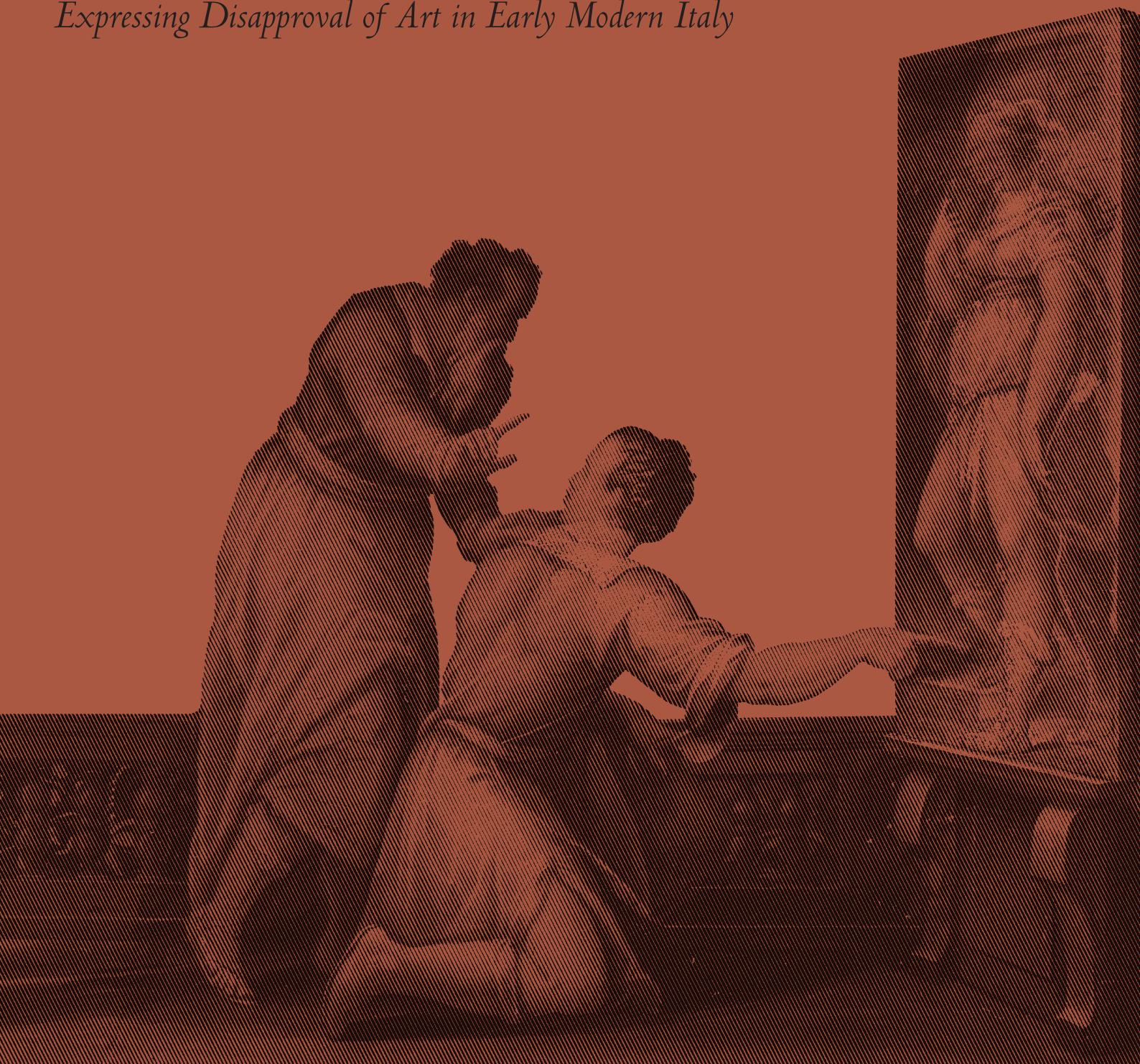


MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ



LXIII. BAND — 2021
HEFT I

*Bad Reception
Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy*



Bad Reception: Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy
edited by Diletta Gamberini, Jonathan K. Nelson, Alessandro Nova

Redaktionskomitee | Comitato di redazione
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Graphik | Progetto grafico
RovaiWeber design, Firenze

Produktion | Produzione
Centro Di edizioni, Firenze

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I-50125 Firenze, Tel. 055.2342666,
edizioni@centrodi.it; www.centrodi.it.

Preis | Prezzo
Einzelheft | Fascicolo singolo:
€ 30 (plus Porto | più costi di spedizione)
Jahresabonnement | Abbonamento annuale:
€ 90 (Italia); € 120 (Ausland | estero)

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THE FIASCOS OF MIMESIS ANCIENT SOURCES FOR RENAISSANCE VERSE RIDICULING ART

Diletta Gamberini

According to Gabriele Paleotti, the most demeaning response to a painter is one that derides him for violating the basic principles of art. In his *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* (1582), Paleotti explains that one can identify many “pitture ridicole” by the irresistible laughter sparked whenever savvy beholders spot their gross deficiencies of pictorial skills, such as crude design, distorted features, and lack of proportions. As an example, he chooses the anecdote of a painter who, according to Aelian, was so unskilled in the mimesis of reality that he had to add explanatory inscriptions to even the most prosaic subjects of his pictures:

Sono altre pitture che chiamiamo ridicole, perché muovono il riso a chi le riguarda [...]. Non parlia-

mo ora di quelle che, per rozzezza del disegno o lineamenti storti, o altra inezzia del pittore, eccitano il riso a chi ha qualche giudicio; imperoché questo non è veramente riso, ma deriso [...]; e di un pittore narra Eliano ch'era sì sciocco et imperito nell'arte sua, che, non dipingendo cosa che s'assomigliasse, era sforzato di aggiunger il nome alle cose, dicendo: “questo è un cavallo, questo è un arbore, questo è un libro”, onde ognuno se ne ridea.¹

While Paleotti does not mention laughter raised by mocking verse, he probably had in mind the poetic lampoons that transformed many Cinquecento artworks into sensational fiascos, because these texts constituted a most peculiar, vitriolic, and widespread

¹ See Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane*, II, 31 (quoted from *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento fra Manierismo e Controriforma*, ed. by Pao-la Barocchi, Bari 1960–1962, II, p. 390). For a comparable discussion of public derision as the most degrading form of reception an artwork can encounter, see also the remarks by Paolo Pino in the *Dialogo di pittura* (*ibidem*,

