Repetition, Variation, and the Idea of Art in Renaissance Italy

Robert Williams

In 1507, Pietro Perugino completed work on the painted panels of a large, two-sided altarpiece for the high altar of Santissima Annunziata in Florence. The important commission, originally given to Filippino Lippi, had been left unfinished at that artist's death in 1504. Perugino completed the *Deposition*, begun by Filippino for one side, and painted the *Assumption* (fig. 1) for the other himself, together with several smaller panels belonging to the ensemble.[1] The response to the result was described by Vasari:

> Dicesi che quando detta opera si scoperse, fu da tutti i nuovi artefici biasimati, e particolarmente perché si era Pietro servito di quelle figure che altre volte era usato mettere in opera: dove tentandolo gli amici suoi, dicevano che affaticato non s'era, e che aveva tralasciato il buon modo dell'operare o per avarizia o per non perder tempo. Ai quali Pietro rispondeva: Io ho messo in opera le figure altre volte lodate da voi, e che vi sono infinitamente piaciute: se ora vi dispiacciono e non le lodate, che ne posso io? Ma coloro aspramente con sonetti e pubbliche villanie lo saettavano.
>
> [They say that when this work was unveiled, it was very much criticized by all the young artists, particularly because Pietro had made use of figures that he had used elsewhere in his work; for which his friends scolded him, saying that he had not exerted himself at all, and that he had abandoned the good way of working, whether out of greed or so not as to waste time. To which Pietro responded: "I have put in the work figures that you have admired at other times, and to which you gave infinite praise; if now they displease you and you do not praise them, what can I do?" They continued, however, to attack him bitterly with sonnets and public ridicule.][2]

Vasari's anecdote emphasizes Pietro's inability to keep up with the new standards of inventive originality that began to develop among ambitious artists in Florence in the first years of the new century. As a young man, Vasari says, Perugino had been in the forefront of innovation; he had achieved spectacular success and had produced much admirable work, but now, suddenly, he found himself outmoded. Indignant and embittered, he retreated to Perugia, where he continued to produce pictures that appealed only to old-fashioned taste. For Vasari, the episode marks a turning point, not only in Perugino's career, but in the history of art as a whole, a crucial moment

---

[1] Jonathan Nelson, "The High Altar-Piece of Santissima Annunziata in Florence: History, Form, and Function," *Burlington Magazine* 139 (1997): 84–94; Franca Falletti and Jonathan Nelson, eds., *Filippino Lippi e Pietro Perugino: La Deposizione della Santissima Annunziata e il suo restauro* (Livorno: Sillabe, 2004).

[2] Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite . . . nelle redazioni del 1550 de 1568*, ed. Rosana Bettarini and Paola Barocchi [hereafter B/B] (Florence: Sansoni, 1966-); *Le Opere di Giorgio Vasari*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi [hereafter M] (Florence: Sansoni, 1906), III:586–87. Quotations from Vasari make use of the translation of Gaston De Vere [Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, New York: Abrams, 1979], although seldom without modification.

of transition from the second to the third "age," from the "youth" to the "maturity" and "perfection" of art,[3] to the emergence, that is, of a more sophisticated, more demanding, more modern idea of what art is.

Vasari's account is conditioned by an obvious disapproval of Perugino, much remarked upon by modern scholars,[4] yet independent testimony confirms the sudden reversal of Perugino's fortunes.[5] The incident is further illuminated by the fact that the Annunziata *Assumption* resembles not only an earlier work, the *Ascension* for San Pietro in Perugia, painted between 1495 and 1500, but another large picture, destined for Borgo San Sepolcro (fig. 2), that Perugino was producing in his Florentine studio while work on the Annunziata altarpiece was underway.[6] Florentine artists could thus have seen Perugino working on two very similar pictures side by side, and since the San Sepolcro panel was an *Ascension* even more closely dependent on the Perugia picture than the Annunziata *Assumption*, one wonders whether it, rather than the *Assumption*, was the real source of their irritation. One also wonders whether Perugino may have chosen to make the pictures so similar as a deliberate demonstration of his working method—a method he may have thought to be an appropriate response to the challenge of increased demand for his work—even whether he may have done so in order both to edify and provoke his Florentine colleagues.

Vasari was well aware of the fact that many artists in late-15th and early-16th-century Florence produced work in formulaic fashion. He refers to numerous painters who turned out images of the Madonna and Child for export abroad;[7] the phenomenon was much more widespread than Vasari's testimony suggests, and modern scholarship has begun to illuminate its socio-economic context.[8] Many Florentine artists repeated themselves just as blatantly as

---

[3] Jonathan Nelson, "La Disgrazia di Pietro: l'importanza della pala della Santissima Annunziata nella Vita del Perugino del Vasari," in *Pietro Vannucci il Perugino: Atti del convegno internazionale di studio, 25–28 ottobre 2000*, ed. Laura Teza (Perugia: Volumnia, 2004), 65–74. See also David A. Brown, "Raphael, Leonardo, and Perugino: Fame and Fortune in Florence," in *Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael in Renaissance Florence from 1500 to 1508*, ed. Serafina Hager (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 29–53; and David Franklin, *Painting in Renaissance Florence, 1500–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 5–17. The decline of Perugino's fortunes seems not to have been quite as immediate as Vasari implies: Michael Bury, "Perugino, Raphael and the Decoration of the Stanza dell'Incendio," in *Rethinking the High Renaissance: The Culture of the Visual Arts in Early Sixteenth-Century Rome*, ed. Jill Burke (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 223–44.

[4] Rudolf Hiller von Gaertringen, "Vasari und Perugino. Geschichte einer Verleumdung," in *Perugino. Raffaels Meister*, ed. Andreas Schumacher (Ostfilder: Hantje Cantz, 2011), 107–27; Giorgio Vasari, *Das Leben des Perugino und des Pinturicchio*, ed. Rudolf Hiller von Gaertringen, trans. Vittoria Lorini (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2011).

[5] Paolo Giovio, *Scritti d'arte*, ed. Sonia Maffei (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 1999), 202–04; see also Franklin, *Painting in Florence*, 5–6, 14–15.

[6] Rudolf Hiller von Gaertringen, *Raffaels Lernerfahrungen in der Werkstatt Peruginos. Kartonverwendung und Motiveübernahme im Wandel* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1999), esp. 110, 208–14, 303, 306. See also Michelle O'Malley, *Painting under Pressure: Fame, Reputation, and Demand in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 177–78, 181–83.

[7] See, for example, the lives of Perugino (B/B, III:598–99; M, III:569–70), Ridolfo Ghirlandaio (B/B, IV:248; M, IV:462), and Aristotile de San Gallo (B/B, V:403; M, VI:450).

