

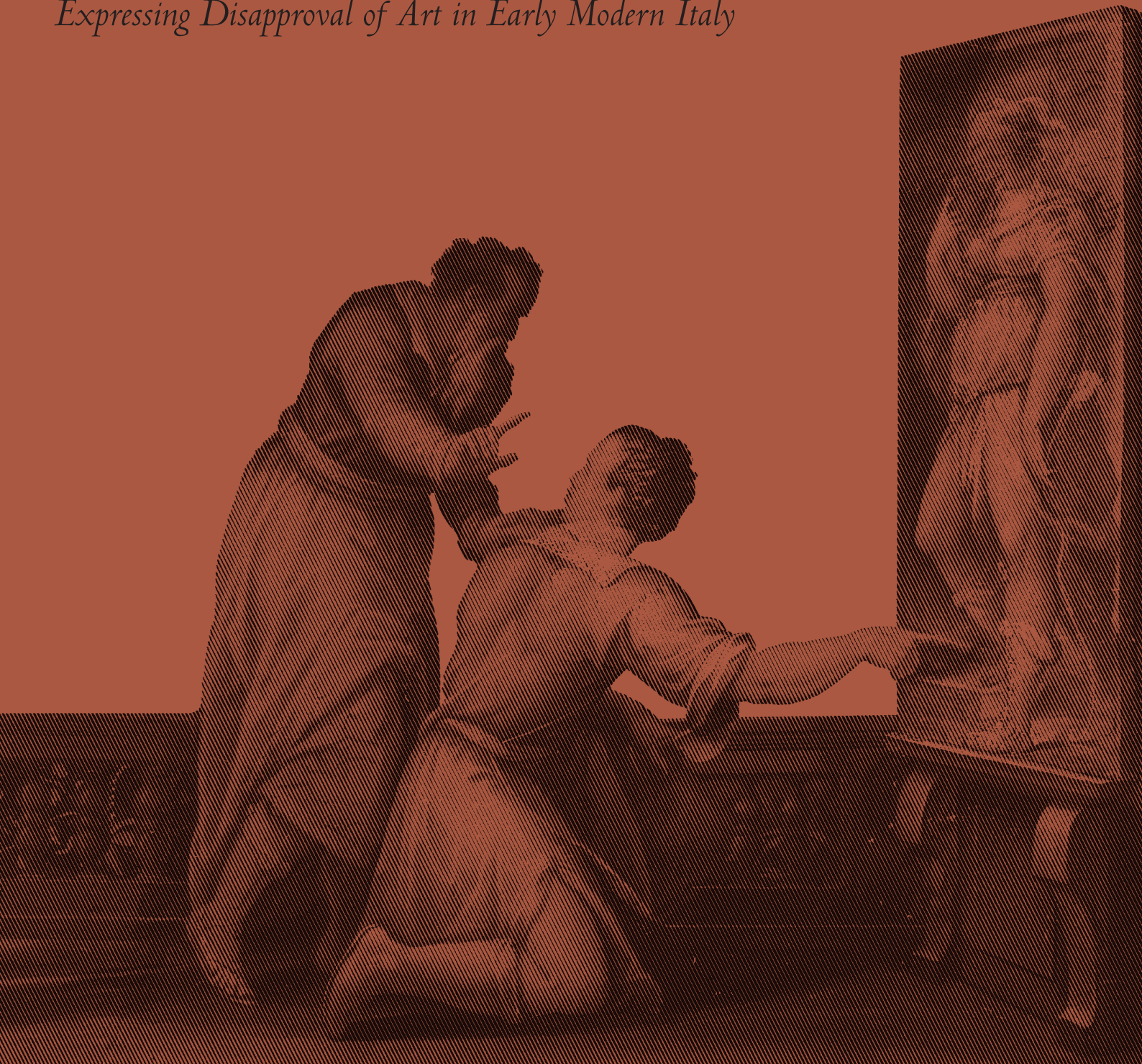
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Bad Reception

Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy



Bad Reception: Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy

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1 Rosso Fiorentino, *Virgin and Child with four saints*.
Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi,
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BAD RECEPTION IN EARLY MODERN ITALY AN INTRODUCTION

