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Titian's Late *St. Sebastian*: Pestilence, Piety, Ineffable Emotion*

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Abstract

Titian's *St. Sebastian* (c.1570–1575) warrants sustained examination in view of the facts that the artist elected to formulate a distinctive mode of presentation vis-à-vis his previous versions of the subject and sufficiently finished principal portions of the image to establish essential concepts. David Rosand has elucidated the image's *paragone* with antique sculpture; I expand investigation about heroic characterisation, an allusion to Apollonian beauty, and variations on sculptural prototypes by comparing iconographic examples and textual accounts of the saint. In particular, the saint's striding stance intimates a narrative prolepsis that mitigates static representation as a bound martyr and amplifies resonant thematic conceits; close reading, in turn, facilitates scrutinising period conceptions within contexts of Sebastian as plague saint, Venetian political circumstances, and Christ-like sacrifice. *Non-finito* handling implies the artist's immersion in representing this St. Sebastian, who presents an evolving image of the righteous character that, heedless of physicality, actively pursues things of greater glory. St. Sebastian incorporated implications of the divine origin attributed to the plague but evolved into a magnanimous exemplar of faith in redemption through Titian's practice of inhabiting all emotions depicted.

Keywords: Titian, Saint Sebastian, *non-finito* concept, plague, Apollonian beauty, Christian iconography

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Although Titian's *St. Sebastian* (**Figure 1**) remained incomplete in the artist's shop until his death, the painting warrants sustained examination in view of the facts that the artist elected to formulate a distinctive mode of presentation vis-à-vis his previous versions of the subject, and sufficiently finished principal portions of the image to establish essential concepts.

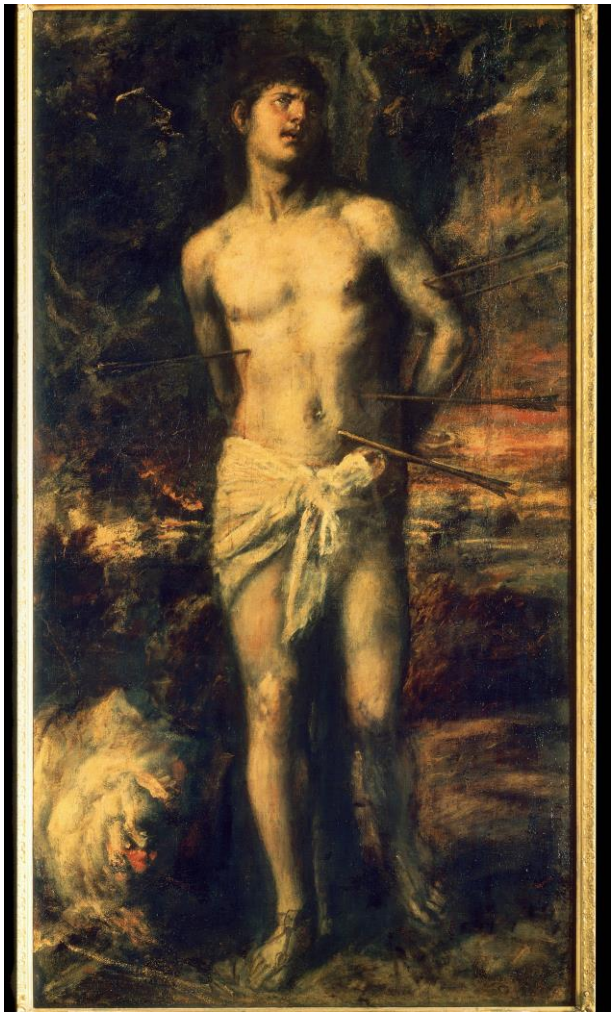

Figure 1. Titian, St. Sebastian, c.1570–1575, oil on canvas. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

David Rosand has elucidated the image's *paragone* with antique sculpture; I expand investigation with regard to heroic characterisation, an allusion to Apollonian beauty, and variations on sculptural prototypes by comparison with textual accounts of the saint and with images by Titian and other Venetian painters. My interpretive interest lies with well-known concepts that the aged painter engaged poetically in typical Renaissance word/image play, a "compositional process [that] involves forming assemblages that are also implicated with texts," rather than with iconography per se (Campbell, 2017, p. 293). In Titian's image, iconographic components and striding stance intimate narrative prolepsis that

mitigates static representation as bound martyr and amplifies resonant thematic conceits. Careful examination suggests a pattern of intention guiding pictorial logic; close reading, in turn, facilitates scrutinising period conceptions within contexts of Sebastian as plague saint, Venetian political circumstances, and Christ-like sacrifice. *Non-finito* handling implies the artist's immersion in representing this *St. Sebastian*, who presents an evolving image of righteous character that, heedless of physicality, actively pursues things of greater glory. *St. Sebastian* incorporated implications of the divine origin attributed to the plague but, through Titian's practice of inhabiting all emotions depicted, evolved into a magnanimous exemplar of faith in redemption.

The painting is usually dated to 1570–1572 or 1575 although the degree of completion is questioned; many consider it to be essentially finished given pictorial consistency and painterly freedom congruent with others of Titian's latest works.[1] The lower part constitutes the principal exception (**Figure 2**): in the left corner, the cuirass is rendered sketchily even though its basic design, neck opening, and leather shoulder belts are readily apparent; the saint's shins are developed precisely but only in preliminary layers of pigment; and *pentimenti* reveal Titian's repeated repositioning of the saint's left foot.[2]

Figure 2. Titian, St. Sebastian, detail of lower portion, c.1570–1575, oil on canvas. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

[1] The painting languished in Titian's house at Biri Grande from which it and other items were purchased by Cristoforo Barbarigo following the artist's death. Although we have no record of a commission, the painting is almost unanimously accepted as a product of Titian's late activity; see Artemieva, 2008, Cat. no. 3.19, p. 304; and Pedrocco, 2000), Cat. no. 262, p. 299.

[2] It was repositioned at least three times: see Artemieva, 2008, pp. 306–307. Humfrey opines that cuirass and background landscape are sketchy and can be regarded as unfinished; see Humfrey, 2007, Cat. no. 291, p. 366. Cf. Gentili, 1992, p. 116, who argued for complete lack of finish. See also Wethey, 1969, Cat. no. 134, pp. 155–156; and *Titian: Prince of Painters*, 1990, Cat. no. 75, p. 368.