[8] Ronald Kecks, *Madonna und Kind. Das hausliche Andacht in Florenz des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1988); Mina Gregori, Antonio Paolucci, Cristan Acidini Luchinat, eds., *Maestri e botteghe: pittura a Firenze alla fine del Quattrocento* (Milan: Silvana, 1992); Roberta Olson, *The Florentine Tondo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Megan Holmes, "Copying Practices and Marketing Strategies in a Late Fifteenth Century Painter's Workshop," in *Artistic Exchange and Cultural Translation in the Italian Renaissance City*, ed. Stephen Campbell and Stephen Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 38–74; Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, *Kunstwerke—Kunstwerte: die florentiner Maler der Renaissance und der Kunstmarkt ihrer Zeit* (Norderstedt: Books

Perugino: they included those who catered to less highly developed taste, but also major artists, such as Botticelli. Some studios even specialized in the duplication of other artists' work.[9] Repetition was condemned by Leonardo da Vinci,[10] yet he too seems to have had his students produce multiple pictures after some of his designs.[11] While painters had always made use of pattern drawings, the cultivation of repetitive or formulaic techniques in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, driven by the pressures and opportunities of a new, more expansive market, may have given them new relevance and urgency, even made them seem "modern," and it may be that Perugino thought of them as such.[12]

---

on Demand, 2005), esp. 307–12; Michelle O'Malley, *The Business of Art: Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and esp. O'Malley, *Painting under Pressure*. On merchant investors and speculation in works of art, see Richard Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 402–07. The painter Neri di Bicci has been at the center of much of this work because the surviving documentation allows for especially fine-grained analysis. See Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze (10 marzo 1453–24 aprile 1475)*, ed. Bruno Santi (Pisa: Marlin, 1976); Annabel Thomas, *The Painter's Practice in Renaissance Tuscany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Rita Comanducci, "Produzione seriale e mercato d'arte a Firenze tra Quattro- e Cinquecento," in *The Art Market in Italy, 15th–17th Centuries*, ed. Marcello Fantoni, Louisa Chevalier Matthew, and Sara Matthews Grieco (Modena: F.C. Pannini, 2003), 105–32; Megan Holmes,"Neri di Bicci and the Commodification of Artistic Values in Florentine Painting (1450–1500)," in *The Art Market in Italy, 15th–17th Centuries*, ed. Marcello Fantoni, Louisa Chevalier Matthew, and Sara Matthews Grieco (Modena: F.C. Pannini, 2003), 213–23; Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, "Immagini devozionali nel Rinascimento fiorentino: produzione, commercio, prezzi," in *The Art Market in Italy, 15th–17th Centuries*, ed. Marcello Fantoni, Louisa Chevalier Matthew, Sara Matthews Grieco (Modena: F.C. Pannini, 2003), 115–25.

[9] Verrocchio, Botticelli and Domenico Ghirlandaio all seem to have had their workshops produce replicas or derivative pictures, and an artist or group of artists known as the "Lippi and Pesellino Imitator" seems to have obtained cartoons from leading masters and specialized in reproductions and varied versions of their work: Gregori et al., *Maestri e botteghe*, esp. 150–63; Holmes, "Copying practices," esp. 195–211; Jean K. Cadogan, "Sulla Bottega del Ghirlandaio," in *Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1449–1494: atti del convegno internazionale, Firenze, 16–18 ottobre, 1994*, ed. Wolfram Prinz and Max Seidel (Florence: Centro Di, 1996), 89–96; and ead., *Domenico Ghirlandaio: Artist and Artisan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), esp. 153–71; Patricia Rubin and Alison Wright, *Renaissance Florence: The Art of the 1470s* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1999), 91–106; and Alison Wright, "Between the Patron and the Market: Production Strategies in the Pollaiuolo Workshop," in *The Art Market in Italy, 15th–17th Centuries*, ed. Marcello Fantoni, Louisa Chevalier Matthew, and Sara Matthews Grieco (Modena: F.C. Pannini, 2003), 227–28. On the importance of Verrocchio's method for Perugino, see Tommaso Mozzati, "Produzioni in serie, derivazioni e modelli: Perugino e la bottega di Andrea del Verrocchio," in *Perugino, il divin pittore*, ed. Vittoria Garibaldi and Francesco Mancini (Milan: Silvana, 2004), 95–103. In Venice, Giovanni Bellini and his workshop produced duplicates and variants: see esp. Keith Christiansen, "Giovanni Bellini and the Practice of Devotional Painting," in *Giovanni Bellini and the Art of Devotion*, ed. Ronda Kasl (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2004), 7–57. Similar replication also occurred in sculpture: see, for instance, Giancarlo Gentilini, *I Della Robbia e l'arte nuova della scultura invetriata* (Florence: Giunti, 1998), esp. I:24–32.

[10] *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Jean Paul Richter (London: Phaidon, 1970), 304 (489): "sommo difetto è al pittore replicare medesime attitudine."

[11] Since his *Madonna of the Yarnwinder* is known only from what seem to be workshop versions, it may be that he never produced an "original" painting of the subject, but simply gave his students a design to copy and vary: see Martin Kemp, "The *Madonna of the Yarnwinder* in the Bucchleuch Collection Reconsidered in the Context of Leonardo's Practice," in *I Leonardeschi a Milano*, ed. Maria Florio (Milan: Electa, 1991); Martin Kemp, "From Scientific Examination to the Renaissance Art Market: The Case of Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna of the Yarnwinder*," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 24 (1994): 259–74. The several instances of pictures derived from other pictures—the various versions of *Leda*, of *St. John the Baptist*, or of *Salome with the Head of St. John*—suggest that such an approach was not unusual for him: Kemp, "The *Madonna of the Yarnwinder*," 39, uses the terms "duplicate pictures" and "component pictures" to refer to these products.

[12] Hiller makes an impassioned case for what might be called the modernity of Perugino's approach (*Raffaels Lernerfahrung*, esp. 208–15, 217–22, 305–11), even though he elsewhere distinguishes between Perugino's strategy

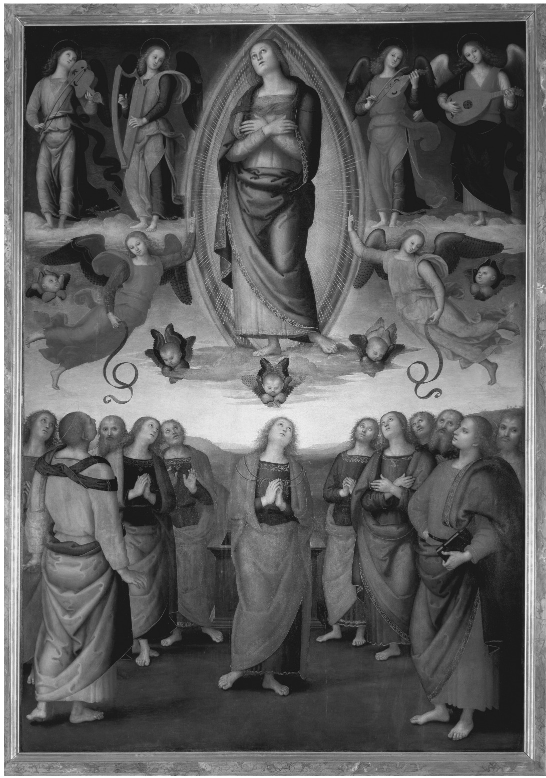

Fig. 1. Perugino, Assumption, SS. Annunziata, Florence (Scala Art Resource, NY).

