

ROBERT BROWNING'S ART TRILOGY:
THE EVOCATION OF AN AGE

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We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under
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be accepted as fulfilling this part of the requirements for the Degree of
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PREFACE

It is my purpose in this thesis to show that Robert Browning in writing the three art poems, "Pictor Ignotus," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea Del Sarto," depicted each artist as being representative of certain definitive characteristics of the Italian Renaissance.

In chapter one, I have dealt with the factors that contributed to Robert Browning's interest in art. Chapters two, three, and four explain the three art poems "Pictor Ignotus," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea Del Sarto," respectively, in relation to their time in the development of Italian Renaissance art. I have concluded with a brief summation.

Many have helped me during the time I have been in graduate school--friends, family, teachers. None, however, has helped more than the following three teachers: Dr. Autrey Nell Wiley, Dr. J. Dean Bishop, and Dr. Eleanor James. Dr. Wiley first smoothed the way for me to enter graduate school; since then, she has taught and advised me. Dr. Bishop, with unfailing tact, patience, and humor, has guided this thesis to completion. Dr. James, in consenting to read my thesis, has helped me greatly. It is a pleasure to express my gratitude.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: ROBERT BROWNING AND ITALIAN ART

A statement to the effect that Robert Browning was an erudite man can cause little controversy. The quality of his mind and the quantity of his information are evident in the depth and breadth of his characterizations, in the variety and authenticity of his backgrounds and settings, and in his inexhaustibly large vocabulary and his diverse, fresh use of words. Indeed, from the pen of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the person who, perhaps, knew him best and who was, herself, no intellectual nonentity, comes praise of Robert Browning, "who talks wisdom of all things in heaven and earth."¹ It is, however, to a consideration of only one phase of Robert Browning's knowledge that I wish to direct this thesis--to his knowledge of Italian Renaissance art and to his three art poems that correspond to the three periods in the development of Italian art in the Renaissance.

¹The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ed. by Frederic G. Kenyon (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), I, 301.

At this point, one might well ask how Robert Browning's interest in art was fostered and what caused his interest to strengthen to love. For the answers to inquiries of this nature a look at Robert Browning's father and a knowledge of some facets of the poet's childhood prove helpful. Undoubtedly, the father of Robert Browning exerted the beginning influence on his son in the development of the young man's interest in art. In addition to the father's influence, three other factors contributed to the growth of Robert Browning's interest in, and knowledge of, art, particularly Italian Renaissance art. A book in his father's library provided an inducement to young Browning's budding interest in art; trips to nearby Dulwich Gallery further increased his knowledge. Life in Florence amid the art treasures of the past proved the culminating force in developing the poet's extensive knowledge of Italian Renaissance art.

A scholar in his own right, Robert Browning, Senior had been given an excellent education; he knew Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and Hebrew.² His half-brother Reuben, in attesting to the breadth of the elder Browning's learning, wrote the following tribute:

His wonderful store of information might really be compared to an inexhaustible mine. It comprised not merely a thorough scholastic outline of the world,

²W. Hall Griffin, The Life of Robert Browning, completed and edited by Harry Christopher Minchin (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1938), p. 7.

but the critical points of ancient and modern history, the lore of the Middle Ages, all political combinations of parties, their description and consequences. . . . In short, he was a living encyclopaedia.³

Although he had been placed in the Bank of England, Robert Browning, Senior merely endured the work because, at heart, he was an artist.⁴ That banking was a sacrifice he made for his family is verified by his son's words in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett: "My father on his return [from the West Indies] had the intention of devoting himself to art, for which he had many qualifications and abundant love--but the quarrel with his father,--who married again and continued to hate him till a few years before his death,--induced him to go at once and consume his life after a fashion he always detested."⁵ Once Rossetti spoke of the artistic achievement of the elder Browning and described him as having "a real genius for drawing."⁶ Not only was Robert Browning's father a well-educated man with talent and interest in painting,⁷ he was also an avid reader and book collector.⁸

³Cited in Griffin, p. 8.

⁴William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1935), p. 3.

⁵Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning 1845-1846, with a note by Robert Barrett Browning (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1899), I, 474.

⁶Cited in Griffin, p. 12.

⁷Alexandra Leighton Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1905), p. 11.

⁸Orr, p. 13.

Reuben Browning said of his brother's love of books:

The love of reading attracted him by sympathy to books; old books were his delight, and by his continual search after them he not only knew all the old bookstalls in London, but their contents, and if any scarce work were spoken of, he could tell forthwith where a copy of it could be had. Nay, he would even describe in what part of the shop it was placed, and the price likely to be asked for it. Thus his own library became his treasure.⁹

It is not too difficult to skip twenty years into the future and into another country to see the son of such a man "picking up pictures at a few pauls each, 'hole and corner' pictures which the 'dealers' had not found out."¹⁰ Even less difficult to imagine is the fact that Robert Browning, Senior with his scholarly background, his extensive knowledge, his love of books and interest in collecting them, and, particularly, with the special value he placed on painting exerted a powerful influence on his son and provided the first of a series of stimuli that resulted in the writing of some of the finest poetry about painting in the English language.

Although the elder Browning initiated his son's interest in art, the Browning homelife also provided a strong impetus to the boy's attention to art, for among the thousands of books in his father's library to which the young man had unlimited access was one very special one--The Art of Painting

⁹Cited in Griffin, p. 8.

¹⁰The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I, 448.

in All its Branches.¹¹ This book, the work of the Flemish artist Gerard de Lairese, affected to a great degree the young Browning, who wrote, years later, on the flyleaf of the volume: "I read this book more often and with greater delight when I was a child than any other; and still remember the main of it most gratefully for the good I seem to have got from the prints and wonderful text."¹² In addition to de Lairese's book, Browning also had Pilkington's Dictionary of Painters, from which he learned something about the history of art, and Vasari's Lives of the Painters, from which he gained material for many of his poems.¹³

Furthermore, in the days of the poet's youth, Browning's visits to Dulwich Gallery added stimulus to his burgeoning love of art, for in 1814 Dulwich Gallery, the chief existing art gallery that was open to the public, provided a specially constructed building for viewing pictures and afforded a representative sampling of Dutch, French, Spanish, Italian, and English works of art. It was in the Dulwich Gallery that Robert Browning first became acquainted with the work of some of the Italian Renaissance painters about whom, years later, he was to write: Guercine, Giorgione, Albano,

¹¹William Clyde DeVane, Jr., Browning's Parleyings (New York: Yale University Press, 1927), p. 215.

¹²Cited in Griffin, pp. 9-10.

¹³DeVane, Browning's Parleyings, p. 214.

Andrea del Sarto, Raphael, Titian, and Guido Reni.¹⁴ In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett years later, Robert Browning wrote of his excursions to the gallery:

. . . I so love and am so grateful to the gallery--having been used to go there when a child, far under the age allowed by the regulations--those two Guidos, the wonderful Rembrandt of Jacob's vision, such a Watteau, the triumphant three Murillo pictures, and 'Jupiter's nursing'--and--no end to the 'ands'--I have sate before one, some one of those pictures I had predetermined to see, a good hour and then gone away . . [sic] it used to be a green half-hour's walk over the fields.¹⁵

Thus, we can conclude that Robert Browning's early interest in painting and beginning knowledge of painting resulted from three forces in his life--from his father who loved and valued art, from books in his father's library, especially the technical The Art of Painting in All its Branches by Gerard de Lairese, and from visits to the Dulwich Gallery, where he learned to study and interpret paintings.

Browning's already strong interest in, and knowledge of, Italian art was further stimulated by his life in Florence, the city that had been the center of the artistic renaissance in Italy. Undoubtedly, it was the experience of living in Florence that was the culminating influence behind Browning's great works concerning the Italian Renaissance. The Brownings lived fifteen years in Italy, most of that time

¹⁴Griffin, p. 11.

¹⁵Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning 1845-1846, I, 524.

in Florence, a city that offered them a wealth of history in its ancient churches, medieval mansions, and private palaces--buildings resulting from the marvelous skill of the Florentine architects and artists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.¹⁶ Moreover, Florence was especially rich in memories of the Renaissance artists, for it was there that Giotto and Gaddi worked; Andrea del Sarto had his dark little shop in Florence; there Ghiberti cast his famous gates, those gates that another genius of the Italian Renaissance--Michael Angelo--pronounced worthy to serve as the entrance to paradise; and Michael Angelo, himself, worked in Florence as a youth and lived there as an old man.¹⁷ Because the Brownings settled in Florence, it is natural that frequent references to Florentine history, setting, and personages are made in Browning's poetry. Florence was not, however, the only city in Italy to furnish inspiration to the poet. The Brownings, during their fifteen years in Italy, traveled over most of that country, staying only a few days at places and remaining months at others. The only poem known to have been written by Robert Browning during the first three years of his married life, "The Guardian Angel: A Picture at Fano," was inspired by a

¹⁶Herbert Vaughan, Florence and Her Treasures (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), p. 26.

