

# David Molesky on Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*

Apr 11, 2016 | Renaissance



Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, 1570-1576, Oil on canvas, 83 x 81 inches

Through the double doors that open into the Met Breuer's inaugural exhibition, I fell into the familiar vortex of a painting I have loved for decades: Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*, (1570-1576). To behold this elusive masterpiece is a rare treasure, as it usually hangs in Archbishop's Castle in Kromeriz, Czech Republic.

Previously I had only known this painting from books. I first wrote an essay about it in 1995 for my freshman art history class at UC Berkeley. In 2008, I heard that the painting was loaned for exhibition in Venice. A few planes and trains later, I rolled into the Italian museum, running on

empty, nearly frozen and half starved. I walked through the exhibition until I found it, that beautifully painted horror. I parked myself before it and stared. The dance of angled limbs, positioned around the inverted figure, began to hypnotize me into a trance. In this state, my eyes seemed to focus at a point somewhere beyond the painting's surface and those limbs seemed to come to life with jarring marionette-like movement. Internally, these visuals were giving me the spins, a kind of vertigo. Nearly two hours after I had arrived, I was shaken back to consciousness by a guard who needed me to vacate the galleries as the museum was closing.

Did this painting put a spell on me? I am not sure, but it certainly has made me feel more open to the possibility that within the mysteries of painting there is a kind of magic that perhaps can be revealed by studying how great work interfaces with our minds. Painting is a kind of pre-masticated vision, that is, what's depicted has been pre-chewed by the painter's mind and hands, making it easier for viewers to digest complex fantastical views. One aspect of *The Flaying of Marsyas* that is so wonderful is that we can gain a sense of Titian's own disposition by the way he spits out the characters in his painting. Titian is receptive to the noble qualities of humanity and he seems to have sympathy for the character of Marsyas and how his death has affected those around him.

I see three clear ways of looking at *The Flaying of Marsyas*. First, we can look at the individual elements of the painting — a formal analysis of the figures, composition, the placement of things in relation to each other — and try to assemble a narrative based on stored concepts and our internal understanding of inherent archetypes. Titian directs us into the painting at the point of highest contrast, Apollo's pale white arm that holds a knife against a darker background. The angle of this arm and its association to other similar limbs in the painting catapults the viewer's eye into a swirling counter clockwise movement through all of the figures.

The second way of looking at the painting is as a literate picture, which according to David Ligare who invented the term, is a representational painting based on literary, philosophical, or epistemological sources. This gives the viewer the opportunity to utilize his or her own knowledge of the text as a tool to dig at deeper interpretations of the painted image. The benefit of literate pictures is that they build upon a story that's commonly known. They take advantage of a pre-existing trail of breadcrumbs and allow the artist to make a more specific statement than would be available to them through an entirely new narrative.

In the case of *The Flaying of Marsyas*, Titian has chosen the climactic moment from Ovid's texts *Metamorphosis* and *Fasti*, a moment in which all the characters involved (including the audience) realize the full effect of Marsyas' nasty punishment. (For a refresher on the story, I encourage you to revisit Ovid's texts.) If you know the story of Marsyas (and Titian assumed that his audience would), you can start to think about how Titian interprets the text and what details he embellishes and which he ignores. For example, you might notice that Titian has downplayed the elegance of Apollo, whose lyre is made out of wood and not ivory inlaid with gems as Ovid describes it in the original text. Titian has also chosen to include elements of the narrative that occur both before and after the main event. In the background we see Apollo

playing his lyre, and in the foreground we see him staring deeply into Marsyas' flesh as he cuts it away. The double depiction of Apollo conveys the brutality of an immortal god towards a mortal creature.

It's also interesting to notice what Titian chooses to include or invent in his painting. For example, he's included Midas (in a pose we would now call "The Thinker") contemplating the flaying of his friend while watching an aristocratic toy dog lap up the pooling blood. There is no mention of this dog in Ovid's text, so it's a peculiar addition to the foreground of Titan's painting. Here Titian is perhaps giving us a clue about his own philosophical outlook. Perhaps Titian is suggesting that the rich are directly benefitting from the destruction of things that are earth-bound or deemed "lower" than the immortal gods, with whom they would more readily identify than with poor Marsyas. Add to this the fact that, as we know, Midas is a figure whose own story teaches of the errors of greed and selfishness, and who then reformed and learned from his past. Looking at the dog, perhaps Midas too is feeling ashamed for the greedy way he once had lived.

A third way of looking at the painting is from a historical perspective. Knowing that this was the last painting that Titian finished, and that he died while painting his next work (a Pieta that includes himself as Nicodemus kneeling before the dying Christ), it is eerie to look at this work knowing that Titian himself was, like Marsyas, in his final hour. The look in Marsyas' eyes in his last moments of consciousness is spot on — and to my knowledge no other work of art has so successfully captured this specific moment where consciousness slips into death. Only someone who is very familiar with the processes of death could have painted with that degree of acute understanding. The plague was a relentless and ceaseless wave of death that engulfed much of Titian's world (and ultimately his life). During the years that Titian worked to complete his last two masterpieces, a massive plague outbreak killed nearly one third of the population of his hometown, Venice. In moments of severe grief, when it seems nothing is fair in the world, even a devout believer begins to question whether there is/are gods and whether these gods mean well. Titian's final completed masterpiece, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, perhaps suggests his feelings and frustrations about the death that seemed to be circling in on him.



David Molesky, *Maidan*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 inches

David Molesky ([www.davidmolesky.com](http://www.davidmolesky.com)) is a New York based painter whose work has been exhibited widely throughout the US and Europe. His recent body of work "Riot Paintings" is currently on view through May 1st at Stephen Romano Gallery in Brooklyn.

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**Martha Edelheit** on April 13, 2016 at 8:45 am

Thanks for reminding me of this wonderful painting. And for the opportunity to look and think about it again! It is so powerful and moving! Like your thoughtful commentary .

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