

## LEONARDO ON THE *PARAGONE*

*The so-called Treatise on Painting by Leonardo is a collection of some of the painter's notes, transcribed and somewhat roughly arranged around the middle of the century by an unknown copyist. It consists largely of texts which can still be checked on Leonardo's original manuscripts. The manuscript of this treatise (Cod. Urbinas Latinus 1270, Vatican) was published only much later, and first in an abridged version, but even before publication it was widely known.*

### Fragments from the Treatise on Painting

*51. Difference between painting and sculpture.* I do not find any difference between painting and sculpture except that the sculptor pursues his work with greater physical fatigue than the painter, and the painter pursues his work with greater mental fatigue. This is proved to be true, for the sculptor in producing his work does so by the force of his arm, striking the marble or other stone to remove the covering beyond the figure enclosed within it. This is a most mechanical exercise accompanied many times with a great deal of sweat, which combines with dust and turns into mud. The sculptor's face is covered with paste and all powdered with marble dust, so that he looks like a baker, and he is covered with minute chips, so that he looks as though he had been out in the snow. His house is dirty and filled with chips and dust of stones. In speaking of excellent painters and sculptors we may say that just the opposite happens to the painter, since the well-dressed painter sits at great ease in front of his work, and moves a very light brush, which bears attractive colors, and he is adorned with such garments as he pleases. His dwelling is full of fine paintings and is clean and often filled with music, or the sound of different beautiful works being read, which are often heard with great pleasure, unmixed with the pounding of hammers or other noises.

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The sculptor says that if he takes off too much of the outer portion of his material, he cannot add to it later as can the painter. The reply to this is that if his art were perfect, through knowledge of the measurements, he would have removed just enough and not too much of the covering material. Excessive removal of material arises from his ignorance, which makes him remove more or less than he should.

But I am not really speaking of such as these, for they are not masters but wasters of marble. Masters do not depend on the judgment of the eye, because it is deceptive, as is proved when one wishes to divide a line into two equal parts by means of the judgment of the eye, and there experience shows it often to be deceptive. Because of this uncertainty good judges always fear what the ignorant do not, and therefore they are continually guided by knowledge of the measurement of each dimension, length, and breadth of the limbs, and when they do thus, they do not remove more than they should.

The painter has ten different subjects to consider in carrying his work to completion: light, shadow, color, volume, outline, location, distance, nearness, motion, and rest. The sculptor has to consider only volume, outline, location, motion, and rest. He does not need to be concerned about darkness or light, because nature itself creates these for his sculpture, and about color there is no concern at all. He concerns himself moderately about distance and nearness. He employs linear perspective but not that of color, although at different distances from the eye, color, and clarity in the contours and forms of figures vary.

Therefore sculpture has fewer matters to consider and consequently is less fatiguing to the mind than is painting.

### A Comparison of Painting and Sculpture

*54. The difference between painting and sculpture.* The first marvel that appears in painting is that it appears to be detached from the wall or other flat surface, and deceives those of subtle judgment as it is really not separated from the surface of the wall. In comparison with this the sculptor creates his

works so that they appear as they are. And this is the reason that the painter needs to understand the shadows that go with lights. The sculptor does not need this knowledge, because nature aids his works, as it does all other objects which are all of the same color when the light is gone, and . . . when the light is returned, they are of different colors, bright and dark.

The painter's second task is to evaluate with care the true qualities and quantities of shadows and lights. Nature provides these for the sculptor's work.

The third thing is perspective, which is the most subtle discovery in mathematical studies, for by means of lines it causes to appear distant that which is near, and large that which is small. Sculpture is aided by nature in this case, which accomplishes its end without any artifice of the sculptor.

55. *Comparison of painting and sculpture.* Painting is a matter of greater mental analysis, of greater skill, and more marvelous than sculpture, since necessity compels the mind of the painter to transform itself into the very mind of nature, to become an interpreter between nature and art. Painting justifies by reference to nature the reasons of the pictures which follow its laws: in what ways the images of objects before the eye come together in the pupil of the eye; which, among objects equal in size, looks larger to the eye; which, among equal colors will look more or less dark or more or less bright; which, among things at the same depth, looks more or less low; which, among those objects placed at equal height, will look more or less high, and why, among objects placed at various distances, one will appear less clear than the other.

