

ONE

INTRODUCTION

*Perché delle cose rare e ben fatte ognun sa la difficoltà.*¹

RENAISSANCE ART, LIKE THAT OF ANTIQUITY, HAS SUFFERED FROM its success. It is both loved and resented, sometimes simultaneously. High Renaissance style defined a norm for centuries afterwards, sometimes deemed Classical, sometimes termed more generically Old Master art. When the Modernists swept aside tradition and tried to start again from scratch, the Renaissance art enshrined in palatial museums soon began to seem rather dusty by comparison with newer and sleeker models. In an age of photography, repeated reproduction made it all too familiar. Additionally, the gross simplification of its theoretical aims to *mimesis*, or the imitation of nature, made it sound obsolete. So if the art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries wasn't ignored by twentieth-century sophisticates, it was parodied – except in the hands of art historians, whose discipline was burgeoning during the middle years of the century, and in the hands of collectors who could still buy important Renaissance paintings. In the 1920s and early 30s, the Hermitage Museum (in what is now St. Petersburg) sold off many of its most admired paintings, not a few of which were purchased by Andrew Mellon and later

¹ “Because everyone knows the difficulty of unusual and well done things”; Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del Cortegiano* (Venice, 1528), I, xxvi.

given to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which opened in 1941.² Since then the influential attention of collectors has turned elsewhere.

Affection for the Renaissance has tended to flag as the norm of classical education has atrophied. The Fascists' appropriation of classical culture didn't help either. As late as 1930, the Royal Academy in London was delighted to mount an exhibition of Italian art, helped by Lady Chamberlain's access to "Signor Mussolini," in response to the "urgent need for further and more intimate contact with Italian art, with the children of the Mother of Painting."³ After the trauma of World War II, any approach to the idealism of Renaissance nudes needed to emphasize its connection with acceptable, non-Nazi definitions of virtue: the "athlete of virtue" was born.⁴ Still, the period's reputation suffered by the company it had inadvertently acquired. In 1976, late fifteenth-century Italy struck the central character in *Doctor Who* as "not a very pleasant time,"⁵ totalitarian and violent.

Those for whom ancient epic means little, and perhaps even poetry in general, may find it hard to sympathize with an art whose avowed aim was to compete with poetry. Similarly, those who aren't familiar with the Bible have to make more initial effort than even the illiterate viewer of the Renaissance. Being largely Christian in content while coming from a not very admirable epoch in the history of Christianity, Renaissance art has the potential to alienate both the devout and their opposites. Some of its art is known for its tactile and sensuous qualities, and for its earthiness and erotic appeal, but depending on the viewer's politics, this may prove just as off-putting as the religious content: that is, it may be taken as sexism rather than sensuousness. The gaze for which Renaissance art was intended was in large part uninhibitedly male, although there was plenty for women to enjoy too. Nevertheless, in an age in which the viewing of art tends to be highly politicized, Renaissance art has become as problematic as it once was canonical.

Renaissance art led directly to academic art with its "Old Masters" (*vieux maîtres*, *Alte Meister*), their oil paint varnished, the varnish growing ever darker over the centuries. Since the Napoleonic era the works have been ensconced in the grandest museums. Eventually the Impressionists and Modernists dislodged

² Cf. Martha Frick Sanger, *Henry Clay Frick: An Intimate Portrait* (New York, 1998). Frick encouraged Mellon to be interested in collecting art, and Mellon promptly astounded family friends by paying one thousand dollars for a painting; see David E. Finley, *A Standard of Excellence: Andrew W. Mellon Founds the National Gallery of Art at Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1973), 9.

³ Robert Witt, "Introduction," *An Illustrated Souvenir of the Exhibition of Italian Art* (London, 1930), xi.

⁴ Colin Eisler, "The Athlete of Virtue: The Iconography of Asceticism," in *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (Princeton, 1961), I, 82–97.