I, p. II6): “mal è per l'artefice se l'opera muove a riso li circostanti, perché si stupisce del bene e si burla del sproporzionato e goffo”. For a recent critical evaluation of Renaissance images that were intended to raise the beholders' laughter, see the essays of *Rire en images à la Renaissance*, conference proceedings Paris 2012, ed. by Francesca Alberti/Diane Bodart, Turnhout 2018.

form of early modern Italian *Kunstliteratur*.² To explore the literary models underpinning this genre of vituperative poetry against artists and their creations, the passage from Paleotti's *Discorso* offers a valuable starting point. What makes his discussion particularly noteworthy is its comic tone, which has no equivalent in its direct source. Indeed, in the corresponding chapter of his *Varia historia*, Aelian does not recount public derision of artistic ineptitude. Rather, taking a cue from a remark in Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, he presents identifying inscriptions as a pragmatic means by which artists had attempted, during the infancy of the art of painting, to overcome the mimetic limits of a primitive visual language.³ The transformation of an anodyne ancient anecdote into an amusing novelette of a laughable painter is telling, for it highlights how the age of Paleotti identified in classical antiquity the earliest history of those scathing modes of response that were characteristic of poems mocking artworks.⁴ With this in mind, it becomes important to ask if ancient literature provided the authors of such verse with textual models for lambasting bad art; and, if so, to what extent and

through which processes of appropriation. Given the humanistic pedigree of most of its practitioners, a genealogical approach is all the more relevant for a nuanced reading of this early modern form of art criticism. As Maddalena Spagnolo has demonstrated, those who penned these compositions were often writers whose ostensibly humble vein concealed a solid literary education, as well as classicist inclinations in matters of artistic judgment.⁵

Certainly, most of these poets were familiar with what, at the time, was the standard ancient model for the praise in verse of painting and sculpture, namely, the *Planudean Anthology*, one of the two main epigrammatic collections that are included in the so-called *Greek Anthology* (the other being the *Palatine Anthology*, discovered in Heidelberg in 1606 or 1607).⁶ Scholars have long recognized the receptiveness of Italian Renaissance poets to the topoi of artistic encomium disseminated in the florilegium of Hellenic, Hellenistic, and Byzantine epigrams. First assembled in Constantinople by Maximus Planudes between 1299 and 1301, this compilation of poetry began circulating in manuscripts in 1460s Italy and en-

² The fundamental contribution on the historical development of the genre, starting from its early documented examples in the Veneto of the final decades of the Quattrocento, is Maddalena Spagnolo, "Poesie contro le opere d'arte: arguzia, biasimo e ironia nella critica d'arte del Cinquecento", in: *Ex marmore: pasquini, pasquini, pasquinate nell'Europa moderna*, conference proceedings Lecce/Otranto 2005, ed. by Chrysa Damianaki/Paolo Procaccioli/Angelo Romano, Manziana 2006, pp. 321–354. Also useful, though synchronic in approach, is Marianne Albrecht-Bott, *Die bildende Kunst in der italienischen Lyrik der Renaissance und des Barock: Studie zur Beschreibung von Porträts und anderen Bildwerken unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von G. B. Marinos Galleria*, Wiesbaden 1976, pp. 90–98.

³ Compare Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, ed. and trans. by N. G. Wilson, Cambridge, Mass./London 1997, pp. 320f. (X, 10): "Οτε ὑπήρχετο ἡ γραφικὴ τέχνη καὶ ἦν τρόπον τινὰ ἐν γάλαξι καὶ σπαργάνοις, οὕτως ἄρα ἀτέχνως εἴκαζον τὰ ζῷα, ὅστε ἐπιγράφειν αὐτοῖς τοὺς γραφέας: "τοῦτο βοῦς, ἐκεῖνο ἵππος, ἐκεῖνο δένδρον" ("When the art of painting was in its early stages, as one might say not yet weaned or out of infant's clothing, animals were so crudely represented that the painters would write an inscription, 'this is an ox, that is a horse, this is a tree'"). Compare the remarks in Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, XXXV, 5.

⁴ For a number of other Renaissance writers that evoked – often without explicitly mentioning the source – Aelian's anecdote, see Emmauelle Hénin, "Ceci est un bœuf": la querelle des inscriptions dans la peinture, Paris 2013, pp. 92–96, and Fabian Jonietz, *Das Buch zum Bild: Die Stanze nuove im Palazzo Vecchio, Giorgio Vasaris Ragionamenti und die Lesbarkeit der Kunst im Cinquecento*, Berlin/Munich 2017, p. 278. Cervantes eventually offered the most memorable rewriting of Aelian's tale. In a dialogue with Sancho Panza, Don Quixote expresses the hope that the artists who would eventually immortalize the pair's heroic deeds would be of a different sort than Orbaneja of Úbeda, who needed to add the identificatory inscription to the painting of a rooster so that beholders would not think the subject was a fox (Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, II, 71).

⁵ In her contribution to the present volume, in a sense complementary to my own, Maddalena Spagnolo addresses a Plinian episode that testifies to Greek or Roman artists' biting remarks about the creations of fellow painters and sculptors (see below, p. 85). For an enlightening discussion of the cultural background and aesthetic preferences of the authors of these poems, see Spagnolo (note 2), pp. 332f. and 348.

⁶ For a general introduction to the *Planudean Anthology* see Alan Cameron, *The Greek Anthology from Meleager to Planudes*, Oxford 1993.

joyed increasing popularity after the Florentine *editio princeps* by the Greek erudite Janus Lascaris (1494).⁷ Much attention has been given to the pervasive and enduring influence on early modern poetry of some of the anthology's most recurrent thematic refrains, such as the mimetic relationship between artistic creation and nature, so stringent as to make the viewer mistake the image for its referent; the bafflement of a spectator who falls victim to the deceptive illusion of art's vitality; and an object's alleged capacity to speak.⁸ What has remained unnoticed, however, is the very existence, and consequently the afterlife, of a different strain of the *Planudean Anthology*'s discourse on images. The collection provided Renaissance writers with not only the topical repertoire for celebrating pictures, but also effective examples of how to ridicule a visual artifact. Alongside hundreds of encomiastic compositions on artistic subjects, the florilegium holds a suite of epigrams in which the adoption of the modes of parody – etimologically, the song that is both parallel with and contrary to its model – lays bare the typical form, style, and rhetorical clichés of poetic encomia of images by reversing them.