¹⁷Mabel Major, "Browning and the Florentine Renaissance," Texas Christian University Quarterly, I (1924), 26.

painting in Fano, a seaport on the Adriatic.¹⁸ An Italian town very popular with the Brownings was Siena, only a short distance from Florence and, like Florence, home of many treasures dating from the Renaissance.¹⁹ The Brownings, at different times, visited and liked Pisa, Venice, and Rome.

It is Florence, nevertheless, and especially the magnificent art galleries there, that, almost certainly, chiefly inspired Robert Browning's great art poems. From a letter Mrs. Browning wrote to her friend Miss Mitford, just four months after arriving in Italy, we know that the newly married couple had a design to study the art of Italy:

I mean to know something about pictures some day. Robert does, and I shall get him to open my eyes for me with a little instruction. You know that in this place are to be seen the first steps of art, and it will be interesting to trace them from it as we go farther ourselves.²⁰

Visiting the galleries must have become almost habitual with the Brownings; otherwise, Mrs. Browning would not have made the following remark in a letter to Mrs. Martin: "Think of my having been in Florence since Tuesday, this being

¹⁸Betty Miller, Robert Browning: A Portrait (London: John Murray, Ltd., 1952), p. 145.

¹⁹John Addington Symonds, Renaissance in Italy, III: The Fine Arts (London: John Murray, Ltd., 1923), 158.

²⁰The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I, 307.

Saturday, and not a step taken into the galleries. It seems a disgrace. . . ."21 In another, later later to Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Browning comments on Browning's continuing study of art: "As for him [Robert] he is as fond of digging at Vasari as I am at the Mystics, and goes to and from him as constantly, making him a betwixt and between to other writers."22 From the foregoing remarks, it seems clear that during the time between 1845, the date of publication of "Pictor Ignotus," Browning's first poem devoted entirely to the subject of Italian Renaissance painting, and 1855, the year in which Men and Women, the work that contains Browning's most popular Renaissance art poems, was published, the poet must have increased tremendously his already detailed knowledge of that period in Italian history through visits to the galleries and through further study of Vasari. Mabel Major, in "Browning and the Florentine Renaissance," writes of Browning's probable visits to the galleries: "Here [Pitti Gallery] Browning must have come again and again to study the works of Filippo, Perugino, Fra Bartolomo, Andrea del Sarto, Raphael, and the others; . . . and across the Ponte Vecchio to the Uffizi, where the great art collection stated by the Medici still adds glory to

²¹The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I, 326.

²²Cited in Miller, p. 175.

their name. Here, Browning saw many of the greatest pictures in the world."²³

In later years, Browning called Italy his university.²⁴ Certainly, Italy, especially Florence with its art masterpieces and the significant place it held in the development of Renaissance art, must be placed first in importance in any enumeration of the influences on the growth of Robert Browning's interest in art. Yet, the three other forces that began and stimulated Browning's interest must not be discounted. Without the elder Browning's talent and love of art marking a beginning example for his son to follow, without the books in the vast library and the freedom to read there, and without the frequent visits to the Dulwich Gallery, it is doubtful that even the genius of Robert Browning could have assimilated the Renaissance period of Italian art or could have incorporated in his art poetry the essence of the Renaissance. That he was able to do so was attested to by John Ruskin who wrote, in discussing Browning's "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church": "I know of no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told as in those lines, of the Renaissance spirit, its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of

²³Major, p. 27.

²⁴DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 208.

luxury, and of good Latin. It is, namely, all that I said of the Central Renaissance in thirty pages of the Stones of Venice put into as many lines, Browning's being also the antecedent work."²⁵

Unquestionably, as Ruskin noted, Browning possessed the knowledge and skill to evoke the spirit of the Renaissance, and in Men and Women (1855), the work that contains his outstanding dramatic poems about the Italian Renaissance, three poems--"Pictor Ignotus," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea del Sarto"--offer excellent pictures of the three periods in the development of Italian Renaissance art. When John Addington Symonds wrote that "The successive stages in the evolution of Italian painting correspond to similar stages in the history of the Renaissance,"²⁶ he stated in prose what Robert Browning had presented dramatically in three poems thirty years earlier. Helen Gardner, however, expressed succinctly and precisely what Robert Browning delineated in three of his art poems: "The coming of the seventeenth century marked the decline of the Renaissance in Italy, as the sixteenth marked its maturity and the fifteenth, its youth."²⁷ Robert Browning

²⁵John Ruskin, Modern Painters (New York: The Publishers Plate Renting Co., n.d.), IV, 156.

²⁶Symonds, p. 135.

²⁷Art Through the Ages (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1926), p. 429.

has given us in "Pictor Ignotus" the picture of a beginning Renaissance artist; in "Fra Lippo Lippi," the picture of the realist of the fifteenth century; and in "Andrea del Sarto," the artist of the late Renaissance.

CHAPTER II

THE SPIRIT OF THE EARLY RENAISSANCE:

"PICTOR IGNOTUS"

With Robert Browning's thorough knowledge of the Italian Renaissance and his understanding of the art Renaissance in Italy, he was fully aware that for hundreds of years before the Renaissance art had been the servant of the church. Playing such a role, art was constrained to evolve in a certain direction--to be the embodiment of mystical Christian ideas. As a result, during the Middle Ages and until the thirteenth century, painting was primarily a decorative art, unconcerned with the creation of realistic images of objects.¹ Because the church prescribed the subject matter and general treatment, all painting had grown remarkably similar,² but with the growth in power and stability of the city-states and with the development of classicism in the thirteenth century, man himself replaced the mysteries of religion as the focal point of life and

¹David M. Robb and J. J. Garrison, Art in the Western World (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1935), p. 447.

²Gardner, p. 322.

culture.³ Art, sensitive to the changing philosophy, sought to incorporate the new outlook into the old form. The Italian painter of the beginning Renaissance, therefore, faced the decision of choosing between two different attitudes in painting. Helen Gardner defines the choices: "With the one . . . forms are constructed of purely formal elements--line, light and dark, color--with little or no regard for the natural appearance of what is represented; its tendency is toward abstraction and if carried to its logical conclusion would result in pure geometry. . . . With the other. . . forms are constructed with direct reference to visual perception and spatial relations; its tendency is toward naturalism and its logical conclusion is a photographic copy."⁴ In "Pictor Ignotus" Robert Browning presents an artist faced with this dilemma. The unknown painter, however, in a confrontation between joining the new realists or clinging to the medieval traditions, chooses the past. "Pictor Ignotus," therefore, rightfully belongs in the position Browning placed it at the time Men and Women was published--as the first of a trilogy of art poems setting forth his knowledge of how the Italian art Renaissance had developed.

³Enzo Carli, "The Revival of Realism in Medieval Italy," Larousse Encyclopedia of Renaissance and Baroque Art, ed. by Rene Huyghe (New York: Prometheus Press, 1964), p. 26.

⁴Gardner, p. 384.

As a poem that furnishes a glimpse into the schism that was to occur between the church and the world, "Pictor Ignotus" presents, in its two parts, the struggle undergone by an early Renaissance painter in trying to assure himself that he has chosen correctly. In the first half of the poem the unknown painter envisions the fame he might have achieved by painting for the more popular, naturalistic taste, and in the second, explains why he chose not to seek fame. At the outset, though, Pictor Ignotus is quick to note that he was equipped with the natural talent and inspiration to achieve fame:

I could have painted pictures like that youth's
 Ye praise so. How my soul springs up! No bar
 Stayed me--ah, thought which saddens while it soothes!
 Never did fate forbid me, star by star,
 To outburst on your night with all my gift
 Of fires from God.⁵

The unknown artist says that he could have painted pictures that would have drawn praise, just as that certain "youth" had done.⁶ The artist quickens with excitement to think of it. He says that nothing stopped him from outshining the

⁵Robert Browning, "Pictor Ignotus," The Works of Robert Browning (New York: Ams Press, Inc., 1966), IV, 101, ll. 1-6. (All future quotations from "Pictor Ignotus" will be taken from this volume.)

⁶Critics agree that the youth mentioned in line one is a reference to Raphael. See Edward Berdoe, The Browning Encyclopaedia (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1897), p. 338, and Paul F. Jamieson, "Browning's 'Pictor Ignotus,' Florence, 15--," Explicator, XI (November, 1952), item 8.

stars with his glorious gift from God. Although the realization that he could have achieved fame assuages his feelings, he nonetheless feels regret.

