

❧ STYLE IN THE
ART THEORY OF
EARLY MODERN ITALY

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FIGHTING WITH STYLE

Today it is fashionable for painters to do nothing but squabble among themselves about manner, taste, and style, and this arose because the reasoning is not established according to solid principles. Maximus of Tyre said that in his day one painter never contradicted another on the matter of style because each walked unwaveringly along the same path of knowledge, hardened by true and good discipline. Today each painter introduces precepts according to his own inclination, a precept of one painter is negated by that of another, and this is most certain – that it is not well-founded.¹

In the prefatory “Osservazione” to his *Vite de’ pittori, scultori ed Architetti che hanno lavorato in Roma, morti dal 1641 fino al 1673*, Giovanni Battista Passeri described the mid-seventeenth century as a querulous age obsessed with style. Why did style provoke such disagreement in the seventeenth century? What were people arguing about? What were the modes of argumentation? Style had an edge, often serrated, that was used to separate insiders and outsiders, good and bad. Prejudice was voiced with style. Readers attuned to the ambiguities of language will find in this chapter’s deliberately ambivalent title a set of overlapping meanings. “Fighting with style” can mean that critics were fighting about style, its meanings and practices; that the mode of fighting was stylish with parries of a gilded sword; that critics fight about an artist’s character, a nation’s identity, or some other matter with style as their weapon; and finally, that today some art historians fight with style as their opponent (fighting *against* style) as, for example, David Summers does by identifying it with the multifarious “idealist-historicist-relativist tenets of modern art history.”² Art historians who want to discredit style often seem to adopt a combative tone. That style could signal all of these things at once might be a source of discomfort for some readers who want semantic meanings to be clear and unequivocal – the

“squirm factor” that I mentioned in the Introduction – but for me it is style’s very ambiguity that makes it important and appealing. In style I see the clouded uncertainties of human personality and the acculturated codes of behavior.

Living in an age of subjectivity and relativism when each painter introduces precepts “according to his own inclination,” Passeri asserted a “most certain” argument that trumps all others by appealing nostalgically to the certainties of a simpler age (“simpler” only from a viewpoint of retrospective reductionism). Maximus of Tyre serves as Passeri’s authority. In his age, according to Passeri, “a painter never contradicted another on the matter of style” because painters shared a canon of knowledge and art. Actually Maximus never made any such statement. To the contrary, his *Orationes* resembled seicento relativists more than Passeri would have us believe. “Human beings are terribly contentious,” he tells us, citing as evidence the representations of gods and heroes: “There is no one set of rules governing images, nor one set form, nor one single skill or material for their making.”³ Even Homer’s poetry “is not beautiful for all people on all occasions.”

The nostalgic reconstruction of antiquity as a time of stylistic certainty, and the need to anchor the insecurities and ambiguities of modern times in a more secure past, also structure Angelo Decembrio’s account of an artistic contest between Pisanello and Gentile Bellini. Lionello d’Este had instructed the two painters to portray him with complete accuracy and objectivity, evidently assuming that his face could serve as an authoritative standard against which art could be judged.⁴ He was surprised to find, however, that each painter captured his appearance exactly and yet each differed in recognizable ways: “You remember how Pisanello and Bellini, the finest painters of our time, recently differed in various ways in the portrayal of my face. The one added a more emphatic spareness to its handsomeness, while the other represented it as paler, though no more slender; and scarcely were they reconciled by my entreaties.” Decembrio, in reporting these results, concluded that this illustrated an essential difference between ancient and modern art: in antiquity artists worked toward a common end, “whereas nowadays, as we know, they are consumed by rivalry with one another.”

Passeri rued the fights over style that surrounded him without, however, refraining from combat himself. He reported Duquesnoy’s prescient hieratic distinction between “Greek style” and “Latin style” and sanctioned the invention of the “Greek style” as a coherent, stable standard by which to evaluate other, lesser styles: “[Duquesnoy] wished to show himself a

rigorous imitator of the Greek style, which he called the true mistress of perfect procedure in art because it held within itself at one and the same time grandeur, nobility, majesty, and loveliness, all qualities difficult to unite together in a single compound, and this feeling was increased in him by the observations of Poussin, who desired altogether to vilify the Latin style. . . .”⁵ Charles Dempsey has given us a fascinating account of this crucial turn in the history of naming and defining classicism,⁶ but for the moment I just want to illustrate how Passeri positioned himself above the fray by appealing to a kind of supra-style that transcends individual style. By polemicizing style as a mire of individual expression where artists fashionably feuded, he was actually participating in the squabble that he deplored. He did so by attacking a central tenet of art criticism: that all style is individual and that belief in a stable ideal is a chimera. If only, he seemed to be saying in the prefatory “Osservazione,” art could be governed by “discipline” and “principles,” then it would become objective, absolute, and presumably impervious to the raging geniuses who only want to paint in their own way. One senses why Passeri was so popular as a lecturer at the Accademia di San Luca. There was also a wider audience and context for his remarks. Ten years later Francesco Fulvio Frugoni, a bellwether critic and author of *Del cane di Diogene* (Venice, 1687–89), described the triumph of style and fashion (*moda*) as a form of extermination of truth and beauty – “it sterilizes every place it is spread” – and envisioned “a kind of warfare, always conducted by means of stratagems and tricks.”⁷

