

On the Cover



Sisyphus 1548-1549 by Titian, Vecellio di Gregorio.
Oil on canvas, 237 × 216 cm.
Pieve di Cadore, Belluno, Veneto, 1490- Venecia, 1576.
©Museo Nacional del Prado

Mary of Hungary, sister of Emperor Charles I of Spain and V of Germany, commissioned this painting to Titian, then the leading Venetian painter of the High Renaissance. Her commission actually included 4 large paintings (the “Furias”) that told the mythological punishments given to Tityus, Tantalus, Sisyphus and Ixion for having defied the gods in one way or another. Mary intended for these paintings that hung in her palace at Biche to be a reminder of the four protestant princes who had risen against her brother the Emperor only to be crushed by him in the battle of Mühlberg.

The punishment for Sisyphus was to haul a large rock up to the top of a mountain, a rock that rolled downhill to the valley as soon as it had reached the top. Sisyphus then walked down the mountain and kept repeating this herculean task again and again.

Of the four canvasses that constituted the “Furias” only that of Sisyphus survived a fire. While the original intention of this painting was a political warning, the myth of Sisyphus became a metaphor for defiance and courage in the face of adversity. It has been the subject of paintings by others, it has inspired poems, Rosa Luxemburg used the term “labor of Sisyphus” to describe the role of trade unions in the capitalist economy of Germany after WWI and Albert Camus used the narrative of this myth to vertebrate his theory of absurdism in his book “The Myth of Sisyphus”.

The painting is in the baroque style of Titian with a monumental nude, a complex foreshortening and a mastery of the chiaroscuro. It speaks of resoluteness, defiance and courage in the face of adversity. Camus wrote of the moment when Sisyphus looks at the rock that has rolled down to the valley and calmly walks downhill towards his endless torment: “The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn”.

My choice of cover art for this issue is obviously related to its contents. For many years the leaders of the vascular community made efforts to free a mature and grown-up vascular surgery from their governess, the American Board of Surgery. These leaders suspected that most of the sensible arguments they advanced and the tortuous bureaucratic applications and appeals they filed were unlikely to yield success. And yet they invested great effort in it because proper procedure had to be satisfied even when, at the end, a denial would likely be waiting. And it was the resilience of these leaders over 20 years that eventually resulted in the partial gains that were achieved at the end.

Ramon Berguer