



Giambattista Tiepolo
The banquet of Cleopatra 1743–44

Giambattista Tiepolo

Italian 1696–1770

The banquet of Cleopatra 1743–44

oil on canvas

250.3 x 357.0 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1933 (103-4)

The story of Mark Antony (83–30 BC) and Cleopatra (69–30 BC) was a popular subject for artists in the eighteenth century. The ancient tale of the Roman consul and his relationship with the Egyptian queen provided them with stories of romance, war, military splendour, tragedy and death. The love affair between Mark Antony and Cleopatra also enabled artists to depict the classic opposites of male and female, East and West.

The episode represented in Tiepolo's *The banquet of Cleopatra* is drawn from the Roman historian Pliny's *Natural History* (written in AD 77). Here Pliny recounted the tale of a famous contest between the Egyptian and Roman rulers (who became lovers), whereby Cleopatra wagered that she could stage a feast more lavish than the legendary excesses of Mark Antony. Tiepolo's painting shows the dramatic moment at the end of Cleopatra's sumptuous repast when, faced with a still scornful Mark Antony, she wins the wager with her trump card. Removing one of a pair of priceless pearls that adorn her as earrings, Cleopatra dissolves the pearl in a glass of vinegar and drinks it, an extravagance that causes Mark Antony to lose his bet.

The banquet of Cleopatra was purchased directly from Tiepolo's Venice studio in early 1744 by Count Francesco Algarotti for Augustus III, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. A member of the Court of Saxony, Algarotti had presented the king in 1742 with a proposal to update the Royal Museum at Dresden through the acquisition of a small selection of modern paintings that would balance the old masters already in the king's collection. Giambattista Tiepolo, at the time one of the most celebrated contemporary artists working in Europe, was an obvious choice for Algarotti. Surviving documents tell us that on 10 February 1744 Count Algarotti paid for a frame for *The banquet of Cleopatra*. On 5 March 1744 the artist was paid 300 zecchini (Venetian gold coin) for the painting, which was then dispatched to Dresden (and, subsequently, to the Royal Hunting Lodge at Hubertusburg), remaining in the royal collections of Saxony until 1765. By the turn of the nineteenth century, *The banquet of Cleopatra* had entered the Russian imperial collections, and was for a time placed on a ceiling within the Mikhailovsky Castle in St Petersburg. Later it was transferred to the Hermitage Palace, where it remained until sold to Melbourne by the Soviet authorities in 1932.

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Giambattista Tiepolo

Italiano 1696–1770

El banquete de Cleopatra, (1743–44)

óleo sobre lienzo

250,30 x 357,00 cms

Galería Nacional de Victoria, Melbourne

Legado Felton, 1933 (103-4)

La historia de Marco Antonio (83-30 a.C.) y Cleopatra (69-30 a.C.) fue un tema popular entre los artistas de siglo XVIII. La historia de la relación entre el cónsul romano y la reina egipcia les proporcionó romance, guerra, esplendor militar, tragedia y muerte. La aventura amorosa entre Marco Antonio y Cleopatra permitió a los artistas reflejar en sus obras el clásico contraste entre lo masculino y lo femenino, oriente y occidente.

El episodio representado en *El banquete de Cleopatra* de Tiepolo se inspira en *La historia natural* del historiador romano Plinio (escrita en el 77 d.C.). Plinio narra la famosa competición entre la reina egipcia y el cónsul romano (que luego serían amantes). Cleopatra había apostado que podía ofrecer un banquete más lujoso que los legendarios y excesivos de Marco Antonio. El cuadro de Tiepolo muestra el momento dramático, al final de la suntuosa comida, en el que Cleopatra, frente al todavía desafiante Marco Antonio, gana la apuesta al quitarse uno de sus valiosísimos pendientes de perlas, disolver la perla en un vaso de vinagre y bebérselo, extravagancia que hace que Marco Antonio pierda la apuesta.

A principios de 1744 *El banquete de Cleopatra* fue comprado directamente al estudio de Tiepolo en Venecia por el conde Francesco Algarotti para el rey de Polonia y elector de Sajonia Augusto III. Algarotti había propuesto al rey en 1742 un plan para modernizar el Museo Real de Dresde mediante la adquisición de una pequeña selección de pinturas modernas y así crear un cierto equilibrio con las antiguas obras maestras de arte ya existentes en la colección real. Para Algarotti, el adquirir una obra de Giambattista Tiepolo, uno de los artistas contemporáneos más famosos en Europa, era una decisión obvia. Sabemos, gracias a los documentos que hoy perduran, que el 10 de febrero de 1744 el Conde Algarotti pagó el coste del marco; y que el 5 de marzo de 1744 le pagaron al artista 300 zecchini. El cuadro fue enviado a Dresde (y, posteriormente, al palacete de caza de Hubertusburg) y permaneció en la colección real de Sajonia hasta 1765. A finales del siglo XIX *El banquete de Cleopatra* pasó a la colección imperial rusa y durante un tiempo estuvo colgado del techo del Castillo de Mikhailovsky en San Petesburgo. Más tarde, fue trasladado al Palacio Hermitage donde permaneció hasta que fue vendido a Melbourne por las autoridades soviéticas en 1932.

