



1.1 Titian, *Madonna di Ca' Pesaro*, 1519–26. Oil on canvas, 478 × 266.5 cm. Venice: Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. Photo: Curia Patriarcale.

TITIAN'S VEILS

PAUL HILLS

Hanging from a hook on the wall above Evan's low workbench, said Austerlitz, was the black veil that his grandfather had taken from the bier when the small figures muffled in their cloaks carried it past him, and it was Evan, said Austerlitz, who once told me that nothing but a piece of silk like that separates us from the next world.

(W.G Sebald, *Austerlitz*)¹

A cloth, drape or veil as the membrane between two worlds recurs in many cultural guises. According to Christian legend, the true image of Christ's face was itself imprinted upon a veil, the *vera icon* or Veronica, and in medieval art sacred images were commonly honoured and protected by curtains or precious cloths. But in the later middle ages, the corporeal presence of the icon increasingly came up against the concept of the perspicuity of the picture, which was to be memorably formulated in Alberti's image of the painting as window. Where veils or curtains once signalled the presence – either concealed or revealed – of the sacred image, veils now enter into the manifestation of art. Their sacral connotations endure within a new pictorial staging, but co-exist with more mundane devices. For Alberti a veil is instrumental in the art of painting: it is divided into a grid and stretched across a frame as an aid to plotting the position of outlines in space and as a tangible realization of the plane of intersection of the visual pyramid.² Building upon recent scholarship, notably by Gerhard Wolf and Klaus Krüger, the present essay shifts attention forward to the sixteenth century and focuses on an artist crucial to the emergence of painting as a painterly art.³

In Titian's art veils are caught up in narratives of pictorial discovering, covering, uncovering. What is veiled or nebulous and what open to view become closely meshed, and sacred archetypes are unravelled within the mundane fabric of material culture, fashion and social practice. Like the piece of silk in Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Titian's cloths are material and metaphorical. Within a mercantile context of acute discrimination of quality fabrics and an artistic context of the fast-developing practice of oil painting on canvas, depicted veils register ever greater nuances of sensuous appeal. Sacred veiling and erotic suggestion now shadow one another to an unprecedented degree. Whereas significant recent scholarship has illuminated the symbolism of the veil, and explored the philosophical relation between veiling and mirroring in the Renaissance concept of the

picture, the aim of the present study is to show how closely the material and metaphorical are interwoven in pictorial performance. Like Daniela Bohde, who has led the way in her imaginative account of skin, flesh and colour in Titian's painting, I believe that meaning is embodied in the handling of material substance.⁴ By moving between modes of inquiry too often kept separate – between the iconographer's understanding of symbolism, the social historian's concern with material culture and the connoisseur's eye for pictorial facture – it may be possible to get closer to how Titian's art brings together body, veil and paint as the very stuff and subject of representation.

If the significance of Titian's veils has prompted little comment, it may be because it is effectively absorbed within the play of his figures as they are swept up in the story. An example is the *Madonna di Ca' Pesaro*, the altarpiece that Titian completed for the church of the Frari in Venice in 1526 (plate 1.1). Here the



1.2 Detail of Titian, *Madonna di Ca' Pesaro*. Venice: Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari.

child turns away from his mother and pulls her veil vigorously over his head, while at the same time waving and looking down towards Francis, the saint devoted to Christ Crucified (plate 1.2). Of incandescent whiteness, the Virgin's veil is as ample as a winding-sheet or shroud for a grown man.⁵ Carlo Ridolfi, writing in the seventeenth century, caught the significance of this binding or swaddling of the incarnate body when he observed how the Virgin pressed to her breast the Child– God, 'Dio bambinetto', who, out of love, enclosed his infinite being within the bonds of humanity, 'trà legami dell'umanità'.⁶ Since the

veil, as explained below, is a figure of Christ's flesh, the Child's gesture signals that He willingly accepts His mortality and therefore also His sacrificial death. Stretched like a canopy, over Mother and Son, the undulating veil is echoed in the bank of cloud high above, a celestial canopy that supports two putti bearing the Cross. Just as the Christ Child vigorously pulls the veil over Him, the putti above do not simply display the Cross but struggle to support its weight. X-rays of the *Madonna di Ca' Pesaro* indicate that Titian first sketched a curtain behind the Virgin and Child: in the final solution he transposed the significance of the curtain onto the play of veil and cloud.⁷ Typically, Titian converted symbols into actions and accommodated them, even camouflaged them, in the pictorial staging. Time and again throughout his long career he dramatized imagery of veil and cloud, often discovering the essence of his narrative in the dialogue between the two. In doing this he breathed new life into ancient meanings.

THE TABERNACLE AND THE VEIL OF CHRIST'S FLESH

To understand how this recuperation of meaning occurred, two symbolic traditions must briefly be summarized. One is Judaeo-Christian, the other Classical. Seemingly so distinct, in Renaissance representations these strands occasionally become entwined, and in both the figure of the veil serves as synecdoche for the body or a part of the body.

The word tabernacle, like the Italian word *tenda*, or curtain, means tent, and this is precisely what it was. God's instructions to Moses on how to make the tabernacle are set down at length in several books of the Old Testament, especially in Exodus chapter 26: 'You shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet stuff.' It goes on to specify the lengths of the curtains, how they are to be looped and fixed. Later in the same chapter the veil is described: 'And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen ... And bring the ark ... in thither within the veil; and the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy.' The High Priest bearing a sacrificial offering was the only mortal permitted to pass through the veil and venture into the Holy of Holies. Once the ark received its fixed place within the temple in Jerusalem, this veil became the veil of the temple – the same veil that, according to St Mark's gospel (15:38) was rent in two from top to bottom at the moment when Christ died on the Cross.

St Paul brought another veil into play, namely the *velamen* with which Moses hid his shining face from the Children of Israel after he came down from talking with God on Sinai, which Paul interpreted as prefiguring the blindness of the Jews towards Christ the messiah.⁸ In Paul's exegesis, the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies was replaced by Christ, who was himself both priest and sacrifice: 'Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh'.⁹ From this idea derive the words of the hymn, 'veiled in flesh, the Godhead see' – the new veil of the temple is Christ's flesh.¹⁰

The Virgin Mary, without whom Christ could not take on flesh, is the tabernacle of the New Covenant. Fittingly, the Marian legends embroidered upon her links with the temple.¹¹ The thirteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ* asserted that 'when she was three she was offered in the temple by her father and mother and stayed there until she was fourteen';¹² according to the apocryphal infancy gospel *The Book of James* or *Protevangelium*, she was the virgin chosen to spin and weave that part of the veil of the temple of the Lord which was made of 'the true purple and scarlet'.¹³ So it came about that Christian tabernacles for the reservation of the consecrated host – the Eucharistic body of Christ – no matter how costly their material, had to be furnished with curtains, just as the Old Testament tabernacle had been furnished with curtains. Carlo Borromeo, writing in 1577, also stipulated that 'the inside of the tabernacle should be completely covered and decorated with silk cloth, which should be red in the Ambrosian rite