Fig. 2. Perugino, Ascension, Cathedral, San Sepolcro (Scala/Art Resource, NY).

Perugino seems to have begun to repeat himself in conspicuous fashion in the early 1490s, in response to a number of new commissions for large pictures of similar kinds.[13] His method had obvious practical advantages, making it easier to delegate parts of the productive process to assistants, as well as to concentrate their efforts on developing their mastery of the relatively new and complex medium of oil painting, especially of the refined facture for which Perugino's work had always been admired.[14] Its primary purpose may have been to guarantee workshop discipline and thus both the distinctiveness and quality of the pictures produced.[15] It also lent itself to pictures for locations distant from one another: few viewers would notice the duplication, much less find it worrisome.[16] As has often been observed, however, it also had a specifically artistic

of "adaptation" and Raphael's of "variation" (270) and points out that while Raphael undoubtedly learned from Perugino, he went further, even arriving at a critical "Gegenposition" (295–96, 309). He concludes that Perugino's methods helped to achieve a "Paradigmensprung in die Moderne."

[13] Hiller, *Raffaels Lernerfahrung*, 110, 208–14, 303, 306; O'Malley, *Painting under Pressure*, 88–92, 141–44.

[14] Hiller, *Raffaels Lernerfahrung*, 215–16, 304; O'Malley, *Painting under Pressure*, 153–56.

[15] On disciplined workshop organization and the desire for uniformity as a feature of Florentine practice in particular, see Hiller, *Raffaels Lernerfahrung*, 307; and esp. Edith Gabrielli, "Timoteo Viti, Raffaello, e le prattiche di bottega in Italia centrale tra VX e XVI secolo," in *Timoteo Viti*, ed. Bonita Cleri (Urbino: Vadese, 2008), 217–49.

[16] Hiller insists, on the other hand, that in at least a couple of instances Perugino created similar pictures for locations near to one another, so that reliance on the ignorance of his public could not have contributed to his strategy (*Raffaels Lernerfahrung*, 217–18).

or expressive effect. It was well-suited to devotional subjects, in which figures tend to be still, and to sit or stand in relative isolation as objects of contemplation in themselves. Perugino's enterprising cultivation of his method, his creation of a visual language in which formulae could be adapted and component parts exchanged as necessity required, gave such mechanical techniques a new significance by emphasizing the interrelationships and interdependencies among different pictures; it reinforced the "canonical" quality of any repeated composition or motif, essentially *producing canonicity* by deriving or distilling it from the processes of art. This effect might well be thought appropriate for "modern" devotional imagery, offering a treatment of figures and themes that while conspicuously the product of inventive sophistication and craftsmanly skill was yet perfectly satisfactory, even authoritative, from a religious point of view.

The distinction between repetition and what might be called "systematic variation" is not always easy to determine. Even the most repetitive paintings usually involve some variation, and it may be that Perugino thought of himself as varying rather than repeating his designs. Yet systematic variation could be practiced in a more emphatic—one might almost say aggressive—way within an individual picture. The outstanding example is Pollaiuolo's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (fig. 3), in which the figures of the six executioners are all variations on one of two poses, each shown from different angles. This expedient was certainly not simply a matter of Pollaiuolo's lack of imagination, but intended to demonstrate his *systematic* knowledge of the body, and thus to redefine the art of painting as a form of systematic knowledge. It was intended to be noticed and appreciated, in other words, recognized as innovative, and to produce an effect of its own, one which, however artful, was not in any way incompatible with a religious subject of utmost seriousness.

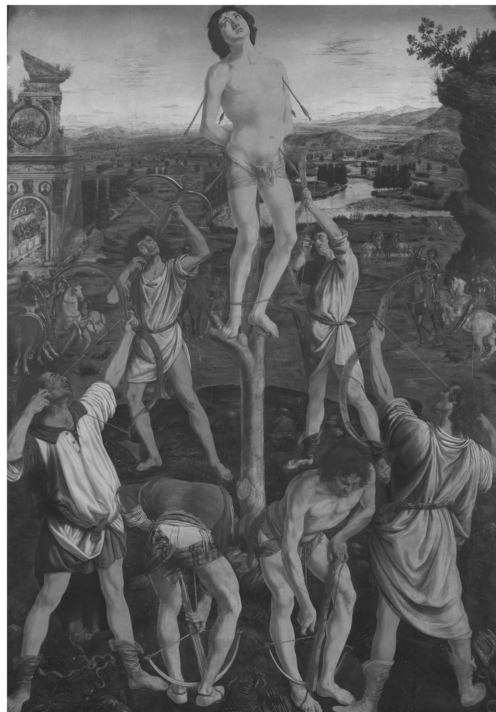

Fig. 3. Pollaiuolo, Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, National Gallery, London
(© National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY).

The fact that the scandal of Perugino's Annunziata altarpiece erupted in the midst of an environment characterized by the widespread practice of similar methods suggests that the distinction between variation and mere repetition, or between sufficiently and insufficiently subtle variation, was subject to contestation.[17] Leonardo's intensively exploratory inventive method—involving the production of numerous designs for a single motif and the critical selection and combination of their best elements into the final design[18]—might help to set him apart from his less imaginative colleagues, and it would eventually come to be the distinctive approach of the serious artist as opposed to the hack, yet it also suggests the belief that an artist overcomes the limitations of systematic variation, not by avoiding or rejecting it, but by practicing it in a more highly charged, rigorous, and critical way. The artist's responsibility is to subject his ideas to relentless critique and revision so that the result may be an invention of greater genuine originality and objective integrity.

