

The Flaying of Marsyas Analysis by Titian

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“The Flaying of Marsyas” is an oil on canvas painting by the Italian Renaissance artist Titian. Titian’s masterpiece is placed in the archbishop’s palace in Kroměříž, enticing metaphysical, artistic, and historic interpretations commencing around the world. The grotesque savagery and violent imagery are what clasps massive attention. The Flaying of Marsyas was painted in 1576, reflecting the poignant features of the Renaissance art movement. Several eminent authors present this artistic picture as the reflection of Renaissance Neoplatonism, focusing on the “Liberation of the spirit from the body” exhibited by Titian^[1]. Substantial critical appreciations and interpretations have been conducted of this painting in the last forty years of the contemporary era. Titian emulated the mythological story of the satyr Marsyas onto the canvas with vivid imagery and bold pigment. This essay intends to explicate the exploration of the identities of Marsyas, Apollo, and King Midas envisaged in the painting “*The Flaying of Marsyas*” with the help of pictorial analysis of circumstantial details of the art piece.

Historical Analysis

The Flaying of Marsyas is considered to be the last artistic piece created by Titian in his timeworn age. The respective painting encapsulates the story from Ovid in *Metamorphosis*, in which Marsyas is punished for challenging the Olympian God Apollo. Ovid circumstantially describes the grotesque torment inflicted by the Olympian God Apollo on Marsyas. Marsyas is crying out in anguish inflicted by flaying. Ovid states in *Metamorphoses*:

“Why do you tear me from myself, he cries.

Ah, cruel! Must my skin be made the prize?

This for a silly pipe? He roaringly said.

Mean-while the skin from off his limbs was flay’d.

All bare and raw, one large continued wound,

With streams of blood, his body bath’d the ground.”^[2]

Titian’s painting has a lot of features that are comparable to those of Giulio Romano’s painting *Apollo Flaying Marsyas*, which was painted back in 1527. The prodigal feature which exhibits Titian’s and Romano’s paintings on similar paradigms is the representation of the violent punishment of flaying inflicted upon Marsyas. However, Romano’s art piece uses the medium of ink, pen, and wash-over chalk to envisage the historical event of punishment by Apollo upon Marsyas. Romano’s choice of

medium for portraying the painting does not exhibit the true intensity of the violent punishment inflicted by Apollo, as compared to Titian's vivid exhibition of the flaying in his painting.

The historical punishment of a half-horse and half-human Marsyas is painted by Titian, shedding light upon the punishment inflicted by God Apollo upon winning the musical contest against the satyr Marsyas. Marsyas proves to be unwise enough to challenge the superior God to a musical contest. Marsyas mastered the art of playing the pipe and thought of winning against Apollo. Apollo agrees to the musical contest on the condition that the loser of the competition will have to accept any kind of punishment inflicted by the victor of the competition. As predicted, Marsyas loses to the superior God Apollo, and he inflicts the most vicious punishment of flaying/ skinning Marsyas alive inch by inch of his entire body. Apollo used cunning, jeopardizing ways to win the musical contest against the imprudent satyr Marsyas.

The Flaying of Marsyas eloquently exhibits the dangerous consequences of challenging the divine power of God. The satyr Marsyas was foolish enough to challenge Apollo. Therefore, he bears the punishment inflicted by Marsyas while being tied upside down on the tree.

Pictorial Analysis

The mutilated hanging body of Marsyas, the brutal punishment of flaying/ skinning, and running blood are the poignant subjects pictured in Titian's painting "*Flaying of Marsyas*". The rough usage of scarlet and dark colours is one of the important factors in Titian's painting. The violent brush strokes, along with the sumptuous scarlet red usage, demonstrate the eloquent imagery of the brutal punishment inflicted upon Marsyas. Malvezzi views Titian's meticulous brushstrokes in his artistic paintings, and the deliberate rough/ bold strokes articulated his eloquent painting style^[3].

