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Negotiating the Gift

Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange

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Art as Gift

Liberal Art and Religious Reform in the Renaissance

by

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Giorgio Vasari tells us that when Michelangelo completed the Tondo now in the Uffizi he sent it to his client Angelo Doni together with a bill for 70 ducats. Doni thought the price too high and sent back 40 ducats, a price closer to what one might expect to pay for a painting this size. Michelangelo replied by demanding 100 ducats, or the painting back. At that point, Doni, who had taken a strong liking to the painting, said he would settle for the original 70. But it was too late; because of »Angelo's little faith« Michelangelo decided to charge him double the original price: 140 ducats, or the painting back. Doni paid the money and kept the painting.¹

Vasari's tale is not confirmed by Condivi, Michelangelo's other important sixteenth-century biographer. In fact, the story bears distinct resemblance to several others told about ancient and Renaissance artists, all of them designed to assert the prestige of painting and painters. It has no less historical interest, however, as a piece of fiction associated with Michelangelo in 1550.

We might take the story as an illustration of Michelangelo's consummate bargaining skills and of his well-attested arrogance. Without first fixing the price, he sent the painting to a client he knew would appreciate the work and then proceeded to gouge him mercilessly. This in itself would be fairly unusual behavior for an artist at this time, and a sign of changing artist-client relations. But there is more here than money-grabbing and the inflated ego of an artist. More important, the episode indicates a new consciousness of arbitrariness in the pricing of art. The point of the story is not simply that Michelangelo got more money and thus asserted his prestige, but that he con-

¹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. ROSANNA BETTARINI, with comments by PAOLA BAROCCHI, 8 vols., Florence 1966-1987, vol. 6, pp. 14-15 [1550], pp. 22-23 [1568].

tested the very means of measuring artistic value. Already the absence of a contract (as we have seen, the price was not fixed beforehand) marked this commission as one between a special artist and a sophisticated client. Nonetheless, the initial asking price of 70 ducats remained within the traditional price scheme, even if at the top end of the scale. At the first resistance, however, Michelangelo abandoned traditional pricing altogether and asked for 100 ducats. Why 100? No one during that time would accept that a painting's value could increase from week to week. This was clearly no fresh assessment of the work's value, but rather the choice of a substantial round sum, as if to declare a symbolic independence from the traditional price scheme. This impression is confirmed by the next increase, which is simply double the original sum. Once again, this is not a new calculation of the painting's worth, but an open refutation of such a mode of assessment. If you want to start questioning the price, he seems to be saying, I'll explode the price scheme altogether. Michelangelo is not simply asking for more, but declaring that the painting is not to be evaluated like a piece of merchandise. Doni subtracted 30 from the original price of 70 in the belief that this was a more accurate assessment of the painting's value. Michelangelo took this difference and added it to the original 70 to make the »perfect« sum of 100. When Doni then proposed the original 70, he took Doni's figure and »magically« doubled it. Michelangelo refuted Doni's commercial calculations by taking Doni's figures and submitting them to symbolic number games involving significant round numbers and multiples.²

Paying double the price was a symbolic gesture, virtually a declaration of inestimable value. Francisco de Hollanda, writing about 1550, tells the story of the painter »who was commanded by Caesar to paint a picture, and having asked a sum of money for it that Caesar would not give, perhaps in order to effect his intention the better, the painter took the picture and was about to break it up, his wife and children around him bemoaning such great loss; but Caesar then delighted him, in a manner proper to a Caesar, *giving him double the sum which he had previously asked*, telling him that he was a fool if he expected to vanquish Caesar.«³ Vasari tells a similar story about Donatello, who made a bust for a Genoese merchant:

² My discussion of this passage has benefited greatly from exchanges with Gadi Algazi.

³ Francisco de Hollanda, *Three dialogues on painting*, in: Michael Angelo Buonarroti, with Translations of the Life of the Master by his Scholar, Ascanio Condivi, and *Three Dialogues from the Portuguese* by Francisco Hollanda, trans. CHARLES HOLROYD, London 1911, p.269 (emphasis mine throughout).

»When it was finished, and the merchant wished to pay for it, it seemed to him that Donato asked too much. The question was referred to Cosimo [de' Medici], who caused the head to be brought to the court of his palace, and placed among the pinnacles on the street front, that it might better be seen. Cosimo then decided that the merchant's offer was inadequate, saying that the price asked was too small. The merchant, who thought it too high, said that Donato had completed it in a month or a little more, which came to more than half a florin a day. Donato turned around angrily, much incensed at the remark, and exclaiming to the merchant that in an instant he was able to destroy the work and toil of a year, gave the head a push into the street where it was broken into many pieces, saying that the merchant was accustomed to bargain for haricot beans but not for statues. Then he repented, *and offered Donato double if he would make another*, but the sculptor refused, though Cosimo united his prayers to those of the merchant.«⁴

The idea that art was not a measurable commodity would have been news to most people who commissioned art in the period. And yet, by the seventeenth century the attitude implied by the behavior of Michelangelo in this story had become fairly common, and was even expected from artists. Both Nicolas Poussin and Salvator Rosa, for example, openly rejected the system of pricing paintings according to the number of figures they contained.⁵ Much work has been done, especially by humanist historians of the early and middle part of the twentieth century, on the rise of these attitudes, and on the defenses of painting as a liberal art that accompanied them.⁶ It is the purpose of this chapter to revisit the old question of the »rise« of painting as a liberal art in light of the last three decades of art-historical research, which have significantly enriched our understanding of the socio-religious system that governed most artistic production in the period. In what sense did the defense of painting as a liberal art involve a critique of this system? In what sense is the discourse of the gift implicit in the notion of liberal art at odds with the discourse of gift-giving that dominated the entire practice of be-

⁴ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. A. B. HINDS, 4 vols., London 1927, p. 306.

⁵ ALESSANDRO CONTI, *L'evoluzione dell'artista*, in: *Storia dell'arte italiana*, vol. 2, Turin 1979, pp. 117-263.

⁶ JULIUS VON SCHLOSSER, *La letteratura artistica: manuale delle fonti della storia dell'arte moderna*, 2d ed. with revisions by OTTO KURZ, Florence 1956; ERWIN PANOFSKY, *Artist, scientist, genius: Notes on the Renaissance-Dämmerung*, in: *The Renaissance: Six Essays*, New York 1962, pp. 123-182; IDEM, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, Columbia, NC 1968; ANTHONY BLUNT, *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450-1600*, London 1975; RENSSALAER W. LEE, *Ut pictura poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, New York 1967; RUDOLF WITTKOWER and MARGOT WITTKOWER, *Born under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*, London 1968.

quest, legacy, and donation that produced most of the church art in the period?

This same system – the system of chapel endowments, of chantries and mass-sayings, of observances, indulgences, and numbered prayers – came under fire from another quarter during this same period, namely, from reformers both north and south of the Alps, who exposed it as a crass form of mercenary exchange and affirmed in its place a different, highly rigorous conception of the gift based on the fundamental belief in the non-reciprocity of divine grace. We thus have three discourses that used the language of the gift in the period, which in different ways affected the production of art: the traditional system of bequest and endowment that governed the making of church art; the efforts, largely promoted in humanist contexts, to include painting among the liberal arts; and the reformist polemic over divine grace. The latter two, it so happens, found a common enemy in the first system.

Much of the time this common cause went unrecognized, but not always. Jean Calvin, for example, condemned the use of church art in the same breath that he, as a good humanist, affirmed that the art of painting should be cultivated and appreciated as a gift from God.⁷ Artistic and religious developments of the first half of the sixteenth century prompted a critical review of the functions of art during the preceding centuries, and they encourage us to do the same.

Research in recent decades has revealed significant links between humanist culture and reform movements in Italy, and thus has offered alternatives to the traditional view of a pagan humanist culture replacing a »medieval« religious one.⁸ A parallel revision was undertaken by Martin Warnke in *The Court Artist*, in which he attacked the notion that modern ideas about art and artists originated in proto-republican contexts, and provided ample documentation to show that court culture was primarily responsible for disrupting traditional conceptions and valuations of art embedded in the guild system. One can raise objections to Warnke's argument – by pointing, for example, to the great variety of courtly contexts and the resulting difficulty of speaking generically about court culture in this period – but his book has made it impossible to draw a straight line between Early Modern developments and the cultural institutions and values enshrined in the nineteenth-century university and museum. Renaissance ideas that we recognize as pro-

⁷ See LÉON WENCELIUS, *L'esthétique de Calvin*, Paris 1937.

⁸ CHARLES TRINKAUS, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, Chicago 1970; JOHN O'MALLEY, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521*, Durham, NC 1979; CHARLES STINGER, *The Renaissance in Rome*, Bloomington, IN 1985.

to-modern unfolded in the context of institutions that we do not associate with modernity, such as the court and the church.

This chapter thus offers a challenge to the traditional account, still extremely influential in Renaissance art history, which sees the emancipation of the arts from »medieval« forms of valuation as part of the triumph of a modern and secular conception of art in the Renaissance. It is possible to do so on the basis of the vast amount we have learned in the last three decades about the patronage and production of art, primarily religious art, in the period. To take these findings seriously is to recognize that tampering with this system of artistic production also meant tampering with a system of socio-religious practice. Artistic innovations, developments in the status of art, exalted ideas about artistic genius, these are not simply anticipations or instantiations of modern secular culture. They developed within a traditional set of socio-religious practices and beliefs. Sometimes they cohabited harmoniously with those practices, sometimes they caused disruptions, and sometimes they precipitated or accompanied a critique, a critique that more often than not originated within a religious context.

The issue is of special relevance in Italy, because the separation between art and religion was never so starkly drawn there as it was in the Protestant North. Clerics, humanists, patrons, and artists in Italy continued to believe in the religious vocation of art, even as its nature and status was changing, and even as the pressure to reform mounted. A significant number embraced exalted claims for art and artists while remaining firmly committed to religious art. Some even affirmed that a more high-minded conception of art was the avenue to reforming its religious function. The reason this was thought possible, I contend, is that affinities existed, and were at times recognized, between the discourse of the gift surrounding the liberal arts and the discourse of the gift promoted by the reformers. Many of the links I propose are hypothetical. The main purpose of this chapter is to bring to light possible affinities that have until now received little attention, and to make them a matter for debate.

1. Endowments, Dedications, Altarpieces

As few or no human works are considered in this life to be more agreeable to the omnipotent Lord nor more praiseworthy for mortal men than the celebration of the divine cult, for that reason Francesco Sassetti has recently acquired, in the church of Santa Trinita in Florence, a chapel dedicated to the holy St. Francis, and has had it painted and ornamented with tombs and cloths and all the necessary ornaments, and

desires that every morning in perpetuity the divine office of the Mass be celebrated there, for the merit and memory of his soul and of his ancestors and descendants, and for many other good reasons that move him.⁹

In framing a contract for church decoration, painters, sculptors, and joiners entered into an elaborate system of patronage. When an individual endowed a chapel or left provisions for such in a will, he or she made precise allocations for an altarpiece or a tomb, and a fairly reliable standard made it possible to allocate the sums accurately. The allocation of funds for the decoration of the chapel went hand in hand with the endowment of chantries, or other arrangements for the regular saying of masses.¹⁰ Church art was thus implicated in a series of negotiations that bound the larger money economy to the economy of devotion, that is, the economy of prayer, mass-sayings, and purgatorial dispensation. Artists worked according to their patrons' specifications, which were in turn dictated by an appeal to higher patrons – saints, the Virgin, sometimes Christ. (Of 205 altarpieces commissioned in Venice between 1450 and 1530, 121 depicted saints or the Virgin with saints. A mere 8 showed the adult Christ in the center.¹¹) The stipulations that made up the artist's contract were a function of the higher system of »contracts« – the economy of vows, endowments, dedications, and mass-sayings – within which church art worked generally. Wealthy clients or confraternities paid good money for works of art, and then »donated« them to the churches. They also left »endowments« in order to have regular masses said at their altar.¹²

In Italy, testamentary bequests began to take a markedly »private« turn towards the late thirteenth century, and it is from this period forward that we see the rise of the practice of earmarking funds from legacies for the construction and decoration of private chapels.¹³ Not surprisingly, it is also this period that saw the rise and proliferation of the forms of painting that were to predominate in the later medieval period: fresco cycles, altarpieces, devo-

⁹ Francesco Sassetti's contract with the monks of Santa Trinita, Florence, January 1, 1487, in: EVE BORSOOK and JOHANNES OFFERHAUS, *Francesco Sassetti and Ghirlandaio at Santa Trinita, Florence: History and Legend in a Renaissance Chapel*, Doornspijk 1981, p. 62.

