

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo
The Death of Hyacinthus, c. 1752–53
Oil on canvas. 287 x 232 cm

The canvas was probably commissioned by Baron Wilhelm Friedrich Schaumburg-Lippe. The baron lived in Bückeberg, near Würzburg, where Giovanni Battista had been working on the decoration of the palace of Prince-Bishop Carl Philipp von Greiffenclau with his sons Giovanni Domenico and Lorenzo since 1750. The painting appears to be autobiographical and elegiac, as the baron is thought to have commissioned it from Tiepolo a year after the death of his lover, a young Spanish musician who had passed away in 1751 and with whom he had had a passionate affair.

The painting is inspired by the episode of the death of Hyacinthus recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book X, 162–219). According to the tale, the god Apollo and his lover Hyacinthus were taking turns throwing the discus. Apollo went first, hurling it with such force that it reached the sky and ripped the clouds apart. The young Hyacinthus, emboldened by the competition, ran to catch it as it fell, but it rebounded off the ground and struck him in the face. He lies pale and mortally wounded, supported by the inconsolable Apollo.

Tiepolo depicts the same scene but takes as a reference the Italian translation of Ovid's work made by Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara (Venice, 1561), who turns the discus contest into a tennis match. Here the solar disc is replaced by a racquet and some balls in the foreground, and the detail of a tennis net is visible in the background.

Hyacinthus's lifeless body lies in the foreground, and behind him Apollo guiltily gesticulates about the fatal outcome. Depicted as a young athlete with blonde hair adorned by a laurel wreath, Apollo had abandoned his godly duties to devote all his time to his young lover. Tiepolo reminds us of this by showing two of his attributes, the lyre and the quiver with arrows, lying forgotten on the ground on the left.

The artist and his son and assistant Giovanni Domenico worked out the composition of this central group in many sketches. They tried out various positions for both figures, as can be seen in the drawing from the Martin von Wagner Museum in Würzburg. Other surviving studies show isolated details that were faithfully copied in the final version of the canvas. Prominent among them are the drawing owned by the Staatsgalerie of Stuttgart on view in this room and the sketch whose original is housed in the Morgan Library & Museum in New York.

The artist accentuates the drama of the event by contrasting the pair of lovers with a compact group of figures who observe the outcome of the story. In accordance with the satirical tone in which the episode is described, the painter adds symbolic elements that refer to the forbidden love between the god and the youth, such as the macaw and the sculpture of the god Pan, both depicted above the main scene.

This canvas attests to Tiepolo's keen ability to create masterful compositions without neglecting the details, as all the objects and textiles are accurately rendered and their textures and properties are reproduced in a brilliant Venetian palette of colours.

This work belonged to the Schaumburg-Lippe family until 1934, the year it first appears in the records of the Rohoncz collection, as the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection was previously known.



White flowers – hyacinths – sprout from the ground beside the lifeless young man and will become tinged with colour by the drops of blood spilling from his wound.



A *putto* or Cupid, depicted as a naked, winged infant, though without his bow and arrows, hastens to the spot and leans against the god Apollo's leg. The presence of this figure, a symbol of the love and desire the men felt for each other, underlines the amorous nature of the episode.



The macaw perched on the architecture framing the scene symbolises licentiousness and the perils of a love affair between a god and a mortal.



Pan, depicted with the horns and extremities of a he-goat, is a Greek god who symbolises fertility and male sexuality. With its searing expression, the statue seems to mock the tragic end of the love affair of Hyacinthus and Apollo.



The tennis racquet and balls that replace the solar disc attest to the tragic outcome. This ball game, which had been practiced by kings and noblemen since the 15th century, was very popular during the 18th century.



Prominent among the compact group of observers are the figures of the elderly halberdier and an old man dressed in an oriental headdress and rich textiles, who is sometimes identified as Hyacinthus's father Amyclas, king of Sparta.

M^a Eugenia Alonso
Curator Old Master Painting