

Giorgio Vasari's Use of *Èkphrasis*: an Example and its Reception in Spain during the 16th Century

Carlos Montes Serrano

Abstract

The paper discusses how Giorgio Vasari was one of the Renaissance authors who most effectively employed Ekphrasis in his descriptions of artworks included in his book *The Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors, from Cimabue to Our Times*. As an example, it highlights one of his rhetorical strategies: the idea that some works of art are meant to be viewed up close, while others are designed to be appreciated from a distance. In the second edition of *The Lives* (1568), Vasari applies this concept to Titian's paintings, which later became a locus classicus for subsequent authors writing about Titian. Lastly, the presentation examines how this idea, specifically applied to Titian's paintings, was received in the Spanish court during the 16th century.

Keywords

Vasari, *The Lives*, Titian, Spain.



*The Great Hall of the
Binche Palace (detail);
on the right, two large
paintings by Titian.*

Introduction

On several occasions, I have analyzed the evocative power with which Giorgio Vasari describes works of art in *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori italiani* [Montes 2004; Montes 2006]. Indeed, Vasari was a master of description, utilizing all kinds of ideas and anecdotes from Antiquity and later periods in his narratives to bring to life and make memorable his commentary on hundreds of works of art.

This is why, in accordance with Svetlana Alpers' important essay *Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's Lives* [Alper 1960], we must consider Vasari an authority in the use of the rhetorical device of ekphrasis, just as Homer was in his descriptions of the epic stories contained in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

There are many passages in *Le Vite* that illustrate the way Vasari describes the works of the artists he biographs, so I will focus on commenting only on one of these rhetorical devices: the idea that there are works of art made to be viewed up close, while others must be executed to be viewed from afar.

This idea has some precedents in Antiquity, both in Pliny and Horace; but it can be safely assumed that the original source is the Byzantine scholar Joannes Tzetzes [1], who in his book *Chiliades* extensively comments on a competition between the sculptors Phidias and Alcamenes [Montes 2009].

It is evident that Vasari must have known Tzetzes' account, as he adapts it, without citing the source, in a passage of his work where he compares the level of finish of the cantorie sculpted by Donatello and Luca della Robbia for the tribunes of the sacristies of the Duomo in Florence. Vasari judged Donatello's work to be of higher quality for leaving his sculptural group in rough form, without a polished finish, so that it appeared better from a distance than Luca's. He concludes that, "*Tutte le cose che vanno lontane, o siano pitture o siano sculture o qualsivoglia altra somigliante cosa, hanno più fierezza e maggior forza se sono una bella bozza che se sono finite*" [2].



Fig. 1. Titian, *Philip II in Armour* (detail), 1551 (Museo del Prado).

Vasari and his comments on Titian

Vasari applies this same rhetorical resource to the finishing of Titian's paintings in a passage that would later be widely discussed in writings about the painter. As we know, in the second edition of *Le Vite* (1568), Vasari writes that there is a significant difference between Titian's early works and his later ones, stating: "*Ma è ben vero che il modo di fare che tenne in queste ultime è assai diferente dal fare suo da giovane. Conciò sia che le prime son condotte con una certa finezza e diligenza incredibile e da essere vedute da presso e da lontano. E queste ultime, condotte di colpi, tirate via di grosso e con macchie, di maniera che da presso non si possono vedere e di lontano appariscono perfette. E questo modo sì fatto è giudizioso, bello e stupendo, perché fa parere vive la pitture e fatte con grande arte, nascondendo le fatiche*" [3]. The commentary soon became a *locus classicus* on Titian's painting, being known in the Spanish Court even before it was included in the second edition of *Le Vite*. In this regard, it is worth recalling the courtly prestige that Titian achieved in Spain by being named in 1532 as the first painter of Emperor Charles V, whom he portrayed on four occasions, as well as the collection of his paintings that his son, King Philip II, managed to accumulate during his lifetime, most of which can be seen today in the Prado Museum.

