

The Death of Hyacinthus by Giambattista Tiepolo

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Giambattista Tiepolo
The Death of Hyacinthus, c. 1752-53
(detail)



fig. 1

Giambattista Tiepolo
Detail of the fresco *The Apotheosis*
of Prince-Bishop Greiffenclau
on the ceiling above the main
staircase, with portraits of
Giambattista Tiepolo and
his son Giandomenico, 1753

Giambattista Tiepolo (Venice, 1696–Madrid, 1770) left his hometown for the first time in 1750 to travel to Würzburg, accompanied by his sons Giandomenico (Venice, 1727–1804) and Lorenzo (Venice, 1736–Madrid, 1776), where he had been commissioned to paint decorative frescoes for the impressive residence of Karl Philipp von Greiffenclau. Appointed Prince-Bishop of Würzburg in 1749, Von Greiffenclau began looking for a painter to decorate his majestic palace, designed by the renowned architect Balthasar Neumann. Focusing his search on Venice, he eventually managed to sign a contract with Tiepolo, who upon arrival was given several rooms in the palace itself.

During their time in Würzburg, Tiepolo and his sons worked tirelessly on the ceiling frescoes in the Imperial Hall (*Kaisersaal*) and over the main staircase (*Treppenhaus*), following the decorative programme that the prince-bishop had forwarded to him in Venice, although the artist had a degree of creative freedom and was allowed to propose any changes he deemed necessary. His extraordinary skill as a fresco painter and amazing talent for creating dramatic scenery is perfectly illustrated by one of the staircase ceiling frescoes, specifically the representation of the European continent, in which he glorified his patron and included portraits of himself and his son Giandomenico in the composition [fig. 1].

Würzburg Residence

fig. 2

Giambattista Tiepolo***The Death of Hyacinthus*, c. 1752–53****Oil on canvas, 287 × 232 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,****Madrid, inv. 394 (1934.29)**[\[+ info\]](#)

It does not seem that Tiepolo received other fresco commissions during his time in Würzburg, which ended in November 1753, but he did paint canvases for other patrons, one of which was *The Death of Hyacinthus* [fig. 2]. The date assigned to the painting (1752–53) is widely accepted given the existence of preparatory drawings by both Giambattista and his son Giandomenico with sketched motifs that later appeared in this canvas and the frescoes at the prince-bishop's residence.

The Death of Hyacinthus was originally in the collection of Baron Wilhelm Friedrich Schaumburg-Lippe in Bückeburg, a town near Würzburg. It is believed to have remained in this family's possession until 1934, when it appeared in the inventory of the Schloss Rohoncz Collection, forerunner of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection. In all likelihood, the work was commissioned from Giambattista by Baron Schaumburg-Lippe himself. It is probably an elegiac and autobiographical painting, for Robert Contini tells us that the baron, after a passionate affair with a young Hungarian man, had had a more enduring relationship with a Spanish musician with whom he lived in Venice for a time, and who Wilhelm Friedrich's father referred to in a letter as "your friend Apollo". The Spaniard

Giambattista Tiepolo
The Death of Hyacinthus
(detail)



died in 1751, shortly before the young Baron Schaumburg-Lippe, who was twenty-eight at the time, commissioned the painting from Tiepolo.¹

The work depicts the moment of Hyacinthus's death, tragically ending his love affair with Apollo. The theme was inspired by a passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book X, 162–219), which tells how the young Hyacinthus was mortally wounded by Apollo's discus. The god and his lover Hyacinthus, scantily clad and slick with oil, decided to have a discus throwing contest. Apollo hurled the first with such strength that it flew high into the sky and scattered the clouds. The young Hyacinthus, caught up in the excitement of the game, ran to catch the discus as it fell to earth, but it glanced off the ground and struck him full in the face. The pale youth fell, mortally wounded, and the inconsolable Apollo cradled him in his arms. On the ground beside the young doomed lover, flowers sprang up: white hyacinth, the petals stained red by the blood flowing from his wound.