* * *

Raphael's earliest Madonnas include closely related variations of a formulaic kind. The series that he began to produce as a result of his intensive engagement with Florentine art, starting with the *Madonna del Prato* of 1505 or 1506 (fig. 4), show him borrowing motifs from Leonardo but also learning to imitate Leonardo's more demanding inventive process. This technique yielded numerous well-known variations, the *Madonna del Cardellino* and the so-called *Belle Jardiniere*, both painted within two years of the *Madonna del Prato*. The process can be traced with the help of surviving drawings: two early sketches for the *Belle Jardiniere*, for example, reveal more clearly than the finished picture how it began in a simple reversal of the central motif of the *Madonna del Prato*.[19]

That the result of this method of working might be understood to contribute something distinctive to the finished pictures—that their sameness-in-variety might be regarded, as with the Pollaiuolo, not as a limitation but as a positive quality—is strongly suggested by the fact that the patrons of the *Madonna del Prato* and the *Madonna del Cardellino*, Taddeo Taddei and Lorenzo Nasi, were related by marriage[20] and would have known each other's pictures. They were in a position, in other words, to appreciate slight but expressively significant variation—*maximally efficient variation*—as an inventive strategy. The pleasure to be had from precisely this feature of the paintings—that it might suggest potentially infinite configurations, each producing a subtly different expressive effect while at the same time testifying to and further articulating an essentially unchanging identity—has special relevance to the subject and function of the images, witnessing, as it were, to the inexhaustible virtue of the Virgin Mary.

---

[17] Noted also in Carmen Bambach, *Drawing and Painting in the Italian Renaissance Workshop: Theory and Practice, 1300–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 296.

[18] See esp. E.H. Gombrich, "Leonardo's Method for Working out Compositions," in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance I* (London: Phaidon, 1971), 58–63.

[19] Paul Joannides, *The Drawings of Raphael with a Complete Catalogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), cat. nos. 120, 121. On the relation of the pictures to one another, see Jürg Meyer zur Capellen, *Raphael in Florence* (London: Azimuth, 1996), 186–204; Jürg Meyer zur Capellen, *Raphael: A Critical Catalogue of His Paintings* (Landshut: Arcos, 2001), I:222, 260.

[20] Mina Gregori et al., eds. *Raffaello a Firenze: dipinti e disegni delle collezioni fiorentine* (Florence: Electa, 1984), esp. 39–41 (Cecchi et al.). See also Tom Henry and Carol Plazzotta, "Raphael: From Urbino to Rome," in *Raphael: From Urbino to Rome*, ed. Hugo Chapman et al. (London: National Gallery Publications, 2004), 40; and Sheryl Reiss, "Raphael and His Patrons," in *The Cambridge Companion to Raphael*, ed. Marcia Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. 46–47.

Fig. 4. Raphael, Madonna del Prato,
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
(Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

Insofar as such pictures involve repetition and variation on the theme of female beauty and virtue, moreover, their effect would have been apprehended in terms of poetry: the Virgin is seen to be an object of endlessly varied praise in the same way as the beloved in a series of Petrarchan sonnets. Much as Raphael's inventive process, derived from Leonardo's, may seem to be bound up with methods specific to painting, this comprehensive exploration of different possibilities was also associated with poetic invention. Deploying standard motifs, meters, and rhyme schemes, poets produced closely related variations on well-established themes. The appeal of such verse was eloquently described by the poet Pietro Bembo:

> Ma della varietà che può entrar nel verso, quanto ne sia stato diligente il Petrarca, estimare più tosto si può, che esprimere bastevolmente; il quale d'un soggetto e materia tante canzoni componendo, ora con una maniera di rimirarle, ora con altra, versi ora interi e quando rotti, e rime quando vicine e quando lontane, e in mille altri modi di varietà, tanto fece e tanto adoperò, che, non che sazietà ne nasca, ma egli non è in tutte loro parte alcuna, la quale con desio e con avidità di leggere ancora più oltra non ci lasci. La qual cosa maggiormente apparisce in quelle parti delle sue canzoni, nelle quali egli più canzoni compose d'alcuna particella e articolo del suo soggetto; il che egli fece più volte, né pure con le più corte canzoni, anzi ancora con le lunghissime, sì come sono quelle tre degli occhi, le quali egli variando andò in così maravigliosi modi, che quanto più si legge di loro e si rilegge, tanto altri più di leggerle e di rileggerle divien vago.

> [But of the variety that one may introduce into verse, and of how diligent Petrarch was in cultivating it, one can more easily estimate than sufficiently express; for he composed so many poems on a single subject and theme — now with one way of looking at it, now with another, verses now whole and sometimes broken, rhymes sometimes placed near to one another and sometimes distant — and in a thousand different ways, made and did so much that not only do [his poems] never give rise to satiety, but of any part of them [it might be said] that the desire and appetite for further reading never leaves us. One sees this even more clearly in those parts of his work in which he composed several poems out of one little aspect or feature of his subject, which he did many times, and not only in the shorter poems, but also in the very long ones, as he did in the three [poems] on [Laura's] eyes, in which he went on varying in such a wonderful way that the more one reads and re-reads them, the more one longs to read and re-read them.][21]

However contrary to modern taste, the ability to produce a limitless number of variations on a single theme was regarded as a demonstration of imaginative originality and poetic skill. The validity of the strategy was understood to be proved by the fact that one never tires of reading and re-reading the poems; in the same way, its validity for painting would seem to be proved by the fact that the pictures in question reward repeated viewing and contemplation.

Bembo and Raphael knew one another and would become friends, though exactly when they met has never been securely established. They are likely to have been acquainted since at least 1505–1506, and, if not earlier, to have encountered each other for the first time in Urbino.[22] Raphael's most important Florentine patron, Taddeo Taddei—the man for whom he painted the *Madonna del Prato*—was also an acquaintance of Bembo and seems to have been in contact with him during the period in which Raphael was spending much of his time in Florence.[23] Raphael was himself a poet, though a very modest one, and his verses are imitative of Petrarch in the same way as Bembo's own.[24] We will probably never know whether, when, or how seriously Raphael and Bembo discussed their respective approaches to imitation, but the evidence suggests that Raphael understood his inventive method—derived from Leonardo's method—as poetic.

This hypothesis is strengthened by two additional considerations. The first is that Leonardo, however much we may think of his innovations as motivated by "scientific" interests and of his attitude toward poetry—evidenced by the writings on the *paragone*—as rather dismissive,

---

[21] Pietro Bembo, *Prose e rime*, ed. Carlo Dionisotti (Turin: Unione Tipgrafico-Editrice, 1960), 171.

[22] For the most recent consideration of this issue, see Vittoria Romani, "Raffaello e Pietro Bembo negli anni di Giulio II," in *Pietro Bembo e le arti*, ed. Guido Beltramini, Howard Burns, and Davide Gasparotto (Venezia: Marsilio, 2103), esp. 341–47. See also, John Shearman, *Raphael in Early Modern Sources (1483–1603)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 101–04.

[23] Gregori et al., *Raffaello a Firenze*, esp. 41.

