
Leonardo da Vinci in a Tale by Matteo Bandello

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In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder gives a brief and seemingly factual account of the life and works of the fourth century B. C. Greek artist, Apelles of Cos. Pliny says unequivocally that Apelles “surpassed all painters who were born before him and all who were to come after.”^[1] Even though none of his works survived into the modern period, from the fourteenth century onward, poets and scholars continued to admire Apelles, or more precisely his legend, and by the end of the fifteenth century the rebirth of Apelles as a literary image was virtually complete.^[2] He had become the stereotypical ancient painter, and both the events of his life and the structure of their presentation had a profound influence on the ways in which Renaissance authors perceived artists and their lives. In other words, Renaissance writers so shaped or framed the biographical material of certain contemporary artists that they became embodiments or at least reflections of Apelles. The effect of the literary image of Apelles on the writing of an artist’s life is nowhere better illustrated than in the most famous tale in Matteo Bandello’s collection of stories called *Novelle* (1:58).^[3]

The fame of Bandello’s novella is due to its dedication, which is addressed to Ginevra Gonzaga Rangone. There the author describes Leonardo da Vinci’s working habits as he painted his Last Supper in the refectory of the monastery attached to the church of Sta. Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Surprisingly, however, the remainder of the dedication, in which Bandello tells an anecdote about Leonardo and one Cardinal Gurcense the Elder, has been largely overlooked.^[4] Even the novella proper, which is narrated by Leonardo, has received relatively little attention.^[5]

In the introduction to his story, Bandello speaks of certain unnamed gentlemen who liked to gather in the refectory as Leonardo was working on his painting. The artist welcomed the presence of the visitors, Bandello says, because he believed that everyone who saw his paintings should freely speak his opinion of them. Apparently Bandello, a Dominican friar who as a young boy

lived in the monastery at Sta. Maria delle Grazie, had heard Leonardo express such a belief. If, as Bandello claims, Leonardo in fact welcomed the opinions of others concerning his painting, he would have been following the example of Apelles, who, according to Pliny (*Natural History*, 35.85), also invited criticism of his works. Pliny says that Apelles regarded the public as a more accurate critic than he was. Consequently, when he had finished a picture, he would put it out in the open for passersby to see and would then hide behind the painting. From that vantage point he was able to overhear anyone who might find fault with his work and correct his mistake.^[6]

After explaining Leonardo's attitude toward critical comments on his work, Bandello goes on to describe other examples of the artist's remarkable behavior. The painter would often arrive at the refectory early in the morning and, mounting the scaffolding, would work from sunrise to sunset without pausing for food or drink. At other times, he would not touch his picture with his brush for days on end. Rather, he would spend only an hour or two each day in contemplation of the work, silently judging it. On still other occasions, Leonardo would abruptly leave the Corte Vecchia, where he was working on the clay model for the equestrian statue of Lodovico's deceased father, Francesco Sforza, and go to Sta. Maria delle Grazie, where he would add one or two strokes to his picture. Then he suddenly would go elsewhere.

Bandello's description of Leonardo's actions has the ring of historical truth, for it echoes advice recorded in the artist's notebooks. For instance, he warns painters about working on their pictures for long stretches of time with no diversion. Directly addressing the artist, he advises the following: you should "get up [from your painting] and take a little recreation elsewhere, because when you return to your work your judgement will be improved;" and adds, "If you stay doggedly at your work you will greatly deceive yourself."^[7]

Bandello next tells us that once while the Cardinal Guercense was staying in the monastery at Sta. Maria delle Grazie, he paid a visit to the refectory. On the cardinal's arrival, Leonardo reverently greeted him, and the prelate was very warm and attentive to the artist. The people who gathered to contemplate Leonardo's picture began to speak about the excellence of the art of painting. Some wished that they were able to see examples of

ancient works, so that they could discover if modern masters are the equals of their illustrious predecessors. Hearing the conversation, the cardinal asked Leonardo about the salary he received from Duke Lodovico. Leonardo replied that he was paid two thousand ducats, plus the gifts that the duke daily bestowed on him. To the cardinal, Leonardo's answer seemed "a great matter," and he left the refectory to return to his rooms.

Bandello does not explain the reason for the cardinal's question or for his abrupt departure. Apparently, the cardinal believed that modern painters are not as good as their ancient counterparts. He seems not to have been convinced by the conversation about the excellence of the art of painting, and he seems to have felt that Leonardo was paid too much for his work. Anyway, that is how Leonardo interpreted the cardinal's actions for he began to address those present with the intention of demonstrating "that good painters have always been honored." Bandello ends the dedication to his novella with the claim that he was present when Leonardo spoke. He remembered Leonardo's words and later, when he began to compose his book, the *Novelle*, he wrote them down.