You are fallen in your prime, defrauded of your youth,
O Hyacinthus!" the god moaned. "I can see in your sad
wound my own guilt, and you are my cause of grief and self-
reproach. My own hand gave you death unmerited—I only can
be charged with your destruction.—What have I done wrong?
Can it be called a fault to play with you? Should loving you
be called a fault? And oh, that I might now give up my life
for you! Or die with you! [...] The lyre struck by my hand,
and my true songs will always celebrate you. [...] A new flower
you shall arise, with markings on your petals, close imitation
of my constant moans."²

Giambattista depicted the Theban youth after he had been struck down, lying in a rather languid yet unnatural position for a dying man, and, faithful to the literary source, painted little flowers in the foreground.

In another later version of this tale, set down by Nonnus of Panopolis in his *Dionysiaca*,³ the death of Hyacinthus was caused not by Apollo but by Zephyrus, god of the gentle west wind. Zephyrus became enamoured of the young man's beauty and, jealous that Hyacinthus preferred Apollo's company, blew the discus off course and dealt him the fatal blow.⁴

¹ Roberto Contini. *The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection: Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Italian Painting*. London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2002, p. 221.

² Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Brookes More, ed. Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922. Retrieved <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0959.phi006.perseus-eng1:10.143-10.219>

³ A Greek epic poem composed in hexameter by the Egyptian poet Nonnus of Panopolis, probably between AD 450.

⁴ Gertrude Borghero. *Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection: Catalogue Raisonné of the Exhibited Works of Art*. Lugano, Collection Thyssen-Bornemisza-Milan: Edizione Electa, 1986, p. 309.

fig. 3

Pallacorda racket, 1700–99
Leather and wood, 41 × 71 cm
Procuratie Nuove, Museo Correr,
Venice, inv. 58



Tiepolo portrayed this very scene, but certain details do not match the accounts in the aforementioned sources. The sun god's discus has been replaced by two balls and a tennis racket, whose placement beside the hyacinth in the foreground is deliberately ironic. The backdrop of the tragic event is completed by a partially visible net in what might be the tennis court, situated behind the group of figures observing the central scene. A third tennis ball lying in the foreground, in the corner opposite Hyacinthus, may be the one that struck his reddened cheek. These details suggest that Giambattista may have found inspiration in a rather satirical Italian translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara (Venice, 1561). During the Renaissance, it was quite common for translations of classical texts to replace certain details of mythological scenes with contemporary elements in an attempt to modernise or update the story's setting. According to Cees de Bondt, the translator may have seen the game of *pallacorda* played at the court of his patron, Alessandro Farnese, who ordered two courts built to practise this sport, one of them at his estate of Villa Caprarola.⁵

As Bondt notes, Tiepolo apparently followed Anguillara's version and substituted a tennis match for the discus-throwing contest. The painter must have been well acquainted with this translator's rendering of the *Metamorphoses*, which had enjoyed great success in its day and remained quite popular throughout the 17th century, while the popularity of tennis endured into the 18th century. For proof we need look no further than the client who commissioned the painting: Prince Wilhelm Friedrich Schaumberg-Lippe himself was a dedicated tennis player.⁶ In his commentary on this painting for the exhibition catalogue of *Giambattista Tiepolo 1696–1770* held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Keith Christiansen writes,

This new sport was popular among Renaissance nobility, enjoying a special vogue in England during the reigns of Henry VIII (1509–1547), himself a very good player, and his daughter Elizabeth I (1558–1603). [...] Anguillara's *Metamorphoses* was contemporary with Elizabeth's rule and was first published in Venice, where it saw further printings during the 17th century, one of which Tiepolo must have had in hand.⁷

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Gabriele Bucchi. "Meraviglioso diletto". *La tradizione poetica del Cinquecento e le Metamorfosi d'Ovidio di Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2011, p. 202.

6

Cees de Bondt. "Tiepolo's *The Death of Hyacinth* and the image of the game of tennis in art (1500-1800)". In *Studi Veneziani*, vol. 47, 2004. Pisa and Rome: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali MMIV, pp. 381-83.