[24] On Raphael's poems and literary culture, see Shearman, *Raphael*, esp. 130–43; Riccardo Scrivano, "Cultura letteraria di Raffaello," in *Studi su Raffaello*, ed. Maria Sambucco Hamoud and Letizia Strocchi (Urbino: Quattro Venti, 1987), 69–82; Alberto Fortuna, "Il canzoniere," in *La Fornarina di Raffaello*, ed. Lorenza Mochi Onori (Milan: Skira, 2002), 109–13. Matteo Burioni assumes that Raphael had a literary education that must have included some introduction to the principle and practice of imitation ("Die Immunität Raffaels. Lehre, Nachahmung und Wettstreit in der Begegnung mit Pietro Perugino," in *Perugino. Raffaels Meister*, ed. Andreas Schumacher [Ostfilder: Hantje Cantz, 2011], 129–51). For other aspects of Bembo's theory of imitation and its relevance to Raphael, see Robert Williams, *Raphael and the Redefinition of Art in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

clearly understood his inventive process to be similar in some ways to that of the poet.[25] His early portrait of Ginevra de' Benci—which may have been commissioned by Bembo's father—is explicitly and ambitiously poetic, and became a model for the celebration of female beauty in specifically Petrarchan terms common in 16th-century portraiture.[26]

The second factor is the example of the Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini. Active since the 1450s, Bellini was known for his many variations on the Madonna and Child theme in which the expressive potential of the subject is explored in a manner that can also be related to Petrarchan poetry (fig. 5). An artist of considerable literary sophistication,[27] he too was on friendly terms with Bembo: indeed, Bembo himself may have commissioned work from Bellini, including a portrait of his own beloved, Maria Savorgnan. At least he went on to extol the picture—perhaps only imagined—in verse in a manner deliberately imitative of Petrarch's poems in praise of Simone Martini's portrait of Laura.[28] Bembo had also acted as an intermediary between Bellini and Isabella d'Este, negotiating the execution and delivery of a devotional picture for her collection, and in a letter of January, 1506—at just the moment when he may first have met Raphael—he had tried to defend the inventive and poetic prerogatives of the artist by explaining to Isabella that Bellini did not take well to explicit instructions for pictures but preferred "always to wander at will in his painting."[29]

If a method to some degree self-consciously poetic were at work in Raphael's and Bellini's Madonnas, it would call into question the validity of the claim—now well-established in Renaissance art studies—that devotional images continued to remain dependent on icons. In the Middle Ages, the story goes, all images of the Madonna were understood to derive from a handful of "true" likenesses and inherited their validity from the authority of their prototypes. Only in the Renaissance did they come to be seen differently, valued rather for their skill and inventive originality, as "art." The image no longer offered direct, self-evident, unproblematic access to the divine; instead, it became equivocal, an object of judgment, of assessment in terms of artistic quality. Eventually all pictures—even devotional images—came to be subsumed into

---

[25] Implicit, for instance, in those passages of the *paragone* texts that emphasize the ways in which the tasks of painter and poet overlap (such as Richter, ed., *The Literary Works*, I:56–58 [no. 23] and 63–64 [no. 28]) in the elaborate descriptions of battles and deluges, and in the inventions for allegories. See also Martin Kemp, "Leonardo da Vinci: Science and the Poetic Impulse," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 133 (1985): 196–214.

[26] See Jennifer Fletcher, "Bernardo Bembo and Leonardo's Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci," *Burlington Magazine* 131 (1989): 811–16; and Caroline Elam, "Bernardo Bembo and Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci*: A Further Suggestion," in *Pietro Bembo e le arti*, ed. Guido Beltramini, Howard Burns, and Davide Gasparotto (Venice: Marsilio, 2103), 407–420. See also *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's* Ginevra de' Benci *and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, ed. David A. Brown (Washington, DC: 2001).

[27] On Bellini's literary culture, see Jennifer Fletcher, "Bellini's Social World," in *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini*, ed. Peter Humfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13–47, esp. 31, 36. On his relation to Bembo, David A. Brown, "Bembo and Bellini," in *Pietro Bembo e le arti*, ed. Guido Beltramini, Howard Burns, and Davide Gasparotto (Venice: Marsilio, 2103), 309–29. See also, Keith Christiansen, "Bellini and Mantegna," in *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini*, ed. Peter Humfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 48–74. Although Bellini's work is generally not as ambitiously literary or conceptual as that of his brother-in-law, Andrea Mantegna, an interest in the relation of poetry and painting is clearly indicated already in the very early *Man of Sorrows*, discussed in Hans Belting, *Giovanni Bellini Pieta: Ikone und Bilderzählung in der venezianischen Malerei* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), esp. 28–31; and even more ambitiously in the great *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, a picture which—since the old claim that it represents the Stigmatization is groundless —may indeed represent the Saint composing his *Canticle of the Sun*, and thus a moment of divinely inspired poetic invention, the invention of a poetic prayer.

[28] Brown "Bembo and Bellini," 315–17.

[29] Ibid., 326: "sempre vagare a sua voglia nelle pitture."

the category “art,” and while they may thus have acquired a new source of value that seems to us to be self-evident, the process also denatured and reconstituted them. Whatever an image might gain in “aesthetic” interest, it *necessarily* lost in terms of its authenticity in relation to the sacred. Now having to make up for that loss through their inventiveness and skill, Renaissance artists faced with the challenge of creating compelling devotional pictures frequently found themselves recurring to archaic formulae and icon-like effects.[30]

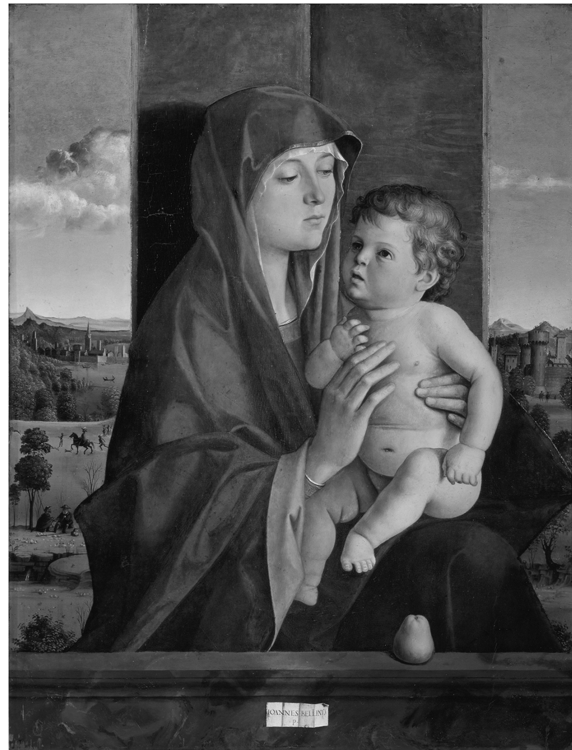

Fig.5. Giovanni Bellini, Madonna, Accademia Carrara, Bergamo (Scala/Art Resource, NY).

