Renaissance Florence and Venice:
An Artistic Tale of Two Cities

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Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura* (Florence, 1435):

Di questo adunque, lasciate le altre cose da parte, racconterò io quel che faccia mentre ch'io dipingo**.** *La prima cosa nel dipingere una superficie, io vi disegno un quadrangolo di angoli retti grande quanto a me piace. Il quale mi serve per un'aperta finestra della quale si abbia a veder l'istoria*, e quivi determino le grandezze degli uomini ch'io vi voglio fare in pittura, e divido la lunghezza di quest'uomo in tre parti, le quali a me sono proporzionali con quella misura che il vulgo chiama il braccio….

[Leaving other considerations aside, I will come straight to the matter of telling you what I do when I paint. *First of all, on the surface which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is to be seen.* In this I then decide the size of the human figures which I want in the painting and divide that height of each figure into three parts, which will be proportional for me with the measure commonly called a '*braccio*'…]

Leonardo Bruni, *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis* (1403/4):

- Nothing in this state is ill-proportioned, nothing improper, nothing incongruous, nothing left vague; everything occupies its proper place, which is not only clearly defined but also in the right relation to all the others.

Giorgio Vasari on Antonello da Messina

(*Salient passages have been italicised in red*.)

When I consider within my own mind the various qualities of the benefits and advantages that have been conferred on the art of painting by many masters who have followed the second manner, I cannot do otherwise than call them, by reason of their efforts, truly industrious and excellent, because they sought above all to bring painting to a better condition, without thinking of discomfort, expense, or any particular interest of their own. They continued, then, to employ no other method of colouring save that of distemper for panels and for canvases, which method had been introduced by Cimabue in the year 1250, when he was working with those Greeks, and had been afterwards followed by Giotto and by the others of whom we have spoken up to the present; and they were still adhering to the same manner of working, *although the craftsmen recognized*

clearly that pictures in distemper were wanting in a certain softness and liveliness, which, if they could be obtained, would be likely to give more grace to their designs, loveliness to their colouring, and greater facility in blending the colours together; for they had ever been wont to hatch their works merely with the point of the brush.

But although many had made investigations and sought for something of the sort, yet no one had found any good method, either by the use of liquid varnish or by the mixture of other kinds of colours with the distemper. Among many who made trial of these and other similar expedients, but all in vain, were Alessio Baldovinetti, Pesello, and many others, not one of whom succeeded in giving to his works the beauty and excellence that he had imagined. *And even if they had found what they were seeking, they still lacked the method of making their figures on panel adhere as well as those painted on walls, and also that of making them so that they could be washed without destroying the colours, and would endure any shock in handling.* These matters a great number of craftsmen had discussed many times in common, but without result. This same desire was felt by many lofty minds that were devoted to painting beyond the bounds of Italy--namely, by all the painters of France, Spain, Germany, and other countries. Now, while matters stood thus, it came to pass that, while working in Flanders, Johann of Bruges [Jan van Eyck], a painter much esteemed in those parts by reason of the great mastery that he had acquired in his profession, set himself to make trial of various sorts of colours, and, as one who took delight in alchemy, to prepare many kinds of oil for making varnishes and other things dear to men of inventive brain, as he was.

Now, on one occasion, having taken very great pains with the painting of a panel, and having brought it to completion with much diligence, he gave it the varnish and put it to dry in the sun, as was the custom. But, either because the heat was too violent, or perchance because the wood was badly joined together or not seasoned well enough, the said panel opened out at the joints in a ruinous fashion. Whereupon Johann, seeing the harm that the heat of the sun had done to it, determined to bring it about that the sun should never again do such great damage to his works. And so, being disgusted no less with his varnish than with working in distemper, he began to look for a method of making a varnish that should dry in the shade, without putting his pictures in the sun. Wherefore, after he had made many experiments with substances both pure and mixed together, he found at length that linseed oil and oil of nuts dried more readily than all the others that he had tried. These, then, boiled together with other mixtures of his, gave him that varnish that he--nay, all the painters of the world--had long desired. *Afterwards, having made experiments with many other substances, he saw that mixing the colours with those oils gave them a very solid consistency, not only securing the work, when dried, from all danger from water, but also making*

the colour so brilliant as to give it lustre by itself without varnish; and what appeared most marvellous to him was this, that it could be blended infinitely better than distemper.

