

Michael Cole

IN HIS BOOK *Tintoretto: Tradition and Identity*, Tom Nichols drew out connections between the Venetian artist's pictorial manner and the economics of his practice. As contemporary writers regularly noted, Tintoretto worked unusually quickly. His paintings, to quote Pietro Aretino, 'were finished in less time than normally might have been devoted to the mere consideration of the subject'.<sup>1</sup> And by his late career, Tintoretto's employers at San Rocco were taking advantage of that, contractually requiring the artist to produce large amounts of work in short order. This commitment, in turn, encouraged Tintoretto to break from traditional techniques. He rejected, for example, the time-consuming gesso preparations other artists used and began to paint directly on a dark ground.<sup>2</sup> In a painting like the *Baptism of Christ* (Figure 11.1), from the Sala Superiore, the gloom has the same motivation as the quick handling.

By delivering more painted canvas in less time, Tintoretto could charge less for individual works than his contemporaries did. Using inexpensive pigments – Nichols speculates that Tintoretto procured his red lakes from the local dyeing industry, in which his family worked – cheapened his production still further.<sup>3</sup> Such cost-cutting might have helped any artist anywhere win commissions, but the look that resulted from Tintoretto's approach also lent itself particularly well to the nature of his assignments at San Rocco, where he was painting for a confraternity dedicated to the care of the poor, and where many of the scenes he depicted take place in a dilapidated world. As Nichols sees it, however, Tintoretto's manner was not just an index of a competitive market or pictorial function but also a distinctive, personal response to a broader tradition. When Tintoretto nodded to Michelangelo's *Day* in his depictions of the miracles of Saints Augustine and Roch, this humbled a Roman (we might rather say 'Medicean') sort of magnificence.<sup>4</sup> When Tintoretto rejected colour in favour of light–dark drama, he cast himself



11.1. Tintoretto, *Baptism of Christ*, 1579–81, oil on canvas, Sala Superiore, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice

as a strong local alternative to the greatest living Venetian painter, Titian. Titian's painting, Nichols suggests, foregrounded his medium, while 'Tintoretto's technique . . . [acted] at once to dematerialize and to spiritualize the painted surface'.<sup>5</sup>

Nichols's book represents not only an original reading of Tintoretto but also one of the most perceptive recent reflections on the materiality of Renaissance painting. At the same time, casting the topic as a study of Tintoretto's 'identity' and approaching the question of tradition as a matter of 'self-fashioning' or individual pictorial style might lead us to miss one larger historical frame.

Consider, for comparison, this excerpt from a 2008 *New Yorker* interview with the video artist Paul Chan. Chan has just been talking about his decision to animate Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit*: he was attracted, he explains, to the 'gravity' of the original, and he wanted to invert that, causing individual pieces of fruit to float upwards. But then Chan remarks on how his revision of Caravaggio generated dissatisfaction with the direction his work was going:

It still has the lines and shapes and colours of 'My birds' [an earlier video] and you're still looking at it through the camera obscura of the past. I realized that what I had to do was impoverish the image. I had to give up all the things that I thought were my strengths – the vibrant colour, the brutal clarity of line that comes from digital animations, the sort of depth I got by almost putting the foreground and the background together. If you're willing to impoverish, you can go on to something else.<sup>6</sup>

What Chan is describing here is a change in style – a new avoidance of bright colour and linear clarity – which he casts as a kind of progress. More strikingly, he presents both the change and the forward movement in terms of an 'impoverishment'. Chan shares something with Tintoretto, but it is not a conception of self or even a style so much as a *strategy*: 'If you're willing to impoverish, you can go on to something else.'

It is useful to evaluate Nichols's take on Tintoretto with Chan in mind not only because the comparison shows the extent to which Tintoretto's four-hundred-year-old concerns are still with us but also because Chan himself demonstrates a historical sensibility, having arrived at his interest in 'impoverishing' his video work in the course of studying Caravaggio. These artists' respective conjunctions of progressive art and impoverishment do not seem to point to a peculiarly modern idea, or even quite to an enduring Renaissance legacy. Rather, they represent iterations of or variations on a more broadly shared intuition.

Impoverishment themes are bound up with the very idea of the Renaissance. The letter from Giovambattista Adriani with which Vasari prefaced his 1568 edition of the *Lives* imagined a time 'when our citizens were rough and our commonwealth poor, where they had many images of those gods that they adored, made of terra cotta, and the vases used in the sacrifices made at those images were of clay. And we believe that the poverty and simplicity of those centuries pleased the Gods much more than the gold and silver that followed.'<sup>7</sup>

The association between antiquity and poverty here is twofold. To remodel the present on an ancient past was to abandon a more recent decadence. Yet it was also to return to an ancient idea, a classical trope.