Raphael’s Madonnas—and Bellini’s too—function instead like the poems of Petrarch or Bembo: in their expressive variety they testify to the infinite virtue of their subject while also demonstrating the artist’s limitless powers of invention. They are poetic variations on a sacred theme, *poetic prayers*. They do not derive their authority from some painted prototype, but explore new expressive possibilities, exposing new dimensions of content implicit in their subjects. Rather than representing a loss of immediacy and authority, they offer a fresh, intensified engagement with the subject’s qualities while not presuming to exhaust them; they aspire not to “iconicity” but to discursivity, to a complex meaning-making capable of mobilizing

[30] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Presss, 1994), esp. 14–16 and 458–90; Alexander Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 25–48; Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 30–36; and Stuart Lingo, *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

conventional religious ideas and sentiments as well as encouraging creative—"poetic"—contemplation and prayer.[31]

The deliberate transparency of Raphael's inventive method, of the way in which relatively slight variations yield significantly different expressive effects, means that any one image depends upon the sensed possibility, the potential presence, of others. As much as any individual image may command attention for its unique qualities, it also points beyond itself to all possible images. Indeed, some such sense of other possibilities is what enables us—even if we are not artists ourselves—to judge the "rightness" of an image, its aptness to its specific purpose, and because such judgments are based on an awareness of purpose, they are never unconnected to content.

Such a poetic conception of invention offers an implicit critique of the idea that any *single* image, no matter how authoritative, can do justice to so exalted a subject as the Virgin Mary; it might thus be understood to point beyond itself—and all other images—to the *true* archetype, the Virgin herself, and thus to constitute a more nearly perfect form of praise. If artful images do not just concentrate attention on their individual perfection, but always also point beyond themselves, then they confess their ultimate *inadequacy* to an idea of the divine that transcends all representation; they are thus *superior* to icons as mediators of divinity. That in pointing beyond themselves—in beginning, as it were, to eclipse themselves—artful images might also suggest how art, when masterfully practiced, might most eloquently address any content whatever, does not mean that the effect of "art" is to render content superfluous—as we, the heirs of modern aestheticism, tend to assume—but makes possible a vastly more sophisticated, extensive, "reflexive" or "discursive" engagement with content. Art is not something introduced from without, a corruption of sacred formulae or a distraction from what is essential, but the very means by which the essential is made apprehensible.

* * *

Raphael's inventive method, evident in even more impressive and complex form in his great narrative pictures—*istorie*—than in his Madonnas, attracted the interest of his contemporaries, including those who were not artists. Lodovico Dolce, possibly relying on first-hand testimony provided by Aretino, offers one description:

> Voglio ancora avertire che, quando il pittore va tentando ne' primi schizzi le fantasie che genera nella sua mente la istoria, non si dee contentar d'una sola, ma trovar più invenzioni e poi fare iscelta di quella che meglio riesce, considerando tutte le cose insieme e ciascuna separatamente; come soleva il medesimo Rafaello, il quale fu tanto ricco d'invenzione, che faceva sempre a quattro e sei modi, differenti l'uno dall'altro, una storia, e tutti avevano grazia e stavano bene.
>
> [I should also say that as the painter tries out in his first sketches the ideas that the narrative has stimulated in his mind, he must not content himself with only one [invention], but should try to find more, then make a choice of the one that seems to him to work best, considering everything together and each individually, as

[31] For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Robert Williams, "*Kunstwissenschaft*, *Bildwissenschaft*, and Vasari," *Vasari als Paradigma*, ed. Fabian Jonietz and Alessandro Nova (Florence: Kunsthistorisches Institut, forthcoming).

> Raphael himself used to do, who was so rich in invention that for one narrative scene he always did four or six, each different, and all graceful and appropriate.][32]

Giovanni Battista Armenini, writing in the 1580s, offered a different account of Raphael's inventive process:

> Dicesi poi che Raffaelle teneva un altro stile assai facile, perciò che dispiegava molti dissegni di sua mano, de quelli che li pareva che fossero piú prossimani a quella materia, della quale egli giá gran parte n'avea concetta nella idea, et or nell'uno or nell'altro guardando e tuttavia velocemente dissegnando, cosí veniva a formar tutta la sua invenzione, il che pareva che nascesse per esser la mente, per tal maniera, aiutata et fatta ricca per la moltitudine di quelli.
>
> [It is said that Raphael had another, very easy method, according to which he would set out many of his own drawings, those which seemed most similar to the subject that he had already, for the most part, conceived in his mind. Looking first at one, then at another, and drawing rapidly, he brought his invention to completion, which [invention] seemed to be newborn because the mind had been helped and enriched in such a manner by the multitude [of other inventions].][33]

Although these accounts diverge, they also overlap: Dolce has Raphael working up several distinct designs for any one assignment, then choosing the best; Armenini has him re-using designs for earlier projects, adapting them by combining elements of each in a new invention. In a related passage, however, Armenini also recommends the practice of making several new and different versions, since "con piú attenzione si dissegna di novo che non si fa rivedere solamente quella macchia" ["one concentrates one's attention more when drawing anew than when merely going over a sketch"].[34] The variations in these methods are less important than what they have in common: in all cases, invention involves the imitation of one's own earlier inventions as well as an energetic, disciplined, systematic exploration of different possibilities and a critical exercise of judgment and choice.

Raphael might repeat figures within a single composition simply by reversing them, as he did with the pair of angels in the very early *Mond Crucifix*.[35] He might repeat figures from one composition to the next, as he did a few years later, for instance, with the angels of the *Madonna del Baldacchino*, using one of them again for the Chigi Chapel in Santa Maria della Pace, even though, in this case, he altered the draperies and made a fresh, more detailed anatomical study.[36] A survey of his work shows that his inventive method could sometimes be much more formulaic than even Dolce and Armenini suggest.[37] The best examples from his Florentine period are

---

[32] Lodovico Dolce, *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi (Bari: Laterza, 1960-1962), I:170.

[33] Giovanni Battista Armenini, *I Veri precetti della pittura*, ed. Marina Gorreri (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), 92. Quotations from Armenini make use of the translation by Edward Olszewski [*On the True Precepts of the Art of Painting*, New York: Franklin, 1977] but seldom without modification.

[34] Ibid., 90.

[35] Chapman et al., *Raphael*, 120–24.

[36] Joannides, *The Drawings of Raphael*, cat. nos. 209, 300, 207; see also Achim Gnann and Michiel Plomp, *Raphael and his School* (Haarlem: Teylers Museum, 2012), 92–95.

