Preface to Part Three

Those excellent masters we have described up to this point in the Second Part of these Lives truly made great advances in the arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture, adding to the accomplishments of the early artists rule, order, proportion, design, and style, and if they were not perfect in every way, they drew so near to the truth that artists in the third group, whom we shall now discuss, were able, through that illumination, to rise up and reach complete perfection, the proof of which we have in the finest and most celebrated modern works. But to clarify the quality of the improvements that these artists made, it will not be out of place to explain briefly the five qualities I mentioned above and to discuss succinctly the origins of that true goodness which has surpassed that of the ancient world and rendered the modern age so glorious.

In architecture, rule is, then, the method of measuring ancient monuments and following the plans of ancient structures in modern buildings. Order is the distinction between one type and another, so that each body has the appropriate parts and there is no confusion between Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Tuscan orders. Proportion in architecture as well as sculpture is universally considered to be the making of bodies with straight, properly aligned figures, and similarly arranged parts, and the same is true in painting. Design is the imitation of the most beautiful things in Nature in all forms, both in sculpture and in painting, and this quality depends upon having the hand and the skill to transfer with great accuracy and precision everything the eye sees to a plan or drawing or to a sheet of paper, a panel, or another flat surface, and the same is true for relief in sculpture. And then the most beautiful style comes from constantly copying the most beautiful things, combining the most beautiful hands, heads, bodies, or legs together to create from all these beautiful qualities the most perfect figure.
possible, and using it as a model for all the figures in each of
one’s works; and on account of this, it is said to be beautiful
style.

Neither Giotto nor those early artisans did this, even though
they had discovered the principles underlying all such diffi-
culties and had resolved them superficially, as in the case of
drawing, which became more lifelike than it had been before
and more true to Nature, and in the blending of colours and
the composition of the figures in scenes, and in many other
things, about which enough has already been said. And
although the artists of the second period made extraordinary
efforts in these crafts in all the areas mentioned above, they
were not, however, sufficient to achieve complete perfection.
They still lacked, within the boundaries of the rules, a free-
dom which—not being part of the rules—was nevertheless
ordained by the rules and which could coexist with order
without causing confusion or spoiling it; and this freedom
required copious invention in every particular and a certain
beauty even in the smallest details which could demonstrate all
of this order with more decoration. In proportion, they lacked
good judgement which, without measuring the figures, would
bestow upon them, no matter what their dimensions, a grace
that goes beyond proportion. In design they did not reach the
ultimate goal, for even when they made a rounded arm or a
straight leg, they had not fully examined how to depict the
muscles with that soft and graceful facility which is partially
seen and partially concealed in the flesh of living things, and
their figures were crude and clumsy, offensive to the eye and
harsh in style. Moreover, they lacked a lightness in touch in
making all their figures slender and graceful, especially those
of women and children, whose bodies should be as natural as
those of men but yet possess a volume and softness which are
produced by design and good judgement rather than by the
awkward example of real bodies. They also lacked an abun-
dance of beautiful costumes, variety in imaginative details,
charm in their colours, diversity in their buildings, and dis-
tance and variety in their landscapes.

And although many of these men, like Andrea Verrocchio,
Antonio del Pollaiuolo, and many other more recent artists,
began by seeking to make their figures more studied and to display in them a greater sense of design along with the kind of imitation that would achieve a greater similarity to natural objects, they did not attain that level of perfection which displays even greater confidence. However, they were moving in the right direction, and their works might well have been praised in comparison with the works of the ancients. This was evident in Verrocchio’s efforts to repair the legs and arms of the marble Marsyas at the home of the Medici in Florence, which still lacks a refined and absolute perfection in its feet, hands, hair, and beard, even if everything was done according to antique style and possessed a certain proper proportion in its measurements. If these artisans had mastered the details of refinement which constitute the perfection and the flower of art, they would have created a robust boldness in their works and would have achieved the delicacy, polish, and extreme grace they do not possess, despite the diligent efforts which endow beautiful figures, either in relief or in painting, with the essential elements of art. They could not quickly achieve the finish and certainty they lacked, since study produces a dryness of style when it is pursued in this way as an end in itself.

The artisans who followed them succeeded after seeing the excavation of some of the most famous antiquities mentioned by Pliny: the Laocoon, the Hercules, the great torso of Belvedere, the Venus, the Cleopatra, the Apollo, and countless others, which exhibit in their softness and harshness the expressions of real flesh copied from the most beautiful details of living models and endowed with certain movements which do not distort them but lend them motion and the utmost grace. And these statues caused the disappearance of a certain dry, crude, and clear-cut style which was bequeathed to this craft through excessive study by Piero della Francesca, Lazzaro Vasari, Alesso Baldovinetti, Andrea del Castagno, Pesello, Ercole Ferrarese, Giovanni Bellini, Cosimo Rosselli, the Abbot of San Clemente, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Sandro Botticelli, Andrea Mantegna, Filippino Lippi, and Luca Signorelli. All these artisans made every effort, seeking to achieve the impossible in art with their labours, and especially
in their displeasing foreshortenings and perspectives, which were as difficult to execute as they are unpleasant to look at. And while the majority of them were well drawn and free from error, they were nevertheless completely lacking in any hint of the liveliness and softness of the harmonious colours that Francia of Bologna and Pietro Perugino first began to display in their works. And the people ran like madmen to see this new and more realistic beauty, absolutely convinced that it could never be improved upon.