Here is the ancient Roman historian Pliny, writing on the Greeks who preceded his own people:

It was with four colours only that Apelles, Echio, Melanthius, and Nicomachus, those most illustrious painters, executed their immortal works; melinum for the white, Attic sil for the yellow, Pontic sinopis for the red, and atramentum for the black; and yet a single picture of theirs has sold before now for the treasures of whole cities. But at the present day, when purple is employed even for colouring walls, and when India sends to us the slime of her rivers and the corrupt blood of her dragons and her elephants, there is no such thing as a picture of high quality produced. Everything, in fact, was superior at a time when the resources of art were so much fewer than they now are.<sup>8</sup>

If Adriani's evocation of an earlier moment of impoverishment underwrote a new modern aesthetic, it did so by repeating a Plinian scheme.

Jan Białostocki identified numerous examples of the medieval afterlife of this idea in his classic essay 'Ars auro prior'. He took his title phrase from a twelfth-century reformulation of what he considered to be an Ovidian *topos* – an important early text for Białostocki was Ovid's description of the Palace of the Sun at the beginning of Book 2 of the *Metamorphoses* – and he focused especially on the conviction numerous later theologians articulated that one could acknowledge and even expect material preciousness in a sacred object while also admiring a facture that was at odds with this. Thus he pointed to the rapture medieval viewers described experiencing when they stood in the presence of mosaics like those in Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio in Palermo, while also citing Abbot Suger to the effect that, before church decorations, 'the onlooker should wonder not at the expense and not at the gold, but at the workmanship, the "art"'.<sup>9</sup> By no later than the twelfth century, Białostocki believed, viewers had arrived at a twofold way of seeing, one that provided the basis for later outright rejections of material splendour.

For the post-medieval Italian tradition, the monument that served as the real touchstone for tensions of this sort was the Franciscan mother church at Assisi. Early modern artists would regularly look back to the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century frescoes there, or at least the idea they embodied: Nichols, for example, characterizes Tintoretto's San Rocco paintings at one point as an instance of 'Franciscan naturalism', and a painting of Saint Francis counts among Caravaggio's first religious works. As Donal Cooper and Janet Robson have recently underscored, here, too, we have documented responses to artistic patronage that make the question of luxury and poverty a central theme. Especially telling are the writings of Ubertino da Casale, an early fourteenth-century spokesman



11.2. Giotto, *Miracle of the Crucifix*, fresco, Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi

for a breakaway faction that condemned the laxity of conventual Franciscans and regarded their architecture and its decoration as a tell-tale sign of this. Members of the order, Ubertino reminded his readers, were supposed to live by a vow of poverty, yet the friars at Assisi not only accepted offerings from the laity but also used these to construct 'sumptuous, superfluous and richly decorated' buildings.<sup>10</sup>

Ubertino's target included the Upper Church, but do the murals there make or undermine his point? One (Figure 11.2) shows Francis praying in the decrepit church of San Damiano before a crucifix that spoke to him, saying 'Francis, go and restore my house, which is in danger of collapsing'.<sup>11</sup> Francis would subsequently set out to restore San Damiano itself, only then to realize that God in fact meant for him to repair the institution of the Church, not one of its buildings. Accenting the deteriorating fabric of a physical structure, the fresco foreshadows Francis's misconstruing of God's own instructions, and other paintings in the same cycle underscore the saint's ultimate, exemplary self-abnegation. Adjacent to the San Damiano scene is the episode in which Francis's father hauls him before the bishop and accuses him of giving away the family possessions; Francis, in response, hands his father the clothes off his back. In another image (Figure 11.3), Francis preaches before Honorius III, and the painter emphasizes the difference between Francis's simple habit and the fine textiles that cover every surface of the Pope's chamber. Are these frescoes to be taken as virtual tapestries, comparable in kind to those that cover the depicted room's walls, or does the fact that they in fact consist of nothing more than cheap paint make them more like Francis himself, clothed in coarse fabric as he delivers his message?<sup>12</sup>

In 1309, Pope Clement V had Bonagrazia of Bergamo and Raymond of Fronsac draft a reply to Ubertino's criticisms. Their tract took as its



11.3. Giotto, *Christ Preaching before Honorius III*, Upper Church, San Francesco, Assisi

point of departure an earlier bull by the Franciscan Pope Nicholas IV, one that explicitly directed the use of alms to ‘conserve, repair, build, modify, enlarge, furnish and decorate’ the Assisi basilica.<sup>13</sup> This reply, in turn, must form part of the background for the paintings added to the crossing of San Francesco a few years later. In one spandrel (Figure 11.4),