¹⁰ See JOEL THOMAS ROSENTHAL, *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift Giving and the Aristocracy, 1307–1485*, London 1972.

¹¹ PETER HUMFREY, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*, New Haven 1993, pp. 64–65.

¹² ROSENTHAL, *Purchase of Paradise* (as in note 10); HUMFREY, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (as in note 11), pp. 60–72.

¹³ EVE BORSOOK, *The Mural Painters of Tuscany from Cimabue to Andrea del Sarto*, Oxford 1980; SAMUEL KLINE COHN, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*, Baltimore 1992, pp. 248–250.

tional images.¹⁴ As Samuel Cohn has shown, throughout the thirteenth century the increasing tendency of testators to impose demands on their heirs and on their property in attempts to control the future behavior of their beneficiaries was matched by developments in the commissioning of the art for their chapels. Testators demanded that more patron saints be depicted on the surfaces of their altarpieces, and with increasing frequency demanded that their own figures be included in supplication either within the images or in effigy within the chapel space.¹⁵ It is as if the testators, who frequently expressed concern that their wishes be honored by the priests after their death, and who often made provisions in case the priests should fail in their obligations,¹⁶ had found in the concretizations of religious art a form of insurance, a means of making certain that even in the case of priestly negligence their memory would be preserved and their devotion made manifest.

Money was converted into art and masses, which in turn brought divine favors to the commissioner. One modest donor from Perugia in 1348 donated 10 lire for a painting to »beautify« (*in reactatione*) the altar of his confraternity, the *disciplinati* of San Domenico. This is a standard enough bequest, but the wording of his will is particularly eloquent: he asked that his pious sums be »converted« into »painted figures.«¹⁷ The Franciscans of San Francesco di Palco in Prato commissioned an altarpiece from the Ghirlandajo brothers in 1490. Despite the small sum, 35 florins, the friars were only able to raise 20, and had to appeal to the Otto and the Gonfaloniere di Gastonia of Prate for the rest. What did they offer in exchange for the grant of the 15 florins? A place in the altarpiece and a place in their prayers. They would see to it that the coat of arms of the *Commune* of Prate would be placed on the altarpiece, and they would always pray to God for the *Commune*. The petition was granted; the altarpiece is now in the Galleria Comunale of Prato.¹⁸

Investment in church art and investment in mass-sayings were understood to be strongly equivalent, to the extent that one could be exchanged for the other. In his Last Will of 1429, Andrea Pellegrini ordered that his body be buried in his family chapel in Sant'Anastasia in Verona and that »for three

¹⁴ HANS BELTING, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter: Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion*, Berlin 1981.

¹⁵ COHN, *Cult of Remembrance* (as in note 13), esp. p. 272.

¹⁶ COHN, *Cult of Remembrance* (as in note 13); ROSENTHAL, *Purchase of Paradise* (as in note 10); JACQUES CHIFFOLEAU, *Sur l'usage obsessionnel de la messe pour les morts à la fin du Moyen Age*, in: *Faire Croire: Modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XII^e au XV^e siècle*, Rome 1981.

¹⁷ COHN, *Cult of Remembrance* (as in note 13), p. 112.

¹⁸ CESARE GUASTI, *I quadri della galleria del comune di Prato*, Prato 1888, pp. 112-114.

years continuously the Mass of Saint Gregory shall be said« for his soul. He also stipulated that a terracotta figure of him »kneeling [and] praying« be completed and placed in the chapel within three years of his death. Why stipulate the same number of years for the saying of masses and for the making of the sculpture? When the saying of masses ceased, the sculpture would be in place. The implication is that the praying effigy would take over the »work« of the prayers. In this case, Pellegrini was right to assume that the effigy would outlast the workings of church ritual: the terracotta figure is still there, directing prayer towards the altar in the chapel.¹⁹

If we follow the thorough records of the busy mid-fifteenth-century Florentine workshop of Neri di Bicci, we find a very regular production of painted panels (*Tavole*, most of which were *Tavole d'altare*) and a fairly standard system of pricing. Prices were calculated swiftly and fairly by the quality and quantity of the materials used and by the size of the panel, assessments which typically bore strong relation to the number of figures painted. Unfortunately, Neri only gave his side of the account, and did not record the decisions and considerations made by his clients.

According to Charles Hope, when commissioning altarpieces patrons were concerned above all that they show the right sacred personages. Even narrative subjects were understood as ways of displaying the favored patron saints.²⁰ These considerations, and considerations over the use of high-quality materials by the painter, dominate the language of altarpiece contracts. Specifications abounded, for example, over the quantity and quality of gold and ultramarine blue used in the altarpieces.²¹ These materials not only ensured a longer lasting work, always a concern in a funerary context, but also carried values of dignity and majesty. All of these considerations – number of figures, cost of materials – were easily translated into monetary terms. The relative stability of modes of evaluation, so strongly confirmed by Neri di Bicci's account books, in turn served the devotional system within which the art worked. It made it possible to calculate accurately when it came time to »convert« pious sums into »painted figures.« Although many people com-

¹⁹ GÉRALDINE JOHNSON, *Activating the Effigy: Donatello's Pecci Tomb in the Siena Duomo*, in: *Art Bulletin* 77 (1995), pp. 445–459. The »agency« of liturgical gifts is explored also in ELIANA MAGNANI S. CRISTEN's chapter in this volume.

²⁰ CHARLES HOPE, *Altarpieces and the Requirements of Patrons*, in: *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento*, ed. TIMOTHY VERDON and JOHN HENDERSON, Syracuse 1990, pp. 536–571.

²¹ MICHAEL BAXANDALL, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford ²1988, pp. 1–14; HANNELORE GLASSER, *Artists' Contracts of the Early Renaissance*, New York 1977, pp. 36–37.

missioned church art during their lifetimes, many testators also left moneys for bequests to be dispensed by the executors of their wills after their death. They needed to know with some degree of assurance what their money would buy them.

2. Liberal Art in Practice

Amidst these practices, other criteria of value arose in the appreciation of painting. Michael Baxandall noted that towards the end of the fifteenth century artists' contracts placed less emphasis on precious and costly material – gold and ultramarine blue, for example – and more emphasis on the less easily quantifiable resource of the artist's skill or *ingegno*.²² The issue was directly addressed by Leon Battista Alberti, who wrote his *De Pictura* in 1434: »There are some who make excessive use of gold, because they think it lends a certain majesty to painting. I do not praise them at all.« Instead, he said, it brings the painter greater admiration and praise to represent the glitter of gold with plain colors. He also banished gems from the picture surface, allowing them only on the frame.²³ These strictures go hand in hand with the logic of the perspectival *costruzione legittima*: the presence of gold and gems on the surface of the painting would disrupt the effect the perspectival picture was meant to produce, which is to resemble an »open window« giving onto a view. The quality of the perspectival picture was the result of the artist's knowledge and understanding in constructing the composition. The resistance to precious materials was also an expression of the antique-inspired ethos of sobriety embraced by Alberti generally: it is of a piece with his strictures against copiousness and clutter in pictorial composition.

There are affinities between Alberti's rigor and high-minded sobriety and certain views held by reformers. Alberti's contemporary Saint Antoninus, friend of Cosimo de' Medici, prior of the Dominican convent of San Marco, later Archbishop of Florence, also had things to say about painting, and as it happens his views were quite compatible with Alberti's. In a discussion of the various professions, he stated: »Painters claim, more or less reasonably, to be paid the salary of their art not only by the amount of their work, but more in proportion to their application and greater expertness in their trade.« He also inveighed against the tendency among painters to paint »curiosities (*cur-*

²² BAXANDALL, *Painting and Experience* (as in note 21), pp. 14–23.

²³ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. CECIL GRAYSON, London 1991, paragraph 49.

iosa), that do not serve to excite devotion, but laughter and vanity, such as monkeys and dogs chasing hares and such things, or vain ornaments of clothing,« invoking instead a kind of rational and measured naturalism very much in line with Alberti's proposals.²⁴ From his remarks, one gathers that Antoninus approved of a painting that is not distracting and that gets to the moral and spiritual core of the story, and one can imagine that he was very well pleased with Fra Angelico's frescoes in his convent. Such a purist aesthetic was amenable to archaizing tastes, such as those of Antoninus's mentor, the Dominican Giovanni Dominici, who believed »old, smoky« images to be closer to »the figures, or to the truth represented by those figures« than the highly ornamented pictures of his day.²⁵ Alberti's aesthetic has itself been described as neo-Giottesque.²⁶

Even the logic of the *costruzione legittima* has elements that can be aligned with the concerns of reformers: the perspectival picture was predicated on the denial of the picture surface so lavishly proclaimed in the traditional polyptych, offering a »virtual« visual experience in its place. Its »immaterial« quality was part of its conceptual logic, and was potentially quite well suited to concerns over material splendor, as well as over idolatry. (It is hard to think of a type of painting that more strongly reinforces the idea that veneration should be directed not to the physical image but to the prototype represented by it.) That there should be any congruence between the views of a humanist and the voices of religious reform has seemed unlikely as long as the humanists were seen as the avatars of secular modernity and the reformers as the reactionary »medieval« opponents to innovation.

Alberti's polemic against associating value with the material of art became a standard battle cry among self-respecting artists. Leonardo da Vinci criticized Lombard artists who lived »under the spell of the beauty of gold and ultramarine blue.«²⁷ When Francesco Francia was asked what he thought about Michelangelo's statue of Julius II in Bologna, he replied that the bronze was of very good quality and well cast. Michelangelo, believing »that he had praised more the bronze than the artifice,« unleashed one of his most

²⁴ CREIGHTON GILBERT, The archbishop on the painters of Florence, 1450, in: *Art Bulletin* 41 (1959), pp. 75-87.

²⁵ Giovanni Dominici, *Regola del governo di cura familiare*, ed. DONATO SALVI, Florence 1860, p. 133.

²⁶ MICHAEL BAXANDALL, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, Oxford 1971, pp. 129-130.

²⁷ Leonardo da Vinci, MS A, facsimile edition, in: *I manoscritti e i disegni di Leonardo da Vinci*, pubblicati dalla Reale commissione vinciana sotto gli auspici del Ministero dell'educazione nazionale, Rome 1936, f. 105^r; *Il Maestro della Pala Sforzesca*, ed. GIOVANNI ROMANO et al., Florence 1978, p. 11.

withering attacks: *Va al bordello, tu e 'l Cossa, che siete due solennissimi goffi nell'arte.*²⁸

With the emphasis shifted away from material value and towards *artificio* and *ingegno*, it was but a short step to claim that the worth of an artwork had no correspondence with its size or with the amount of labor expended in working on it. Albrecht Dürer declared that an artist of understanding and experience can show more of his power and art »in crude and rough things, and this in works of small size, than many another in a great work.«²⁹ In the *Dialogues* of Francisco de Hollanda, Michelangelo is made to say that an artwork is »worth a great price which has been done by the hand of a very capable man, even though in a short time [...] for works ought not to be esteemed because of the amount of time employed and lost in the labor, but because of the merit of the knowledge and of the hand which did them.«³⁰ Such a quality takes the work out of the sphere of measurable value and into the sphere of the gift, as Hollanda suggested elsewhere: »I will tell you: to do anything quickly and swiftly is very profitable and good, and it is a gift received from immortal God to do in a few hours what another is painting during many days.«³¹

The idea that there is no clear correlation between materials or amount of labor and the worth of a work of art, that a sketch or an unfinished work were precious because they were emanations of an artistic idea, promoted the claim that there was no way of accurately calculating the price of works of art. Pliny declared that »[Zeuxis] set about giving his works as presents, saying that it was impossible for them to be sold at any price adequate to their value.«³² The references Pliny made to the outrageous prices paid for works of art were echoed by almost all the Renaissance treatise-writers who touched on the issue. In referring to these prices, they were not claiming upholding them as accurate assessments of value, but rather as hyperbolic acknowledgements of priceless value. In doing so, Renaissance artists and thinkers were adapting a tradition well known in the world of letters. Bartolomeo of Brescia declared in 1245: *Nec vendit magister scientiam, quia aestimari non potest.*³³

²⁸ Vasari, *Vite* (as in note 1), vol. 6, p. 32.

²⁹ Albrecht Dürer: *Schriftlicher Nachlass*, ed. HANS RUPPRICH, 3 vols., Berlin 1956-1969, vol. 1, p. 291.

³⁰ Francisco de Hollanda, *Three dialogues on painting* (as in note 3), pp. 268-269.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-278.

³² Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. HARRIS RACKHAM, 10 vols., Cambridge, MA 1958, xxxv, 62.