This art comprises and includes within itself all visible things such as colors and their diminution which the poverty of sculpture cannot include. Painting represents transparent objects but the sculptor will show you the shapes of natural objects without artifice. The painter will show you things at different distances with variation of color due to the air lying between the objects and the eye; he shows you mists through which visual images penetrate with difficulty; he shows you rain which discloses behind it clouds with mountains and valleys; he shows the dust which discloses within it and beyond it the combatants who stirred it up; he shows streams of greater or lesser density; he shows fish playing between the surface of the water and its bottom; he shows the polished pebbles of various colors lying on the washed sand at the bottom of rivers, surrounded by green plants; he shows the stars at various heights above us, and thus he achieves innumerable effects which sculpture cannot attain.

The sculptor says that bas-relief is a kind of painting. This may be accepted in part, insofar as design is concerned, because it shares in perspective. But with regard to shadows and lights, it is false. The lighting of bas-relief would be false both in sculpture and in painting, because the shadows of bas-relief are of the same nature as those of the full relief, as seen in the shadows of foreshortenings, which do not occur in the shading of painting and sculpture. This art is a mixture of painting and sculpture.

56. *The painter and the sculptor.* The sculptor says that his art is more worthy than painting, because his work is more enduring, for it has less to fear from humidity, as well as fire, heat, and cold, than does painting.

The reply is that this does not make the sculptor more worthy, because this permanence comes from the material and not from the artist. The same kind of permanence can also be found in painting when it is done in enamel on metals, or terracottas, which are fired in a furnace and then polished with various instruments that give a smooth and lustrous surface. These can be seen in several places in France and Italy, and most of all in Florence among the della Robbia family, who have discovered a way to carry out every kind of great work in painting on terracotta covered with glaze. It is true that this sort of painting is subject to knocks and breaks, as is also sculpture in marble, but not to destruction . . . as are figures in bronze. With regard to durability it is equal to sculpture and surpasses it with regard to beauty, since in it are combined the two perspectives, but in sculpture in the round there is no perspective except that found in nature.

But bas-relief requires incomparably greater thought than that which is wholly in relief and somewhat approaches painting in concept, because it is indebted to perspective. Work wholly in relief is not troubled at all about the problem, because it employs the simple measures that it finds in life, and therefore the painter learns sculpture more quickly than the sculptor does painting.

But to return to the claim of what is called bas-relief, I say that it requires less physical fatigue than work wholly in relief, but far more study, since it requires consideration of the proportion of the distances which lie between the first and the second planes of bodies and those from the second to the third and so forth in succession. If these are being considered by you, master in perspective, you will find no bas-relief which is not full of errors, with regard to the greater or lesser relief required by the parts of the body, in relation to their distance from or proximity to the eye. There is never any error in total relief because nature helps the sculptor, and therefore he who works in total relief is freed of this great difficulty.

There exists a basic enemy of the sculptor who works in the round as well as in bas-relief. His works are worth little if the light in which they are seen is not adjusted so that it is similar to that of the place in which it was made. If the light is from below, the works will appear distorted, and this will be so most of all in bas-relief, because of shadows cast in a direction opposite to that intended, almost eliminating recognition of the work. This cannot happen to the painter who, after having placed the limbs of his figures properly, turns to two functions of nature which are very great, which are the two perspectives, and also to the third great factor which is the brightness and darkness in shadows and lights, of which the sculptor is ignorant and in which he is aided by nature in the way in which it aids other visible things, natural as well as artificial.

#### **EXCERPTS FROM BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE'S *THE COURTIER***

*The Courtier, the main work of Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), a famous man of letters and a diplomat, was published in 1527, but it had circulated previously in manuscript for several years; it soon gained an immense authority throughout cultured Europe, and the few pages on art it contains were crucial for fashionable aesthetics in 16th century. In particular, it established the main points of the ritual disputation on the paragone, and once and for all it secured a place for the plastic arts among occupations proper for a gentleman.*

Then said the Count: before we enter into this matter, I will talk of another thing, which for that it is of importance (in my judgement) I believe our Courtier ought in no wise to leave it out. And that is the cunning in drawing, and the knowledge in the very art of painting.