11.4. *Allegory of Poverty*, c. 1330, Lower Church, San Francesco, Assisi

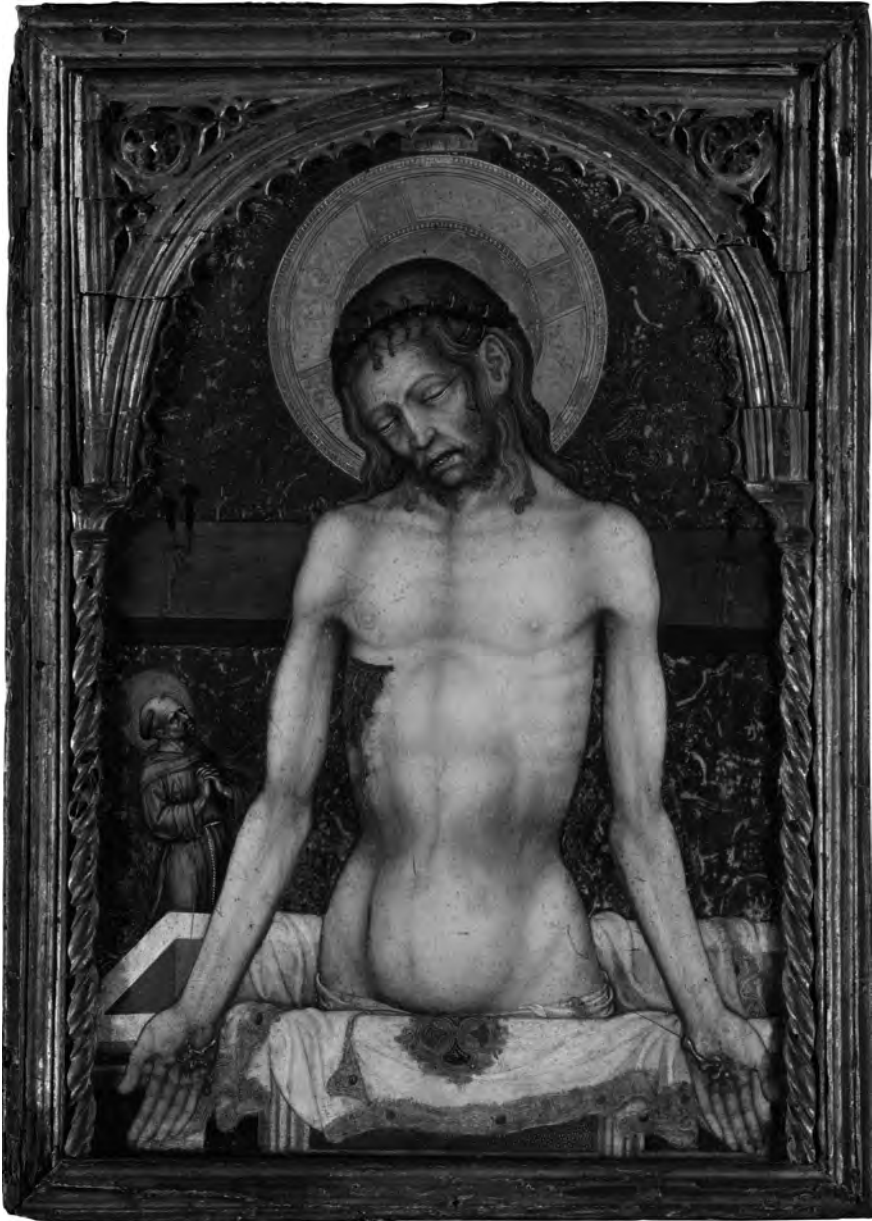
Christ officiates at a wedding between Saint Francis and a personification of Poverty, whose bridal gown is sewn from rags, and at whom children derisively throw rocks rather than rice. The fresco reasserts the fundamental commitments that Ubertino's Spiritualist followers had accused the order of forgetting, even while it flouts the central point these opponents made: by the standards of anything in the basilica dating to before 1310, this is a 'rich' thing, arraying its protagonists against a sky of gold. The painting, with its promotion of Franciscan poverty, would seem self-contradictory, even hypocritical, were it not for the acts that take place at its margins. At bottom left, a young man imitates one of Francis's own most celebrated deeds and gives his cloak to a beggar. Above, God receives a similar, perhaps identical, cloak in offering. Gestures to the poor, the painting suggests, are gestures to God. Yet more remarkable is the motif with which the angelic cloak-bearer is paired – the elevation of a complete church. The reference, in this case, must be to the basilica itself, or rather to its decoration; the painting, like others in the church, implies a connection between human dress and the art that covers church walls. But it also equates the prospect of impoverishing oneself to help the poor – giving away enough that one ends up in a Franciscan habit or in Poverty's rags – with that of *art patronage*, the sponsorship of churches and their decoration. Suddenly, the painting's expense looks like evidence of an especially generous

donation, the patron's possibility of imitating Francis in a way befitting his own station.

The early Franciscan paradigm provides terms that help make sense of a longer tradition. There is, to begin, the putative author of the hagiographic cycle in Assisi's Upper Church: Giotto. Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Commentaries* introduced an episode that would appear repeatedly in the later biographies when he wrote that Cimabue discovered the boy 'seated on the ground, drawing on the slab of rock'. He asked Giotto's father, 'who was very poor', to place the boy in his care, and Giotto then proceeded to lead a revolution against the 'Greek style' that Cimabue represented. What facilitated Giotto and his disciples as they 'brought about natural art' in Assisi and elsewhere was the fact that Giotto himself came from the humblest of origins, and learned to draw by using simple materials.<sup>14</sup> Vasari's later Giotto biography goes so far as to locate the painter's most ground-breaking displays of artfulness in his renderings of the poor: 'The foreshortenings, next, that are seen in another picture among a quantity of beggars that he portrayed, are very worthy of praise and should be held in great price among craftsmen, because from them there came the first beginning and method of making them, not to mention that it cannot be said that they are not passing good for early work.'<sup>15</sup>