7

Keith Christiansen. *Giambattista Tiepolo, 1696-1770* [exh. cat.]. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996, p. 171.

Drawings

fig. 4

Giambattista and Giandomenico Tiepolo
Two putti, 1750/1752–53
 Red and white chalk on blue paper, 190 × 227 mm
 Staatsgalerie, Graphische Sammlung, Stuttgart,
 inv. C 1475

fig. 5

Giandomenico Tiepolo
*Dying Hyacinthus and details for the Würzburg
 Residence frescoes*, 1752–53
 Red and white chalk on blue paper, 275 × 417 mm
 Staatsgalerie, Graphische Sammlung, Stuttgart,
 inv. C 1471

fig. 6

Giandomenico Tiepolo
Details of The Death of Hyacinthus, 1726?–1804
 Red chalk, heightened with white chalk,
 on blue paper, 235 × 394 mm
 The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.
 Gift of Lore Heinemann, in memory of her
 husband, Dr. Rudolf J. Heinemann, inv. 1997.31



The main scene in the foreground presents the god Apollo as a young athlete with a laurel wreath crowning his golden curls, whose gesticulating body eloquently conveys his inconsolable grief over the loss of the lover at his feet, struck down by his own hand. Apollo had neglected his divine duties to spend all of his time with Hyacinthus, and Giambattista makes this clear by showing two of his attributes, the lyre and the quiver full of arrows, carelessly tossed aside in the foreground. A small cupid has rushed to rest his hand on the god's leg. The figure of this putto is sketched in a study on paper held at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart [fig. 4] which Giambattista later transferred unaltered to the canvas. The same museum owns two other drawings related to this painting, all drawn in red chalk. One depicts the tennis racket, while the other, sketched by his son Giandomenico, shows the nearly full-length figure of Hyacinthus lying on the cloak, exactly as it appears in the painting [fig. 5].

Another related sketch made by Giandomenico using the same medium, now at the Morgan Library in New York, shows details of the painting such as Apollo's arm and the sandal-shod leg and face of Hyacinthus [fig. 6]. Unlike Giambattista's preliminary sketches or studies, most of which were rapidly executed in pen and wash, the extant drawings by Giandomenico's hand are actually *ricordi*, highly detailed copies of the finished painting.

fig. 7

Giambattista Tiepolo
Study for *The Death of Hyacinthus* (recto)
 Pen and deep bistre wash over red chalk
 on paper, 324 × 222 mm
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London,
 inv. D. 1825.171-1885



fig. 8

Giambattista Tiepolo
Study for *The Death of Hyacinthus* (verso)
 Pen and deep bistre wash over red chalk
 on paper, 324 × 222 mm
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London,
 inv. D. 1825.171-1885



fig. 9

Giambattista Tiepolo
***Apollo and Hyacinthus* (recto)**
Studies for a *Crucifixion* (verso)
 Pen and wash on paper, 202 × 160 mm
 Victoria and Albert Museum, London,
 inv. D. 1825.80-1885



8

Michael Levey. *Giambattista Tiepolo: His Life and Art*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986, p. 207.

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Tiepolo left us an abundance of drawings and etchings made primarily for his own amusement, most of which are poetic musings, improvisations or *capricci*. Giandomenico published many of these works after his father's death under the title *Scherzi di fantasia*.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London owns six pen and wash drawings [figs. 7–9] that have also been linked to *The Death of Hyacinthus*, in which Tiepolo experimented with various possible poses for the two central figures using a fresh, flowing technique. As Michael Levey⁸ suggests, the figures in the central group of the scene “might have strayed from the *Capricci* and will reappear in the *Scherzi di fantasia*”.⁹ Apollo is depicted to the right or left of Hyacinthus, whose limp body leans against his lover in a more or less recumbent position. Yet there is no physical contact in the dramatic finished canvas, and the god's gesticulating attitude bears little resemblance to the figures in the studies.



