

Titian's mythological paintings: A pictorial personal code

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to introduce *pictorial personal codes* that differ from linguistic ones. Since individual norms distinguish personal codes, the concept of norms serves as the starting point for extending their scope beyond language. Indeed, there is a strong case for nonverbal norms within the philosophy of normativity. Gestures and drawings can establish these nonverbal norms. Drawn norms, such as those enforced by traffic signals, are part of a pictorial code in our everyday experiences. However, the application of this code view has been challenged in the field of semiotics, particularly in art and visual semiotics. Conversely, the *pictorial turn* suggests that cultural history involves a struggle between words and pictures. Pictures differ from words, yet are not purely visual media. This distinction can be traced back to Marcello Barbieri's differentiation between the *world of perceptual objects* and the *world of names*. I hypothesize that pictorial personal codes lack an abstract system of rules but still present a set of norms that can be categorized into shared and individual. I exemplify this with a case study of the Venetian painter Tiziano Vecellio (Titian). By integrating research results from art history, I show that Titian transformed his workshop into a modern firm and, as a form of legitimization, defined his original style in terms of tragic painting, specifically a personal approach to painting that connotes a literary genre such as Greek tragedy. I also evaluate the role of a graphic code in Titian's productive system. Finally, I draw certain conclusions regarding the social ontology of the firm, suggesting that Titian's tragic painting illustrates how firms endure, thanks to personal or brand-specific codes, and propose that gestural personal codes, like pictorial ones and unlike linguistic ones, should include unsystematic *legisigns* and a set of norms that can be divided into shared and individual ones.

1. Introduction: pictorial personal codes

Personal codes consist of a set of rules or types and a set of idiosyncratic norms resulting from the personalized use of a linguistic or cultural tradition. The tradition provides persons with inherited models for imitation and renewal. Personal codes are social and cultural codes. Their sociality is peculiar since the communication population is made up of different mental states of the same individual brain (Marconi, 2023). This distinguishes the linguistic personal code from the idiolect. Indeed, "each person behaves like a small-scale community in her self-communication as much as in communication with fellow native speakers of a language" (Marconi, 2023, 2). Philosophically, linguistic personal codes are partially private languages because they mediate between the individual Umwelt and the Umwelt of the speaking community (Marconi, 2025). Personal codes are cultural since their adaptors are human and, like all other cultural codes in nature, they can last even less than a lifetime. Indeed, cultural codes are the most unstable codes in

nature and change even when external or noncultural factors are stable (Barbieri, 2019, 18). Linguistic personal codes show a complex layering: they share an abstract linguistic system (Saussure's *langue*) and a set of more concrete linguistic norms with the rest of the speaking community, while having individual norms and meanings that depart from what is shared (Marconi, 2023). Poets and bilingual or bicultural people are outstanding examples of adaptors in personal codes.

At least a few claims from different research fields suggest that linguistic personal codes are not the only personal codes we can find evidence of.

For instance, the *pictorial turn* in visual culture studies suggests that cultural history is a struggle between words and pictures (Mitchell, 1994, 11–34). This view can be epitomized thus: "Humans are finite and defective beings who play with the infinite, such as on the 'contested terrain' (Mitchell) between verbal and visual, between text and picture" (Cometa, 2024, 130). Pictures differ from words but are not purely visual media (Mitchell, 2015, 14). Indeed, pictures are surrounded by

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written and spoken words in their cultural functioning (see Section 4), and their materiality endows them with tactile and olfactory features (Kay-Wand, 2018, 62–63 and 111–113). The difference between words, or minimal texts,¹ and pictures can be traced back to their biological ground in terms of Marcello Barbieri's distinction between the *world of perceptual objects* and the *world of names* (Barbieri, 2024, 207–217). The distinction is based on the different brain pathways employed in the elaboration of linguistic sounds and visual inputs and corresponds to different developmental environments, i.e. the fetal and the post-natal ones. Also, there is evidence that the development of language recognition starts before visual interpretation (Mehler et al., 1988)

On the other hand, there is a case for nonverbal norms in the philosophy of normativity (Lorini, 2019). According to Giuseppe Lorini, gestures and drawings can establish nonverbal norms. For instance, drawn norms enforced by traffic signals are part of a pictorial code in our everyday experience. Still, there might be doubts about nonverbal individual norms. While not necessarily an example of individual norm, the following might at least imply the possibility of individual norms:

I was heading for the lounge area of a bar I used to sit down in for a quick meal before boarding, but I found the entrance blocked by a row of chairs. The row of chairs wasn't close enough to actually block the entrance. You could easily cross it as the chairs were about a meter apart. I asked myself: Why was this row of chairs here? Was it just a row of chairs devoid of any meaning? Clearly not. That row of chairs had a meaning, and a very specific normative meaning in fact: "Do not go beyond this line! Do not enter!". When had this norm been established, forbidding access to the lounge area? Quite simply, when those chairs had been lined up by some waiter to obstruct entrance to the lounge. When would the ban be lifted? When those chairs would be removed. There was no need for words here. (Lorini, 2019, 83)

Given that nonverbal individual norms are possible and that pictures are divergent and anthropologically equally relevant counterparts of words, I hypothesize that pictorial personal codes present a set of shared and individual norms, while lacking a linguistic system or an abstract set of rules. Much like a speaker or a writer, a painter operates within a tradition and considers which models are best to creatively follow. Even though painting, unlike poetry, does not involve an abstract system of rules, it follows or initiates traditions. In a case study (Sections 5 and 6), I will show how Titian joined an emerging tradition of mythological painting and thus renewed Renaissance painting, drawing inspiration from Western poetic tradition and influencing painters across Europe.