The first reference in Spain to Titian's pictorial style is related to a portrait of the future King Philip II, made by Titian in Augsburg around 1551 (fig. 1). On May 16 of the following year, Prince Philip sent it to his aunt, Mary of Hungary, Governor of the Spanish Netherlands and a great lover of painting. The portrait was accompanied by a letter in which Philip expressed that he was not entirely convinced by the finish of the portrait: "With this goes the portraits by Titian [...] mine in armor looks fine to him, but the haste with which he made it, and if there were more time, I would have him redo it" [Campbell 1990, pp. 236, 258; Falomir 2003, p. 218].

It is worth noting that Mary of Hungary, like her brother Charles V, was an admirer of Titian's painting, having commissioned three large canvases from him in 1548, known as *The Furies*, to decorate the Great Hall of Binche Palace (fig. 2). The canvases were placed above a high baseboard, between four large windows, as Mary of Hungary was understood that Titian had painted them to be viewed from a distance, which is confirmed by the technique and the monumentality of the figures, as we can see today in the Prado Museum (fig. 3) [Falomir 2003, p. 214].



Fig. 2. Anonymous, *Celebrations in the Palace of Binche during the visit of Emperor Charles V and Prince Philip in 1549* (Royal Library Brussels, F12931).

The anecdote continues two years later, in 1553, during the negotiations for the marriage of Philip II to the Queen of England. Mary of Hungary decided to send Mary Tudor a portrait of her nephew, painted by Titian. She wrote to Simon Renard de Bermont, the imperial ambassador to England and the official in charge of the marriage negotiations, instructing him to ensure that the painting was displayed in a location with appropriate lighting and viewed from a distance, as Titian's works do not always appear their best when observed up close: "*elle verra assez par icelle sa ressemblance, la voyant à son jour et de loing, comme sont toutes ppointures ducit Titian que de près ne se recognoissent*" [4].

Another notable reference to Titian's technique comes from a comment by Antonio Pérez, the treacherous and cunning secretary of Philip II. In his *Obras y relaciones* (1598), Pérez recounts a conversation between the painter and the Spanish ambassador Francisco de Vargas [5]. In this dialogue, Titian explains the origins of his distinctive style, describing it as a deliberate effort to distinguish himself from the artists of his era by innovating and refining the painting techniques commonly in use: "*Preguntavale un día el Embaxador Françisco de Vargas (Embaxador en aquella Republica de Carlos Quinto, Varon de los muy çelebres, y estimados de los de mi naçion, y siglo) porque avia dado en aquella manera de pintar tan sabida suya de golpes de pinçel grosseros, casi como borrones al descuydo (que borrones es quanto pinta el Poder humano caydos del appetito las mas vezes) y no con la dulzura del pinzel de los raros de su tiempo: Respondiò el Tiçiano, Señor, yo desconfiè de llegar a la delicadeza, y primor del pinzel de Michael Angelo, Urbinia, Corregio, y Parmesano, y que quando bien llegasse, seria estimado tras ellos, ò tenido por imitador de ellos, y la ambiçion natural, no menos à mi Arte que à las otras, me hizo echar por camino nuevo, que me hiziesse çelebre en algo, como los otros fueron por el que siguieron*" [6].



Fig. 3. Titian, *Tityus* (The Furies), 1549 (Museo del Prado).

Federico Zuccaro: paintings for the main altarpiece of El Escorial

There is yet another reference to Italian paintings, though this time it emphasizes that not all commentators adhered to the theories originating in Italy. Specifically, the notion that some paintings were meant to be appreciated up close, while others were intended for viewing from afar. This idea is vividly illustrated by an anecdote shared by Fray José de Sigüenza (1544 -1606), the librarian and chronicler of the construction of El Escorial [7].

In one passage of his book, the friar remarks with sharp irony and a critical tone on the arrival of the painter Federico Zuccaro in Spain in 1586, invited by Philip II. The monarch, influenced by the recommendations of supposed art connoisseurs and impressed by engravings of Zuccaro's works –which had earned the painter renown beyond Roman circles, commissioned him to decorate El Escorial.

