

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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TITIAN'S MASTERPIECE THE FLAYING OF MARSYAS ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Washington, D. C., Jan. 15, 1986. The National Gallery of Art and the State Museum in Kroměříž, Czechoslovakia have concluded an agreement which will bring Titian's masterpiece of Venetian painting, The Flaying of Marsyas, to the United States. When the painting goes on view Jan. 17, 1986 in Lobby A of the Gallery's West Building, it will be only the second time since the 17th century that this extraordinary work has been seen outside Czechoslovakia.

J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art said, "We are honored to exhibit one of the greatest Venetian paintings in existence. Our gratitude goes out to the State Museum in Kroměříž and to the government and people of Czechoslovakia for making this possible."

Titian (c. 1488-1576) was the dominant figure in Venetian art during the 16th century, achieving reknown beyond that of any other artist of his time, including Michelangelo. Painted at the end of his long career, sometime between 1570 and his death in 1576, The Flaying of Marsyas is recognized as one of Titian's most important works.

The painting measures nearly 7 feet square and depicts in life-size figures the climactic episode of one of the most horrific stories in classical mythology: the satyr Marsyas being skinned alive by the god Apollo, who has defeated him in a contest of musical skill.

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Professor Sydeny Freedberg, chief curator of the National Gallery of Art, describes Titian's The Flaying of Marsyas as "concerned obviously and immediately with death, but at the same time an extraordinary affirmation of living. Vitality is expressed in the visual and psychic vibrance of nature and the creatures who inhabit it -- men, animals, satyrs, gods. In this world all things co-exist, subsumed into one resonating harmony, the comic and the cruel, the terrible and the sublime, ugliness and magisterial beauty. Awaiting death, like Marsyas, the old Titian proclaims that he is one with the cosmos into which his body and spirit soon will pass, and that it is miraculously, incandescently alive."

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BACKGROUND: THE FLAYING OF MARSYAS BY TITIAN

I. The Painting

In a dense forest, the goat-man Marsyas is strung upside down from a tree, his feet tied with pink ribbons, looking much like an animal about to be slaughtered. Apollo, identified by his golden hair and wreath of victor's laurel, kneels beside Marsyas and calmly peels away his skin. Standing above Apollo, a rustic assistant wields a second knife against the satyr's leg. Beside him a beautiful youth sings while accompanying himself on an Apollonian stringed instrument known as a "lira da braccio." To the right of the canvas sits Midas, the Phrygian king who voted for the satyr-god Pan against Apollo in an earlier musical contest. He was awarded the ears of an ass by Apollo for this error in judgment. Behind Midas, Pan himself rushes forward with a bucket of water to assist in Apollo's deadly undertaking. In the foreground an agitated satyr-child holds back a panting dog, while below him a small Venetian lap dog tastes the blood that pours from Marsyas' wounds.

II. The Legend

The Marsyas legend has been understood to represent the symbolic act of sacrificial purification, or more specifically, a Dionysian rite in which a being is spiritually freed by removing the ugliness of his outward appearance. The musical contest alludes to the mythological legend that regards wind instruments as part of rustic nature, appealing to man's more primitive instincts, while stringed instruments touch man's higher, cultured nature. Thus, the victory of lyre over pipes exemplifies the triumph of art, and that which appeals to man's higher instincts, over the baser human emotions.

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It is not known for whom The Flaying of Marsyas was painted, but there is reason to believe it was conceived in part as a response to contemporary political events. On Aug. 1, 1571, the military stronghold of Famagusta, on the Venetian colony of Cyprus, was conquered by the Turks. Four days later the Venetian commander, Marcantonio Bragadin, who had surrendered to the Turkish general, Lala Mustafa Pasha, went out to present him with the keys to Famagusta.

The ceremony began with great courtesy, but suddenly Mustafa turned violent. Without warning, he drew a knife and cut off Bragadin's right ear, ordering an attendant to cut off the other and his nose. He then commanded his guards to kill the entire surrendering party. Three hundred and fifty people were beheaded and additional slaughter continued throughout Famagusta for several days.

The worst fate was reserved for the Venetian commander, Bragadin. After two weeks of suffering in prison, he was taken to the public square and flayed alive. Titian, and his fellow Venetians reacted with horror to this event, regarding the death of Bragadin as a heroic military equivalent to the sacrifice of Christ. However, when a few months later the Venetian naval fleet defeated the Turks at the battle of Lepanto, the anguish of defeat turned to a celebration of victory. The city of Venice had experienced the deeper meaning of the Marsyas legend first-hand: torment and sacrifice ultimately ended with purification and redemption.

III. History of the Painting

The known history of Titian's The Flaying of Marsyas, begins around 1620 when it was purchased in Italy by Lady Arundel of England. It was later acquired by a collector from Cologne and in 1672 passed into the hands of a bishop from Bohemia, Karl von Lichtenstein, who won it in a lottery.

For nearly 300 years, Titian's masterpiece has remained in the Archepiscopal Palace (now a state museum) in Kroměříž, Czechoslovakia. It has been seen outside Czechoslovakia only once before, in 1983, at London's Royal Academy of Arts.

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