⁵ In *The Masque of Mandragora*, part of the British television series, first broadcast in 1976 with Tom Baker as the Doctor.

them from pride of place. For museum visitors now, the Old Masters' much-vaunted naturalism can seem naïve rather than illusionistically impressive, and its psychological aspects must appear simple in an age whose theory of the mind (and whose artistic exploration of the mind) has grown so much more complicated. The Grand Tour and its more pedestrian offspring, that obligatory pilgrimage by people who are culturally eager and economically able to see the great wonders of Western civilization, is now no more requisite than trips to the wonders of also great and sometimes yet older civilizations elsewhere. The Renaissance has been hemmed in both by past and present.

One response has been to recast the Renaissance in the image of the present by studying its scarce female artists, its homosexuality, its Latin American component, its ties with the East, its bourgeois collectors, or its print culture. Earlier historians had emphasized the analogy between the small capitalist republic of Florence and their idea of the United States, or between its acceptance of a norm of *non-finito* (preeminently, in Michelangelo's leaving marbles half-carved) and abstraction. I myself sometimes hear my descriptions of Cosimo de' Medici and fifteenth-century Florence sounding a bit like Yankee culture plus art. Certainly the past is valued partly for its connections to the present. The correlate challenge is to balance that self-interest with an equally intense though more dispassionate interest in the differences between past and present. This extended essay takes the second route, seeking to highlight the ways in which the Renaissance was unlike the present. Until the nineteenth century, the Renaissance seemed modern, but no longer.

I have envisioned two distinct kinds of readers: any student of the Renaissance who wants to step back a bit and think more broadly than the concentrated study of any discipline-specific literature allows; and any members of the museum-going public who want to acquaint themselves with some of the basic cultural background for the period. This is not yet another attempt to "Rewrite the Renaissance" in order to bring it up to date, but simply an effort to introduce it afresh as a time of admirable achievement – though not necessarily an admirable time – and to do so as succinctly as possible without ignoring the intervening centuries of interpretation and response. Certainly cultures closer to the Renaissance than ours have warped the view back to that distant past in various ways. During the twentieth century, exaggerated emphasis on systematic linear perspective construction made Renaissance aesthetic norms seem almost as rigid as the steel and glass of Modernist spaces; and Neoplatonic interpretations made all the art of the period seem quasi-religious, leaving the introduction of secular subjects to the Baroque. Giorgio Vasari, who might have been credited with establishing a historical perspective by which less naturalistic styles were tolerated (not only in the early periods he managed to admire despite their limited naturalism, but also in Michelangelo's

style, clearly less naturalistic than Raphael's), instead has become the arch-villain of revisionists, who cast him in the mold of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, as constructing heroic and teleological narrative. Vasari, who struggled so to camouflage Michelangelo's faults, including his lack of courtly suavity and his disinterest in following faithfully either nature or the Ancients, succeeded too well for the long-term good of his subject.

Familiarity with either current or historical debates in the scholarship is not presumed here. The objective is to focus on those questions that specialists and lay readers may have in common. How did even run-of-the-mill artists manage to produce works of such lasting impressiveness? Should Leonardo and Michelangelo be considered as the miracles that Vasari and others have claimed,⁶ or simply as having achieved an exemplary degree of artistic greatness? I have used the terms Renaissance and High Renaissance without meaning to reify the concepts, but simply (as Renaissance humanists might defend non-Tuscan dialect) because established usage makes it more convenient to use than to avoid them. Their signification is deliberately vague, as is that of "the Antique" and "Old Master."⁷

One of the disfavours art historians have wrought is to embed the idea that the Renaissance was so exalted that no other period could hope to equal its art. Special it was, but neither incomprehensibly nor uniquely so. It is hoped that the reader will obtain an understanding not only of the "period eye" (that is, visual associations typical for and peculiar to the period) but also of period thinking (the typical ideas of the period that, when handled particularly deftly, were essential to producing the works so long admired).⁸ No art historian hopes to "explain" art, but only to introduce artists as alive to ideas shared with non-artists. Otherwise what we admire is craft, whether glorious or merely serviceable.

⁶ In our time, by contrast, even house-wrapping materials proclaim "the miracles of science."