One of the fighters was Pietro Testa, a fellow student of Passeri in Domenichino’s studio during the 1620s. Like Passeri, he lamented the “corruption” of art as *manieracce* born from a loss of reason and good principles.⁸ Elizabeth Cropper has shown how much emotional investment Testa made in the subject and how he responded to this perceived decline with anger: “What unleashed his tongue and drove him to the game of writing was anger, often very heated anger, provoked by the bad teaching he saw everywhere around him. . . . If Testa was angered by such works because they denied the universality of ideal painting, he was also driven to despair by their success.”⁹ With good cause, Cropper describes Testa’s tone as one of sarcasm, mockery, and bitterness, driven as much by antisocial tendencies and social alienation as by theoretical issues.¹⁰ Before Passeri and Testa studied with Domenichino, Giovanni Battista Agucchi had also talked with Domenichino. He polemicized the fragmentation of style into styles most famously as an “infection” and as “artistic heresies”:

Then there came about the decline in painting from the peak it had gained. If it did not again fall into the dark shadows of the early barbarians, it was rendered at least in an altered and corrupt manner and mistook the true path and, in fact, almost lost a knowledge of what was good. New and diverse styles came into being, styles far from the real and the lifelike, based more on appearance than on substance. The artists were satisfied to feed the eyes of the people with the loveliness of colors and rich vestments. Using things taken from here and there, painting forms that were gross in outline, rarely well joined together, and straying into other notable errors, they wandered, in short, far from the good path that leads one toward perfection. While the profession of painting was infected, so to speak, in this way with so many artistic heresies it was in real danger of going astray.¹¹

Agucchi attributed the problem of “artistic heresies” to Mannerism, when the stylistic canons of antiquity and the Renaissance disintegrated, and held out hope for renewal with the Carracci, but what is important here is how he used style to pathologize painting. Styles are reprehensible because they deviate from “the true path” and “perfection.” Art should have style, not styles: “It does not, therefore, follow that there must be as many styles of painting as there were painters, but that one style alone may be deemed that which was followed by many who, in their imitation of the true, the lifelike, or simply the natural, or the most beautiful in nature, follow the same path and have the same intention. . . .”¹² The “one style” that stands “alone” as the standard for all others is that of ancient sculpture (which he takes as a unity instead of many competing styles). His absolutist stance, like that of Passeri’s Maximus, subjected art to a test of purity that he construed as being outside of time – or at least as having withstood the test of time.

STYLE AS SYMBOLIC FORM


Theodor Adorno argues that normative or “obligatory styles” are a sign of and reflex by a closed and repressive society.¹³ When critics insist on the authoritative validity of their particular stylistic norm, they are exercising ethical and political judgments motivated by a need to control social structures and to make individuals conform. Agucchi expressed a doctrinaire certainty with such terms as “heresies” and the “true path.” Whether or not his mantle of authority befits his various ecclesiastical offices as secretary to the papal nuncio in Paris, archbishop of Ravenna, and

secretary to Gregory XV, I shall leave to the readers' prejudices. Lorenzo Pasinelli, in upholding antiquity, Raphael and the new Raphaels as absolute and eternal standards, adopted Agucchi's metaphor of heresy to indicate departures from orthodoxy.¹⁴ Some purists like Francesco Milizia so idealized the norm that all style was deemed "defective" for being personal: "the style of a great artist, however beautiful it may be, is always defective because it is never the same as beauty in nature; it always manifests the effects of the artist's personality."¹⁵ What made style defective was that it departed from his constructed ideal of antiquity. Diderot arrived at a similar conclusion in looking at style from the constructed ideal of nature: art should have "no style at all, either in drawing or color, if nature is to be scrupulously imitated."¹⁶ And, writing earlier as a connoisseur, Baldinucci decided that style deviated (and must deviate) from antiquity and nature (see Chapter 7).

Fighting suggests that styles are embedded in ethics, politics, and psychology, and that style could be symbolically invested with extra-artistic values. Passeri, Testa, and Agucchi wrote in response to optimistic modernists whose position was popularized by Secondo Lancellotti in *L'oggi di overo il mondo non peggiore né più calamitoso del passato* (1623) and *L'oggi di overo gl'ingegni non inferiori a' passati* (1636). They took style (that is "good style") to represent ancient certainties. In this section I propose to introduce ways in which style participated in the politics and sociology of gender, and how it could represent national character and power, or an artist's identity and sense of self-worth. If style did not embody these higher philosophical, political, or personal values, it would not be worth fighting over. To fight also requires polarized positions that are intolerant of differences and ambiguity: Boschini's relentless polemic against Vasari demonized the enemy (Florence) and foresook any equivocal or contradictory evidence that might have suggested Vasari found merit in Venetian art.

Stoics and seicento neo-Stoics probed the ethics and psychology of style in ways that made style into a symbolic form of great diagnostic power.¹⁷ The mode of argumentation adopted by Agucchi and Passeri that used style as evidence of social and moral corruption was essentially Stoical, as were most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criticisms of Mannerist art.¹⁸ Seneca the Younger was particularly influential in associating stylistic excesses with the feminine, artificial, ornamental, and degenerate: "Wherever you find a corrupt style of speech in favor, you may be sure that morals too have deviated from the right path. Luxury in feasting and clothes are signs of an ailing society; so, too, licentious speech . . . shows the degeneracy of the minds from which it proceeds."¹⁹ Seneca the Elder took grooming

habits and other activities marginal to politics and morality and invested them with grave importance. Decadent morality among orators was represented by means of beauty, effeminacy, and other gendered superficialities: “waving the hair, thinning the tone of the voice till it is as caressing as a woman’s, competing in bodily softness with women, beautifying themselves with indecent cosmetics.”²⁰ Seneca the Younger found Cicero’s speech to be “degenerate” and “deployed too effeminately,” as were Maecenas’s strange dress and gait.²¹ Emasculation “sometimes happens to a man, sometimes to an age.” Attention to style, any style other than his own “pure” and “clear” one, indicates a superficial mind “absorbed in petty things” rather than one focused on the subject.²² His injunction “Seek what to write rather than how to write it” expressed the hope that style would disappear just as Seneca tried to make it seem to disappear in his own writing. Cicero, on the other hand, thought that the Stoics had no feeling for style, which was not true even if it was the impression they wanted to project.²³