Alessandro Nova

When Diletta Gamberini and Jonathan Nelson came into my office with their proposal to organise a workshop entitled *Bad Reception. Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy*, I responded immediately with great enthusiasm, in part because I had already given some thought to this peculiar phenomenon. To reject a product that has been commissioned with a legal contract implies a set of important issues. These include the recognition of certain quality standards, a shared perception of what we now call ‘aesthetics’; the freedom of the artist, who could promote his or her own style, but also the freedom of the patron to reject a work that did not match his or her expectations; and the existence of an art market with mostly fixed, but also some flexible rules. Of course, there are many different reasons for rejecting a work of art. In this introduction, however, I will discuss only a few well-known examples with no pretension to exhaust all possible categories. Indeed,

even if I have tried to create a ‘grid’ based on historical facts as a point of departure for further discussion, I am afraid that each instance of rejection had and still has its own meaning, context, and dynamics.

The most interesting type of rejection is the one based on aesthetic criteria. As discussed by David Franklin in his monograph on Rosso Fiorentino in Italy and by David Ekserdjian in this volume, the extant documentation for the altarpiece commissioned by the director of the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, Leonardo Buonafè, in fulfilment of a bequest made by a Catalan widow (Fig. 1) allows us an insight into the reasons for the negative reactions of a patron to Rosso’s early style. Furthermore, “it shows how stylistic innovation did not always translate into success, even in a city with a rich artistic heritage like Florence”.¹ The altarpiece was commissioned from Rosso on 30 January 1518 for the church of Ognissanti, where

¹ David Franklin, *Rosso in Italy: The Italian Career of Rosso Fiorentino*, New Haven/London 1994, p. 35.



2 Fra Bartolomeo, *God the Father with Saints Mary Magdalen and Catherine of Siena*.
Lucca, Museo Nazionale di Villa Guinigi

the Catalan community used to assemble, but the patron reserved the right to reallocate the work if the painter failed to finish it within the time limit. Such a clause indicates that Buonafè did not completely trust the young artist, and their relationship must have soon deteriorated if Giuliano Bugiardini and Francesco Granacci were asked to arbitrate between the contending parties.² It is likely that Giorgio Vasari, commenting on this episode in the mode of a Tuscan *novella*, exaggerated the implications of the controversy. Indeed, he went so far as to relate how the ignorant patron, seeing the work at an early stage, objected to the harshness of the saints who seemed to him like devils. According to Vasari's biased narrative, the commissioner "non volse la tavola, dicendo che [Rosso] lo aveva giuntato".³ The truth, however, is much more ambiguous. On the one hand, we know that the patron had conservative tastes: he liked Lorenzo di Credi's and Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio's works more than Rosso's; furthermore, we know that he tried to reduce the artist's compensation. On the other hand, Buonafè did not reject the altarpiece outright. It seems, instead, that he confined himself to sending the panel to the small church of Santo Stefano in Grezzano, north-east of Florence in the Val di Sieve, given that the site had been made a benefice of Santa Maria Nuova in the early sixteenth century.⁴ Therefore, Franklin is not entirely correct when he states that "the conflict traced in the documents over Rosso's altarpiece represents a rare example of a patron refusing a work".⁵ Yet, he is surely right in noting that outright refusals were rare, as is shown by the essays in this volume. In many cases works were accepted and then moved, payment was reduced or refused, major changes were requested, and a wide range of documented actions by patrons

² *Ibidem*, pp. 38–40.

³ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966–1997, IV, p. 476.

⁴ Franklin (note 1), pp. 40f.

expressed disapproval – very seldom, however, works were returned to the artists.