The main theme of violence is penetrated throughout the painting, envisaging the superiority of divine order through the inflicted punishment. The painting seems to be abandoned, rough, blurred, red, and unfinished when glanced at it closely. However, from a distance, the oil painting exhibits the horrors of flaying vividly. Titian's use of finger smudging to give the final touches to the painting is reflected when observed closely. Titian's painting, from a distance, looks perfect for envisaging violence. However, when the scene is observed closely, the finishing of the painting is distorted and inadequate. Titian uses the painting technique of impasto, which involves the thick layering of paint. Titian used fingers to make agitated strokes of violet colour to elucidate the violence performed in the painting. The painting's focal figures are only visible from a distance. Upon closer inspection, the painting looks like only a smearing of strokes using fingers.

The satyr Marsyas's massive body is hanging upside down with superficial red ribbons. Titian painted the long hairy legs of Marsyas splaying across the scene upside down. The foremost focus of our gaze and scrutiny becomes Marsyas's huge figure tied to a tree on the principal axis of the masterpiece. The depth of the scene is indicated by the view of the satyr victim, who is turned upside down in

space, and the legs are sprawled on the axis. The lapdog is portrayed as licking the pool of blood dripping from Marsyas's flayed body, heightening the imagery of the violence. The other dog portrayed besides King Midas is restrained from tasting the blood of the satyr Marsyas. It seems that the small child standing beside King Midas is restraining the dog from going closer to the blood-straining Marsyas. We also observe a malevolent (Cold) gawked satyr with horns and a beard, who is standing beside the anguish-baring Marsyas, lending a bucket for flaying abutting King Midas^[4].

The background of the painting consists of gold and blue sky, and trees accentuate the main theme of violence, which is aligned with the picture plane of the painting. Titian uses diverse figures in the painting to annihilate the mythological theme he wants to illustrate. The crowd in the scene consists of Marsyas (the victim), Apollo (The God), the musician standing behind Apollo, the other satyr lending a bucket standing beside King Midas, the assistant of Apollo assisting in skinning Marsyas and King Midas. King Midas is seen deeply studying the facial expressions of extremely pained Marsyas. The gaze of King Midas is subjected directly to Marsyas. Titian's envisagement of Midas explicates his contemplative expressions towards Marsyas's brutal punishment. Midas's hands above his head explicate his distressed contemplation.

Furthermore, Apollo is looking young, innocent, and noble, decipherable by his crown, and he is flaying Marsyas with a knife. Apollo's innocent facial expressions contrast his vicious infliction of flaying upon Marsyas. Apollo is viewed as satisfyingly witnessing the punishment of Marsyas because of his triumph in the musical contest. The vicious scene unfolded in the painting feels crowded with the number of people witnessing the punishment. It appears that Apollo desires everyone to witness the consequences of challenging a God.

The Flaying of Marsyas exhibits various experiments against physicality. For illustration, Bohde designates a visual description of Marsyas being tied to the tree with minimal red bows. The visual description of these superficial red bows reflects the notion of a massive body devoid of the physicality of Marsyas's massive body. The visual description of the bows significantly hints that they cannot support the massive body weight of Marsyas. Therefore, these red bows imply a body lacking physicality, changing it into painterly experimentation concerned with the skin and its relation to painting^[5].

Identity Analysis

Titian's influential portrait has been brought into the limelight through the lens of poignant iconic themes of sacrifice, Good versus Evil, sin against divine power, and power against weak class. Many of these themes are elucidated through Christian and Greek mythology. This essay intends to explore the brutal punishment of flaying through the materiality of the surface. In Held's point of view, "Titian may have been sensationalizing a permanent relationship of violence that is accepted in his painting *Flaying of Marsyas*. At the same time, its brutality is condemned and lamented"^[6]. In other words, though the punishment by the divine power Apollo is lamented by everyone portrayed in the scene, it

is accepted by everyone because it is inevitable.

The rough brushstrokes on the canvas and the dark red pigment propel the observer to question the identities of the figures painted on the canvas. Titian's painting summons its spectators to join and reflect upon the contrasting identities of the flayer (Apollo), the victim (Marsyas), and the observer (King Midas). It is very challenging to identify the identity of various characters crowded in the painting, witnessing the flaying.