 As personal identity, style meant fighting for self-preservation or self-advancement; as national identity, it meant fighting for cultural supremacy. Concepts of national styles are a by-product of collectivist myths and national stereotyping that served political agendas for military, economic, or cultural supremacy. As in politics, regionalism in style meant factionalism and reductive mentalities that were inclined to simplify the complexity of individuals and societies. From the Lombard perspective of Agucchi, Scannelli, Malvasia, and Gherardi, the “Lombard” style of painting was natural and pure whereas the “Roman” and “Tuscan” styles were artificial.²⁴ From the Roman perspective of Passeri: “Opinions are allotted to sects, and the various schools try to authenticate their opinions. . . . The Accademia of Tuscany wants to uphold its uniqueness in having true and unique mastery of perfect design and condemns the Lombard school as innocent of this good foundation.”²⁵ He cited Michelangelo’s dismissal of Titian’s *Danaë* and Venetian painting in general – as related by Vasari: “It is a shame that in Venice they never learned to design well from the beginning. . . .”²⁶ – as a particularly egregious example of contentious parochialism.

How style was politicized can be seen in the case of Venetian colorism. Like the sober senatorial toga, colorism was both the sign and the product of a stable, free republic: “In conclusion, the Venetian pictorial style carries with it the same liberty that everyone enjoys who lives in this city.”²⁷ When

the Venetian critic and art dealer Marco Boschini drew this conclusion in 1660, he contributed to a pseudo-Longinian revival, popularized in the multieditioned *Ragguagli di Parnaso* (Venice, 1612) by Traiano Boccalini, which joined two famous concepts: that an orator's or a poet's eloquence depended on political freedom, and that Venice's mythical liberty produced political stability and economic prosperity.²⁸ Boschini seems to have been the first to transpose Boccalini's discourse to Venetian art criticism. One strategy to maintain your cultural supremacy was to argue for the inferiority of others. Vasari's charges against Venetian painting of simple naturalism and visual illiteracy (where literacy is construed as knowledge of antiquity) is a well-known example. Art critics and historians responded patriotically in a cultural war initiated by Vasari and reinvigorated in 1647 by a new edition of his *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti*.²⁹ In defending Venetian painting, Boschini used physically repellent terms ("a stinking vase") and militaristic imagery ("birds bombing with turtles"), as if the Tuscan Vasari were a foreign invader.

This pan-Italian battle underlies the bloodier fights that were endemic between painters, or between painters and critics, about the reputations of individual artists. Painters fought with words, damning with stylistic monickers – such as the gothic Borromini, mannered Bernini, dessicated Raphael, and sloppy Tintoretto – and battled with pictures, as, for example, in the case of Titian's *Monkey Laocoön* (Figure 5). Style could also critique style. Annibale Carracci was famous for his pictorial, nonverbal retorts, as his *Laocoön* sketch showed. At another time, having just seen a painting by Caravaggio, he asked:

Is there anything so marvelous here? Did it seem to you that this was something new? I tell you that all those fellows with the never-seen-before style that they themselves invented will always have the same reception when they appear and will have no less praise. I know another way to make a big splash, in fact to beat and humiliate that fellow; I would like to counterpose to that bright color one that is totally soft. Does he use a slanting, sharply delimited light? I would like it open and direct. Does he cover up the difficult parts of art in nighttime shadows? I, by the bright light of noon, would like to reveal the most learned and erudite of my studies.³⁰

Art criticism dramatized disagreements over style in terms of fights. Annibale plans "to beat and humiliate that fellow." (The words are Malvasia's, but the sentiment could easily have been Annibale's.) He saw style as a means for

revenge: "When Agostino comes [to Parma] . . . let us apply ourselves to learn this beautiful style [of Correggio's], as this will be our trade in order to be able one day to mortify this beret-wearing rabble that attacks us as if we were assassins. . . ." ³¹

Style even led to violence, real, imagined, and threatened. Domenico Calvaert subjected his students Guido Reni and Domenichino to physical and verbal abuse for painting in the Carracci style; this style made him "rant" and "rave."³² Caravaggio threatened to carve a frieze on Reni's forehead if he did not stop stealing his style.³³ Caravaggio had cause for anger. Cesare d'Arpino had arranged, out of spite, for Reni to paint a *Crucifixion of St. Peter* that had been intended for Caravaggio, promising Scipione Borghese that Reni would transform himself into Caravaggio and paint it in his "dark and driven style." The *Crucifixion of St. Peter* (Vatican, Pinacoteca; Figure 2) has been seen as an artistic homage to Caravaggio, as a clever market strategy of Reni, as a case of a weaker artist coming into the orbit of a stronger one. Caravaggio saw it, more than an artistic theft, as a theft of personal identity whereby Reni would "transform himself into Caravaggio" in order to paint in his style. He reacted with characteristic violence, because he valued his self-fashioned identity as art rebel and singular paragon of nature. Reni threatened his unrivaled status and "never-seen-before style," but for the threat to be effective he had to believe, like so many others, that style was power. Caravaggio's interpersonal style was confrontational and bullying; Reni, who was "anxiety-prone, mistrustful, and even paranoid," quickly backed down, assuring Caravaggio, according to Malvasia, that he did not want "to compete with anyone, knowing and admitting that he was inferior to all."³⁴ For a man with a deep-seated inferiority complex, this must have been a difficult statement to make.