The reader may be puzzled by the a priori exclusion of a rule system in painting. The reasons for this exclusion are discussed in the next section.

2. Issues with codes in art and visual semiotics

The application of code view was challenged in the semiotics of art and visual semiotics. For instance, Emilio Garroni challenged the theoretical relevance of speaking of codes and messages when it comes to art. Objects can count as messages because their functions can be interpreted as their meaning – a hammer is made for driving nails into wood or walls and pulling them out of such materials. Eventually, the function of an artistic message would be reduced to the most general and vague meaning of *making art* (Garroni, 1977, 112–113). Structural semiotics substituted codes with texts as its main objects of study between the Seventies and the Eighties (Calabrese, 1985, 153–155; Santaella and Nöth, 1998, 50–51). Even before preferring to look into textuality in artworks, semioticians debated the existence and nature of artistic codes

¹ A couple of words can be enough to produce a one-sentence text in English: "It rains!". Even one word is enough in languages like Italian, as in the Italian translation of "It rains!": "Piove!".

(Calabrese, 1985, 111–120 and 140–151; Santaella and Nöth, 1998, 39–50). Traces of the preference for textuality and the skepticism about artistic codes are still present in recent approaches that focus on enunciation theory and only admit codes in terms of social status and genre constraints (Dondero, 2020).

Briefly, the existence of codes in art is far from being uncontroversial. A far more common and uncontroversial claim is:

[...] the thinking involved in making art, the visual thinking, is distinct from linguistic thinking because it takes place in mediums such as ink, paint, stone, plaster, clay, film, and digital images. It is a complex synthesis of perception and problem solving, which occurs in structures, forms, and materials with their particular conventions, possibilities, and limitations. Unlike linguistic thinking and articulation, which must follow specific characteristics and rules, more often than not, visual thinking may bend the rules and challenge conventions. (Kay-Wand, 2018, 111)

Things seem to get worse when it comes to Peircean visual semiotics: codes are charged with being atomistic, "vaguely deterministic" (Jappy, 2013, 47), and – "perhaps the most compelling reason of all for abandoning the notion of the code" (Jappy, 2013, 47) – blind to the personal nature of every interpretation (Jappy, 2013, 47–48). To this extent, speaking of personal codes sounds like an oxymoron in visual semiotics. On the contrary, Tony Jappy refrains from denying that the Highway Code is a real visual code (Jappy, 2013, 48). This is not a surprise here since the fact that traffic signals follow and enforce nonverbal norms was a premise for the introduction of pictorial personal codes (see Section 1). Also, Jappy gives an outstanding contribution to shaping a viable definition of pictorial personal codes: "codes are special types of legisigns, so that we can summarize the position adopted in this book by stating that while all codes are legisigns, not all legisigns are codes" (Jappy, 2013, 48). Along with the icon/index/symbol and rHEME/dicisign/argument trichotomies (see Section 4), Peirce distinguished *legisigns* or general signs from *sinsigns* or actual individual signs and *potisigns* or possible particular signs. Legisigns relate to sinsigns as types (e.g., the English article "the") to tokens (e.g., all the occurrences of "the" as a word in this paper) when the latter are individuals following rules.² In the next Section, the distinction between code and legisign is turned into a trichotomy by introducing norms as an intermediate level between codes and unsystematic legisigns. I will apply the trichotomy to personal pictorial codes to show their peculiarity. This way, I will make room for personal pictorial codes in Peircean visual semiotics' framework, overcoming the *prima facie* incompatibility between personality and codification. Indeed, introducing norms in a Peircean framework is also a way of connecting it with structural semiotics and so a preliminary step towards the intertheoretical methodology I am adopting (see Section 4).

3. The peculiarity of pictorial personal codes

The presence of *non-code* legisigns, i.e. signs that are types or rules without building a constant system, does not hinder the fact that pictorial personal codes are real codes since they share the normative dimension with the linguistic ones: both kinds of personal codes are made of norms constrained by legisigns, yet linguistic legisigns or symbols are organized into codes at the system level. On the contrary, pictorial legisigns or images are located at the usage level and lack codification. Since normativity is a phenomenon shared by linguistic codes and pictorial personal codes, it is possible to formulate the code/norm/mere legisign trichotomy where the norm is an intermediate entity or partial codification between systematic rules (code) and non-systematic types (mere legisigns). The trichotomy is fully Peircean in spirit as symbols can be either genuine or degenerate, and their

² Ordinary sinsigns are not tokens of any type and do not follow or conform to any legisign (Jappy, 2013, 32–34).