At the same time, he continues to justify his actions by indicating that he alone is responsible for his decisions. Certainly, he has not renounced the physical world out of fear of offending God nor out of a distaste for hard work. The painter tells us that he would not have drawn back from the physical work involved in ascertaining the world:

. . . nor would my flesh have shrunk
 From seconding my soul, with eyes uplift
 And wide to heaven, or, straight like thunder,
 sunk
 To the center, of an instant; or around
 Turned calmly and inquisitive, to scan
 The licence and the limit, space and found,
 Allowed to truth made visible in man.
(11. 6-12)

The artist would have put his body in the service of his soul and would have used his eyes to search for heaven, or to grasp the truth of the moment, or to learn, by closely observing man, how to present the scope of truth.

We are made to understand that the painter has not only the capacity to execute great pictures but also the power to recall the images of all he has seen:

And, like that youth ye praise so, all I saw,
 Over the canvas could my hand have flung,
 Each face obedient to its passion's law,
 Each passion clear proclaimed without a tongue;
 Whether Hope rose at once in all the blood,
 A-tiptoe for the blessing of embrace,

Or Rapture drooped the eyes, as when her brood
 Pull down the nesting dove's heart to its place;
 Or Confidence lit swift the forehead up,
 And locked the mouth fast, like a castle braved,--
 O human faces, hath it spilt, my cup?
 What did ye give me that I have not saved?
 (11. 13-24)

The painter explains that he could have done as the youth and put everything he saw in his painting, drawing each nuance of an expression realistically. He could have embodied each expression through the medium of his art as clearly as if the expression had been named. He could have drawn a face that blushed with hope, or a face showing the same kind of rapture that the mother dove feels as her nestlings pull her down to them, or a face that, brightened with confidence, shows a mouth tightened like the draw-bridge of a besieged castle. Simply thinking of the varied emotions that play across the human visage, of the feast set before him by life, his cup runneth over. He has not forgotten a single detail of all that he has seen.

Moreover, at this point, it is worth noting the quality of the verbs Pictor Ignotus uses to express his attitudes towards fame. One group, containing such verbs as "stayed," "forbid," "shrunk," "spilt," "sunk," "stooped," "moulder," and "die," connote the negative. These verbs are used, most commonly, in reference to the present life and present work of the artist. In contrast, when the artist speaks of the other life, the life and the work it had been possible for

him to do, the verbs used connote the positive--youth, eagerness, striving. The positive verbs, fewer in number because of the prevailing tone of the poem, are "springs," "outburst," "flung," "rose," "lit," and "praise." Naturally, then, since the negative verbs predominate in the latter half of the poem, the first half of the poem, where the painter reminisces about what might have been, contains the greater number of positive verbs.

This quality is also evident when the unknown painter comments upon his dreams of fame:

Nor will I say I have not dreamed (how well!)
 Of going--I, in each new picture, --forth,
 As, making new hearts beat and bosoms swell,
 To Pope or Kaiser, East, West, South, or North,
 Bound for the calmly-satisfied great state,
 Or glad aspiring little burgh, it went,
 Flowers cast upon the car which bore the freight
 Through old streets named afresh from the event,
 Till it reached home, where learned age should greet
 My face, and youth, the star not yet distinct
 Above his hair, lie learning at my feet! --
 (11. 25-35)

In his dream the unknown artist goes forth, through each picture, to the grand courts in all parts of the land and also to the small, busy towns. There he enthralls everyone. The vehicle that carries the picture has flowers scattered over it, and the artist imagines that the eventual fame of the picture will be such that the streets through which it has been carried will be renamed in his honor. This picture, finally reaching its destination, will be esteemed

by the learned; the youth, not having achieved fame yet, will be prostrated before the unknown dreamer, in the role of pupil.

From such dreams, it is clear that Pictor Ignotus has not merely desired fame; he has craved it:

Oh, thus to live, I and my picture, linked
With love about, and praise, till life should end,
And then not go to heaven, but linger here,
Here on my earth, earth's every man my friend,--
The thought grew frightful, 't was so wildly dear!
(ll. 36-20)

Continuing the dream of what might have been, the artist considers that could he and his picture be linked in fame, in praise, and, at the time of death, not go to heaven but remain here on earth, friend of all men, known by all men, he would choose that fate. But even so, the very violence of his desire frightens him.

With the word "frightful," Robert Browning ties the dreaming artist of the first section of the poem to the fearful, timid painter of the second part, for here, Pictor Ignotus explains his decision to forego fame. Several critics interpret this second part of the poem as mere rationalization on the part of the painter.⁷ One such critic is Lloyd N. Jeffrey, who maintains: "Pictor Ignotus

⁷See Jamieson, item 8, and L. Robert Stevens, "Aestheticism in Browning's Early Renaissance Monologues," Victorian Poetry, III (Winter, 1965), 21.

is another kind of failure through self-ignorance. He refused to look critically into himself, knowing in his heart that self knowledge would bring self-contempt and that he lacks the courage to make the bold leap into the stream of the world which alone could expunge this loathing of self. Tenderly considerate in his own behalf, he finds it both easier and pleasanter to disguise his weaknesses as virtues than to acknowledge them and try to overcome them."⁸

Certainly, from a twentieth-century point of view, it would appear that Pictor Ignotus is attempting to turn weakness into virtue, but from the medieval view of the world, it can hardly be argued that a withdrawal from the material world is a retreat to preserve self-esteem. With the emphasis placed upon the "other world," it would be only natural that a man such as Pictor Ignotus would elect the cloistered life in an effort to secure salvation. Indeed, the artist tells us that a voice changed him. The voice, presumably his conscience, called him back from his dreams of success and fame:

But a voice changed it. Glimpses of such sights
Have scared me, like the revels through a door
Of some strange house of idols at its rites!
(ll. 41-43)

⁸"Browning as Psychologist: Three Notes," College English, XVII (March, 1956), 346-347.

Now, he equates his vision of fame and happiness with the false worship of idolaters seen through a door at their profane acts. This vision of fame called up by the pricking conscience is quite different from the artist's earlier vision:

This world seemed not the world it was before:
Mixed with my loving trusting ones, there trooped
...Who summoned those cold faces that begun
To press on me and judge me?

(ll. 44-47)

The foregoing lines suggest fear on the part of the painter. As long as his world was peopled by those who approved his work, the artist was content, but with the advent of those who coldly judged, he began to withdraw, not liking to be pressed.

With the next lines, the fearful artist compares himself to a nun who, shrinking from a soldier, is pulled from her hiding-place; he too felt himself being drawn into a material world that he could not control. The artist shrinks from the give-and-take of the world and prefers, consequently, the security of his hiding-place:

Though I stooped
Shrinking, as from the soldiery a nun,
They drew me forth, and spite of me...enough!

(ll. 47-49)

Suddenly, though, Pictor Ignotus summons the strength to halt the thought of the disaster he felt would result if he allowed himself to be sucked into the crass world of

commercialism. The artist even draws back from allowing his pictures to stay in houses where they will be valued only as household furnishings and subjected to the trivialities of small-minded people:

These buy and sell our pictures, take and give,
 Count them for garniture and household-stuff,
 And where they live needs must our pictures live
 And see their faces, listen to their prate,
 Partakers of their daily pettiness,
 Discussed of--"This I love, or this I hate,
 "This likes me more, and this affects me less!"
 (ll. 50-56)

Not caring to have his pictures handled by those who do not appreciate them as he appreciates them, the artist objected most to their being judged and discussed by trivial minds. He feels that the "daily pettiness" and prattle of the owners violate the sanctity of his work. Thus, the artist renounced the world and its art patrons:

Wherefore I chose my portion. If at whiles
 My heart sinks, as monotonous I paint
 These endless cloisters and eternal aisles
 With the same series, Virgin, Babe and Saint,
 With the same cold calm beautiful regard,--
 At least no merchant traffics in my heart.
 (ll. 57-62)

Admittedly, the painter accepted the safer, less painful way. He elected to paint religious pictures in the manner sanctioned by the church. The Virgin Mary, the Baby Jesus, and the Saints all have the same somber appearance. They are calm, detached, and serene in their eternal life.

