

be decided upon without having first consulted the most holy Roman pontiff.

Aretino's Attack on Michelangelo

Aretino tried several times to obtain some of Michelangelo's drawings by the direct means of writing and asking the artist, as well as through the intercession of common friends. His first letter on the Last Judgment (see above pp. 56-58) was one of these attempts. Hurt by having obtained nothing and by seeing his advice disregarded, he turned to shameful blackmail in the letter reprinted here. He claimed to be shocked by the nudes in the Last Judgment, and then hinted threateningly at accusations currently made against Michelangelo: the breaking of his contract for Julius II's tomb, and his inclination for young men.

In a post scriptum to his letter, Aretino assures Michelangelo that he will not let the letter circulate and damage his reputation. Notwithstanding the assurance, a few years later, having received nothing from the artist, Aretino published the letter in a slightly different version.

To the Great Michelangelo Buonarroti in Rome ¹

SIR,

When I inspected the complete sketch of the whole of your Last Judgment, I arrived at recognizing the eminent graciousness of Raffaello in its agreeable beauty of invention.

Meanwhile, as a baptized Christian, I blush before the license, so forbidden to man's intellect, which you have used in expressing ideas connected with the highest aims and final ends to which our faith aspires. So, then, that Michelangelo stupendous in his fame, that Michelangelo renowned for prudence, that Michelangelo whom all admire, has chosen to display to the whole world an impiety of irreligion only equalled by the perfection of his painting! Is it possible that you, who, since you are divine, do not condescend to consort with human beings, have done this in the greatest temple built to God, upon the highest altar raised to Christ, in the most sacred chapel upon the earth, where the mighty hinges of the Church, the venerable priests of our religion, the Vicar of Christ, with solemn ceremonies and holy prayers, confess, contemplate and adore his body, his blood, and his flesh?

If it were not infamous to introduce the comparison, I would

plume myself upon my discretion when I wrote *La Nanna*.² I would demonstrate the superiority of my prudent reserve to your immodesty, seeing that I, while handling themes lascivious and immodest, use language comely and decorous, speak in terms beyond reproach and inoffensive to chaste ears. You, on the contrary, presenting so awful a subject, exhibit saints and angels, these without earthly decency, and those without celestial honors.

The pagans when they made statues I do not say of Diana who is clothed, but of naked Venus, made them cover with their hand the parts which should not be seen. And here there comes a Christian who, because he rates art higher than faith, deems a royal spectacle martyrs and virgins in improper attitudes, men dragged down by their genitals, things in front of which brothels would shut their eyes in order not to see them. Your art would be at home in some voluptuous bagnio, certainly not in the highest chapel of the world. Less criminal were it if you were an infidel, than, being a believer, thus to sap the faith of others. Up to the present time the splendor of such audacious marvels has not gone unpunished; for their very superexcellence is the death of your good name. Restore it to good repute by turning the indecent parts of the damned to flames, and those of the blessed to sunbeams; or imitate the modesty of Florence, who hides your David's shame beneath some gilded leaves. And yet that statue is exposed upon a public square, not in a consecrated chapel.

As I wish that God may pardon you, I do not write this out of any resentment for the things I wished to have. In truth, if you had sent me what you promised, you would only have been doing what you ought to have desired most eagerly to do in your own interest; for this act of courtesy would have silenced the envious tongues which say that only certain Gerards and Thomases dispose of them.³

Indeed, if the treasure bequeathed you by Pope Julius, in order that his remains may be deposited in the shrine of your sculptures, was not enough to make you keep your plighted word, what can I expect from you? It is not your ingratitude, your avarice, great painter, but the grace and merit of the Supreme Shepherd which determined his sepulture. God wills that Julius' renown should live for ever by itself, in a simple tomb, and not by the strength of your genius in some proud monument. Meantime, your failure to discharge your obligations is reckoned to you as an act of thieving.

² That is parts I and II of Aretino's *Ragionamenti* (1534 and 1536), famous for their licentiousness.

³ This is a slanderous allusion to Gherardo Perini and Tommaso Cavalieri, intimate friends of Michelangelo. There is no trace of such a promise as Aretino claims to have received.