[37] Rolf Quednau, "'Imitatione d'altrui': Anmerkungen zu Raphael's Verarbeitung entlehnter Motive," in *De Arte et libris: Festschrift Erasmus, 1934–1984*, ed. Abraham Horodisch (Amsterdam: Erasmus Antiquariaat, 1984), 349–67;

anatomical studies and drawings for narrative compositions: new motifs are sometimes generated from older ones by devices as simple as reversing a figure, or altering the position of a single body part. In one case, a two-sided drawing shows the front and back of a nearly identical figure.[38] Another trick, already used by Pollaiuolo and facilitated by the use of clay, wax, or wooden models, involved imagining the figure as a three-dimensional form and revolving it slightly on axis to arrive at a new configuration. In a preparatory study for the *Massacre of the Innocents* engraving, for instance, Raphael experimented with rotating a figure group 90 degrees.[39] Perhaps the best-known instance of this device dates from his early years in Rome, the slight rotation and alteration of Leonardo's *Leda* (fig. 6) to create the figure of Galatea (fig. 7).

Fig. 6. Copy after Leonardo, Leda,
Galleria Borghese, Rome
(Alfredo dagli Orti/ Art Archive at Art Resource, NY).

Fig. 7. Raphael, Galatea, Villa Farnesina, Rome
(Alinari/Art Resource, NY).

Michael Kwakkelstein, "The Model's Pose: Raphael's Early Use of Antique and Italian Art," *Artibus et Historiae* 23 (1992): 37–58.

[38] Konrad Oberhuber, "A Drawing by Raphael Mistakenly Attributed to Bandinelli," *Master Drawings* 2 (1964): 398–401; Joannides, *The Drawings of Raphael*, cat. no. 183r & v; Kwakkelstein, "The Model's Pose," 54.

[39] The drawing is discussed in Chapman et al., *Raphael*, 244–51; see also, esp. Bambach, *Drawing and Painting*, 310–12; Lisa Pon, *Raphael, Dürer and Marcantonio Raimondi: Copying and the Italian Renaissance Print* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 118–36; and Raphael, *Raphael: Drawings*, ed. Joachim Jacoby and Martin Sonnabend (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2012), 178–79.

These strategies, too, are described by Armenini, who discusses the need to borrow from others and to vary:

> Conciosiacosaché qualunque figura, per poca mutazione d'alcuni membri, si leva assai della sua prima forma, perciò che, col rivoltarle o con mutarli un poco la testa, o alzarli un braccio, torli via un panno, o giungerne in altra parte o in altro modo, o rivoltar quel dissegno overo ungerlo per minor fatica o pur con l'imaginarselo che sia di tondo rilievo, par che no sia piú quello, che considerando bene cosí fatte mutazioni con quali e con quanti modi di una sol figura un solo atto variar si possa. E poi dovendo maggiormente esser di molte, laonde ci piace che mirabil forza ne apporti et a qualunque ingegno debolissimo aiuto grande.
>
> [The original form of any figure is altered greatly by a small change in any member, as by reversing members, changing the head slightly, raising an arm, taking away a drape or adding drapes in another portion of the work or in presenting them differently, reversing the drawing or blurring it for the sake of expediency, or by imagining it in round relief. All these devices result in its no longer seeming the same figure. Consider well how and in how many ways such alterations can vary a single figure and even greater change in a composition of several figures. Therefore we sanction this practice as giving great aid and power to an artist of very weak mind.][40]

Although he dismisses such tricks in condescending terms, Armenini goes on to point out how even leading artists use them: he describes in some detail the inventive methods of Raphael's students Giulio Romano, Polidoro da Caravaggio, and Perino del Vaga, suggesting that reliance on such techniques was one of the things for which they were well-known among artists. Polidoro, for instance, would invent the principal figures of a composition for a frieze, then trace figures from another composition onto the same field: "dipoi calcava dell'altre figure di un altro fregio della medesima altezza su quel campo dove era quello, una volta e due, con rimutar quel calco dal primo luogo ogni volta, di modo che, per questa confusione di segni duplicati et i tanti contorni, esso ne cavava per simil via materia per quello abondantissimo" ["He would do this once or twice, each time changing the position of the tracing so that out of this confusion of duplicate markings and many outlines he would derive abundant material for the frieze"].[41] Even a great artist, Armenini recognizes, may resort to such devices; as Leonardo—and Bembo—also recognized, they lie close to the heart of genuine creativity.

An *istoria* is a type of picture in which, in addition to the decorous representation of significant human action, all formal elements are arranged with the aim of achieving a carefully calculated effect, in which every individual element points beyond itself, as it were, to a larger whole, and in which, as a result, the entirety of the composition is made expressively effective. Raphael's *istorie* in the Vatican Stanze set a new standard of such maximally integrated pictorial organization. An image such as the *School of Athens* (fig. 8)—which Vasari describes as an *istoria* even though it is not a narrative—is composed of individual forms so carefully and tightly

---

[40] Armenini, *I Veri Precetti*, 95.
[41] Ibid., 94.

integrated that we are irresistibly led from one to another and finally to the composition as a whole. However much satisfaction we may get in dwelling on the individual figures, their self-sufficiency as objects of interest is continually undermined by the manner in which the entire composition is organized.

Fig. 8. Raphael, School of Athens, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace
(Scala/ Art Resource, NY).

The effect of such a pictorial strategy is subtly to pressure the viewer into a certain kind of attentiveness, essentially to educate him or her in a disciplined mode of looking that relativizes engagement with any individual element and urges him or her on to a contemplation of the whole. Insofar as it conduces to an appreciation of "formal" order, we might be inclined to consider it an "aesthetic" mode of looking, but such a characterization would be misleading, since the appreciation takes account of the treatment of subject matter and does not stop with the individual composition, but pushes past it, so to speak, to take in the entire decorative context in which the image is situated, and which includes the meaning-making capacity of the decoration as well as its form. Indeed, the elements of the Stanze frescoes also echo each other from room to room, reinforcing the expressive resonance of the individual scenes even when there is no direct thematic connection between them.

Just as Raphael's Madonnas point beyond themselves to other pictures and past other pictures to the true archetype, the individual forms in his *istorie* point to the other forms in the picture, to the pictorial order as a whole, and even beyond the order of any one picture to the entire decorative setting and its expressive or discursive function. However much they may command our admiration individually, Raphael's *istorie* lead us beyond any tendency to fixate on or fetishize them, and the way in which they actively discourage a fetishistic mode of looking should perhaps be recognized as essential to the art-historical achievement they represent.

What might thus be characterized as an anti-fetishistic orientation is also at work at a more fundamental level in the importance attached to design—*disegno*—as a practice that decomposes and recomposes forms, charging each element with the energy to assume an active role in the larger composition. In the same way that objects in perspective are able to suggest how they would look if seen from another point of view, *disegno* constitutes particular forms in such a way as to suggest that they might have been and might yet be reconstituted differently; it concentrates the transformative power of representation so as to negate the real existence of things while yet seeming to liberate some potential within them; it shows us the way something is as a special condition of the way it might be or should be, its actuality as a special condition of its potentiality.[42] We might say that it mobilizes the power of representation itself to liberate us from any particular representation. An *istoria* like the *School of Athens*, with its masterfully integrated forms, impresses the viewer as a complex actuality that has been distilled or deduced from an infinite potentiality by an energetic and rigorous process of critical invention and systematic variation, one in which the potentiality has not been lost but preserved, and the aim of which is in fact its preservation. This effect may be what we mean by Raphael's "idealism" or "classicism."