Unlike Pictor Ignotus, they are free of earthly desires and frustrations. By accepting this sort of life, by retiring from worldly competition, the artist hoped to find in his life a reflection of the serene life suggested in his paintings. He did avoid commercialization of his work, but he has not attained the fulfillment he seeks. Although he is dissatisfied and bored, he still commends himself for choosing the cloistered life. In commenting upon the choice of Pictor Ignotus, Edward Berdoo considers this retiring from the worldly as laudable:

The plain fact is that this spirit of retirement, this abhorrence of working for the praise of men, this hatred of applause-seeking and of self-advertisement, was that which animated the men of old Catholic times who built our cathedrals and our abbeys, and who painted our great pictures and florified all Europe with works of art. . . . The great monastic painters. . . . painted under the eye of God, looking upon their work as immediately inspired by His Spirit: for God and through God, not through men and for men, was their work done.⁹

Although Berdoo's explanation is valid, perhaps, for the truly religious artist, the unknown painter seems moved less by a sense of religious fervency than by a fear of rejection. Taking somewhat the same view and, in addition, interpreting "Pictor Ignotus" as a commentary on one of the problems of Victorian times, that of assessing the role of aesthetics in the scheme of life, L. Robert Stevens suggests that the

⁹Berdoo, pp. 338-339.

artist chooses the cloistered role with the idea that here he can keep his deficiencies as a painter from being discovered:

The unknown painter in "Pictor Ignotus" tries to explain his insufficiencies as an artist as though he had made a moral choice between a compromising success and an honest obscurity. He speaks as though he has access to all the gifts necessary for greatness as an artist, yet he refers to such greatness as a "temptation". . . The supposed temptation to greatness thus seems to him to posit a moral choice between painting commercial, popularized pictures on the one hand, or obscure but pious and honest pictures on the other. The protagonist thus implies that he is consciously choosing to sacrifice the life-in-art because it is "vain." When he says "At least no merchant traffics in my heart," he implies that life in the cloister is perhaps a second (but more honest) best. . . He thus implies that there is a clear antithesis between ethical life and the life-in-art.¹⁰

As Stevens intimates, Pictor Ignotus deceives himself into believing that his decision was based upon moral considerations. He refuses to acknowledge his fear of unfavorable criticism, and yet he continues to justify his present role to himself, still offering the same old arguments:

The sanctuary's gloom at least shall ward
 Vain tongues from where my pictures stand apart:
 Only prayer breaks the silence of the shrine
 While, blackening in the daily candle-smoke,
 They moulder on the damp wall's travertine,
 'Mid echoes the light footstep never woke.
 (11. 63-68)

¹⁰Pp. 21-22.

This cloistered life of the monastic painter provides an escape. The safe, conventional life, though not bringing fame, will, nevertheless, permit his pictures to be sequestered; his paintings will not be harshly judged by worldly critics. Instead, they will be viewed only by the silent-footed priests lighting the candles whose smoke eventually will destroy his work.

Ultimately, the painter, facing such a situation, must opt either for life or for death, and the unknown painter chooses the latter:

So, die my pictures! surely, gently die!
 O youth, men praise so, --holds praise its
 worth?
 Blown harshly, keeps the trump its golden cry?
 Tastes sweet the water with such specks of earth?
(ll. 69-72)

Now, in choosing what he knows to be oblivion for himself as an artist, Pictor Ignotus sends out one last defensive cry to that painter who did not compromise his art. Pictor Ignotus asks the youth if, having painted for the popular taste, he is able still to paint purely. He asks if, by commercializing his art, the youth finds it still valuable. In comparing the youth's paintings to a golden-voiced trumpet, Pictor Ignotus questions the use of magnificent instruments. He wonders if used for the wrong purposes value might not be destroyed. In like manner, he compares the youth's pictures to sweet water and queries whether or

not his fame has contaminated his work. He further asks if the youth has ruined, by painting popular pictures, his sense of pride and pleasure in his work.

The concern Pictor Ignotus shows with the conflicting aims of art may express a corresponding concern on the part of Robert Browning. At least one critic has seen "Pictor Ignotus" as an expression of one aspect of Robert Browning's own personality. Darrell Figgis, writing for The English Review, stated:

. . . there was in Browning the possibility of the artist who could turn away resolutely from vulgar success, in the secrecy of his own soul to work the thing that pleased him; there was also the artist who could happily take all good things, or seeming good things, as they came; and also the artist whose labour consistently was to express the thing just beyond his reach, and who knew that to fail to reach forward would be to fall into sterility, perfect or imperfect. He was not one of these, but at one time all three. Each expressed no more than a facet of himself; and he could discover each facet in turn by looking at art through such different temperaments as those of "Pictor Ignotus," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Andrea del Sarto". . . .¹¹

By far the greater number of those who have concerned themselves with the subject of painting in Robert Browning's poetry, however, interpret "Pictor Ignotus" as being one of three poems reflecting Browning's knowledge of how Italian painting developed during the Renaissance. Helen Archibald Clarke places "Pictor Ignotus" in the late Renaissance: "We

¹¹"Robert Browning," The English Review, XI (April-July, 1912), 243.

may imagine this painter belonging to the crowd of painters who filled up the latter part of the sixteenth century and marked the decline of the great age of Italian art."¹²

William Clyde DeVane, supporting the developmental idea of the poem but disagreeing with Helen A. Clarke's placement of it, maintains: "It is certainly the fruit of his [Browning's] observation of pictures in Florence, and embodies his conception of how the early, and now unknown, painters of those pale, formal, monastic series--Virgin, Babe, and Saint--might defend themselves in the face of the great vogue for the newer, more vulgar, painters who depict the expressions of contemporary human beings."¹³ Mabel Major, in accord with DeVane, believes that "Pictor Ignotus" depicts a painter of the early Florentine school.¹⁴

One dissenting voice is that of Paul F. Jamieson, who asserts that "Pictor Ignotus" is merely a poem of characterization having no relation to the development of art or to the two other great art poems, "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea Del Sarto": ". . . Pictor, morally a trimmer, is not an advocate of any trend of doctrine. His conventionality is not a protest against naturalism, which he admires in the

¹²Browning's Italy: A Study of Italian Life and Art in Browning (New York: The Baker and Taylor Company, 1907), p. 278.

¹³DeVane, A Browning Handbook, p. 155.

¹⁴Major, p. 63.

youthful painter, but a gesture of withdrawal. It is an expression of personal temperament, not an illustration of the development of Italian painting in the sixteenth century."¹⁵ It is true that "Pictor Ignotus" is the portrait of a shrinking, fearful character. One visualizes, as the poem progresses, a pale, thin man talking, a note of self-pitying complaint in his voice, as he half-heartedly paints in a dim, quiet church. Fear has prevented him from painting as he would have liked, fear of being judged and rejected. As a result, he renounces the new and chooses a sheltered, safe, second-best life. In a sense, then, "Pictor Ignotus" is, as Paul F. Jamieson suggests, a study of character. But it is more. It is a character study of the kind of medieval painter who, facing a reviving realism in art and lacking the courage of conviction, chooses "the sanctuary's gloom." Undoubtedly, many painters in the early Renaissance must have confronted a similar situation. Many must have chosen, like the artist in "Pictor Ignotus," to retire from struggle, to cling to the traditions of the past, and to leave the newly-emerging, realistic painting to hardier souls.

¹⁵See Jamieson.

CHAPTER III

THE VITALITY OF THE MIDDLE RENAISSANCE:

"FRA LIPPO LIPPI"

With the first stirrings of the Renaissance, two philosophies contended for the mind of man. A new belief in the value of man and of the present world opposed the monastic view of the ephemerality, hence, unimportance, of everything but the spiritual. The painter of the time stood in the middle of the controversy, for it was through his work that the vast majority of the people, unable to read, was educated.¹ It became necessary, in many cases, for the painter to choose between the "old" and the "new," between spiritualism and naturalism, between the spirit and the flesh, as John Addington Symonds explained in discussing the development of realism in Italian painting:

. . . In proportion as the painters fortified themselves by study of the natural world, their art became more secular. Mysticism gave way to realism. It was felt that much besides religion was worthy of expression. At the same time, about the year 1440, this process of secularization was hastened by the influence of the classical revival, renewing

¹Daniel Dorchester, Jr., "Browning's Philosophy of Art," The Boston Browning Society Papers 1886-1897 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897), p. 102.

an interest in the past life of humanity and stirring a zeal for science.

The painters now aimed at accurate delineation of actual things: good perspective, correct drawing, and sound portraiture. These techniques occupied their attention to the exclusion of more purely spiritual motives.²

Supporting the role of realism in art, Robert Browning, in his "Essay on Shelley," wrote that the function of the "whole" artist is to behold "with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection."³ Fra Lippo Lippi, the fifteenth-century Florentine painter, is Browning's "whole" artist from the series of three painters and represents the vital middle Renaissance when, according to Helen Gardner, "The world of actuality, curiosity about man and his world, led to fresh observations and to a compelling need for new forms in which to express them."⁴ In discussing the artist of this period, Daniel Dorchester, Jr., in a paper delivered before the Boston Browning Society, noted: "In the next great period of Italian art, the period ushered in by Fra Lippo Lippi, the artist was less fettered, he asserted his individuality more, and sought more earnestly for beauty in his forms."⁵

²Symonds, p. 135.

³Cited in Thomas J. Collins, Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory 1833-1855 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 143.

⁴Gardner, p. 389.

⁵Dorchester, p. 114.