degeneration can be of two kinds (Peirce, 1998, 275). Likewise, legisigns are divided into genuine or systematic (codes), degenerate or unsystematic (norms or single legisigns). Like degeneration, the lack of systematicity can be partial (norms) or total (sign rules that do not enter a code or systems of rules and do not partake in a set of norms, i.e. mere legisigns). This reflects Eugenio Coseriu's insight into the semiotic nature of norms:

the individual creates her expression in a language, speaks a language, and concretely actualizes models, the structures of the language of her community, in her speech. At the first level of formalization, these structures are simply normal and traditional in the community, constitute what we call *norm*; yet, at a higher level of abstraction, a series of essential and indispensable elements or functional oppositions are severed from them: here is what we call *system*. (Coseriu, 1967, 94)

Norm (set of rules) differs from code (system of rules) in the level of abstraction, while a singular model is a non-systematic type, i.e. merely a legisign that is neither normal nor codified, if it is not traditional. Models that enter the tradition of the individual without joining the tradition of the community are individual norms. This also clarifies the difference with idiolect (recall Section 1) because idiolect corresponds to a list of mere legisigns. Indeed, the idiolect is located at the level of usage, namely concrete actualization, rather than at the level of norm or first level of formalization. Philosophically, the trichotomy stresses the difference between mere generality and continuity. For generality, multiple instantiations are enough. Normativity makes singular generals presuppose each other; the rules are part of a whole and thus a degenerate form of continuity or a lesser degree of codification. Indeed, the same rules can exist before and after being part of a tradition as stand-alone models or mere legisigns. Systematicity is genuine continuity in that the rules of a system are not mere parts because they melt into a whole. Then, system rules have no existence outside of the code. Italian morphology exists only in Italian; similar morphological structures can be found in other Romance languages and dialects. This means that these structures are not the same but just comparable since their identity depends on the linguistic system where they are located.

Regarding the claims extensively quoted in the previous section, my point is that there are everyday life pictorial codes with a system level like linguistic codes (e.g., the Highway Code) and artistic pictorial codes that are always personal. The latter lack a system level but have a degree of codification in terms of normative level, i.e. pictorial personal codes are endowed with individual and shared norms while featuring mere legisigns at the usage level. In the case study on Titian (Section 5), the Venus type will be my example of mere legisign.

Recall that symbols are organized into codes while images are mere legisigns. It is important to distinguish between images and pictures since the latter are not even mere legisigns, pictures are replicas in the concrete actualization. Indeed, a Peirce-based distinction between images as perceptible types and pictures as tokens or clones can already be found in image science (Mitchell, 2015, 16–18). More on images and pictures is forthcoming in Section 6; here, an example like the Biblical Golden Calf will suffice to make the theoretical distinction clear:

The Golden Calf may be smashed and melted down, but it lives on as an image in stories and innumerable depictions. The picture, then, is the image as it appears in a material support or a specific place. This includes the mental picture, which (as Hans Belting has noted) appears in a body, in memory, or in imagination. The image never appears except in some medium or other, but it is also what transcends media, what can be transferred from one medium to another. The Golden Calf appears first as a sculpture, but it reappears as an object of description in a verbal narrative, and as an image in painting. It is what can be copied from the painting in another medium, in a photograph or a slide projection or a digital file (Mitchell, 2015, 16).

What is new in the concept of pictorial personal codes is that they can be regarded as artistic “codes of sorts” (Dondero, 2020, 18) along with already accepted ones: “median levels of discursive organization may be envisioned between the system and a single utterance—those pertaining to statuses, genres, series, and filiations” (Dondero, 2020, 20). In the case study on Titian's mythological paintings (see Section 5), the personal code pertains to a series for Philip II, king of Spain from 1556 to 1598. Yet some elements of this code extend to Titian's late style while the code's tragic connotation migrates outside the mythological genre (Cole, 1999, 191–218; Puttfarken, 2005, 183–204; Contini, 2013, 205–207). Indeed, connotation analysis is an important constituent of the case study's methodology.

4. Methodology

The paper's method is mixed or intertheoretical, combining visual semiotic analysis based on Peirce's main trichotomies and Louis Hjelmslev's connotative analysis.³ The point is to test a hypothesis put forward by the seminal paper on personal codes: fine arts present stylistic phenomena that can be reduced to those individuated by the connotative analysis of literature (Marconi, 2023, 7).

In Peircian visual semiotics (Santaella and Nöth, 1998, 141–155; Jappy, 2013), the following trichotomies are applied to visual signs: qualisign/sinsign/legisign, icon/index/symbol, and rHEME/argument. Iconicity is subject to further trichotomization: images (similarity of perceptual qualities), diagrams (proportion of relations), and metaphors (parallelism). Again, different structures from visual metaphors are individuated in visual allegories and personifications (Jappy, 2013, 128–133).