Whether a sign of feudal fealty to the master or a theft of identity, style was worth fighting about or fleeing from in shame. What else, other than the psychologizing of style, made it so vital to the lives of artists that they would feud over it? Style had a market value that represented considerable sums of money. With time, styles proliferated, as did the need to differentiate among them, and collections became ever more diverse. Paintings without attributions, and judging from inventories many were unattributed, need style experts to facilitate their sale. Who painted what became an important question, especially as the old masters started to fetch high prices. To be a collector or dealer, and both were growing groups during the seventeenth century, required a knowledge of style in order to protect investments and reputations. Old masters were a finite resource subject to an increasing

demand. This motivated the production of fakes along with an attendant expertise to identify fakes. Also, as the stock of old masters became depleted, a demand grew for lesser masters, which in turn demanded wider connoisseurial experience to sort them out. Paintings were appraised for sale based on their size, condition, and subject, but by the seventeenth century the variant that determined value more than any other was authorship. Investment of capital in art required and encouraged a growth in reliable experts to attribute or authenticate.³⁵

As the art market grew and diversified, connoisseurs and critics developed an ancillary need to refine and expand the language used to describe different styles. (This subject will be taken up in the final section of this chapter.) And, from the artist's point of view, the market value of style heightened competition, as the story of Caravaggio and Guido Reni shows. To earn a reputation as an artist, it was not enough to be a reliable supplier and good courtier; one had to be original, possessor of a recognizable style that no one else could produce. After Vasari's *Vite* were published, artists might also factor style into considerations about their posthumous reputations. Because Vasari ennobled artists through biography and used style as a sign of their identities, his *Vite* must have seeded hopes (and doubts) about the adequacy of their style. Did it represent them well? Did it contribute to the progress of art?

FIGHTING WORDS

“**T**he pen is an evil weapon, the point of which sometimes, though it does not pass through the viscera, transfixes the reputation, more dear than life itself.”³⁶ Malvasia opens an omnibus life of early-sixteenth-century Bolognese painters by cautioning his readers against Vasari's animus toward Bagnacavallo, Amico Aspertini, and others who (according to Vasari) “have their heads filled with pride and smoke.” Vincenzo Vittoria turned Malvasia's *sententia* against its author, as Charles Dempsey has adroitly remarked, by hoisting him by his own petard because he had dared to criticize Raphael.³⁷ Critics and artists fought styles by name calling or pinning an unsavory sobriquet onto an artist. It was a successful attack strategy because it reduced the complexity of an artist's style to a single memorable defect. One flaw, even if it is a flaw conceived in prejudice, stands as synecdoche, crowding out more nuanced, contradictory, or historicized insights into the artist's work. It tamps down a complex of conflicting

artistic values and hence serves as a shorthand for critics. Terms like *diligente* and *ammanierato* became sites for intense logomachies.

Statuino was another fighting word, a battle standard in the good fight against bad taste.³⁸

These new masters in their schools and in their books instruct us that Raphael is dry and hard, that his style is stony (*statuina*), a term introduced in our time. They affirm that he did not have frenzy or spirited daring and that his work was improved by his followers. Others offered different opinions, more noxious and reckless than one can imagine, still less pronounced by one who discourses with reason and intellect. Whence the poet Boschini, speaking in the person of a portraitist, reached a definitive conclusion. When questioned on how he liked Raphael, he responds by twisting his head and singing in his distorted language: "He nods his head ceremoniously and said: Raphael (to tell you the truth, if I may speak freely and honestly) does not please me at all." Carlo Maratta, however, was wont to reprove with agitation this vulgar opinion of our century that one does not have to follow Raphael to have a dry and stony style, responding that rather their brains are made of stones and rocks [i.e., they are "blockheads": *di macigno*].³⁹

Giovan Pietro Bellori is quite exceptionally personal about Boschini. He mocked his "distorted language," referring both to his Marinist style of writing and to his use of Venetian dialect, and even mocked his body language, giving Boschini an undignified cranial twisting. In other words, he attacked Boschini's character (if style is identity) and his nationality. Boschini's dubious artistic taste is somatized in an undignified body language ("twisting his head") and form of speech. Art critics did not normally "sing" and, if this unusual form of speech refers to more than dialect poetry, it might even be considered as illicit. In criminal argot, to say that someone "sings" implies he is a thief.⁴⁰ I cannot say whether Bellori used "singing" to imply that Boschini had stolen Raphael's honor, but at least this figure of speech might have heightened the negative tone of Bellori's report.

Never before or after was Bellori quite this rude in naming and condemning a fellow critic. He once wrote that Giovanni Baglione's *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti* "was written wretchedly," criticizing the writer's achievement through his literary style just as he did with Boschini, but this comment was discreetly marginalized in his personal copy of the *Vite*.⁴¹ Public discourse was usually cloaked in greater civility, at least when living

writers were concerned. Sometimes accusations of bias and lying were leveled, usually at Vasari. Boschini called him a festering bouquet of flowers, a mangy dog, and “the stinging nettle in the garden of painting,” all bilious epithets that Boschini deserved more than Vasari.⁴² Boschini was unusually impolite with Vasari, but when he named living writers he was much more restrained. Typically in seventeenth-century criticism, when strong distaste was voiced, names were rarely named if the author was still alive.⁴³ Vincenzo Vittoria was just as rude as Bellori about Malvasia’s *Felsina pittrice*, but he decided that a decent interval should lapse after Malvasia died before publishing his opinions. He wrote his polemic in 1679 and published it in 1703, ten years after Malvasia’s death.⁴⁴