Yet it was not just the condition of the painter that mattered for the heirs of the Assisi models but also the patronage debate. William Hood has noted that when Fra Angelico painted the *Annunciation* in one of the cloister cells at San Marco in Florence, he rendered the Virgin with the grey contour line and red wash modelling that artists typically used when preparing to apply lapis lazuli, then left the figure in this unclothed state. Hood goes on to note the absence of blue throughout the cells, 'a concession to the [Order's] rule of poverty'.<sup>16</sup> In this case, the site was an Observant Dominican rather than a Franciscan house, but the self-consciousness about avoiding luxuries in a mendicant context responds to scepticism in the vein of Ubertino da Casale's critiques. Or consider another Franciscan painting, Michele Giambono's c. 1430 *Man of Sorrows* in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 11.5). Behind the head of Christ is a large gold halo with punchwork and etched ornaments; both are positioned before a cross which stands against a backdrop decorated with gilding in a manner that evokes a costly tapestry, and the artist has used additional gold to render the embroidered cloth that appears to have fallen from Christ's body. The entire work has a splendour that contrasts pointedly with the diminutive figure of Saint Francis to the left: the hierarchy of scale corresponds to a hierarchy of materials. And yet the painting departs in subtle ways from the conventions of gold-ground panels. Artists conventionally used *pastiglia* (gesso relief)





11.5. Michele Giambono, *Man of Sorrows*, c. 1430, tempera and gold on panel, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

to produce virtual goldsmithery: Gentile da Fabriano's c. 1420 *Coronation* in the Getty Museum (Figure 11.6), for example, employs the technique for rendering the Virgin's crown, the brooch that closes her drapery, and Christ's gold belt. The *pastiglia* in Giambono's painting, by contrast, realizes



11.6. Gentile da Fabriano, *Coronation of the Virgin*, c. 1420, tempera and gold on panel, J. Paul Getty Museum

the blood that flows from Christ's wounds. This amplifies the Franciscan dimension of the *Pietà* form, since it is from the same wounds that the rays effecting Francis's stigmatization emerge. Yet historically considered, the picture exhibits a replacement, blood taking over for gold.

Paintings like this point to a fundamental question that the makers and patrons of Renaissance art confronted: should paintings of the

Virgin and Christ elevate them with regal splendour or humble them with saintly poverty? Surely such a dilemma was felt at the court of the single Franciscan Pope of the Quattrocento, Sixtus IV, who in summoning a group of Florentine masters to paint the Sistine Chapel brought something like the Assisi cycle to Rome itself. Its type–antitype pairs include, for example, one between the followers of Moses, who worship an idol cast from golden earrings, and the good Christians who listen to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, which begins, ‘blessed are the poor’. It also included a ceiling of ultramarine and gold.

Perhaps the most pointed confrontation with the Franciscan ideal in those years, however, is the bronze tomb Giovanni de’ Medici commissioned from Antonio Pollaiuolo to honour Sixtus after his death (Figure 11.7). The inscription at the foot of this announces Sixtus’s membership in the Franciscan order and also nods to the fact that Sixtus had asked to be buried in the floor rather than in a wall tomb, as a sign of humility.<sup>17</sup> Such a gesture was, by this point, a familiar one: Andrew Butterfield, picking up on an earlier argument by Julian Gardner, has noted that when early Renaissance cardinals rejected the option of a wall tomb in order to be buried in the floor, their wills typically specified that that tomb was to be *humile*, and more recently Ingo Herklotz has given us a history of the medieval tomb that turns on the opposition between the ‘sepulchre’ and the ‘monument’.<sup>18</sup> Yet the gesture to humility in this case must have seemed ironic, since the bronze tomb Giovanni ordered was more costly than many a wall monument. Surely he would have been familiar with conflicting sentiments like those of Maffeo Vegio, who asserted that the expense of Eugenius IV’s tomb greatly displeased the pope. The tension provides context for the remarkable additional inscription on Sixtus’s own monument, which insists that Cardinal Giovanni erected that moment ‘with more piety than expense’. As Alison Wright has observed, this formula ‘neatly draws attention to, rather than veils, the cardinal’s munificence in paying for it’.<sup>19</sup>

Do we take the phrase ‘MAIORE PIETATE QVAM IMPENSA F[ECIT]’ to mean that the patron’s piety exceeded even the tomb’s mammoth price, or does it deny that the work cost as much as it appears to? Giovanni must have known that such denials had a good Medici tradition. To follow Vasari, Cosimo I de’ Medici – Giovanni’s great grandfather – had mitigated the risky ostentation involved with building the grandest private palace in Florence by circulating the story that the patron had rejected a still more lavish proposal from Brunelleschi on grounds that it ‘was too sumptuous and magnificent, and more likely to stir up envy among his fellow citizens than to confer grandeur or adornment on the city’.<sup>20</sup> More relevant still is another work of bronze, Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes*, which Giovanni’s grandfather Piero had outfitted with the



11.7. Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Tomb of Sixtus IV*, 1484–93, bronze, St Peter's, Vatican

inscription, 'Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues; behold the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility.' However we read the words on the tomb, it demonstrates the cardinal's awareness that spending vast sums of money on art violated at least some viewers' sense of propriety, not all of them Franciscan.