³³ GAINES POST, KIMON GIOCARINIS, and RICHARD KAY, *The medieval heritage of a Humanis-*

Holding to the high-minded notion that art has no adequate price might of course leave the artist vulnerable to drastic underpayment, as often occurred in the case of the sculptor Giambologna. Acting on behalf of the Duke of Urbino, Archdeacon Simone Fortuna visited the sculptor in 1581 to arrange for the commission of a marble statue: »I tried my very best to learn the approximate cost, though with dexterity and tact. I did not succeed, as he answered that he does not value money and never arranged prices beforehand, taking what is given to him, and it must be added that everybody says that he has never been paid half the price his works are worth and would be valued by others.« This meant, unfortunately, that Giambologna was at times forced to ask for money. What is significant is that when doing so, he felt it necessary to adhere tortuously to the language of gift-giving. In a letter appealing for the payment of arrears from the Grand Duke of Tuscany, even when he referred to specific sums promised he maintained, »Yet I request nothing as my due, on the contrary, anything will be a gift,« and added: »I shall at once return in taxes two hundred and fifty of the fifteen hundred scudi which he gives me, besides spending His Highness's gift within his State.«³⁴

3. The Framing of the Work of Art

How do these rhetorical claims relate to changes in the practice and making of art? Let us return to the case of altarpieces. I choose altarpieces advisedly, for since Jacob Burckhardt they have been considered the cradle of the modern easel picture, that form which more than any other epitomizes the exalted conception of the modern »work of art.« According to Burckhardt, altarpieces were in their day »the most progressive genre in Italian painting,« marked by the most important »advances« in naturalism. It is likely, he posited, that our modern term *quadro* first originated in the context of the altarpiece, for it was in the morphological development of the altarpiece that the familiar rectangular picture format originated. It is, I believe, for this reason

tic ideal: »Scientia donum Dei est, unde vendi non potest«, in: *Traditio* 11 (1955), pp. 195–234, here: p. 201, note 15; NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS, *Beyond the market: Books as gifts in sixteenth-century France*, in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (5th ser.) 33 (1983), pp. 69–88.

³⁴ Johann Wilhelm Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'artisti dei secoli 14, 15, 16*, pubblicato ed illustrato con documenti pure inediti, Florence 1839–1840; rpt. Turin 1961, vol. 3, pp. 440–443, 468–470; quoted from the English translation in: WITTKOWER and WITTKOWER, *Born under Saturn* (as in note 6), pp. 259–260.

that the essay on altarpieces figured so importantly in his projected art-historical companion to the *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*: together with the essay on the collectors and on the portrait, it was to provide a picture of the rise of a modern artistic culture to parallel his famous account of the rise of modern individualism and statecraft.

In the last three decades we have learned a great deal about the physical, economic, and institutional conditions of altarpiece production. It has become natural to expect altarpiece studies to take the work out of the museum, put it back on its original altar, reconstruct its original environment, and investigate the ways in which it was intended to serve the donor or commissioning body.³⁵ Such studies have provided a much-needed corrective to earlier approaches that tended to consider altarpieces in aesthetic isolation, that is, as gallery pictures *avant la lettre*. They have thrown into question the Romantic legacy of the painter as autonomous creator, and have implicitly or explicitly argued that the modern conception of easel painting – in which, as Jacob Burckhardt once put it in one of his most Kantian moments, the frame serves to reinforce »the isolation of the beautiful from the entire rest of space«³⁶ – should not be projected back into a period when images were integrated into their setting as functional pieces of ecclesiastical furniture. Art history books and slide collections have adapted and now more often show pictures together with their frames, and within their original settings. The general upshot of such studies has been to join the efforts of scholars of Renaissance social history in emphasizing a »pre-modern« Renaissance in contrast to the »proto-modern« Renaissance emphasized by Panofsky, Wittkower, and other mid-century humanist historians.

And yet, as we have seen, new ideas about art and artists did arise in this period. The idea that art is autonomous and »liberal« is no longer a universally held assumption in our day, but that only means that we are in a better position to understand its historical origins. Any truly historical analysis of the rise of the modern gallery picture, for example, must take into account what its early history has to do with the genre of the altarpiece, which was

³⁵ GLASSER, *Artists' Contracts* (as in note 21); HENK VAN OS, *Sieneese Altarpieces, 1215–1460*, Groningen 1984–1990; HUMFREY, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (as in note 11); CHRISTA GARDNER VON TEUFFEL, Lorenzo Monaco, Filippo Lippi und Filippo Brunelleschi: Die Erfindung der Renaissance-pala, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 45 (1982), pp. 1–30; CREIGHTON GILBERT, *Peintres et menuisiers au début de la Renaissance en Italie*, in: *Revue de l'Art* 35 (1977), pp. 9–28.

³⁶ JACOB BURCKHARDT, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Italy*, trans. PETER HUMFREY, Cambridge 1988, p. 315.

the pre-eminent venue for large easel painting in the late Middle Ages.³⁷ What changes did it undergo in the later Middle Ages? How did new ideas about art and artists affect its function and status? It is necessary to revisit, in a more carefully historicized way, the classic question of the development from the polyptych to the modern »pala« – the rectangular, window-like picture format promoted by Alberti.

In the old polyptych format, frame and panel were a unified structure that was then colored and gilded by the painter. In the new format, the square panel was detached from the frame and could be made and painted independently – before, during, or after – the making of the frame.³⁸ This changed business practice in that it allowed painters to produce altarpieces more quickly, by having panels ready to hand and by subcontracting the making of the frame.³⁹ But the change meant more than a slightly different arrangement between painter and carpenter. Traditionally, the surface and shape of the altarpiece were established in advance; the carpenter delivered the structure to the painter, who would then decorate its surface.⁴⁰ Now the shape of the frame was, inversely, determined by the shape of the panel, a rectangular shape dictated by »internal« considerations of pictorial construction. In Alberti's perspective construction, the first step is to draw the rectangle. But even without Alberti's precepts, the rectangular format is an »abstract« shape, a picture field dictated by the painter.

The development was novel enough to require linguistic innovations. The old words *tavola* and *ancona* described the entire piece of carpentry including the frame, and thus were not suited to describe this new picture area *within* the frame. Some of the new words adopted for this purpose were *quadro*, *corpo*, *piano*, *campo*, and *vano*. On September 1, 1455, for example, Neri di Bicci subcontracted to have the frame for an altarpiece made by his associate Giuliano da Maiano, an elaborate frame that required some time to make. Only two days later, however, Neri received the panel surface alone (*cioè il quadro solo*) on which he was to paint, which he carefully distinguished from the frame as a whole. The *quadro* portion was thus readily available, and could be worked on while the frame was being made.⁴¹ In an

³⁷ HANS BELTING, Vom Altarbild zur autonomen Tafelmalerei, in: *Kunst: Die Geschichte ihrer Funktionen*, ed. WERNER BUSCH and PETER SCHMOOCK, Weinheim-Berlin 1987, pp. 128–149.

³⁸ GARDNER VON TEUFFEL, Lorenzo Monaco (as in note 35).

³⁹ GILBERT, *Peintres et menuisiers* (as in note 35).

⁴⁰ For example, see GLASSER, *Artists' Contracts* (as in note 21), pp. 157–158.

⁴¹ Neri di Bicci, *Le ricordanze* (10 marzo 1453–24 aprile 1475), ed. BRUNO SANTI, Pisa 1976, p. 33: Ebi la detta tavola di legname, cioè il quadro solo, a dì 3 di setembre 1455. Elsewhere (p.

altarpiece contract of 1488, Domenico Ghirlandaio stated that the artists would pay for the panel, clearly distinguished from the wood for the frame, which was an entirely separate operation.⁴² In the case of the Innocenti altarpiece of 1490, also by Ghirlandaio, mention is made of »the *piano* inside which requires the brush and not gold« – the gold was, in good Albertian fashion, reserved for the frame.⁴³ A similar distinction between frame and panel is made in the contract for Raphael's Monteluce Coronation, in which Raphael is asked to paint only the story inside (»depignere solum la Istoria supradicta *in lo campo o vero vano de dicta tavola*«).⁴⁴

The traditional mode of altarpiece construction put the painter under significant restrictions. The compartmentalization of the polyptych format fundamentally determined the painter's composition, dictating a row of standing saints, for example, and even dictating whether the figures would be full-length or half-length. This is not to assert that Trecento painters were unable to exercise compositional ingenuity. It is only to argue that the new format granted the painter a new order of control over the picture field: the entire zone from the frame inward was now the exclusive domain of the painter. The *quadro* or panel inside the frame was notionally no longer wood framework but picture field, designated as the area *dove si richiede penello et non oro* in Ghirlandaio's Innocenti contract.

The physical separation involved, in other words, a conceptual separation. The panel inside the frame was now understood as an open window giving onto a view, and the frame accordingly began to resemble »real« surrounding *all'antica* architecture. Little surprise that the frame-makers were now drawn increasingly from the ranks of the architects rather than the carpenters.⁴⁵ Again, this development was not limited to works inspired directly by Alberti; it was a function of the format: Nero di Bicce, who very likely never read a word of Alberti, typically described this new architectonic altarpiece as *al'anticha, chon predella da pie', cholonne da lato a chanali e architrave, fregio e chornicione e foglia sopra* (»in the antique style, with a predella below, flu-

48), Neri called this element »el chorpo di legname di detta tavola,« where again tavola refers to the entire altarpiece.

⁴² GUASTI, I quadri (as in note 18), pp. 111–112: la quale tavola dobbiamo fare el piano del legname nostro [...]. E tutto l'altro legname debbe pagare el detto frate Francesco. These documents describe the altarpiece for San Francesco di Palco near Prato.

⁴³ PAUL ERICH KUPPERS, Die Tafelbilder des Domenico Ghirlandaio, Strasbourg 1916, p. 88: el piano dentro dove si richiede penello e non oro.

⁴⁴ VINCENZO GOLZIO, Raffaello nei documenti: nelle testimonianze contemporanei e nella letteratura del suo secolo, Vatican City 1936, p. 48; GLASSER, Artists' Contracts (as in note 21), p. 155 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁵ GILBERT, Peintres et menuisiers (as in note 35), pp. 9–28.

ted columns on the sides and architrave, frieze, cornice with foliate ornamentation above»).⁴⁶

The earliest applications of a new aesthetic system usually involve the most manifesto-like, overtly ideological interpretation of its implications. Such is the case, for example, with Masaccio's »Trinity,« which I will leave aside here. It is also the case for the 1434 plan for the nave chapels of the Florentine church of San Lorenzo, first published in 1978. The plan stipulated that all the chapels should have identical dimensions, and that each of them should carry on its altar a *tabula quadrata et sine civoiriis*, a »square panel and without crockets« – that is, an *all'antica pala* and not a Gothic polyptych. The document also stipulated that no pictorial decoration other than the altar panel was to be allowed in any of the chapels without special license.⁴⁷

It is difficult to overestimate the regulated asceticism of this plan in a period when churches were typically filled with a riot of mural decorations, votive images, and private chapels, each vying with the others for greater richness and impressiveness.⁴⁸ In usual practice, donors in their contracts with artists regularly referred to existing altarpieces, and demanded that theirs be larger or in some other obvious way more impressive. In the new scheme at San Lorenzo, the only thing that would distinguish the decoration of one chapel from that of another, and that might indicate a difference in value, would be the excellence of the paintings within the picture frames. This would be competition of a new and highly aestheticized sort. White walls were an essential part of Brunelleschi's architectural conception, and his churches were designed to hold pictures in the new format.⁴⁹

But this was not only an aesthetic vision. It also involved institutional and ecclesiastical considerations: The ordered regularity would produce a restrained interior compatible with reformed Observant ideals, and the fact that images were confined to altars would make them more closely subject to institutional regulation. Strong-minded aesthetic design went hand in hand with institutional reform, making for a striking anticipation of the ordered

⁴⁶ Bicci, *Le ricordanze* (as in note 41), p. 48.

⁴⁷ JEFFREY RUDA, A 1434 building programme for San Lorenzo in Florence, in: *Burlington Magazine* 120 (1978), pp. 359–361, here: p. 361: *Et quod in dictis hujusmodi capellis et seu tribunis non possit fieri aliqua pictura preter tabulam predictam sine expressa licentia capituli dicte ecclesie.*

⁴⁸ See, for example, MARTIN WACKERNAGEL, *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist: Projects and Patrons, Workshop and Art Market*, trans. ALISON LUCHS, Princeton, NJ 1981, pp. 51–52.