In this body of verse, the codified and virtuosic language of ekphrasis, with its hyperbolic celebration of the artist's abilities and the miraculous likeness of

its creation, leaves room for the grotesque hyperbole of dissimilarity.⁹ The comic motif of the impossibility of recognizing any affinity between the artwork and its referent thus underpins several of the *Planudean Anthology*'s so-called scoptic or scommatic epigrams, that is to say, short compositions that ridicule the vices, defects, and idiocies of a varied humanity. Since one of the most recurring themes in these texts is the derision of ludicrous professional failures, it comes as no surprise that beside the physicians who invariably send their clients to the other world, the barbers who unwillingly anticipate the deeds of Jack the Ripper, and a parade of mute orators, short-sighted astrologers, and singers who deafen their listeners, we come across artists characterized by a catastrophic inability to create a proper mimesis.

Noteworthy examples include a distich by Leonidas of Alexandria, a Greek poet of the Neronian age (Appendix, no. 1). Here, the derision targets a certain Diodorus for a portrait that resembled everyone but its subject.¹⁰ The Roman Lucillius, a contemporary of Leonidas, elaborated further on this motif in an epigram on the painter Eutychus (Appendix, no. 2). With an irreverent reversal of an encomiastic trope that was destined to become very popular among early modern writers, namely the image of the artist who gives life to his works just as a father does to his off-

⁷ The classic, and still unsurpassed, study on the literary impact of the *Planudean* in early modern Italy is James Hutton, *The Greek Anthology in Italy to the Year 1800*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1935. For a discussion of the early diffusion of the *Anthologia*, see also Marc D. Lauxtermann, "Janus Lascaris and the Greek Anthology", in: *The Neo-Latin Epigram: A Learned and Witty Genre*, conference proceedings Rome 2006, ed. by Susanna de Beer/Karl A.E. Enenkel/David Rijser, Leuven 2009, pp. 41–66.

⁸ Scholarly works that have paid consideration to the *Planudean Anthology*'s shaping impact on Renaissance poetry on art include Albrecht-Bott (note 2), esp. pp. 4–6; John Shearman, *Only Connect . . . Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, Princeton, N.J., 1992, esp. pp. II3f; Norman E. Land, *The Viewer as Poet: The Renaissance Response to Art*, University Park, Pa., 1994, pp. 42f.; Luba Freedman, *Titian's Portraits through Aretino's Lens*, University Park, Pa., 1995, esp. p. 164; Francesca Pellegrino, "Elaborazioni di alcuni principali *topoi* artistici nei *Coryciana*", in: *Visuelle Topoi: Erfindung und tradiertes*

Wissen in den Künsten der italienischen Renaissance, ed. by Ulrich Pfisterer/Max Seidel, Munich et al. 2003, pp. 217–262; 219, 247; Lina Bolzoni, *Poesia e ritratto nel Rinascimento*, texts ed. by Federica Pich, Rome/Bari 2008, p. 38; Federica Pich, *I poeti davanti al ritratto: da Petrarca a Marino*, Lucca 2010, pp. 21–28.

⁹ The primal structures of meaning in these texts repeat, in a comical way, a motif dating back at least to Plato, who in the second book of the *Republic* (377e3) has Socrates drawing a parallel between the bad storyteller and "an artist who paints nothing like those whose likeness he wishes to paint" ("ώσπερ γραφεὺς μηδὲν ἐσικότα γράφων οἵς ἂν ὅμοια βουληθῇ γράψῃ"; quoted from Plato, *Republic*, ed. and trans. by Chris Emlyn-Jones/William Preddy, Cambridge, Mass./London 2013, I, pp. 196f.).

¹⁰ Several early modern Latin translations of the poem, including one by the Vatican librarian Fausto Sabeo (ca. 1475–1559), are preserved: see Hutton (note 7), p. 601.

spring, this character is deemed incapable of achieving likeness not only in his paintings but also in his twenty children. In this way he is doubly slammed: in explicit terms as an incompetent practitioner of the visual arts, and in a more allusive way as a cuckold of a serially unfaithful wife.¹¹ This recalls another epigram by the same author (Appendix, no. 3), which was only included in the *Palatine Anthology* but might have circulated as an independent poem prior to the rediscovery of that florilegium.¹² Lucillius here records the fictional protest of the butcher Erasistratus, a dissatisfied client of the painter Diodorus. The patron, who had commissioned a portrait of his child, complains that in Diodorus's painting his son bore a creeping resemblance to Anubis, the Egyptian jackal-headed god, and actually seemed to be born from the old Hecuba, who according to myth had been turned into a repulsive female dog.

Derision of epic fiascos in the mimetic recreation of reality is the main refrain of the *Planudean Anthology*'s suite of scommatic texts against artists, yet this underlying motif lends itself to a number of different inflections. In certain instances, the main focus of irony is the artwork's effect on the beholder, presented as perfectly antithetical to the artist's aim. An epigram by Apollonides thus poked fun at the image

of a lion – or of a man named Lion (Λέων) – that caused perplexed skepticism among its viewers rather than awe and admiration (Appendix, no. 4).¹³ On other occasions, the barb is directed in general terms at the artifact's lamentable quality. One example is a text in which Lucillius stated that the only suitable compensation for two paintings depicting Deucalion and Phaeton was a fate comparable to their main characters – namely, water and fire (Appendix, no. 5).¹⁴ Notably, examples also exist of sardonic commentaries on images whose main aesthetic limits were an excess of mimesis and a lack of idealization which, given the subject, would have been appropriate. An anonymous epigrammatist remarked that, while portraits are usually dear to men, the effigy of the rhetor Marinus was an affront to its sitter because it accurately displayed his lack of charms (Appendix, no. 6).¹⁵

This short survey of the critiques of artworks present in the *Planudean Anthology*, though far from exhaustive, indicates the rich suggestions that Renaissance authors of derisive poetry on art could find in the ancient texts. That set of leitmotifs and tropes, which the Greek scoptic epigrams concentrated in the most concise and trenchant form, provided these writers with a basic score that they could enrich and intersect with characteristic motifs from the thriv-

¹¹ See, for a rich commentary to the poem, Lucillio, *Epigrammi*, ed. and trans. by Lucia Floridi, Berlin/Boston 2014, pp. 414f. For the encomiastic topos of the artist who gives life to his visual creations, compare, among others, Tullius Geminus's epigram on the statue of Eros by Praxiteles ("She [Phryne] dreads no longer the son of Cypris, but thy offspring, Praxiteles, knowing that Art is his mother"; *The Greek Anthology*, trans. by W. R. Paton, Cambridge, Mass./London 1916–1918, V, pp. 280f. [XVI, 205, ll. 5f.]). On the early modern fortune of such generative metaphors, see Ulrich Pfisterer, *Kunst-Geburten: Kreativität, Erotik, Körper in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin 2014, esp. pp. 63–76.