An extensively gilded fresco in a Franciscan basilica could affirm the order's commitment to poverty; a large bronze tomb monument could insist that it was not, primarily, a display of wealth: in view of examples like these, how can we know 'arte povera' when we see it? Expenditure

was always relative; objects could be placed under competing labels. Repeatedly, an expectation of sumptuary restraint found itself with competition with the virtue of magnificence, such that patrons needed to identify paths towards impressive display that did not work in terms of cost alone. In his classic book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Michael Baxandall found in the contracts that Quattrocento patrons drew up with artists 'a lessening preoccupation with precious pigments'. '[A]s the conspicuous consumption of gold and ultramarine became less important in the contracts, its place was filled by references to an equally conspicuous consumption of something else – skill.'<sup>21</sup> Baxandall took this change in painting to be part of a 'general shift away from gilt splendour'; he associated it both with neo-Ciceronian humanism (returning us to the latter-day Roman appreciation of the Greek four-colour system), and with 'accessible sorts of Christian asceticism', of which the Franciscan example would certainly be one. Indeed, Hood writes of Fra Angelico that it was 'characteristic of him to have pushed his technique as a painter to the point at which his hand could compensate for the material wealth that would have been inappropriate for dormitory decoration, however sacred both the subject and its function.'<sup>22</sup> Yet Baxandall's own chief example was no longer a mendicant image: it was a Pinturicchio fresco in which landscape had become a newly prominent feature.

The disappearance of gold and ultramarine from the painter's palette, to follow Baxandall, did not mean that painting over the course of the century became any less costly. Rather, it meant that craftsmen became artists when patrons started paying them to. Looking forward rather than back, in fact, we might invert Baxandall's formulation and say that the emergence of the artist depended upon – that it first became visible through – a conspicuous cheapening of paint. It is not just Tintoretto's style but Renaissance artfulness as such that amounts to a sort of anti-materialism. What Baxandall observed happening with gold and ultramarine repeated itself across other media: in the same period, canvas replaced panel, and from the beginning artists like Mantegna would save costs by using size as a medium, eliminating the time-consuming step of preparing a gesso ground. Paper would replace parchment as the preferred drawing support, and the printing press would make the individual image less expensive still. The example of Michelangelo would help marble overtake the equally established but far more expensive material of bronze in prestige; stucco would soon thereafter begin taking the place of marble.<sup>23</sup>

Yet even this requires qualification. In a December 1523 letter, Michelangelo recorded a now famous response to the suggestion of Pope Julius II that the painter compose the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes

around a series of apostles: 'I said to the Pope that if I were to make the Apostles alone there, it would turn out to be a poor thing . . . for they, too, were poor.'<sup>24</sup> Reading the first part of the remark, it would be tempting to take its notion of the 'poor' as nothing more than a manner of speaking: Michelangelo essentially rejects the Pope's proposal for being insufficiently ambitious. But then the conclusion puts weight on the expression, elevating it to the level of a more serious metaphor. What is most remarkable, especially in the context of an amplification of the chapel built and named for a Franciscan pontiff, is the assertion that a decorative programme celebrating apostolic poverty was unworthy of the modern papacy.

Complicating things still further is the conversation between Michelangelo and the pope that Vasari reports (or imagines), one that seems to reverse this very sentiment. When Michelangelo had broken off work and had the scaffolding removed, Vasari writes, the painter:

desired to retouch some portions of the work *a secco*, as had been done by the older masters who had painted the stories on the walls; he would also gladly have added a little ultramarine to some of the draperies, and gilded other parts, to the end that the whole might have a richer and more striking effect. The Pope, too, hearing that these things were still wanting, and finding that all who beheld the Chapel praised it highly, would now fain have had the additions made, but as Michelangelo thought reconstructing the scaffold too long an affair, the pictures remained as they were, although the Pope, who often saw Michelangelo, would sometimes say, 'Let the Chapel be enriched with bright colours and gold; it looks poor.' When Michelangelo would reply familiarly, 'Holy Father, the men of those days did not adorn themselves with gold; those who are painted here less than any, for they were none too rich; besides which, they were holy men, and must have despised riches and ornaments.'<sup>25</sup>

It is an odd, contradictory, passage: can it really be that Michelangelo wished to add ultramarine to his work, then later simply found a way to justify the state in which it had been left? Just which 'none too rich' 'men of those days' did Vasari have in mind, when after all Michelangelo had rejected the proposal of painting humble apostles in favour of a Genesis sequence, surrounded by prophets, sibyls, and an elaborate genealogy? How is the celebration we hear from Vasari's Michelangelo of characters who 'despise riches' to be reconciled with the disdain his letter expresses toward poor pictures of poor people? In the end, it is tempting to conclude that Vasari himself did not know what to make of the ceiling, how to describe its richness in terms of the aesthetic of poverty that readers by 1568 expected.



