TITIAN AND THE
POESIE

AMONG TITIAN’S MOST BREATHTAKING WORKS is a series of mythological subjects known as the poesie, which celebrate the loves of ancient gods, goddesses, and mortals. In paintings of deep, sonorous color and broken, expressive brushwork, Titian created a visual equivalent to lyric and emotive forms of poetry. The erotic beauty of the nude female form, often encompassed in the thick atmosphere of a pastoral landscape, is the focus of these compositions. Titian’s classical literary sources, especially the Metamorphoses, completed by the Roman author Ovid around AD 8, provide a veneer of respectability for these remarkable paintings. Ultimately, however, Titian’s poesie explore a world of physical sensuality that is made palpable through his brilliant technique. Designed for the pleasure of the male viewer, paintings such as Danaë were sought after by collectors and often replicated by the artist to satisfy the requests of noble patrons.

Standing before such glorious celebrations of human intimacy and longing, it is immediately apparent why Titian dominated the sixteenth-century art world. His expressive handling of the brush imparts vitality to the natural environment—not simply describing nature’s parts but bringing the very air alive. Indeed, Titian is the greatest exponent of Venetian colore, with its insistence on the primacy of color and the gestural application of paint. Not surprisingly, his work has inspired the great colorists of subsequent generations.