Landscape details, too, are perfunctory, although typical features are perceptible (**Figure 3**): "the view onto the hill opens up in the middle ground, behind the figure, with single groups of trees on the left, the plain with a course of running water and a chain of distant mountains rising on the low horizon."[3]

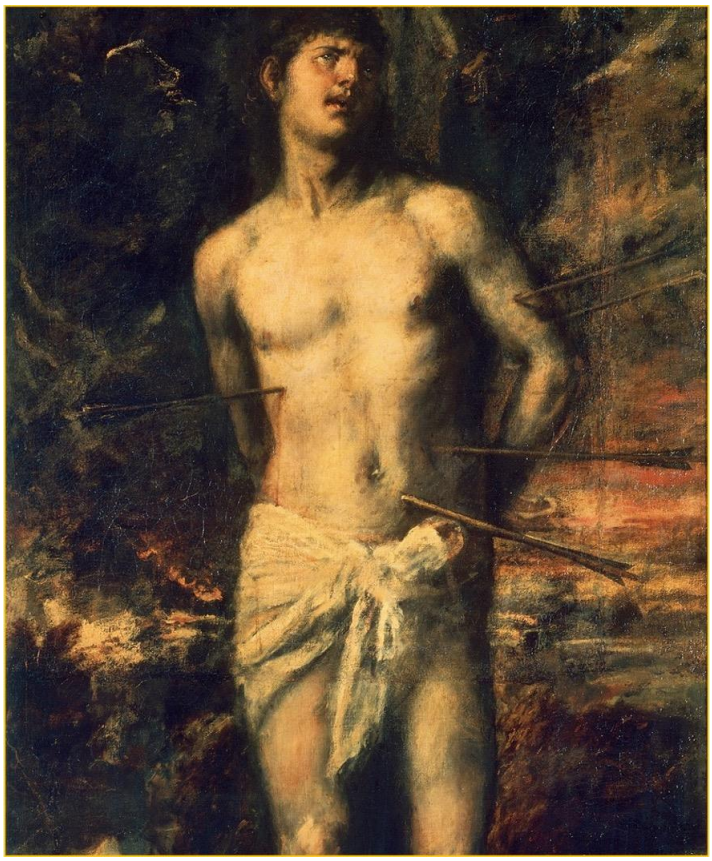

Figure 3. Titian, St. Sebastian, detail of torso and landscape, c.1570–1575, oil on canvas. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

The painting's physical evolution provides insight into Titian's choices: he began with a canvas that would have encompassed an intimate half-length figure of the saint[4] but enlarged it with strips on the bottom and along the right side prior to painting a figure in full length whose deportment conveys a complex interior life. In pose, scale, simplification, and dramatic presentation of figure, St. Sebastian

[3] Artemieva, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

[4] Aside from the Man of Sorrows, Mater Dolorosa, and Ecce Homo (1570–1576, St. Louis Art Museum), Titian had depicted only a few single half-length saints after c.1550: Dominic (1565) and Mary Magdalen (1555–1565). These are distinguished from the half-length multifigured narrative scenes discussed by Cranston; see Cranston, 2010, p. 95. Titian, however, clearly rejected depiction of a half-length Sebastian by enlarging an existing piece of canvas.

recalls the solution Titian had engaged a few years earlier in his *St. James Major*, c.1565, for an altar in S. Lio, Venice (**Figure 4**) (Pedrocco, 2000, n. 238, p. 277).[5]

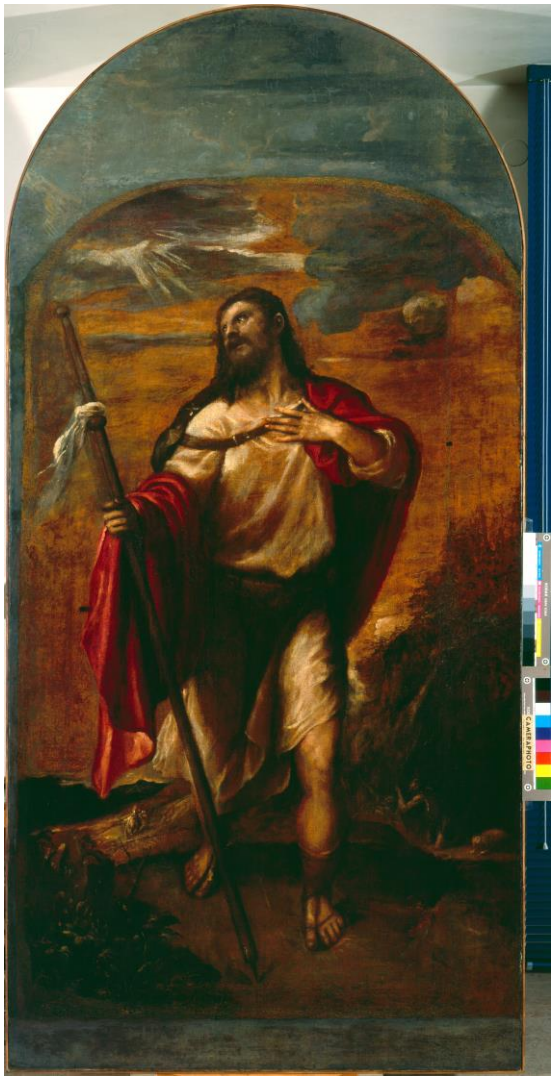

Figure 4. Titian, St. James Major, detail, c.1565, oil on canvas. S. Lio, Venice. Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

Despite or because of the lack of finish, St. Sebastian "presents itself as complete," (*Titian: Prince of Painters*, p. 368.) its apparent monochrome masking a vibrant play of ochre, olive, and red, with the result that the saint emerges from the shadows "almost illuminated by the sparks of the fire that burns without flames or by the reddish rays of the sunset" (Artemieva, 2008, p. 307) and, with spiritual energy concentrated in the isolated figure, gives rise to characterisation as tragic

[5] The painting was drastically altered during the late eighteenth century: its top was revised, drapery and outlines were repainted, and the sky redone. The sum of these changes altered the entirety both compositionally and formally, but, after restoration in 1981 the painting was accepted as autograph and redated to c.1565 in accordance with the simplification and dramatic presentation of figure.

pathos based on "heroic opposition of the man and the enemy world that surrounds him" (*ibid.*).[6]

The concept considerably revises Titian's earlier renderings of the saint. His Sebastian at the right of the *Resurrection Polyptych*, 1518/19–1522, stages an artful comparison with Michelangelo in torsion and physique (**Figure 5**),[7] while that in the *San Niccolò Altarpiece*, c.1520–1525, is Giorgionesque in conception and modelling (**Figure 6**).[8]

Figure 5. Titian, St. Sebastian, detail of Averoldi Polyptych, 1518/19–1522, oil on panel. Santi Nazaro e Celso, Brescia. Artefact/Alamy Stock Photo.

