

Giovann Battista Tiepolo

Frescoes for Palazzo Labia, 1746-1750

Mythological Themes for the Venetian Aristocracy

According to the most likely hypotheses, between 1746 and 1750 Tiepolo worked on the **decoration for Palazzo Labia**, a home that belonged to one of Venice's wealthiest families which had recently been elevated to noble status.

The artist's commission specified two rooms, a larger ballroom and a smaller one called the *Room of Mirrors*. In the latter Tiepolo carried out the *Triumph of Zephyr and Flora*; however his most important work was done for the ballroom in which he decorated the whole ceiling and the walls. On the huge central oculus of the ceiling Tiepolo painted a mythological-allegorical scene: *Bellerophon Riding Pegasus Towards Glory and Eternity*.

Among the various mythological figures along the walls there are **two main narrations**: *The Meeting of Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Cleopatra's Banquet*. Tiepolo painted only the figures in the scenes; all the rest of the Baroque *trompe l'oeil* architecture was carried out by his faithful assistant **Girolamo Mengozzi**, known as **Colonna** (1688-1772).

The impressive overall effect presents a **strong illusionism** with a tendency towards deep space and a total domination of the painted surface. Illusory perspective creates a fictitious space for a realism that, when it is observed from a precise point of view, produces disturbance or vertigo. This element should not be underestimated because Mengozzi's illusionistic set design is not purely decorative; rather it answers to a precise expressive project that organises the space of the room like a **theatre stage set**.

Anthony and Cleopatra: two perfect Courtiers

An anecdote recounted by Pliny the Elder appears in the *Banquet* scene. Although he had brought many precious gifts to his lover, Anthony realised that the queen was unsatisfied so he asked her what else he could bring her to avoid her scorn. Cleopatra answered that in a single dinner she could eat ten million sesterces. To show him her riches and power, she dropped a priceless pearl into a glass of vinegar where, once it had dissolved, she drank it.

The scene is represented in all its **splendour and luxury**, and even the painter witnesses the event: on the far left of the scene we see Tiepolo as the man with the hat and the blue suit with another man, Mengozzi, next to him. The extraordinary **trompe-l'oeil technique** and the **knowing use of light** give a surreal feeling to the space. But, as opposed to the Baroque, there is clearly an **ironic awareness of artifice** which emphasises the division between the realms of representation and reality. The queen's suspended gesture creates an atmosphere of tension with a melodramatic tone. Indeed in *Palazzo Labia's* rooms **history and reality, theatre and truth have been unified** into a sole entity thanks to Tiepolo and his assistant.

The Venetian master, in keeping with the taste of his time, narrates Roman history with courtly manners that are also just as joyous and frivolous as the 18th century Venetian courts, therefore the ancient scenes are transposed into a more modern era.

In the banquet scene, **Cleopatra** is portrayed as something of a courtesan, as can be seen in the low-cut front of her dress and in her bearing. In this way she might have been depicted to comply with Pliny's definition of her as *regina meretrix*, 'courtesan'.

Glimpsed beyond the table and through the columns, a pearl-white obelisk appears as an allegory of Glory. In this way the depicted scene represents an image of **Venice** that celebrates its grandeur between East (Cleopatra) and West (Anthony) and its ephemeral glory.



Fig. 1 Giovann Battista Tiepolo, *The Banquet of Cleopatra*, 1746-1750. Fresco. Venice, Palazzo Labia.