At the beginning of the novella proper, Leonardo, addressing the company assembled before his painting, calls attention to the just-departed cardinal's astonishment at the liberal salary that Lodovico Sforza gives him. He says, too, that he is amazed at the cardinal's ignorance ("*ignoranza*"), because he seems not to have studied the works of good authors, who have written about the honor and reverence bestowed upon artists. Using Apelles and Fra Filippo Lippi as examples, Leonardo goes on to illustrate the great esteem in which ancient and modern artists have been held. He begins by recounting an anecdote about Apelles, who was greatly admired by Alexander the Great. Indeed, Leonardo says, Alexander was so familiar with Apelles that he often visited the artist's "*bottega*" to watch him paint. Once when Alexander was in Apelles's studio arguing with certain gentlemen about the art of painting, he made many uninformed observations in that regard ("*dicendo molte cose indottamente*"). Apelles very civilly corrected Alexander, saying, "Be silent and do not speak such folly, for you make the boys who mix the colors laugh." Leonardo also points to Apelles's great authority with Alexander, an authority that is all the more astonishing because the general was "proud, spiteful and

irritable beyond measure.” As further proof of the Alexander’s high regard for the painter, Leonardo explains that he publicly declared that no one but Apelles was to paint his portrait.

Leonardo’s account of Apelles and Alexander, which comes directly and with little variation from the pages of Pliny’s *Natural History* 35. 85-86, implies a parallel. The relation between Leonardo and the cardinal is similar to that between Apelles and Alexander. The cardinal and the general each visit the respective artists in their workplace, and each speaks in a manner that displays his lack of knowledge and understanding, but in different ways. Alexander did not understand the art of painting, while the cardinal is ignorant of the value of art and artists. Such ignorance, however, implies a lack of knowledge about and appreciation of art. Leonardo goes on to recount another story from Pliny -- the one about Apelles and Alexander’s beautiful mistress, Campaspe (*Natural History* 35.86-87). Alexander once asked Apelles to paint Campaspe’s portrait. When the artist saw the naked and beautiful body of his subject, he fell passionately in love with her. Alexander, noticing how Apelles felt, gave Campaspe to the artist as a gift. In this instance, Leonardo says, Alexander surpassed himself and showed himself no less worthy than if he had won a great victory. He was so great of soul that he was able to overcome his own desires and to bestow upon Apelles the body of his beloved without regard for Campaspe, who, from the consort of a king, became the mistress of a painter.

From Apelles, the ancient artist, Leonardo turns to Filippo Lippi, the modern painter. Filippo’s father, Leonardo explains, was Tommaso Lippi, who died while his son was just a boy. Subsequently, Filippo’s mother placed him in the monastery of the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence. Filippo, forsaking his studies, began to paint on walls and scrolls, and his talent was recognized by the prior of the monastery who allowed him to apply himself to the art of painting. Filippo greatly admired Masaccio’s frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine and would spend the entire day drawing from them. As his proficiency and fame increased, Filippo grew tired of his monkish way of life and left the monastery, even though he had been ordained a deacon.

Filippo, Leonardo continues, was a very libidinous man and an ardent lover of women. If he saw a woman he liked, he would

drop everything, including work on a painting, until he had her.^[8] Once Filippo was painting a picture that Cosimo de' Medici planned to give to Pope Eugene IV. When Cosimo noticed Filippo's frequent absences, he had the artist locked in a room. After three days, Filippo tied some sheets together and escaped out a window. Soon Cosimo discovered what had happened and agreed to let Filippo paint when he wished, saying that rare and sublime talents like his are "celestial beings [*forme celestiali*] and not asses for hire."

Here Leonardo seems to indirectly respond to the insensitive cardinal who caused him to speak out in defense of painting, but also to the broader issue concerning the social position of the artist. He implies that Filippo was more than simply a craftsman for hire. Rather, he was an artist with a divine gift that could not be forced into service. Likewise, he (Leonardo) is not, as the cardinal seems to have believed, a mere ass for hire; rather he is a "celestial being," well deserving of his patron's admiration and generosity.

In order to show that even barbarians honor excellence, Leonardo tells the story of Filippo's enslavement. When the painter and some of his friends were in a boat in the waters near Ancona, they were captured by Moorish pirates led by a certain Abdul Maumen. Filippo and the others were taken into Barbary where they lived in misery as oarsmen for over eighteen months. One day, when the weather was bad and the ships could not go out, Filippo was put to work in a garden. All of a sudden he grabbed a piece of charcoal and began drawing a portrait of his captor, Abdul Maumen, on a white wall. The drawing was so well made that the portrait seemed alive. Everyone was astonished, Leonardo says, because drawing and painting were not practiced in that part of the world. As a result Filippo and his companions were freed from their chains. After Filippo had made several paintings in color for Abdul Maumen, the Moor was very pleased and out of respect for his art, gave Filippo many gifts and allowed him and his friends to return to Italy. Leonardo closes his brief account of Filippo's life by referring again to one of his lovers, Lucrezia Buti. She bore Filippo an illegitimate child named Filippino Lippi, who eventually became an excellent painter in his own right. Lastly, Leonardo mentions Pope Eugene's great admiration for Filippo and for the many paintings the artist

had made for rum. The pope was even willing to release Filippo from his vows as a deacon so that he could marry Lucrezia, but because the artist loved liberty too much, he wished to avoid “the matrimonial bond” and refused the offer. As Leonardo’s narrative implies, this is yet another attempt to restrain Filippo, but once again the artist asserts his love of liberty and avoids confinement. Here the novella ends.