Zuccaro was tasked with painting the main altarpiece, the side altarpieces, and several frescoes in the large cloister. However, as is well known, Zuccaro's work fell far short of Philip II's expectations. After three years of unproductive efforts at El Escorial, the painter was dismissed, albeit with a generous compensation, and sent back to Italy.

The anecdote in question, however, pertains to two paintings for the main altarpiece –a *Nativity* and an *Adoration of the Magi*– placed on either side of the tabernacle. Zuccaro had executed these works 'with the utmost care and skill he could summon,' as recounted by Sigüenza: "*Cuando las acabó quedó tan enamoradas de sus manos Federico, que quiso las viese Su Majestad antes que las asentasen, lo que no osó hacer en las otras del mismo retablo, pareciéndole que, como les había dado tanta fuerza para que relevasen de lejos, no serían tan apetecibles mirándose de cerca. Estas sí, y cuando llegó Su Majestad a verlas, habiéndolas puesto a la luz que le pareció responderían mejor, le dijo con harta confianza: Señor, esto es donde puede llegar el arte, y estas son para de cerca y de lejos*" [8].

Sigüenza concludes the anecdote by noting that once Zuccaro had returned to Italy, Philip II ordered the mentioned paintings removed from the altarpiece, along with the central one depicting the martyrdom of St. Lawrence, commissioning replacements from Pellegrino Tibaldi. Zuccaro's works were placed in less prominent locations; the *Adoration of the Magi* and the *Nativity*, Sigüenza recounts with a touch of sarcasm, "*que son para de cerca y de lejos, como dijo su autor, mandó poner aquí entre estas dos aulas, que a pocos he visto que den gusto, aunque sin duda son de lo mejor que aquí nos dejó*" [9].

Conclusions

The references Vasari made to Titian and the finishing of his paintings were adopted in early 17th-century Spanish painting treatises and even echoed in passages by great literary figures such as Quevedo, Lope de Vega, and Calderón de la Barca [Socrate 1966]. This influence is evident in works like *Diálogos de la pintura* by Vicente Carducho, *El arte de la pintura* by Francisco Pacheco, *Discursos practicables del nobilísimo arte de la pintura* by Jusepe Martínez, and *El museo pictórico y escala óptica* by Antonio Palomino.

However, the prominence Vasari attributed to Titian was eventually replaced in these writings by commentary on Diego Velázquez's painting technique. This shift is illustrated by Juan Caramuel Lobkowitz's reference to painting up close and from a distance in his treatise *De la Architettura Civil, recta y obliqua* [10].

Notes

[1] Ioannis Tzetzes (1110-1180) was a Byzantine writer and poet. In his writings, he preserved many texts from Antiquity; among them, the *Chiliades*, published in Italy in 1546, stands out.

[2] "All things that are viewed from afar; whether they be paintings, sculptures, or any other similar thing, have more grandeur and greater force if they are a beautiful sketch than if they are finished" (translation by author).

[3] "But it is very true that the way of working he employed in these later ones is quite different from his youthful style. Whereas the earlier works are executed with an incredible refinement and diligence, to be admired both up close and from afar,

these later ones are done with broad strokes, roughly executed and with patches, such that they cannot be seen up close but appear perfect from a distance. And this manner is judicious, beautiful, and astonishing, because it makes the paintings seem alive and crafted with great skill, concealing the effort behind them" (translation by author).

[4] "It will be enough to see its likeness in this, viewing it in its light and from afar; as are all the paintings by said Titian, which are not recognized up close": [Campbell 1990, pp. 236, 272].

[5] *Las obras y relaciones de Anton Perez secretario de estado, que fue del Rey de España Don Phelippe II deste nombre, Ginevra, 1654*, p. 874. Francisco de Vargas y Mexia was an ambassador in Venice from 1552 to 1559, and during that time, he received several assignments from Charles V related to Titian.

