

PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

BACCHUS AND ARIADNE
TITIAN



'BACCHUS AND ARIADNE'

BY TITIAN (born between 1480 and 1485; died 1576)



The actual size of the picture is 172.2 x 188.3 cm.
It was painted in oils on canvas in about 1521-3.

These notes and a large print of Titian's 'Bacchus and Ariadne' are for primary teachers attending the one-day course 'In the Picture' at the National Gallery in 2000/2001. Cross-curricular work produced in schools as a result of these courses will be shown in an exhibition called **Take One Picture** to be held at the National Gallery in 2002. The notes offer teachers basic information about the painting and the artist, as well as suggestions for classroom activities, and curriculum links.

The **Take One Picture** project is generously supported by Mr and Mrs Christoph Henkel.

Why was the painting made?

'Bacchus and Ariadne' was commissioned by Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, as part of a decorative scheme for a small room, the Camerino d'Alabastro (alabaster chamber), in the ducal palace. Alfonso's plan was for works by the best artists in Italy to hang together there, to recreate an ancient picture gallery, as described in a late antique Greek text. Two of the commissioned artists, Raphael and Fra Bartolommeo, died before completing their works, and Titian ended up painting three pictures (the other two are in the Prado, in Madrid).

What is the subject?

'Bacchus and Ariadne' illustrates mythological texts by the Latin poets Catullus and Ovid, which Titian would have been required to read. They refer to the story of Princess Ariadne, who, in love with the hero Theseus, helped him to kill the Minotaur at the palace of Knossos on the island of Crete. Theseus then abandoned her while she slept, on the Greek island of Naxos. Distraught, Ariadne was wandering along the shore searching for sight of her lover's ship, when she was surprised by the wine god Bacchus. He had fallen in love with her and asked her to marry him, offering her the sky as a wedding gift, in which one day she would become a constellation.

How does Titian translate word into picture?

Titian chooses to depict a significant and dramatic moment in the story. Bacchus falls in love with Ariadne at first sight, but Ariadne is still lamenting her fate. She is startled by Bacchus' noisy group of followers and looks up at him with a mixture of shock and fear, but also perhaps of interest. However, Titian also refers to the past, with the ship on the horizon reminding us that Ariadne has been abandoned by Theseus. The end of the story is present too, in the form of the promised crown of stars above Ariadne's head. Most of the detail comes straight from the text: Bacchus and his group are described by Catullus as 'youthful Bacchus wandering with the rout of satyrs and the sileni, children of Nyssa, looking for you Ariadne...some waving thyrsi...some tossing about the limbs of a mangled steer, some girding themselves with mangled serpents...others beating timbrels with raised hands or clashing with round brass cymbals'. Ovid describes Ariadne as 'clad in an ungirt tunic, barefoot, golden hair unbound as if she had just risen from sleep, calling for Theseus across the deep water, her cheeks bedewed with tears'. Titian also adds his own elements, all in the foreground: lying on a prominent lemon yellow cloth is a bronze vase with the artist's signature engraved on to it (TICIANVS F(ECIT)., Latin for 'Titian made this'). A small dog with a collar (so perhaps belonging to the 'human', rather than the godly side of the picture) barks at a little satyr child who drags a calf's head behind him. The flower in front of him is a caper flower which was a symbol of love. The two cheetahs pulling the chariot may also be personal references. Bacchus' chariot is normally drawn by tigers or panthers, but Alfonso d'Este is known to have had a menagerie at the palace in which he kept a cheetah or a cheetah-like member of the cat family.

Who was the artist?

The artist Tiziano Vecellio (known as Titian in English) was born in Pieve di Cadore, north of Venice, probably between 1480 and 1485. He trained in Venice with Giovanni Bellini and worked with Giorgione, a talented but short-lived painter. Titian became the most famous of the 16th-century Venetian painters and had an international clientele that included the Habsburg emperor Charles V and his son Philip II of Spain, Pope Paul III and Francis I of France, as well as the churches and government of Venice and other powerful families on the Italian mainland. He painted innovatively in all the picture categories traditional for his time: altarpieces, portraits and mythological paintings. He had a long and active life and died in 1576.