Rejoicing greatly over such a discovery, as was only reasonable, Johann made a beginning with many works and filled all those parts with them, with incredible pleasure for others and very great profit for himself; and, assisted by experience from day to day, he kept on ever making greater and better works. The fame of this invention soon spread not only through Flanders, but to Italy and many other parts of the world, and great desire was aroused in other artists to know how he brought his works to such perfection. And seeing his pictures, and not knowing how they were done, finally they were obliged to give him great praise, while at the same time they envied him with a virtuous envy, especially because for a time he would not let any one see him work, or teach any one his secret. But when he was grown old he at last favoured Roger of Bruges, his pupil, with the knowledge, who passed it on to his disciple Ausse [Hans Memling?] and to the others whom we have mentioned in speaking of coloring in oil with regard to painting. *But although the merchants bought the paintings and sent them to princes and other great personages to their great profit, the thing was not known beyond Flanders*; and although these pictures had a very pungent odour given to them by the mixture of colours and oils, particularly when they were new, so that it would seem the secret might have been discovered; but for many years it was not. It came about then that some Florentines who traded between Flanders and Naples sent a picture by Johann containing many figures painted in oil to King Alfonso I of Naples, and the picture pleasing him from the beauty of the figures and the new method of colouring, all the painters in the kingdom came together to see it, and it was highly praised by all.

Now there was a one Antonello da Messina, a man of an acute mind and well skilled in his art, who had studied drawing [*disegno*] in Rome for many years and afterwards retired to Palermo, where he had worked for many years, and finally came back to Messina his native place, where he had confirmed by his works the good opinion that his countrymen had of his excellent ability in painting. This man, then, going once on some business of his own from Sicily to Naples, heard that the said King Alfonso had received from Flanders the aforesaid panel by the hand of Johann of Bruges, painted in oil in such a manner that it could be washed, would endure any shock, and was in every way perfect. *Thereupon, having contrived to obtain a view of it, he was so strongly impressed by the liveliness of the colours and by the beauty and harmony of that painting, that he put on one side all other business and every thought and went off to Flanders. Having arrived in Bruges, he became very intimate with the said Johann, making him presents of many drawings in the Italian manner and other things, insomuch that the latter, moved by this and by the respect*

shown by Antonello, and being now old, was content that he should see his method of colouring in oil; wherefore Antonello did not depart from that place until he had gained a thorough knowledge of that way of colouring, which he desired so greatly to know. And no long time after, Johann having died, Antonello returned from Flanders in order to revisit his native country and to communicate to all Italy a secret so useful, beautiful, and advantageous. Then, having stayed a few months in Messina, he went to Venice, where, being a man much given to pleasure and very licentious, he resolved to take up his abode and finish his life, having found there a mode of living exactly suited to his taste.

And so, putting himself to work, he made there many pictures in oil according to the rules that he had learned in Flanders; these are scattered throughout the houses of noblemen in that city, where they were held in great esteem by reason of the novelty of the work. He made many others, also, which were sent to various places. Finally, having acquired fame and great repute there, he was commissioned to paint a panel that was destined for San Cassiano, a parish church in that city. This panel was wrought by Antonio with all his knowledge and with no sparing of time; and when he finished, by reason of the novelty of the colouring and the beauty of the figures, which he had made with good design, it was much commended and held in very great price. And afterwards, when men heard of the new secret that he had brought from Flanders to that city, he was ever loved and cherished by the magnificent noblemen of Venice throughout the whole course of his life.

Among the other painters of name who were then in Venice, the chief was a Master Domenico. He received Antonello when he came to Venice with as much attention and courtesy as if he were a very dear friend. For this reason Antonello, who would not be beaten in courtesy, by Master Domenico, after a few months taught him the secret of colouring in oil. Nothing could have been dearer to Domenico than this extraordinary courtesy and friendliness; and well might he hold it dear, since it caused him, as he had foreseen, to be greatly honoured ever afterwards in his native city. Grossly deceived, in truth, are those who think that, while they grudge to others even those things that cost them nothing, they should be served by all for the sake of their sweet smile, as the saying goes. The courtesies of Maestro Domenico Vineziano wrested from the hands of Antonello that which he had won for himself with so much fatigue and labour, and which he would probably have refused to hand over to any other even for a large sum of money. But since, with regard to Maestro Domenico, we will mention in due time all that he wrought in Florence, and who were the men with whom he generously shared the secret that he had received as a courteous gift from another, let us pass on to Antonello. After the panel for San Cassiano, he made many pictures and