Thinking and discussing before the visit

Tiepolo's art was executed in oil paints or fresco, a painting technique suitable for walls and ceilings in which water-based pigments are applied to a surface of wet plaster.

You probably already know something about Cleopatra, the enigmatic Ptolemaic queen of ancient Egypt who lived from 69–30 BC.

- How do you picture her? As a class, discuss and list all the things you already know about her. Where did your information come from – teachers, books, the internet, popular culture?
- Discuss whether we can ever be certain that the information we learn from these sources is true.
- There have been many contradictory portrayals of Cleopatra over time. Choose some particular questions about her that you would like to investigate such as: was she a villain or a hero? Is there evidence to suggest she was beautiful? What aspects of her life have made her so famous? Who were the most important men in her life? Is there evidence to suggest that she was an intelligent and courageous ruler? How did she die?
- Individually or in small groups, conduct further research about Cleopatra and present your findings to the class in the form of an illustrated PowerPoint lecture, an essay, visual diagram or short performance involving drama and music.
- What factors affect our understanding of history?

Gallery visit activities

- Describe what you see when you look at the painting.
- Who or what stands out and why?
- Describe the palette of colours the artist has used. How do they contribute to the extravagance and drama of the occasion?
- Consider in what ways the artist has directed our eye to the key action in the painting (the vanishing point above Cleopatra's glass on the table).
- How could you guess from the visual clues in the painting that this story took place during the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Rome and Greece?
- Study the facial expressions of the people depicted in the painting—what mood or atmosphere do they suggest?
- How has Tiepolo depicted the body language of Cleopatra and Mark Antony? What does this suggest about how each of them is feeling?
- If you are not yet familiar with the story depicted in the painting, try to work out what might be happening in the painting based on your observations so far.
- When your teacher or NGV guide has explained the story, discuss what universal human qualities are explored in the painting that are still relevant today.
- Both Cleopatra and the Venetian aristocracy lived decadent, pleasure-seeking lives in societies that were in decline. Can you suggest why Tiepolo might have depicted the Egyptian queen as a Venetian aristocrat?
- What aspects of the painting puzzle you? What questions would you like to ask Tiepolo if he were alive today?
- Create a newspaper headline that you think encapsulates the key themes of the story.
- What factors relating to the display of *The banquet of Cleopatra* suggest that it is a very important painting in the NGV collection?

Research and discuss the life and paintings of Diego Rivera. He is arguably the greatest Mexican painter of the twentieth century and is credited with the reintroduction of fresco painting into modern art and architecture. His large murals on universities and other public buildings introduced his work into the everyday lives of the people.

Useful link

<http://diegorivera.com/murals/index.php>

The following individual lines are taken from a poem *The Banquet of Cleopatra — A Painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo* by John Mateer, inspired by the painting:

*Rigid with competitive
arrogance, her arm is silencing
us all with a held moment.
And at her fingertips the famous
pearl gleaming like our star seen
from another solar system.*

Create an evocative sentence that describes one aspect of the painting in detail.

Gallery visit activities, continued

- Tiepolo's paintings show the influence of the seventeenth-century Baroque style, characterised by much ornamentation, dramatic light and shade and exaggerated emotional expression. Discuss where you can see evidence of these characteristics in *The banquet of Cleopatra*.

Post-visit activities

In 1762 Tiepolo moved to Spain where his commissioned work included frescos on the ceilings of the Royal Palace in Madrid.

- Research the life of the ruling monarch at the time, Charles III.
- What profound reforms did he carry out? How did he transform Madrid?
- Can you imagine any famous people today behaving in a similar way to Cleopatra and Antony in this painting? If so, who might they be and what would your reaction be? Create an artwork or short play that depicts a modern day version of the story.

Research the life of Tiepolo. Find out about his great rival in Spain, Anton Raphael Mengs. Why was Tiepolo's work unpopular in Spain at the end of his life?

The following activity encourages students to think about a story or topic from diverse perspectives:

As a class, brainstorm various viewpoints about the story in the painting. Consider who is involved, who might be affected by it and how it might be viewed by people of diverse ages, professions, cultures and different times in history.

Students take on the role of the character with one of these viewpoints and describe the story from his or her perspective. Characters could include a contemporary politician, psychologist, feminist, playwright, vet, dietician, gossip columnist, detective, a poor Egyptian citizen, or Cleopatra or Antony themselves.