What provoked Bellori into breaking this code of honor was an attack on his hero Raphael, the first such attack in print in a major art publication. Raphael had slipped from favor in certain circles, starting most famously with Annibale Carracci’s writing to his cousin Ludovico, but the criticism remained behind closed doors, voiced in letters to family or within the studio: “And that beautiful old man, St. Jerome, has he not more grandeur and also more tenderness than has the St. Paul of Raphael, which at first seemed a miracle to me and now seems a completely wooden thing, hard and sharp?”⁴⁵ When Malvasia published Annibale’s letter about Raphael’s *Ecstasy of St. Cecilia* (Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale; Figure 3), it was considered inflammatory, although he more than Annibale received the blame, and it persists as an irritant to some modern scholars who have tried (unsuccessfully) to suppress its importance by accusing Malvasia of falsifying documents.⁴⁶ In order to help himself articulate what he liked about Correggio’s *Madonna and Child with Saints Catherine and Jerome* (Parma, Galleria Nazionale; Figure 4), and as we have noted he felt some frustration putting his thoughts into words, Annibale used Raphael to illustrate what Correggio had contributed to art. His language has its roots in rhetoric, but it also resonates as shoptalk in its use of “wooden,” a term that Leonardo had used repeatedly in his technical or studio notes. I call it “shoptalk” not just because Annibale’s letter to Ludovico was a substitute for conversation in the studio (although it is that too) nor because Leonardo discussed it as technical advice to other painters, but because the term “wooden” transfers qualities of an artist’s material to the qualities of its styles. The transfer is illegitimate, according to Leonardo, because it makes figures appear stiff, dry, sharp, knotty, muscular, and devoid of grace.⁴⁷ It illegitimately transfers to painting qualities inherent to sculpture.

Raphael emerges as wooden through a calculated exercise of historical

hindsight and revisionism. Annibale looked at Raphael through the corrective lens of Correggio, and from this perspective Raphael came to look more like the “hard and affected” Michelangelo, whose critical fortunes were starting to wane at this time and plummeted thereafter.⁴⁸ Annibale’s language applied to Raphael and Correggio the most venerable of stylistic polarities – soft (*tenero*) and hard (*cosa di legno, duro, and tagliente*) – and in so doing problematized the history of art. Wooden, hard, and cutting circumscribe a single style that was thought to be immobile, too emphatically contoured with sharp lighting and unblended colors.⁴⁹ Hard styles were often mentioned in conjunction with their opposite: soft, melting colors; *sfumato* light; blurred contours. Boschini thought the soft–hard polarity originated with Aristotle,⁵⁰ but most art critics would have been more familiar with it from ancient rhetoric in general. Dionysius of Halicarnassus likened Lysias’ orations to archaic paintings with their simple, unblended colors and clear outlines, in contrast to Isaeus’s orations, which he thought were like more modern paintings, with nuanced color and an interplay of chiaroscuro: “In order to clarify further the difference between the two men, I shall use a simile from the visual arts. There are some old paintings which are worked in simple colours without any subtle blending of tints but clear in their outlines, and thereby possessing great charm; whereas the later paintings are less well-drawn but contain greater detail and a subtle interplay of light and shade, and are effective because of the many nuances of colour which they contain.”⁵¹ Cicero and Quintilian used similar parallels.⁵²

Rhetoricians and art critics agreed that both oratory and art evolved from an archaic hard style to a modern soft style. They agreed about this historical trajectory, but they invested the forms with different values. Dionysius, Cicero, and Quintilian intended to praise the older forms as more enduring, less indulgent toward verbal trickery, and more powerful in effect. In contrast, art critics deemed hard styles to be not only outdated but also artistically inferior to the modern soft style. Hard styles were construed as historically distant or, in a further twist, geographically distant, foreign and hence unsophisticated.⁵³ German and quattrocento painting bore the brunt of these charges. They are dry bones, “as much skeletons as figures being dry and without spirit.”

Annibale Carracci must have assumed that Ludovico would bring these common associations to his letter and would recall, in particular, Vasari’s preface to part 3 of the *Vite*: “Their figures [i.e., those by quattrocento artists] appeared crude and excoriated, offensive to the eye and harsh in style. . . . This artist [Correggio] painted hair, for example, in an altogether new

way, for whereas in the works of previous artists it was depicted in a labored, hard, and dry manner, in his it appears soft and downy. . . .” Annibale refashioned Vasari’s history by demoting Raphael from his exalted status to the rank of an outdated quattrocento artist. Raphael becomes Perugino. What Annibale did was reverse the order of history devised by Vasari, where Raphael was Perugino at first but then became Raphael.⁵⁴ Boschini also made Raphael retrogressive by transforming him into the Bellini of Rome, and hence into a quattrocento master in Vasarian terms:

And thus to respond to Vasari who praises Raphael to the skies, I say that Giovanni Bellini’s brush was more learned. . . . First there was Giovanni Bellini who rendered each figure in a purified style of good forms and who was certainly one of the most talented artists of those times. Also, even Raphael took on a style of great diligence and learning! . . . In all this one sees painting stupefied by its meticulous diligence. . . . And that was the good road for a certain time, highly esteemed for being the first Style. Later on came an immortal spirit who was our Giorgione.⁵⁵

Boschini used the code of “diligence,” often identified as a cause for hard styles, to mark Raphael as a quattrocento painter.

