

## The Stag's Skull and the Iconography of Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*

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### Article abstract

Les études iconographiques du tableau du Titien *Diane et Actéon* publiées au cours de ces trente dernières années suivent l'interprétation de Ellis Waterhouse selon laquelle le crâne de cerf placé sur un pilier à la droite de la composition annonce la métamorphose d'Actéon et sa mise à mort par ses propres chiens. Selon ces analyses le tableau est ainsi centré sur le destin d'Actéon puni par Diane.

L'auteur remarque cependant que des modifications de la couche picturale ont conduit les observateurs à considérer le crâne de cerf comme un motif isolé. Celui-ci ne serait en réalité qu'un simple trophée de chasse de Diane. Titien aurait plutôt choisi de représenter la confrontation initiale entre le chasseur et la déesse. En effet, une telle interprétation de l'épisode mythologique coïncide parfaitement avec les traductions italiennes de Diodore Siculus contemporaines du peintre vénitien.

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# The Stag's Skull and the Iconography of Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*

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## RÉSUMÉ

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Les études iconographiques du tableau du Titien *Diane et Actéon* publiées au cours de ces trente dernières années suivent l'interprétation de Ellis Waterhouse selon laquelle le crâne de cerf placé sur un pilier à la droite de la composition annonce la métamorphose d'Actéon et sa mise à mort par ses propres chiens. Selon ces analyses le tableau est ainsi centré sur le destin d'Actéon puni par Diane.

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In his lecture of 1951 on Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (Fig. 101),<sup>1</sup> Ellis Waterhouse referred to the deer's skull placed upon the rusticated pillar in the right foreground near Diana as "a gruesome reminder of Actaeon's fate."<sup>2</sup> This evocative interpretation has been accepted in all subsequent studies on the painting.<sup>3</sup> This note, however, proposes a different interpretation, one that is more consistent with what can be seen or, more accurately, what was originally more clearly to be seen in the painting.<sup>4</sup> The matter is more important than it might be thought at first, because our understanding of the

meaning of this detail affects our overall interpretation of one of Titian's greatest works.

The stag's skull, complete with antlers, is actually only one of a number of reminders of Diana's hunting prowess depicted in the right-hand section of the painting above the offended goddess (Fig. 102). Hanging on a branch above her raised hand is a deerskin with feet, while at the same level at the very edge of the canvas, above the figure of Diana's black attendant, hangs another deerskin. This one, which appears to be much closer to the picture plane, is complete with head. Although the present condition of the painting allows for these skins to be easily confused with the trees, they would have been more clearly discernible when the painting left Titian's studio because, like many Italian Renaissance painters, Titian frequently used copper resinate in areas of green foliage. With prolonged exposure to light this pigment changes to brown. This appears to be the case in much of the upper right section of the *Diana and Actaeon*.<sup>5</sup> One result of this change is that the skull is now much more prominent than the skins and

1 Duke of Sutherland Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland.

2 Ellis Waterhouse, *Titian's Diana and Actaeon*, Charlton Lectures on Art (London, 1952), 19.

3 H. Keller, *Tizians Poesie für König Philipp II von Spanien* (Wiesbaden, 1968), 161; E. Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic*, The Wrightsman Lectures (New York, 1968), 157; M. Tanner, "Chance and Coincidence in Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*," *Art Bulletin*, LVI (1974), 537; H. E. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian III: The Mythological and Historical Paintings* (London, 1975), 74; A. Gentili, *Da Tiziano a Tiziano* (Milan, 1980), 120-21; and most recently, J. Nash, *Veiled Images, Titian's Mythological Paintings for Philip II* (Philadelphia and London, 1985), 41-42.

4 I should like to thank the staff of the National Gallery of Scotland who, some years ago, extended every courtesy and allowed me to examine the painting in detail.

5 For the browning of foliage painted with copper resinate in an earlier painting by Titian, see A. Lucas and J. Plesters, "Titian's 'Bacchus and Ariadne,'" *National Gallery Technical*

so tends to be seen as an isolated motif. Indeed, neither Waterhouse's lecture nor any of the recent iconographic studies that assign such importance to the skull even mention the skins, despite their proximity to the skull and the fact that they too are the remains of deer.<sup>6</sup>

That the skins and the skull are to be considered together as attributes of Diana is supported by comparison of the painting with its pendant, the *Diana and Callisto* (Fig. 103),<sup>7</sup> where the goddess of the chase is clearly identified by the presence of two hounds, two hunting spears, two bows, and no fewer than three quivers full of arrows in the right foreground close to her. Other references to her devotion to the hunt are given on at least one of the two fictive reliefs on the pillar that forms the base of the fountain in that picture.<sup>8</sup> These reliefs are the iconographic counterparts of the small scene above the goddess in the background of the *Diana and Actaeon*, where a female figure dressed in flowing white garments, with one arm raised, runs in pursuit of a stag and is, in all probability, a representation of the goddess in the act of hunting.<sup>9</sup>

*Bulletin*, II (1978), 40-41. Unfortunately no detailed pigment analyses have been carried out on the *Diana and Actaeon*, but John Dick of the Conservation Department of the National Gallery of Scotland kindly informs me that my supposition that the foliage at upper right is discoloured copper resinate pigment would appear to be reasonable to him. He notes, however, that the painting would never have had the range of bright greens of the *Bacchus and Ariadne*.