[6] The full quotation reads, "The heroic opposition of the man and the enemy world that surrounds him reaches its utmost expression in this work."

[7] *Resurrection Polyptych* (Altarpiece with Resurrection, Saints Nazarius and Celsus with Altobello Averoldi, Saint Sebastian, Angel of the Annunciation, and Virgin Annunciate), Church of SS. Nazaro and Celso, Brescia; see Rosand, 1994, pp. 27–29.

[8] *San Niccolò Altarpiece* (Madonna and Child in Glory with Saints Catherine, Nicholas, Peter, Sebastian, Francis, and Antony of Padua); see *ivi*, pp. 23–27.

Figure 6. Titian, S. Niccolò Altarpiece, c.1520–1525, oil on panel transferred to canvas. Museo Vaticano-Pinacoteca, Rome. Album/Alamy Stock Photo.

In intervening years, Titian painted an independent variant of the San Niccolò Sebastian c.1530, a now-lost version of the saint for Charles V during the 1540s, and another lost painting known from documents.[9] In Titian's final mode of presentation, strength and spiritual power derive from recourse to the Apollo

[9] For the 1530 painting, see *ivi* pp. 29–33. For the later versions, see *Titian: Prince of Painters*, "St. Sebastian," Cat. no. 75, p. 368: the second version may have been in the collection of the Duke of Arundel in 1655. Although some think the Hermitage painting is a *modello* of the second, its size and manner of construction argue against that. On the lost versions, see also Wethey, 1969., Cat. no. 135, pp. 156–157.

Belvedere as a figural prototype (**Figure 7**), as well as to the expressive face of one of the sons of Laocoön.[10]

Figure 7. Roman after Greek sculptor Leochares. Apollo Belvedere, 2nd century AD, marble copy after bronze original. Museo Vaticano, Rome. rakus/Alamy Stock Photo.

Others have examined this issue in terms of a *paragone* with sculpture and Antiquity, but disagree as to whether Titian's motive may have been conceptual or aesthetic in nature. Unanswerable in a definitive sense, the debate has yielded useful observations: Peter Meller thought the derivation owed to the Apollo as aesthetic symbol while Titian's interpretative approach in terms of colouring and lighting freed the figure from the force of gravity (Meller, 1977, pp. 144-145); more recently, Una Roman D'Elia notes that the combination of classicism and violence is closest to Mantegna's late *St. Sebastian*, c.1504–1506 (**Figure 8**), albeit in tragic rather than lyric mode, and that "The … aesthetic victory over ancient sculpture …

[10] For recent discussion of Titian's recourse to the Apollo Belvedere and the Laocoön group, see, *inter alia*, Freedman, 1998, pp. 13–15; Rosand, 1994, p. 37; Artemieva, 2008., p. 306; and D'Elia, 2005, pp. 43–44.

also expresses the triumph of Christian martyrs over paganism and over tremendous suffering" (D'Elia, 2005, p. 40).[11]

Figure 8. Andrea Mantegna, St. Sebastian, c.1504–1506, tempera on canvas. Galleria Franchetti alla Ca' d'Oro, Venice. Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

Be that as it may, the antiquities also provided apposite temporal and expressive models. The citation of ancient artifacts incorporates traces of historical time that permit the image to act as a substitute for a lost or non-existent original "portrait" of Sebastian, appropriately Roman in appearance.[12] More important, the note of Christological suffering imparted by the son of Laocoön is modulated, as

[11] For imitation of antique models, see *ivi* pp. 34–44. For Mantegna's *St. Sebastian*, see Lightbown, 1986, pp. 444–445.

[12] For this concept in relation to the statue of Christ in Vittore Carpaccio's *Vision of St. Augustine*, see Nagel and Wood, 2010, pp. 35–44.

Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle observed during the nineteenth century, into a "Beautiful head, finished Magdalene type" (Artemieva, 2008, p. 304) (**Figure 9**) that evinces surety of faith more than physical suffering. Having seen Titian's *Penitent Magdalen* (**Figures 10 and 11**) in 1566, Giorgio Vasari noted her heavenward gaze, penitence, and sorrow for sins, opining that "The picture … moves greatly anyone who sees it, and what is more, her beauty inspires pity rather than lasciviousness…." (Pedrocco, 2000, Cat. n. 241, p. 279)[13].

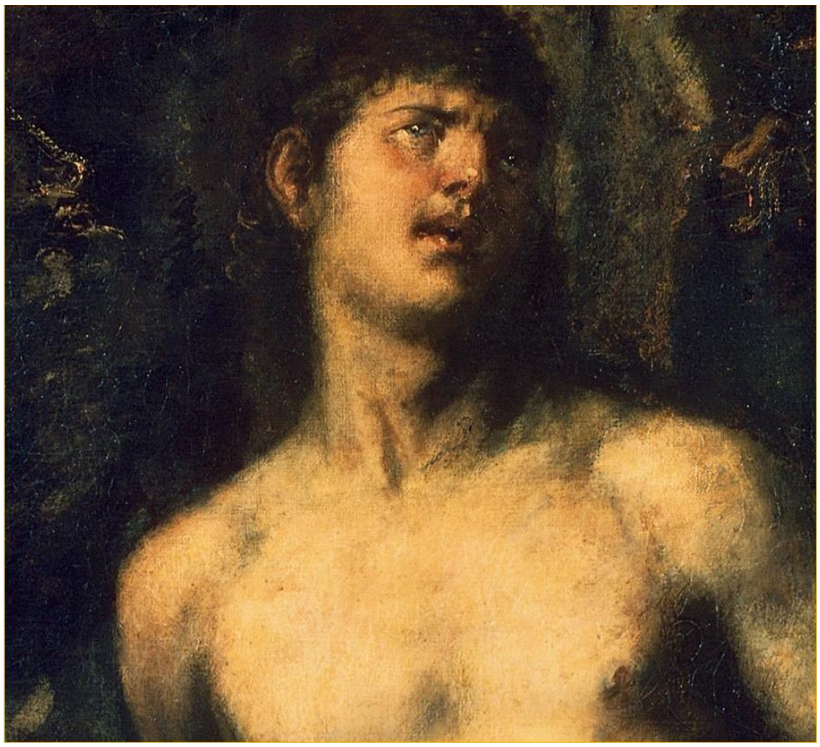

Figure 9. Titian, St. Sebastian, detail of head, c.1570–1575, oil on canvas. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

[13] For the painting see also Wethey, 1969, Cat. no. 123, pp. 146–147 (as c.1560).