⁷ The literature on how to up-date the terminology and thereby understanding of the period is vast, and it is not the purpose of this introductory study to address that topic. For the progressive view of a decade ago, see Anne Dunlop, "Did the Renaissance Have a Renaissance?," review article of four books, *Art History*, XXI, 1998, 440–5. I would suggest that instead of decrying "boosterism," we might attempt to see the concept "Renaissance" as not a problem at all. The first step is not to make its definition a goal in itself. I try to use the word in full recognition that it is but a vague signifier of limited historical pedigree. As a partly coherent and multifarious phase of Western history with many beginning points and many ending ones too, the word is more easily used than avoided here. And while "sweeping generalizations" may be inappropriate in scholarly discourse, when one is aiming at a broad overview they may have a purpose – though remaining always subject to refutation or refinement. Paula Findlen, "Understanding the Italian Renaissance," *The Italian Renaissance: The Essential Readings*, ed. Findlen (Oxford, 2002), 4–40, provides a survey of the period from a historian's perspective.

⁸ The term was introduced by Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972); cf. Patricia Emison, *The Shaping of Art History: Meditations on a Discipline* (University Park, Pa., 2008), 10.

I have not attempted to be comprehensive or even particularly evenhanded. I simply don't like Gentile da Fabriano's or Ghiberti's work, although I ungrudgingly recognize the historical role of both men. I don't expect the reader to agree with my taste, but I don't think it helps our approach to the period to ignore either issues of quality or of personal taste.⁹ The more all Renaissance art has been uniformly praised, the less anybody has really cared about any of it. As for northern Renaissance painting, although I love it I don't include it here, despite its having been much admired by Italians for its exacting naturalism. Its cultural matrix was quite different. I would feel more compelled to dwell on Venetian art if I were writing about Baroque rather than Renaissance art.¹⁰ Although twentieth-century art history rehabilitated the art after Raphael under the rubric "Mannerism," assisted by the analogous development of unrestrained personal style in contemporary art, the emphasis here is the period during which Europe was opening up internally rather than closing down internally, that is, before the Sack of Rome and subsequent religious troubles.¹¹ In short, no Olympian perspective is offered here, but only

⁹ Without being presumptuous or reactionary, I hope, I would suggest that Pliny, Vasari, and Johann Joachim Winckelmann all managed to write about the history of art well, partly because their taste, right or wrong, did enter into it – in fact, that the history of art began when people were willing to take action on behalf of their taste. Those who dislike the Renaissance *tout court* might find that if they were allowed to like parts and dislike others, the whole "problem of the Renaissance" might vanish.

¹⁰ The line between Renaissance and Baroque was not introduced until fairly recently: Helen Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* (New York, 1926) had no chapter on the Baroque until 1936, when it was characterized, interestingly, by complexity and contradiction; cf. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York, 1966), *passim* and esp. 26 (in 1926 the adjectives "degenerate" and "excessive" had been invoked, and in between she seems to have read Wölfflin). The growth of interest in Baroque art history has been a considerable factor in diminishing the prestige of the Renaissance; instead of seeming a period in which both medieval and modern traits could be found, it has sometimes been reduced to a barren stretch after the medieval and before the modern. Nevertheless, I observe the distinction in this study, but without crediting all interest in things ordinary or in painterliness and its correlates to the Baroque. Leonardo, for example, achieved many of the new qualities of indefiniteness and empiricism associated with the Baroque.

¹¹ David Franklin, *Painting in Renaissance Florence, 1500–1550* (New Haven, 2001), 1–3, wrestles with the term and seems to conclude that the word "Mannerism" is best avoided. Daniel Arasse suggests the admittedly paradoxical formulation, "La Renaissance maniériste," in a book of the same title, co-authored with Andreas Tönnemann (Paris, 1997), 1–49. Horst Bredekamp, "Der Manierismus: Zur Problematik einer kunsthistorischen Erfindung," in *Manier und Manierismus*, ed. Wolfgang Braungart (Tübingen, 2000), 109–29, examines the sense of analogy between Mannerism and the *entartete Kunst* as propelling the Modernists' interest in both. For a wide-ranging historiographical analysis, see Paul van Akker, *Looking for Lines: Theories on the Essence of Art and the Problem of Mannerism* (Amsterdam, 2010). The development of the concept of Mannerist art made it possible to cast Renaissance artists and Modernists as complete opposites, a more pressing desideratum in the time of Clement Greenberg than of Corbusier. In 1905, in his introduction to Reynolds's Fifth Discourse (1772), Roger Fry discussed the "characteristic" or "temperamental style," which offered to moderate the danger of insipidity in the grand style: Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Roger Fry (London, 1905), 108.