¹² For a discussion of how numerous epigrams from the *Greek Anthology* circulated independently from the collection, see Hutton (note 7), pp. 2–29.

¹³ Almost all poems from the sixteenth book of the *Greek Anthology* refer to an artwork, which suggests an interpretation of this text as a commentary on an image. Motifs closely related to the one at the core of Apol-

lonides's composition can be found in the ancient epigrammatic tradition also outside the *Anthology*. Martial, for instance, argued that a painting of Venus so little resembled the goddess of beauty as to become very favorable to one of her rivals on the occasion of Paris's judgment; see Martial, *Epigrams*, ed. and trans. by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Cambridge, Mass./London 1993, pp. 112f. (I, 102): "Qui pinxit Venerem tuam, Lycori, / blanditus, puto, pictor est Minervae" ("Methinks the painter who painted your Venus, Lycoris, flattered Minerva").

¹⁴ On this poem, see also the editor's comments in Lucillio (note 11), pp. 411–413. In early modern Italy, the epigram was translated into Latin and Italian by authors of the likes of Andrea Dazzi (1473–1548), Francesco Franchini (1495–1559), and Giovan Battista Marino (1569–1625); see Hutton (note 7), p. 602.

¹⁵ For a discussion of how Renaissance patrons often saw a lack of idealization in their own portraits as a problem, see the article by Jonathan K. Nelson and Richard J. Zeckhauser in this volume, pp. 24–27.

ing medieval and early modern traditions of burlesque verse.¹⁶ To focus on just one major thematic instance, this grafting of ancient and early modern comical traditions probably underpinned a recurrent *topos* of Renaissance *vituperative* poems directed at artistic subjects, namely the motif of the picture that leads the beholder to misinterpret the species and genre of its object. Also relevant for the codification of this theme were probably those popular vernacular compositions that, overturning the aesthetic assumptions crystallized in lyrical *descriptions pulchritudinis*, often presented their deformed human protagonists as bizarre experiments in the abolition of boundaries among species.¹⁷ In doing so, they drew literary portraits whose subjects embodied the hybridity of the monsters that Horace famously stigmatized in the opening lines of his *Ars Poetica*. Moreover, they evinced a parodic reversal of the principle of selection from multiple beautiful models and recomposition in one visual unit that was the main lesson from an immensely popular anecdote on Zeuxis, who would have studied the five most attractive maidens of Croton in order to paint the image of Helen of Troy.¹⁸

From the late fifteenth century, the antique *topos* of the confusing and grotesquely unmimetic image set off an authentic outpouring of mocking poetry

in several cultural centers of the Italian peninsula. A precocious, little-known example comes from Michele (alias Tifi) di Bartolomeo Odasi, a man of letters who had a solid education in the classics and belonged to the most distinguished humanistic circles of Padua.¹⁹ Published between 1484 and 1490, his poem *Macaronea* – today almost exclusively remembered as one of the earliest examples of macaronic verse, the humorous genre whose defining feature was an incongruous contamination of Latin language structures with vernacular words and inflections – elaborated on these tropes in a long description of the painter Canziano (Appendix, no. 7).²⁰ The historical figure who might lie behind the character is not identified, although it has been argued that his literary persona was conceived as the alter ego to the major laughing stock of the initial phase of Renaissance poetry against artists, Ombrone da Fossombrone, who appears to have resided in the Veneto around this period.²¹ The issue of identification, however, becomes of secondary importance once we focus on how Odasi lampoons Canziano as, first and foremost, the paradigm of the failed *artifex*.

In the narrative of the *Macaronea*, Canziano owns a pitiful workshop in the Piazza dei Signori in Padua. We are told that his activity as a varnisher of rudi-

¹⁶ On the deep influence of the language of Tuscan burlesque poetry on Renaissance poems against artworks, see Spagnolo (note 2), pp. 339, 348.

¹⁷ For an introduction to the format of *descriptio pulchritudinis* in medieval and Renaissance Italian poetry and on its links to pictorial canons of beauty of the age, see Giovanni Pozzi, “Il ritratto della donna nella poesia d’inizio Cinquecento e la pittura di Giorgione”, in: *Giorgione e l’umanesimo veneziano*, conference proceedings Castelfranco 1978, ed. by Rodolfo Pallucchini, Florence 1981, I, pp. 309–341. Ever since the origins of the genre, burlesque poets had produced myriad variations on the theme of ugliness and physical deformity. Within such thematic concentrations, these authors recurrently presented their subjects as visually mismatched creations of nature or a capricious *deus artifex*: for a useful discussion of the fortune of these motifs, see Paolo Orvieto/Lucia Brestolini, *La poesia comico-realistica: dalle origini al Cinquecento*, Rome 2000, pp. 73–85, 127–146, and esp. pp. 84 and 142 for discussion of Rustico Filippi’s sonnet *Quando Dio messer Messerino fece* and Antonio Cammelli’s *Più di cent’anni imaginò Natura*.

¹⁸ On the Renaissance fortune of this story and its different ancient versions, see at least Leonard Barkan, “The Heritage of Zeuxis: Painting, Rhetoric, and History”, in: *Antiquity and Its Interpreters*, conference proceedings Toronto 1994, ed. by Alina Payne/Ann Kuttner/Rebekah Smick, Cambridge et al. 2000, pp. 99–109. On the relevance of this hypotext for Rustico Filippi’s burlesque portrayal of “messer Messerino”, see Claudio Giunta, *Versi a un destinatario: saggio sulla poesia italiana del Medioevo*, Bologna 2002, pp. 304–306.

¹⁹ A recent assessment of the author’s rich network of cultural relations is provided by Paolo Zaja, s.v. Odasi, Michele (Tifi), in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, LXXIX, Rome 2013, only available online: [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/michele-odasi_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)./](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/michele-odasi_(Dizionario-Biografico)./).

