

Titian's *Three Ages of Man*: A New Interpretation

Las tres edades del hombre de Tiziano: una nueva interpretación

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Abstract: This article proposes an interpretation of Titian's *The Three Ages of Man*, based on a medal by Giovanni Boldù. Since the painting was commissioned by the goldsmith Emiliano Targone, I claim that it was conceived as a gift for the wedding of his daughter Polissena to Giovanni Bernardi, who belonged in the same trade and therefore he must have been able to interpret the picture. Titian would have worked on the canvas between 1516 and 1524, and he produced an exceptionally beautiful epithalamic painting that, besides conforming to genre conventions, conveys a profound moral message that can be deduced from the medal.

Keywords: Titian; *Three Ages of Man*; Interpretation; Iconography; *Love and death*.

Resumen: Este artículo propone una interpretación de *Las tres edades del hombre* de Tiziano, a partir de una medalla de Giovanni Boldù. Dado que el cuadro fue encargado por el orfebre Emiliano Targone, sostengo que fue concebido como un regalo para la boda de su hija Polissena con Giovanni Bernardi, que pertenecía al mismo oficio y por lo tanto debía haber podido interpretar el cuadro. Tiziano habría trabajado en el lienzo entre 1516 y 1524, y produjo una pintura epitalámica de excepcional belleza que, además de ajustarse a las convenciones del género, transmite un profundo mensaje moral que se puede deducir de la medalla.

Palabras clave. Tiziano; *Las tres edades del hombre*; interpretación; iconografía; *El amor y la muerte*.

ERNST GOMBRICH, in what was possibly his last work¹, pointed out that there were few great paintings —Velázquez's *The Spinners* among them— for which the source that guided their artists in their composition had been found. He himself did not believe he had come across more than one or two of these rare canvases.

It is my claim in this paper that the source of one of Titian's most important works the one known today as *The Three Ages of Man* [Fig. 1], may be established with a high degree of probability, and that it provides us with a decisive clue for the interpretation of the painting². My proposal, based on Peter Humfrey's findings,³ aims to be more specific as to the context and meaning of the work. Humfrey correctly assumed that the notarial inventory that mentions «a canvas painted in oil representing *love and death*» refers to this painting, and claimed that it conveys its essence better than the currently usual title.⁴ However, I shall be arguing that its subject is more particular than «a general musing on the poetically fashionable pastoral theme of the transience of human life, beauty and happiness», and that it may have been intended to be specific to the patron, as suggested by a net of references and allusions to works and texts which Titian and his commissioner were well acquainted with.



Fig. 1. Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, 1516-1524, Edinburgh, Scottish National Gallery

Fig. 2 Giovanni Boldù, *Boldù with the Genius of Death*, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1957.14.735.b, (CC0)

¹ Gombrich, 2003, pp. 15-16.

² I came across this source, by a happy chance, while writing a study on the sources of Titian's *Allegory of Prudence*, Zafra, 2010. Another article related to this topic is Zafra, 2024.

³ Humfrey, 2003, p. 791.

⁴ A «tela dipinta al olio representante l'amor e la morte», Humfrey, 2003, p. 791.

The nucleus of this net and the cornerstone of my argument is a medal by Giovanni Boldù [Fig. 2], erroneously considered by the poet laureate Conrad Celtes to be a Roman representation of the Fates [Fig. 3]. This medal was circulating in the same environment in which Titian's painting was commissioned and painted. If you observe the reproductions side by side, you may easily appreciate the relationship between the three figures on the medal and their equivalents in the painting. The figure on the left correspond to the naked young man — notice the position of the leg and the hidden face —; the skull, to the old man on the background — who is holding two of them—; and the winged *putto*, to the one on the right of Titian's picture.

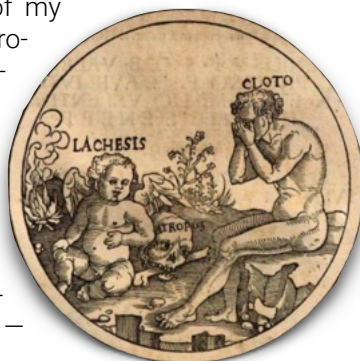


Fig. 3 Apianus and Amantius, *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis...*, (detail) Venice, 1534, p. cccclxxxv

Thus, the connection between medal and painting seems, to my mind, «so exact that, once it has been suggested, no one will doubt it»⁵. Even if my subsequent analysis may lead to a «complexity of meaning in the picture which some may find hard to accept» and some of its claims are conjectural and certainly debatable, none of these «contradicts the known customs and ideas of the place and time in which it was painted»⁶.

With this in view, I shall begin by rehearsing the original environment of the painting and certain problems regarding its date. Then I proceed to analyzing the medal, its diffusion and influence. Later on, I consider generic and iconographic aspects of the picture, on which basis I propose an interpretation of the characters and setting, namely, that it is an epithalamion reminding the newly weds that death looms on their present love and happiness. Let us take these topics one by one:

THE PICTURE

The Three Ages of Man is an oil on canvas measuring 90 x 150.7 cm, painted by Titian Vecellio around 1513, according to the unanimous opinion of critics. It is now owned by Francis Ronald Egerton, 7th Duke of Sutherland and 6th Earl of Ellesmere, who, along with a number of other paintings, has it on loan to the Scottish National Gallery, where it is on display⁷.

According to Vasari, the painting was given to the artist and medallist Giovanni Bernardi da Castel Bolognese⁸ by his father-in-law, perhaps as part of his daughter's dowry. Bernardi was its owner when Vasari described it as follows:

When Titian later returned to Venice, he painted for the father-in-law of Giovanni da Castel Bolognese a canvas in oils of a **naked shepherd and a country girl** who

⁵ Gombrich, 1972, p. 69.

⁶ Gombrich, 1972, p. 69.

⁷ A good description of the painting can be seen in Brigstocke, 1993, pp. 172-177. It can also be seen in Jaffé, 2003, p. 88-89.

⁸ About Giovanni Bernardi see Donati, 2011.

offers him some pipes to play, along with an extremely beautiful landscape. Today this painting is in Faenza in the home of this same Giovanni⁹.

And it was still so when he died in 1553, as shown in the inventory of his estate, which describes it as «a canvas painted in oil representing *love and death*».