A second example involves issues of style and iconography alongside financial problems. In 1508, ten years before Rosso painted his altarpiece for Buonafè, Fra Bartolomeo travelled to Venice. There, he signed a contract with Bartolomeo d'Alzano, the prior of the Reformed Dominicans of San Pietro Martire on Murano, for an altarpiece representing God the Father appearing to Mary Magdalene and Saint Catherine of Siena (Fig. 2). Although the contract was signed in Venice, Fra Bartolomeo painted the altarpiece in the convent of San Marco in Florence. The painter was evidently pleased with this commission, given that the altarpiece is signed and dated 1509 at the bottom left, but by February 1512 the fellow Dominicans of Murano had not yet paid the sum agreed upon in the contract. Fra Bartolomeo, therefore, donated it to an old friend of his, the theologian Sante Pagnini, who in 1513 had been appointed prior of the Dominican convent of San Romano in Lucca.⁶

In our context, it is interesting to note that the friars in Murano did not give up on their ambitions for a new altarpiece, since they commissioned another one to substitute the loss of Fra Bartolomeo's painting. The artist entrusted with the new work was Francesco Bissolo, who painted a *Coronation of Saint Catherine of Siena* (Fig. 3), now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice. Interestingly, Bissolo's altarpiece was not only far more conventional but also considerably cheaper than Fra Bartolomeo's. It seems, therefore, that the price was an issue, but, above all, that the friars were upset by the complex iconographic programme developed by Bartolomeo d'Alzano for their high altar. When the latter died in 1508, soon



3 Francesco Bissolo,
*Coronation of Saint Catherine
of Siena*. Venice,
Gallerie dell'Accademia

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

⁶ Chris Fischer, *Fra Bartolomeo Master Draughtsman of the High Renaissance*, exh. cat., Rotterdam 1990, pp. 157–159. For a discussion of the two paintings for San Pietro Martire on Murano, see also the article by David Ekserdjian in this volume, p. 40.

after signing the contract with Fra Bartolomeo, his fellow Venetian friars must have taken this opportunity to back out of the commission.⁷ Some of them might also have appreciated the local visual idiom of a mediocre painter like Bissolo, a minor follower of Giovanni Bellini, more than the Florentine clarity of structure achieved by Fra Bartolomeo in the first decade of the sixteenth century. In this case, therefore, the bad reception of the work could have taken place simultaneously on three levels: financial, iconographical, and stylistic.

It seems that the inhabitants of Murano were parsimonious, since an agreement with Titian for an *Annunciation* also failed. According to Vasari, in 1536 the Franciscan nuns of Santa Maria degli Angeli refused to pay the astronomical sum of five hundred *scudi* for an altarpiece commissioned from Titian.⁸ Though this story has been repeated hundreds of times in the literature on the artist,⁹ this narrative cannot be trusted. It seems highly unlikely that the nuns or one of their patrons would have agreed to sign such an onerous contract. It is more credible, instead, that the story of the five hundred *scudi* was made up by Aretino, who must have been Vasari's source, as part of a new strategy developed to sell Titian's paintings on the international market at a very high price. As the story invented by the writer goes, he would have convinced the painter, after the nuns' refusal, to donate the picture – which is unfortunately lost but recorded in a beautiful engraving by Jacopo Caraglio (Fig. 4) – to Isabella, the wife of

the emperor Charles V. In this account, the generous empress would have then rewarded Titian's "dono" with two thousand *scudi*. This sequence of events is highly suspicious, and a letter Aretino wrote in 1537 supports such skepticism. Indeed, the "gift" was only the first part of the work for the empress. The second part had yet to come, namely Aretino's ecphrastic description of the panel.¹⁰ The letter is too long to be quoted in full. I would only like to mention how he describes the light in the painting:

Egli s'abbaglia nel lume folgorante che esce da i raggi del Paradiso, donde vengano gli angeli adagiati con diverse attitudini in su le nuvole candide, vive, e lucenti. Lo Spirito Santo circondato da i lampi de la sua gloria, fa udire il batter de le penne, tanto simiglia la Colomba di cui ha preso la forma.¹¹

Image and text were two sides of the same work. Aretino recounts that the empress paid four times the sum that Titian had agreed upon with the Franciscan nuns, but this scenario is clearly the result of manipulating history. The enormous sum of five hundred *scudi* was certainly pure fantasy, if one considers that the contract between Fra Bartolomeo and the friars of Murano had fixed a payment of only seventy *scudi*, later increased to seventy-eight.¹² Yet the story of the refusal must contain some truth. In other words: the nuns did commission a painting from Titian; the altarpiece was planned and executed for their church on Murano, but they finally rejected the work be-

⁷ Chris Fischer, in: *Fra Bartolomeo: The Divine Renaissance*, exh. cat., ed. by Albert J. Elen/Chris Fischer, Rotterdam 2016, p. 113, no. 6.