But their mistakes were later clearly demonstrated by the works of Leonardo de Vinci, who initiated the third style which we call modern; besides his bold and powerful design and his extremely subtle imitation of all the details of Nature, exactly as they are, his work displayed a good understanding of rule, better order, correct proportion, perfect design, and divine grace. Abounding in resources and most knowledgeable in the arts, Leonardo truly made his figures move and breathe. Following after him somewhat later was Giorgione of Castelfranco, whose pictures possessed a delicacy of shading and a formidable sense of motion through his use of the depth of shadows, which he well understood. Fra Bartolomeo of San Marco was by no means less skilful in giving to his own paintings a strength, relief, softness, and grace in colour. But the most graceful of all was Raphael of Urbino, who studied the efforts of both ancient and modern masters, taking the best elements from them all; and, by assimilating them, he enriched the art of painting with the kind of complete perfection reflected in the ancient works of Apelles and Zeuxis and perhaps even surpassed them, if it were possible to claim that his work equalled theirs. His colours triumphed over those of Nature herself, and anyone who looks at his works can see that invention was effortless and natural to him, because his scenes, which resemble stories in writing, show us similar sites and buildings, and the faces and clothing of our own peoples as well as those of foreigners, just as Raphael wished to depict them. Besides the graceful quality of the heads in his young men, old men, and women, he carefully represented the modest with modesty, the wanton with lustfulness, and his children now with mischief in their eyes and now in playful poses.
And in the same way, the folds of his draperies were neither too simple nor too elaborate but had a very realistic appearance.

Andrea del Sarto followed his use of this style, but with a softer and less bold colouring; it can be said of him that he was a rare artisan, since his works were without mistakes. It is impossible to describe the extremely delicate vitality that Antonio da Correggio achieved in his works, for he painted hair in a new style which, unlike the refined one used by the artisans before him, was exacting, well-defined, and unadorned rather than soft and downy; the ease with which he painted enabled him to distinguish the strands of hair so that they seemed like gold and even more beautiful than natural hair, which was surpassed by his use of colour.

Francesco Mazzola Parmigiano created similar effects and in many details the grace, decoration, and beauty of his style surpassed even Correggio, as is evident in many of his paintings, which are full of smiling faces, the most expressive eyes, and even the beatings of the pulse, all depicted in whatever way it suited him. But anyone who will examine the wall paintings of Polidoro [da Caravaggio] and Muturino will see figures performing incredible exploits and will be amazed by their ability to create with the brush rather than the tongue (which is easy) formidably inventive scenes in their works which reveal their great knowledge and skill and represent the deeds of the Romans as they actually were. And how many artisans, now dead, were there who brought their figures to life with their colours? Like Rosso [Fiorentino], Fra Sebastiano [del Piombo], Giulio Romano, Perin del Vaga, not to mention numerous living artisans who are themselves well known.

But what matters most* is that the artisans of today have made their craft so perfect and so easy for anyone who possesses a proper sense of design, invention, and colouring that whereas previously our older masters could produce one panel in six years, the masters of today can produce six of them in a year. And I bear witness to this both from personal observation and from practice; and these works are obviously much more finished and perfect than those of the other reputable masters who worked before them.

But the man who wins the palm among artists both living
and dead, who transcends and surpasses them all, is the divine Michelangelo Buonarroti, who reigns supreme not merely in one of these arts but in all three at once. This man surpasses and triumphs over not only all those artists who have almost surpassed Nature but even those most celebrated ancient artists themselves, who beyond all doubt surpassed Nature: and alone he has triumphed over ancient artists, modern artists, and even Nature herself, without ever imagining anything so strange or so difficult that he could not surpass it by far with the power of his most divine genius through his diligence, sense of design, artistry, judgement, and grace. And not only in painting and colouring, categories which include all the shapes and bodies, straight and curved, tangible and intangible, visible and invisible, but also in bodies completely in the round; and through the point of his chisel and his untiring labour, this beautiful and fruitful plant has already spread so many honourable branches that they have not only filled the entire world in such an unaccustomed fashion with the most luscious fruits possible, but they have also brought these three most noble arts to their final stage of development with such wondrous perfection that one might well and safely declare that his statues are, in every respect, much more beautiful than those of the ancients. When the heads, hands, arms, and feet they created are compared to those he fashioned, it is obvious his works contain a more solid foundation, a more complete grace, and a much more absolute perfection, executed at a certain level of difficulty rendered so easily in his style that it would never be possible to see anything better. The same things can be said of his paintings. If it were possible to place any of them beside the most famous Greek or Roman paintings, they would be held in even greater esteem and more highly honoured than his sculptures, which appear superior to all those of the ancients.

But if we have admired those most celebrated artists who, inspired by excessive rewards and great happiness, have given life to their works, how much more should we admire and praise to the skies those even rarer geniuses who, living not only without rewards but in a miserable state of poverty, produced such precious fruits? It may be believed and there-
fore affirmed that, if just remuneration existed in our century, even greater and better works than the ancients ever executed would, without a doubt, he created. But being forced to struggle more with Hunger than with Fame, impoverished geniuses are buried and unable to earn a reputation (which is a shame and a disgrace for those who might be able to help them but take no care to do so). And that is enough said on this subject, since it is now time to return to the Lives and to treat separately all those who have executed celebrated works in this third style: the first of these was Leonardo da Vinci, with whom we shall now begin.

THE END OF THE PREFACE