11.8. Tintoretto, *Annunciation*, 1583–87, oil on canvas, Sala Inferiore, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice

Or perhaps it is art itself that could not quite resolve such conflicting demands. Vasari's Michelangelo conveys a double sense of art's potential: its depictions of poverty can signify holiness, but glorious art can just as well give a holy aura to magnificence. Tintoretto's patrons may have accepted his way of painting and appreciated his low prices, but they also placed his paintings in gilded frames. Nor are the paintings of the Scuola di San Rocco themselves always straightforward. Among the most derelict of Tintoretto's depicted spaces is the chamber in which the *Annunciation* takes place (Figure 11.8): everything is dingy, the chair at the edge of the room is broken, and the whole exterior of the building seems to have collapsed. Yet the depicted interior is also an obvious extension of the architecture of the Scuola itself, picking up both the marble floor and gilded, coffered ceiling. How is it that the Virgin could occupy such a house unless she was of the same privileged social class as Tintoretto's patrons? Perhaps the point is related to that in Giotto's depiction of San Damiano: the confraternity's reform mission includes the rebuilding of the Church. But it is also possible to read Tintoretto's setting as an intentional impoverishment, even a 'soiling', of the space it was meant to decorate. The painting might work against

the architecture here, much as Nichols proposed that the ideological orientation of Tintoretto's painting in general stood at odds with the classical ornamentation on the building's exterior. That would suggest that where there was a question of the painting's place between luxury and poverty, the interests of painter and patron might not stand in complete harmony.

Compare this to the situation of Tintoretto's contemporary Giambologna in Florence. While Tintoretto was painting in San Rocco, Giambologna was overseeing the execution of a chapel in San Marco – the same mendicant church for which Fra Angelico had worked – that broke all local codes of sumptuary restraint. At the ceremony inaugurating the space, in fact, Bishop Ugolino Martelli felt compelled to give a sermon justifying the expenditure, and the chapel's imagery itself takes up related arguments. The right-hand wall centres on a painting of the banker Saint Matthew relinquishing his worldly possessions so as to join Christ. The Latin inscription 'relictis omnibus secutus est eum' ('and leaving all things, he rose up and followed', Luke 5:27–28) equates the Apostolic mission with the abandonment of money and provides a point of identification for the chapel's banker-patrons. On the opposite wall, one patron's namesake, Edward, holds a church, echoing the Assisi mural by presenting the sponsorship of ecclesiastical settings as a saintly act.

What is most striking in this case, though, is not the chapel's representation of patronage but rather the difference between its excess and persona of the architect in charge. The Urbinate ambassador Simone Fortuna reported on visiting Giambologna while he was at work on San Marco, and finding that the Fleming was 'the best person you could ever meet, not greedy in the least, as his absolute pennilessness shows. Everything he does is in the pursuit of glory, and he has ambition in the extreme to match Michelangelo.'<sup>26</sup>

Here we have an artist who seems to associate the task of living up to Michelangelo – what he calls *ambizione* – with pennilessness. The idea that the pursuit of art might be at odds with the pursuit of money dates at least to Ghiberti, who began the autobiographical section of his *Commentaries* with the line: 'I, O most excellent reader, not having to obey money, dedicated myself to the study of art.'<sup>27</sup> Vasari opened his life of Perino del Vaga with the generalization that art is a gift, one that 'with no regard to abundance of riches, to high estate, or to nobility of blood, embraces, protects, and uplifts from the ground a child of poverty much more often than one wrapped in the ease of wealth.'<sup>28</sup> And Michelangelo himself – 'a rich man who lived like a pauper', to quote Wittkower – might have seemed to reinforce that very idea.<sup>29</sup> Leone Leoni's medal of around 1560 – made of lead rather than a



precious metal – showed the artist as a simple pilgrim, virtually a beggar.<sup>30</sup>

Giambologna's example differs from these precedents in the explicit dis-identification of the artist with the costly things he made. What we seem to have by the 1580s, in fact, is an artist who recognized the attraction of *arte povera* – he saw that the path to being Michelangelo involved the rejection of wealth – but who found himself in circumstances (employ as a court artist) that made such a path impossible. Could it even be the case that the patronage system in Italy, the expectation that the best artists would attach themselves to wealthy households, worked against a set of pictorial values that both the Franciscan tradition and the classical example of Apelles might otherwise have encouraged? Tintoretto notwithstanding, it is difficult to find close Italian parallels for the numerous northern European artists who both claimed to be impoverished and made pictures that in one way or another adhered to that image of self.

That situation, in fact, adds to the interest of an etching like Salvator Rosa's *The Genius of Salvator Rosa* from about 1662 (Figure 11.9). A variation on an earlier print by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (Figure 11.10) that itself responded to a series of etchings by Pietro Testa, Rosa's invention included an inscription that clarified his more distinctive point: 'sincere, free, equable painter and igniter, despiser of wealth and of death: this is my genius.' At the heart of the conceit is the by now familiar image of the poor artist. What is not conventional, though, is Rosa's sense that living up to this image meant rejecting the court system, and indeed commissioned works generally.<sup>31</sup> What his inscription replaced, in fact, was the dedication to the patron that earlier artists, Castiglione among them, had added to their own prints. Rosa wrote in a 1666 letter that he painted not to enrich himself, but for his own satisfaction.<sup>32</sup> As a matter of practice, Rosa put his economic fate in the hands of the print-buying public. And the image in this case – of a genius at odds with wealth, literally turning away from money – conformed to the medium, a cheap paper multiple that Rosa could undertake on his own initiative. *Arte povera* here has become more than just a style or a way of living; now it is a means of artistic freedom.