one person's imperfect scan, ripe for revision by the reader. This is not a work of reference, but a book meant for perusal, and with any luck, for some debate.

Conciseness has been preferred to comprehensiveness. Without seeming ungrateful for the enormous amounts of careful research that have honed and deepened knowledge of the period since art history became an academic discipline, it must be admitted that by now so much is known that it has become harder to know anything. Where is the curious beginner to start, especially one who doesn't want either a textbook or an encyclopedia article? The hope here is to provide a first step, after which readers may pursue their own study of the Renaissance, whether desultory or intense. Many written primary sources are available now to those who do not read Italian, some of them of literary as well as historical appeal. Even for those who do not travel to Italy, there is scarcely a museum of art's overall history that doesn't include some work from the Italian Renaissance; furthermore, color illustrations are increasingly accessible. Standing next to or within Renaissance works (preferably in quiet circumstances) is of course always more suggestive than any text can hope to be.¹²

Readers of Shakespeare might have had their curiosity about early modern Italy aroused, for example, through the dumb show in *Hamlet*, "The Murder of Gonzago," believed to allude to the death of Francesco Maria I della Rovere, Duke of Urbino,¹³ or the slightly inaccurate citation in *The Winter's Tale* of Giulio Romano, Raphael's premier pupil, as a sculptor.¹⁴ Shakespeare's world had borrowed significantly from Italy, still in his day a culturally pre-eminent land. Anglophones should ultimately resist the temptation to imagine Renaissance Italy in the image of Romeo and Juliet's Verona,¹⁵ though there is nothing wrong with becoming acquainted with Arcady, Padua, and Milan first through Shakespeare.

With so many monographs and microhistories available, readers may find themselves gasping for air amidst a superabundance of information about the Renaissance that never quite adds up to full understanding. By contrast, wide swathes of the Renaissance population were charmingly eager to garner every

¹² Unfortunately, the stricter environmental controls exacted for conservation reasons have made it much harder to contemplate certain of the most canonical works. Moreover, many of the works freely available to students in my day are now not only ticketed but require reservations. On a more positive note, print study rooms often have significant collections of Renaissance art available by appointment. In Europe, an appointment is not always required.

¹³ *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, 2006), 61–3. He became duke after the death of Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, and figures in Castiglione's *Courtier*.

¹⁴ Based on the inscription on an engraving of the *Three Fates*, B. XV, 403, 47, which identifies the invention as Giulio's and refers to a relief made after the invention.

¹⁵ Among cinematic attempts to convey a picture of the Renaissance, I favor, with all requisite disclaimers, *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and *Brother Moon, Sister Sun* (1972), both directed by the Florentine Franco Zeffirelli.

scrap they could about Greek and Roman Antiquity, without being bothered by any lacunae. Florence at the time of its artistic greatness had a population of not much over 40,000,¹⁶ yet counted as one of the most important cities of Europe. Even on these straightforward demographic grounds, that world is gone never to return, gone as definitively as was Antiquity when the humanists began to be fascinated by it. As saturated as present-day culture is with images, theirs was starved for them. The disparities between then and now are many and major; nostalgia is irrelevant. What beckons is the possibility that studying this period of ferment will have consequences for how we evaluate and change our own world. Yankee culture could use a Cosimo or two, and familiarity with Raphael's dolphin in *Galatea*, or Guiliano da Sangallo's reliefs of mourning in the Sassetti Chapel of Santa Trinità in Florence, might usefully complicate our reactions to Damien Hirst's shark. Petrarch's project, seven hundred years ago, of using the past as a tool for progressive criticism of the present might still prove rather pertinent – particularly as Post-Modern attitudes increasingly license reference to precedent.