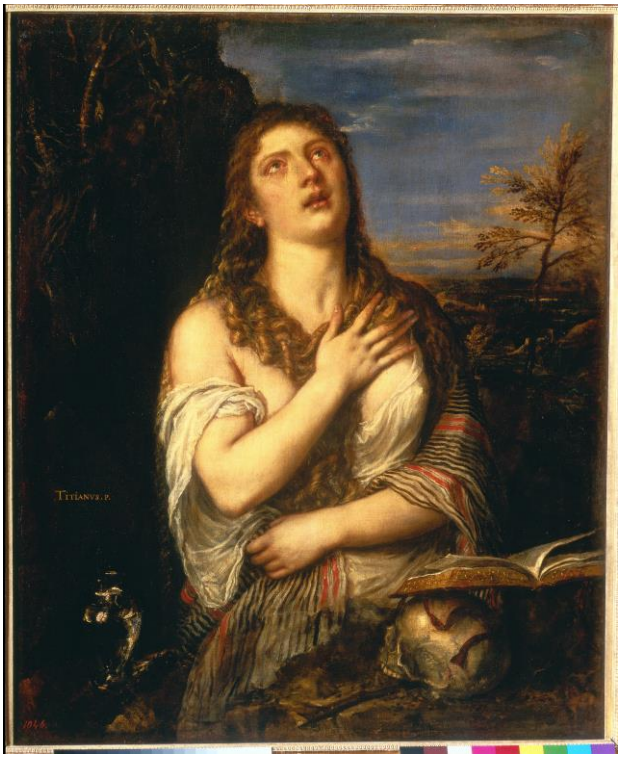

Figure 10. Titian, Penitent Magdalen, c.1565, oil on canvas. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

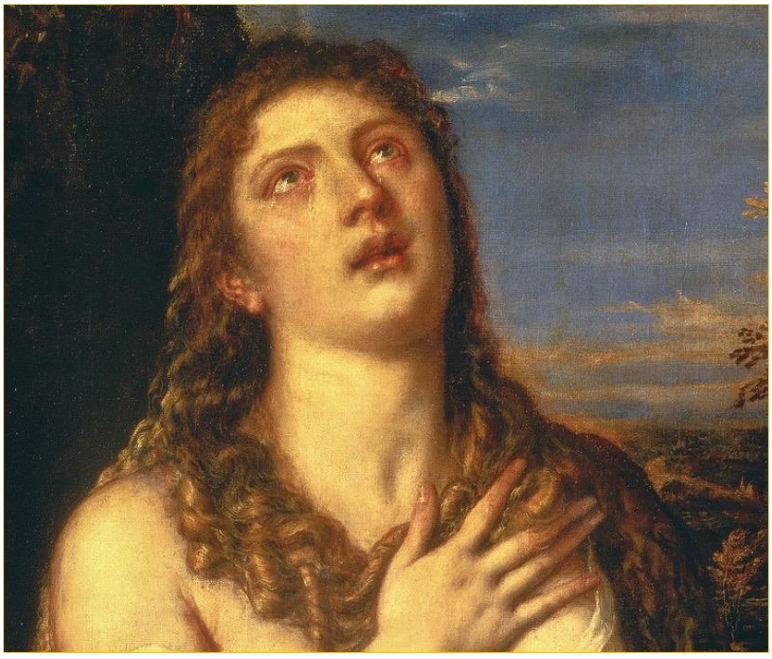

Figure 11. Titian, Penitent Magdalen, detail of head, c.1565, oil on canvas. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

Their physicality notwithstanding, then, Magdalen and Sebastian exemplify *agape*, a love that pines for union with God and willingly endures suffering for that

reason (Barker, 2007, pp. 118-119).[14] Moreover, Titian's bound Sebastian, literally godlike in form, figuratively like St. James, an apostle of Christ, seemingly attempts to stride toward martyrdom even while the artist's approach to colouring and lighting frees classicising form from constraints of gravity. In its full-length presentation, Titian's *St. Sebastian* connotes intimacy of expression in his intercessory guise of ardent lover-of-God while preserving his exemplary role as a martyr, twin roles of sainthood that acquired fresh impetus following the Council of Trent.[15] Titian's final conception of the saint implies thoughtful engagement with ideas about Sebastian's iconography and narrative.

By tradition, Sebastian was a favoured member of the emperor Diocletian's bodyguard during the late third century; discovered to be a Christian when Sebastian exhorted fellow soldiers Marcus and Marcellinus to stand firm in their faith rather than revert to paganism, he was first martyred by archers. Having been nursed to health by St. Irene, he berated Diocletian for worshipping idols, whereupon the emperor ordered him bludgeoned to death and his corpse disposed of in the sewers, from which the widow Lucy retrieved the saint's body and buried it at the catacombs by the apostles (da Voragine, 1931; Löffler, 1912). Sebastian was not immediately associated with pestilence;[16] rather, Jacobus da Voragine's retelling of a seventh-century miracle in which the saint saved Pavia from the plague was instrumental in creating Sebastian as plague saint following compilation of the *Golden Legend* c.1265 (*ivi*, pp. 97-98).[17] Then, according to Sheila Barker, the saint's iconography and devotional connotations changed significantly during years after the Black Death. Arrows intimated sudden death as much as they did the plague itself, conferring on St. Sebastian a more generalised *memento mori* effect. The *Golden Legend*'s closing prayer inaugurates this dual reference: "Then let us pray to this holy martyr S. Sebastian that he pray unto our Lord that we may be delivered from all pestilence and from sudden death …,"[18] a tradition that Mantegna invoked with explicit reminder of the vanity of earthly things inscribed on the

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[14] Willing suffering for love has sometimes led to the suggestion that Sebastian was a saint beloved by sodomites, as discussed by Bohde, 2004, pp. 85–98.