Rosa's etching, relative to Castiglione's, is also considerably less calligraphic. In rhetorical terms, it exemplifies a 'plain style', reminding us that the pursuit of an impoverished art could go beyond the question of materiality altogether.<sup>33</sup> In this respect, Rosa belongs not in the tradition of other printmakers, but of Caravaggio, who provided a model from his own day right up to that of Paul Chan for how to impoverish one's art. Caravaggio's early paintings rejected the landscapes and other displays of manual virtuosity that Baxandall found to have taken the



11.9. Salvator Rosa, *The Genius of Salvator Rosa*, c. 1662, engraving



11.10. Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, *The Genius of Castiglione*, c. 1645–47, engraving

place of precious materials, yet they also gave up on the rendering of nude bodies in complex postures that artists from Michelangelo to Tintoretto identified with 'art'. Over time, moreover, Caravaggio reduced his paintings in other ways as well, eliminating colour, restricting himself to a palette that consisted of little more than browns and a bit of red – as though he, like the child Giotto, were painting with dirt. To moderns, these decisions have sometimes made Caravaggio look like the first 'Realist' painter: if we find in 'neo-Realists' like Rossellini or De Sica a recycling of Caravaggio's subject matter, which contemporaries of all three took to consist of characters pulled in from the street, so might we see in Caravaggio the origins of the chiaroscuro effect that became so central to later cinema.<sup>34</sup> To become a Caravaggist, indeed, has often been to *amplify* Caravaggio's own poverty: when a French painter like Valentin 'corrected' Caravaggio's model by adding more characters, he darkened it, exaggerated its low-life elements. Yet, ironically, this gesture has only lent to Caravaggio's original simplicity. When Fréart de Chantelou first saw the *Fortune Teller* that arrived in Paris in 1662 (Figure 11.11), he reacted with a dismissal that has come to look like a compliment: this, he wrote, is 'a poor painting'.<sup>35</sup>



11.11. Michelangelo Merisi, called 'Caravaggio', *The Fortune Teller*, 1595, oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris

## Notes

My initial thinking on this topic owed much to my collaboration with Stephen Campbell on our book *Italian Renaissance Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011). Readers will find my discussions of Fra Angelico, Pollaiuolo, and Tintoretto take up themes we addressed there. Diane Bodart drew my attention to Giambono's use of *pastiglia*. I presented an earlier version of this chapter in 2010 at the University of St Andrews. I thank Fabio Barry and Alistair Rider for the invitation and for helpful comments.

- 1 Tom Nichols, *Tintoretto: Tradition and Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 38.
- 2 Nichols, *Tintoretto*, p. 200.
- 3 Nichols, *Tintoretto*, p. 202.
- 4 Nichols, *Tintoretto*, p. 210.
- 5 Nichols, *Tintoretto*, p. 214.
- 6 Calvin Tomkins, 'Shadow player: The provocations of Paul Chan', *The New Yorker*, 26 May 2008.
- 7 Giorgio Vasari, *Le opera di Giorgio Vasari*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence, G.C. Sansone, 1906), vol. 1, p. 54: quando i cittadini vi erano rozzi ed il commune povero, dove ebbero molte imagini di quelli Dei, che essi adoravano, di terra cotta; e ne' sacrificj appresso di loro furono in uso i vasi di terra. E molto piu si crede che piacesse alli Dei la semplicita e povera di quei secoli, che l'oro e l'argento e la pompa di coloro li quali poi vennero.'
- 8 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), p. 299.
- 9 Jan Białostocki, 'Ars auro prior', in *Aesthetics in 20th-Century Poland: Selected Essays* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1973), pp. 270–85, here p. 276.
- 10 Donal Cooper and Janet Robson, "'A great sumptuousness of paintings": Frescoes and Franciscan poverty at Assisi in 1288 and 1312', *The Burlington Magazine* 151 (2009), pp. 656–62, here p. 659.
- 11 Thomas of Celano, *St Francis of Assisi: First and Second Life of St Francis with Selections from The Treatise on the Miracles of Blessed Francis*, trans. Placid Hermann (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), p. 144.
- 12 For the importance of clothing as a metaphor in this period, see the excellent article by Philine Helas, 'The clothing of poverty and sanctity in legends, and their representations in Trecento and Quattrocento Italy', in Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert (eds), *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 245–87.
- 13 Cooper and Robson, 'A great sumptuousness of paintings', p. 659.
- 14 Lorenzo Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, ed. Lorenzo Bartoli (Florence: Giunti, 1998), pp. 83–4. (English trans.: Christie Knapp Fengler, 'Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Second Commentary*: The translation and interpretation of a fundamental Renaissance treatise on art' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1974), pp. 17–18.)
- 15 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (New York: Everyman's Library, 1996), vol. 1, p. 108; cf. Vasari, *Le opera*, vol. 1, p. 393.
- 16 William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 236. When, in the following decade, Paolo Uccello began painting frescoes in terra verde, he enacted a different kind of 'disrobing' of the painting, first in the Olivetan San Miniato al Monte, then in the Dominican S. Maria Novella. Later viewers regularly identified Uccello's reduction of pictorial means with his modernism.
- 17 Alison Wright, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers: The Arts of Florence and Rome* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 377.