- 6 They are more visible in the painting than in photographs, but are clearly to be seen in the colour reproduction in C. Cagli and F. Valcanover, *L'opera completa di Tiziano*, *Classici dell'arte*, 32 (Milan, 1969), Tav. XLVI.
- 7 Titian mentioned the *Diana and Actaeon* several times in his correspondence with Philip II (19 June and 22 September 1559, Sim. Estado, leg. 1323, fols. 284 and 287 respectively, and 2 April 1561, Sim. Estado, leg. 1324, fol. 226) and on each occasion he coupled it with the *Diana and Callisto*. He worked on them together over the same period of time (1556-59) and sent them to Philip in the same shipment. The canvases are approximately equal in size (184.5 × 202.2 cm and 187 × 204.5 cm respectively), for which see H. Brigstocke, *Italian and Spanish Paintings in the National Gallery of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1978), 162 and 167. They are so closely related that it is generally agreed that they were intended to be viewed together, with the *Actaeon* on the left (e.g., Panofsky, *Problems in Titian*, 155, and Wethey, *Paintings of Titian III*, 73).
- 8 Because of the free handling of the paint in a relatively small area it is difficult to interpret the subjects of the reliefs. The upper one appears to show a standing female figure dressed in long, flowing garments observing a more active but similar figure pursuing a stag. The lower relief (which is even less distinct) seems to bear the representation of a stag approaching a reclining nude female figure. Wethey (*Paintings of Titian III*, 74) interprets the two reliefs as "an unobtrusive link in iconography with the companion picture in their reference to the story of Actaeon." This is certainly in accord with the present proposal.
- 9 Only Nash (*Veiled Images*, 43) and Gentili (*Da Tiziano a*

In his lecture, Waterhouse discusses Titian's interpretation of the myth not in relation to its companion piece but in relation to earlier Renaissance versions. These almost invariably choose the moment when Actaeon is changed into a stag and occasionally refer to his being killed and torn to pieces by his own hounds. Waterhouse emphasizes Titian's independence from this tradition, but at the same time sees him as subtly maintaining the element of metamorphosis and death through the inclusion of the skull. In all fairness it should be acknowledged that this was merely a passing remark,<sup>10</sup> but subsequent interpretations have taken it as their cornerstone and see the painting as being primarily concerned with Actaeon and his fate. The more detailed of these studies have been as elaborate as they have been inconclusive.<sup>11</sup> It is my contention that, unlike earlier versions, Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* is not concerned with Actaeon's metamorphosis or his fate.<sup>12</sup>

From the foregoing discussion of Diana's attributes in our painting and its companion piece it is obvious that Titian was careful to identify her as goddess of the hunt. She is instantly recognizable as Diana by the crescent moon diadem that she wears on her head in both pictures, so that her role as huntress must be iconographically important.

Another aspect of the painting has long been acknowledged, but its significance has not been appreciated in recent studies. This is its eroticism.<sup>13</sup> There is considerable sexual tension

*Tiziano*, 120-21) comment on this significant detail. The former is perplexed by it while the latter interprets it as Diana inciting hounds to attack Actaeon in the form of a stag. As I am unable to discern any dogs in this part of the painting and it was his own hounds who turned on him, not Diana, I remain unconvinced of this interpretation. In a rare earlier version of the meeting of Diana and Actaeon, where he is shown in the foreground still in completely human form, it is quite obvious that his death is alluded to in the background directly behind him, where a stag is being pursued by hounds. This appears on a majolica plate from Faenza, for which see A. N. Kube, *Italian Majolica XV-XVIII Centuries* (Moscow, 1976), Pl. II, where it is dated ca. 1525-30. This detail, however, is very different from Titian's little scene above Diana.