⁸ Vasari (note 3), VI, pp. 161f.

⁹ *Die Kunstliteratur der italienischen Renaissance: Eine Geschichte in Quellen*, ed. by Ulrich Pfisterer, Stuttgart 2002, pp. 13–16.

¹⁰ On the salient features of Aretino's *ekphrasis* and their *colores rhetorici*, see especially the recent discussions by Paolo Procaccioli, "Una parola complice: luoghi, tempi, modi, ragioni di un dialogo", in: "*Pietro pittore aretino*": una parola complice per l'arte del Rinascimento, conference proceedings Venice 2018, ed. by Anna Bisceglia/Matteo Ceriana/Paolo Procaccioli, Venice 2019, pp. 11–21; Luca d'Onghia, "'Con parole dipinte': su Aretino scrittore d'arte", *ibidem*, pp. 171–179, with further references. Also relevant is Paolo Marini, "'A i piè della imagine di Cristo': note sull'Aretino sacro e le arti figurative", in: "*Inchiostro per colore*": arte e artisti in Pietro Aretino, ed. by Anna Bisceglia/Matteo Ceriana/Paolo Procaccioli, Rome 2019, pp. 275–290, and Giulio Ferroni, "Arte e artisti nella critica aretiniana", *ibidem*, pp. 301–318.

¹¹ Pietro Aretino, *Lettere*, I, I, ed. by Paolo Procaccioli, Rome 1997, pp. 316f.

¹² Fischer (note 7), p. 113.



4 Jacopo Caraglio after Titian,
Annunciation. New York, The
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
inv. 49.97.219



5 Giorgio Vasari, *The calling of Peter and Andrew*.
Arezzo, Badia church

cause of the very high price requested by the painter. It seems that there was no written contract but only oral agreements. Aretino, therefore, seized this opportunity to create his own version of the events.

A new style, religious controversy, or lack of funds were not the only causes for a bad reception. Other owners were simply indifferent. Vasari, for example, painted an altarpiece (Fig. 5) for one of the Vatican chapels above the Belvedere corridor built at the time of Pope Julius III. It represents the call of Peter and Andrew on Lake Tiberias, since the pope was exceptionally devoted to Saint Andrew. Indeed, it was on this saint's feast-day that he had entered the conclave which elected him pope. The patron might have liked the picture, but he never paid for it, and when Vasari asked one of his successors, Paul IV, to be paid for the work done, the pope simply answered that Vasari could have his painting back. The artist took it on the spot and subsequently used the panel as part of his double-sided altarpiece placed before his family's tomb in Arezzo.¹³

It would be easy to add more material, but perhaps it is more important to point out that I am not aware of any documented examples of outright rejection before Federico Zuccari and, more famously, Caravaggio. What seems to be certain, however, is that the narrative of rejection is embedded in topoi, and that Vasari's *Vite* are replete with critiques and anecdotes of this kind.¹⁴

It remains to wholeheartedly thank all those who have contributed to the success of the workshop held at the Kunsthistorisches Institut on 15 and 16 November 2018. First of all, I want to express my deepest gratitude to the wonderful team of my *Sekretariat*: Christine Klöckner, Pavla Langer, and Mandy Richter. Many thanks also to Samuel Vitali

¹³ *Giorgio Vasari: principi, letterati e artisti nelle carte di Giorgio Vasari* [...]. exh. cat. Arezzo 1981, ed. by Laura Corti/Margaret Daly Davis, Florence 1981, pp. 340f.

¹⁴ For a discussion of bad reception in Vasari, see the essay by Chiara Franceschini in this volume.

and Ortensia Martinez for editing this issue of the *Mitteilungen* with their usual expertise and professionalism. My greatest debt, however, is to Diletta Gamberini and Jonathan Nelson, who own the intellectual property of this publication. In preparing the workshop together, we often made the insider joke of how good the reception of *Bad Reception* was, since our call for papers had triggered the response of numerous scholars with excellent proposals. We hope that this issue of the *Mitteilungen* will also be received favourably by the many colleagues who are interested in this phenomenon.

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

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