In contrast to "Pictor Ignotus," the study of a shrinking, fearful, early Renaissance painter, Robert Browning depicts in "Fra Lippo Lippi" a vigorous monk-artist of the quattrocento and reveals, through Fra Lippo's conversation, the dilemma faced by this most articulate proponent of naturalism in art. Fra Lippo appreciates the beauty and goodness of the flesh and also understands the value of the spirit. Unconsciously, in his life, he unites the two; but consciously, intellectually, he does not recognize the possibility of union until, near the end of his discourse, he glimpses, momentarily, the vision of his work as it could be--spirit and flesh fused, making it whole.

From the beginning of the scene when he has been caught, very nearly flagrante delicto, by the city guards, Fra Lippo treats us to a picture of pure realism:

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!
 You need not clap your torches to my face.
 Zooks, what's to blame? You think you see a monk!
 What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,
 And here you catch me at an alley's end
 Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?⁶

In only six lines Robert Browning sets the scene, identifies the players, and begins his characterization of the frolicsome friar.

⁶Robert Browning, "Fra Lippo Lippi," The Works of Robert Browning (New York: Ams Press, Inc., 1966), IV, 104, ll. 1-6. (All future quotations from "Fra Lippo Lippi" will be taken from this volume.)

To an apparent question about his identity, Fra Lippo explains that he is a monk from the Carmelite Order:⁷

The Carmine's my cloister: hunt it up,
Do,--harry out, if you must show your zeal,
Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,
And nip each softling of a wee white mouse,
Weke, weke, that's crept to keep him company!
Aha, you know your betters! Then, you'll take
Your hand away that's fiddling on my throat,
And please to know me likewise.

(ll. 7-14)

Here, Robert Browning's use of blank verse, the poetic meter closest to ordinary speech, and his use of racy language give a strong realistic tone to the poem. Furthermore, his word choice and use of animal imagery, maintained, incidentally, throughout the poem, reinforce the sense of reality of the scenes. Using the word "pilchards" to designate the commonness and abundance of ordinary man, the phrase "skipping of rabbits" to describe the feminine shapes that tempted him, making the "old mill horse" kick up his heels in the pasture after being released from drudgery--all these animal images call up pictures from the natural world and are, in a way, a reflection of Fra Lippo's theories of art.

This same penchant for the real, or the natural, is present when Fra Lippo begins the explanation of how he came

⁷Browning took the facts about Fra Lippo Lippi's life from Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Painters, which tells of Fra Lippo's being placed, as a child, in the community of the Carmelites of the Carmine in Florence. (Berdoe, p. 183.)

to be a member of the Carmelite Order:

I was a baby when my mother died
 And father died and left me in the street.
 I starved there, God knows how, a year or two
 On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,
 Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,
 My stomach being empty as your hat,
 The wind doubled me up and down I went.
 Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
 (Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)
 And so along the wall, over the bridge,
 By the straight cut to the convent.

(11. 81-91)

Here of course, Fra Lippo is making an appeal for sympathy. He has carefully presented, in words, an exact picture of degradation. As he adds to his appeal, he continues to gain sympathy for himself by using realistic details that cast aspersions upon the clergy. In a supremely ironic tableau, the picture of the fat, feeding priest obviously enjoying at least one of the temporal pleasures while at the same time asking the young boy to give up "this very miserable world," Fra Lippo intimates what Richard Burton was later to call the "unholiness of those in holy orders at that time."⁸ In addition, the scene prepares for the hypocrisy that will be shown later in the poem by another hierarch of the church. The obvious function of such a scene is to produce an eventual suspension of belief in what the church characters say. Within the context of the next lines, however, the picture serves as prelude to the dramatic irony

⁸Richard E. Burton, "Renaissance Pictures in Robert Browning's Poetry," Poet Lore, X (January-March, 1898), 73.

of an eight-year-old boy renouncing what he had never experienced. Not at all does the adult Fra Lippo believe that the world is "trash":

. . . Six words there
While I stood munching my first bread that month:
"So, boy, you're minded," quoth the good fat father
Wiping his own mouth, 'twas refection-time,--
"To quit this very miserable world?
"Will you renounce". . ."the mouthful of bread?"
thought I;
By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;
I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house,
Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici
Have given their hearts to--all at eight years old.
(11. 91-101)

Although saved from starvation by the church, Fra Lippo soon learned that he must pay a price for security:

Well, sir, I found in time, you may be sure,
'Twas not for nothing--the good bellyful,
The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,
And day-long blessed idleness beside!
"Let's see what the urchin's fit for"--that
came next.
(11. 102-106)

Fra Lippo found that he would have to work at something beneficial to the order so that he could have the food, warm clothing, and security of clerical life. The boy was put to learning Latin; obviously not suited for the scholarly life, he learned only one declension--the important one: "All the Latin I construe is, 'amo' I love.'" (1. 111)

In time, though, the monks found that the young boy could draw:

I drew men's faces on my copy-books,
 Scrawled them within the antiphonary's marge,
 Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,
 Found eyes and nose and chin for A's and B's,
 And made a string of pictures of the world
 Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,
 On the wall, the bench, the door.

(11. 129-134)

Even at this early stage, Fra Lippo was already drawing
 "a string of pictures of the world." But then, his experi-
 ences in the streets of the city had honed his wits and his
 eyes:

But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets
 Eight years together, as my fortune was,
 Watching folk's faces, to know who will fling
 The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,
 And who will curse or kick him for his pains,--
 Which gentleman processional and fine,
 Holding a candle to the Sacrament,
 Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch
 The droppings of the wax to sell again,
 Or holla for the Eight and have him whipped,--
 How say I?--nay, which dog bites, which lets drop
 His bone from the heap of offal in the street,--
 Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
 He learns the look of things, and none the less
 For admonition from the hunger-pinch.

(11. 112-126)

Fra Lippo never lost this hard-earned faculty for close
 observation. His "artist's eye" noted faces even in times
 of difficulty, such as when he is seized by the city guards:

I'd like his face--
 His, elbowing on his comrade in the door
 With the pike and lantern, --for the slave
 that holds
 John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair
 With one hand ("Look you, now," as who should
 say)

And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!
 It's not your chance to have a bit of chalk,
 A wood-coal or the like? or you should see!
 (11. 31-38)

Notwithstanding the boy's excellence in transferring his impressions of the world to the pages of his text-books, he would have been punished except that the Prior recognized his value to the order:

"Nay," quoth the Prior, "turn him out, d'ye say?
 "In no wise. Lose a crow and catch a lark.
 "What if at last we get our man of parts,
 "We Carmelites, like those Camaldolese
 "And preaching Friars, to do our church up fine
 "And put the front on it that ought to be!"
 And hereupon he bade me daub away.
 (11. 136-142)

Because great rivalry existed between the different orders of the church at this period in Italian history and because the rivalry was directed toward the adornment of individual churches with paintings, murals, sculpture, and carvings, the Prior knew that, should the young Lippo prove to be a great artist, his order would gain advantage over the rival orders.

Thus, with the official sanction of the Prior, Fra Lippo began to paint. He painted the people he saw and the scenes he witnessed in the church; he lumped together thieves, children, murderers, and Christ; he captured the emotions of anger, sadness, and admiration on their faces; in short, he painted realistically:

. . . my head being crammed, the walls a blank,
 Never was such prompt disemburdening.
 First, every sort of monk, the black and white,
 I drew them, fat and lean: then, folk at church,
 From good old gossips waiting to confess
 Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends,--
 To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
 Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
 With the little children round him in a row
 Of admiration, half for his beard and half
 For that white anger of his victim's son
 Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,
 Signing himself with the other because of Christ
 (Whose sad face on the cross sees only this
 After the passion of a thousand years).

(11. 143-157)

The painter, missing nothing, not a face nor an act, put everything on canvas. He painted all shapes and colors of monks, he drew faces on those waiting at the confessional, he noted the expressions on the faces of those who watched a murderer that had sought sanctuary in the church, and Fra Lippo noticed even the sad expression on a picture of Christ that overlooked the church scene.

Eventually, Fra Lippo finished his mural and then unveiled it; he waited for the judgment of the order. The simple monks praised his work:

I painted all, then cried "Tis ask and have;
 "Choose, for more's ready!" --laid the ladder flat,
 And showed my covered bit of cloister-wall.
 The monks closed in a circle and praised loud
 Till checked, taught what to see and not to see,
 Being simple bodies, --"That's the very man!
 "Look at the boy who stoops to pat the dog!
 "That woman's like the Prior's niece who comes
 "To care about his asthma: it's the life!"