The qualisign/sinsign/legisign trichotomy distinguishes the logical nature of the sign: a qualisign is a possible and particular sign (e.g., a shade of red that might be seen or brushed), a sinsign is an actual and individual sign (e.g., a photo printed by an instant camera), a legisign is a general type or rule (e.g., a brand's logo). Famously, an iconic sign is similar to its object (e.g., a realistic portrait without a title or label), an indexical sign is causally connected to its object (e.g., an analog photo), and a symbol is conventionally or habitually connected to its object (e.g., a traffic signal). More interestingly, the explicitness of the interpretant (meaning) distinguishes rhemes from dicisigns and arguments, the arguments explicitly guiding their interpretation. Pictures with captions are dicisigns (Jappy, 2013, 150–151), they visually tell us something without stating the reason why (e.g., memes on Instagram). On the other hand, visual arguments should also justify themselves. In the case of captioned pictures, pictures are iconic rhemes: their meaning is implicit until they are captioned (e.g., a drawing of the Golden Gate Bridge might mean any suspension bridge or exemplify a bridge type). In contrast, captions are indexical rhemes, implicit in meaning without the pictures they refer to. For instance, the writing **Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, California** printed on an aged piece of paper might refer to either a realistic drawing or a photograph of the real bridge in San Francisco Bay, as much as to a dystopian artwork where the same bridge is being destroyed by a tsunami in an unpleasant but sadly not impossible future. Thus, a dicisign results from the combination of iconicity and indexicality and a distribution of the propositional content among pictures and written, then visible, words. The situation is similar in a video clip, but spoken words substitute for written ones. The same can happen wordlessly in analog photography, given that analog pictures combine indexicality through chemical reaction with their object and iconicity (colored pictures show similarity, while black and white

³ Elsewhere, I have shown that Peirce's sign classification can solve Hjelmslev's theoretical problems with the typology of semiotic usage (Marconi, 2020, 200–263). Here I perform the complementary operation of introducing Coseriu's norms (see Section 3) and Hjelmslev's connotation in Peirce's sign classification.

photos are diagrammatic). Apparently, we can make analog pictures lie by carefully painting them.

By considering this application of Peirce's speculative grammar to pictures as a denotative analysis, I will integrate it with Hjeltmslev's connotative analysis. Here is his definition of denotation and connotation:

A denotation is a sign relation of the first degree; a connotation is a sign relation of the second degree, in which the expression plane is a whole denotative language: CRE, and the content plane the connotatum: the nation or region. So if C_d and E_d be taken to mean the denotative content and the denotative expression, respectively, and C_c and E_c the connotative content (the connotatum) and the connotative expression (the connotant), respectively, then the entire relational field C_dRE_d makes the connotative expression (the connotant) E_c , and the formula for a connotative 'language' (better: a connotative semiotic) will be: $(C_dRE_d) RC_c$ (Hjeltmslev, 1961, 60).

Further methodological details concerning connotation are exposed elsewhere in Open Access (Marconi, 2023). Here, it shall suffice to add that the relevant field of connotative analysis is stylistic. Thus, I will look for connotants, i.e. denotative expressions or contents that express a connotative content, of the tragic style in Titian's paintings.

5. Case study: Titian's mythological paintings or *poesie*

Tiziano (Titian in English) Vecellio was a leading figure in Venetian painting during the Sixteenth century. Mythological painting, i.e. the depiction of gods and heroes of the ancient Greece with ends ranging between the allegoric and erudite ones and the sensual and aesthetic ones, was a genre of recent foundation in that period and, despite Florentine anticipations like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1484-86) and *Primavera* (c. 1482), had Venetian origins (Cole, 1999, 37; Puttfarken, 2005, 129–154). Titian endowed this genre with a peculiar tragic meaning after his artistic maturity. Despite having practiced mythological painting before, Titian calls his mythological works *poesie* (the Italian word for poems) only when referring to the series invented for Philip II (Puttfarken, 2005, 155). Just like Greek tragedies took inspiration from archaic myth, giving them a new narrative form, Titian was not illustrating the myths retold in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Rather, Titian invented a pictorial narration inspired by Ovid's storytelling but shaped by the Aristotelian definition of tragedy (Puttfarken, 2005, 178–181). The connotant or expression of this stylistic connotatum is the individual norm of *locating episodes or references to them from the beholder's left to right according to the chronological order and without duplicating the characters*. This is peculiar to Titian's pictorial storytelling in his mythological *poesie*. Traditional religious painting was ruled by the convention of locating evil or unfaithful figures at God's or Christ's left (beholder's right) and good or faithful ones at their right (beholder's left), like in Giotto's *Universal Judgment* (c. 1306) in the Scrovegni Chapel and Michelangelo's one (1536-41) in the Sistine Chapel (Uspensky, 1975). The difference in spatial conventions and consequent meanings between mythological and religious painting is clearly due to the difference in genre. Yet Titian's correlation of spatial order with chronological sequence and his avoidance of duplication of the same character to show him/her in different episodes or episode sequences breaks with shared norms in the pictorial storytelling of his time (see Figs. 1 and 2).

The difference in genre allows narrative experimentation, still Titian's solution is led by the Aristotelian conception of tragedy, entailing the unity of action, time, and space (Puttfarken, 2005, 57–73). Another convention comes from Western written poetry, i.e. the readability from left to right. Thus, Titian's pictorial individual norm is the translation of linguistic shared norms in painting. Given the distinction between pictures and words (see Section 1), this translation does not hinder the individuality of the pictorial norm.