Despite the existence of other versions of the painting that might correspond to Vasari's description, Peter Humfrey demonstrated that only the Edinburgh version could be the original and the one he saw and described¹⁰.

After passing through several hands, the work came into the collection of Christina of Sweden, and then, through that of the Dukes of Orleans, into that of the Earls of Ellesmere, its current owners¹¹.

THE DATE

I have to address now the date of the painting, since this is what led Humfrey to rule out that it was a «marriage picture». Assisted by the specialist Valentino Donati, Humfrey managed to determine the identity of Bernardi's father-in-law and thus of the commissioner of the painting: the Venetian Emiliano Targone, considered one of the finest goldsmiths of his day¹². It is known that Bernardi and Targone's daughter Polissena married in 1524, whereas, according to Humfrey, Targone himself must have married about 1500. On the other hand, Humfrey accepts the traditional dating of the painting in ca. 1513, which is too late for Targone's wedding and too early for his daughter's¹³. However, I believe that there are reasons to bring the date of the picture and the epithalamic occasion closer to one another.

Let start with the date of the painting. The year 1513 was proposed by Roberto Longhi in the idea that the *putti* on the right side of the picture acted as a model for Romanino's *tondo degli innocenti* at the bottom side of his great *pala* for Santa Giustina (see below, fig. 18c), which is known to have been commissioned in 1513 and finished in 1514. Even though the similarity is unmistakable, an argument from a part of one work to a tiny part of another is not as cogent and conclusive as to overcome any other considerations —leaving aside the possible existence of a common source, such as Mantegna's drunken *putti* in fig. 18a—.

According to Vasari, Targone must have commissioned the work on his return from one of Titian's trips to the palace of the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso I d'Este, who had commanded three of the paintings that decorated the famous *Camerini d'alabastro*: the *Offering to Venus* (1520), *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1523) and *The Bacchanal of the Andrians* (1524)¹⁴. Since Titian did not make his first preliminary trip to Ferra-

⁹ «Tornato poi Tiziano a Vinezia, fece per lo suocero di Giovanni da Castel Bolognese, in una tela a olio, un pastore ignudo et una forese che gli porge certi flauti perché suoni, con un bellissimo paese; il qual quadro è oggi in Faenza in casa il su detto Giovanni», Vasari, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori...*, p. 809.

¹⁰ Humfrey, 2003, p. 791. Rowland-Jones, 2000, pp. 7-13.

¹¹ For the successive owners see Brigstocke, 1993, pp. 174, and with further development, Humfrey, 2003, pp. 787-790.

¹² Donati, 2012, p. 107.

¹³ Humfrey, 2003, p. 791.

¹⁴ On Titian's work at the court of Ferrara, see Checa, 2013, pp. 59-68. The dating of the paintings, different from other catalogues, is taken from there. See also Hope, 1971, pp. 641-650.



Fig. 4. Titian, *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, 1524, Madrid, Museo del Prado

ra until 1516¹⁵, this is the earliest date compatible with Vasari's narrative. Notice that it agrees with Erwin Panofsky's idea of an «immediate» relationship between this painting and *The Bacchanal of the Andrians* [Fig. 4]¹⁶.

As to the occasion for a marriage gift, it can be safely assumed that Targone would have betrothed his daughter, as was common at the time. According to the Roman custom in Renaissance Italy —it was sufficient for the future spouses to be seven years old— a future marriage was agreed upon, which had to take place on pain, among other things, of forfeiting the goods given as a deposit¹⁷. This may explain the long time that elapsed between the commissioning of the painting and the date of the actual marriage in 1524.

¹⁵ Checa, 2013, pp. 65-66.

¹⁶ Panofsky, 1955, p. 96.

¹⁷ See, for example, Abad and Garrido, 1988, p. 574. On the celebration of marriage at the time see Altieri, 1873. Also briefly discussed is Bayer, 2008.

Thus, Titian must have worked on the painting –possibly in Venice and with the help of Targone– in the gaps left by Ferrara’s work, leaving periods of inactivity in between during which the design may have been changed, seen by other painters such as Palma, and copied by some of his pupils even if unfinished. I shall examine later these copies that witness a protracted time of execution. This agrees with the fact that Titian delayed in finishing the commissions for the Duke of Ferrara; it is highly implausible that he would have complied with such a powerful lord less promptly than with a mere goldsmith such as Targone, however rich and famous the latter was.

The possible relationship between the painting and Boldù’s medal, which I have already mentioned, suggests an intervention by Targone in the iconographic design, entirely consistent with the epithalamic theme and with the work’s topic as given in the notarial document: *Love and Death*. If –as is almost certainly the case, since both Polissena’s father and her future husband were famous goldsmiths– they knew about the medal and, perhaps, the hidden meaning proposed by Celtes that I shall discuss immediately, the painting could easily be read as a betrothal gift.

In sum, in view of the data available, I do not believe that the possibility of an epithalamic purpose should be excluded, because although the work was commissioned on one of Titian’s earlier trips, it may have been delivered years later, by the time of the betrothal. If this hypothesis is accepted, the picture could be considered as having been painted shortly after 1516, amidst two of Titian’s early periods of maturity.

THE MEDAL

I have already mentioned the similarity between the medal by Boldù and the picture by Titian. In this section I shall discuss an interpretation of the medal that is attested in the early 16th century and may have a bearing in the meaning of the picture as an epithalamion.



Fig. 5 Giovanni Boldù, *Self-retracted Boldù with the Genius of Death*, 1458, Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1957.14.735.b, (CC0)



Fig. 6 Giovanni Boldù, *Caracalla, imperatore romano* (recto);
Un personaggio seduto, Museo del Bargello, Firenze, 1466, N. Inv. 5932, (CC0)

The medal¹⁸ reproduced in figures 2 and 5, dated 1458, by the also famous Venetian goldsmith Giovanni Boldù (?-before 1477), shows a self-portrait of the author on the obverse and, on the reverse, a complex *memento mori* of intricate iconography that was studied by Janson in a detailed study of 1937 on the theme of the *Putto* and the skull. This side of the medal shows the artist, the young man covering his face with his hands, reflecting on death, as represented by a dead man—the skull—on whom the Genius of Death rests, charged with carrying his soul—the flame—to the afterlife¹⁹.