- 18 Andrew Butterfield, 'Social structure and the typology of funerary monuments in early Renaissance Florence', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 26 (1994), pp. 47–67, esp. p. 58; Ingo Herklotz, 'Sepulchra' e 'monumenta' del medioevo: Studi sull'arte sepolcrale in Italia (Naples: Liguori, 2001), p. 337.
- 19 Wright, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers*, p. 373.
- 20 Vasari, *Lives*, vol. 1, p. 379.
- 21 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 15.
- 22 Hood, *Fra Angelico*, p. 236.
- 23 For a relevant example of this as a theme in Renaissance printmaking, see Madeleine Viljoen, 'Paper value: Marcantonio Raimondi's "Medaglie Contraffatte"', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 48 (2003), pp. 203–26. Cristina Acidini Luchinat has observed that the blue Andrea della Robbia began to achieve in his terracotta glazes would previously only have been obtainable 'solo con stesure pittoriche costose', the use of the rare pigments like lapis lazuli. The art that aligns with impoverishment is in this case an alchemical one. See 'Del blu in città', in Giancarlo Gentilini (ed.), *I Della Robbia e l'arte nuova della scultura invetriata* (Florence: Giunti, 1998), pp. 9–16.
- 24 Paula Barocchi and Giovanni Poggi (eds) *Il carteggio di Michelangelo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1973), vol. 3, pp. 8, 11: 'dissi al papa come facendovi gli Apostoli soli, mi pareva che riuscissi cosa povera . . . perché furon poveri anche loro.'
- 25 Vasari, *Lives*, vol. 2, p. 668.
- 26 Paola Barocchi and Giovanna Gaeta Bertelà (eds), *Collezionismo mediceo Cosimo I, Francesco I e il Cardinale Ferdinando* (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 1993), p. 181: 'Egli è poi la migliore personcina che si possa trovar mai, non punto avaro, come dimostra l'esser egli poverissimo e in tutto e per tutto volto alla gloria, avendo una ambizione estrema d'arrivare Michelangelo et a molti giudiziosi par già che l'abbi arrivato e vivendo sii per avanzarlo e tale opinione ha il Gran Duca ancora.'
- 27 Ghiberti, *Commentarii*, p. 92: 'Et io, o excellentissimo, non ò a ubbidire la pecunia, diedi lo studio per l'arte.'
- 28 Vasari, *Lives*, vol. 2, p. 152; cf. Vasari, *Le opere*, vol. 5, p. 587.
- 29 Rudolf and Margaret Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn* (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 263.
- 30 For the Leoni medal, see the discussion in Andreas Schumacher, 'Leone Leonis Michelangelo-Medaille: Porträt und Glaubensbekenntnis des alten Buonarroti', in Georg Satzinger (ed.), *Die Renaissance-Medaille in Italien und Deutschland* (Münster: Rhema, 2004), pp. 169–94; also Tom Nichols, *The Art of Poverty: Irony and Ideal in Sixteenth-Century Beggar Imagery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 242.
- 31 This aspect of Rosa's career – though not its relevance to the *Genius* etching – had already been noted by Francis Haskell, *Painters and Patrons: A Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 15.
- 32 Haskell, *Painters and Patrons*, p. 22, note 1: 'io non dipingo per arricchire mà solamente per propria sodisfazione.'
- 33 See the still fundamental discussion in Marc Fumaroli, *L'Âge d'éloquence* (Geneva: Droz, 1980).
- 34 One provocative take on the themes of this essay as it bears on Rossellini and De Sica is André Bazin's. See, for example, 'An aesthetic of reality: Cinematic realism and the Italian school of the liberation', in *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1971), esp. p. 29 (on the realism that resulted

- from the technical limitations Italian directors faced) and p. 31 (on what he terms 'modal poverty').
- 35 Paul Fréart de Chantelou, *Diary of the Cavaliere Bernini's Visit to France*, ed. Anthony Blunt, trans. Margery Corbett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 239: 'I afterwards discussed with him the pictures that Prince Pamphili had sent to the King. I said that they were all mediocre, the one by Albani being among his least successful pictures; the landscapes by Carracci are remarkable only for the freedom with which they are painted; they lack nobility; the *Gypsy* by Caravaggio is a poor work, lacking originality or spirit.' Cf. Chantelou, *Journal de voyage du cavalier Bernin en France*, ed. Milovan Stanic (Paris: Macula, 2001), p. 212: 'J'ai parlé, après, de ces tableaux que le prince Pamphili a envoyé au roi . . . la *Cingara* du Caravage un pauvre tableau, sans esprit ni invention.'