The most evident example of the norm occurs in Perseus and Andromeda (Fig. 3). The visual plot begins with the naked and chained

Andromeda, who evokes the beholder's pity. In the center of the painting, a sea monster stirs fear even in Perseus' eyes and suggests a horrific ending. Yet, the monster's gaze is already on the hero, whose saber at the far right of the main scene foreshadows his eventual victory. Andromeda's beauty is both the beginning and the cause of what follows for those familiar with the story, as her mother's pride in her beauty provoked the ire of the sea nymphs, and her statue-like splendor compelled Perseus to confront the monster sent by the nymphs (Puttfarken, 2005, 166–169). Thus, Andromeda's awful yet marvelous beauty triggers the monster's appearance and, subsequently, the heroic intervention, as reflected by the synthetic and dynamic composition of figures and gazes moving from the beholder's left (past) to right (future) through the monster's horrific presence at the center of the picture/story. Indeed, Titian depicted this following "Aristotle's definition of the tragic, with its emphasis on pity, fear and horror, and awe or marvel, and its reliance on peripeties" (Puttfarken, 2005, 181).

An interesting variation of the norm of correlating spatial order with chronological sequence and avoiding duplication is in *The Flaying of Marsyas* (Fig. 4). The violin and the hanging flutes on the beholder's left recall the music contest lost by the satyr Marsyas. His horrible punishment by the divine winner (Apollo) is shown at the center. Nothing new seems to happen to the beholder's right, as if the narration stopped. Yet the pensive Midas on the right is Titian's self-portrait (Attardi, 2013, 268). So, the last episode refers to Titian's invention of the visual mythical tale, i.e. the painting ends portraying its invention as a meditation on Greek myths and their Latin afterlife (Ovid's retelling). The painting is not part of the *poesie* series and, thus, does not feature a female nude, unlike most paintings in that series. Still, it is a metapicture of the series (see Section 6), a picture reflecting on its inception and topic. For instance, *Perseus and Andromeda* (Fig. 3), *Diana and Actaeon* (1556-59), *Diana and Callisto* (1556-59), and *The Death of Actaeon* (1559-76) portrayed the divine ire in the *poesie* series.⁴

The variation in *The Flaying of Marsyas* (Fig. 4) is not an isolated case. Another variation testifies that Titian was a real codemaker rather than just an adaptor.⁵ Indeed, Titian plays with his own rules by inserting a reference to the final episode, which is also a hidden duplication of a character in *Venus and Adonis* (Fig. 5), fully part of the *poesie* series. The duplication is not a real one according to the traditional rules since the duplicated character, Venus, is not recognizable. Only the beholder who knows the story can guess that the tiny yellow figure on the flying golden chariot, surely a divinity, is Venus desperately looking for Adonis (Puttfarken, 2005, 164), tragically killed by a wild boar. Since it refers to the last episode portrayed, the chariot is near the rightmost upper part of the painting. Venus is not only different in size – a smaller duplicate can be seen in Masaccio too (Fig. 1) – but also in color, shape, and detail. Semiotically, Venus is duplicated only on the content plane since there is too much difference on the expression plane. Even before metapictorially reflecting on his *poesie* in *The Flaying of Marsyas* (Fig. 4), Titian was already testing how far he could go without violating the individual norm he invented. What happens in *Venus and Adonis* (Fig. 5) is a negotiated refinement of the norm: character duplication is ruled out just on the expression plane.

Recall that most *poesie* paintings depict female nudes, considering this shifts the analysis from the normative layer to the merely legisignic one (see Section 3). Indeed, the female nude is an iconic rhematic legisign, i.e. an image (recall Section 3), featured in the *poesie* series and another series. All the female main characters are nude in the *poesie* series, except for Europa in *The Rape of Europa* (1559-62), and they are signs of the same figurative type despite their differences in appearance. Andromeda is no exception: "Her appearance, in her full, naked

⁴ Despite being part of the original plan, *The Death of Actaeon* was eventually excluded from the series and is grouped with *The Flaying of Marsyas* and other paintings as the last mythologies (Puttfarken, 2005, 178).

⁵ I owe this insight to Stephen J. Cowley.



Fig. 1. – Masaccio: *The Tribute Money*, c.1425, fresco, 247 × 597 cm, Brancacci Chapel, Florence (source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed May 16, 2025). St Peter's figure occurs three times, while the gatekeeper features twice. The beginning of the episode is at the center of the picture.