And wonder not if I wish this feat in him, which now days perhaps is counted an handicraft and full little to become a gentleman, for I remember I have read that the men of old time, and especially in all Greece, would have gentlemen's children in the schools to study painting, as a matter both honest and necessary. And this was received in the first degree of liberal arts, afterward openly enacted not to be taught to servants and bondmen.

Among the Romans in like manner it was in very great reputation, and thereof sprung the surname of the most noble family of Fabii, for the first Fabius was surnamed Pictor, because in deed he was a most excellent Painter, and so addicted to painting, that after he had painted the walls of the temple of Health, he wrote therein his name, thinking with him self, that for all he was borne in so noble a family, which was honored with so many titles of Consulships and triumphs, and other dignities, and was learned and well seen in the law, and reckoned among orators, to give also an increase of brightness, and an ornament unto his renown, by leaving behind him a memory that he had been a Painter.

There have not in like manner wanted many other of notable families that have been renowned in this art, of the which (beside that in it self it is most noble and worthy) there ensue many commodities, and especially in war, to draw out Countries, Platforms, Rivers, Bridges,

Castles, Holds, Fortresses, and such other matters, the which though a man were able to keep in mind (and that is a hard matter to do) yet can he not show them to others.

And in very deed who so esteems not this art, is (to my seeming) far wide from all reasons for so much as the ensigne of the world that we behold with a large sky, so bright with shining stars, and in the midst, the earth, environed with the seas, severed in parts with hills, dales, and rivers, and so decked with such divers trees, beautiful flowers and herbs, a man may say it to be a noble and great painting, drawn with the hand of nature and of God: the which who can represent in mine opinion he is worthy much commendation. Neither can a man attain to this, without the knowledge of many things as he well knows that try it.

Therefore had they of old time in very great estimation, both the arte and the artificers, so that it came to the top of all excellences.

And of this may a man gather a sufficient argument at the ancient Images of Marble and metal, which at this day are to be seen. And thought painting be a diverse matter from sculpture, yet do they both arise of one self fountain (namely) of a good design.

And even as the statues are divine and excellent, so it is to be thought paintings were also, and so much the more, for that they contain in them a greater workmanship.

Then the Lady Emilia turning her unto John Christopher Romano, that sat there among the rest, how think you (quoth she) to this judgement, will you grant that painting contains in it a greater workmanship, than sculpture?

John Christopher answered: in my mind sculpture is of more travail, of more art, and of more dignity than painting.

Then said the Count, Because statues are more durable, perhaps a man may say that they are of a more dignity. For since they are made for a memory, they better satisfy the effect why they be made, than painting.

But beside memory, both painting and sculpture are made also as ornaments and in this point hath painting a great deal the upper hand, the which though it be not so long lasting (to term it so) as sculpture is, yet doth it for all that endure a long time, and for the while it lasts, is much more sightly.

Then answered John Christopher: I believe verily you think not as you speak, and all this do you for your Raphaele's sake.

And peradventure too, you judge the excellency you know to be in him in painting, to be of such perfection, that carving in Marble can not come to that degree. But weigh with your self, that this is the praise of the artificer, and not of the art.

Then he proceeded: and I judge also both the one and the other, to be an artificial imitation of nature. But yet I know not how you can say, that the truth and property that nature makes, can not be imitated better in a figure of Marble or Metal, wherein the members are all round proportioned and measured as nature her self shapes them, than in a panel, where men perceive nothing but the outward sight, and those colors that deceive the eyes: and say not to me, that being, is not nigher unto the truth than seeming.

Again, I judge carving in Marble much harder, because if you make a fault, it can not be amended again, for marble can not be joined together, but you must be driven to make a new Image.

The which happens not in painting, for a man may alter, put to, and diminish, always making it better.