portraits for various Venetian noblemen. Messer Bernardo Vecchietti, the Florentine, has a painting by his hand of St. Francis and St. Dominic, both in the one picture, and very beautiful. Then, after receiving a commission from the Signoria to paint certain scenes in their Palace (which they had refused to give to Francesco di Monsignore of Verona, although he had been greatly favoured by the Duke of Mantua), he fell sick of a pleurisy and died at the age of forty-nine, without having set a hand to the work. he was greatly honoured in his obsequies by the craftsmen, by reason of the gift bestowed by him on art in the form of the new manner of colouring, as the following epitaph testifies:
D.O. M. ANTONIUS PICTOR, PRAEXIPUUM MESSANAE SUAE ET SICILIAE TOTIUS ORNAMENTUM, HAC HUMO CONTEGITUR. NON SOLUM SUIS PICTURS, IN QUIBUS SINGULARE ARTIFICIUM ET VENUSTAS FUIT, SED ET QUOD COLORIBUS OLEO MISCENDIS SPLENDOREM ET PERPETUITATEM PRIMUS ITALICAE CONTULIT, SUMMO SEMPER ARTIFICIUM STUDIO CELEBRATUS.

The death of Antonello was a great grief to his many friends, and particularly to the sculptor Andrea Riccio, who wrought the nude marble statues of Adam and Eve, held to be very beautiful, which are seen in the courtyard of the Palace of the Signoria in Venice. Such was the end of Antonello, to whom our craftsmen should certainly feel no less indebted for having brought the method of colouring in oil into Italy than they should to Johann of Bruges for having discovered it in Flanders. Both of them benefited and enriched the art; for it is by means of this invention that craftsmen have since become so excellent, that they have been able to make their figures all but alive. Their services should be all the more valued, inasmuch as there is no writer to be found who attributes this manner of colouring to the ancients; and if it could be known for certain that it did not exist among them, this age would surpass all the excellence of the ancients by virtue of this perfection. Since, however, even as nothing is said that has not been said before, so perchance nothing is done that has not been done before, I will let this pass without saying more; and praising consummately those who, in addition to draughtsmanship, are ever adding something to art, I will proceed to write of others.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

Writing on chiaroscuro in the Notebooks:

The first intention of the painter is to make a flat surface display a body as if modelled and separated from the plane, and he who surpasses others in this skill deserves most praise. This accomplishment, with which the science of painting is crowned, arises from light and shade, or one may say *chiaroscuro*.

Cardinal Louis of Aragon and his secretary, Antonio de' Beatis, visit Leonardo at his home in Cloux. De' Beatis writes that he showed the Cardinal…

10th October 1517:

[*I saw*]…three pictures: one of a certain Florentine lady, done from life, at the instance of the Late Magnificent, Giuliano de' Medici; the other of St. John the Baptist as a Young Man; and one of the Madonna and the Child, which are placed on the lap of St. Anne, and all of them most prefect: but indeed, on account of a certain paralysis having seized him in the right hand, one cannot expect more fine things from him.

He has instructed a Milanese disciple [*Francesco de' Melzi*], who works well enough: and, although the aforesaid Messer Leonardo is not able to colour with that sweetness with which he was wont, nevertheless he works at making designs and giving instructions to others. This gentleman has compiled a treatise on anatomy, with the demonstration in draft not only of the members, but also the muscles, nerves, veins, joints, intestines and of whatever can be reasoned about in the bodies of men and women, in a way that has never been done by any other person. All of which we have seen with our own eyes…

He has also written concerning the nature of water, and of diverse machines, and other things, which he has set down in an endless number of volumes.

Leonardo's letter of introduction to Ludovico Sforza, 1482.
Most Illustrious Lord, Having now sufficiently considered the specimens of all those who proclaim themselves skilled contrivers of instruments of war, and that the invention and operation of the said instruments are nothing different from those in common use: I shall endeavour, without prejudice to anyone else, to explain myself to your Excellency, showing your Lordship my secret, and then offering them to your best pleasure and approbation to work with effect at opportune moments on all those things which, in part, shall be briefly noted below.

1. I have a sort of extremely light and strong bridges, adapted to be most easily carried, and with them you may pursue, and at any time flee from the enemy; and others, secure and indestructible by fire and battle, easy and convenient to lift and place. Also methods of burning and destroying those of the enemy.

2. I know how, when a place is besieged, to take the water out of the trenches, and make endless variety of bridges, and covered ways and ladders, and other machines pertaining to such expeditions.

3. If, by reason of the height of the banks, or the strength of the place and its position, it is impossible, when besieging a place, to avail oneself of the plan of bombardment, I have methods for destroying every rock or other fortress, even if it were founded on a rock, etc.

4. Again, I have kinds of mortars; most convenient and easy to carry; and with these I can fling small stones almost resembling a storm; and with the smoke of these cause great terror to the enemy, to his great detriment and confusion.