²⁰ For a thorough introduction to the text, see Ivano Paccagnella, *Le macaronee padovane: tradizione e lingua*, Padua 1979, pp. 34–106.

²¹ The identification of Ombrone da Fossombrone with Canziano was proposed by Enrico Guidoni, *Ricerche su Giorgione e sulla pittura del Rinascimento*,

mentarily decorated *cassoni*²² and credenzas for rustic clients is indeed quite successful, but that he cultivates the ambition to devote himself to the art of painting. Unfortunately, though, he has never managed to learn the craft. The author thus observes that Canziano's attempts to paint something other than simple wooden sticks always end up in litigation, because his discontented clients always drag him to court to sue for refunds – and they have good reason to do so. For starters, animal painting is not his forte: his painted roosters look like storks, his hunting dogs resemble free-swimming pikes, his goldfinches come off as chickens, and his chickens bear a conspicuous similarity to horses. Secondly, his human figures fare no better, for the men he depicts are said to have a strong resemblance to beheaded wooden mannequins. What is more, Canziano apparently sees no reason to shy away from standard contemporary subjects of secular and religious painting. As a consequence, no beholder can tell the head from the behind of his painted naked putti, while in his Madonna and Child pictures viewers find it impossible to distinguish the former from the latter. Even so, the poet concludes, the painter has the gall to blame his brushes while considering himself equal to a Bellini.²³

Rome 1998–2000, I, p. 182. A most useful reconstruction of Ombrone da Fossombrone's artistic career and often catastrophic reception among his contemporaries, but also of the illustrious protection that he seems to have enjoyed from such patrons as Alvise Contarini, is offered by Giovanna Perini Folesani, "Per Ombrone da Fossombrone", in: *Notizie da Palazzo Albani*, XXXVIII (2009), pp. 25–37, with further references. On vituperative poems on him, see also Claudio Franzoni, "Le raccolte del *Theatro* di Ombrone e il viaggio in Oriente del pittore: le *Epistole* di Giovanni Filoteo Achillini", in: *Rivista di letteratura italiana*, VIII (1990), pp. 287–335; Land (note 8), pp. 95–97; Giovanni Agosti, "Scrittori che parlano di artisti, tra Quattro e Cinquecento in Lombardia", in: Barbara Agosti et al., *Quattro pezzi lombardi (per Maria Teresa Binaghi)*, Brescia 1998, pp. 39–93 (at 88f.); Spagnolo (note 2), pp. 324–326.

²² Odasi mentions the "bancos de villa novicis", literally the "benches for peasant brides", among the few successful creations by Canziano. Most probably, the expression is meant to indicate a poor type of *forziera* or *cassone*, which held the bride's trousseau while also providing her and her family with a seating.

In the same years when Tifi Odasi created his caricature of Canziano, similar barbs had wide literary dissemination. Images so distant from their referents that the beholder would misjudge their subjects were for instance often ridiculed by the Venetian Andrea Michieli (d. 1510), alias Squarzola or Strazzola, the most prolific poetic voice at the dawn of Italian Renaissance verse against artworks.²⁴ One example is the critique, unfolded within a tailed sonnet targeting four ignorant exponents of the liberal arts in contemporary Venice, of an unidentified painting by Gentile Bellini (Appendix, no. 8).²⁵ For Squarzola, despite the arrogance with which Gentile paraded a knighthood granted during his service at the Ottoman court of Mehmed II from 1479 to 1481, the painter was so unskilled that what he had intended as an ermine looked like a far more prosaic "gatto cum li unghi raspanti".²⁶

The founding motifs of vituperative verse on art also became popular among prose writers, including those who had professional interests in artistic practices. Rather than a simple transmigration of comic leitmotifs from the realm of poetry to such genres as biography, epistolography or treatises, this appears to have been the result of a cross-fertilization between

²³ It is not clear whether the poem's encomiastic reference to "Belino" (l. 276) refers to Gentile or Giovanni Bellini.

²⁴ On the author, see esp. Vittorio Rossi, "Il canzoniere inedito di Andrea Michieli detto Squarzola o Strazzola", in: *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*, XXVI (1895), pp. 1–91; also relevant are Albrecht-Bott (note 2), pp. 64, 93, 153f.; Land (note 8), pp. 95–97; Spagnolo (note 2), p. 324. For other genres of his comic verse, see Luca D'Onghia, "Quattrocento sperimentale veneto: un diagramma e qualche auspicio", in: *Quaderni veneti*, n. s., I (2012), pp. 83–106: 85–90.

²⁵ Scholars who have paid attention to the poem's artistic critique include Jürg Meyer zur Capellen (Gentile Bellini, Stuttgart et al. 1985, p. 121) and David Young Kim (*The Traveling Artist in the Italian Renaissance: Geography, Mobility, and Style*, New Haven, Conn., et al. 2014, p. 109).

²⁶ Rossi's identification of two other characters that the sonnet derides (Rossi [note 24], p. 47) provides us with useful elements for dating the composition to the period 1480–1490, when the physician Luigi Malatini (ll. 3f.) and the organist Bartolomeo di Batista de Vielmis (ll. 9–11) held prominent offices and were matriculated professionals in the Serenissima.

those poetic topoi and some refrains that had enjoyed a certain currency in the domain of the *novella*. Close linguistic scrutiny of a famous note penned by Leonardo between 1497 and 1502 might help to illustrate the phenomenon (Appendix, no. 9).²⁷ In the annotation, recorded in what is now codex L of the Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France, the author theorized the need for the painter to possess in-depth knowledge of human anatomy, while at the same time stigmatizing artists who emphasized the relief of each individual muscle bundle to the point of producing an unnatural effect. With what is usually considered a scathing allusion to Michelangelo, Leonardo sketched with a harsh brush the profile of those who, in the attempt to display their ability as craftsmen, create graceless and wooden nudes, “che pare a vederli un sacco di noci più presto che superfizie umana, ovvero un fascio di ravanelli più presto che muscolosi nudi” – a note that Francesco Melzi eventually transcribed in the *Libro di pittura*.²⁸

The use in this context of the predicate “pare” deserves particular emphasis. In line with an aesthetics grounded in classicistic ideals of visual illusionism, Tre- and Quattrocento writers often employed inflections of the verb in order to celebrate an artwork’s ca-

pacity to look exactly like its referent. A famous and influential example of this established lexical pattern is Dante’s ekphrasis of the God-made marble reliefs on the floor of the terrace of pride, whose supreme artistry was praised by noting how “morti li morti e i vivi parean vivi”.²⁹ But some decades after Dante, a Florentine *novelliere* very interested in the visual arts, Franco Sacchetti, used the same predicate, semantically charged through its recurrent association with convincing mimesis, to signal the degrading identifications elicited in beholders by a questionable artistic creation. In one of the stories of his *Trecentonovelle* (LXXIII), he observed how a painting in the Florentine basilica of Santa Croce depicting the Volto Santo was so at odds with the true aspect of the Saviour, who “e di viso e di membra fu il più bel corpo che fosse mai”, that the work “pareva un mascherone”.³⁰ In this example, the questionable pictorial quality created a problem that was not just aesthetic but bordered on the theological.