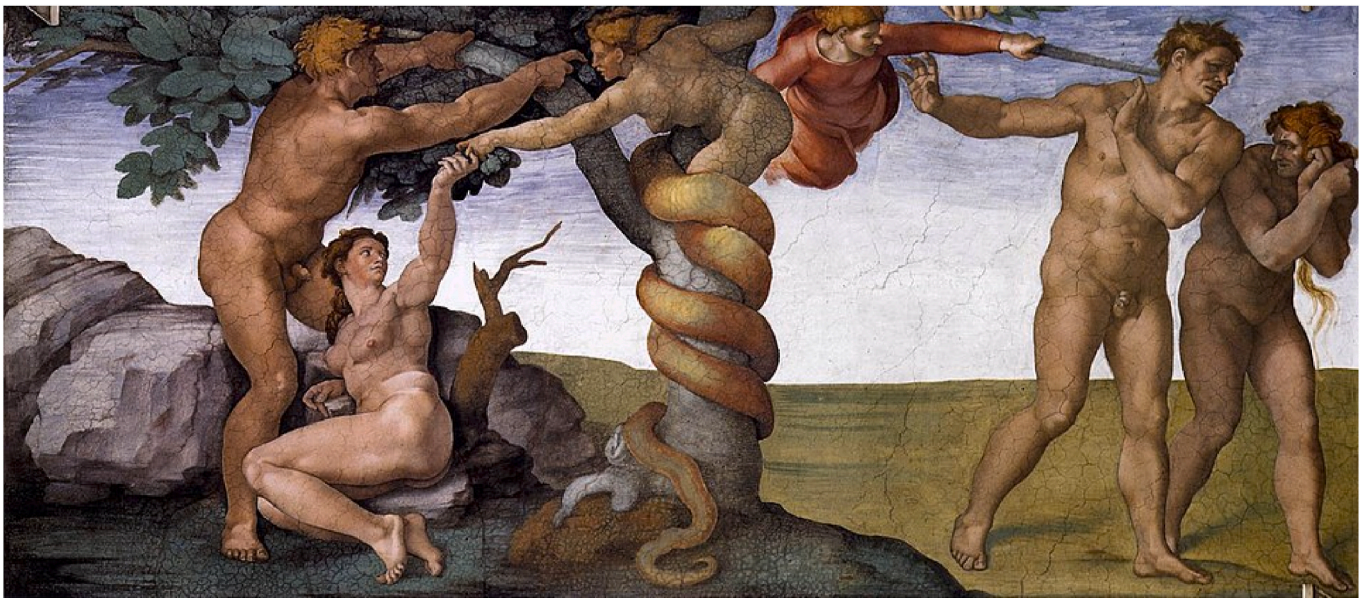


Fig. 2. – Michelangelo: *The Fall and Expulsion from Paradise*, 1508-12, fresco, 280 × 570 cm, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City (source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed May 16, 2025). Michelangelo traditionally portrayed fallen humanity at the beholder's right (the punishing angel's left, the angel is God's lieutenant). Both Adam and Eve feature twice in the painting.

beauty, is like an upright version, only more fully turned to the beholder, of the *Danae* or of reclining Venuses, except that here a small bit of drapery, flowing in the wind, is protecting her private parts” (Puttfarken, 2005, 168). The other series is dedicated to Venus, who also appears in the *poesie* (Fig. 5). In creating the series, Titian quotes his successful *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and systematically employs “a dialogue between invention and execution, directly involving the assistants” (Tagliaferro et al., 2010, 225). Working as mere adaptors, his assistants copied the same figure from Titian’s invention in slightly different postures, introducing varied elements into the composition, like a musician with a new instrument each time or a group of nymphs, to produce an actualization of the same Venus-type in each painting of

the series, ultimately refined by the master’s brush (Tagliaferro et al., 2010, 225–231). For instance, two versions (one in Cambridge and the other in New York) of the composition *Venus and the Lute Player* (c. 1565) are distinguished by the presence of different trees in the background. The resulting pictures are *dicisigns* combining an iconic rhematic sign of the Venus type with indexical elements that draw attention to the context and thus function like proper names, demonstrative pronouns,



Fig. 3. – Titian: *Perseus and Andromeda*, c. 1554-56, oil on canvas, 183 × 199 cm, Wallace Collection, London (source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed May 16, 2025).

or locative adverbs (Ferraro, 2012, 58–60; Jappy, 2013, 88–90).⁶ The *Venus with an Organist and Cupid* (c. 1555) illustrates an instance of Venus identified by the presence of Cupid (this presence operates as a proper name, indicating that the nude figure near him is Venus). This

⁶ Indexicality in pictures can take the form of a sinsign instantiating an indexical legisign just like verbal indices in a sentence (Jappy, 2013, 86–90 and 164–165). The difference is that pictures with such indexical rhematic sinsigns are indexical dicisigns, while sentences are symbolic dicisigns. For instance, the two versions of *Venus and the Lute Player* are indexical dicent sinsigns actualizing the same indexical dicent legisign, i.e. the composition *Venus and the Lute Player* nowadays instantiated in Cambridge and New York. The idea of a sinsign as an occurrence of a class, be it a virtual or real class, plays an important role in a Saussurean (social and structural) approach to visual semiotics too (Ferraro, 2012, 112–115). This approach differs from the Peircean one in that all sinsigns are tokens (occurrences of types), whereas ordinary sinsigns are not tokens in Peirce's view (see footnote 2).

artwork (Fig. 6) places Venus in a different context from *Venus and the Lute Player* due to the organ in the foreground and the garden in the background.