Continuing with this series of drawings, we find other examples at the Museo Civico in Trieste. In one of them, the recto depicts Apollo and Hyacinthus [fig. 10] but the two figures on the verso [fig. 11] have been associated with the theme of Angelica tending to Medoro's wounds which Giambattista used in a fresco for the Ariosto room at Villa Valmarana, Vicenza, commissioned by Giustino Valmarana himself in 1757.

Other similar sketches held at the Martin von Wagner Museum in Würzburg [figs. 12–14] even show the racket outlined in the foreground. In these drawings, the artist played with the pose of Apollo and Hyacinthus, using a Pietà-like compositional arrangement.

This museum also owns a preparatory drawing for some of the bystanders observing the scene, clad in obviously Orientalising robes and head gear [fig. 15]. At the front of this compact group are two older men, a halberdier and a bearded figure sometimes identified as Hyacinthus's father, King Amyclas of Sparta. Both gaze upon the scene with stern disapproval, perhaps because Apollo had forsaken his duties as a god to live a passionate romance with the young Hyacinthus.



fig. 10
Giambattista Tiepolo
Sketch for *The Death of Hyacinthus* (recto)
Brush and deep bistre wash over red chalk on paper, 337 × 242 mm
Museo Civico Sartorio, Trieste, inv. 2106a

fig. 11
Giambattista Tiepolo
Sketch for *Angelica Caring for Medoro* (verso)
Brush and deep bistre wash over red chalk on paper, 337 × 242 mm
Museo Civico Sartorio, Trieste, inv. 2106b

fig. 12
Giambattista Tiepolo
Sketch for *The Death of Hyacinthus* (recto)
Wash and ink on paper, 369 × 292 mm
Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität
Würzburg, Würzburg, inv. 7912



fig. 13
Giambattista Tiepolo
Sketch for *The Death of Hyacinthus* (verso)
Wash and ink on paper, 369 × 292 mm
Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität
Würzburg, Würzburg, inv. 7912



fig. 14
Giambattista Tiepolo
The Death of Hyacinthus
Wash and ink on paper, 374 × 293 mm
Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität
Würzburg, Würzburg, inv. 7911



fig. 15
Giambattista Tiepolo
Sketches for *oriental heads*
Wash and ink on paper, 438 × 289 mm
Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität
Würzburg, Würzburg, inv. 7913

fig. 16

Giambattista Tiepolo
Sketches for the god Pan
 Wash and ink on paper, 430 × 292 mm
 Martin von Wagner Museum der Universität
 Würzburg, Würzburg, inv. 7914



fig. 17

Giambattista Tiepolo
Rinaldo and Armida, 1752–53
 Oil on canvas, 105 × 140 cm
 Staatsgalerie Würzburg. Leihgabe der
 Bayerischen Verwaltung der staatlichen
 Schlösser, Gärten und Seen,
 inv. WÜ Res. G 159

Why did Giambattista choose Anguillara's version over the Ovidian classic? Perhaps acting on instructions from Baron Schaumburg-Lippe and accepting that the commission was a posthumous tribute to his dead lover, the musician Domènec Terradella, the master opted for this version to give the story a more contemporary backdrop—a tragic yet ironic version, in which the forbidden love between the divine Apollo and the youthful Hyacinthus could either be glorified or criticised. This moralising undertone is betrayed by the presence of various symbolic details alluding to the passions of the flesh. The macaw, perched on a ledge of the classical architectural structure that centres the composition, has often been associated with sin and licentious living. Beneath the bird, observing the scene with a caustic smile, we see a statue of Pan, a Greek deity associated with shepherds and venerated in Arcadia, known as Faunus in Rome. Depicted as a man with horns on his head and the legs and hindquarters of a goat, Pan was the god of fertility and male sexuality, and we can assume that his presence here is not coincidental. His image is the foil to the tragic tone of the scene. There is a drawing with various sketches of this figure at the Martin von Wagner Museum in Würzburg [fig. 16].

