Camillo Saracini was paid for work he had completed for the Chigi family, including 16.80 *scudi* “for having gilded a carved frame with mordant and polished gold, 6 *palmi* high and 5 wide, for a portrait by Titian, which served for the Most Eminent Cardinal Chigi for his legation to France.”¹⁶ While the payment does not record the sitter of the Titian portrait, the dimensions of the frame are not



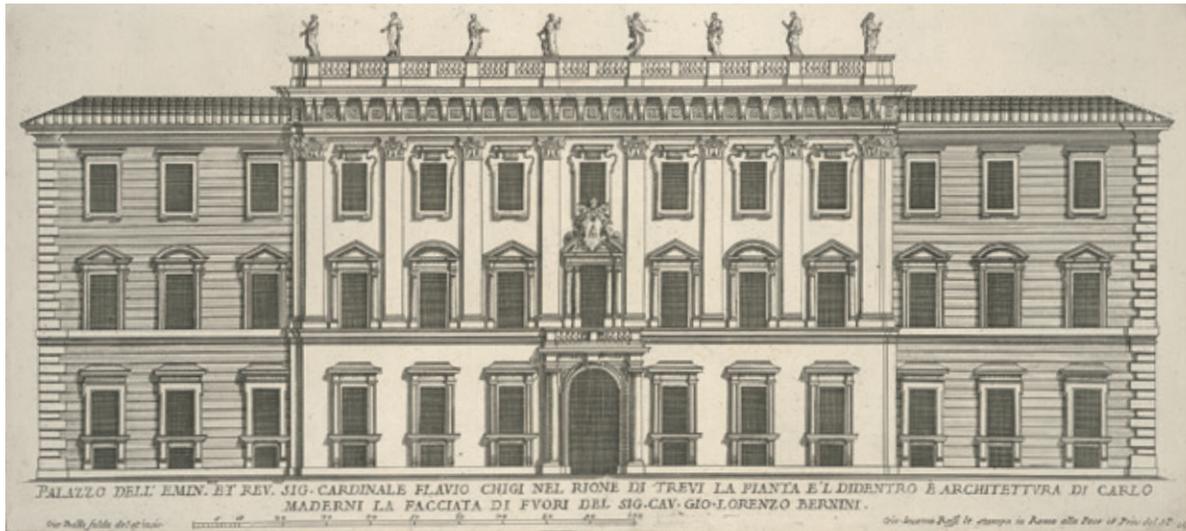


Fig. 4
Giovanni Battista Falda
Palazzo Chigi at Santi Apostoli,
ca. 1655
Etching
7 × 14½ in. (17.8 × 35.9 cm)
The British Museum, London
(1877, 0811.1489)

incompatible with the Aretino portrait.¹⁷ It is unclear why Chigi would have brought the painting with him to France during his embassy to King Louis XIV in 1664.

A 1650 inventory of the possessions of Cardinal Fabrizio Savelli, papal legate to Bologna between 1648 and 1651, lists—among the “paintings of the Cardinal that came from Bologna”—a “portrait of Pietro Aretino 5 *palmi* tall and 4 wide.”¹⁸ While the inventory does not mention the artist, the dimensions are compatible with the portrait owned by the Chigi, who are known to have acquired numerous works of art from the Savelli family in the seventeenth century.¹⁹ While the precise origins of the Chigi portrait of Aretino remain uncertain, the painting probably did not stay in the palazzo at Santi Apostoli for long, if in 1725 it was already described as being in Palazzo Chigi on Piazza Colonna, where it remained until 1905.

The creation of the portrait, however, is well documented, and it was the result of the relationship among three extraordinary individuals who lived in Venice during the first half of the sixteenth century: the sitter, Pietro Aretino; his publisher, Francesco Marcolini; and the painter, Titian. By delving into their biographies, the links among the three men become apparent, and light is shed on the commission of the painting. The canvas brings to life the intellectual circles in which both Titian and Aretino moved and the world of publishing in Renaissance Venice.