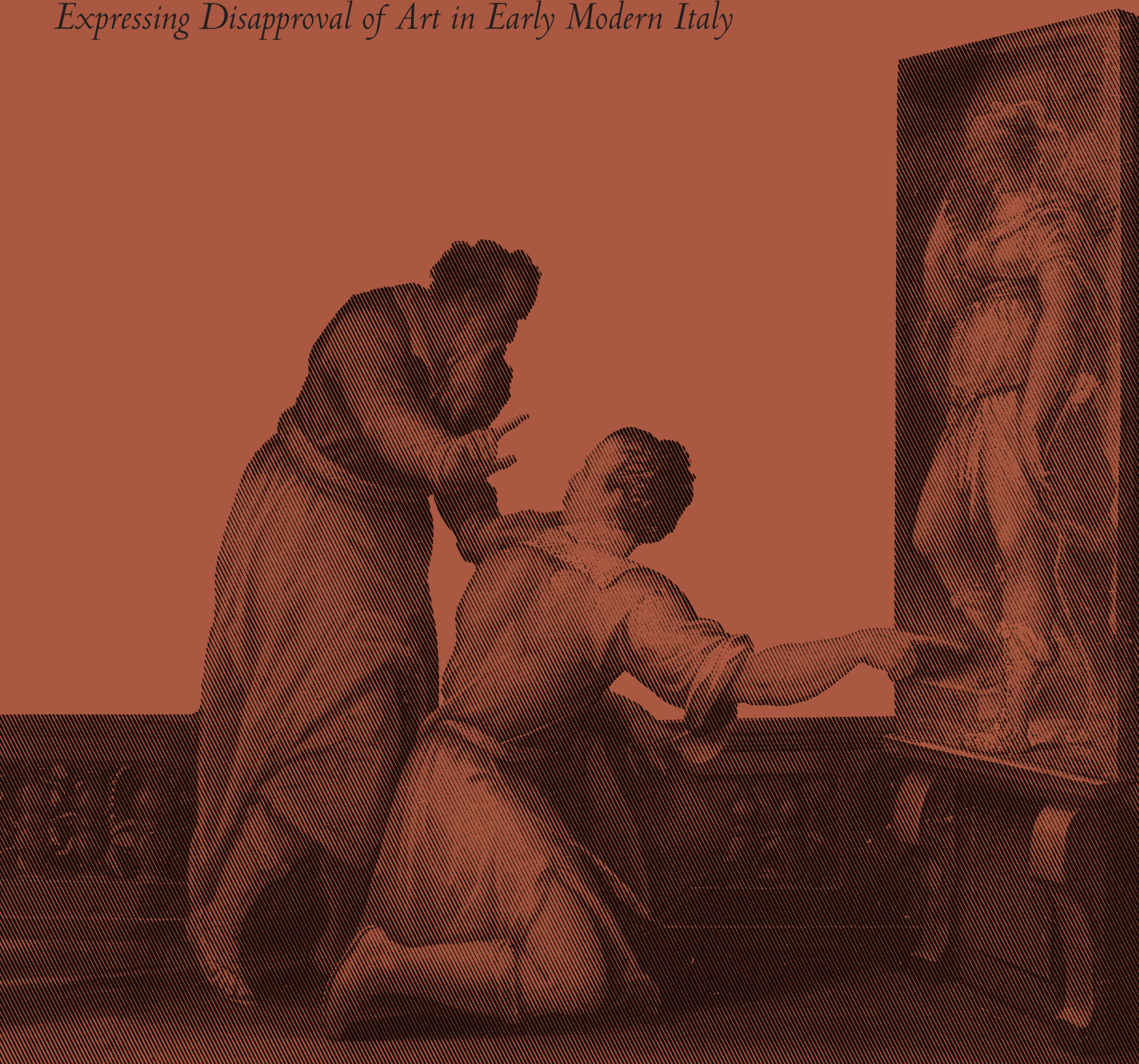
MITTEILUNGEN DES KUNSTHISTORISCHEN INSTITUTES IN FLORENZ

LXIII. BAND — 2021
HEFT I

Bad Reception
Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy



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Bad Reception: Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy

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Preface

The articles in this volume developed out of the workshop *Bad Reception. Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy*, held at the Kunsthistorisches Institut on 15 and 16 November 2018. The event was organized to address a lacuna in our knowledge about artistic reception in early modern Italy. Only rarely do studies that focus on this cultural context discuss the widespread phenomenon of negative responses to recently created paintings, sculptures, and buildings. In part, and especially in earlier scholarly literature, this omission reflects a triumphalist narrative where the history of art is presented as an uninterrupted sequence of successes. But even art historians who avoid or actively reject this approach inevitably devote more attention to objects that survive, at least in the documentary record, when constructing arguments about individual artists, patrons, geographic areas, or themes. The works of art that were appreciated by their contemporaries have a better chance of surviving or being recorded than those considered to be failures. Nevertheless, from the late fifteenth through the early seventeenth centuries, the bad reception of art appears with noteworthy frequency in a wide range of written sources, including artistic treatises, letters, poetry, biographies, and archival documents. As Ernst Gombrich first suggested in his groundbreaking essay "The Leaven of Criticism in Renaissance Art", first published in the volume *Art, Science, and History in the Renaissance* (1967), the kind of critiques found in these writings often served a key function. By censoring what were perceived to be aesthetic or technical blunders, such comments were intended to function as proactive stimuli that would eventually push artists to come up with better solutions to the creative challenges they faced.