⁴⁹ GARDNER VON TEUFFEL, *Lorenzo Monaco* (as in note 35).

church schemes of the Counter Reformation, such as Vasari's schemes for Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella and Palladaio's design for the Redentore in Venice.⁵⁰ The San Lorenzo scheme is the strongest period evidence we have that the new picture format was believed to carry a significant ideological charge, but well before it was considered a venue for secular artistic autonomy it was adopted as an instrument and symbol of religious reform.⁵¹

Nonetheless, everything did not change with the introduction of the new format, and the San Lorenzo scheme remained a remarkable exception. As Max Ernst once said about a later revolution in picture-making: *Ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage*.⁵² After the new format became the norm for altarpiece manufacture – as it was already for Neri di Bicci's busy mid-century workshop – we see a return to business as usual: the new format was used to do most of the things traditionally expected of altarpieces. We see Neri di Bicci, for example, able to work in both the Gothic polyptych format and the modern *all'antica* format, and in both cases his procedures were essentially the same.

And yet, the separation between panel and frame afforded by the *pala* format did promote pictorial developments that occasionally led to real conflicts with traditional systems of valuation. One such case is that of Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna of the Rocks*, commissioned in 1483 for the chapel of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in the church of San Francesco Grande in Milan. This work is rarely shown or discussed in relation to its original framework, but in this case the tendency of modern art historians to see it as an autonomous painting was anticipated already in the period. Although the original altarpiece structure, or *ancona*, carved by Giacomo del Maino, has been lost, it is known from verbal descriptions to resemble several other such structures made by members of the Maino family. This Milanese type of *ancona* was more than a framework for a painting; it was

⁵⁰ MARCIA HALL, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce, 1565–1577*, Oxford 1979; PETER HUMFREY, *Co-ordinated altarpieces in Renaissance Venice: The progress of an ideal*, in: *The Altarpiece in the Renaissance*, ed. PETER HUMFREY and MARTIN KEMP, Cambridge 1990, pp. 190–211.

⁵¹ Another coordinated project of this sort was carried out by Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Pope Pius II, at the Cathedral of Pienza in the early 1460s, which he had rebuilt by Bernardo Rossellino and outfitted with a series of new altarpieces in the modern *tavola quadrata* format. Even more clearly than in the case of San Lorenzo, this distinct choice of aesthetic modernism in architecture and altarpiece design (a particularly strong statement in the Siennese region at this time) was allied to a reform-minded impulse. See ENZO CARLI, *Pienza, la città di Pio II*, Siena 1976; VAN OS, *Siennese Altarpieces* (as in note 35), pp. 208–214.

⁵² MAX ERNST, *Au-delà de la peinture*, in: *Écritures*, Paris 1970, p. 256. My thanks to Elisabeth Legge for helping me locate this reference.

an elaborately carved piece of wooden architecture, complete with cupola and figural sculpture in the round. Leonardo's panel was to go in the center of the bottom register.⁵³

The comparison of this description to what we see in the picture reveals that Leonardo was given a great deal of freedom in the painting's design: the picture in the Louvre is no ordinary *nostra dona con lo suo fiollo*. Leonardo and his associates, the brothers de Predis, were also commissioned to paint side panels with angels as well as to gild and paint the *ancona* structure itself. In the early 1490s, they lodged a complaint (probably addressed to Duke Ludovico il Moro) in which they appealed for more money from the confraternity, claiming that the 800 lire (200 ducats) they were paid were lost in expenses. Interestingly, this *supplica* draws a strong distinction between the painted panels and the work on the frame: they are called *dicte due opere*, even though they were paid as one job. The central panel by Leonardo now in the Louvre is given special treatment as a separate entity. Leonardo even referred to potential purchasers who were willing to buy the panel separately for 100 ducats (*lo quale pretio de ducati cento hano trovato da persone quale hano voluto comprare dicta nostra dona*), and used this offer as a kind of alternative assessment to that of the 25 ducats he claimed was made by the confraternity.

The episode reveals a conflict between two conceptions of the status and role of painting and, thus, two modes of evaluation: on the one hand, that applied by the traditional confraternity, and on the other that adopted by a new breed of art collector. The *supplica* makes the most of this split, alleging that the members of the confraternity are not expert in painting, and that the blind cannot judge color (*et che dicti scolari [de la conceptione de sancto francesco de Milano] non sono in talibus experti, et quod cechus non iudicat de colore*).⁵⁴ As Glasser has pointed out, the extended litigation surrounding this work reveals a clear tendency on the part of the painters involved to dissociate themselves from the »surface« painting of the *ancona* structure itself, even though it was demanded in the contract, and to concentrate instead on the »paintings.« The documents show that the painters, and possibly the potential »external« buyer alluded to in the *supplica*, saw Leonardo's oil painting, the fruit of a relatively free process of invention on the part of the painter, as something that could be appreciated separate from its altarpiece framework.

⁵³ GLASSER, *Artists' Contracts* (as in note 21), p. 332: *la tavolla de mezo facta depenta in piano la nostra dona con lo suo fiollo eli angolli facta a olio in tucta perfectione.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 345; pp. 254–256.

The errors of later historians in privileging painters over other artisans, and in removing their work from their original contexts, go back at least to Vasari, who was already so committed to such a view that he seriously neglected the significant role of carpenters in the making of altarpieces.⁵⁵ The tendency to separate paintings from their frames and from their original physical surroundings – even the trend of taking altarpieces down from their altars and putting them in picture galleries – itself began in the Renaissance. The episode of Leonardo's *Madonna of the Rocks* is just one instance where we see a collision between two scales of value – one belonging to the traditional system of altarpiece production and the other to an emerging culture of collecting and connoisseurship. In the early sixteenth century, it became almost commonplace in the case of the highest-ranking artists. Titian seems to have received offers for his *Assunta* (Frari, Venice) and for his now lost St. Peter Martyr altarpiece when the original commissioning bodies were reluctant to accept them. He received a firm offer from Duke Alfonso d'Este for one panel of his Resurrection polyptych (SS. Nazaro e Celso, Brescia), and when his Annunciation proved too expensive for the nuns of Santa Maria degli Angeli he sent it instead to Empress Isabella of Spain.⁵⁶

The conflict with a traditional system of evaluation, which we saw sharply expressed in Leonardo's *supplica* (*et quod cechus non iudicat de colore*), became a standard feature of polemics in favor of painting as a liberal art. Dürer went so far as to assert: »The art of painting can be properly judged only by those who themselves are good painters; to others it is as inscrutable as a foreign language.« Elsewhere Dürer advised the artist to »see to it that art is dearly bought; no remuneration is too great for it, and this is godly and just.«⁵⁷ The even more extreme formulation *a nemine iudicatur*, claiming that an individual product of the mind cannot be judged by others, was sometimes applied from the traditional justification of the liberal arts.⁵⁸

To return to the individual cases, we may still ask what it was about these paintings that produced a crisis in standards of judgment and evaluation. What about Leonardo's painting threw into question the traditional criteria of assessment? It is my belief that as the physical unity and autonomy of the

⁵⁵ GILBERT, *Peintres et menuisiers* (as in note 35).

⁵⁶ HUMFREY, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (as in note 11), p. 85.

⁵⁷ Dürer: *Schriftlicher Nachlass* (as in note 29), vol. 2, pp. 112, 91; MARTIN WARNKE, *The Court Artist: On the Ancestry of the Modern Artist*, trans. DAVID McLINTOCK, Cambridge 1993, pp. 37–39.

⁵⁸ ERNST H. KANTOROWICZ, *The sovereignty of the artist: A note on legal maxims and Renaissance theories of art*, in: *De artibus opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. MILLARD MEISS, New York 1960, pp. 267–279; WARNKE, *The Court Artist* (as in note 57), p. 147.

panel gave rise to explorations of thematic and pictorial unity, it became harder to submit such works to traditional forms of quantitative estimation. Traditional altarpieces were estimated by their size and by the number of figures they contained, as well as by the quality of materials used, as the records of Neri di Bicci make abundantly clear. The clarity of pricing went hand in hand with clarity of devotional function. The traditional *sacra conversazione*, overwhelmingly the most common type of altarpiece composition through the fifteenth century and most of the sixteenth century, allowed for a clear path by which devotees could appeal for favors from sacred personages. Even altars dedicated to mysteries rather than personages – the four most common narrative subjects identified by Humfrey for Venetian Renaissance altarpieces were the Annunciation, the Lamentation over Christ, the Nativity, and the Coronation of the Virgin – had fairly stable iconographic traditions.

The sort of painting advocated by Alberti and, in their various ways, developed by Leonardo and Titian tended away from these conventions. What they prized above all was thematic unity achieved through forceful composition and congruent experiments in light and color. Such a wholesale approach to the conception of a picture was also, it was believed, the surest means of producing something innovative and original. And certainly Leonardo's *Madonna of the Rocks* looks nothing like a traditional *nostra dona con lo suo fiollo*, as requested in the contract, and Titian's *Assunta* looks nothing like traditional altarpieces of that subject. A *sacra conversazione* would have been the expected solution to the commission for Titian's *St. Peter Martyr* altarpiece; it is likely that Titian exerted some influence in the Scuola's decision to adopt a highly dramatic event instead as the subject of their altarpiece. In all three cases, as we have seen, the innovations ran into conflicts with traditional criteria of evaluation – and encouraged alternative forms of appreciation from a new breed of buyers.

It is likely that a similar problem arose in the case of Rosso Fiorentino's disputed *Madonna and saints* now in the Uffizi. The cleric in charge of the commission, Leonardo Buonafè, detested the painting, paid Rosso only 16 of the promised 25 florins for it, and sent it off to an outlying parish church instead of putting it on its intended altar in the church of Ognissanti in Florence. As it happens, Buonafè was an experienced patron of altarpieces, and the surviving works commissioned by him by Ridolfo Ghirlandaio and Lorenzo di Credi, for which they were paid as much as 40 florins, show very stable and conventional compositions, with a Madonna enthroned and saints clearly disposed on either side. Although Rosso's painting is still a *sacra conversazione*, the animation of the figures and the compression of the composition produce a very different effect from the other Buonafè altarpieces.

There is a sense of urgent drama that unifies the picture, and this might have been disturbing and confusing to someone, like Buonafè, who expected stable clarity in altarpieces. As Franklin put it: »The devout expected to be able to offer their prayers to the saints in an altarpiece, who would in turn make their prayers more efficacious by intervening on their behalf before the Virgin represented in heaven. The saints do not play this role in Rosso's painting, but rather are totally concentrated on internal matters.«⁵⁹

The qualities valued by the new connoisseurs – forcefulness of expression, innovative composition, subtlety in the handling of light, and so on – were very difficult to quantify. They were also difficult to dictate to a painter. During Isabella d'Este's frustrating negotiations with Giovanni Bellini, she had to be reminded by Pietro Bembo that Bellini »prefers not to have overly defined terms imposed on his style, being accustomed, as he says, always to wander at will in his pictures, so that they can give satisfaction to himself as well as to the beholder.«⁶⁰ Similarly, Federico I Gonzaga of Mantua soothed the nettled Bona of Savoy, Duchess of Milan, over her efforts to extract a small portrait from Mantegna. Reporting that Mantegna would consider making instead something larger – »a Madonna, or something the length of a *braccia* or a *braccia* and a half« – he advised her: »My lady [...] usually these excellent painters have a touch of the fantastic and it is advisable to take what they offer one.«⁶¹ In both instances, we see a traditional patron being forced into the novel role of collector: the difference between the two roles is that in the one case the commission comes first, whereas in the other the work of art does. Soon enough, however, it was to become common practice for art-loving patrons to engage in the familiar modern quest for a Michelangelo or a Raphael, without regard for the subject or, usually, the price.⁶²

One significant example is the episode of the Leda that Michelangelo made for Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, who had left the subject entirely up to the artist. Having heard that the painting was ready, Alfonso, in a letter of October 1530, broached the delicate subject of payment, which he carefully avoided associating with traditional compensation: *Et non vi scan-*

⁵⁹ Franklin, p. 50.

⁶⁰ Gaye, Carteggio inedito d'artisti (as in note 34), pp. 71–73: ha piacere che molto signati termini non si diano al suo stile, uso, come dice, di sempre vagare a sua voglia nelle pitture, che quanto in lui possano soddisfare a chi li mira.

⁶¹ PAUL KRISTELLER, Andrea Mantegna, trans. S. ARTHUR STRONG, London 1901, p. 480: comunemente questi magistri eccellenti hanno del fantastico e da loro convenien tuore quello che se po havere.

⁶² JOHN SHEARMAN, Mannerism, Harmondsworth 1967, p. 44.