When Annibale used “wooden, hard, and sharp” and “tender” styles to reconfigure the history of style, he initiated a reassessment of Raphael that had a profound impact on artistic taste and practice. As time passed, Annibale’s view of the wooden Raphael became widely accepted. Francesco Albani heard “even from painters” that Raphael’s style was “hard and cutting,” as if this opinion were more common among the public.⁵⁶ Salvator Rosa reported that Raphael was not popular among Neapolitan painters because they found his work to be “stony and dry,” and he heard similar reservations expressed from a Bolognese perspective by Simone Cantarini.⁵⁷ Carlo Maratta and Bellori blamed “new masters” with “fantastical opinions” about a stony Raphael. Malvasia’s tag for Raphael – Boccalaio Urbinate (Jugmaker of Urbino) – appeared in only a few copies of the *Felsina pittrice*, but that was enough to help launch Vincenzo Vittoria, writing under the influence of Carlo Maratta, in a booklet diatribe on the subject.⁵⁸ When Giovanni Pietro Zanotti decided to defend Malvasia two years later, he dismissed the sobriquet Boccalaio Urbinate as “a slip of the pen,” meaning (I assume) a slip in judgment, and quoted Malvasia as saying, “I don’t know how such temerity and insolence could have come from my pen.”⁵⁹ This confession, written suspiciously in the style of Zanotti himself, supplements

the definitive proof of its absence in the original manuscript, which Zanotti then owned. Zanotti failed to note another derisive nickname that Malvasia accepted for publication: Seccarello l'Urbinate (The dry man from Urbino).⁶⁰

The respect accorded to hard styles by Cicero, Quintilian, and Dioscorius of Halicarnassus rested on a bedrock of values: appeal of the intellect over the senses; ancestor worship; respect for those who first created a style. Hard styles in art criticism also referenced antiquity, but in a more deeply conflicted way. Ancient sculpture represented the canon for modern artists, and yet everyone also seemed to know that studying, copying, and contemplating statues transformed the softness of living flesh into hard stone.⁶¹ These unwanted side effects were acknowledged even by dedicated boosters of antiquity. Vasari thought that Battista Franco spent too much time imitating statues instead of nature and that as a result his work was “hard and cutting,” as one sees, he tells us, in *Tarquin and Lucretia*.⁶² These dangers, however, paled in comparison to the benefits, at least in Vasari's mind. The discovery of the Laocoön, the Apollo Belvedere, and other Hellenistic works in the early sixteenth century “caused the disappearance of the dry, hard, harsh style that art had acquired through the excessive study of Piero della Francesca, Lazzaro Vasari, Alesso Baldovinetti, Andrea del Castagno. . . .”⁶³ When Titian mocked idolaters of the *Laocoön* with his *Monkey Laocoön* (Figure 5), or when Malvasia launched into a philippic about pointless trips to Rome to study statues and recast Vasari's story of Brunelleschi's Roman trip into an opera buffa, they struck at the core of Renaissance art and the academic literature and instruction that accepted ancient sculpture as the undeniable repository of knowledge. In a polemical canard penned in the margins of his copy of Vasari's *Vite*, Annibale called Vasari “ignorant” because “he did not notice that the good ancient masters took things from life, and he wants to believe instead that it would be better to copy secondary things that are ancient rather than things that are alive.”⁶⁴ In Malvasia's view, the stony style is further evidence that the “Roman style” is artificial and studied, whereas his fellow Bolognese paint naturally and purely, just as they should.⁶⁵

Statuino thus illustrated the dangers of good intentions. Previously, stony styles had referred to hard materials alone: Leonardo's and Annibale Carracci's “wooden” (*legnoso*); Passeri's “stony” (*di pietra*). Clearly related to these is Ludovico Dolce's critique of quattrocento painters and Michelangelo as stony (*di porfiro*), a critique that archaicized Michelangelo precisely on those grounds that he had staked out for himself.⁶⁶ In some ways *statuino* is a more effective epithet because it combines the formal qualities of stoniness

with the cultural referencing of the antique, and hence represents a considerable advance for those wanting to attack anticophiles. *Statuino* combines the good intentions of imitating ancient art with the undesired consequence of an art that mirrors the hardness of its models. If in Annibale's construction nature is primary and alive, then antiquity, being secondary, is probably dead – “things that are ancient instead of things that are alive.” This does not represent the full extent of his ideas on antiquity, only an overactive response to provocations he found in reading Vasari. Boschini, probably after conversations with Malvasia, also used the Carracci to suggest that ancient statues are dead things, hardened by rigor mortis. Boschini has Agostino Carracci give this advice to his brother Annibale, who was nervous about not yet having visited Rome to study its antiquities: “Fear nothing . . . and come to Rome and do not doubt that, although there are statues in abundance there, really they neither move nor know how to speak.”⁶⁷

The “stony” ideal as seen by a sixteenth-century practitioner is found in *The Academy of Baccio Bandinelli in Rome* (Figure 6) where the Academy members hold and draw various statuettes. The Carracci, who opened their academy to natural light and life studies, could have seen Bandinelli's Academy as an ideal in extremis: introverted, denatured, windowless, lit artificially, and surrounded only by artificial objects. Candlelight serves as a heuristic for the study of chiaroscuro and shadow projection, but visually the cast shadows are sharp and cutting; in other words, they represent iconically Raphael's *statuino* style.

