

The Death of Hyacinthus
ca. 1752-53
by
Giambattista Tiepolo

CLASS-1222
Essay Paper #1

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Source:
http://www.museothyssen.org/img/obras_mediana/1934.29.jpg

This large painting (9'5" x 7'8.5") depicts the story of the death of Hyacinthus during a game of tennis with Apollo. It is painted with oil on canvas and currently resides in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, Spain. In the foreground is Hyacinthus with his head on Apollo's thigh while a cherub, or perhaps Cupid, leans in. Over Apollo's right shoulder a small crowd has gathered with expressions that range from stoic concern to shock and grief. Over his other shoulder is a leering statue of a satyre or perhaps Pan. Above that is a bright parrot, emphasizing the over-all brightness in that side of the painting. The painting is attributed to Giambattista Tiepolo who was known to be working, with his two sons, on a major commission for the Prince-Bishop von Greiffenklau of Würzburg during this time. It is variously said to have been commissioned for, or else purchased by, Baron Wilhelm Friedrich Schaumburg-Lippe whose descendants donated it to what is now the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum.

There are a number of tales of Apollo falling for humans; Hyacinthus was certainly not the only one. There are various versions of the story of their love and of Hyacinthus' death. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the death is caused by a discus. Apollo throws it with such force that when it finally falls to Earth it bounces up and strikes the youth "Full in the face" (*Metamorphoses*, Book X, line 185, page 240). There are versions that blame Zephyrus (god of the west wind) blowing the discus off course out of jealousy. That is the basis of Mozart's opera *Apollo et Hyacinthus* which replaces the same-sex attraction by having Apollo in love with Melia, Hyacinthus' sister.

Most versions of the story focus on Apollo's reaction to the death of his lover; in his lament Apollo declares "...and you will be reborn / As a new flower..." (*Metamorphoses*,

Book X, lines 205-6, page 240). It is generally believed that the flower thus created is not what we know as a hyacinth; Random House Webster's says the mythological flower is “variously identified as an iris, gladiolus, larkspur, etc.” (definitions.net). Tiepolo includes a clump of white flowers above the tennis racket, just below and beside Hyacinthus' left hand.

The sport of discus throwing is, in this work, replaced with references to a game of tennis. A racket and two tennis balls lay below Hyacinthus, in the lower right corner of the piece. There is a glimpse of a net behind the small crowd of onlookers and a single ball almost off the opposite edge of the canvas; perhaps the instrument of the youth's death. The Museum's description of the painting, written by Mar Borobia, Department of Old Master Paintings, suggests the references to tennis sprung from a 1561 translation of Ovid's work that made that change; noting that the game (known then as *pallacorda*) “was popular among the nobility of the 16th century and at the time when Tiepolo painted this canvas” (Borobia)

The *Nederlands Real Tennis Bond* describes itself as an association that promotes “the game of Pallacorda as it was played at the Italian Renaissance Courts” (real-tennis.nl). On their web-site they illustrate and discuss this piece of art. Their article makes the claim that the work was commissioned by Schaumburg-Lippe. They go on to state he was a serious tennis player, and suggest the use of tennis in the painting may have been also inspired by the death of his grandfather “after an exhausting game at the family's tennis court” or perhaps “the unfortunate death of Frederick, Prince of Wales in 1751 having been hit by a tennis ball” (real-tennis.nl) The article then suggests that the most likely inspiration for replacing references to discus-throwing with tennis was the death of Wilhelm's lover and

probable tennis-partner, a musician in Venice who the Count's father reportedly called “your friend Apollo”. Tiepolo might also have been influenced by the popularity of *Pallacorda* at that time, “a phenomenon particularly manifest in Venice” (real-tennis.nl).

There is no way of knowing whether the subject was selected by the artist or his patron. Did Schaumburg-Lippe know of the 1561 translation of Ovid's work or did he perhaps ask the artist for a piece that related in some way to stories he had shared? The Museum says there are a number of known studies for the two main characters while many of the ancillary details are found in pieces Tiepolo painted for von Greiffenklau while in Würzburg. Does this suggest a wise economy of effort, a rush to complete work for an unscheduled second patron, or was Tiepolo not inspired by the commission?

The Museum's description includes the phrase “malicious smile on the face of the statue of Pan” and suggests this piece “expresses the subtle sense of irony that made the artist such a great creative figure” (Borobia). Professor Barcham identifies the statue as a satyr, and says that it's lewd grin suggests lasciviousness. He concludes that “Tiepolo is commenting on the illicitness of Apollo and Hyacinth's relationship. Whether it is because of their homosexuality or because the Sun God had too many lovers we do not know” (Barcham, page 110). To be fair to Professor Barcham, he states the painting was done for an unknown patron and he seems unaware of the 1561 translation of *Metamorphoses*. As such, he assumes the change from discus-throwing to tennis is meant to be comedic; “the sport seems just too delicate for the two heroic figures” (Barcham, page 110). However accidental, he might also be divining a less than wholehearted effort by the artist to depict the recently-deceased same-sex lover of the client.

This painting strikes me as clearly depicting love and tragedy; the detailed analysis above notwithstanding. The one missing aspect of the myth that really stands out is the lack of Hyacinthus' blood. Here he is shown with a bruised cheek but no open wound. In the myth Apollo's promise that Hyacinthus will be reborn is immediately fulfilled: "... for on the ground / The blood was blood no longer; in its place / A flower grew..." (Metamorphoses, Book X, lines 210-2, page 240). Tiepolo's artwork is a clear expression of love and loss but misses perhaps a detail that reveals the depth of Apollo's love while differentiating this from the story of Ganymede or any of Apollo's other human love affairs.

Works Cited

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