[15] See Cocke, 1996, pp. 393–394, for the twin roles of exemplary martyr and heavenly intercessor.

[16] Sebastian's original connotations engage religious dominion: in Ravenna he was identified with territory over which Emperor Justinian claimed rulership as Constantine's successor, and later, Pope Gregory the Great designated Sebastian as one of Rome's patron saints (Barker, 2007, p. 91). Early images do not depict Sebastian with arrows or Apollonian attributes, so he did not immediately substitute for the pagan plague deity Apollo; see Barker, *ivi*, p. 93.

[17] For a survey of changing representations of S. Sebastiano in the Veneto focusing on mid–fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, see Mason Rinaldi, 1979, who notes that St. Sebastian comes to represent plague metaphorically, while S. Rocco represents its actuality. As complementaries, they show the body's harmony transformed in its corruptibility (ivi, p. 214).

[18] The entire prayer reads "Then let us pray to this holy martyr S. Sebastian that he pray unto our Lord that we may be delivered from all pestilence and from sudden death, and so depart advisedly hence, that we may come to everlasting joy and glory in heaven"; de Voragine, 1931, Para. 5, 1931.

banderole winding around snuffed candle, *Nihil nisi divinum stabile est / cetera fumus* (Barker, 2007, p. 102). In addition, the saint's wounded body could evoke Christ's own torments, so pairings of Sebastian with salvific imagery such as the Annunciation or Christ, as in Giovanni Bellini's *Polyptych of St. Vincent Ferrer*, 1464–1470 (**Figure 12**), associated suffering with salvation which allowed Sebastian to function simply as conduit to Christ's power over sin and death (*ivi*, p. 107).[19]

Figure 12. Giovanni Bellini, Polyptych of St. Vincent Ferrer, detail, 1464–1570, tempera on panel. Mondadori Portfolio/Art Resource, NY.

This emphasis, too, follows from Jacobus, whose prayer for deliverance from sudden death (cited above) concludes " … and so depart advisedly hence, that we may come to everlasting joy and glory in heaven." Finally, works such as Bellini's or Pietro Perugino's *St. Sebastian*, c.1495 (**Figure 13**) extract the icon

[19] For the altarpiece, see Tempestini, 1999, pp. 88–93. Marshall links iconic imagery, in particular, with the Man of Sorrows so that Sebastian recalled the *imitatio Christi* and thereby offered Christ-like promise of resurrection; see Marshall, 1994, pp. 495–500.

from narrative specifics and, with arrows angled from above, maintain anagogical significance with the implication that the shafts represent Divine ire.

Figure 13. Pietro Perugino, St. Sebastian, c.1495, oil on oak panel. Louvre, Paris. Peter Horree/Alamy Stock Photo.

Perugino reified the concept by inscribing a phrase from a penitential Psalm on the painting's base line: "sagittae tuae infixi sunt michi" (Thine arrows stick fast in me; PS 37:3 [Latin Vulgate]).[20] Titian's painting depicts Sebastian with two downward-angled arrows on his left arm, as well as a cuirass lying at his feet, which is an unusual iconographic element.

Rarely does Roman armour appear even in narratives of Sebastian's martyrdom.[21] However, Dosso Dossi had included at the feet of his *St. Sebastian*,

[20] Barker, 2007, p. 111, and, for Perugino's painting, pp. 114–115. Intriguingly, Perugino complicated reference to divine wrath by inscribing his own name on the arrow piercing Sebastian's neck.

[21] Marshall, 1994, p. 498, illustrates an unusual example of the martyred Sebastian by Lorenzo Costa that includes an armoured soldier in mid-distance.

c.1526–1527 (**Figure 14**), a contemporary helmet or balaclava that may have intimated darts of a poetic lover's gaze in an ambiguous martyrdom of love (Gibbons, 1968, Cat. n. 37, pp. 186-187; Humfrey, 1998, pp. 43, 285).[22]

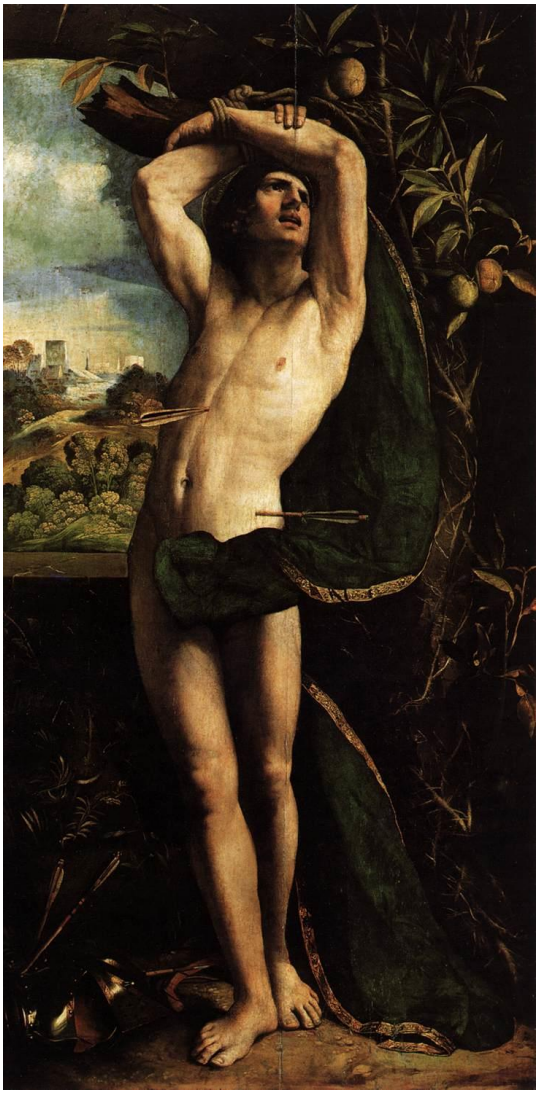

Figure 14. Dosso Dossi, St. Sebastian, c.1526–1527, oil on panel. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. Dosso Dossi, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dosso_Dossi_033.jpg.