*dolezate se hora [...] non vi mando pagamento alcuno, perché né da per me lo so iudicare, non l'havendo ancor vista. Ma ben vi prometto che non havrete perso quella fatica che havrete durata per mio amore; et mi farete piacere gratissimo se mi scrivete quanto vi piacerà ch'io vi mandi, perché sarò molto più sicuro del iudicio vostro, in stimarla, che del mio.*⁶³ Unfortunately, Alfonso's courtier, sent to obtain the painting, did not have his master's tact in these matters. Upon seeing the work, he said it was »a small thing.« Michelangelo then asked him what his profession was, that he should make such a judgment. The courtier responded, ironically, »a merchant.« To which Michelangelo responded: »You will have done bad business for your master this time. Get out!« He then gave the painting to his pupil Antonio Mini, who sold it in order to give his two sisters dowries.⁶⁴

Under the new mode of evaluation, the monetary assessments of the present day became less important than the »priceless« value the work would have for posterity. Just as the painting was being loosened from its physical framework, so was it freed from the framework of immediate socio-economic considerations, so as to take up a position in the virtual gallery of the history of art. In the words of the sixteenth-century antiquarian Pirro Ligorio, »It may be said that painting is a sovereign art [*arte da signore*] because it must be practiced for fame, not for reward [*non per premio: ma per Gloria*].«⁶⁵ Or in those of Alberti: »A mind intent on gain will rarely obtain the reward of fame with posterity.«⁶⁶

This consideration led Vasari, a painter with a strong interest in the history of art, to change the terms of traditional commissions on a number of occasions. Asked to do a small panel of the Virgin and saints for the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, for example, he reported, »I remembered having learned that Filippo Brunelleschi, the architect of the church, had constructed the chapels so that each should have one large picture filling the whole space, and not a little one [see discussion above!]. Wishing to respect Brunelleschi's idea and thinking more of honour than of the slight gain to be made from a small picture with few figures, I did the martyrdom of Saint Sigismund, the king, ten *braccia* long by thirteen high.«⁶⁷ This is a clear in-

⁶³ Il Carteggio di Michelangelo, ed. GIOVANNI POGGI, PAOLA BAROCCHI, and RENZO RISTORI, 5 vols., Florence 1965-1973, vol. 3, p. 290.

⁶⁴ Vasari, *The Lives* (as in note 4), pp. 137-38.

⁶⁵ DAVID COFFIN, Pirro Ligorio on the nobility of the arts, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964), pp. 191-210, here: p. 209, quoted by WARNKE, *The Court Artist* (as in note 57), pp. 152-153.

⁶⁶ Alberti, *On Painting* (as in note 23), paragraph 29.

⁶⁷ Vasari, *The Lives* (as in note 4), p. 279.

stance of a painter considering that a grand narrative would do him more honor than a Virgin and saints; at the same time, his regard for the place of his work in the history of art (Brunelleschi's scheme) involved a disregard for the terms and monetary conditions of the commission.

Similar considerations influenced Vasari when, after making a Virgin and saints for the Pisa cathedral, he was asked to make another. Considering that the Pisa Duomo contained »many other paintings by great artists,« he decided to attempt a more challenging narrative composition: »As this was also a Madonna, for the sake of variety I did Our Lady with the dead Christ in her lap, at the foot of the cross, the thieves hanging on crosses above, the Maries and Nicodemus standing by; and introducing the titular saints of the chapels, forming a pleasing composition.«⁶⁸ On still another occasion, at the Refectory of the Camaldolese church in Bologna, he described his paintings as »experiments in the difficulties of art,« undertaken with little concern for payment: »I accepted 200 crowns for the whole, being more eager for glory than for gain.« He then recorded the inscription devised by the humanist Andrea Alciati for the frescoes: »This work was painted by Giorgio Aretino in eight months, not for gain but as a gift of friendship and by a vow of honor, in the year 1539 [...].«⁶⁹

4. Liberal Art and Reformed Art

Despite this superstition, I do not rule out the possibility that images should exist at all. But as sculpture and painting are gifts of God, I require them to have a pure and legitimate use [...]. It therefore remains to paint and sculpt only that of which our eyes are capable, lest God's majesty, which far surpasses our sight, be corrupted by unseemly forms. The permissible images include histories and events, as well as images and the forms of bodies, without historical significance. The former serve to instruct and admonish; I cannot see what the latter offer beyond delight.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 269.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 266: *Octonis mensibus opus ab Aretino Georgio pictum, non tam praetio quam amico obsequio et honoris voto, anno 1539 [...].*

⁷⁰ Jean Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (1559), ed. AUGUST THOLUCK, Edinburgh 1874, vol. 1, XI, 12: *Neque tamen ea superstitione teneor ut nullas prorsus imagines ferendas censeam. Sed quia sculptura et pictura Dei dona sunt, purum et legitimum usum requiro [...]. Restat igitur ut ea sola pigantur ac sculptantur quorum sint capaces oculi, Dei majestas quae oculorum sensu longe superior est, ne decoris spectris corrumpatur. In eo genere partim sunt historiae et res gestae, partim imagines ac formae corporum, sine ulla rerum gestarum notatione.*

When Calvin called art a gift of God, he was invoking an age-old tradition concerning the liberal arts. An art was considered *liberalis* if it was not practiced for gain but rather in the disinterested pursuit of learning. Because learning was a »gift of God,« its value could not be quantified or remunerated because divine gifts could not be sold but only honored: *Scientia Donum Dei est, Unde vendi non potest.*⁷¹ Liberal arts were also meant to be free of manual labor, a tradition that presented some difficulty for the defenders of the visual arts. Without denying that manual labor and physical materials were involved, the defenders of the visual arts diminished the importance of this fact in a number of ways. They insisted that the value of the work was separate from the value of materials used in the work. They asserted that the worth of the work bore no relation to the amount of labor involved in making it. In his preface to the third part of his *Lives*, the era of art's »perfection,« Vasari dissociated the excellence of painting from the laborious realm of applied techniques, invoking instead a *licenzia* that operates outside the rules, marked by »a grace that exceeds measure« and a »graceful and suave facility that appears between the seen and the not seen.«⁷² Once again, we are not far from the language of divine grace.

If the manual nature of artistic work presented an obstacle, the mimetic claims of the visual arts were eminently well suited to the idea that art was a divine gift. A tradition of artists' biographies established the topos of artists in their childhood learning to draw directly from nature rather than through instruction – a topos found in the biographies of Giotto, Michelino da Besozzo, Andrea del Castagno, Mantegna, Andrea Sansovino, Domenico Beccafumi, and later Zurbarán and Goya. This was a way of asserting that painting was a natural gift rather than a learned craft.⁷³ Leonardo used the story about Giotto having been discovered by Cimabue drawing after animals as proof that as an »offspring of Nature« painting was a liberal art.⁷⁴ After citing Pliny's anecdote about Zeuxis giving away his pictures because there was no price adequate to them, Alberti commented: »He did not be-

Priores usum in docendo vel admonendo aliquem habent; secundae quid praeter oblectationem afferre possint non video.

⁷¹ POST, GIOCARINIS, and KAY, *The medieval heritage* (as in note 33); DAVIS, *Beyond the market* (as in note 33).

⁷² Vasari, *Le vite* (as in note 1), vol. 4, p. 5.

⁷³ OTTO PÄCHT, *Early Italian nature studies and the early calendar landscape*, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23 (1950), pp. 13–47; ERNST KRIS and OTTO KURZ, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, New Haven 1979, pp. 26–38; WARNKE, *The Court Artist* (as in note 57), pp. 35–36

⁷⁴ JEAN PAUL RICHTER, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, New York 1970, p. 660.

lieve any price could be found to recompense the man who, in modelling or painting living things, behaved like a god among mortals.«⁷⁵

Leonardo da Vinci, as is well known, claimed an exalted status for the painter on the basis of his quasi-divine relation to nature, claiming that »necessity compels the mind of the painter to transmute itself into the actual mind of nature to become an interpreter between nature and art.«⁷⁶ This argument, it must be said, was more important to Leonardo's defense of painting as a liberal art than any qualms about painters receiving payment for their work. In response to the accusation of writers that painters work for gain, he replied: »Do you not make works for gain? Nonetheless, I don't say this to disparage such opinions, because every effort expects its reward.«⁷⁷ But the conception of the gift is still a significant part of his argument, for his understanding of the artist as »lord and God« makes painting part of a cosmic process of creation and procreation: painting is the »grandchild of nature« and the »kin to God.«⁷⁸ Painting is begotten from God and in this sense is gift-like.

What do these pronouncements have to do with Leonardo's practice? For Leonardo, as for van Eyck and Dürer, the development of the oil painting technique was essential to the pursuit of naturalism in art. Because it allowed for a greater degree of subtlety in modeling, the oil technique made it possible to envision an »unmediated« realism that would present the visual phenomena as if without the intervention of artist's brush. Leonardo engaged in countless experiments with oils, varnish, and possibly diluents in an effort to improve this effect. He did everything he could to eliminate the trace of the artist's »hand« in the work, which he believed was an index of his failure to accomplish the goals of naturalism; it betrayed the imposition of the artist's personal judgment on the phenomena of experience.⁷⁹

Van Eyck, Dürer, and Leonardo were each heralded as founders of a new era of painting within their respective traditions, and in all three cases this »inauguration« is accompanied by a fascination with the idea of a painting that hides all trace of the artistic labor that produced it. Why should the

⁷⁵ Alberti, *On Painting* (as in note 23), paragraph 25.

⁷⁶ CLAIRE J. FARAGO, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone: A Critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the Codex Urbinas*, Leiden 1992, p. 272.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁷⁹ FRANK ZÖLLNER, *Ogni pittore dipinge se: Leonardo da Vinci und »Automimesis«*, in: *Der Künstler über sich in seinem Werk*, ed. MATTHIAS WINNER, Weinheim 1992, pp. 137-160; ALEXANDER NAGEL, *Leonardo and Sfumato*, in: *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 24 (1993), pp. 7-20.

most self-conscious of Renaissance artists have promoted an ideal of »stylelessness« in art? I believe the answer lies in the legacy of the tradition of *acheiropoeta*, or cult images »made without human hands« – that is, images that are bestowed directly by God. (All three artists in fact produced versions of these cult images using the new technique.) At the core of some of the most ambitious and »advanced« developments in Renaissance art, therefore, lay a claim to the unbidden, gift-like qualities traditionally associated with cult images.⁸⁰ Little wonder that Leonardo's arguments in defense of painting as a liberal art should be studded with allusions to the miraculous qualities of cult images and to the veneration accorded them.⁸¹ Once again, the gift-like status claimed for painting by its Renaissance defenders borrowed from a religious discourse of divine grace and bestowal.

Such ideas about painting were not confined to Italy. Dürer and his humanist contemporaries were also capable of extolling the visual arts as quasi-divine gifts,⁸² but after the Reformation very few people were willing to assert that this recommended them for a privileged role in religion. Quite to the contrary. Calvin, as we have seen, was able to call painting and sculpture divine gifts and at the same time to exclude them from any role in religious life. Luther's protector Franz von Sickingen appreciated works of art so much he felt they should be taken out of churches and admired instead as »ornaments in fine rooms.« For him, their *Kunst und Schönheit und Pracht* could only be a distraction from *die rechte innerliche Betrachtung im Gebet*.⁸³

In Italy, which saw reform movements without a Reformation, the lines were not so clearly drawn. It was more commonly believed that reform could be accomplished while preserving existing institutions, and thus it became possible to see the new »liberal« conception of the visual arts as a potential avenue for the renovation of their role in religious life. The idea appears in one of the first Counter-Reformation treatises on art, *Degli errori de' pittori*, written in 1562 by Giovanni Andrea Gilio. He opens the treatise with the assertion that the abuses and errors of the painters derive from the fact that painters have traditionally held a low status and have lacked education; the way to improve religious art is to promote painting as a liberal art, and to de-

⁸⁰ HANS BELTING, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich 1990, ch. 20; JOSEPH KOERNER, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago 1993; NAGEL, *Leonardo and Sfumato* (as in note 79).

⁸¹ FARAGO, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone* (as in note 76), pp. 189, 199.

⁸² PANOFKY, *Artist, scientist, genius* (as in note 6), pp. 171–175.

⁸³ ULRICH OELSCHLÄGER, *Der Sendbrief Franz von Sickingens an seinem Verwandten Dieter von Handschuchsheim*, in: *Blätter für pfälzische Kirchengeschichte und religiöse Volkskunde* 37/38 (1971–1972), pp. 710–726, here: p. 723.

mand that painters live up to the standards of the liberal arts. Throughout his treatise, he invokes classical examples very much in the manner of humanist treatises on art, but now these examples are adduced with the novel and explicit purpose of defending and promoting art's religious vocation. There are several areas where Gilio does not see eye to eye with other defenders of painting as a liberal art, but this should not blind us to the areas of agreement. It would be wrong to depict Gilio, and several other Counter-Reformation writers, simply as conservative critics of innovation in art.