Fig. 9. Raphael, St. Paul Preaching in Athens,Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Bridgeman Art Archive).

An anti-fetishistic approach is also evident in the Sistine Chapel Tapestry Cartoons (fig. 9). The finished tapestries were all intended for display in one space, where formal interrelationships would have been even more obvious than in the Stanze frescoes. The motive behind their

[42] Williams, *Raphael and the Redefinition of Art*.

manifest ambition to create an effect of canonicity—to produce canonicity—is partly explicable in terms of their special location and function.[43] Although some of the compositions rely on well-known classical formulae, they seem to revitalize them, to rediscover them anew by creating the impression that they have been distilled or deduced in the critical process of systematic variation. One must remember that the Cartoons are not finished works of art but designs to be used in the production of fabulously luxurious objects, and that the sheer richness of the Tapestries themselves would certainly have absorbed the attention of beholders in what might be regarded as a fetishistic way. Even so, the conceptual sophistication of their design and their relation to each other would have forced themselves onto the attention of thoughtful viewers, and Raphael's determination to guarantee that they would may explain the special rigor of his formal vocabulary.

At first sight, the *Loggia of Leo X* (fig. 10) seems to adopt a strategy exactly opposed to that of the Tapestry Cartoons: it is dominated not by magnificently generalized forms but a busy particularity that demands the most minutely attentive, even obsessive, scrutiny, and that would seem to invite fetishization. Yet, at the same time, the sheer abundance of detail also requires the viewer to objectify, reflect upon, and organize his or her perceptions, and thus calls for the exercise of an energetically dialogical mode of viewing. We are helped by the fact that individual elements are framed: we notice that such organization as exists is structured by the architecture, with the divisions between the different kinds of architectural elements forming natural frames for different kinds of decoration. Some elements, such as the undersides of the arches, are further divided. We are invited to become absorbed in individual details only to then have to "frame" them and move on to the next, to shift continually between a lingering, indulgent delectation of minutiae and a more functional kind of scanning that relates the minutiae to each other and to their place in the larger decorative order. As our eyes move back and forth over the surfaces, our minds move back and forth between absorption and objectification. We achieve a heightened attentiveness that is also a heightened self-consciousness, one that might be understood to represent an ideal disposition toward the world. This decorative strategy forces us as viewers to perform our own overcoming of our tendency to fetishization and, in so doing, to glimpse an ideally liberated way of seeing things, an ideal mode of being.

Modern art historical scholarship seems to have difficulty reckoning with the decorative. We tend to privilege the self-contained image or object, and in the case of pictures like the *istorie* of the Stanze, which were intended to be seen in their architectural setting and the spatial experience associated with it, we tend either to study them in isolation from one another, or if together, as part of an iconographical program. The modern preference for easel pictures is a bourgeois taste, and is subliminally reinforced by the centrality of photography to our visual culture. Indeed, the emphasis on icons that figures so prominently in some recent scholarship on Renaissance devotional imagery is little more than a projection back in time of our tendency to regard the photograph—with its indexical trace as an effect of "authentic" presence—as the type of all images; it is thus just an unconscious rationalization of our own prejudices. Our tendency to isolate and fixate on objects of "aesthetic" interest, moreover, is symptomatic of the same limiting predisposition. Fetishizing their sensuous particularity works against our ability to recognize the ways in which certain images might accommodate potentiality or productively qualify the immediacy of our engagement with them. Yet images structured by *disegno* resist the fetishistic habits to which we, as the products of modern consumer culture, unthinkingly subject

---

[43] John Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London: Phaidon, 1972).

them: in so doing, they prove that the Renaissance idea of art does not lead to a modern "aesthetic" orientation but already points beyond it.

Fig. 10. Raphael and assistants, Loggia of Leo X, Vatican Palace
(Scala/Art Resource, NY).

* * *

Vasari's account of Perugino's Annunziata altarpiece and its reception illustrates one way in which the new idea of art revealed itself, and as we have attempted to unpack that idea, so to speak, we have exposed some of the values implicit in it. We have been able to isolate the consistently anti-fetishistic orientation that it encouraged in the approach to devotional images,

istorie, and decoration. On one level, perhaps the most obvious, it led to a redefinition of the art object. Artful images point beyond themselves, not just in the sense of representing things in nature, but in their dependence on other images, on all possible images. At the same time, artistic images set themselves apart from other kinds; they differentiate themselves from those that are made with less concentrated invention or skill, and so establish a hierarchy among all images, implicitly structuring or systematizing the field of possibilities. As an object in which the self-critical process of its creation is encoded, an artful image makes those possibilities perceptible, if only to intuition: it is not a substitute for the actual but utilizes its artificiality to project a realm in which the actual is referred to the potential. The idea of "art" as a complex, coherent set of practices is what makes any one image fully articulate but also liberates us from the limitations of that image.

Secondly, the new idea of art involved a new idea of the labor required. Art is not just a kind of object but a kind of work. It distinguishes itself from other kinds of work by being more sophisticated, like poetry, not just a matter of repetition but of inventive variation. This qualification has often been correctly seen as symptomatic of a general "intellectualization" of art, but it is also more specifically motivated: artistic image-making is essentially reflexive, essentially *critical* image-making; as such it also distinguishes itself from all forms of non-reflexive production. Artistic production results in objects the value of which derive from the rigorous critical process of working through and organizing different possibilities and, at least in some cases, the high intellectual effort of distilling the actual from the potential. That the work the artist does also involves relentless *self*-critique and *self*-overcoming is indicated by the importance attached to Raphael's development, his self-reinvention in the face of every new challenge.[44]

Finally, the new idea of art also brought about a redefinition of the viewer's experience: it led viewers to look at any one image in a way that mobilized an awareness of other images. That images should refer to each other and develop such interdependency is perhaps an inevitable step in the evolution of any complex culture, yet it does not necessarily lead to modern aestheticism. The other images to which an image of the Madonna refers are, in the first place, other images of the Madonna; subject and function are essential to its appreciation. The work of such images is rather to structure the realm of other images, ultimately of all possible images, and even of the power of imagination itself. Such structuring is perhaps also one of the functions that images must perform in a complex culture. Artful images, even when representations, are also, at the same time, critiques of representation, and it is this complex condition that enables us to have the kind of discursive relation to any single image that we recognize as essential and distinctive to our engagement with art.

[44] Emphasized, for instance, in Vasari's biography of Raphael: B/B, IV:204–08; M, IV:373–79. For a discussion of the theme and its significance, see Williams, *Raphael and the Redefinition of Art*.