The organ and the garden correspond to the demonstrative pronoun and the locative adverb in the phrase “that Venus there.” In the Wien *Diana and Callisto* (c. 1565, a remake of the original version and thus not part of the *poesie* series), the nymphs indicate that the Venus-like figure is Diana as in the *poesie* version, while the fountain in the Wien version (Fig. 7) locates her in a less tragic environment than the fountain in the original (Tagliaferro et al., 2010, 229). Thus, art historians even speak of “fixed structures and human types, nonetheless modulable through successive transformations” (Tagliaferro et al., 2010, 234).

The iconic rhematic legisign of the naked woman or female nude is a type occurring in tokens like the iconic rhematic sinsigns of the Venuses and the other nudes mentioned above. This legisign also works as a diagram instantiated by the first sketches on canvas, autonomous drawings, and accomplished paintings held in the workshop before being sold



Fig. 4. – Titian: *The Flaying of Marsyas*, c.1570-76, oil on canvas, 212 × 207 cm, Archbishop's Palace, Kromeriz (source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed May 16, 2025).

to clients or sent to patrons. Indeed, “the idea of an ‘archive’ seems a bit too like that of a modern drawing cabinet rather than that of a Sixteenth-century artisanal workshop. On the contrary, it seems natural that, in a painting workshop, models, sketches, drawings, and any other sample tracking previous works were stored as it happens nowadays” (Tagliaferro et al., 2010, 232). The diagrammatic function stems from the production of recognizable figures, printed or painted, that would feature proportions and compositions invented by Titian, thus bearing the mark of the master’s brand in the art market of his time. Titian’s

workshops built a productive system or an *image factory* for his branding (Tagliaferro et al., 2010, 223–273). This organization shows a personal code while spreading throughout the community. The systematic employment of assistants in the intermediate phase between the master’s first sketches on the canvas and his completion and correction of the painting does not make Titian’s pictorial code less personal: the old master’s control over the organization of his workshop, intended to make it last beyond his lifespan, paradoxically made the workshop unable to survive without such control (Lüdemann, 2016, 248). Overall,



Fig. 5. – Titian: *Venus and Adonis*, 1553-54, oil on canvas, 136 × 220 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid (source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed July 10, 2025).

the meaning of Titian's messages to the art market is far from mere *artmaking*, against what is implied by Garroni's criticism of the notion of artistic codes (see Section 2). Indeed, evidence would force him to admit that the meaning of those messages is far more personal, i.e. *artmaking in Titian's way* implying visual poetry and invention.

6. Again on Titian: a graphic personal code?

In a recent study on the role of drawing in Titian's productive system, there is another example of a mere legisign ruling tokens in different artworks and media across diverse genres, such as the religious and mythological ones. The children featured in the xylography *Triumph of Christ* (c. 1508-17) also appear as angels in Titian's *Assunta* (oil on canvas, 1516-18), as cupids in Titian's *Worship of Venus* (oil on canvas, 1518-19), and as putti in a preparatory sketch by his collaborator Domenico Campagnola (Lüdemann, 2016, 47–48). We have already met the type of the female nude and remarked on its diagrammatic nature. That type was pictorial, while the angel-child type is graphic, or at least, its discussion pertains to the role of drawings in Titian's workshop. Were

this type found to interact with a set of shared and individual graphic norms, we would have also individuated a graphic personal code in Titian. This task should wait for future research. Here I am limiting myself to briefly tracking evidence of codemaking in terms of metapictorial phenomena (recall the discussion of *The Flaying of Marsyas* in Section 5). Indeed, drawings as models or preparatory sketches, or even as autonomous artworks to be reproduced in engraved prints, function as metapictures or pictures about pictures. These pictures either transfer images from different media or allow a medium to present itself (Mitchell, 2015, 18–19). This is a potential that every picture possesses: “any picture may become a metapicture, whenever it is employed as a device to reflect on the nature of pictures” (Mitchell, 2015, 19). Still, it is not by chance that Mitchell's first example of a picture used to reflect on pictoriality is a drawing (Mitchell, 2015, 19). On the other hand, diagrammaticity makes drawings metapictorial; they are sinsigns of a diagrammatic (iconic) rhematic legisign or, shortly, pictures of an image. Titian's drawings instantiate productive metaimages. Yet they are metasemiotic devices (signs about signs) due to diagrammaticity, just like the diagrams used in scientific imaging, computational image