This work became well known and influential already in the last few decades of the 15th century. In 1466, either Boldù or one of his disciples produced another version of the medal [Fig. 6], with the effigy of the emperor Caracalla (under the name of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius) on the obverse and the same reverse, with the inscription «lo son fine», 'I am the end'. Before long, this second medal would be taken for an ancient Roman coin, and reproduced as such by Cristoforo Solari [Fig. 7]



Fig. 7 Cristoforo Solari, Medallions of the «Basamento» of the
 Certosa di Pavia, c. 1490, Author's image retouched.

¹⁸ Hill, 1930, n° 421 and n° 423. A good study of this medal and its diffusion, with references to previous bibliography can be found in Wood, 2008, pp. 261-263.

¹⁹ Janson, 1937, pp. 423-449. Janson's study of the motif reproduced on the medal makes it impossible to consider the existence of an earlier Roman medal on which Boldù could have based himself.

among the several that he copied on the reliefs of the façade of the Cartusian monastery in Pavia, sculpted around 1490²⁰.

Shortly afterwards, the German humanist Conrad Celtes described it as a Roman antiquity, as attested by the mathematician Petrus Apianus and the poet laureate Bartholomeus Amantius in their *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis* (1534)²¹:

Conrad Celtes recently discovered a lead plate in Styria on the hill where St. Andrew's Church stands. In 1500²².

Apianus and Amantius, professors at the university of Ingolstadt, must have had access to Celtes's findings in the German area. Therefore, we may suppose that it was Celtes who interpreted the reverse of the medal as an image of the Fates, as specified in the added cartouches, perhaps already present on the copy he made, that identify the three figures depicted as Clotho, Atropos and Lachesis²³. Thus, Janson's reflections on the reinterpretation of the medal must be applied not only to Apianus, as he does, but to his source Celtes as well²⁴:

it was impossible for Northern artists, when this source reappeared in the Apianus woodcut, to give it their customary interpretation. A new meaning had to be found, on the basis of two clues: the presence of a skull implied an allegory of death; this, however, had to be taken from antiquity, since the design itself was regarded as



Fig. 3 Apianus and Amantius, *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis...*, Venice, 1534, p. cccLxxxv

²⁰ Wood, 2008, p. 263. In Pavia the inscription is *Innocentia et memoria mortis*, Innocence and the memory of death. On this image see Seznec, 1938, pp. 298-303. Also Burnett and Schofield, 1997, pp. 5-28.

²¹ Janson, 1937, p. 443, describes the whole process without mentioning Celtes.

²² «Nuper a Con. Cel. Inventum in plumbea lamina in Stiria in Colle in quo est Ecclesia circa Sanctum Andream. Anno M. D.», Apianus and Amantius, 1534, p. 384, (fig. 3).

²³ Wood, 2008, p. 263, explains this process. Panofsky, 1955, p. 290, detected a similar confusion, also in this work by Apianus and Amantius, between an engraving by Dürer and an ancient medal found in Moravia in 1504.

²⁴ Probably Janson found the interpretation in an edition of Cartari's work which mentions only Apianus, and not directly in that of Apianus and Amantius (*Inscriptiones...*) in which it is clearly attributed to Celtes: «Nuper a Con. Cel. Inventum in plumbea lamina...». Cartari entered the service of the house of Este at a very young age and there he became acquainted with the medal and the interpretation of Celtes and Apianus.

antique. Obviously suggested to the Northern mind by the figures of putto, youth and skull was the idea of the Three Ages of Man, childhood, adult age, and death, just as they had been represented since the late fifteenth century. The only ancient subject to fit this scheme was the Three Fates, the rulers of man's temporal destiny. From antiquity on, they had been paralleled to Past, Present, and Future, the third Fate, Atropos, being synonymous with death²⁵.

Subsequent references to this image include its interpretation as the Fates, revealing a lasting influence of Apianus's and Amantius's *Inscriptiones*, and thus, indirectly, of Celtes. For instance, Vincenzo Cartari writes in his *Le imagini con la spositione de' dei de gli antichi* (1556):

I remember having seen in the book of antiquities which have come down to our time, the Fates drawn in this manner: a sign is drawn in a circle, and within it, seated on a small hillock a naked youth, who with both hands covers his face and eyes, and it is written Clotho over his head. At his feet lies a winged child, also naked, holding his right hand on his right knee, and with his left arm resting on a dead man's skull, which holds a tibia crosswise in its mouth. And on the child was written Lachesis, and on the skull Atropos. It seems then that, from the right hand of the child, not far from him, there was a burning flame, and behind it almost towards the young man who was sitting, on a grassy bush with some flowers. And all the rest was barren ground with some stones scattered there in disorder²⁶.



Fig. 8 Cartari, *Le imagini...* Venetia, Giordano Ziletti, 1571, p. 297.

Interestingly, Cartari's new edition in 1571 mentions his source, Apianus, but also the place and date of the finding, which derive from Celtes, as we have seen²⁷.

²⁵ Luh, 2001, p. 331, n. 25, has suggested that the connection between the scene on the medal and the Fates was established from an allusion in a passage in Book VII of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*.

²⁶ Cartari, *Le imagini...*, fol. 58v. The neatness and accuracy of the description is due to the fact that the work was not intended to be illustrated, which did not happen until the Venice edition, Giordano Ziletti, 1571, p. 305, [Fig. 8]. The translation is mine.

²⁷ Cartari, *Le imagini...*, p. 305.

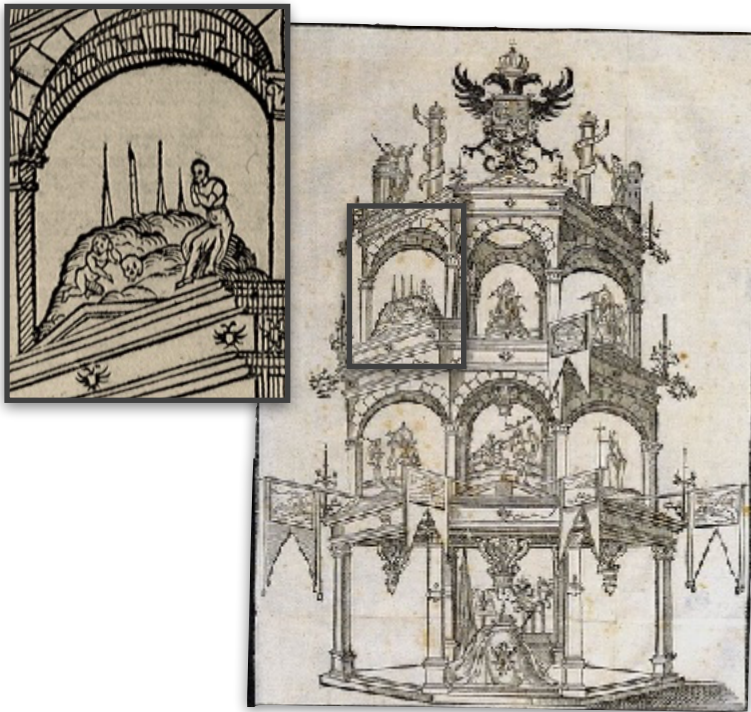


Fig.9 Anónimo, *Catafalco de Carlos V en Valladolid* and enlarged detail, Juan C. Calvete, *El túmulo Imperial ...*, Valladolid, 1559, final insert