- 10 It was given in his discussion of "a horror of uprights and diagonals" in the picture. The sentence is: "The outer line of the arch is not parallel with the edge of the picture nor with the stone column whose crown shows a deer's skull, a gruesome reminder of Actaeon's fate."
- 11 Tanner, "Chance and Coincidence," 537; Nash, *Veiled Images*, 41-42.
- 12 When Titian wrote to Philip II on 19 June 1559 (Sim. Estado, leg. 1323, fol. 284) to inform him that he had finished the two paintings of Diana, he stated that he had already begun an *Actaeon Torn by His Own Hounds*, which logically is where those aspects of the myth were to be treated.
- 13 R. Fry ("The Bridgewater Titians 1," *Burlington Magazine*, LXII [1933], 4) rightly regards it as one of Titian's great erotic compositions.

between the impetuous, heroically built but clothed young mortal male and the imperious yet erotically characterized naked goddess,<sup>14</sup> a tension that is clearly stated in formal terms and augmented by the crossed glances of the nude nymphs arranged in various alluring poses between but beyond them. It is this face-to-face confrontation, the first act of the tragedy, that Titian depicts,<sup>15</sup> and his interpretation of it is in perfect agreement with literary sources that were available to him.

It is indisputable that one or more Italian translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were used.<sup>16</sup> However, it is not this source that accounts for the clear identification of Diana as goddess of the hunt or for the painting's eroticism; rather, it is Diodorus Siculus.<sup>17</sup> Diodorus states that some said that Actaeon had boasted that he was superior to the

divine Diana in hunting. This is clearly a case of hubris and according to classical conventions justifies a gruesome end for the young mortal. He also reports that the gods believed there could have been an equally justifiable reason for Diana's action because, according to others, Actaeon desired the chaste goddess sexually.<sup>18</sup>

We may therefore conclude that if the stag's skull is considered within its context, with due regard for the condition of the painting, Titian is not here referring to Actaeon's metamorphosis, let alone exploring philosophical questions prompted by his death, but is imaginatively and empathetically depicting only the dramatic moment when the young hunter bursts in on the secluded spot where Diana and her nymphs are bathing. Furthermore, this interpretation of the meeting is in accord with literature then available in translation. All this suggests that we might do well to return to the title used by the painter himself in his correspondence with Philip II: *Diana at the Fountain Surprised by Actaeon*.<sup>19</sup> Admittedly it is rather cumbersome, but it does convey the iconography much more accurately than the conventional *Diana and Actaeon*.

14 L. Skarsgard (*Research and Reasoning, A Case Study on an Historical Inquiry: Titian's "Diana and Actaeon": A Study in Artistic Innovation* [Göteborg, 1968], 63) regards the unusual rendering of the figure of Diana as "an optical illusion of a rapid revolving motion in the figure." In this he has been followed by C. Hope in *Titian* (London, 1980), 133. However, this is not a very satisfactory explanation, as the only torsion in the figure is to be seen in the turn of the head. The viewer is presented with the profile view of the left breast and *mons pubis* as well as a three-quarter view of both buttocks. This rearrangement of female anatomy is combined with a continuous view of both thighs so that it is surely most logical to see her as an erotic figure.

15 Waterhouse, *Titian's Diana and Actaeon*, 4.

16 C. Ginsburg ("Tiziano, Ovidio e i codici della figurazione erotica nel '500," *Tiziano e Venezia* [Vicenza, 1980], 131-32) has identified the literary source of Diana's grotto in Giovanni dell'Anguillara's 1555 edition of the *Metamorfosi*.

17 Italian translations of Diodorus known to this writer were published in Florence in 1526 by Filippo di Giunta and then twice in Venice by Gabriele Giolito in the 1540s. These editions of the *Library of History* were not of all the surviving books, but only of the first six concerned with the origins of different civilizations and their respective mythologies.

18 "Atteone discerto da suoi cani (secondo le fabule) tramutato in cervo da Diana perche e'la richiese di coito seco cacciando alli monti vicini al tempio della Sete. Altri dicono perche si vantava superarla in caccie, sia quel si voglia l'una e l'altra causa era sufficiente ad fare crucciare Diana, per la deliberata castita e per la gloria della venatione inche gli Dei tutti li cedono" (Diodoro Siculo *Delle Antiquarie historie fabulose* [Florence, 1526], Libro Quinto, 100v). The notion that Actaeon met his fate because he boasted that his hunting skills were superior to Diana's appears to have originated with Euripides (*Bacchae* 337-40). However, Diodorus Siculus was more widely read than Euripides in the Renaissance, at least in regard to the early books.

19 "Diana al fonte sopraggiunta da Atheone," Titian to Philip II, 19 June 1559 (Sim. Estado, leg. 1323, fol. 284).

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FIGURE 102. Titian, detail from *Diana and Actaeon*, Duke of Sutherland Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland (Photo: National Gallery of Scotland).



FIGURE 101. Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, Duke of Sutherland Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland (Photo: National Gallery of Scotland).



FIGURE 103. Titian, *Diana and Callisto*, Duke of Sutherland Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland (Photo: National Gallery of Scotland).