

Art Story: *Queen Zenobia Addressing Her Soldiers* by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo

Read by Julie Carmean

You might be wondering... Why did Tiepolo make this painting?

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo worked in Venice, Italy, in the eighteenth century, in the grand tradition of history painting. The word history comes from the Italian *istoria*, meaning narrative or story, and Tiepolo's subjects were drawn from history, literature, mythology, and religion. Tiepolo worked on a correspondingly large scale—this painting is eight-and-a-half feet tall and twelve feet wide!

Although Queen Zenobia remained a model of valor throughout history, representations of her were rare in Venetian art – art made in Venice, Italy, between the 15th and 18th centuries. A prominent family in Venice, the Zenobio family, probably commissioned Venetian artist Tiepolo to make at least three paintings to depict Queen Zenobia's story. With nearly identical surnames, the Zenobio family may have wanted to claim that Queen Zenobia was a distant ancestor.

Notice the clear light and saturated color, characteristic of Venetian painting, and the theatrical composition, with the figures in the foreground arranged as if on a stage. The other two narrative paintings in this series are now in other collections. They depict Zenobia in chains, and Zenobia before the Emperor Aurelian, and share these traits of Venetian painting.

Throughout his long career, Tiepolo's fame continued to grow, and today it rests in his ability as a dramatic storyteller of both the sacred and the secular. In addition to decorating the churches and palazzi of Venice, he took commissions from abroad for other large paintings and ceiling frescoes. Today, the monumental ruins of the city of Palmyra, in the Syrian desert northeast of Damascus, are a UNESCO World Heritage site. Tragically, much of these ancient sites were destroyed by terrorists in recent years, yet the story of Queen Zenobia lives on today.