Titian, however, set his saint into historical past by depicting an ancient Roman cuirass, omitted prompts that might elicit the notion of viewer as carnal lover, and allowed Sebastian's form to suggest beauty as treasured offering to God

[22] For poetic reference to (male) lovers' gazing and bound prisoner of love, see Koos, 2011, pp. 43–73. The helmet, it might be noted, does not resemble closely items examined in Bridgeman and Watts, 2000, pp. 20–27.

(Barker, 2007, p. 114).[23] Narrative images in Venice provided impetus for Titian's usage: Paolo Veronese painted two canvases for the chancel of San Sebastiano c.1565; on the left wall, armoured Sebastian exhorts his compatriots to ignore family members' entreaties and persevere in faith; on the right wall, Sebastian, now divested of cuirass that threatens the surface of pictorial space below his naked body (**Figure 15**), is trussed for his clubbing, a scene that Veronese had frescoed in the monks' choir c.1557.[24]

Figure 15. Paolo Veronese, The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, c.1565, oil on canvas. San Sebastiano, Venice. Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.

Titian would have known these images since he produced a painting of St. Nicholas for a small altar in San Sebastiano c.1563;[25] his appropriation of cuirass not only historicises Sebastian but also signals removal of armour for the dual martyrdom that rendered the saint like Christ and, most evocatively, established his character as acclaimed knight. According to the *Golden Legend*, Diocletian so

[23] Sebastian's increasing beauty during the Renaissance may owe to the idea that the more precious offering would be more effective in placating an angry God. Too, informed by study of anatomy and ancient art, artists could represent the nude Sebastian as demonstration of artistic skill. On the latter topic, see Freedman, 1988, pp. 5–20. Beauty also may have countermanded physicians' concerns to avoid focusing thoughts on death and plague, since philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino considered that contemplating beautiful things brought humans' animal spirits into consonance with macrocosmic order; see Barker, 2007., pp. 119–127.

[24] See Cocke, 1966, pp. 389–390, for Veronese's images: the unusual separation of the key event in Sebastian's martyrdom into two separate scenes, first stripped and flogged in preparation for his martyrdom, and then followed by the actual clubbing, allows Veronese to stress both the saint's exemplary role as martyr and his role as intercessor since the bound Sebastian looks toward his resurrected form in the high altarpiece.

[25] Pedrocco, 2000, "St. Nicholas," Cat. no. 232, p. 271; according to Vasari, it was commissioned by lawyer *messer* Niccolò Crasso c.1563.

esteemed Sebastian that he was named master of the palace, "And [Sebastian] was always with them in habit of a knight, and was girded with a girdle of gold above like as was used," descriptions that recur in the account of his actions to sway Marcus and Marcellinus (de Voragine, 1931, Para. 3 & 4). The elaborate "girdle of gold above," or cuirass, was to be stripped from the saint along with imperial favour as Veronese's paintings indicate, but his identity as knight was allied more popularly to his efficacy as plague saint and intercessor with Christ. Petrucci's *Motetti libro quarto* (Venice, 1502) included a madrigal by Johannes Martini set to a traditional text *O beate Sebastiane* (Chiu, 2012, p. 161, n. 26): named most holy soldier, *miles beatissime*, Sebastian was enjoined to "Free us from that [plague] and from evil so that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ" (*ivi*, p. 162).[26] Identified by cuirass as holy knight and Christian successor to those of pagan antiquity,[27] Titian's intercessory saint stands bound within a maelstrom of flashing colours and flickering gleams that instils affective response to the image.

Within a changing intellectual and religious climate leading to Counter-Reformation ideals, Titian developed this type of *pittura di macchia* in a manner that intimated such qualities as ardour and awe. Paul Hills has shown that in natural philosophy of the era, a shift occurs "in the manner of apprehending and imagining the world. … For the diffused light of the astronomically distant sun is substituted an ardour which is more localised and fiery: a sun rendered as flame or radiance …," (Hills, 1996, p. 268)[28] noting that intellectuals renew attention to fire's transformative power. For example, Sebastiano Erizzo articulated in his *Dell'istrumento et via invetrice de gli antiche* (Venice, 1554) "universal principles of *sole*, *luce*, *lume*, and *splendore* that descend to heat and generation. Here *splendore* is '*l'anima del mondo*' and *calore* '*lo spirito del Mondo; overo il fiato dell'anima*'" (*ivi*, p. 267).[29] With celestial heat conjoined to energising forces, fire

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[26] The entire text reads: "O beate Sebastiane, miles beatissime / Cuius precibus tota patria Lombardie / fuit liberata a pestifera peste. / Libera nos ab ipsa et a malign ut digni / efficiamur promissionibus Christi" (O blessed Sebastian, the most holy soldier, / by whose prayers the entire land of Lombardy was liberated from the pestiferous plague. / Free us from that and from evil so that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ). Probably traditional, the text can be dated securely to a collection *Mignotydea de peste* (Milan, 1535), by Jean-Marie Mignot (*ivi*, p. 161 n. 27).

[27] For a Christian humanist, the cuirass suggests ascendency of the soldiers of Christ vis-à-vis those of Antiquity with idea that the pagan world's mouldering glory would be recaptured in the Christian world, a recurring theme in humanist literature beginning with Petrarch's letter to Giovanni Colonna; see Brown, 2013, Papers Dedicated to Peter Humfrey, p. 42.

[28] What may appear to be an actual fire behind the cuirass is perhaps Titian's nod toward resemblance, were the image completely finished, while the fitful flashes that gleam in the distance seem to turn toward representation by substitution of spectacle.

[29] Hills continues, "Girolamo Cardano in his *De subtilitate* departed from traditional discussion of the four elements by removing fire from their number. For Cardano all true elements are cold: fire is hot, and on account of that heat is perpetually moving. Paradoxically perhaps, if fire is an accident, an *accidens* not a substance, this makes it all the more potent and pervasive; and in Cardano's

could be allied in Counter-Reformation thought with Eucharistic ardour and the divine fire of Christ's sacrifice. In this sense, the *calore* and *splendore* evinced in Titian's light-shot landscape may evoke the transformation of Sebastian's ardour, through two martyrdoms, into Christological surrogate. Alternatively, its enveloping atmosphere suggests the *spiritus* that animates the body of an organism imbricated in the natural world and thus subject to earthly dissolution. Airy atmosphere, in this case, would connote transformation of *spiritus* into the ardour for Christ that animates Sebastian's bound body with suggestion of graceful movement (Hills, 2005, pp. 181-187).