Gilio's treatise is concerned almost exclusively with history painting, the arena that most painters and theorists since Alberti considered the highest test of artistic excellence. Although Gilio had many criticisms to make of painters who pursue artistic goals to the detriment of religious meaning, the orientation towards history painting reveals a fundamental agreement over the purposes of art. The emphasis on history painting, and on the Gregorian dictum of images as the bible of the unlettered, became a dominant theme of Counter-Reformation writing on art, most notably in Gabriele Paleotti's much more extensive treatise of 1582. Not only was this bias not essentially in conflict with a »liberal« defense of art, it can be seen as a departure from traditional forms of piety and image-making that was very much in line with »modern« trends. Not many of Paleotti's comments apply very well to, say, the traditional polyptych, or even the traditional *sacra conversazione*. Whereas that type of image catered to a piety based on donations, favors, and indulgences, the new orientation towards history painting placed emphasis instead on painting's capacity to teach and to move. To return to the earlier discussion, whereas the *sacra conversazione* was designed to serve a calculated exchange of prayers and favors, the history painting offered a non-quantifiable experience, and a more intangible benefit. It functioned more like the »gift of learning« offered by the other liberal arts.

We see a related departure from the saint-oriented piety so ridiculed by the Protestant Reformers in the new forms of Christocentrism that appeared in Italian sixteenth-century altarpieces.⁸⁴ Such a reorientation moved the content of altarpieces away from the individual sphere of private patrons and their patron saints and towards a more »public« and high-minded piety – promoting, as Humfrey put it, »an emphasis on the eucharistic connotations of the Christian altar in general, at the expense of the hagiological connotations of one altar in particular.«⁸⁵ It was, in this sense, a movement away

⁸⁴ HUMFREY, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (as in note 11), pp. 72–78; PETER HUMFREY, *Altarpieces and altar dedications in Counter-Reformation Venice and the Veneto*, in: *Renaissance Studies* 10:3 (1996), pp. 371–387.

⁸⁵ HUMFREY, *Altarpieces and altar dedications* (as in note 84), p. 396.

from the system of gift exchange that dominated late medieval devotions, which consisted overwhelmingly of offerings to saints and expected favors for self and family, and towards an emphasis on the fundamental and general gift of sacrifice and redemption offered by Christ.

An early example of such a trend is Titian's Resurrection polyptych of 1519–1522 in Brescia, which was made for an altar dedicated to Saints Nazarus, Celsus, and Sebastian. Rather than appearing in the central panel of the altarpiece, these saints are relegated to the margins, and the center is given to the more universal Eucharistic theme of the Resurrection, conceived by Titian in a highly dramatic key. This work has traditionally been seen as an emblem of a conflict between a proto-secular artistic modernism and the shackles of religious tradition. Titian produced a highly modern picture, filled with drama and an emphasis on the nude, and yet he is confined to a traditional polyptych form. The idea seems confirmed by evidence that one of the agents of Alfonso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, attempted to acquire one of the panels for the Duke's private collection.⁸⁶

And yet it now seems clear that the painting shows a joining of forces rather than a conflict. The patron of the polyptych, Altobello Averoldi, was noted for his reform-minded orientation and, as papal legate to Venice, was particularly concerned about the spread of heresy. Given Luther's recent contestation of the Sacraments, it comes as little surprise that Averoldi should have commissioned an altarpiece with a strongly Eucharistic emphasis. It has frequently been observed that this sort of doctrinal emphasis was extremely rare in altarpieces up to this time.⁸⁷ In other words, the new emphasis required a corresponding innovation in altarpiece design. Titian's grand manner and dramatic emphasis would have seemed, to a sophisticated patron such as Averoldi, ideally suited for such an enterprise. Seen from this perspective, it is not entirely surprising that the desire for a newly dramatic and didactic altarpiece, one that would reassert basic Catholic doctrine, should also have been accompanied by a preference for a distinctly archaic format, the polyptych. Titian's dramatic grand manner and the archaic format, so far from being incompatible, were both part of a reform-minded strategy. Artistic modernism and religious reform, even deliberate archaism, went together. As it turns out, Titian's work anticipated a long line of dramatic, Christocentric altarpieces produced during the Counter Reformation. Likewise, Titian's highly innovative St. Peter Martyr altarpiece, which sub-

⁸⁶ *Il Polittico Averoldi di Tiziano restaurato*, ed. ELENA LUCCHESI-RAGNI and GIOVANNI AGOSTI, Brescia 1991, pp. 89–93.

⁸⁷ HUMFREY, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (as in note 11), pp. 72–78; HOPE, *Altarpieces and the requirements of patrons* (as in note 20).

stituted a grand drama for a more static traditional composition, anticipated a long line of Counter-Reformation martyr dramas. The fact that both works also attracted the interest of collectors and connoisseurs need not be seen as a contradiction: it is instead a sign that avant-garde trends in art were not yet seen as incompatible with efforts at religious renovation.

5. The Seductions of the Gift

And yet this was not a simple and harmonious marriage, for the erotic invitations of the new art continually threatened conflict. It is no coincidence that the panel from Titian's altarpiece that most attracted the collector's speculative eye was the one showing the nude Saint Sebastian. Perhaps the most emblematic account of the conflict comes in the writings of Leonardo da Vinci. In response to the argument that poets have the capacity to kindle love in men, he said, »The painter has the power to do the same, and much more because he puts the actual effigy of the thing loved [*cosa amata*] in front of the lover. Often the lover kisses the effigy and speaks to it, which he would not do if the same beauties were put in front of him by the writer.« This he illustrated with an example:

Once I happened to make a painting which represented something divine [*una cosa divina*] that was bought by someone who loved it, who wanted to remove the representation of the deity [*la rappresentazione de tal Deità*] so he would be able to kiss it without misgivings [*sanza sospetto*]. But in the end his conscience rose above his sighs and his lust, and he was forced to remove it from his house.⁸⁸

In the painting described by Leonardo the mingling of aesthetic and religious claims produces discomfort, and demands that iconographic and generic clarity be imposed »externally,« through forceful intervention: Either the painting has to be retouched, or it has to be removed from the house.

Elizabeth Cropper has stressed that in the artistic culture of the High Renaissance newly exalted values assigned to painting were often associated with values assigned to female beauty, so much so that the image of the beautiful woman became metonymic for the beauty of painting itself.⁸⁹ Many of the most explicit expressions of this association were, in turn, dominated

⁸⁸ FARAGO, Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone (as in note 76), p. 231.

⁸⁹ ELIZABETH CROPPER, On beautiful women: Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the vernacular style, in: Art Bulletin 58 (1976), pp. 374-394.

by a discourse of gift-giving. One of the legends most often cited in celebrations of painting as a liberal art was the story of Alexander and Apelles. Pliny recounts that Alexander commissioned a painting of his mistress Campaspe in the nude from Apelles; discovering that Apelles had fallen in love with her, he gave the woman to the painter and kept the painting.⁹⁰ Seneca famously made the Three Graces into the visual emblem of his treatise on benefits, and specifically advised that they be shown in transparent clothing »because benefits should be seen.«⁹¹ For similar reasons other ancient writers recommended that they be shown entirely nude, and it is in this form that they are shown in most ancient examples.⁹² The image of the Three Graces, in Botticelli, in Raphael, and elsewhere, became in the Renaissance an emblem of a humanist conception of beauty, and thus of the ideals of art.

The theme of the Three Graces was related in the minds of several Renaissance artists and patrons to the story of the judgment of Paris, in which Minerva, Juno, and Venus display their beauties to the gaze of the prize-awarding shepherd. Once again, the display of female beauty occasions an archetypal »moment« of aesthetic judgment, a judgment that is sealed with a gift, the golden apple offered to Venus – a gift that, in turn, entails a war, fraught with historical consequences, hinging on the possession of a woman.⁹³ We find similar ingredients in the story of Adam and Eve, which Dürer made a showcase for the display of the artistic mastery of the nude and virtually a manifesto for humanist art in the North. Here again we have the combination of a seductive woman and the offering of a gift (Genesis 3, 6: »she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her«), a moment that inaugurates the very awareness of nudity and thus the history of shameful desire (Genesis 3, 7: »And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked.«).⁹⁴

Apart from these specific themes, much of what was considered especially valuable in High Renaissance art – much of what recommended it to be included among the liberal arts – involved a distinct eroticization of the viewing experience, a development that went hand in hand with a thematics of grace and gift-giving. Beauty was a gift of love, and – as the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino once put it – »love, born from the Graces, gives

⁹⁰ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (as in note 32), xxxv, pp. 86–87.

⁹¹ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, in: *Moral Essays*, trans. JOHN W. BASORE, vol. 3, London 1935, I, iii, 5.

⁹² EDGAR WIND, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, New York ²1968, pp. 30–31.

⁹³ Cf. HUBERT DAMISCH, *Le jugement de Paris*, Paris 1992.

⁹⁴ Cf. JEAN STAROBINSKI, *Largesse*, Paris 1994, pp. 1–3.

and accepts everything without payment.«⁹⁵ Vasari, as we have seen, celebrated the era of art inaugurated by Leonardo da Vinci for having removed the »dryness« and »diligence« of earlier art, replacing it with new qualities of loveliness (*vaghezza*) and a certain »grace that exceeds measure.« Castiglione's discussion of the visual arts, one of the strongest arguments in favor of their nobility, leads directly into a discussion of the affections of erotic love.⁹⁶

Elizabeth Cropper has correlated the new values of High Renaissance art with a predominantly Petrarchan culture of poetic desire: new conceptions of picture-making in the period, she contends, invoked relations to the beholder whose closest parallel and cultural model is the relation between lover and beloved, or *io* and *tu*, found in the tradition of the Petrarchan love lyric, which at this time was undergoing a notable revival.⁹⁷ In thematizing desire as a relation to something that exceeds the possibility of possession, the Petrarchan tradition engaged in a discourse of gifts similar to the one adduced in discussions of painting as a liberal art: in both cases the object of beauty is priceless, excessive, eludes easy possession, and thus commands extravagant, noble gestures of liberality on the part of the lover/beholder.⁹⁸

Contemporaries were not slow to perceive a potential contradiction between the claims of the new art and the purposes of religion. The Marquis of Mantua Federico Gonzaga, who was one of the foremost collectors of high-quality erotic art (he commissioned Correggio's series of the »Loves of the Gods«), wrote to Baldassare Castiglione in Rome in 1524, asking him to see about getting a painting by Sebastiano del Piombo. The painting, he said, can be of any kind »so long as it is not about saints, but rather something lovely and beautiful to look at.«⁹⁹ The phrasing (*ma*) clearly implies that re-

⁹⁵ ERNST GOMBRICH, Botticelli's mythologies: A study in the Neo-Platonic symbolism of his circle, in: IDEM, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, Chicago 1985, p. 41.

⁹⁶ Baldassare Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortigiano* (1528), in: *Opere di Baldassare Castiglione*, Giovanni della Casa, Benvenuto Cellini, ed. CARLO CORDIÉ, Milan-Naples 1960, pp. 86-87.

⁹⁷ ELIZABETH CROPPER, The place of beauty in the High Renaissance and its displacement in the history of art, in: *Place and Displacement in the Renaissance*, ed. ALVIN VOS (*Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 132) Binghamton, NY 1995, pp. 159-205; and see AMEDEO QUONDAM, *Il naso di Laura: lingua e poesia lirica nella tradizione del classicismo*, Ferrara 1991, pp. 291-328.

⁹⁸ For an excellent analysis of the thematics of the gift in Shakespeare's reception of the Petrarchan tradition, see WILLIAM WEST, Nothing as given: Economies of the gift in Derrida and Shakespeare, in: *Comparative Literature* 48 (1996), pp. 1-18.

⁹⁹ ALESSANDRO LUZIO, *La galleria dei Gonzaga venduta all'Inghilterra nel 1627-28* (1913) Milan 1974, p. 28: non siano cose di sancti, ma qualche pitture vaghe et belle da vedere.

ligious images tend not to belong to the category of pictures that are lovely and beautiful to look at; put another way, Gonzaga is implying that secular subjects (and for Gonzaga this would tend to mean subjects with a strongly erotic flavor) provide better opportunities for the display of artistic excellence and for the experience of aesthetic pleasure.