Giambattista Tiepolo reused this compositional device with few alterations in *Rinaldo and Armida*, a work dated to 1752–53 and currently at the Staatsgalerie Würzburg [fig. 17], part of the *Jerusalem Delivered* series painted during his years in that German town. Once again, he used the macaw, the god Pan and the arch in the background by the cypresses to centre the scene, and even the colour of the cloak on Armida's lap is identical to the one spread beneath the dying Hyacinthus, whose physiognomy recalls that of Rinaldo.

Veronese

fig. 18

Paolo Veronese (Paolo Caliari)
Mars and Venus United by Love, 1570s
Oil on canvas, 205.7 × 161 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York. John Stewart Kennedy
Fund, 1910, inv. 10.189



Giambattista had a special predilection for the paintings of Veronese (Verona, 1528–Venice, 1588), admiring not only his marvellous technique but also his way of imagining different themes. Veronese’s influence is plain to see in the paintings he produced at Würzburg. According to Philipp P. Fehl, both the background scenery and the group of onlookers are a tribute to the painting of the master he so admired, as is the figure of Hyacinthus himself.¹⁰ If we observe Veronese’s *Mars and Venus United by Love* [fig. 18] at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, we find that Tiepolo borrowed certain elements from it for his *Death of Hyacinthus*, specifically the row of trees and the statue of the god Pan forming a backdrop to the main group in the foreground. Following Veronese’s example, Giambattista devised a scene in which the gods are sumptuously attired and the great richness and quality of the splendid objects leaps to the eye. However, while the Verona master’s work celebrates the triumph of love, Tiepolo’s narrates its tragic consequences.

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Philipp P. Fehl. “Farewell to Jokes: The Last ‘Capricci’ of Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo and the Tradition of Irony in Venetian Painting”. In *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 4, summer 1979, The University of Chicago, 1979, p. 777.

Giandomenico Tiepolo



fig. 19
Giandomenico Tiepolo
Pulcinella's Departure, 1797
 Fresco, 198 x 150 cm
 Ca' Rezzonico, Venice,
 inv. Cl. I n. 1752

fig. 20
View of the reconstructed
Pulcinella room at Ca' Rezzonico,
Venice



In 1757 Giambattista Tiepolo purchased Villa Zianigo,¹¹ a typical Italian villa in Mirano, near the City of Canals. He remodelled it to suit his needs and worked alongside Giandomenico, who would inherit the property on his father's death, to decorate it with frescoes. Giandomenico painted one of the frescoes, entitled *Pulcinella's Departure* [fig. 19], as a tribute to his progenitor's work, composing a curious scene reminiscent of *The Death of Hyacinthus*. This work, together with the majority of the villa's frescoes, is now in the Venetian museum of Ca' Rezzonico, where several small rooms have been used to recreate the villa's decorative programme [fig. 20]. Giandomenico's composition features a prostrate figure in the foreground, a man resting after a tennis match but whose seemingly unconscious form emulates the pose of the dying Hyacinthus. The racket and feather tossed carelessly on the ground beside him are positioned just as in Giambattista's canvas. Giandomenico's caustic reproduction of the mythological scene from his father's painting, itself infused with irony, nevertheless retains the tragic undertone of the original tale.

11
 Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall. *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, p. VIII.

Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen and *The Death of Hyacinthus*

When Barth D. Schwartz interviewed Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen for an article in *Connoisseur* magazine, “Thyssen in All Candor”¹² and asked what he thought of this work, the baron replied,

Years ago I did not like it. In 1948, it was inherited by my brother, Stefan. Rudolph Heinemann, who was adviser to my father and also to me, said, ‘If your brother sells this picture, you must buy it at any price.’ So, I bought it from my brother for, I think, \$24,000. That was ‘any price’ in the late 1940s. With time, I changed my feelings about it. Now I use it as a standard. When I am considering what to buy, keep, or sell, I judge it against this one. I ask myself, ‘Do I want to keep this picture, or the one I’ve been offered?’ Many times, I give the other one back.

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Barth Davis Schwartz. “Thyssen in All Candor: A far-ranging conversation with the world’s most powerful collector”. In *Connoisseur*, New York, January 1984.