(11. 163-171)

The Prior, in contrast to the attitude expressed by the monks, was displeased when he saw the artist's work. He wanted Fra Lippo to paint the spirit of man rather than to concentrate on realistic details of actual people:

"How? what's here?
 "Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
 "Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true
 "As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!
 "Your business is not to catch men with show,
 "With homage to the perishable clay,
 "But lift them over it, ignore it all,
 "Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
 "Your business is to paint the souls of men--
 "Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke. . .no, it's not...
 "It's vapour done up like a new-born babe--
 "(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
 "It's. . .well, what matters talking, it's the soul!
 (ll. 174-187)

The Prior's criticism is merely an echo of the attitudes of the hierarchs of the church, who at this time in history clearly realized the danger that the growing trend toward naturalism posed for organized religion. Naturally, the church leaders sought to limit, by every means at their command, the spread of the new ideas. The Prior, then, was defending the church by his disapproval of Lippi's work. Boyd Litzynger, however, has advanced another reason for the Prior's displeasure. Noting that the Prior's tirade against naturalism in art began immediately after one of the monks spoke of the resemblance of one of the figures in the mural to the Prior's niece, Litzynger maintains that the "young woman is clearly intended to be the mistress of the

Prior. . . . This fact is important, for its acceptance prejudices us against the Prior and his theory of 'proper' art. . . ."9

This proposal, then, would negate the validity of the Prior's admonition when, in explaining to Lippo Lippi the kind of work he should do, he advises him to take Giotto as a guide:

"Here's Giotto, with his Saint a-praising God,
 "That sets us praising,--why not stop with him?
 "Why put all thoughts of praise out of our head
 "With wonder at lines, colours, and what not?
 "Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
 "Rub all out, try at it a second time.
 (11. 189-194)

Litzinger, commenting about the Prior's advice on art, reasons that ". . . the Prior is not shouting so much for art's sake as for his own. Is not his tirade against flesh-painting inspired by the shock of seeing his mistress painted before the eyes of his community? It is as much his seeing his 'niece' as his disapproval of realistic art which prompts him to order, 'Have it all out!'"10

If this suggestion is accepted, it is little wonder then that the Prior, ending his discourse to Fra Lippo, reverts to the subject that, perhaps after all, is uppermost in his mind:

9"Incident as Microcosm: The Prior's Niece in 'Fra Lippo Lippi,'" College English, XXII (1962), 410.

10Litzinger, p. 410.

"Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
 "She's just my niece. . . Herodias, I would say,--
 "Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!
 "Have it all out!"

(11. 195-198)

Perhaps, as Litzinger theorizes, the "episode of the Prior's niece . . . is used by Browning to discover a wolf in Prior's clothing, to prejudice us against the Prior's view of art, and to prepare us to accept the view of flesh and art held jointly by Fra Lippo and the poet himself."¹¹

Needless to say, regardless of whatever Browning's intentions may have been, Fra Lippo Lippi, in setting forth his beliefs about art, finds little need to speak to a biased audience. His defence of naturalism in art is so logical and sincere that it is easy to imagine the young city guard listening to Lippi and nodding his head in agreement, affirming that the painter is, indeed, correct:

Now, is this sense, I ask?
 A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
 So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further
 And can't fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white
 When what you put for yellow's simply black,
 And any sort of meaning looks intense
 When all beside itself means and looks nought.
 Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,
 Left foot and right foot, go a double step,
 Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,
 Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,
 The Prior's niece. . . patron-saint--is it so pretty
 You can't discover if it means hope, fear,
 Sorrow or joy? won't beauty go with these?
 Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,

¹¹Litzinger, p. 410.

Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
 And then add soul and heighten them threefold?
 (ll. 198-214)

In his indictment of the usual kind of religious painting, Fra Lippo says that the paintings are wrong because the proper colors are not used and, furthermore, the figures in the paintings do not portray expressions that are natural. Fra Lippo wants to paint so realistically, using the proper colors, giving faces expressions that are natural, that his paintings show the soul because of their realism. Fra Lippo believes that one can more easily see the soul if the picture is painted true-to-life. As Thomas J. Collins asserts, "Fra Lippo knows that their view of art is invalid. His purpose in painting is not to glorify the flesh, but to employ it as a means through which man can more easily perceive soul."¹²

Indeed, Fra Lippo seems to value the flesh almost more than spirit:

Or say there's beauty with no soul at all--
 (I never saw it--put the case the same--)
 If you get simple beauty and nought else,
 You get about the best thing God invents:
 That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you
 have missed,
 Within yourself, when you return him thanks.
 (ll. 215-220)

¹²Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory 1833-1855 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 143.

Saying that beauty, by itself, without trying to show the soul, is its own excuse for being and that by painting the beautiful as God made it, life-like and real, the painter will cause a feeling of gratitude to God, Fra Lippo previews the idea that he expresses more graphically later:

"Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!"
 Strikes in the Prior: "when your meaning's plain
 "It does not say to folk--remember matins,
 "Or, mind you fast next Friday!" Why, for this
 What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
 Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what's best,
 A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.
 (11. 316-322)

Asserting still the supremacy of the realistic, Fra Lippo gives, in the last line of the following anecdote, his estimation of those who demand symbolic, didactic art:

I painted a Saint Laurence six months since
 At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:
 "How looks my painting, now the scaffold's
 down?"
 I ask a brother: "Hugely," he returns--
 "Already not one phiz of your three slaves
 "Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,
 "But's scratched and prodded to our heart's
 content,
 "The pious people have so eased their own
 "With coming to say prayers there in a rage:
 "We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.
 "Expect another job this time next year,
 "For pity and religion grow i' the crowd--
 "Your painting serves its purpose!" Hang
 the fools!

(11. 323-335)

Dismissing those who hold opposing views as "fools," Fra Lippo Lippi accepts the beauty of the world and recognizes the value of the beauty inherent in the natural. As

Thomas J. Collins explains, "He sees that the beauty of the world has value because it is created by God and reflects His glory."¹³ In his most penetrating summation of the function of the real in art, Fra Lippo explains:

. . . you've seen the world
 --The beauty and the wonder and the power
 The shapes of things, their colours, lights and
 shades,
 Changes, surprises,--and God made it all!
 --For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
 For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
 The mountain round it and the sky above,
 Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
 These are the frames to? What's it all about?
 To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
 Wondered at? Oh, this last of course!--you say.
 But why not do as well as say,--paint these
 Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
 God's works--paint anyone, and count it crime
 To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works
 "Are here already; nature is complete:
 "Suppose you reproduce her--(which you can't)
 "There's no advantage! you must beat her, then."
 For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
 And so they are better, painted--better to us,
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that.
 (11. 282-304)

Although Fra Lippo. in these discourses on art, always defends the newer, realistic art, he actually is torn at times by a sense of conflict between the old and the new. This tension is made evident by his following remark:

And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes
 Are peeping o'er my shoulder as I work,
 The heads shake still--"It's art's decline, my son!
 "You're not of the true painters, great and old;

¹³Collins, p. 144.

"Brother Angelico's the man, you'll find;
 "Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:
 "Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third!"
 (11. 231-237)

Not only is the conflict between the old and new, the spiritual and the natural, manifested by his remarks about art, but it is also evident in his private life, for Fra Lippo chafes against restraint:

. . . there's pretty sure to come
 A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints--
 A laugh, a cry, the business of the world--
 . . .
 And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,
 The world and life's too big to pass for a dream,
 And I do these wild things in sheer despite,
 And play the fooleries you catch me at,
 In pure rage!
 (11. 245-254)

Suffering because of his non-conformity, Fra Lippo longs for truth:

The old mill-horse, out at grass
 After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so,
 Although the miller does not preach to him
 The only good of grass is to make chaff.
 What would men have? Do they like grass or no--
 May they or mayn't they? all I want's the thing
 Settled for ever one way. As it is,
 You tell too many lies and hurt yourself.
 (11. 254-261)

W. David Shaw, calling Fra Lippo Lippi "the most genuinely religious sensualist in English Literature, believes that Lippo's next words show the child-like truth

and "passion for spontaneous worship"¹⁴ of the monk:

For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
 I always see the garden and God there
 A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
 The value and significance of flesh,
 I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.
 (ll. 265-269)

Most critics explain the above lines only in relation to Fra Lippo's defence of the flesh; however, it is worthwhile to note, also, that God is mentioned in connection with flesh, and, so, the lines foreshadow the vision of his work that Lippo will have, later, when he entertains the thought of his work as being a fusion of the natural and the spiritual. For as Fra Lippo has, in his life, been able to value the flesh and through the joys of the senses been able to glorify the spiritual, so, too, he is able to imagine how, by fusing the natural and the spiritual, his painting could be made complete:

Have you noticed, now,
 Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,
 And trust me but you should, though! How much more,
 If I drew higher things with the same truth!
 That were to take the Prior's pulpit-place,
 Interpret God to all of you!