The Count said laughing: I speak not for Raphaele's sake, neither ought you to think me so ignorant a person, but I understand the excellence of Michaelangelo, of you your self, and of other men in carving of Marble, but I speak of the art and not of the Artificers.

And you say well, that both the one and the other is imitation of nature. But for all that, it is not so, that painting appears and sculpture is: for although statues are all round like the lively model, and painting is only seen in flat surface, yet want there many things in statues that want not in paintings, and especially lights and shadows, for flesh gives one light, and Marble another, and that does the

Painter naturally follow with clear and dark, more and less, as he sees occasion, which the graver in marble can not do.

And when the Painter makes not his figure round he makes the muscles and members in round wise, so that they go to meet with the parts not seen, after such a manner, that a man may very well gather the Painter has also a knowledge in them, and understands them.

And in this point he must have another craft that is greater to frame those members, that they may seem short, and diminish according to the proportion of the sight by the way of prospective, which by force of measured lines, colors, lights, and shadows, discover unto you also in the outward sight of an upright wall the plainness and fairness, more and less as pleases him.

Think you it again a trifling matter to counterfeit natural colors, flesh, cloth, and all other colored things.

This can not now the graver in marble do, nor yet express the grace of the sight that is in the black eyes, or in azure with the shining of those amorous beams.

He can not show the color of yellow hair, nor the glistening of armor, nor a dark night, nor a sea tempest, nor those twinklings and sparks, nor the burning of a City, nor the rising of the morning in the color of Roses, with those beams of purple and gold. Finally he can not show the sky, the sea, the earth, hills, woods, meadows, gardens, rivers, Cities, nor houses, which the Painter does all.

For this respect (I think) painting is more noble, and contains in it a greater workmanship than graving in Marble. And among them of old time, I believe it was in as high estimation as other things, the which also is to be discerned by certain little remnants that are to be seen yet, especially in places under ground in Rome.

But much more evidently may a man gather it by old writings, wherein is so famous and so often mention both of the work and workmen, that by them a man may understand in what high reputation they have been always with Princes and common weales.

Therefore it is read, that Alexander loved highly Apelles of Ephesus, and so much, that after he had made him draw out a woman of his naked, whom he loved most dearly, and understanding that this good Painter, for her marvelous beauty was most fervently in love with her, without any more ado, he bestowed her upon him. Truly a worthy liberality of Alexander, not to give only treasure and states, but also his own affections and desire, and a token of very great love toward Apelles, not regarding (to please him withall) the displeasure of the woman that he highly loved, who it is to be thought was sore aggrieved to change so great a king for a painter.

There be many other signs rehearsed also of Alexanders good will towards Apelles, but he showed plainly in what estimation he had him, when he commanded by open Proclamation no other Painter should he so hardy to draw out his picture.

Here could I repeat unto you the contentions of many noble Painters, with the greatest commendation and marvel (in a manner) in the world.

I could tell you with what solemnity the Emperors of old time decked out their triumphs with paintings, and dedicated them up in public places, and how dear it cost them, and that there were some painters that gave their works freely, seeming unto them no gold nor silver was enough to value them: And how a panel of Protogenes was of such estimation, that Demetrius lying encamped before Rhodes, where he might have entered the City by setting fire to the place, where he wist this panel was, for fear of burning it, stayed to bid them battle, and so he won not the City at all.

And how Metrodorus a Philosopher and a most excellent Painter, was send out of Athens to Lucius Paulus, to bring up his children, and to deck out his triumph he had to make.

And also many noble writers have written of this art, which is a token great enough to declare in what estimation it has been. But I will not we proceed any farther in this communication.

Therefore it suffices only to say that our Courtier ought also to have a knowledge in painting, since it was honest and profitable, and much set by in those days when men were of more prowess than they are now. And though he never get other profit or delight in it (beside it is a help to him to judge of the

excellency of statues both old and new, of vessels, buildings, old coins, cameos, gravings, and such other matters) it makes him also understand the beauty of lively bodies, and not only in the sweetness of the Physiognomy, but in the proportion of all the rest, as well in men as other living creatures.