5. And if the fight should be at sea I have kinds of many machines most efficient for offence and defence; and vessels which will resist the attack of the largest guns and powder and fumes.

6. I have means by secret and tortuous mines and ways, made without noise, to reach a designated spot, even if it were needed to pass under a trench or a river.

7. I will make covered chariots, safe and unattackable, which, entering among the enemy with their artillery, there is no body of men so great but they would break them. And behind these, infantry could follow quite unhurt and without any hindrance.

8. In case of need I will make big guns, mortars, and light ordnance of fine and useful forms, out of the common type.

9. Where the operation of bombardment might fail, I would contrive catapults, mangonels, *trabocchi*, and other machines of marvellous efficacy and not in common use. And in short, according to the variety of cases, I can contrive various and endless means of offense and defence.

10. In times of peace I believe I can give perfect satisfaction and to the equal of any other in architecture and the composition of buildings public and private; and in guiding water from one place to another.

11. I can carry out sculpture in marble, bronze, or clay, and also I can do in painting whatever may be done, as well as any other, be he who he may.

Again, the bronze horse may be taken in hand, which is to be to the immortal glory and eternal honour of the prince your father of happy memory, and of the illustrious house of Sforza.
And if any of the above-named things seem to anyone to be impossible or not feasible, I am most ready to make the experiment in your park, or in whatever place may please your Excellency – to whom I comment myself with the utmost humility, etc.

Giorgio Vasari, writing about the Mona Lisa in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects,* published in 1550.

Leonardo undertook to execute, for Francesco del Giocondo, the portrait of Mona Lisa, his wife, and after he had lingered over it for four years, he left it unfinished; and the work is today in the possession of King Francis of France, at Fontainebleau. Anyone wishing to see the degree to which art could imitate nature could readily perceive this from the head; since therein are counterfeited all those minutenesses that with subtlety are able to be painted: seeing that the eyes had that lustre and moistness which are always seen in the living creature, and around them were the lashes and all those rosy and pearly tints that demand the greatest delicacy of execution. The eyebrows, through his having shown the manner in which the hairs spring from the flesh, here more close and here more scanty, and curve according to the pores of the flesh, could not be more natural. The nose, with its beautiful nostrils, rosy and tender, appeared to be alive. The mouth with its opening, and with its ends united by the red of the lips to the flesh-tints of the face, seemed, in truth, to be not colours but flesh. In the pit of the throat, if one gazed upon it intently, could be seen the beating of the pulse: and indeed it may be said that it was painted in such a manner as to make every brave artificer, be he who he may, tremble and lose courage. He employed also this device: Mona Lisa being very beautiful, while he was painting her portrait, he retained those who played or sang, and continually jested, who would make her to remain merry, in order to take away that melancholy which painters are often wont to give to their portraits. And in this work of Leonardo there was a smile so pleasing, that it was a thing more divine than human to behold, and it was held to be something marvellous, in that it was not other than alive.

Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564)

Flemish painting will appeal to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony. In Flanders they paint with a view to external exactness…. They paint stuffs and masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees, and rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes, with many figures on this side or on that. And all this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skilful choice or boldness, without substance or vigour.

(*Michelangelo quoted by Francisco de Hollanda, Four Dialogues on Painting*, *c. 1545*)

- La pittura è una musica e una melodia che solo l'intelletto può sentire, e comunque con grande difficoltà.

Good painting [is nothing less than a copy of the perfection of God… It] is a music and a melody that only the intellect can understand – and that with great difficulty.

(*Michelangelo, Letters.)*

- Letter from Michelangelo to the historian, Benedetto Varchi, cited by the latter in his lectures on Art given at the Florentine Academy in 1549.

Rome 1549. To Messer Benedetto Varchi

Messer Benedetto,

So that it may be clear that I have received your booklet which has been delivered to me, I will say something in reply to your questions, although ignorant.

It seems to me that the nearer painting approaches sculpture the better it is, and that sculpture is worse the nearer it approaches painting. Therefore, it has always seemed to me, at least, that sculpture was a lantern to painting and that the difference between them is as that between the sun and the moon. But after reading your booklet where you say that, speaking philosophically, things that have the same end in view are the same, I have changed my mind, and I now say that if the use of greater discretion and labour, and the overcoming of greater difficulties and impediments do not confer greater merit, then painting and sculpture are equal. If this be so, every painter should not fail to practise sculpture as well as painting, and similarly every sculptor painting as well as sculpture. By sculpture, I mean that which is done by carving – sculpture that is done by adding on resembles painting. In short, since both Sculpture and Painting require similar accomplishment they might be induced to make peace with one another and give up such disputes, which waste more time than it takes to produce a statue. As for him [i.e. Leonardo] who

wrote that painting was nobler than sculpture, if he understood the other subjects on which he wrote no better than this, my servant could have done better.

