

The Entombment

The Entombment, by Tiziano Vecelli (called **Tizian**, 1487-1576), oil on canvas 58" X 81" (1.48 X 2.05 m).

Sold from the Mantua collection to Charles I in 1628. Subsequently sold to Louis XIV and passed with the French Royal Collection to the Louvre.

The drama of the subject is paralleled by another drama – of the light and shade. Tizian's root idea was concerned equally with both. It was that the pale body of Christ, borne on a white sheet, should hang in a pool of darkness, as if in a human cave; and that beyond this cave should be two buttresses of vibrating colour. The crimson robe of Nicodemus and the balancing blue of the Virgin's cloak would not only make more precious, by contrast, the body of Christ, but would produce in us a sense of harmony, through which the tragedy might become tolerable.

The actual form of Christ's body plays little role in the design. The head and shoulders are lost in shadow, and the dominant shapes are given by the knees, the feet and the white linen folded over the legs. Our thoughts are deflected by the arm of Joseph of Arimathea, almost aggressively solid and alive. By the juxtaposition of this sunburnt arm with Christ's lunar body Tizian takes us back from the contemplation of colour, light and shadow and fixes our attention to the figures themselves. Our eye passes to the head of St John at the summit of the pyramid and is enchanted by its romantic beauty. With mounting emotion our eye is being directed away from the central group towards the figures of the Virgin and St Mary Magdalene. Here the solemn drama of the weight-bearing men takes on a new urgency. St Mary turns away in horror, yet cannot withdraw her eyes; the Virgin with hands tensely clasped, gazes at the body of her son.

In his religious pictures, Tizian, this superbly productive and efficient artist, is thinking of the *Passion of Our Lord* or the *Assumption of the Virgin* as realities, his deep faith convinces us that it was so. These concrete events actually distressed or elated him. More than any other great painter, he combined a desire to render the warmth of flesh and blood and a need to fulfill the dictates of the ideal. An example in the *Entombment* is Our Lord's left arm. Its position in the design is controlled by an ideal prototype (presumably borrowed from a relief on an antique sarcophagus).

In this superb work by Tizian, the classical completion of the design and the actual painting show a sensitive perception of truth which has not been surpassed.