(ll. 306-311)

W. David Shaw, in discussing Fra Lippo's insight at this point in the monologue, says: "His celebration of the flesh

¹⁴"Character and Philosophy in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'," Victorian Poetry, II (1964), 129.

is developed in systematic contrast to the anemic spirituality of the Prior. The highest level is reached, and the dialectic of flesh and spirit is momentarily resolved, as Fra Lippo discerns, in analogy to the Christian Incarnation, the immanence of a spiritual power in nature that will enable him to 'interpret God to all of you!'"¹⁵

Though he is unable always to achieve what he knows to be the ideal in art, Fra Lippo speaks of those who will, in the future, further the cause of realism in art:

But see, now--why, I see as certainly
As that the morning-star's about to shine,
What will hap some day. We've a youngster here
Comes to our convent, studies what I do,
Slouches and stares and lets no atom drop:
His name is Guidi--he'll not mind the monks--
They call him Hulking Tom,¹⁶ he lets them talk--
He picks my practice up--He'll paint apace,
I hope so--though I never live so long,
I know what's sure to follow.

(ll. 271-280)

Turning from the future back to the present, Fra Lippo plans to make amends for his errant behavior by painting a

¹⁵Shaw, p. 131.

¹⁶This Hulking Tom in "Fra Lippo Lippi" has caused probably more controversy than any other phrase in the poem. Critics agree that the man is correctly identified as Masaccio and also that Masaccio was Lippo's teacher, not his pupil; there agreement ends. Perhaps one of the more closely researched reports about the matter is Johnstone Parr's "Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi,' Baldinucci, and The Milanesi Edition of Vasari," in which Mr. Parr shows that Browning's mistake in making Lippi the elder resulted from the erroneous footnotes of Milanesi to Le Vite de piu eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architetti, de Giorgie Vasari [English Language Notes, III (March, 1966), 201].

picture for the church. In true realistic spirit, Fra Lippo will paint himself in the corner of the picture and will be entitled to do so, he explains, because he will have made the picture. By painting the picture, Fra Lippo will accomplish two goals:

And so all's saved for me, and for the church
A pretty picture gained.

(ll. 388-389)

Thus, the irrepressible friar, having demonstrated to his audience the very spirit of the middle Renaissance, a striving to capture and to blend the spiritual and the natural, leaves in the coming dawn. The dawn of the full Renaissance was near, a time when the struggling blossom of Fra Lippo's painting reached glorious flower in the work of Raphael. The mature flower, however, after reaching perfection, soon waned. So it was that Italian art entered into the last period of the Renaissance.

CHAPTER IV

THE INERTIA OF THE LATE RENAISSANCE:

"ANDREA DEL SARTO"

With the early Renaissance typified by "Pictor Ignotus" and the mature Renaissance characterized by "Fra Lippo Lippi," Browning presented, in turn, with "Andrea Del Sarto" the epoch of Italian art in the Renaissance when the vitality of the Renaissance spirit no longer sustained the artist. H. B. Cotterill, speaking of one of the late Renaissance artists, declares: "He [the artist] succumbed to the prevalent craze for imitating, and outdoing, Michaelangelo's powerful plastic style. . . ." ¹ Helen Gardner amplifies this statement and, in doing so, advances a reason for the decline in Italian art: "In Michaelangelo we reach a climax in painting so powerful that it overwhelmed the artists of the time, who forsook their own paths to follow in his-- with the result that we have empty copying of his forms entirely lacking in the creative spirit." ² Noting that Andrea del Sarto also suffered from this malady, Harriet

¹A History of Art (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1924), p. 84.

²Gardner, p. 406.

Ford maintains that "prior to his death the forces of the Renaissance had spent themselves. The last word had been spoken in painting. Andrea del Sarto received the mind of the Renaissance without the power of infusing new life into the dying inheritance. . . . Browning shows in him the never-failing emptiness of satisfied attainments, of exhausted inspiration."³ "Andrea Del Sarto," then, the picture of an artist faultless in the execution of his art but lacking the spirit to create, provides a picture of Browning's conception of the waning Renaissance in Italian art.

Browning begins his evocation of the late Renaissance in "Andrea Del Sarto" by showing the supplicating painter yielding to Lucrezia:

But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.⁴

Then Andrea promises Lucrezia that he will do the work she wants him to, that he will give up any artistic privileges concerning the picture to be painted, and that he will give to her the reward for having painted the picture; all this he offers as a bribe for her love:

³"'Andrea del Sarto': A Painter's Poem," Poet Lore, IV (March, 1892), 147.

⁴Robert Browning, "Andrea Del Sarto," The Works of Robert Browning (New York: Ams Press, Inc., 1966), IV, 117, ll. 1-3. (All following quotations from "Andrea Del Sarto" will be taken from this volume.)

I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,
 Treat his own subject after his own way,
 Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
 And shut the money into this small hand
 When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?
 (11. 5-9)

Andrea shows, by his willingness to sacrifice his artistic principles to get money for Lucrezia, a decay in personal values that cannot fail to affect his work.

Andrea, speaking to Lucrezia, presents a picture of age and inertia. He asks, meekly, that she join him at the window and spend the evening with him; the two of them will watch quietly the life passing by on the street below:

I often am much wearier than you think,
 This evening more than usual, and it seems
 As if--forgive now--should you let me sit
 Here by the window with your hand in mine
 And look a half-hour forth on Fiesole,
 Both of one mind, as married people use,
 Quietly, quietly the evening through,
 I might get up to-morrow to my work
 Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try.
 (11. 11-19)

It is interesting to note, here, that the character of Andrea, truly representative of the lessening vitality of the Renaissance, asks only for negative qualities--not to move, not to fight with Lucrezia.

In justifying the time taken to rest, Andrea mentions a subject--money--that occurs frequently in the poem, especially in conjunction with the mention of Lucrezia:⁵

⁵Sydney Mendel, "Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto'," Explicator, XXII (May, 1964), item 77.

Don't count the time lost, neither; you must
 serve
 For each of the five pictures we require:
 It saves a model.

(11. 23-25)

Andrea tells Lucrezia that she should rest so that she can model for the five pictures he must paint; by doing this, she will save them a model's fee. Again, Browning shows that Andrea's concern is with money rather than with the creation of beautiful art.

As his mind shifts to other subjects, Andrea, paying tribute to Lucrezia's beauty, compares her to the moon--an object of silvery cold radiance:

My serpentining beauty, rounds on rounds!
 --How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
 Even to put the pearl there! oh, so sweet--
 My face, my moon, my everybody's moon.

(11. 26-29)

Andrea, in calling Lucrezia his moon and in mentioning the pearl in her ear, names two colors that are pale and that connote coldness. The two words along with the other two main color images in the poem--silver and gray--reinforce, moreover, the sense of weariness and age that dominates the poem. It is not mere coincidence that the silver and gray color images used by Browning in "Andrea Del Sarto" are the hues that predominate in a Del Sarto painting. Confirming the idea that Robert Browning deliberately chose color images to correspond to the painter's color choice,

Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke note in a study-course:
 ". . . the color-tone of the poem of 'Andrea' is like a
 picture by that artist."⁶

Once again, in the following lines, the color imagery
 is most important. A musing Andrea contemplates the present
 scene with an artist's eye:

You smile? why, there's my picture ready made,
 There's what we painters call our harmony!
 A common greyness silvers everything,--
 All in twilight, you and I alike
 --You, at the point of your first pride in me
 (That's gone you know),--but I, at every point;
 My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
 To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.

(11. 33-40)

Andrea's words contrast two very different worlds. He speaks
 of the present as being gray, the twilight, or end of the
 day, and compares the present to the past when, as a youth,
 in the morning of his life, he held high hopes for his life
 and for his art. All hope is gone, now, toward the end of
 the day and toward the end of his life. Just as Andrea
 began his life with eager hopes for his achievement in art,
 so the Italian art Renaissance began with spirit and vital-
 ity. And now, just as Andrea has lost his zest for achieve-
 ment, so, too, has the Renaissance reached the historic
 moment when the creative force behind it is declining.

⁶"Browning Study Program: A Group of Art Poems,--'Old
 Pictures in Florence,' 'Fra Lippo Lippi,' 'Andrea Del Sarto,'
Poet Lore, VIII (October-December, 1896), 591.

This impression of diminution, having been introduced by Andrea in his comparison of the present with the past, is intensified by the painter's next words, words that stress a sense of finality:

That length of convent-wall across the way
 Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside;
 The last monk leaves the garden; days decrease,
 And autumn grows, autumn in everything.
 (ll. 42-45)

Finally, Andrea's reverie brings him to a judgment of himself and his work:

Eh? the whole seems to fall into a shape
 As if I saw alike my work and self
 And all that I was born to be and do,
 A twilight-piece.
 (ll. 46-49)

Having realized and admitted that neither he nor his work has reached the point he is capable of reaching, Andrea tries to fix the blame. His first scapegoat is God:

. . . Love, we are in God's hand.
 How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;
 So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!
 I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!
 (ll. 49-51)

Andrea's musings, however, take another turn as he defends the craftsmanship of his art:

. . . . You don't understand
 Nor care to understand about my art,
 But you can hear at least when people speak:
 And that cartoon, the second from the door

--It is the thing, Love! so such things should be--
 Behold Madonna!--I am bold to say.
 I can do with my pencil what I know,
 What I see, what at bottom of my heart
 I wish for, if I ever wish so deep--
 Do easily, too--when I say, perfectly,
 I do not boast, perhaps: yourself are judge,
 Who listened to the Legate's talk last week,
 And just as much they used to say in France.
 At any rate 'tis easy, all of it!
 No sketches first, no studies, that's long past:
 I do what many dream of, all their lives,
 --Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
 And fail in doing.

