

THE GENIUS OF VENICE

Tony del Renzio

The exhibition now at the Royal Academy is remarkable for the amazing works brought together for the first time, thus allowing a view of what is generally meant when anyone speaks of sixteenth century Venetian art. It is marvellously rewarding to see, many for the first time in this country, paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture, so accessibly displayed. Though there are difficulties in defining exactly what is meant by 16th century Venetian art, a certain quality does dominate, and might be seen to arise from technical developments that aptly fit the artists' preoccupations. Despite the inclusion of a short essay on architecture in the catalogue, some forty pieces of sculpture though mostly on a small scale, and an array of drawings and prints some of which are on a surprisingly large scale, 'The Genius of Venice' celebrates painting in oil on canvas, pre-eminent in Venice, establishing a

dominant aesthetic of brushwork and surface texture.

The point is frequently made in the catalogue that the opposition of *colorito*, 'colouring', to *disegno*, 'drawing', as the basis of Venetian practice in painting, is not to be interpreted in the modern sense of being colourists rather than draughtsmen, nor as surrendering to the delights of colour at the expense of structure. They aimed to produce works out of the qualities available to them with the brush. They did not conceive their works as coloured drawings in the way the Florentines did. The use of canvas, less resistant to the pressure of the brush than wooden panels, aided this. The same qualities, however, do appear in the murals which, by their nature of course, are absent from this show.

It has been pointed out that the way the Venetians began to paint with the intro-

duction of oil colours might well have been influenced by the mosaics they had before them. Already several centuries old, their surfaces were less regular and took the light in fascinating ways, as do those that remain to this day. This attention to mosaics is further testified by a minor revival of the art in the early 16th century. Moreover, these were portable and on a small scale, like so many of the earlier oil paintings.

Nevertheless, there is something in these works more readily appreciated in our time, something akin to a major side of nineteenth and twentieth century art, to Turner who learned much from the Venetians and from the Lagoons themselves on his visits, to the Impressionists, to the Fauves, to Picasso even in his most austere Cubist phase; something exaggerated and distorted in the Expressionist flight from intellect, and forced to carry too great a load by the American artists of the 50s. It is the sensuous nature of paint applied to a surface to capture light, but alone insufficient.

It would not be entirely fanciful to think that the quality of their environment fed these painters their appreciation of colour

and texture. The work of the elements upon stone and wood and plaster as well as the changing patterns of sky, water and sand, typical of the Lagoons, the 'Seven Seas' of the ancients, presented them with almost unlimited examples of colour at work, colour with indexical functions, colour determined by the processes of nature. As John Steer points out, Florentine painting is brighter and more polychrome. He refers to the importance for the artists of central Italy of what, in a telling afterthought, he defines as 'colours'. For the Venetians, the word remains obstinately singular.

If there is little documentation of any coherent theory of colour, one can be constructed from the works themselves, and from the commentaries of the period. Even though the trade of the Republic made a greater range of pigments more readily available, this, paradoxical as it may seem, made the artists more conscious and more prudent in their use of colour. Working much more directly and able to correct a work more easily during the painting, Venetian artists built their pictures from blocks of colour freely brushed upon the surface. This tended still further to a more restricted range of hues for each picture. It is this aspect of Venetian practice that is indicated by the term *colorito*.

Much of the exhibition is dominated by Giorgione and it is rather a pity that not one of the half dozen or so works nowadays accepted as by his hand was able to be included. Familiar though they may be to the specialist, the presence of one or two of them would have made the logic of the show's argument easier to perceive. 'Giorgionismo' uses this concern with colour and texture, with *facture*, above all, to deal with what, at one end of the range, might be called allegory and myth, and, at the other, is termed, in Italian, *poesie*, the 'poetical'. The preoccupations are not distinct in practice and continued throughout the rest of the century. Some of the later artists were to influence the greatest European artists of the seventeenth century.

The two paintings, now not normally seen together, by Veronese, *Venus and Adonis* from the Prado, and *Cephalus and Procris* from Strasbourg, both acquired by Velazquez in the 1650s for the Spanish Royal Collection, repay careful attention. They depict mythological situations, commonplaces of Venetian culture from the editions of Ovid, among the first printed

books in Venice. Such subjects fitted the developments that followed the acquisition of the mainland territories, the adoption by the nobles and the wealthier citizens of country pursuits more typical of the landed gentry of mainland Italy. The Venetians had, of course, from the earliest times, gone wildfowling in the Lagoons, the resort of migratory birds winter and summer alike. Indeed, throughout the century, hunting dogs are thrust into prominence in paintings as diverse as Tintoretto's *Washing of the Feet*, Moroni's *Gian Lodovico Madruzzo*, Bassano's *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, not to mention this same artist's remarkable portrait of two dogs, and, of course, Titian's famous *Boy with Dogs*. It is obvious why, a couple of centuries later when the Venetians had virtually reinvented gentle manners with the introduction of the table fork and the handkerchief, the new English landed gentry should seek to copy the Venetian style and even build their country houses in a Palladian mode.

What the Giorgionesque paintings show is a particular interlocking of painterly sensibility with the intellectual interests of

sixteenth century Venice, and to miss this is to misunderstand them as the *Guardian* reviewer did, reducing them to the splash, spatter and gob type of painting he champions. What the paintings depict and what they mean are not the same thing, nor are they simple and straightforward. They are demanding, but it is so much easier to surrender to their surface charms and bravura.

The intellectual ferment of the Renaissance was no less in Venice than Florence. It was in Venice the Aldine editions originated and those who are perplexed by the mysteries of Giorgione might well turn to the alchemical symbols of that 'archaeological' romance, *Polifilo*. Aldus Manutius' book publishing has been described as a prototype of early capitalist enterprise. What it helps to underline is the importance of Venice rather than Florence in the Northern Renaissance. Erasmus is particularly significant in this respect. More was accomplished, through the printed book, in the quarter century from 1494 in Venice than in the previous hundred years in Florence. The paintings could not fail to show it.



'Venus and Adonis' by Veronese