[6] "One day, Ambassador Francisco de Vargas (ambassador of Charles V to the Republic of Venice, a gentleman highly recognized and esteemed among those of my nation and era) asked why he had chosen that well-known way of painting of his, with strong brushstrokes, almost as if they were careless stains [...] and not with subtle brushstrokes like the most renowned painters of his time usually painted. Titian replied: "Sir, I feared I would not achieve the delicacy and refinement with the brush like Michelangelo, Raphael of Urbino, Correggio, and Parmigianino, and even if I did, I would not be as highly regarded as they are, or I would be judged as an imitator of them. The natural ambition, no less in my Art than in other matters, led me to seek a new path, to become renowned for something, just as they achieved fame through their own path" (translation by author).

[7] In fact, the history of the construction of the Monastery of El Escorial is found in the Third Part of the *History of the Order of Saint Jerome*, Book Four, Discourse VII. Cfr. [de Sigüenza 1988, pp. 261, 262].

[8] "When Federico finished them, he was so enamored with his own hands that he wanted His Majesty to see them before they were put in place. This was something he had not dared to do with the others from the same altarpiece, as he believed that, since he had given them such strength to stand out from afar; they might not be as pleasing when viewed up close. But these were different, and when His Majesty came to see them –having positioned them in the light that he thought would showcase them best– he said with great confidence: "Sire, this is the pinnacle of what art can achieve, and these are made to be admired both up close and from afar" (translation by author).

[9] "They are for up close and from afar; as their author said, he ordered them to be placed here between these two classrooms, which I have seldom seen bring pleasure, although without a doubt they are among the best things left to us here".

[10] Juan Caramuel Lobkowitz (1606-1682), *De la Architectura civil, recta y obliqua* (1678): Volume II, Treatise VII: "On Certain Arts and Sciences That Accompany and Adorn Architecture"; Article IV: "On Perspective"; Section I: "On the Statues of Alcámenes and Phidias: Made in Competition" Caramuel Lobkowitz 1984.

Reference List

Alpers, S. L. (1960). *Ekphrasis and aesthetic attitudes in Vasari's Lives*. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 23, pp. 190-215.

Campbell, L. (1990). *Renaissance portraits: European portrait-painting in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Caramuel Lobkowitz, J. (1984). *De la architectura civil, recta y obliqua* vol. 2, p. 145. Madrid: Turner.

de Sigüenza, J. (1988). *La fundación del monasterio de El Escorial*. Madrid: Turner.

Falomir, M. (Ed.). (2003). *Tiziano*. Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado.

Montes Serrano, C. (2004). *Facilità e non finito in Vasari's Vite*. *EGA. Revista de Expresión Gráfica Arquitectónica*, 9, pp. 58-67.

Montes Serrano, C. (2006). *Cicerón y la cultura artística del Renacimiento*. Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid.

Montes Serrano, C. (2009). Fídias y Alcámenes: Una indagación sobre la migración de las ideas. In J. M. Parrado & F. Gutiérrez Baños (Eds.), *Estudios de historia del arte: Homenaje al profesor De la Plaza Santiago*, pp. 137-142. Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid.

Socrate, M. (1966). Borrón e pittura di macchia nella cultura letteraria del Siglo de Oro. In *Studi di letteratura spagnola*. Roma: Università di Roma - Università di Torino - Società Filologica Romana, pp. 25-70.

Author

Carlos Montes Serrano, Universidad de Valladolid, carlosmontesserrano@gmail.com

To cite this chapter: Carlos Montes Serrano (2025). Giorgio Vasari's Use of *Ekphrasis*: an Example and its Reception in Spain during the 16th Century. In L. Carlevaris et al. (Eds.), *ekphrasis. Descrizioni nello spazio della rappresentazione/ekphrasis. Descriptions in the space of representation*. Proceedings of the 46th International Conference of Representation Disciplines Teachers. Milano: FrancoAngeli, pp. 1651-1656. DOI: 10.3280/oa-1430-c840.