In these instances the conflict remained implicit, but towards the middle of the sixteenth century it became a matter of open debate. Francesco della Torre, who belonged to the household of the prominent reforming bishop of Verona, Gian Matteo Giberti, addressed the issue as it affected the realm of poetry in a letter of 1540. He was sending along verses by Marcantonio Flaminio, one of the most prominent figures in reform-minded circles in Italy at the time, and offered his opinion on the relative merits of sacred and profane poetry, which appeared by this point to be a well-worn topic of debate. Whereas the verses he was sending were religious, he promised to send other poems of »pastoral and amorous subjects,« which he believed would be more pleasing, because »they are that much more lovely [*vaghi*] and more beautiful [*venusti*] when they treat of matters that are more capable of loveliness [*più capaci did vaghezza*], for in truth in trying to treat these matters of religion in a lovely manner [*vagamente*] more often than not one merely makes the sacred profane: and I believe it is a difficult thing to do it well, and with dignity.«¹⁰⁰

Here again we encounter the view that what is better for art is not necessarily better for religion. Such a view had become a commonplace in debates concerning the visual arts especially after the unveiling of Michelangelo's Last Judgment in 1541. A letter of 1541 by Nino Sernini reporting on this event from Rome to Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga in Mantua put the issue quite succinctly: »The work is of such beauty that your excellency can imagine that there is no lack of those who condemn it.« For Sernini, as for most *intendenti* of the period, »such beauty« in visual art was embodied above all in the nude, and »the very reverend Theatines are the first to say that the nudes do not belong in such a place.«¹⁰¹ The sentiment was expounded in more polemical terms in a famous open letter by Aretino to Michelangelo which dates from 1545. Aretino does not question Michelangelo's artistic genius but rather his judgment. With an opportunist's unerring sense for shifting ideological winds, already in 1545 Aretino set out the fundamental points to be developed in the Counter-Reformation polemic on images: that the pursuit

¹⁰⁰ Lettere volgari di diversi nobilissimi huomini, et eccellentissimi ingegni scritte in diverse materie, vol. 2, Venice 1551, f. 113-113^v.

¹⁰¹ BERNADINE BARNES, Michelangelo's Last Judgment: The Renaissance Response, Berkeley 1998, p. 78.

of artistic ambitions (the depiction of the nude form, the pursuit of *difficultà*) is not necessarily to the greater good of religion, and thus that it is necessary to observe a sense of appropriateness to place, or decorum.¹⁰²

Responding to this rising tide of Counter-Reformation criticism, Vasari addressed the issue most clearly in the »Life of Fra Angelico,« where he referred to contemporary painters who paint nudes that »excite dishonourable appetites and lascivious desires, so that the work is blamed for what is disreputable, while praise is accorded its artistic excellence.« And yet he held out for the possibility that modern »artistic excellence« can still serve the purposes of religion. People should not, he argued, be fooled into thinking that only an awkward, clumsy thing – »goffo et inetto,« terms he used repeatedly to describe medieval art – can be devout. Fra Angelico, who was an excellent painter motivated by Albertian ideals, but who had not yet fallen into the indiscriminate use of the nude, became Vasari's model for the joining of artistic and religious values.¹⁰³ As in the case of Giovanni Andrea Gilio, who like Vasari was in the service of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, the proposal to put modern artistic ideals in the service of reforming religious art involved a carefully considered archaism.¹⁰⁴

6. Can't Buy Me Love

The conflicts between the invitations of beautiful art and the purposes of religion might seem insurmountable, an impression that the secularizing narratives of much of the historiography of Renaissance art have done little to diminish. Even to point to Vasari's and Gilio's efforts at reconciliation seems a feeble response, for these are rather uncomfortable compromises, with no obvious practical application. And yet there were other areas where contemporaries saw the possibility of forging a unity between aesthetic and religious ideals. The gift-like qualities claimed by the most ambitious Renaissance art, the strongly erotic stamp of its thematization of excess, was not entirely at odds with elements in the Christian spiritual tradition, and occasionally Renaissance artists, humanists, and reformers recognized this. The commentaries of Origen on the Song of Songs, and, even more important, those of

¹⁰² ROBERT KLEIN and HENRI ZERNER, *Italian Art 1500-1600: Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1966, pp. 122-124; BARNES, *Michelangelo's Last Judgment* (as in note 101), pp. 80-88.

¹⁰³ Vasari, *Le vite* (as in note 1), vol. 3, pp. 273-274.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. FEDERICO ZERI, *Pittura e controriforma: l'arte senza tempo di Scipione da Gaeta*, Turin 1957.

Bernard, opened a rich field for the exploration of erotic themes and metaphors within devotional practice. The metaphor of Christ as spouse, for example, played an important role in the development of a strongly erotic and somatic strain in late medieval devotions, one that was run through with ideas of ravishment and excess.¹⁰⁵

Within our period, the Dominican reformer Girolamo Savonarola proved himself a worthy inheritor of this tradition in one of his own commentaries on the Song of Songs. What makes his commentary interesting for our purposes is that he directly relates this spiritual tradition to the claims of painting. For him there was a perfect parallel between the beholder's ravishment before a painting of a beautiful woman and the believer's ecstatic embrace of Christ's love:

Love is like a painter. The works of a good painter so charm men that, in contemplating them, they remain suspended, and sometimes to such an extent that it seems they have been put in an ecstasy and have been taken outside of themselves, and seem to forget themselves. This is what the love of Jesus Christ does when it is in the soul [...]. Ask a man who is in love with a woman what love paints in the chamber of his imagination. He will respond, »Her face, her eyes, her movements, her clothes,« and other such things. And love paints them so well that all his powers remain suspended before these pictures [*tali pitture*] and he is not interested in thinking of anything else, or of contemplating anything other than those pictures ... If carnal love produces such effects, spiritual love, that is love of Jesus Christ, produces even more powerful ones.¹⁰⁶

This passage does more than disprove the traditional view according to which Savonarola was a grim and retrograde »medieval« opposed to the aesthetic achievements of Renaissance culture. More important, it shows that the Petrarchan love lyric was not the only, or even the most important, cultural tradition through which the erotic and aesthetic claims of High Renais-

¹⁰⁵ See CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley 1982; JEFFREY HAMBURGER, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, New York 1998.

¹⁰⁶ Girolamo Savonarola, *Sermoni sopra il salmo Quam bonus*, in: *Sermoni e prediche di F. Girolamo Savonarola*, Prato 1846, sermon 16, pp. 434-435: L'amore è come un dipintore. Un buono dipintore, se e' dipigne bene, tanto delectano gli uomini le sue dipinture, che nel contemplarle rimangon sospesi, e qualche volta in tal modo che e' pare che e' sieno posti in estasi e fuori di loro, e pare che e' si dimentichino di loro medesimi. Così fa l'amore di Gesù Cristo quando è nell'anima ... Domanda uno che sia innamorato d'una donna, che cosa gli dipinga l'amore nella camera della fantasia; risponderà, la faccia sua, gli occhi e gesti, le veste e simili cose; e tanto bene gliela dipigne, che tutte le potenze dell'anima sua rimangono sospese a tali pitture, e non si diletta di pensare ad altro, nè di contemplare altro che quelle pitture ... E se questo fa l'amore carnale, molto più l'amore spirituale, cioè di Gesù Cristo.

sance art could be interpreted. In Savonarola's commentary, the painting in question is not even of a religious subject, proving that even the claims of secular art (even those images that, for Cropper, emblematically identify the beauty of woman with the beauty of painting) could be taken as models for this form of religious experience.

That this mystical discourse should inform even the experience of secular works is not surprising if we take seriously the history of pictorial genres. The new forms of art that appeared in the High Renaissance, and the exalted artistic claims that went with them, did not appear out of nowhere, as a fully formed alternative to the hitherto predominant Christian tradition of image-making. They did not result simply from, say, a revival of the antique or as an echo of the Petrarchan revival occurring in the world of letters. Instead, the new venues for art after 1500 emerged primarily within and through the development of traditional genres of Christian art. The modern easel picture arose out of developments in the altarpiece, the modern cabinet picture from developments in private devotional images.¹⁰⁷ Leonardo's story, discussed above, is virtually an allegory of the process: he makes a devotional image, whose owner falls in love with it and wants the sacred attributes removed – that is, wants it »secularized« – so that he may adore it freely.

And yet there were several sophisticated Renaissance patrons who believed that such a mingling was viable and even desirable, that the erotic appeal of the best of modern art, sufficiently sublimated through an exalted discourse of liberal art, could be made to serve the interests of Christian spirituality. One of these was Vittoria Colonna, one of the most prominent figures in the reform-minded ambient of Italy at the time. It is necessary to acknowledge the full importance of the fact that she owned a version of Titian's opulent, sensual Magdalene (very likely the one in the Pitti gallery in Florence), a painting that has often been misinterpreted as an instance of Titian using a religious theme as little more than a pretext for erotic art.¹⁰⁸ Anyone who reads Vittoria Colonna's religious poetry and spiritual tracts will find an erotic intensity to rival Titian. When she pleaded with the former pornographer

¹⁰⁷ HANS BELTING, *Giovanni Bellini Pietà: Ikone und Bildererzählung in der Venezianischen Malerei*, Frankfurt am Main 1985; BELTING, *Vom Altarbild zur autonomen Tafelmalerei* (as in note 37); KOERNER, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture* (as in note 80); ALEXANDER NAGEL, *Michelangelo, Raphael, and the altarpiece tradition*, Ph.D. diss., Harvard University 1993; CHRISTOPHER WOOD, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape*, Chicago 1993.

¹⁰⁸ JOHN A. CROWE and GIOVANNI BATTISTA CAVALCASELLE, *Titian: His Life and Times with Some Account of his Family*, London 1877, vol. 1, p. 350, declared: »It is clear that Titian had no other purpose in view than to represent a handsome girl.« CHARLES HOPE, *Titian*, London 1980, p. 75, asserted that »the religious content is a decidedly minor element in the picture's appeal.«

Pietro Aretino, Titian's friend, to give up secular work and devote himself to religious literature, she was surely not demanding that he abandon the erotic element in his writing. Instead she wanted him to put it to devotional work. This much is suggested by the fact that she was moved to make this appeal by Aretino's *De l'Umanita del Figliolo did Dio*, which contains a highly sensual section on Mary Magdalene that does just this, and which provides perhaps the best basis for coming to a historically informed understanding of Titian's painting.¹⁰⁹

Not every erotic painting exalted by a connoisseur implies a discourse of the gift, and neither does every religious expression of ecstatic ravishment. I hope I have shown, however, that on occasion gift-related ideas brought the two together. Perhaps the clearest instance of an alliance between modern thinking about art and reformist impulses, an alliance forged through a discourse of love and gift-giving, comes in the case of Michelangelo's later devotional works, particularly those that he gave to Vittoria Colonna. It is known that he gave to Vittoria at least two highly finished drawings of Christian subjects, the Pietà now in Boston and the Crucifixion now in London. These drawings belonged to a new category of artwork, the so-called presentation drawing, a drawing made as a finished work and presented as a gift to a friend.¹¹⁰

Presentation drawings were, on the one hand, unlike preparatory studies in that they were expressly made as works of art in their own right. As drawings, on the other hand, they retained an experimental quality, a freedom from the conventions that controlled finished panel painting in the period – a freedom that, in turn, reinforced the exemption from the conventional practice of making works of art on commission. Little surprise, therefore, that the earliest experiments in the genre, by Botticelli, Mantegna, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Rosso Fiorentino, involved a preponderance of pagan subjects and often carried a strong erotic charge.

Appearing a little later than these first experiments, Michelangelo's drawings for Vittoria Colonna (dating from ca. 1540) represent a distinct chastening and Christianization of the genre, nothing less than a motivated use of its special qualities towards reformist ends. The removal of the presentation

¹⁰⁹ For a start in this direction, see BERNARD AIKEMA, 'Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti: An ambiguous painting and its critics, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 57 (1994), pp. 48–59; see also ALEXANDER NAGEL, 'Experiments in art and reform in early sixteenth-century Italy, in *The Pontificate of Clement VII: History, Politics, Culture*, eds. KENNETH GOUWENS and SHERYL REISS, London: Ashgate (forthcoming 2003).

¹¹⁰ JOHANNES WILDE, *Michelangelo: Six Lectures*, Oxford 1978, pp. 147–158; MICHAEL HIRST, *Michelangelo and his Drawings*, New Haven 1988, chap. 10.

drawing from the economy of works made on commission made it, Michelangelo and Vittoria realized, a particularly suitable refuge from the vulgar system of contractual exchanges and obligations that governed the production of most church art in the period. The traditional religious image would be reinvented as a rarefied work of art, and in this sublimation came a new form of spiritualization.