The spread of this image of the Parcae throughout Europe increased with the great success and diffusion of Cartari's book, especially in its illustrated editions. However, it must have already been widespread, as shown by its appearance, together with other representations of the Fates, on the catafalque [Fig. 9] built for the funeral of Charles V in Valladolid in December 1558²⁸. It should not be forgotten that Apianus belonged to the entourage of the Emperor, who appointed him his mathematician and astronomer, and made him a knight.

Given the visual relationship between Titian's work and Boldù's medal, it remains to be seen whether the painting inherits the initial sense of the medal as a generic *memento mori*, or whether, on the contrary, it carries over the confusion caused by Conrad Celtès and can be seen as a representation of the Fates. Although the *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis* by Apianus and Amanti us that spread this erroneous interpretation were published years after Titian finished the picture, it is a fact that by the late 15th century the medal had already been considered ancient, and we cannot rule out —especially in view of Targone's professional interests— that news of Celtès' discovery and interpretation reached the commissioner and the painter by some means.

²⁸ See Abella, 1978, pp. 177-200. The illustration is from Calvete de Estrella, *El túmulo Imperial...*, final insert.

THE PAINTING AS EPITHALMIUM

Various elements of the painting seem to support the idea that it was commissioned as a gift for a marriage²⁹ in which the contracting parties had access to its coding and interpretation keys. It appears to be a hieroglyphic, an iconographic enigma, a game prepared by Targone with Titian's help to be solved by Bernardi, which also fulfilled an epithalamic function. Other great and complex works of the Italian Renaissance, such as Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* [Fig. 10] or Titian's *Sacred Love and Profane Love*, had, according to critics, this same practical purpose³⁰. They were thought to be a revival of a custom common in the ancient world, as Lorenzo Pignoria points out in his commentary on Cartari:

The image of Venus, goddess of pleasures, mother of Love, accompanied by little loves, of the Hours and of the Three Graces, signify the delights of love and the good omens, which the ancients used such images to give to new wives, of a harmonious marriage and ardent love³¹.

These nude depictions, especially of ancient gods, were hung in bedrooms with a very specific intention: to serve as an example and model for sexual activity and to encourage the conception of beautiful children³².

But does it make sense to make a *memento mori* or to represent the Fates, so closely linked to death, in an epithalamic painting? Yes, because these three characters not only deal with the end of life, but with its entire development, and they are in charge of establishing its fundamental moments, Clotho that of birth, Lachesis that of marriage and Atropos that of death³³.



Fig. 10 Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*, c 1485, National Gallery, London

²⁹ Goffen, 1997, p. 31.

³⁰ See Prater's splendid synthesis on the pictorial epithalamion (2002). I reproduce some of his sources. On the epithalamic character of Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* see Gombrich, 1945.

³¹ Cartari, 1615, p. 475.

³² Prater, 2002, p. 30 and Noack, 1929, pp. 209-210. The case narrated by Heliodorus of Emesa in which Queen Persinna, despite being black like her husband, gave birth to a milk-white daughter, Chariclea, after conceiving her while contemplating in a painting the nudity of Andromeda tied to a rock, is well known. See book 4 of *Heliodorus, An Ethiopian romance*, 1957.

³³ See for example Diego López, *Declaración magistral...*, p.110.



Fig. 11 Palma il Vecchio, *Mars, Venus and Cupid*, c.1520,
© National Museum Wales – Amgueddfa Cymru

Thus the Fates — as Catullus narrates at the end of his *Carmen* 64³⁴ —, in the epithalamium they sang at the wedding of Thetis and Peleus prophesied the glory of Achilles, their future mortal son, who perished before the walls of Troy and before whom Polissena would be sacrificed³⁵ in a kind of posthumous wedding³⁶. At this same wedding Hymenaeus, god of marriage ceremonies — sometimes depicted as an angel with a torch in his hand, very similar to the one on Boldu's medal—played the double flute³⁷, an instrument that in Titian's painting is in the hands of the «forese». As Rowland-Jones has already pointed out, «there is continuing iconographic evidence that two recorders close enough together to represent a double flute signify a harmonious union, usually in marriage». Holberton, for his part, showed that, with this double flute and the single flute in the shepherd's hands, the designers of the painting were emphasising, following ancient theatre practices, the tragicomic character, both joyful and sad, so characteristic of the Renaissance pastoral genre and of the scene they were constructing here³⁸.

³⁴ As Gombrich pointed out in 1972, p. 92, Catullus had been one of the main sources for Titian's great mythological works. For example, the *Bacchus and Ariadne* painted during these years for Alfonso D'Este's studio, to which I referred earlier, was also designed after *Carmen* 64 by Catullus. See Dunn, 2016.

³⁵ Polissena, Priam's youngest daughter, was the cause of the death of Achilles who was killed when he sought to marry her. See *Excidium Troiae*, 1944, p. 12. As I will point out below, it is possible that the painting alludes to this story.

³⁶ See the recent translation of Dunn, 2016.

³⁷ Rowland-Jones, 2000, pp. 7-13.

³⁸ Holberton, 2003.