I might continue indefinitely to speak on such subjects, but, as I said, it would take too much time, and I have little to spare, as I am old and almost to be counted among the dead. Therefore please excuse me. I recommend myself to you, thanking you to the best of my abilities, for bestowing too much honour on one so undeserving.

Yours, Michelagniolo Buonarotti at Rome.

- *Torrigiani, quoted by Benvenuto Cellini:*

"This [Michelangelo] Buonarroti and I used, when we were boys, to go into the Church of the Carmine, to learn drawing from the chapel of Masaccio. It was Buonarroti's habit to banter all who were drawing there; and one day, among others, when he was annoying me, I got more angry than usual, and clenching my fist, gave him such a blow on the nose, that I felt bone and cartilage go down like biscuit beneath my knuckles; and this mark of mine he will carry with him to the grave."

Tiziano Vecellio (1487-1576)

- Sir, I am not confident of achieving the delicacy and beauty of the brushwork of Michelangelo, Raphael, Correggio and Parmigianino; and if I did, I would be judged with them, or else considered to be an imitator. But ambition, which is as natural in my art as in any other, urges me to choose a new path to make myself famous, much as others acquired their own fame from the way which they followed.
(*Gonzalo Perez, a friend of Titian's, c. 1552, reports his reply when asked why he painted with such bold strokes*.)

- I was told by Palma il Giovane, who himself was fortunate enough to enjoy the learned instruction of Titian, that the final stage of his last retouching involved his moderating here and there the brightest highlights by rubbing them with his fingers. At other times, using his finger, he would place a dark stroke in a corner to give it strength, or a smear of bright red, almost like a drop of blood, which would enliven some subtle refinement; and so he would proceed, bringing his living figures to a state of perfection. And as Palma himself said to me, it is true to say that in the last stages he painted more with his fingers than his brushes.

(*Marco Boschini*; *17th century Venetian art critic.*)

- These last pictures are executed with broad strokes and smudges, so that from nearby nothing can be seen whereas from a distance they seem perfect. This method of painting has caused many artists, who have wished to imitate him and thus display their skill, to produce clumsy pictures. For although many people have thought that they are painted without effort, this is not the case, and they deceive themselves, because it is known that these works are much revised and that he went over them so many times with his colours that one can appreciate how much labour is involved. And this method of working, applied in this manner, is judicious, beautiful and stupendous, because it makes the pictures appear alive and painted with great art, concealing the labour.
(*Giorgio Vasari, 'Lives of the Most Excellent Painters etc.', 1566.)*

- The nude which Your Reverence saw in Pesaro in the apartment of the Duke of Urbino looks like a nun beside this one.
(*Giovanni della Casa, Papal Legate, to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, speaking about Titian's 1544/5 'Danaë'.*)

Priscianese, Roman grammarian, writing on a dinner at Titian's house:

'On the first of August, the feast of Augustus, now known as the festival of the Chains of St.Peter, I was invited to supper in a most beautiful garden, belonging to Messer Tiziano, an excellent painter, as all the world knows, and a person whose graceful courtesy would lend lustre to the most splendid banquet. Several other remarkable men were present on this occasion- Messer Pietro Aretino, the miracle of nature ; Jacopo Tatti, called Sansovino, who is as renowned a sculptor as our host a painter; and Messer Jacopi Nardi. The heat of the sun was still great. Although the garden is shady, so, while the tables were being carried out and supper laid, we spent our time in looking at the admirable paintings which adorn the house and In enjoying the rare beauty and delights of the garden, which lies on the sea shore at the far end of Venice, looking towards the lovely island of Murano and other fair places. As the sun went down, the lagoon swarmed with gondolas full of beautiful women, and the sweet sounds of musical instruments and singing floated over the water and charmed our ears as we sat at our delightful supper till midnight. The garden is beautifully laid out, and excited universal admiration. The supper, also, was most excellent, rich in choice viands and rare wines. In short, nothing was lacking which could brighten the charm of the summer evening and the pleasure of the company.'

Wilhelm Grimm, letter of 31 October 1815:

Goethe sat for a long time in silence before the great picture by Eyck [*then attributed to van Eyck, not to van der Weyden*]. The whole day he said nothing about it, but in the afternoon whilst walking he remarked. “I have written many verses in my life, a few good ones and a lot that are indifferent; but Eyck paints *one* such picture that is worth more than anything I have done”.