Perhaps closer to Titian's own experience, art theoretical commentary adumbrated similar principles to forge an expressive union that engenders a *terribilitià* of *colore*, as Una Roman D'Elia has discussed in terms of the high style of Titian's Christian Epic mode.[30] Pietro Aretino, for example, imagines the "terrible subject" of a Last Judgement by Michelangelo and describes

> clouds coloured by rays that emerge from the pure fires of the sky … circled by splendour and terrors; I see [Christ's] face burning and the sparkling flames of light that are both pleasant and terrible … I see the lights of paradise and furnaces of the abyss, which divide the darkness (D'Elia, 2005, pp. 126-127).[31]

Splendour and terrors, pleasant and terrible, paradise and abyss: these constitute the juxtaposition of contraries at once "harshly pleasant and pleasantly harsh," which Daniele Barbaro phrased as the "generous medley of things that are repugnant to each other [which] fills everyone with marvel" (*ivi*, p. 129, n. 111).[32] In this sense, the fitful play of gleaming colours that surround Sebastian evoke the dramatic but ineffable confrontations—whether thought to be terror and sweetness, pain and ardour, earthly and heavenly—that inspire awe and marvel in the beholder and that require interpretation within the context of Titian's potential motivations.[33]

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philosophy celestial warmth is linked to *spiritus* as central to earthly processes, a force capable of penetrating and energising substances." See also Paul Hills, 2007, pp. 185–204.

[30] See D'Elia, 2005., pp. 126–131, for relationships among *sprezzatura*, *pittura di macchia*, and Titian's approach to the high style of Christian Epic mode (with reference to the San Salvatore *Annunciation*). Titian seems to have chosen to develop sombre mood and *pittura di macchia* as means to suit changing religious sentiments of the time. On the question of finish, the Epic Style as the "grand style" meant to be appreciated at a distance, its rhetorical basis, and relationships with Titian's last paintings (although not the *St. Sebastian*), see Puttfarken, 2005, pp. 196–204.

[31] For related issues discussed by Francesco Sansovino and Gian Paolo Lomazzo with the result that *terribilità di colore* can be seen as "sweet horror or pleasant burning," see ivi, pp. 126–127.

[32] Barbaro inverts the Ciceronian idea of decorum in favour of juxtaposition of contraries; Pietro Bembo, too, advocates tempering aspects of one style with that of another. D'Eia notes that writers in Titian's circle were fond of such oxymorons (ivi, pp. 130–131).

[33] For *non-finito* as a manifestation of protean forms paralleling the metamorphoses told in Ovid, see Barolsky, 1998, pp. 461–467-ff.. For Marco Boschini's interpretation of painting similar in style, see Cranston, 2010, p. 4; and, for additional Renaissance spectator response to devotional images seizing upon the senses, see ivi, pp. 84–85.

The artist had sometimes placed Sebastian in a context evoking affiliation with Venice as institutional guarantor of public health (Mason Rinaldi, 1979, p. 216),[34] so his decisions to opt for full figure presentation and to characterise with cuirass Sebastian as holy knight guarding against sudden death may suggest an origin as universalised plea for Venetian soldiers' welfare in face of the Turkish threats of which Marc Antonio Barbaro, *bailo* in Constantinople, had warned during the 1560s and which erupted into war from 1570 to 1573 (Norwich, 1982/1989, pp. 464-488). If so, the incandescent setting would evoke the chaos of battle (Hills, 2007, 196-199), but Sebastian's identity as plague saint quickly subsumed reference to knightly protector since shafts launched in downward trajectory seem to have formed part of the initial conception; they signified pestilence as late as the notary Rocco Benedetti's account of the 1575–1577 plague, written in 1630, which described civic chaos when "all the *Savi* were bewildered, not seeing how to provide for so great a need, nor which course to take to protect us from such a hail of arrows, showered down in all directions by the plague" (Chambers and Pullan, 2001, p. 119).[35] Titian need not have anticipated the 1575 plague, but simply the likelihood of a recurring episode, since Venice had suffered some fourteen plagues between 1456 and 1528, with fewer but more virulent outbreaks thereafter (Boeckl, 2000, pp. 98-100).[36] However, his indecision in resolving the position of the saint's left foot intimates an ambition to convey greater complexity of interior life.

Titian knew well how to stabilize the striding pose as that of *St. James Major* demonstrates, but for the bound figure of Sebastian incorporated no support that would have done so, instead allowing his bearing to resonate between stasis and movement. The concept initially seems similar to Mantegna's: bound at tree, or in Mantegna's case, limbs apparently pinned into immobility by arrows interlacing with limbs, Sebastian exemplifies the virtue of constancy or *stabilitas*, a classical cognate for Christian fortitude;[37] but unlike Mantegna's saint agonising in suspended animation, Titian's Sebastian seemingly strides forth with Apollonian

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[34] The author observes that Titian's image of St. Mark Enthroned (c.1510), originally for S. Spirito in Isola, places Sebastian and Roch (with Saints Cosmas and Damian) before St. Mark, who is enthroned like an emperor, serving to underscore the notion of the State as guarantor of public health in accordance with a city known for its piety and privileged relationship with the Divine. However, later sixteenth-century images, in focusing on ducal intervention during times of plague, inaugurate narrative presentations showing plague's effects as opposed to focusing on the iconic image of the saint(s), a trend that continues in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century presentations; see *ivi*, pp. 218–223.

[35] see also ivi, pp. 113–119 for context, including outbreaks between 1456 and 1528.

[36] Boeckl notes that some Renaissance images, including Raphael's *Madonna di Foligno* and Titian's *Gozzi Altarpiece*, incorporate saints associated with the plague and seem to be plague images, but cannot be associated with specific outbreaks. Thus, she suggests that the images may well have been done in anticipation of recurring outbreaks.

[37] See de Voragine, 1931, Para. 4, for constancy: Sebastian urges Marcus and Marcellinus to be constant when wavering in their faith.

aplomb toward his ultimate martyrdom. In this respect, fiery indeterminacy of landscape evokes Jacobus's account of Sebastian's admonishment to those weak in faith: "But the persecution which we suffer on earth, flames up today and blows away like smoke tomorrow; today it is hot and tomorrow cool, in an hour it is done" (Caldwell, 1973, p. 374, n. 7). The *terribilità* of *colore* and ardour coalesces in upturned face where glowing *agape* transmutes pain: the Venetian cleric Girolamo Malipiero explained in 1545 how martyrs survived their torments, writing,

> Our bold and magnanimous faith comes only from the holy and beautiful love of God, so that we are so in love with divine beauty, that in order to acquire and possess it, no suffering is hard, sharp, or difficult. … All persecutions and injuries done to us change themselves into happiness and great contentment of the soul, and for this reason the rocks with which Stephen was stoned, the arrows with which Sebastian was shot, and the flames with which Lawrence was roasted seemed sweet and gentle (D'Elia, 2005, p. 38, n. 49).