On the other hand, the erotic play, here clearly linked to the instruments,³⁹ is frequent in the epithalamic genre, even when it is the father of the bride who composes the composition, as is shown by the poems that the famous Giovanni Pontano composed for his daughters' weddings, preserved in his *De amore coniugali*,⁴⁰ verses, notably influenced also by Catullus,⁴¹ which Emiliano Targone and Titian undoubtedly may have known.⁴²

The epithalamic nature of the painting could also explain another iconographic play created by the similarity of the couple in the foreground and the winged *putto* with the various combinations of Mars, Venus and Cupid, very common in this type of work. At first glance, Titian's painting may remind us of the one by Botticelli mentioned above or that of Palma il Vecchio [Fig. 11], which is very close in space and time, and might even lead us to think that it is the same scene, until we notice the strange elements. If we also look at the medal that Giovanni Bernardi made with this subject (fig. 12)⁴³ we can appreciate a certain influence of Titian's painting, if it was produced after the latter, or the interplay of the painter and his father-in-law, if Bernardi designed it first. Certainly the way he signs the medal «Io Ber. F.», 'I Bernardi made it', and its arrangement as a kind of nickname, — otherwise frequent on medals of the period— is reminiscent of the copy of Boldù's medal of 1466 (fig. 6).

The same is true of another work by Bernardi from the same period, *Pan and Siringa* [Fig. 13], in which the positioning of the protagonists around a flute, who appear to be playing together, is very similar to that of the couple in Titian's painting. This could be a further allusion to the painting by the author of the medal, or another red herring by the designers of the painting, who link it to this sad story by using an iconography undoubtedly familiar to the addressee.



Fig. 12. Giovanni Bernardi, *Mars, Venus and Amor*, 1510-1520, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum (Saal 23)



Fig. 13. Giovanni Bernardi, *Pan and Syrinx*, 1510-1520 National Gallery of Art, 1996.82.5. (CC0)

³⁹ Nichols, 2013, p. 34; Koos, 2014, pp. 20-38.

⁴⁰ Especially the «Epithalamium Nuptiis Aureliae Filiae», Pontano, vol. 1, lib. II, carmen 3. See Butcher, 2018, pp. 321-352, and Serrano Cueto, 2003, pp. 162-163.

⁴¹ See Long, 2008, pp. 12 and 18.

⁴² Pontano's complete works were published by Sigismundo Mayr in six volumes in Naples between 1505 and 1515, and were reprinted on numerous occasions.

⁴³ None of the catalogues in which this medal appears give a date, but from its simple style it seems to belong to the period when Bernardi was working in his father's workshop or to the three years —around 1510-1520— during which he was in the service of Alfonso d'Este in Ferrara, where he certainly coincided with Titian. See Donati, 1989, pp. 40 and 94. I reproduce in Fig. 11 the copy in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Saal 23, Inventar-Nr. 30/2130, photograph by the author.



Fig. 14a Jacometto, *Portrait of Alvise Contarini*, detail, ca. 1485–95, MET, New York, detail. OA



Fig. 14b Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail



Fig. 14c Paris Bordone, *Mars, Venus with Cupid*, detail, 1559-60, Galleria Doria Pamphili, Rome.

It would also favour an epithalamic interpretation if the animal in the background [Fig. 14b] were a roebuck, a symbol of marital fidelity in nearby works such as the one on the reverse of the male portrait –paired with a female one– by Jacometto (c. 1485-1495)⁴⁴, which [Fig. 14a] shows an image of a roe deer in chains with the Greek word ΑΙΕΙΕΙ, 'forever'⁴⁵. However, it could also be a stag, sometimes a symbol of ardent sexual appetite, and often depicted with Mars, Venus and Cupid, as can be seen in the detail [Fig. 14c] of a painting of this subject by Paris Bordone, a pupil of Titian. The difficulty in appreciating the distinctive horns in the painting – they are intermingled with the grove of trees behind them– and in interpreting which animal and symbol they are, suggests a game of ambivalence⁴⁶.

This ambivalence can also be seen in the split tree that seems to support the winged *putto*, perhaps to prevent it from falling on the sleeping children, which resembles the greened trunk in Lorenzo Lotto's *Allegory of Virtue and Vice* (1505) [Fig. 15a], or An-



Fig. 15a Lorenzo Lotto, *Allegory of Virtue and Vice*, detail, 1505, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. (CC0)



Fig. 15b Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail



Fig. 15c Andrea Briosco, *Allegory of Virtue*, c.1515, MET, New York, OA

⁴⁴ Pope-Hennessy, 1987.

⁴⁵ See the analysis of both paintings in Bayer, 2008, pp. 265-268.

⁴⁶ The presence of the stag just behind the hermit is also reminiscent of some paintings of the penitent Saint Jerome, such as the one by Jacopo del Sellaio, (c. 1480-1490), owned by the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art - Sarasota, and depictions of Saint Eustace, another hermit saint.

drea Brioso's medal, «Riccio» (c.1515) [Fig. 15c] with the same subject⁴⁷. A connoisseur like Bernardi would probably pick up on the reference at once.

INTERPRETATION OF THE PAINTING IN THE LIGHT OF THE BOLDÙ MEDAL

Given the plausible epithalamic nature of the painting, it remains to be seen what sense it might make to articulate it from a medal with a *memento mori* or representation of the Fates.

The presence in the tertiary plane of the painting of the old man conversing with a skull while resting his hand on another [fig. 16b] is a clue that may help us to understand the final meaning of the entire work. At first glance it might suggest that this is a Saint Jerome [fig. 16c] —at this time his iconography was becoming established in Italy— or another hermit saint, but it is immediately striking that there are two skulls instead of one.

Although the appearance of the hermit in the centre of the painting already draws the whole into the theme of the *memento mori* so closely associated with this figure⁴⁸, the second skull, which breaks with the usual type, leads the viewer to think of another explanation for his presence. What we see is a penitent hermit [fig. 16a] with his usual skull, who converses with a dead man also depicted in this form⁴⁹, in a scene in which there are two other couples: the two young men and the one formed by the winged *putto* and the sleeping children.

A connoisseur of painting of the period, as Bernardi surely was, might be reminded of the depictions in the well-known *Legend of the Meeting of the Three Living and the Three Dead*, in which a hermit often plays the role of interpreter between



Fig. 16a A. Marescotti, *Fra Paolo Veneto*, 1462, The Frick Collection, NY, Cat. 14



Fig. 16b Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail



Fig. 16c Bellini, *San Girolamo*, 1513, San Giovanni Crisostomo, Venice, detail

⁴⁷ See on this subject Tervarent, 1958, pp. 389-392.