Primarily, the identity of Marsyas is the prodigal point on which the whole painting revolves around. Marsyas is a hybrid, half-human and half-goat, who is subjected to flying. Marsyas's melancholic condition is reflected through his mutilated body hanging upside down. Apollo and his assistant work on the flesh with sharp blades that detach the skin from the flesh. The distorting image of Marsyas reflects the cardinal sin of challenging a God and its brutal consequences. As Apollo is skinning the poor Marsyas, he is detaching Marsyas's identity from his body. The flesh and bones left behind signify nothing but an anonymous person. Marsyas is deemed an anonymous person with no external identity. The identity of Marsyas is skinned away by Apollo, revealing the true anatomy and nature of Marsyas. Rapp states that the Flaying of Marsyas reflects the "radiant inner body"^[7] of Marsyas as it is shed off from the skin. The stagnant gaze of Marsyas's last moments of consciousness in such grievous moments reflects the true artistic features of Titian and the helplessness of Marsyas. Marsyas is defenselessly witnessing his identity being snatched away from his flesh.

Furthermore, the identity of King Midas propels various interpretations associating the identity of Marsyas and Apollo with him. Titian included King Midas in the painting, propelling various interpretations among researchers and art historians. King Midas was one of the judges who arbitrated the musical contest between Apollo and Marsyas. Midas's portrayal in the painting shows regretful contemplation upon his judgment. The mercy and pity for Marsyas are evident in his eyes, and the hand going above his head shows regret about his decision against Marsyas. King Midas, as a figure gazing at the process of flaying while his hands rest above his head, reflects his own story of jeopardy, greed, and selfishness. Midas has learned from his past and is feeling ashamed of his sinful past, including the judgment against Marsyas. There are various other interpretations about the inclusion of King Midas. Held views the figure of Midas as Titian's own "self-portrait",^[8] reflecting the miserable expressions through the identity of Midas. Titian portrayed Midas in the scene to represent his self-witnessing the brutal punishment of flaying inflicted upon Marsyas.

Lastly, the notorious victor of the musical contest, the Olympian God Apollo, is the inflictor of violent punishment. Apollo won against the satyr Marsyas by jeopardizing the contest, which resulted in his cunning victory. Apollo's true cunning identity is reflected in the painting. The contentment and satisfaction on the face of Apollo witnessing the brutal punishment he is inflicting upon Marsyas crystallize his dominancy and divine power. Titian painted Apollo's satisfactory facial expressions to show the true identity of winning the competition by foul means, manifesting his superior power. Upon witnessing the grotesque punishment of skinning the flesh of the satyr, Apollo's vengeful expressions do not give a hint of regret or remorse.

The inclusive critical exploration of this artistic piece by Titian and the individual identities portrayed reflect the anthropological paradigms of rich vs poor, higher class vs inferior class, and patriarchal dominance through cunning ways. Titian's painting provides all the circumstantial details of the punishment by including different subjects witnessing the punishment. The Olympian God Apollo wins the contest with foul means, and the flaying of poor Marsyas shows the patriarchal society. The rich class or the superior class always exploits the lower class for their exhibition of power. Apollo's identity reflects the higher class exploiting, the lower and exhibiting their power through violent ways. Marsyas's identity reflects the lower class, which faces punishment for going against the higher power. King Midas's identity reflects the jeopardized social system of management, which sides with the superior/higher hierarchy of society. Midas judges Marsyas in a biased and immoral approach by making a wrong decision against the poor satyr Marsyas and favouring Apollo, the divine power. The punishment of flaying represents the consequences of challenging the divine power. Flaying also signifies the stripping away of Marsyas's external identity.

Conclusion

Titian works potentially on the canvas and oils to reflect upon the gruesome form of violence "flaying" exhibited through the variety of identities encapsulated in the painting. The finger-smudged artistic painting crystallized true impartiality to Ovid's description of the flaying process. The agitated brush strokes with violent pigmented layers of colours reflect pain, lust, and cruelty. Carrabine^[9] pens down the interpretation of the painting by stating that the Flaying of Marsyas may have been a response to a specific political event. Carrabine's point of notion validates the anthropological analysis of the violent scene unfolded in the painting, which is explicated in this essay. The potentiality of this painting dislodges the observer to analyze the eloquent identities of the figures portrayed in the scene. These individual identities question different social classes of society in the form of a mythological story. Conferring to my scrutiny, no other artistic work has successfully captured the circumstantial details and the true nature of this specific moment where the consciousness and identity of the satyr Marsyas are slipping into the clutches of death.

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