¹ Text of the original manuscript published by Gaye, *Carteggio inedito*, II, 332 ff. Trans. J. A. Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo* (London: 1899), pp. 333-36.

Our souls need the tranquil emotions of piety more than the lively impressions of plastic art. May God, then, inspire His Holiness Paul with the same thoughts as he instilled into Gregory of blessed memory, who rather chose to despoil Rome of the proud statues of Idols than to let their magnificence deprive the humbler images of saints of the devotion of the people.

Lastly, when you set about composing your picture of the universe and hell and heaven, if you had remembered the glory, the majesty, and the terror which I sketched out for you with learning and science in the inspiring letter I wrote you and which the whole world reads,⁴ I venture to assert that not only Nature and all kind influences cease to regret the illustrious talents they endowed you with, and which today render you, by virtue of your art, an image of the marvelous: but Providence, who sees all things, would herself continue to watch over such a masterpiece, so long as order lasts in her government of the hemispheres. Of November 1545, in Venice.

Your Servant,

THE ARETINE

Now that I have blown off some of the rage I feel against you for the cruelty you used to my devotion, and have taught you to see that, while you may be divine, I am not made of water,⁵ I bid you tear up this letter, for I have done the like, and do not forget that I am one to whose epistles kings and emperors reply.

The Didactic Task of Painting

The Council of Trent had entrusted the application of the decree on images to the bishops. The Bishop of Bologna, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, proposed to develop it into a kind of complete legislative digest. His Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane—in fact the collective work of a commission—was to comprise five books of which only two ever appeared (1582).

The first one deals with generalities; the second and more interesting concerns the errors of sacred and profane artists (for the Church must rule the one as well as the other). The following books were to treat of licentious pictures, of a constructive iconography of sacred subjects, and finally of the uses of works of art.

The Discourse is exclusively a work of moral theology. It deals with art in the abstract and never attempts a criticism of existing works. Although the authors have read such writers as Pliny, Dürer, and Vasari,

⁴ See above, p. 56.

⁵ Pun on *divino* (*di vino*) and *d'acqua*.

they considered only the subjects and the moral and didactic value of works of art. The search for artistic perfection implied the danger of vanity, and the imitation of antiquity smelled of paganism; a private citizen who had his portrait painted was already suspect of pride.

The chapter on obscure pictures which we translate is part of a section on "errors common to sacred and profane images." Obscurity was considered to be a sin against the essential didactic function of any art, and could not be tolerated even for the most profound mysteries of faith. The aesthetic taste for obscurity, with which Michelangelo was so often reproached and which had such an immense vogue with Mannerist artists, especially during the second part of the 16th century, was no more commendable than obscurity caused by ignorance.

Pictures with Obscure and Difficult Meaning¹

One of the main praises that we give to a writer or a practitioner of any liberal art is that he knows how to explain his ideas clearly, and that even if his subject is lofty and difficult, he knows how to make it plain and intelligible to all by his easy discourse. We can state the same of the painter in general, all the more because his works are used mostly as books for the illiterate, to whom we must always speak openly and clearly. Since many people do not pay attention to this, it happens every day that in all sorts of places, and most of all in churches, one sees paintings so obscure and ambiguous, that while they should, by illuminating the intelligence, both incite devotion and sting the heart, in fact they confuse the mind, pull it in a thousand directions, and keep it busy sorting out what each figure is, not without loss of devotion. Thus whatever good intention that has been brought to the church is wasted, and often one subject is taken for another; so much so that, instead of being instructed, one remains confused and deceived.

To obviate such a great ill, one must look carefully for the roots of that error, which we shall find comes from one of three things: either the painter or the patron that commissions the work lacks will, or knowledge, or ability; and in this we take an example from the writers, in so far as their art is on this point comparable to the painters'.

As to intention, it must seem strange that there are persons who like to be obscure and not to be understood, but it is true; and for this reason, Heraclitus, in antiquity, was called *σχορευτός* for his obscurity,² and Quintilian³ tells us that there once was a rhetorician who did not

¹ Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 1582, book II, chapter 33. Translated from Barocchi, *Trattati*, II, 408-12. The notes 2 to 13 are Paleotti's.

² Cicero, *De finibus*, ii, 5.

³ *Instit. orat.*, VIII, 2.