⁴⁸ On this symbol and its relation to the Boldù medal see Janson, 1937, pp. 430-432. Jaffe, 2003, p. 89, points out the possible relationship of this character with *The Astrologer* de Giulio Campagnola (1509).

⁴⁹ The presence of several skulls, discovered in the x-ray examination of the painting, could be due to a trial to effectively place this second skull without blurring the iconographic type. See Robertson, 1971.



Fig. 17 Guido da Siena (?), *The Three Living and the Three Dead*, 14th c., Sacro Speco, Subiaco. Author's image retouched to correct bias

three couples consisting of a living person —of different ages or classes— and a deceased person —also of different ages or stages of decomposition [fig. 17]⁵⁰.

This suggests the possibility that there are other, but not obvious, representations of death in the scene, and this is where the Boldù medal can help to find and interpret them.

The shepherd and the «forese».

In this section, I shall try to extricate the meanings that the beholder of the picture, if he was familiar with Boldù's famous medal —as Bernardi must have been— and perhaps with Celtes's interpretation, may have given the scene and especially the two main figures on the left.

In the medal, the young man who covers his face in the foreground [Fig. 18a] is Boldù himself⁵¹, who also portrays himself on the obverse [Fig. 19a]. We have noticed already the similarity between the former and the young man in the painting, who, although he does not raise his hands to his face, also hides his face with this

⁵⁰ On this legend and its representation a reference can be found in the classic work Künstle, 1908. For more modern literature Kinch, 2013, especially chapter 3. Panofsky, 1955, pp. 309-310, already pointed out the connection of this legend with the theme of *Et in Arcadia ego*, especially in Guercino's painting, in a kind of humanistic version of the medieval legend. Something similar happens in our canvas, where Arcadia is also present as we see later. Although Künstle, 1908, p. 56, thought he saw in a 14th century painting in the Pisa Museum (Room III, n. 29) a version of the legend in which the three dead were replaced by the Fates, Storck, 1910, proved that it was a scene from the life of St. Margaret of Antioch.

⁵¹ Janson 1937, p. 428. See also Wood, 2008, pp. 261-264.

strange tuft of hair that covers it almost completely [Fig. 18b]. This could lead Bernardi to view this character as a representation of himself. This does not mean that he would have recognised in him his own features (as must have been the case with those of Boldù in the medal). This is not to be excluded, since it was not uncommon for epithalamic paintings to portray both bride and groom⁵². However, we cannot be certain, for, although a splendid portrait of Bernardi has survived⁵³ – which Vasari cites together with the painting we are studying –, the hidden face in Titian's painting makes it very difficult to determine the resemblance between the two images. Be it as it may, it is the correspondence, and not the similarity, between the bridegroom and the figure that matters.

The epithalamic nature of the painting and the iconographic similarities mentioned above could lead the beholder to identify the young man as the topical Mars next to Venus or even a Daphnis next to Chloe –which are surely also hinted at–⁵⁴, but the more common meaning of the medal and the morbid, almost cadaverous tone⁵⁵ of the young man's skin must have led him to suspect other interpretations.

Janson noted that the young man lamenting and reflecting on death before a skull had contributed to the iconography of the penitent Saint Jerome, and so here –also before the image of the hermit saint– Bernardi is called to contemplate death, but this time in the presence of his beautiful young wife. This may look obnoxious to the modern mind, but in fact a *memento mori* is not out of context in a wedding scene. We may recall the Biblical tale of Tobias and Sarah, who praying together on their wedding night. Let us remember that Sarah's former husbands had died immediately and her family feared that it would be so again on that occasion. Thus, the bride and groom in the painting are called upon to pray on their wedding night –as in that biblical reading, frequent in marriage ceremonies– to avoid being overtaken by sudden death and for God to grant them a happy life together⁵⁶.



Fig. 18a Boldù, as in fig. 4, reverse



Fig. 18b Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail



Fig. 18c Bordone (?), *Portrait of G. Bernardi (?)*, c. 1525, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario

⁵² Goffen, 1992, p. 121; Hope, 1980, pp. 36-37; Wethey, 1975, pp. 175-179.

⁵³ Donati, 2012, p. 107, identified the *Portrait of a Man* attributed to Paris Bordone in the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto [fig. 18c] as a portrait of Giovanni Bernardi.

⁵⁴ Janson, 1937, pp. 430-431.

⁵⁵ Koos, 2014, pp. 20-38, also drew attention to the somewhat androgynous character of the male nude, which would make it more compatible for simultaneously representing one of the Fates.

⁵⁶ Tobit, 8,5-10



Fig. 19a Boldù, as in fig. 4, obverse



Fig. 19b Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail



Fig. 19c Boldù, as in fig. 5, obverse

On the night of their wedding, Tobiah said to Sarah, «We are descended from a people of saints, and we cannot join together like the heathen, who do not know God». The two of them got up and together they prayed fervently. They asked God for his protection.

Tobiah said: «O Lord, God of our fathers, may heaven and earth, the sea, the springs, the rivers, and all the creatures in them bless you. You made Adam from the clay of the earth and gave him Eve as a companion. Now, Lord, you know: if I marry this daughter of Israel, it is not to satisfy my passions, but only to found a family in which your name will be blessed for ever».

The earthy tone of the young man's skin and even the very nudity and disposition of his body may be related to the mention to Adam in that prayer, who was created from clay and received Eve as a wife⁵⁷.

A similar reflection can be applied to the *forese* [Fig. 19b]. Her representation, in profile and wearing a wreath on her hair, shows a correspondence to the faces on the medals by Boldù and his disciple [Fig. 19a and c], which were portraits of the artist and of a Roman emperor. Again, this does not necessarily imply that the painting portrays Polissena Targone, but suggests that the figure refers to her; besides, it strengthens the similarity between the painting and the medal.

I explained earlier that the mythological Polixena was betrothed to a dead Achilles, whose destiny had been decided by the Fates on his birth. If her namesake, Targone's daughter, confronts in this nuptial scene a husband with a cadaverous look, this makes better sense in the context of an allusion to the Fates as implied in the interpretation of the medal.