It is well known that in his later years Michelangelo developed a disdain for »normal« artistic work and for the entire practice of making works of art on commission – a disdain closely linked to the aristocratic claims, familial and other, that preoccupied him later in life. It has not been sufficiently recognized how much this attitude had to do with the distinctly reformist sympathies he embraced later in life. His strongest and most irritable statement on the question comes in a letter of 1548, in response to his nephew's transmission of a request for an altarpiece in which he expresses regret even at having had to work for popes:

Tell the priest not to address me anymore »to Michelangelo, sculptor«, because I am known here in no way but as Michelangelo Buonarroti, and if a Florentine citizen wants an altarpiece painted he must find a painter, for I was never a painter or sculptor like the ones who keep a shop. I have always avoided that for the honour of my father and brothers, although I have served three popes, which has been perforce.¹¹¹

Michelangelo's declaration is clearly in line with several of the other »liberal art« arguments discussed above. It is of a piece with the claim made by Michelangelo's biographer Condivi that Michelangelo had never undergone a normal apprenticeship in the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, a very efficient producer of altarpieces in the late fifteenth century. In both cases, of course, the claims are false: Michelangelo had in fact been apprenticed to Ghirlandaio in an entirely standard way – a fact that Vasari proved with a document, in refutation of Condivi, in his second edition of 1568 – and as a young artist Michelangelo accepted quite standard commissions for church art, such as the tomb/altar of St. Dominic in Bologna and the Piccolomini altar in Siena. The important point is that towards the end of his life he preferred to think he had never done so. Perhaps he preferred to think that he

¹¹¹ The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo, ed. ROBERT LINSKOTT, trans. CREIGHTON GILBERT, New York 1965, p. 276. The original text: Al prete di' che no mi scriva più »a Michelagnuolo scultore«, perché io non ci sono conosciuto se non per Michelagnuolo Buonarroti, e che se un cittadino fiorentino vuol fare dipigniere una tavola da altare, che bisogna che e' truovi un dipintore: ché io non fu' mai pictore né scultore come chi ne fa boctega. Sempre me ne sono guardato per l'onore di mie padre e de' mia frategli, ben io abbi servito tre papi, che è stato forza. Il Carteggio di Michelangelo (as in note 63), vol. 4, p. 299.

had always behaved as Vasari depicted him in the episode involving Angelo Doni with which I began. And yet, false or not the claims deserve careful attention.

Michelangelo categorically associated the inferior, work-a-day artist with the making of altarpieces. One imagines he has in mind an artist very much on the model of Neri di Bicci, or perhaps of his former teacher Ghirlandaio himself. A strong statement in defense of the »liberality« of the artist's vocation, in other words, takes the form of a direct attack against a principal format of late medieval panel painting, a format that owed its very existence to the late medieval devotional economy of bequest, donation, and endowment. It was the excessive reliance on this system of grants and favors that reformers of all stripes, particularly those in Michelangelo's and Vittoria's circles, most consistently deplored. The presentation drawings that Michelangelo gave to Vittoria Colonna were conceived as an alternative to this tradition. The important point is that their role as an aesthetic alternative – the fact that they were not made on commission but resulted instead from the free invention of the artist, and were freely given as gifts – was the key to their role as a religious alternative. A modern conception of liberal art went hand in hand with a reformist critique. The unusual, gift-like qualities of the presentation drawings became a privileged means of insisting, in good reform-minded fashion, on the operations of divine grace that were central to their subjects (Crucifixion, Pietà). The letters between Michelangelo and Vittoria that discuss these drawings are extremely eloquent on the question, drawing fluent parallels among the claims of »liberal« art, the protocols of gift-giving, and the discourse of divine grace.¹¹²

One letter, which is undated but which most scholars assign to the early 1540s, contains a very clear statement on Michelangelo's part about the nature and ethics of gift-giving. Having been offered some items (most likely poems) by Vittoria, Michelangelo confesses that his initial impulse was to make something to give her in return, so as to receive her gift less unworthily. He then recognized, he says, that to introduce a gift into an economy of exchange violates the very principle of the gift, which he goes on to describe in terms of the operations of divine grace: »then, having recognized and seen that the grace of God cannot be bought, and that to have it with discomfort [*tenerla a disagio*] is a grave sin, I say the fault is mine and willingly I accept these things.«¹¹³

¹¹² For an extended analysis of the letters and relevant poetic material, see ALEXANDER NAGEL, *Gifts for Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna*, in: *Art Bulletin* 79 (1997), pp. 647–668.

¹¹³ *Volevo, Signiora, prima che io pigliassi le cose che Vostra [igniori] a m'è più volte volute dare, per riceverle manco indegnamente ch'è potevo, fare prima qualche cosa a quella di mia*

The letter, incidentally, confirms an observation of Vasari's, that the artist was loath to accept presents »because it seemed to him, when someone gave him something, that he was always under obligation to the giver.«¹¹⁴ Michelangelo's intention in this case, nonetheless, is to eliminate this resistance by invoking the parallel to divine grace. Through this parallel he understands that Vittoria's gift, like divine grace, is already given; it cannot be earned or paid for. Michelangelo's conception of divine grace is not far from ideas elaborated in more distinctly theological terms by the reform-minded humanist Marcantonio Flaminio, an acquaintance of Vittoria's and probably of Michelangelo's. According to Flaminio, divine grace is already there, like the light of the sun. It is not up to the recipient to call it down; instead, it is a matter of not resisting it. Divine grace is required to enact this double negative, to abstain from resisting the gift: »Without the special grace and help of God man cannot refrain from putting up an obstacle to the light.«¹¹⁵ The idea found clear expression in the *Beneficio di Cristo*, a treatise co-authored by Flaminio, which circulated widely in reform circles in Italy after 1542: »And what can man do in order to merit such a great gift and treasure as Christ? This treasure is given only through the grace, favor, and mercy of God, and it is faith alone that receives such a gift and allows us to enjoy the remission of sins ... These things cannot be accomplished or done by all the works of all humankind put together.«¹¹⁶

Like Michelangelo, Vittoria applied this conception of divine grace to the social sphere of courtesies: in a letter to Marguerite d'Angoulême she compared Marguerite's generosity to the divine manna of the Hebrews and begged for her charity because »in me you will find resistance in my ability

mano; dipoi riconosciuto e visto che la gratia d'Iddio non si può comperare, e che'l tenerla a disagio è pechato grandissimo, dico mie colpa, e volentieri dette cose accetto. E son certo, quando l'arò, non per ave[r]le in casa, ma per essere io in casa loro, mi parrà essere in paradiso (...) Il Carteggio di Michelangelo (as in note 62), vol. 4, p. 122. Ramsden, missing the analogy between divine grace and gift-giving, offers what I believe to be a flawed translation of the passage: »Then I came to realize that the grace of God cannot be bought, and that to keep you waiting is a grievous sin.« E. H. RAMSDEN, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, London 1963, vol. 2, p. 4. Gilbert offers a mostly similar reading: »[T]hen, having realized and seen that the grace of God is not to be bought and it is a great sin to keep you in suspense ...« GILBERT, *Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo* (as in note 110), p. 267.

¹¹⁴ Vasari, *Le vite* (as in note 1), vol. 6, p. 112.

¹¹⁵ ALESSANDRO PASTORE, *Marcantonio Flaminio: Fortune e sfortune di un chierico nell'Italia del Cinquecento*, Milan 1981, p. 97.

¹¹⁶ ELISABETH GLEASON, *Reform Thought in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, Chico, CA 1981, p. 128.

to receive your graces.«¹¹⁷ Clearly, in this sophisticated and reform-minded milieu, it was common practice for the exchange of courtesies and the practice of gift-giving to be couched, semi-playfully, in terms of the debate over divine grace.¹¹⁸

According to Vittoria, Michelangelo's artistic gifts were to be received in the same spirit. Given that their subject matter itself was the »benefit« of Christ's sacrifice, the parallels between the claims of art and the claims of divine grace became especially resonant. In Vittoria's eyes, the quality that elevated such works to the status of gifts, in the exalted sense of something akin to divine grace, was their claim to a kind of infinity or inexhaustibility – a claim that, she realized, made special demands on the viewer as interpreter of the work. The exemption of such works from the normal economy of works made on commission meant that they enjoyed a semantic freedom: They were not to be explicated by recourse to traditional iconographic conventions, and this meant that they required special interpretative efforts on the part of the viewer. Upon receiving one of the drawings (either the one in Boston or the one in London), Vittoria examined it lovingly with glass and mirror and confessed: »certainly I could never explain how subtly and admirably it is done.«¹¹⁹ In another letter, Vittoria suggested that this wonder goes beyond matters of technique. She offered a breathless description of its effects on her, and in doing so she almost automatically had recourse to the language of divine grace and faith. I give the original passage, which opens the letter:

*Li effetti vostri excitano a forza il giuditio di chi li guarda et per vederne più exsperientia parlai de accrescer bontà alle cose perfette. Et ho visto che omnia possibilia sunt credenti. Io ebbi grandissima fede in Dio, che vi dessi una gratia soprannatural a far questo Christo [...].*¹²⁰

Let us read this passage carefully. In an untranslatable phrase, she states in the opening words that his works urge the viewer to new efforts of understanding: *Li effetti vostri excitano a forza il giuditio did chi li guarda*. The implications of this aesthetic judgment – that his works stretch the limits of human understanding – moved her in the following sentence to make a fully

¹¹⁷ Vittoria Colonna, *Carteggio*, ed. ERMANNO FERRERO and GIUSEPPE MÜLLER, Turin 21892, p. 187: in me troverà resistenza a saper ricever le sue gratie.

¹¹⁸ For the rhetoric of such exchanges in a somewhat later French context, see SHARON KETTERING, *Gift-giving and patronage in Early Modern France*, in: *French History* 2 (1988), pp. 131–151.

¹¹⁹ *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo* (as in note 63), vol. 4, p. 104.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 105.

theological pronouncement, a renewed declaration of the very principle of Christian faith: »And I have seen that all things are possible to those who believe.« She underscored the shift in discourse by switching into biblical Latin in mid-sentence: *Et hoc visto che omnia possibilis sunt credenti* [sic]. The words, quoted from Mark 9:23, were originally addressed by Christ to the father of the possessed boy, enjoining him to believe in God's capacity to heal his son. The healing, crucially, happens only after the father squarely confronts the problem of faith: »Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief« (Mark 9:24). The novel thing about Vittoria's letter is that it invokes this trial of faith in describing the hermeneutic challenges of a new kind of artwork that also tests the viewer's capacity to believe and understand. Fittingly, the analogy is completed by the according of a divine grace to the work of the artist: »I had the greatest faith in God, that he would grant you a supernatural grace in making this Christ.«

That special claims should be made on the individual's personal resources of belief and understanding is a direct consequence of the workings of grace, because a gift in the sense elaborated by Michelangelo and Vittoria is something singular and secret. As William West has put it, in an analysis of the theme of the gift in Shakespeare's sonnets, »when something *means for* someone, it is *meant for* someone.«¹²¹ Or, to quote another passage from the *Beneficio di Cristo*: »do not believe only in general of the remission of sins, but apply this belief to your own case.«¹²² This belief is possible only when the individual hears the word of God and the promise of redemption addressed to her or him personally and directly. For Vittoria, therefore, Michelangelo's drawing did not merely represent the mystery of the gift: it embodied and enacted it, both through its unfathomable technique and through its semantic inexhaustibility. To be receptive to the drawing's special qualities is not merely a way to understanding the mystery; it is an instance of the mystery at work. When Vittoria asserted that Michelangelo's drawings move the viewer to new efforts of understanding (*li effetti vostri excitano a forza il giudicio di chi li guarda*), she was not only making an aesthetic judgment. For Vittoria, to be receptive to the hermeneutic challenge of this kind of art – an art, that is, conceived as a gift – is to engage in the very movements of faith, to open oneself as one does in receiving divine grace. It is to see that »all things are possible to those who believe.«

The episodes studied here – and several of the other contributions in this volume – encourage us to suspend the theoretical task of defining what »the«

¹²¹ WEST, Nothing as given (as in note 98), p. 11.

¹²² GLEASON, Reform Thought (as in note 116), p. 159.

gift is, and instead to train our attention on the history of gifts as a history of theoretical interventions. In raising the possibility of something that lies outside or beyond compensation, gifts have repeatedly provoked reflection on the nature and role of reciprocity and exchange in social relations. In the Early Modern period, certain reform-minded critics and certain champions of visual art found common cause in insisting on values that lay outside the negotiations of the social realm, and resorted persistently to the language of the gift in order to do so. A (re-)definition of the nature of gifts occasioned an effort to understand the nature and limits of a system of social relations, and to put it in historical perspective. Little wonder, therefore, that these debates should anticipate many of the concerns addressed in this volume.