

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Painting of the day:

The Man with the Glove by Titian

One of the things I tell my students at Magdalen College is that there's a quick way to tell if a painting was *not* executed in the Middle Ages. That's if the colors are dark. For the people of the Middle Ages loved light and color and song, and even when they painted devils they did it with a boyish gusto that made those enemies of ours look lumpy and ridiculous, like a cross between a dumb animal and a grinning politician.

But the first *dark* paintings come later on, from the Renaissance. For the rediscovery of oil painting made possible all kinds of effects that egg-tempera paints could not achieve, and one of those effects was the contrast between the light of the human face against a very dark background, with small details showing up clearly and precisely. Such is *The Man with the Glove* (1520), a masterpiece by Tiziano Vecelli – Titian (TEE-shun).

I'd like to mention, by the way, that you can

tell how important the great Renaissance artists were, even in faraway countries, by the fact that we know the best of them by their first names or their nicknames, often put into English form: Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo, Titian. It's as if someone were to ask, "Have you seen Ralph's latest?" and you would know right away who Ralph was, just as if someone now were to ask if you had heard the latest song by Beyonce. I have no idea who that person is, by the way, except I know it's somebody, and everybody else knows her.

In this portrait, the young Titian has set forth, against a very dark background, the single most beautiful object in all of physical creation. What would you say it was, if somebody asked you? It is not a star or a flower or a sunset. It is what the poet John Milton missed the most after he lost his eyesight, what he called the *human face*

divine. That wasn't exaggeration. From out of the human face shines the light of the mind and soul, the very image of God. The human face opens a door into an entire world, the inner world of a person. You can't know a person by using a tape measure. You can't enter his world by asking him to step on the scales. You can



know a glacier by using tools like that, but a glacier or a mountain or a planet is nothing compared with a human being. You can only get to glimpse that inner world of a human being by an encounter with the person: it is a different kind of knowledge altogether, far richer. In the end it's the only kind of knowledge worth having.

The old movie directors who used black and white film understood it too, because when there is no color to distract you or dazzle you, you have to fix the audience's attention on something. So the old directors let their cameras rest on the human face, and the human hands. That's exactly what Titian has done in his portrait. We see a young man seated upon or beside a marble block. His shoulders are broad. He is looking to the side, with large eyes, a strong but still youthful chin and set to the jaw, and full lips closed, as if he were watching and listening, and not a man given to much chatter. He is dressed in a dark coat that is slightly open from the neck to below the chest, with a white shirt beneath. His left hand is gloved and holds a second glove, which he has taken from his right hand, which is bare. That hand is heavily veined and strong, with an index finger bearing a ring with a coat-of-arms.

Who is he? We don't know. What kind of man is he? He seems to be a sensitive man who is yet reserved and powerful. He shows us

“You can only get to glimpse that inner world of a human being by an encounter with the person: it is a different kind of knowledge altogether, far richer.”

much by the light of his features and the speaking in his eyes, but he doesn't appear to be the kind of person who tosses his words around with ease or recklessness. He is not carefree. We sense that also from the fact that one of his hands is still gloved. He shows us who he is, but he does not show us all. He keeps his forces back. He is a strong and quiet man.

He may not be a good man, but there is nothing wrong with his strength and his quiet. The silences of Jesus are as powerful as his words. They are full of life and meaning. It is perhaps why I hate it when I see a picture of Jesus smiling like somebody in a department store catalogue. That isn't Jesus. It's not real. You can size up a glad-hander pretty quickly, but not even Jesus' closest friends got to know more than the surface of his holiness, as they themselves would have admitted. Whoever it was whom Titian painted here – we don't know for certain – he was a young *man*, not a woman, and not a boy.

I'll end with a comment on taste in Titian's time and in ours. *The Man with the Glove* is dressed like a nobleman from Venice. Would you mess up his features with a tattoo? It would be like scrawling graffiti on a great work of art. God did not say, “Let us make man to be a billboard.”



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts is a joyfully Catholic, great books college located on a mountain in beautiful New Hampshire. The college offers a transformative liberal education of the whole person, ordered to human flourishing and communion, animated by the perennial questions, given shape by the classic books, and nourished by a vibrant liturgical and sacramental culture. Magdalen College calls all within her community to enter the great conversation of authors seeking wisdom that has unfolded across the ages, cultivating a life of virtue, poetic imagination, service, and life-giving fidelity.