There is also a certain echo in this scene of the one in which Polia tells Polyphilus, the lovers of the *Hypnerotomachia* of Colonna⁵⁸. of the ceremonies held in the temple of Polyandrión in which they played *tibiline* flutes and *milvinas* dressed in garlands of flowers to ward off unfortunate loves and placate the Fates. It is worth

⁵⁷ Dundas, 1985, p. 49, has already pointed out that this nude reveals Titian's study of Michelangelo's anatomies: there is certainly a certain similarity between the young man in the painting and the famous depictions of Adam in the Sistine Chapel (1511). Nichols, 2013, p. 34 makes the same analysis.

⁵⁸ Colonna, *Hypnerotomachi*, pp. 232-234.

remembering the great influence of this book on the Venetian humanist milieu and in particular on other works by Titian⁵⁹.

What seems clear is that the girl is a true personification of the «venustà», a model of the virtuous woman in whom external beauty is the fruit of inner beauty, something frequent in the depictions of the *novella sposa* by Titian and the Venetian masters of the early 16th century. The blonde hair, the black eyebrows and eyes, the uncovered breast, together with the myrtle wreath⁶⁰ —a flower dedicated to Venus and a symbol of love beyond death— belong to this tradition⁶¹ which points, even more so, to the spousal destiny of the painting.

This maidenly image, reclining next to a strange —almost supernatural—representation of her new husband who seems to stop him in his gesture, seems a call to reflection at the moment when both are heading towards the consummation of their marriage and are about to leave the age of Lachesis for that of Clotho, the grim reaper personified in her own husband⁶².

The two children and the winged *putto*

At this point, the viewer's attention is drawn to another plane, that of the two children and the angel I referred to earlier. At first, they may suggest the future children of the marriage to be consummated, but the close presence of the old man and the *putto* suggest a more complex explanation.

As I have already pointed out, the similarity of the composition to the iconography of Mars, Venus and Cupid has led us to see the god of love in the winged child holding the tree or leaning on it while watching over the dreams of the other two [Fig. 20b].⁶³ However, in the light of Boldù's medal, we can see in him the genie of death or, if we follow Celtes' interpretation [Fig. 20a], Lachesis, the reaper who



Fig. 20a Apianus, as in fig. 3, detail



Fig. 20b Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail



Fig. 20c Titian, *Cupid with the Wheel of Time*, c. 1515, detail, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. (CCO)

⁵⁹ See, for example, Colantuono, 2017, and the bibliography he uses.

⁶⁰ Jaffe 2003, p. 88. On the crown of flowers in marriage ceremonies, see Abad and Garrido, 1988 pp. 573-576.

⁶¹ See in this respect the splendid article Palacios, 2018.

⁶² Dundas, 1985, pp. 50-51 already pointed out the serious, reflective, somewhat morose and down-to-earth character of the young man.

⁶³ Titian himself in his well-known *Cupid with the Wheel of Time* (1515/1520) paints a character very similar to the one in this painting [Fig. 20c].



Fig. 21a Mantegna, *Bacchanal with a Wine Vat*, c. 1470, detail



Fig. 21b Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail



Fig. 21c Romanino, *Pala de St. Giustina*, 1513, Museo Civico Padua, detail, CC

establishes the beginning of man's life. Although the flame that accompanies this character on the medal does not appear in the painting, its effects on a tree that seems burnt rather than dry do seem to be present.

The similarity in the execution of the lying children in this canvas by Titian [Fig. 21b] has been pointed out to the two sleeping drunkards in Andrea Mantegna's *Bacchanal with a Wine Vat*, [Fig. 21a] (b. 1475), and to the innocent martyr saints lying dead [Fig. 21c] in the central tondo of the *Pala of St. Giustina* by Romanino (1513)⁶⁴. This resemblance might also be evident to Bernardi —both works were within his reach— who might hesitate to regard the children as dead or sleeping.

If the winged *putto* is seen as a representation of the genie of death, we would be looking at two children dead in infancy and even before birth, which would give rise to a somewhat cruel and rather untimely *memento mori*. However, if it is interpreted as Lachesis, it would be two lives that are happily about to begin, protected by the grim reaper in their first age.

The old man and the skull

I have already pointed out how the mere presence in the centre of the painting of the old man who seems to be conversing with a skull [Fig. 22b] immediately brings to mind the contemplation of the fleetingness of time and the memory of death that the traditional title of the painting —*The Three Ages of Man*— emphasises.

We saw that the old man could *prima facie* be identified as Saint Jerome or some other hermit saint. Now I wish to focus on the presence of a second skull, which is idiosyncratic for this painting. It is not merely an element associated with this type, but reveals the presence of a new protagonist in the painting, namely death.

By means of this surprising element, death turns into a focal point of the picture, as much as it is the medal by Boldù [Fig. 22a] that I claim to be decisive to its composition. Again, in the light of Celtes's interpretation, the skull represents death in

⁶⁴ Joannides, 2001, p.194.



Fig. 22a Boldù, as in fig. 4,
reverse, detail



Fig. 22b Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail



Fig. 22c Apianus, as in fig. 3,
detail

the precise form of Atropos [Fig. 22c], the Fate who determines the end of life. Consequently, it suggests a reflection about the remaining years, that is, a less blunt, more palatable *memento mori* in the moment of greatest happiness.

In this context, the old man who draws attention to the fleeting nature of human existence while reflecting on his own death just as two new spouses —to whom an eternal and fruitful love is predicted— are united, could be seen as a placeholder for the commissioner and bride's father, Targone. Some sort of presence of the comitant in the painting —which is conventional in works of a religious nature— would not be out of place here if, as it is likely, he took a hand in its design. It could be an appeal to the young couple not to forget a father who was undoubtedly closer to them at the end of his days.

The setting: Arcadia

The pastoral interpretation of the painting has been present since Vasari described it as an oil canvas with a «pastore ignudo, & una forese»⁶⁵. However, it is not the manner in which these figures are depicted that situates it in a pastoral setting, but the woods, green meadows and gentle hills in which shepherds resting as they graze their flocks are more than just glimpsed [fig. 23].

This is not the setting described by Cartari in his accurate description of the medal in which there is only «a grassy bush with some flowers. And all the rest was barren ground with some stones scattered there in disorder». These elements are still present —the flowers and stones on the bare ground in the foreground— but enough detail has been added to place the scene in that classical universe set in the Renaissance by Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia*⁶⁶.

The landscape described at the beginning of this work recalls that of the painting, and it also evokes the first scene of the book in which —after mentioning the panpipes and the aulos of Athena— a young shepherd sadly meditates, leaning against a leafy

⁶⁵ Dundas, 1985, pp. 9-55; Blanco, 2012, pp. 101-137.