In the sixteenth century, the verb seems to have become one of the most recurrent bywords to introduce the genre of derisory critiques that had been typical of ancient compositions against bad artists. Compared to those models, the scope of criticism

ma. A more precise *terminus post quem* for the composition of the poem is January 1481, when Gentile returned to Venice with his newly received knighthood. Squarzola refers to Bellini as a “cavalier spiron d’or” (l. 6), even though this European knighthood did not correspond to the Ottoman title of *eques auratus* which the artist had been bestowed upon by the Sultan. The poet, however, was not the only contemporary who translated the painter’s honor with reference to the order of the Golden Spur: in Jacopo Foresti’s Italian version of the *Supplementum chronicarum* (1491), the title was also translated as “Cavaliere a spiron doro” (see Alan Chong, “Gentile Bellini in Istanbul: Myths and Misunderstandings”, in: *Bellini and the East*, exh. cat. Boston/London 2005/06, ed. by Caroline Campbell/Alan Chong, London et al. 2005, pp. 106–119; 114 and 134, note 49).

²⁷ On Leonardo’s literary interests see now esp. Carlo Vecce, *La biblioteca perduta: i libri di Leonardo*, Rome 2017. For the relevant passage from the *Book on Painting*, see Leonardo da Vinci, *Libro di pittura: Codice Urbinate Lat. 1270 nella Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, ed. by Carlo Pedretti/Carlo Vecce, Florence 1995, II, p. 278 (chapter 340, “Com’è necessario al pittore sapere la notomia”, ca. 1502).

²⁸ For the suggestion that the passage referred to Michelangelo, see, among others, Domenico Laurenza, “Leonardo, c. 1500–1503: il tema dell’armonia”, in: *Leonardo, Machiavelli, Cesare Borgia: arte, storia e scienza in Romagna 1500–1503*, exh. cat. Castel Sismondo 2003, ed. by Carlo Pedretti et al., Rome 2003, pp. 26–35; 31. Nicole Hegener (“Riverberi vinciani: Leonardo e Rustici nell’opera di Baccio Bandinelli”, in: *I grandi bronzi del Battistero: Giovannfrancesco Rustici e Leonardo*, exh. cat., ed. by Tommaso Mozzati/Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi/Philippe Sénéchal, Florence 2010, pp. 212–237: 229) has suggested instead that Leonardo’s biting remarks were directed against the nudes by Antonio Pollaiuolo.

²⁹ *Purgatorio*, XII, 67. On this ekphrasis, see at least Michelangelo Picone, “Il cimento delle arti nella *Commedia*: Dante nel girone dei superbi (*Purgatorio X–XII*)”, in: *Dante e le arti visive*, ed. by Maria Monica Donato et al., Milan 2006, pp. 81–108; 92–99.

³⁰ Franco Sacchetti, *Le Trecento Novelle*, critical ed. by Michelangelo Zaccarello, Florence 2014, p. 162. On this passage see Anita Simon, “Letteratura e arte figurativa: Franco Sacchetti, un testimone d’eccezione?”, in: *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome: Moyen-âge*, CV (1993), pp. 443–479: 460 (though

was nonetheless often expanded. It could for instance target lousy craftsmanship that made the artwork's precious medium look like a vile material, as in Sebastiano del Piombo's epistolary account (1521) of Pietro Urbano's completion of the fingers of Michelangelo's Minerva *Christ*, which "non par lavorate de marmo, par li habi lavorato colloro che lavorino de pasta, tanto sonno stentate".³¹ In a similar vein, Benvenuto Cellini remarked in his autobiography that "le stiene" (the back) of Baccio Bandinelli's *Hercules and Cacus* "paiono ritratte da un sacco pieno di zucche lunghe" (Fig. I).³² It seems plausible that Cellini modeled his criticism after Leonardo's "sacco di noci", especially when one considers that Cellini owned and even planned to publish a now lost apograph of writings by Leonardo he had bought in France in 1542, which most probably included passages from the *Libro di pittura*.³³

Vasari's *Vite* sometimes mitigated the ridiculing criticism leveled through such expressive solutions by attributing it to an inadequate *giudizio* in matters of art or to a lack of understanding of creative processes. In recounting Leonardo Buonafé's bad reception of the still unfinished altarpiece that Rosso Fiorentino

was painting upon his commission, Vasari thus noted how to the patron "parvero, come colui ch'era poco intendente di questa arte, tutti quei Santi, diavoli, avendo il Rosso costume nelle sue bozze a olio di fare certe arie crudeli e disperate, e nel finirle poi addolciva l'aria e riducevale al buono".³⁴ Vasari also found himself at the receiving end of comparable attacks, aimed for example at his penchant for overcrowded pictorial fields. In an undated letter written to Antonio Chigi some time after Vasari's death, Federico Zuccari vindicated the ungenerous treatment that his brother had allegedly received in the *Vite* by observing that Taddeo had without doubt proven to be a superior painter to the Tuscan colleagues of his generation, and certainly far superior to "il povero Giorgio che non sapeva che far presto, ed empir di figure le mura glie, che vi paiono poste a pigione".³⁵

There are many other such examples, more or less jeering in the tone of their criticism, but this survey suffices to demonstrate how disparaging expressions, which have sometimes appeared folkloristic and literally unmediated, had a remarkable currency among writers of the age as well as a high degree of textual codification.³⁶ Nor is this entirely surprising, in light

arguing that the reference was to the Volto Santo of Lucca). On the author's keen interest in the issue of the artistic "recreation of reality", see also Michelangelo Zaccarello, "Ingegno naturale e cultura materiale: i motti degli artisti nelle *Trecento Novelle* di Franco Sacchetti", in: *Italianistica*, XXXVIII (2009), 2, pp. 129–140.