As during the Enlightenment that followed it, the intellectual leaders of the Renaissance admired Antiquity and respected the powers of reason. Yet the Enlightenment resolve to “tend one's own garden,” as Voltaire put it,¹⁷ is distinctly not characteristic of the Renaissance. Early humanists tended to be gregarious, and went so far as to strive to include in that conviviality not only the long dead, but posterity. It is only by adequately distinguishing the Renaissance from its various cultural heirs that the period can shed both its sometimes oppressive though largely superficial familiarity and the stultifying sense that it has already had far too much attention paid to it. The ancestor ought not to be judged by the epigone – though it should also be allowed that the achievements of the Old Master period that followed may be claimed in part by that same ancestor. For centuries, the Renaissance managed to be inspiring, and even those who decline to be similarly inspired ought to respect that. When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe referred to “the holy purpose of art,” he was remembering the Renaissance and its altarpieces not least.¹⁸

Whether the period is loved for its licentiousness or honored for its historical reach both backwards and forwards, what began as an economic upturn in a

¹⁶ The population fluctuated enormously, especially at the time of the Black Death in 1348: Richard Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (Baltimore, 1982), 33; and idem, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore, 2009), 337.

¹⁷ “Il faut cultiver notre jardin”: *Candide, ou l'Optimisme* [1759], in his *Romans et contes* (Paris, 1960), 221. Voltaire's philosophical tale was set by Leonard Bernstein as a two-act operetta in 1956, with seven revised versions in existence by the time of Bernstein's death in 1990.

¹⁸ “Heiligen Kunstzwecken,” *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Book VIII, during a visit to Dresden in 1768; quoted in Harald Marx, *Masterpieces from Dresden*, exh. cat., Royal Academy of Art (London, 2003), 21.

smallish city with a handful of exceptional craftsmen has gradually come to seem remote. At the same time, the Renaissance suffers from an excess of reputation. It cannot satisfy those who expect it to be the benchmark of all important art, nor will it play the role of whipping boy for those who see it as an annoying example of everything outmoded. It is too interesting and too complex for either role.

The Renaissance predates the modern nation state; it preceded much of the religious turmoil that accompanied the establishment of those nation states; it availed itself more of the achievements of the medieval period than did its immediate cultural successors.¹⁹ By peeling back some of the layers of accumulated assimilation, art history can reveal this three-hundred-year-long cultural phenomenon as a time of genuine range and richness, its art both fecund and bold. The challenge is to preserve the understanding that those intervening centuries had of Renaissance art as a necessary though not restrictive part of our own heritage, even while devising an independent approach to the much revered, yet also much despised, early beginning of modernity.

¹⁹ For an attempt to de-purify the traditional flavor of the period, see Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, "Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism," *Art Bulletin*, LXXXVII, 2005, 403–15; idem, "What Counted as an 'Antiquity' in the Renaissance?," in *Renaissance Medievalisms*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto, 2009), 53–74; and idem, *Anachronic Renaissance* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2010). Even Renaissance perspective is now seen as the outcome of medieval optics: Samuel Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope: How Linear Perspective Changed Our Vision of the Universe* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2009).

TWO

A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

*I believe in Michael Angelo, Velasquez, and Rembrandt; in the might of design, the mystery of color, the redemption of all things by Beauty everlasting, and the message of Art that has made these hands blessed. Amen. Amen.*¹

THE RENAISSANCE RECEIVED ITS NAME FROM JULES MICHELET (1798–1874), a French historian and patriot who didn't particularly care about the glories of Ancient Rome, but who did care vehemently about ending the power of Roman Catholicism over Frenchmen. With Napoleon's example behind him, he used the Antique as a counter to piety and a bolster to modern patriotism.² Michelet's history, even if based in fact, was imbued with Romantic fiction.³ He was seeking precedent for his vision of the secular, bourgeois France emerging in his own time. Featuring King Francis I as patron of the

¹ Louis Dubedat, a dying artist, in George Bernard Shaw, *The Doctor's Dilemma* (London, 1927 [1906]), IV, 90.