⁶⁶ Although the *Arcadia* was first published in 1505, it was already well known by then thanks to the fact that it ran in manuscript in several versions since it was written in the first one around 1480. Sannazaro was portrayed by Titian around the same time as he was painting the present work, which further demonstrates the painter's closeness to the *Arcadia*'s author.



Fig. 23 Titian, *The Three Ages of Man*, detail

tree, on an unhappy love. We are in that idyllic place where beauty and happiness are accompanied by unhappy love and even death —like those of Androgeo, Filis or Massilia— which gave the title —*Et in Arcadia Ego*— to the brilliant paintings of Paussin and Guercino, and which has also been proposed for this canvas by Titian⁶⁷.

Many other details in the painting could allude to passages from the *Arcadia* and its characters —the deer that Elpino gives to his beloved Tirrena in the fourth prose, Sannazaro himself (the shepherd Sincero) who puts down his flute and abandons his singing, the tree truncated at the base, etc.— but the most revealing is the song of the old man Meliseo —the very same Giovanni Pontano, author of the *De amore coniugali* mentioned above— who, mourning the death of his beloved Filiis, laments before the shrine he had built on the top of a hill in her memory⁶⁸.

—O Atropo crudel!, potesti parcere
a Filli mia! —gridava—; O Cloto, o Làchesi,
deh consentite omai ch'io mi discarcerel!—⁶⁹

In the network of references established in this complex painting, this allusion could explain, as another *memento mori* linked to love, the presence of the church that can be glimpsed in the background of the image: the tomb of the beloved would be one more element in the zigzag of motifs linked to the growing love and the waiting death that make up the scene.

⁶⁷ Dundas, 1985, p. 52.

⁶⁸ Pontano had the famous funerary temple known as the *Cappella dei Pontano* built in Naples in memory of his beloved wife Adriana Sassone.

⁶⁹ «O cruel Atropos, you had power to spare / my Phyllis (he cried); O Clotho, O Lachesis, / ah, now consent that I be freed from prison», Sannazaro, 1966, Eclogue 12, vv. 194-196. Italian text of F. Erspamer, 1990, punctuation is mine.

THE VERSIONS OF THE PAINTING

It remains to be examined how the differences between the various stages of the painting's production, which can be seen on X-rays and which in some cases coincide with other preserved versions, affect the interpretation I am proposing. The bearing of these versions for the dating of the picture have been already dealt with.

The old man with the skulls happens to be especially concerned in these variations. One of them, preserved thanks to the engraving Lefèvre made from it [fig. 24], omits completely that figure; besides, the burnt trunk is clearly greened and there are more buildings in the background —details that can be seen in the X-radiograph. On the other hand, the copy by Sassoferrato in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, possibly also based on another version, shows several skulls at the feet of the old in addition to the two at their hands; X-rays have revealed that these were present in the original and have been covered⁷⁰.

However, the figure cannot be dismissed as adventitious —which would invalidate my interpretation based on Boldù's medal. A simpler explanation for these changes can be found in the fact that the painting was executed in several stages and may have remained unfinished for quite some time. It is known that when it was commissioned, Titian was working on the paintings for the Duke d'Este that I mentioned at the beginning, and that it took him much longer to finish them than agreed.⁷¹ It must have taken long until the picture took the most appropriate shape to the epithalamic meaning I suggest.



Fig. 24 Valentin Lefèvre, engraving of *The Three Ages of Man*, in *Opera selectiora quae Titianus ... et ... Veronensis inventarunt ac pinxerunt*, Iacobus Van Campen, Venetiis, 1682

⁷⁰ Both versions and their study can be found in Robertson, 1971.

⁷¹ Checa, 2013, pp. 59-68.



Fig. 1. Titian, *Love and death*, c. 1516-1524, Edinburg, Scottish National Gallery

CONCLUSION

If my hypothesis is correct, we could apply to this painting by Titian what Settis wrote in interpreting Giorgione's *Tempest* and *The Three Magi*: that the authors of such canvases tended to conceal their meaning so that they could be interpreted only by a few⁷². This is especially true of this particular work which, once completed, could only be seen by a very narrow circle of people, including true experts such as Vasari⁷³.

It is important to note that, given the trade of the commissioner and the owner—both designers and engravers—the interpretation of the motifs and the general sense of the painting was surely within their reach. It is quite likely that they were both familiar with the main key to the interpretation of the painting, the Boldù medal; besides, given Targone's closeness to Venetian cultured circles, he could possibly be familiar with Conrad Celtès's interpretation of it. Moreover, I even think it possible, as I have pointed out, that Targone helped Titian to create a kind of iconographic set for his future son-in-law.

I avowed at the start that my contentions would suggest a complexity of meaning that may seem implausible to some, but I claim that the connections I have drawn are precise enough and can be admitted by an unprejudiced reader; besides, they do not go beyond what was common knowledge and custom in the place and time in

⁷² Settis, 1990, p. 128.

⁷³ Thus, I do not think that this painting should fall under Hope's interdiction of «abstruse iconographical interpretation». Hope, 1980, p. 22.

which Titian worked. In any case, I can also say with Gombrich, paraphrasing his teacher Popper, that «while we can sometimes become really sure that a theory or interpretation is false, we will never become completely sure that a theory is true»⁷⁴.

In summary, I propose that the present canvas was painted by Titian between 1516 and 1524, based on the Boldù medal, and commissioned by Emiliano Targone as a gift for the wedding of his daughter Polissena to Giovanni de Castel Bolognese, who was supposed to be able to interpret it. It is therefore an exceptionally beautiful epithalamic painting that, in addition to conforming to the conventions of the genre, contains a moral message that can be deduced from the medal.

The painting –which we can now call *L'amor e la morte* (*Love and Death*)– is an advice to the newlyweds that, before consummating their union –a moment of thoughtless happiness –they should restrain their desire for a moment and remember that, although they feel they are already united forever, the thread of their lives and those of their loved ones can suddenly break, and that only by maintaining the bond that now unites them until then will they achieve a *love* that lasts beyond *death*.



Fig. 2. Giovanni Boldù, *Boldù with the Genius of Death*

⁷⁴ Gombrich, 2003, p. 16.

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