Statues thus both introduced the canon and invited its transgression. This duality of coexisting virtue and vice can also be found in the acculturated values assigned to “hard” forms. Hard styles resulted not only from imitating statues but from a too slavish imitation of one model in general.⁶⁸ More than Raphael's reputation rested on the charge of stoniness. All of the new Raphaels – Poussin, Domenichino, Reni, and so on – could be condemned by association.⁶⁹ In France, some thought that Poussin's passion for antiquity had led him to neglect nature and to transform flesh into stone, so that it “resembled painted stone having more the hardness of marble than the delicacy of flesh.”⁷⁰ Poussin might have welcomed de Piles's description of his painting as “severe” because severity was a code for ancient simplicity and grandeur within the rhetorical literature that we know he was reading.⁷¹ On the other hand, “severe” could also mean “rigid,” according to the Crusca *Vocabolario*, a quality associated by Cicero and Quintilian with archaic statues.⁷²

So far I have presented only the antagonisms and social disfunctions of fights over style. There were, however, benefits of such style obsession, in particular a growing sophistication among critics in their perception and description of style. Many years ago I started a lexicon of Italian stylistic terminology, tracking about two hundred adjectives commonly used to modify “style” (*maniera, stile, forma, modo, carattere, gusto*) across two centuries, starting with Vasari’s *Vite* of 1550. I filed over two thousand examples, enough to be useful for simple statistical analyses but not enough to constitute completion. A glance at the list of terms in the Appendix will give some idea why I finally agreed with Francis Sparshott that “an anatomy of style terminology would be an endlessly intricate and tiresome affair.”⁷³ Although the results remain provisional, one conclusion can be drawn about megatrends in usage. We know that Vasari’s *Vite* defined art history for centuries to come in terms of biographical approach, ekphrastic technique, stylistic periodization, and so forth, but less well known is how the imprint of his language defined a lexical canon that dominated at least two centuries of art writing. Over one-half of the two hundred terms were used by him, although not always with the meanings and values accorded them by later critics. For the half century after the first edition of the *Vite*, the language of style criticism remained more or less stable, but in the seventeenth century stylistic terminology nearly doubled. In contrast to this semantic inventiveness, the eighteenth century (up to 1770) contributed only four new stylistic terms, all critical of the baroque style. According to Lorenzo Valla, “a new subject requires a new vocabulary,”⁷⁴ but it is not clear what, in this case, the need was. One might want to argue that artists and art consumers valued individuality and originality more in the seventeenth than in the eighteenth century, when a more conformist, academic mentality set in. As pictorial styles proliferated, so too did the language that described them. I tend to believe that the growing vocabulary can be better explained by linguistic developments during the seicento, particularly a love of neologisms, metaphoric speech, and other forms of catachresis that gave critics greater latitude in their choice of words and emboldened them by competitive example to invent new ways of describing style. If Passeri’s view about an obsession with style is correct, then artists and critics would naturally seek to write about it both more precisely and more evocatively. With an expanded metaphoric language available to them, and a willingness to use it,

they had both the will and the ability to expand the linguistic horizons of criticism.

Interest in style also brought with it a greater visual acuity, at least if we can accept verbal descriptions as an indicator of how people looked at paintings. Consider, for example, how Carlo Cesare Malvasia found four different styles – those of Raphael, Correggio, Titian, and Annibale Carracci, each attached to a different figure – in a single fresco by Guido Reni:

The painting represented, with a certain charm which did not detract from its gravity, St. Benedict coming out of a cave high up in a mountain, and receiving gifts offered him by the rustic inhabitants, who varied in sex, age, coloring, size, attitude, and dress. These included a lovely Raphaelesque girl clothed in veiling, holding a basket of eggs. Behind her is seen the hand and smiling face of an older woman painted in the style of Correggio. Both of them look out at the spectators with such vivacity and spirit that they seem to breathe. A shepherd painted in the style of Titian is playing a flute with hands that seem of living flesh. . . . There is also a woman painted in the manner of Annibale, with a nursing child at her breast. . . . Leaving aside many other figures, the most prominent of all is a great form, completely nude, who pulls a balky donkey with such awesome and vigorous force that the outlines might have been drawn by Michelangelo. It was also softer and more covered with lifelike flesh than the figures of the Lombard School.⁷⁵

Although we know Reni's fresco at San Michele al Bosco only through painted and engraved copies (Figure 7), each imposing its own interpretation of Reni's style onto the original, it is still possible to see in the drapery, figural type, and pose that Malvasia's perception of stylistic quotations is justified, and that Reni, like other seventeenth-century artists, varied his figural style for just this kind of referencing.⁷⁶ Cinquecento ekphrases tended to be prosopopoeic.⁷⁷ Writers assumed a transparency of representation, so that describing what you saw through a picture frame was much the same as describing a scene through a window frame. Editorial comments about artifice such as a beautiful foreshortening were sometimes appended or unobtrusively inserted into the description itself, but they tended not to rupture the illusion as insistently as Malvasia did when he repeatedly referred us to the styles of other painters. More than most previous writers (with Boschini as a possible exception), Malvasia mediated between a painting's

illusionistic representation and the artistic devices employed by the artist to make the representation. In the case of this particular description, Reni's figures are transformed from actors in a drama to signifiers of style.

Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey have written that, if "the great discovery of the Renaissance was style, that of the seventeenth century was the critical investigation and manipulation of style."⁷⁸ They had artists in mind, but writers developed a similar stylistic self-consciousness, none more than Malvasia. Mimesis in its conventional sense was still praised, but increasingly style became recognized as the object of imitation. Style references style. In describing Annibale Carracci's *Assumption* (Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale), Malvasia postpones any mention of expressive poses or lighting effects until after he raises questions of Annibale's technique, intentionality, and sources: "... it was made *alla prima* so that it resembled a sketch more than a finished painting, at any rate it is very well preserved. In this painting Annibale had looked at Tintoretto, and further in the more learned and magnificent drapery folds he sought out Veronese."⁷⁹ The painted surface and the formal vocabulary of drapery folds are adduced as evidence of Annibale's artistic intentions. Familiarity may dull our appreciation for Malvasia's accomplishment, as it resembles in simplified form what art historians still do today. He invites the viewer to watch Annibale as he looks (*mira*) at Tintoretto and Veronese. We see a sketchy technique that in its freshness and its guileless lack of finish reminds us of the physical act of production. *Alla prima* was used by Malvasia and his contemporaries as evidence of the artist's intentions, spontaneously revealed to the discerning eye.⁸⁰ It is a private act whose sole intended audience is the artist. Annibale left this exposed, a common enough act in itself, but exposed in a particular form that enabled Malvasia to see Tintoretto.