Using the picture in the classroom

Introducing it

There are many ways to do this: these are suggestions

- Put it up in the classroom without drawing attention to it and have a tape player recording discussion about it.
- Bring it out as something new, say at story time, and allow children a minute to look at it before covering it up and asking them what they can remember from it.
- Cover it with a piece of card in which you have cut windows as in an advent calendar – and open one each day to reveal an interesting detail, only revealing the entire picture after a week.
- Allow one or two children to look at the picture and get them to describe it to the rest of the class. Each child could do their own picture based on this description. Or blindfold one willing child and get the rest of the class to describe the picture to her/him.

These can all provide a good basis for the more formal discussion you might lead. Using the clues provided by Titian, productive questioning can help children deduce the story. (Which character/s is/are most important? How do you know? Who might the man leaping off the chariot be?)

Art across the curriculum

The art curriculum requires you to show children the work of artists but there are other curriculum links, particularly with literacy, history and music. The links need not be laboured: it can be a question of using a picture imaginatively, fitting it where possible into existing schemes of work. The aim here is for children to become familiar with the image, to understand it, and therefore perhaps also to like it!

Literacy

Many schools now use pictures as the basis for texts for work in the Literacy Hour. Word, sentence and text-level work can all be based on 'Bacchus and Ariadne', including a reading of Titian's source texts*. It can also be the stimulus for story, poems and letter writing.

* Catullus, 'Carmina', LXIV, and Ovid, 'Ars Amatoria', I.

Focus on:

- Letter writing or poems describing feelings – Ariadne's feelings as she was abandoned, Bacchus' feelings when he saw her.
- Conversation – photocopy the print and make speech bubbles for everyone (including the cheetahs).
- Recounting the event in different ways: story writing, letters or newspaper reports. Reconstruct the beginning of the story and follow it through to the end, or make a word picture of this moment in the story.

History

At KS2 in the European History study of Ancient Greece.

- Aspects of the way of life: arts and architecture. Point out how Titian used ancient Greek sculpture as a source for his own art.

- Belief and Achievement: Use 'Bacchus and Ariadne' to help tell the story of Theseus.
- ICT opportunity: use a CD Rom or the internet to find: a map of the Greek islands including Naxos information about Theseus and Ariadne information about the poets Ovid and Catullus.

Music/Dance

Bacchus' followers play dance music on percussion instruments: tambourine and cymbals; perhaps they are also singing. The 'conversation' between Bacchus and Ariadne could also be expressed in music, perhaps using recorders or two different tuned instruments.

- Compose two pieces of music to accompany the visual image: a rhythmic one for Bacchus' followers, and one for Bacchus and Ariadne.
- Develop a simple score using symbols for different instruments. These pieces could also accompany dances.

Art

At both key stages you are encouraged to show children the work of artists as part of the breadth of study in knowledge, skills and understanding. This feeds into the investigating and making.

'Bacchus and Ariadne' could for example be used in a scheme of work (such as the QCA schemes) focusing on the following topics:

Movement or People in Action

After looking at the print, discuss the way Titian has suggested movement:

- Did he look at the way real people move, or perhaps at sculpture, or both?
- Is he aware of muscles? What happens to muscles during strenuous activity?
- Ask children to make short poses of each of a sequence of movements (for example Ariadne's movement as she turns from looking out to sea, towards the noise of Bacchus and his followers, the snake-wrestling satyr or the cymbal-playing Bacchante). Record them in sketch books and/or photograph them and then make clay models of them.

Journeys

This picture links with the story of several journeys:

- Bacchus' journey from India, travelling by chariot, and Theseus and Ariadne's various sea journeys to and from Greece and Crete via Naxos.
- Different pairs or groups could make diagrammatic representations of these different journeys, either using maps or in the form of 'line journeys', perhaps with symbolic marks to represent different events during the journey.

Portraying Relationships

Children could follow a discussion of 'Bacchus and Ariadne' with compositions of two figures relating to each other. They could focus on expression, gesture and physical space between

the two figures. Emphasise that although 'Bacchus and Ariadne' is not a portrait, Titian would have used living models.

Science

Life processes and living things:

- Titian has taken care to paint identifiable plants including the vine, the caper plant, iris and harebell. Use these flowers as examples when teaching the parts of a flower.
- Sort the animals into wild and domestic groups. Where will the satyr go?
- Include the cheetahs in a study of the cat family.
- Movement – Titian is aware of skeletons and muscles; use the picture to illustrate muscles in action, for example.

For more information about **the Take One Picture** project, please telephone National Gallery Education on 020 7747 2424.

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