The suggestion of Sebastian's physical movement in this context acts as metaphor for the transformation of arrows, flames, and persecutions into his soul's contentment, as embodied in the saint's expression of ardour, motivated by seeking to possess divine beauty.

In turn, yearning love and painterly handling that frees the saint from gravity, conjoined with the suggestion of striding toward martyrdom, all evoke the theological virtue of magnanimity, itself annexed to fortitude, which implies a soul reaching out toward great things in every type of virtue, heedless of cost to self (Waldron, 1912). The theological definition was imparted in more general parlance, too: Carlo Ridolfi in 1648 referred to the painting as "the magnanimous martyr Sebastian standing," using the term *generóso* (Artemieva, 2008, p. 304; Ridolfi and Hadlen, 1914-1924, 1:200), which communicates notions of nobility and greatness of soul, spirit of self-sacrifice, and altruistic dedication to a cause (*Treccani Vocabolario*, S.V. *generóso*).[38] Selfless in sacrifice and suffering sweetly, Sebastian's robust form in implied movement embodies the "Athlete of Virtue" of Paul's injunction, "let us run by patience to the fight proposed to us, looking on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:1–2 [Latin Vulgate]),[39] or, as revitalised by San Giovanni Chrysostom,

> Run upon firm ground, up with your head, up with your eyes; … Look upward, where the prize is; the sight of the prize increases the determination of our will.

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[38] Noble moderation of passions and power to execute noble ideas for benefit of others rather than for the sake of vanity number among the characteristics that Cesare Ripa assigned to *Magnanimita* in his *Iconologia* (first edition 1593): see Ripa, 1603, pp. 300–301.

[39] See Eisler, 1961, pp. 94–95, for Paul's Allegory of the Footrace. One wonders whether Titian might have known the relief by Donatello or one of his schools showing an individual athlete of virtue on a pilaster as part of the mural decoration for the Santo at Padua; see also *ivi*, pp. 88–89.

> The hope of taking it suffers us not to perceive the toils, it makes the distance appear short (*ivi*, p. 96, n. 72).

Sebastian becomes like Christ, whom Chrysostom names as victor of all Olympic games, "the Athlete of eternal victory."[40] Emerging from the landscape's evanescent "smoke and fire," Titian's Athlete of Virtue incarnates the etymology that Jacobus provided, "Sebastian comes from *sequens*, following; *beatitudo*, beatitude; *astin*, city; and *ana*, above; and it means one who pursues the beatitude of the city on high …." (Caldwell, 1973, p. 376, n. 22). Titian's Sebastian presents exemplary behaviour in appearance and comportment: a beholder desiring union with the "author of faith" must follow the direction of Sebastian's gaze, ignoring terrestrial disquiet in favour of spiritual certainty.

Thus, within an amorphous atmosphere pierced by flashes of colour, Titian's *St. Sebastian* evokes complex characterisations but emerges as a righteous personage desirous of divine union who actively confronts present and future. The artist's imaginative vision relied upon empathy with disparate characters and motivations: as elucidated by Ludovico Dolce in *L'Aretino*, a painter can claim to accomplish nothing unless he stirs the spectator's soul. "Nor," Dolce continues, "can the painter stir emotion unless he already experiences in his own being, while executing the figures, those passions … which he wishes to imprint on the mind of another."[41] In turn, Antonio Persio identifies this as Titian's customary practice in his *Treatise on the Human Mind* (1576), writing that

> [the model] would so affect his sense of sight and his spirit would enter into what he was representing [… so that …] it appeared … that he had gone into a trance. As a result … , he achieved in his work little less than another Nature, so well did he represent her form and appearance (Carabell, 1995, p. 90).

If artistic vision facilitated an identification with his subject that allowed Titian to imaginatively adopt varied experiences and motivations that subsequently affected a spectator's interpretations, then his manipulation of a *terribilità di colore*

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[40] The words are *ivi*, p. 90: "the Champion Pancratiast, the One who has run the entire course, the Athlete of eternal victory." Such ideas were not confined to academic or theological audiences in sixteenth-century Venice; see Logan, 1996), pp. 440–446, for the Venetian-born canon lawyer and spiritual writer Antonio Pagani (1526–1589). Pagani engaged pastoral activity with a committed laity primarily in nearby Vicenza, and his "spiritual writings are works of ascesis. Key motifs are the spiritual conflict and, following St. Bonaventure, the ascent of the soul through the progressive stages of purification, illumination, and perfection, or illumination of the intellect, uplifting through charity and transformation through union" (ivi, p. 445). However, it must be admitted that dominant values came to include withdrawal in contemplation, focus on internal piety, and, at a certain stage in the soul's transformation, emancipation from imagery. Pagani's ideas exemplify the individualist nature of Venetian religious experience, for which see Martin, 1996, pp. 358–370.

[41] Dolce, *L'Aretino*, in Roskill, 2000, pp. 156–157: "Ne puo movere il Pittore, se prima nel far delle figure non sente nel suo animo quelle passioni … che vuole imprimere in quello d'altrui."

and *non-finito* handling testify to the artist's immersion in that very subject (*ivi*, pp. 86-87). The *pentimenti* of Sebastian's left foot index extended periods of revision as Titian reworked his conception: perhaps motivated initially by Venetian hostilities against the Turk, the artist incorporated insinuations of the divine origin attributed to pestilence, but gradually evolved an expression of faith in redemption. Bound in constancy, Sebastian nonetheless seemingly advances past tribulations that vanish like smoke and in the process burning away, through dissolution of form, the physicality that characterised ancient art, leaving finally as exemplar the ardent face turned on High. A selfless soul aspiring to loving union with the divine, Sebastian embodies ideal model, martyr, and intercessor: judged within the beliefs of its era, Titian's *St. Sebastian* expresses not existential tragedy but spiritual triumph.

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