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Titian, Assumption of the Virgin, S. Maria dei Frari, 1516-18

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Context and Patronage

The fourteenth-century church of S. Maria dei Frari (St Mary of the Brothers) was the largest Franciscan church in Venice. Built of simple brick in accord with Franciscan ideals of holy poverty and humility, it had a large hall for sermons to the urban multitudes and a large choir where the monks sat screened off by a fifteenth-century marble choir screen. By the late fifteenth century, the five chapels on the eastern end of the church had all been sold off to wealthy Venetian families as private chapels decorated with lavish altarpieces. Throughout Europe, wealthy families improved their chances for salvation by

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purchasing burial rights within church property and by making lavish displays of their piety. They also endowed private masses for themselves in perpetuity. Only the high altar remained undecorated.

The urban preaching orders – Franciscans and Dominicans – arose in the mid-thirteenth century. Initially their churches were built just outside city walls, maintaining some monastic seclusion from the sinful world. But the enormous appeal of holy poverty to wealthy urban elites brought large bequests of land and property to these preaching orders. By the fourteenth century, the Franciscans and Dominicans were competing to build large churches in all the major cities of Europe where charismatic preachers competed to attract the biggest crowds. Until 1300, Franciscan and Dominican churches were built of simple brick without the lavish marble facing typical of most late Gothic churches as seen on the Duomo in Florence or Orvieto or the church of San Marco in Venice. Although Francis' first rule forbade ownership of any property or wealth, this proved incompatible with the huge bequests of money, property, and land which flowed into the order in the decades after the saint's death. It was also incompatible with Roman Catholic doctrines allowing the church to own property, to accept bequests, and to spend lavishly on religious art and architecture at a time when outward splendor ruled as an aesthetic principle in sacred and secular art. Indeed, 75 years after the death of Francis, the current pope pronounced the first rule of Francis to be heresy. Already by that time, the Franciscan order had split into two fiercely opposed factions on the question of wealth. The order remained split until the end of the fifteenth century.

All this is important for Titian's high altarpiece because it was the latest in a growing series of lavish decorations transforming the simple Franciscan brick interior. By 1516, the fierce debates over wealth had largely subsided in the Franciscan community, especially in this Franciscan church which was already well decorated at the altar end with private altarpieces. Most of the rest of the church walls remained bare.

The Subject of Mary's Ascension

According to Catholic doctrine through the late sixteenth century, original sin was passed on to each human being through the stain of sexual intercourse. Since Mary was conceived without sexual intercourse, she was free from sin and thus rose directly into heaven following her death. With the exceptions of some saints, all other Christians were sinners who went after death to the holding pen of Purgatory where they were punished until the end of time when Christ came at the Last Judgment.

We have already noted the rise of the cult of Mary in the Latin European church since the twelfth century and the close identification of Mary with the Church. This association is particularly clear in the dedication of most cathedrals across Europe to Mary. One should also note the thousands of other churches built to honor the new cult of Mary, including many erected by the new preaching orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans.

As a subject of glorious salvation, the assumption of Mary was perfectly suited for the high altar of churches dedicated to Mary and was already a common subject in that location. Other subjects of Marian triumph appeared there as well including the Coronation of the Virgin and Christ Enthroned with Mary as the Queen of the Heaven. In all of these subjects, worshippers could see their own hopes for salvation. And since Mary was the chief intercessor for late medieval and Renaissance Christians, viewers could also direct their prayers to the woman most likely to intercede mercifully on their behalf. Framed by a Roman triumphal arch, Titian's Mary rises in Christian apotheosis, her imminent coronation as the Queen of Heaven signaled by the crown-bearing angel above. None of this was new for Titian's high altar. Roman triumphal forms were commonly used in church architecture and altarpiece frames by 1500 and appeared at least four times in the church of the Frari in the nearby side chapels and in the choir screen which framed the distant view of Titian's painting. (In the upper corners of the choir screen arch, Roman winged victories were cleverly replaced with the chief emblem of Venice, the winged lion of St Mark.) In all of this, Titian's altarpiece adhered to the basic conventions of church painting and Marian spirituality at that time.

Titian's Interpretation of Mary's Assumption

What made Titian's altarpiece compelling and influential was its original artistic interpretation, using the new style of the Venetian High Renaissance pioneered by Titian himself. Faced with his first major commission in Venice, no one knew better what was at stake than the artist. As with Michelangelo's early *Pieta* in Rome, the high altar of a large church in an international city offered the young artist a chance to display his originality on a grand scale and make a big splash. No wonder Titian pulled out all stops to recast this traditional subject.

Unlike Raphael and Michelangelo, Titian did not have the advantage of Leonardo to spur him toward a new style of forceful drama and rhythmic composition. Although his predecessor, Giorgione (d.1510) had developed a High Renaissance style using broad, atmospheric light and color and grand forms, Giorgione's manner lacked the dramatic figures and composition introduced by Leonardo. In that sense, Giorgione's style was in some ways still rooted in the early Renaissance. It was left to the young Titian to introduce a fully High Renaissance style into Venetian painting. And he did it on a large and public stage

with this altarpiece. Its success led to a series of other important commissions as Titian quickly established himself as the leading Venetian painter for the rest of his long life. No one challenged him for the next thirty years until the young Tintoretto and Veronese appeared on the scene.

In earlier fifteenth-century depictions, Mary stood quietly on a cloud in mid air, frozen in the quiet, orderly, symmetrical compositions prized in the Early Renaissance. Titian's *Madonna* surges upward in a relatively asymmetrical, dramatic composition unlike anything seen before in Venice. The disciples gesture in wonder and awe, their raised arms silhouetted dramatically against the glowing sky. Surrounded by rhythmically whirling cherubs, Mary soars upwards, her drapery billowing in the windy space around her, her arms opened, her head and eyes tipped up and her mouth opened in a kind of ecstasy.

The handling of light and color is no less important here as Titian dramatized the shimmering, colored light introduced to oil painting by the late Bellini and taken further by Giorgione. This dramatically handled colored light would become a hallmark of Titian's style and a major feature of Venetian painting through the eighteenth century.

The solar glow behind Mary evoked two famous themes in the growing cult of the Virgin: Mary as the Apocalyptic Woman clothed in the sun and Mary as the Altar of Heaven (*Aracoeli*) seen in a vision by the Roman emperor Augustus, according to Christian legend. Borrowing the solar rhetoric from these familiar subjects, and from images of the Resurrection of Christ who had long been compared to the sun, Titian created a much more dramatic, powerful, and visionary Assumption of the Virgin without sacrificing the new naturalism of the early sixteenth century. His human Mary was firmly anchored in the viewer's world even as she soared above it, connecting the viewer's ecclesiastical space with the immaterial glory of heaven.

By clothing Mary and the disciples in reddish orange draperies, Titian extended the theme of solar light and color throughout the painting, as if the human world witnessing this event also shared in its transfiguring glory. Titian's dramatic light and color also capitalized fully on the giant stained glass windows surrounding the painting which rose vertically in a late Gothic spiritual ascent while extended the visual theme of transfiguring light to embrace the church and all of its worshippers. For all its new Renaissance naturalism and classicizing architectural framework, Titian's Assumption managed to use a High Renaissance light and color to connect with a traditional Late Gothic aesthetic of soaring verticality and dematerializing light. On a sunny day, the visual, emotional, and spiritual impact of this painting

seen in situ is still remarkable. None of these qualities can be glimpsed in any reproduction, much less the secular space of a modern academic classroom.