³¹ *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, ed. by Giovanni Poggi/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1965–1983, II, p. 313, letter by Sebastiano del Piombo to Michelangelo of 6 September 1521. On this episode, see Raymond Carlson's contribution to this volume, pp. 133–136.

³² Benvenuto Cellini, *Opere*, ed. by Giuseppe Guido Ferrero, Turin 1971, p. 508 (*Vita*, II, 70).

³³ Nicole Hegener, *Divi Iacobi Eques: Selbstdarstellung im Werk des Florentiner Bildbauers Baccio Bandinelli*, Munich 2008, pp. 481f., first discussed Leonardo and Cellini's texts in parallel, thus hinting at the possibility that they were genetically related. The same hypothesis is more explicitly suggested by Stefano Pierguidi, "Il confronto fra antichi e moderni nel collezionismo di Cosimo I: Michelangelo, Sansovino, Cellini, Bandinelli", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, LIV (2010–2012), pp. 505–520: 511. For more on Cellini's acquisition of the apograph of Leonardo's writings, see Carlo Pedretti, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci, Compiled and Edited*

from the *Original Manuscripts* by Jean Paul Richter: *Commentary*, Berkeley 1977, II, p. 395, and Claire J. Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone: A Critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the "Codex Urbinas"*, Leiden 1992, pp. 18f. and 26. For a discussion of Cellini's aborted publication project, which was possibly hindered by the theft of the precious manuscript, see Diletta Gamberini, "Benvenuto Cellini, o del sapere 'pur troppo dire il fatto suo' a Cosimo de' Medici", in: *Annali d'Italianistica*, XXXIV (2016), pp. 199–218: 208f., note 19.

³⁴ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, a cura di Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966–1997, IV, pp. 475f. (ed. 1568, life of Rosso). On this famous account see the preface by Alessandro Nova and the essay by David Ekserdjian in the present volume, pp. 7f. and 40; on Vasari's criteria of criticism, see the contribution by Chiara Franceschini, pp. 51–59.

³⁵ *Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura ed architettura scritte da' più celebri personaggi dei secoli XV, XVI, e XVII*, ed. by Giovanni Bottari/Stefano Ticozzi, Milan 1822–1825, VII, p. 511. For a discussion of the text see Philip Sohm, "Giving Vasari the Giorgio Treatment", in: *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, XVIII (2015), pp. 61–111: 103f.

³⁶ Compare, for instance, the commentary to Leonardo's annotation on

of the broader scholarly trend that has demonstrated the literary constructedness and participation in learned culture of the foremost comic writings of medieval and Renaissance Italy, particularly with regard to burlesque poetry.³⁷ One last consideration deserves mention. Given that many of the texts discussed here make us smile, we might treat them as disengaged forms of literary divertissement. The passages from Leonardo, Vasari, Cellini, and others, however, serve as reminders not to dismiss the art-historical relevance of the linguistic and thematic conventions that such authors inherited from a variety of comical sources. Their fulminating comments reveal how Renaissance painters and sculptors often bent such conventions into a militant discourse, rich in technical implications, that expressed their aesthetic stances on some of the most important issues of the contemporary artistic life.

Appendix

1. *Leonidas of Alexandria*, in: Greek Anthology, XI, 213.

Εικόνα Μηνοδότου γράψας Διόδωρος ἔθηκεν
πλὴν τοῦ Μηνοδότου πᾶσιν ὄμοιοτάτην.

(Diodorus, painting Menodotus' portrait, / made it very like everyone except Menodotus.)³⁸

2. *Lucilius*, in: Greek Anthology, XI, 215.

Εἴκοσι γεννήσας ὁ ζωγράφος Εὐτυχος νιόνς,
οὐδὲν ἀπὸ τῶν τέκνων οὐδὲν ὄμοιον ἔχει.

(Eutychus the painter was the father of twenty sons, / but never got a likeness even among his children.)³⁹

3. *Lucilius*, in: Greek Anthology, XI, 212.

<Τεκνίον εἴμορφον, Διόδωρε, γράφειν σ' ἐκέλευσα·>
ἀλλὰ σύ μοι προφερεῖς τεκνίον ἀλλότριον,
τὴν προτομὴν αὐτῷ περιθεὶς κυνός ὥστε με κλάειν
πᾶς μοι Ζωπυρίων ἐξ Ἐκάβης γέγονεν.
καὶ πέρας ἐξ δραχμῶν Ἐρασίστρατος ὁ κρεοπώλης
ἐκ τῶν Ἰσείων νιὸν Ἀνουβίν ἔχω.

(I ordered you, Diodorus, to paint a pretty child, but you / produce a child strange to me, putting a dog's head on his / shoulders, so that I weep to think how my Zopyrion was born to me / by Hecuba. And finally I, Erasistratus the butcher, have got for six / drachmae a son Anubis from the shrines of Isis.)⁴⁰

4. *Apollonides*, in: Greek Anthology, XVI, 50.

Εἰ τοιόσδε Λέων λάχεν ἀντίος Ἡρακλῆi,
οὐκ ἦν Αλκίδεω τοῦτο τὸ δωδέκατον.

(If such a Leo [lion] had chanced to face Heracles, this would / not have been his twelfth labour.)⁴¹

³⁸ Quoted from *The Greek Anthology* (note 11), IV, pp. 172f.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 174f.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 172f.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, V, pp. 186f.

5. *Lucilius, in: Greek Anthology, XI, 214.*

Γράψας Δευκαλίωνα, Μενέστρατε, καὶ Φαέθοντα,
ζητεῖς τίς τούτων ἄξιος ἔστι τίνος.
τοῖς ιδίοις αὐτοὺς τιμήσομεν ἄξιος ὄντως
ἔστι πυρὸς Φαέθων, Δευκαλίων δ' ὕδατος.

(Having painted Deucalion and Phaethon, Menesthratus, you /
enquire which of them is worth anything. We will appraise them /
according to their own fate. Phaethon is truly worthy of fire and /
Deucalion of water.)⁴²

6. *Anonymous, in: Greek Anthology, XVI, 319.*

Εἰς εἰκόνα Μαρίνου ρήτορος
Εἰκονες ἀνθρώποισι φίλον γέρας· ἀλλὰ Μαρίνῳ
ὑβρίς, ἐλεγχομένης εἰδος ἀπρεπίης.