Until now, the few studies available on our topic have typically focused on individual examples or else on the specific inflections of negative criticism in codified

literary writings, such as the studies by Maddalena Spagnolo and others examining vituperative poems on artworks. For the first time, the essays in this volume explore the conventions used in different genres of texts that criticized works of art and architecture while also considering the impact these discourses had on the afterlife of the objects under discussion. Instead of presenting new examples of unfavorable responses to images, the ensemble of these contributions aims to demonstrate how different cases point to broader patterns of reception. By transcending episodic contingencies and tracing possible links among different instances of disapproving reactions to Renaissance art, this approach provides a better idea of the tensions, competitions, and struggles that, according to the theory laid out by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (1992), accompany the attempts to define legitimate and illegitimate modes of artistic production in every age and geographic area.

In contrast to the workshop, this volume is divided into three main sections. The studies in the opening section introduce broad methodological questions about the bad reception of artworks in the Italian Renaissance. They also consider which aspects of paintings and sculptures typically generated negative assessments, such as the lack of decorum, verisimilitude, technical skill, or beauty. The first contribution – the result of a collaboration between an art historian, Jonathan K. Nelson, and an economist, Richard J. Zeckhauser – examines a wide array of instances of disapproving reactions that concerned works of portraiture. In the following article, David Ekserdjian considers another major pictorial genre, the altarpiece. Both studies direct special attention to the negative evaluations made by the patrons and recorded in a spectrum of early modern sources. Especially in the second half of the sixteenth century, however, numerous written records document how artists took on an increasingly central role of critical judges of their peers' work. This phenomenon, closely linked to widespread Renaissance debates over the question of who has the right to judge art, is explored by Chiara Franceschini in relation to the most influential product of art historical thinking of the age, Giorgio Vasari's *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (1550, 1568).

A second major focus of the volume is the analysis, both in a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, of the linguistic and thematic conventions used in vituperative sonnets on works of art. These three essays – by historians of literature (Diletta Gamberini, Paolo Celi) and of art (Maddalena Spagnolo) – probe the spectrum of literary models underpinning this popular genre of 'poetic criticism', while also discussing its art-historical implications. Gamberini reveals how Renaissance authors of such verse ridiculing art were expanding on comic suggestions they could find in different textual antecedents, and particularly in Greek epigrams from the so-called *Planudean Anthology*. Spagnolo's article is a wide-ranging critical assessment of the insight that this type of literary material can offer to modern art historians, who have

long disregarded such sources. Both contributions consider a large number of texts, whereas Celi's essay draws attention to two authors who wrote attacks on figurated façades in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Florence, analyzing the linguistic elements that connect their poems.

The last section, a series of case studies by art historians, focuses on the consequences of negative evaluations, either on the artistic product itself or on the author's career and reputation. The first two essays provide close readings of written testimonies to examine attacks on works by Michelangelo. They focus not on the *Last Judgment*, the artist's most divisive creation, which was harshly criticized in Pietro Aretino's letters, Giovanni Andrea Gilio's *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie* (1564), and other texts, but rather on earlier and lesser-known instances of his bad reception. Sefy Hendler considers accounts by Ascanio Condivi, Giorgio Vasari, and Benedetto Varchi on Michelangelo's bronze statue of Pope Julius II, whereas Raymond Carlson explores letters by the artist and his correspondents regarding the fall from grace of his *garzone* Pietro Urbano, who had been entrusted to install the *Risen Christ* in the Roman church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. The last contribution, by Gail Feigenbaum, brings us to the end of the Cinquecento with an in-depth study of Annibale Carracci's *Butcher shop*, casting light on the painting's use of lofty pictorial models as a polemical reaction to the bad reception of his art by some contemporaries, as narrated by Carlo Cesare Malvasia's *Felsina pittrice*.

This volume, with its layered treatment of the theme and its fresh insights into many other far-reaching issues in the field of Italian Renaissance art, aims to advance our knowledge about a phenomenon that has hitherto not received the scholarly attention it deserves. Our greatest hope, however, is that it will serve to encourage and provide a framework for future research on the topic. In closing, we are pleased to express our gratitude to our co-editor Alessandro Nova, director of the Kunsthistorisches Institut, for his enthusiastic support and collaboration, to the colleagues he thanks in his introduction, and to all the contributors to the workshop and this volume.

Diletta Gamberini – Jonathan K. Nelson

Umschlagbild | Copertina:

Giorgio Vasari und Mitarbeiter, *Apelle und der Schuster* | Giorgio Vasari e collaboratori, *Apelle e il ciabattino*
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(S. 46, Abb. 1 | p. 46, fig. 1)

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