The significance of Leonardo’s monologue about Apelles and Fra Filippo Lippi is complex. He not only demonstrates his verbal eloquence and powers of persuasion, he also proves that both ancient and modern artists had been honored and revered by powerful people—Apelles by Alexander, and Filippo by Cosimo de’ Medici, Pope Eugene and Abdul Maumen. In so doing, Leonardo not only justifies Lodovico Sforza’s liberality toward him, he also exposes the ignorance both of the cardinal and, by implication, of anyone who might hold an opinion about art and artists similar to his.

Still, Filippo’s similarity to Apelles goes far deeper than the mere fact that they both had powerful patrons. Just as the story of Apelles and Alexander the Great mirrors Leonardo’s encounter with the Cardinal Guercense, so, too, does the Greek artist’s passionate desire for Campaspe reflect Filippo’s far less temperate lust for women in general, and for Lucrezia Buti in particular. In short, Filippo’s character reflects that of Apelles in as much as both artists are lovers.

Bandello’s account of the circumstances of Filippo’s release from slavery also parallels an event from Apelles’s life, namely the one told by Pliny (*Natural History*, 35.89) about the painter and the Egyptian king, Ptolemy I. While Apelles was in the service of Alexander the Great, he had a falling out with the king. Once, by a stroke of bad luck, he happened to be on board a ship which a storm forced to land at Alexandria. There, prompted by Apelles’s rivals, Ptolemy’s court fool played a trick on the painter. He falsely invited the artist to dine with the king. Apelles accepted the invitation and arrived at the appointed hour. When Ptolemy saw the artist, he became indignant because he thought Apelles was not invited. The king then lined up the servants who were responsible for delivering his invitations and asked Apelles to identify the one who had summoned him. The painter suddenly picked up a piece of charcoal and drew the trickster’s likeness on

the wall. Ptolemy recognized the fool's face even before Apelles had finished his drawing.

Like Apelles, Filippo is the victim of untoward events that begin at sea. More importantly, he, like his predecessor, escapes danger by employing one of his skills as an artist. Each artist also demonstrates his presence of mind or wit. Clearly perceiving the circumstances in which they find themselves, each artist acts spontaneously to free himself from the situation. With little or no deliberation, each draws a lifelike portrait.

More than any of Leonardo's contemporaries, Bandello presents the artist in a way that makes his relation to the image of Apelles both transparent and profound. Like Apelles, Leonardo sought opinions of his works from his contemporaries; he appropriately responded to a powerful person who did not understand the worthiness of painters; and he practiced his art in an unusual and noteworthy manner. Because of his libidinous nature Filippo Lippi was also like Apelles, and like the ancient painter he extracted himself from a dangerous situation by spontaneously drawing a lifelike portrait. Ultimately, Bandello shows us that no matter how different painters such as Leonardo and Filippo Lippi might be, there is a deep similarity between them as artists; each is a type of Apelles.

Notes

[1.](#) Throughout I refer to and quote from the elder Pliny, *Natural History*, tr. Rackham, 9: 318 – 333.

[2.](#) Cast points out that the legend of Apelles did not entirely disappear during the Middle Ages (Cast 161).

[3.](#) Throughout I refer to the text in Bandello, *Tutte le Opere* 1: 646-650. The first three parts of the *Novelle* were published in 1554, and the fourth part posthumously at Lyon in 1573.

[4.](#) Bandello seems to represent Raymond Perauld (1435 -1505), known as Cardinal Peraudi, who was archbishop of Gurk, Austria. The actual cardinal is known to have visited Milan in January 1497 (Godi 319).

5. Most of the attention given to the *novella* has to do with its relation to Vasari's *vita* of Fra Filippo Lippi, first published in 1550. On this subject, see Kurz, "Zu Vasaris Vita des Filippo Lippi," 82-93 [reprinted in Kurz, *Selected Studies* 2: 82-93]. See also Godi 320-325.

6. For a recent discussion of this anecdote, see Kemp 1-6; Land 14-17.

7. da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting* 1: 54, n. 83 and 2: 38-38v.

8. Interestingly, Pliny (*Natural History*, 35:119 -120) mentions a painter named Arellius who also chased after women, whom he often used as models for figures in his paintings.

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