(On a Portrait of the Rhetor Marinus: Portraits are an honour dear to men, but for Marinus a / portrait is an insult, as it exhibits the uncomeliness of his form.)⁴³

7. *Tifi Odasi, Macaronea, ll. 250–276.*

In Segnoria pictor tenet ille platea
de lancis plenam, bardis, targone botegam. 250
Pro capis retinet stranio colore scudellas
et malefactos multa cum pulve penellos.
Facit pro melius bancos de villa novicis
interdum crenzas facit de zalo superbas,
desiderat multum, potuit set discere numquam
pingere: bastonos pingit de mazo rectori,
quod, si aliud pingit, guastat simul atque spegazat
et comandatus opus est litigare palazo, 260
omnia patronis tandem pagare necesse est.
Quod, si forte aliquem voluit depingere gallum,
quicunque aspiciat poterit iurare cicognam.
Depinxitque semel canes a caza currentes:
omnes credebant natantes in equore luzos.
Sive hominem pingit, poteris tu credere lignum 265
in quo sartores ponunt sine capite vestes;
seu nudos facit multo sudore putinos,
tu caput a culo poteris dignoscere nunquam

sive facit gremio Christum retinere Mariam,
non licet a filio sanctam dignoscere matrem.

Pro gardelinis depingit sepe galinas
et pro gallinis depingit sepe caballos.

Blastemat, iurat, culpam dicit esse penelli,
quos spazaturas poteris iurare de brusco:
tam bene depingit pictorum pessimus iste,
nec tamen inferior se cogitat esse Belino.

270

275

(That painter has his workshop, full of spears and axes and under a big sign, in the Piazza de' Signori. He keeps some strangely colored bowls as containers, and dusty, ludicrous brushes. He is quite good at making benches for peasant brides, and every now and then he makes marvellous yellow credenzas; he would very much like to paint, but he never learnt to: he paints [just] the sticks for the dean of May, because, if he paints anything else, he spoils everything with his squiggles, and, after being dragged to court, he has to go through litigation, and eventually reimburse in full his patrons. [This happens] because, if he wants to paint some rooster, any beholder would swear that is a stork. And once he painted some dogs running during hunt: everybody believed they were pikes swimming in the sea. If he paints a man, you could believe that was a headless dummy, on which tailors try dresses; or, if he laboriously depicted naked putti, you would never be able to distinguish face from ass, and if he represents Mary holding Christ on her lap, it is impossible to tell apart the holy mother from her son. Instead of goldfinches he often depicts chickens; instead of chickens, horses. He blasphemes, swears, says the fault is the brushes', which you could swear [were made] of scraps from a butcher's broom: so well does the worst of painters depict, and yet he does not consider himself inferior to Bellini.)⁴⁴

8. *Andrea Micheli alias Squarzola or Strazzola.*

In quattro facultà quattro ignorant
si trova in questa bolla, in sto confino:

el primo in medicina è il Malatino,
che prosume degli altri esser avanti.

4

Ma poi in pittura segue lo arroganti
cavalier spiron d'or Gentil Bellino,
che depinger volendo un armellino
depinse un gatto cum li unghi raspanti.

8

Seguita a questo un musico soprano
Bartolomeo excellente organista

⁴² *Ibidem*, IV, pp. 174f. (translation slightly revised).

⁴³ *Ibidem*, V, pp. 350f.

⁴⁴ Quoted from Paccagnella (note 20), pp. 120f. (the translation is mine).

sonando 'Rosa bella' cum sua mano. Polo Zotto poi seguita, che acquista un ventresino d'un tauro nostrano, ponendol de' poeti nella lista, e de' più vile e trista fronde si trova fargli una corona, qual si conviene a sua gentil persona.	II
	14
	17 ⁴⁵

9. Leonardo, *Codex L of the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France*, fol. 79r.

De pittura.

Necessaria cosa è al pittore per essere bon membrificatore nell'attitudine e gesti che far si possono per li nudi, di sapere la notomia di nervi, ossi, muscoli e lacerti per sapere nelli diversi movimenti e forze qual nervo o muscolo è di tal movimento causa, e sol quegli fare evidenti e ingrossati e non li altri per tutto, come molti fanno, che per parere gran disegnatori, fanno i lor inudi legnosi e senza grazia, che pare a vederli un sacco di noci più presto che superficie umana, ovvero un fascio di ravanelli più presto che muscolosi nudi.⁴⁶

Abstract

The article casts light upon the variety of literary sources that inspired the genre of vituperative poems about artistic subjects, which flourished in several centers of the Italian peninsula since the final decades of the fifteenth century. After stressing how authors of such verse were typically equipped with an extensive humanistic education, the discussion concentrates on the relevance of classical antecedents to the growth of this peculiar form of amusing *Kunstliteratur*. The analysis reveals that this kind of poetry often appropriated some basic thematic refrains from the so-called *Planudean Anthology*, mostly through a process of amplification and cross-fertilization with motifs derived from vernacular comic traditions. Amid this collection of ancient Greek, Hellenistic and early Byzantine epigrams, Renaissance readers could in fact find not only hundreds of eulogistic short poems on artworks, which were to shape the language and conventions of the age's poetry about art, but also a small set of verse compositions mocking the most ridiculous professional failures of artists, particularly in matters of mimeticism. The article then considers several early developments of these clichés in Renaissance derisive verse on art, while also devoting attention to some of the most recurrent linguistic solutions that came to be associated with this humorous mode of criticism.

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Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Editorial Office: Fig. 1.

⁴⁵ Quoted from Rossi (note 24), p. 46.

⁴⁶ Quoted from *Leonardo da Vinci: i manoscritti dell'Institut de France. Il manoscritto L*, ed. by Augusto Marinoni, Florence 1987, pp. 70f.

Umschlagbild | Copertina:

Giorgio Vasari und Mitarbeiter, *Apelle und der Schuster* | Giorgio Vasari e collaboratori, *Apelle e il ciabattino*
Florenz | Firenze, Casa Vasari, sala grande
(S. 46, Abb. I | p. 46, fig. 1)

ISSN 0342-1201

Stampa: Grafiche Martinelli, Firenze
luglio 2021