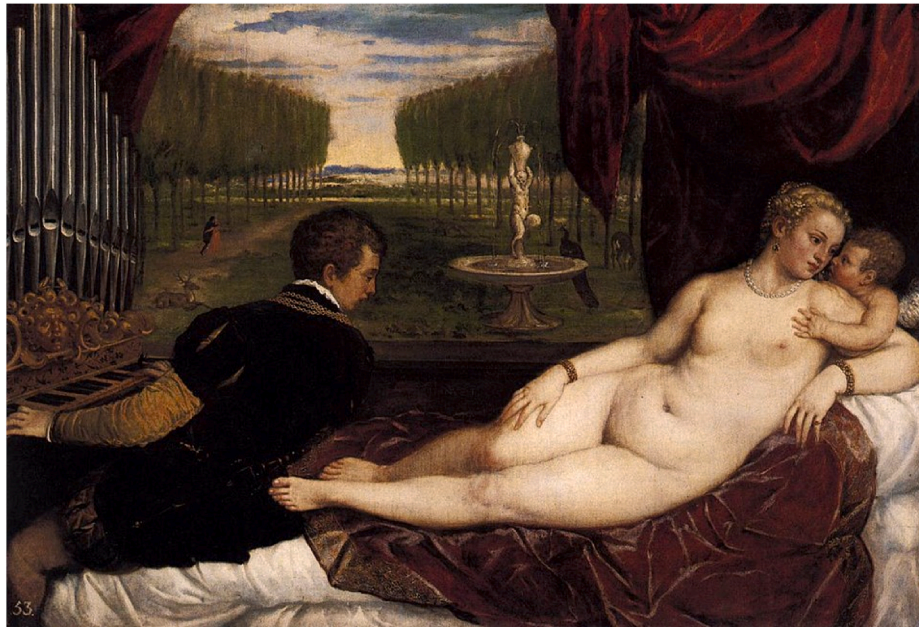


Fig. 6. – Titian: *Venus with an Organist and Cupid*, c. 1555, oil on canvas, 150,2 x 218,2 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid (source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed May 16, 2025).

analysis, and digital art history (Dondero, 2020, 73–142). When art-making becomes systematic, as in Titian’s workshop, the production process leaves traces of the metasemiotic devices employed. The analyst can transform such traces into pictures to reflect on, rather than to produce, other pictures.

7. Conclusions

Visual artists were considered artisans during the Middle Ages, while poets had a higher social status since their art was intellectual rather than manual. By presenting himself as a visual poet, Titian claimed his role as an artist in the modern sense (Puttfarken, 2005, 39–40), both aesthetically and economically. Aesthetically, he claimed inventiveness and creativity beyond mere artisanship. Economically, he positioned his workshops in the international art market of his time. Both claims were possible through personal codes and their spreading in the community of Titian collaborators, but also in the community of European painters who later on started to take inspiration from his works, mainly in the genres of portrait, religious painting, and mythological painting (Cole, 1999, 219–249; Tagliaferro et al., 2010, 274–426). It was Peirce’s opinion that ontology should be based on semiotics (Peirce, 1998, 376); this is true of the semiotics of art. Indeed, the relevant ontological field is social ontology and, in particular, the social ontology of the firm. Titian’s productive system was a firm according to the following definition:

The (modern) firm is simply a specific community, currently legally positioned, that is formally registered, within the wider, typically national (or international), community, as an emergent subcommunity of the latter, oriented to the collectively coordinated production of goods and/ or services to be sold to others, in a way that is intended to be advantageous to (at least some of) the community members. It is normally the case that (at least some of) that advantage is interpreted as ‘profit’. (Lawson, 2019, 98–99, already cursive in the original)

Legally, it was acknowledged by the Republic of Venice.

Economically, it reached European noblemen and bourgeois art collectors. On the other hand, Titian’s case shows that a third dimension, a thoroughly semiotic one,⁷ is missing in Lawson’s analysis: more than at the beginning of capitalist society, firms nowadays persist thanks to personal or brand-specific codes. Social media marketing is somehow turning a possibility, developing personal codes, into a necessity, personal branding. To sell, individual professionals and brands must follow shared communicative norms to reach their targets while finding individual or brand-specific norms to make and keep their brand unique. This is exactly the kind of normativity that features in personal codes. Indeed, a case study from a distant time helped to unveil, through a brief comparison, an aspect of capitalist society and its modal transformation from possibility to necessity.

Apart from the philosophical consequences of the concept of personal codes, a hypothesis is left to be tested for the future. Cognitive semiotics recently suggested that human communication is marked by three fundamental types of sign systems, i.e. linguistic systems (language, writing, and signed language), depiction, and gesture (Zlatev et al., 2023). The difference between words and pictures needed to be accounted for to extend the idea of personal codes from the linguistic domain to the visual-artistic one, as reflected in the codes/norms/mere legisigns trichotomy (see Section 3). What about gestural personal codes? Because of Barbieri’s distinction between the world of objects and the world of names, the hypothesis to be tested about gestures is that, despite the intuitive difference between pictures and gestures, gestural personal codes should show a semiotic layering like pictorial ones since both types of non-linguistic codes stem from the same modeling system (the one that pertains to the world of perceptual objects). Thus, I can conclude with the prediction that, upon future analysis, gestural personal codes should show unsystematic or mere legisigns and a set of norms partitionable into shared and individual norms. The same should apply to graphic personal codes as well (recall Section 6).

⁷ Peirce’s semiotics is already relevant to firm ontology (Bau Macedo, 2018). Yet the semiotics of individual norms still lacks due consideration in this field.



Fig. 7. – Titian: *Diana and Callisto*, c. 1565, oil on canvas, 183 × 200 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien (source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed May 16, 2025).

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