Lomazzo's ideal painting of *Adam and Eve*, where Adam is drawn by Michelangelo and colored by Titian, and Eve is drawn by Raphael and colored by Correggio, gave Malvasia his interpretive template for the *St. Benedict Receiving Gifts*.⁸¹ The correspondence between the *Adam and Eve* and *St. Benedict Receiving Gifts* is close but not exact: Lomazzo has two figures painted in four styles, and Malvasia has four figures in four styles; the Lombard Correggio colors Raphael in Lomazzo instead of a Lombard coloring of a Michelangelo figure in Malvasia's reading. Seicento art theorists gave Lomazzo's *Adam and Eve* mixed reviews. Giambattista Volpato accepted it as a fulfillment of Tintoretto's motto, hung on his studio wall, that admonished him to use "the drawing of Michelangelo and the coloring of Titian."⁸² Domenichino and Francesco Scannelli, on the other hand, questioned its

practicality, because, they thought, no single artist can paint in four different ways and because these particular styles are incompatible.⁸³ Michelangelo would draw Adam with excessive artifice, stony surfaces, and bold contours, but then Titian would cover up the artifice with naturalism. Hard outlines would be softened and lost to Titian's style. Scannelli rejected the *Adam and Eve* for reasons similar to why Bernini rejected the venerable story of Zeuxis and the Crotonian women: the different styles (body parts) taken from different artists (women) would make the painting (figure) appear fragmented and hence would violate the cardinal rule of unity.⁸⁴ Malvasia, however, was not bothered by the "monstrous" combination of styles, viewing it instead as evidence of Reni's mastery over style.

Lomazzo's *Adam and Eve* can be most clearly situated within the debates on imitation that predicate a canon and the ability of artists to manipulate it. How the Carracci replaced Lomazzo's ideal with a new conception of imitation has been clearly established by Charles Dempsey.⁸⁵ My point here, however, is that Malvasia transplanted the dominant theoretical model to explain ideal imitation from the realm of nature to style. Instead of having Zeuxis combine the beautiful parts of nature, Malvasia has Reni gather together the most beautiful styles. Instead of having his readers look at a representation of nature, Malvasia has them look at style.

An oft-told story about Annibale Carracci's early years in Rome shows another way that style usurped the traditional roles of nature in art criticism. In its early version by Giulio Mancini, we learn how Annibale tricked local connoisseurs by switching a painting by Sebastiano del Piombo with one of his own, much as Annibale had been tricked by Passerotti with fake Michelangelo paintings.⁸⁶ The story at this point in its life was brief and intended to show Annibale's versatility. In the later accretion by Malvasia we are told something about Annibale's motivations: how, when Annibale Carracci arrived in Rome, local artists treated him as their inferior. The theme of revenge through deception marks it as an early version of the Van Meegeren gambit. Malvasia's source was Boschini, whose elaborate narrative he quoted at length. In Boschini's invention, Annibale and Cardinal Odoardo Farnese conspired to shame the Roman painters with a variation on the illusionist scam where viewers mistake painting for reality, whether it is Zeuxis trying to lift Parrhasius's painted curtain, or Cimabue trying to brush away a painted fly, or Titian climbing a ladder to see whether Peruzzi's stucco decoration at the Palazzo Ghisi (complete with painted dust) was real or not, or Annibale Carracci trying to pick up a book in Bassano's studio only to find it to be painted paper.⁸⁷ Cardinal Farnese pretended to be waiting for a shipment of

old-master paintings and made certain that the sniping group of painters and dilettantes heard about his mounting excitement. On the side, he had Annibale produce some bait, which was then packed up and delivered. He assembled the dilettantes and painters in his palace and had Annibale wait unobserved in the wings:

The crate was brought there in front of them, and everyone waited with curiosity. As it was unnailed and untied, everyone watched and waited with an expression of curiosity. . . . Finally the pictures emerged like rays of resplendent sunlight. The dilettantes and more learned were stunned and took these works as exquisite. One person said, "This is by Parmigianino"; another said, "This is certainly by Correggio"; and another said with certainty: "It is perhaps even better than Correggio. This has definitely surpassed him." Everyone was stunned and spellbound, but His Eminence was laughing inside. . . . In short, when each of those painters had convinced themselves, the Cardinal said: "This time he who has spoken badly has spoken well," and everyone blushed. His Eminence then said: "Hurry, Carracci, come here so that you can see how your inventions have brought you glory. You have conquered Parmigianino and Correggio," and having said this, he turned around and raised a curtain covering the doorway.⁸⁸

Before Malvasia quoted Boschini's story, he prepared the reader for its moral that the punishment fit the crime: the Roman painters had mocked Annibale for wanting to be "the ape of Titian, Correggio and Veronese," and Annibale showed them how completely he had fulfilled that aspiration. Malvasia's idiomatic phrase "the ape of . . ." (*la scimia di*) deliberately recalls its normal usage – naturalists as apes of nature – and hence the analogous (perhaps even higher) deception perpetrated by Annibale by mimicking style. His success rests on the fact that he could imitate old-master styles better than the Roman painters could discern them. A related story with the same moral is told by Giulio Mancini. Annibale painted a Flagellation in the style of Sebastiano del Piombo, framed it in an old frame, and presented it to Odoardo Farnese. Odoardo rhapsodized that no one could paint this way today, and Annibale enjoyed his humiliation in revealing the truth.⁸⁹

As a story of deception, Boschini's version adopted a narrative structure and staging similar to Pliny's story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius (9.310–311):