² Pierre de Nolhac, *Boucher, Premier Peintre du Roi* (Paris, 1925), 7–9, epitomized the history of art in similar terms. For him, the theme of art was “une humanité idéalisée,” the history of which leads in brief from the Greeks, to Raphael, to Fontainebleau, to Versailles, to Boucher. The Renaissance causes “les images triomphales de la vie” to be reborn; modern art is still seen as essentially a “réveil esthétique du paganisme.”

³ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 15 vols. (Paris, 1833–65), IX. See also Arthur Mitzman, *Michelet, Historian: Rebirth and Romanticism in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven and London, 1990), 38–41; and Wallace Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston, 1948), 174–8.

elderly Leonardo da Vinci, Michelet created a lasting vision of the Italian-French Renaissance as a golden age of early modern statehood. Regardless of his military defeat in Italy, Francis I had initiated a centuries-long emulation of Italian culture.⁴ For Michelet, this was the beginning of the glory of France.

Michelet himself was following in the impressive footsteps of the philosopher and man of letters Voltaire (1694–1778), who had cited four great epochs in the history of civilization: the Greeks, the Romans, Florence under the Medici, and – not least – his own time, the age of his patron Louis XIV, the Sun King. In his introduction to a history of his own epoch, Voltaire had expounded how, after the Sack of Constantinople in 1453, “Italians uniquely had everything” (“les Italiens seuls avaient tout”):

The Medici called to Florence the learned men whom the Turks had driven out of Greece; it was the epoch of Italy’s glory. The fine arts had already been reborn; the Italians honored them with the name of virtue, as the early Greeks had associated them with wisdom. Everything inclined toward perfection.⁵

Voltaire himself owed something of his admiration of Italy to the French Academy’s long-standing devotion to the art of Raphael. In the seventeenth century Nicolas Poussin and his followers took Raphael as the model artist, as the master of the *historia*, the multifigured narrative composition of an important and true subject, the most difficult and most worthy project of a painter. Although Raphael was not Florentine, he offered more grist than Leonardo to artists in search of worthy examples to follow. His Vatican Stanze (a sequence of four frescoed rooms) supplied a visual textbook of complex yet highly coherent and intelligible compositions of venerable though innovative subjects. The Early Renaissance, defined by the triumvirate of Masaccio, Brunelleschi, and Donatello, set the stage for the High Renaissance, defined by the synergy of Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo. Raphael came to his artistic maturity while living in Florence, so it was easy to overlook his birth elsewhere. From the seventeenth century until the growth of Romanticism in the nineteenth, Raphael reigned as the most essential of artists; at the same time, Florence got chief credit for the Renaissance, in part because no one wanted to give

⁴ His sister, Marguerite, Queen of Navarre, wrote the *Heptameron* (1558), a collection of short stories inspired by Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (c. 1350–3).

⁵ Voltaire, *Le siècle de Louis XIV: Extraits* [1751], ed. Roger Petit (Paris, 1936), 16: “Les Médicis appelèrent à Florence les savants que les Turcs chassaient de la Grèce; c’était le temps de la gloire de l’Italie. Les beaux-arts y avaient déjà repris une vie nouvelle; les Italiens les honorèrent du nom de vertu, comme les premiers Grecs avaient caractérisés du nom de sagesse. Tout tendait à la perfection.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writing only a year before Voltaire, had interpreted the effects of the fall of Constantinople quite differently. He also credited that event with precipitating the Renaissance, but thought: “Tout ce que le débauche et la corruption ont de plus honteux; le concours de tous les crimes de plus atroce: voilà ce qui forme le tissu de l’histoire de Constantinople; voilà la source pure d’où nous sont émanées les lumières dont notre siècle se glorifie”; Rousseau, “Discours sur les sciences et les arts,” [1750] in *Du contrat social*, ed. J.-L. Lecercle (Paris, 1963), 207–8.