

## *Historical speculation about Titian's grounds: the mobility of a theory*

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In some paintings of Titian, & of Paul Veronese, we see that they used a water-based ground, on which they then painted in oil colours; this has served well and made their works more lively & more fresh; because the water-based ground attracts and absorbs the oil that is contained in the colours, and makes them keep more beautifully, the oil destroying much of their liveliness.<sup>1</sup>

Art critic and art historian André Félibien wrote these words in his 1676 *Des Principes de l'Architecture, de la Sculpture, de la Peinture, et des Autres Arts qui en Dependent*. Félibien admired Titian, describing 'le Titien' as 'the painter with the highest reputation of all'.<sup>2</sup>

Félibien is not the only author who introduces Titian as a role model in discussions on the materials and methods of painters past. Comments about the supposed technique of this much-esteemed painter appear throughout the centuries, up until the time when instrumental analysis actually allows us to determine this artist's materials and methods.

Because Félibien's *Des Principes* itself had a huge influence, Félibien's account of the grounds of Titian spread. The book knew three subsequent seventeenth-century editions<sup>3</sup>, but more importantly, Félibien's comments on the grounds of Titian were taken up and often copied literally by a great number of later authors until at least 1831, all the way from London to Germany or Copenhagen, even as far as Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> The occurrence of these comments gives evidence of the mobility of the idea of Titian's ground, the transfer of recipes from one source to another, is evidence of the authority of Félibien. In addition, it shows that recipes may still be considered relevant in societies that differ hugely in time and place from those of their original authors – and of the artist himself (figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> Félibien 1676, pp. 406-408. L'on voit dans quelques tableaux de Titien, & Paul Veronese, qu'ils observoient d'en faire l'imprimeure à détrempe, sur laquelle ils peignoient ensuite avec des couleurs à huile; ce qui a beaucoup servi à rendre leurs ouvrages plus vifs, & plus frais: parce que l'imprimeure à détrempe attire, & boit l'huile qui est dans les couleurs, & fait qu'elles restent plus belles, l'huile ostant beaucoup de leur vivacité.

<sup>2</sup> Félibien 1725, p. 65. 'le Titien, qui étoit alors celui de tous les peintres qui avoit le plus de réputation'

<sup>3</sup> Paris: Coignard 1690, 1697 and 1699.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Dupuy du Grez (Paris/Toulouse 1699), Chambers (London 1728), De la Hire (Paris 1730), Barrow (London 1735), Chomel (Leiden 1743), *École de la Mignature* (Paris 1759), Jombert/de Piles (Amsterdam 1766), Chomel (Paris 1767), Grisellini & Fassadoni (Venice 1772), Watin (Paris 1773), *Valuable Secrets* (London 1775), *Nieuwen Verlichter* (Gent 1777), le Pilleur d'Apligny (Paris 1779), (Paris Pernety 1781), *Artist Assistant* (London, c. 1785), *Encyclopédie Méthodique* (Paris 1789), *the Golden Cabinet* (Philadelphia 1793), *Maler- og Forgylder Bog* (Copenhagen, 1794-5), *Praktisches Handbuch* (Berlin 1795), Krünitz (Berlin 1779), *Secrets concernant les Arts et Métiers* (Paris 1801), Stöckel (Munich 1825), Riffault (Paris 1826), *Artist & Tradesman's Guide* (n.p. c. 1827), Vergnaud (Paris 1831)



Figure 1.  
*Charles V in the studio of Titian/Imperial Hommage to Art.*  
Printed by Samuel Bellin after Samuel Fisk, published in Birmingham, 1843.  
British Museum, London. Image © Trustees of the British Museum

This print shows Samuel Fisk's nineteenth-century vision of an unfinished painting by Titian, with a light-coloured ground.

Félibien's account also echoed in texts that do not literally repeat, but present some of its aspects as a firm fact. For example, American artist Thomas Sully wrote in his *Hints for Pictures* manuscript (1809-71, p. 104): 'In the beginning of the art, the cloths were prepared in the same manner as the panels with a distemper ground and generally the pictures of Paul Veronese were painted on such cloths.' And also English colourmaker George Field (1835), wrote that Titian and his contemporaries used of plaster or 'stucco' ground followed by a size layer and first lay-in of the composition in aqueous paints.<sup>5</sup>

While instrumental analysis demonstrates that Titian did indeed paint some of his paintings on grounds consisting of gesso mixed with animal glue, at least in some cases this gesso was covered by a second ground layer, in his earlier paintings often off-white in tone (see Dunkerton and Spring 2013: 13-14). This choice of ground fits better with another historical text describing Titian's ground. Nicholas Paillot de Montabert (1829, vol. 9: 180-181) claimed that Titian never painted on an 'absolutely uncoloured and cold' white. He himself advised artists to paint on grounds with the colour of 'dirty ivory', as

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<sup>5</sup> Field 1835, p. 213.

absolute white would dull the vividness of some colours applied on top and overpower the liveliness of other colours, leading to 'mistakes' in painting.

In the nineteenth century, alternative opinions were expressed concerning the colour of Titian's grounds. What we currently know thanks to instrumental analysis about Titian's grounds, which is his exploration of more strongly coloured grounds from the late 1520s onwards<sup>6</sup>, fits with an account recorded by Mary P. Merrifield in the introduction to her *Original Treatises, dating from the XIIth to the XVIIth Centuries* (1849, page cxxix) of her discussion with artist 'C', who told her that Titian sometimes used grounds consisting of red earth instead of gesso. Gullick & Timbs (1859) ascribed the use of darkly coloured grounds to Titian. They believed that the effect of *luce di dentro* ('light from within') that they admired in Titian's paintings, was not the result of a white ground, but of applying glazes of semi-transparent paints over white opaque underpainting applied on top of dark or red grounds.

Whether the changing and varied theories or speculations about Titian's grounds and their role in his paintings were the result of observation of the master's works or whether they were inspired by an author's personal convictions regarding painting technique remains largely uncertain. Yet, one may wonder how American Thomas Sully would have been able to conclude upon the basis of visual examination of a panel painting by Titian that the artist had mixed his gesso with starch, a substance Sully he himself had adopted as binder for his grounds, as he considered starch 'one of the most indestructible things in nature' (Sully 1809–1871: 098, 104). What is evident is that different authors and eras each had their own vision of Titian's grounds (figure 2). And by referring to Titian to legitimize a certain recipe, authors may have aimed to increase the impact of their writings and thus the mobility of their ideas.



Figure 2

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<sup>6</sup> Dunkerton & Spring 2013, p. 16-17

Pietro della Vecchia (Venice/Vicenza 1602/3- Venice 1678). *Imaginary Self Portrait of Titian*. Oil on Canvas. Auctioned by Sotheby's London on 27 April 2016.

In contrast to figure 1, Pietro della Vecchia imagines Titian holding a canvas with a distinctly coloured ground.

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