(11. 54-71)

Andrea is fully aware of his merits; he knows that his pictures are so natural looking that they can be taken for real persons. He has passed the stage in his work where he must make preliminary sketches before painting; he can do easily and perfectly whatever he sees or wants to do. He achieves effortlessly what other painters, even after great striving, fail to do.

Through Andrea's words Robert Browning calls attention to a principle of art stated by John Ruskin, a principle that Andrea, by his own admission, violates: "The skill of the artist, and the perfection of his art, are never proved until both are forgotten. The artist has done nothing till he has concealed himself,--the art is imperfect which is visible,--the feelings are but feebly touched, if they permit us to reason on the methods of their excitement."⁷ So it is with the work of the artist in "Andrea Del Sarto."

⁷Modern Painters (New York: John W. Lovell Company, n.d.), I, 23.

Andrea's work, so perfect in execution, undoubtedly caused the viewer to respond to the skill of the artist rather than to have an aesthetic experience.

In speaking further of the painters who struggle to achieve, Andrea separates himself from them:

I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive--you don't know how the others strive
To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,--
Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,
(I know his name, no matter)--so much less!
(11. 71-77)

Yet in spite of his technical mastery over most other painters, Andrea realizes that they achieve, in their work, a quality denied him:

Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged.
There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up
brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of
mine.
(11. 78-82)

Again, Andrea acknowledges that something from the minds or hearts of the striving painters infuses their work with an element that he fails to attain in his own work.

As the monologue progresses, Andrea continues to contrast himself and his works to those painters who, having more spirit than he, are capable of offering more to the world, yet who, lacking technical skill, are unable to

express themselves perfectly:

Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I
 know
 Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
 Enter and take their place there sure enough,
 Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
 My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.
 (11. 83-87)

So Andrea voices the cry of those who, capable of understanding great art, of appreciating great art, endowed, even, with the technical skill necessary to produce great art, fail for lack of the creative spirit.

Later, Andrea notes another characteristic which isolates him from the artists of spirit--a lack of passion and consequent disregard of criticism. Andrea knows very well what is lacking in his work, but he is indifferent to judgment because he has stopped trying:⁸

The sudden blood of these men! at a word--
 Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too.
 I, painting from myself and to myself,
 Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame
 Or their praise either. Somebody remarks
 Morello's outline there is wrongly traced,
 His hue mistaken; what of that? or else,
 Rightly traced and well ordered; what of that?
 Speak as they please, what does the mountain care?
 (11. 88-96)

Andrea is satisfied with the work he is doing and cares nothing for either the approval or criticism accorded his work. It was this kind of self-satisfied complacency and

⁸Lawrence S. Poston, III, "Ruskin and Browning's Artists," English Miscellany, XV (1964), 209.

failure to strive always for higher achievements, typified by Andrea del Sarto and multiplied by the great majority of the artists who followed him, that brought about the decline of Italian art in the Renaissance.

Fully aware of his own decline, Andrea, lacking passion, spirit, and goals, expresses the knowledge of what is wrong with his work:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

(11. 97-98)

Andrea knows that some ideal calling forth ever greater efforts on the part of the artist is the necessary quality for producing sublimity in art. Andrea also knows that he lacks this spirit.

Still dwelling upon the lack of spirit in his work, Andrea realizes the futility of effort:

All is silver-grey
Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!
I know both what I want and what might gain,
And yet how profitless to know, to sigh
"Had I been two, another and myself,
"Our head would have o'erlooked the world!"
(11. 98-103)

Andrea knows that his failure to reach the pinnacle of art is due to his own character and that to wish he had been different is pointless.

Having compared himself to the many painters who fail for a reason other than the one for which he himself fails,

Andrea next chooses one specific artist with whom to compare himself, the artist who, perhaps, best represents in his work the glory of the Italian Renaissance--Raphael:

Yonder's a work now, of that famous youth
 The Urbinate who died five years ago.
 ('Tis copied, George Vasari sent it me.)
 Well, I can fancy how he did it all,
 Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,
 Reaching, that heaven might so replenish him,
 Above and through his art--for it gives way;
 That arm is wrongly put--and there again--
 A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,
 Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,
 He means right--that, a child may understand.
 Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:
 But all the play, the insight and the stretch--
 Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?

(11. 104-117)

Andrea looks at a work that had been done by Raphael earlier and notes the technical errors in the work but judges it in the light of its spiritual qualities. Once again emphasis falls on the division between craftsmanship and creativity or, as Andrea remarks, between "body" and "soul." Raphael continued to reach; as a creator he went beyond his ability as a painter. Andrea del Sarto, on the other hand, and by his own admission, fails at the creative level. By failing to strive for higher achievements, by prostituting his talent, and by rationalizing his moral bankruptcy, Andrea contributes not only to the decline of his own work but also to the decline of art in general.

Unwilling yet to accept his own culpability in the matter of his failure, Andrea blames Lucrezia as, earlier,

he had put the burden of his failure on God:

Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
 We might have risen to Rafael, I and you!
 Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think--
 More than I merit, yes, by many times.
 But had you--oh, with the same perfect brow,
 And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
 And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
 The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare--
 Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!
 Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
 "God and the glory! never care for gain.
 "The present by the future, what is that?
 "Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!
 "Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!

(11. 118-131)

Had she encouraged him, not only with her great beauty but also with an active intelligence, had she but inspired him to paint for future glory rather than for present profit, Andrea believes that he could have achieved a fame as glorious as that of Raphael or Michaelangelo. In linking his own name to two of the three acknowledged masters of the Renaissance, Andrea del Sarto does not, perhaps, err too greatly, according to William Lyon Phelps: "Andrea's pictures are superior technically to those of his great contemporaries--Rafael, Michel Angelo, Leonardo da Vinci--but their imperfect works have a celestial glory, the glory of aspiration, absent from his perfect productions."⁹

In searching for excuses for his failure, Andrea, rather fatalistically, returns to the idea that all occurs

⁹Robert Browning (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1932), p. 206.

as God wills; finally, though, he admits his own part in the failure of his art:

I might have done it for you. So it seems:
Perhaps not. All is as God over-rules.
Beside, incentives come from the soul's self;
The rest avail not. Why do I need you?
What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo?
In this world, who can do a thing, will not;
And who would do it, cannot, I perceive:
Yet the will's somewhat--somewhat, too, the
power--
And thus we half-men struggle.

(11. 132-140)

Andrea understands that, unless the inspiration comes from within the artist, nothing is gained. He sees, also, that the artists who do not have the unity of technical talent and creativity can do little more than struggle to achieve; the great works are done by those artists who, in their work, combine both attributes.

Seeking what comfort he can find, Andrea decides that it is better for him to be underrated now, in this life, because God compensates man after death:

. . . At the end,
 God, I conclude, compensates, punishes.
 'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,
 That I am something underrated here,
 Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.
 (11. 140-144)

(11. 140-144)

Convinced that he will receive amends in heaven for his less-than-ideal life on earth, Andrea turns from his thoughts of heaven to thoughts of a mundane nature--fear:

I dared not, do you know, leave home all day,
 For fear of chancing on the Paris lords.
 The best is when they pass and look aside;
 But they speak sometimes; I must bear it all.
 Well may they speak!

(11. 145-149)

Andrea fears the French lords with reason, as Giorgio Vasari makes clear in his account of the life of Andrea del Sarto, for Andrea, painting in the French King's court, had accepted money from the King to bring art treasures from Italy and, instead, had squandered the money on Lucrezia.¹⁰ In Italy, safe from punishment, Andrea, nevertheless, shrinks in embarrassment when he must face those who know of his betrayal.

Andrea now recalls that wonderful year, before the betrayal, spent painting at the French Court:

. . . That Francis, that
 first time, . . .
 And that long festal year at Fontainebleu!
 I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,
 Put on the glory, Rafael's daily wear,
 In that humane great monarch's golden look,--
 One finger in his beard or twisted curl
 Over his mouth's good mark that made the smile,
 One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,
 The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,
 I painted proudly with his breath on me,
 All his court round him, seeing with his eyes,
 Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of souls
 Profuse, my hand kept playing by those hearts,--
 And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,
 This in the background, waiting on my work,
 To crown the issue with a last reward!
 A good time, was it not, my kingly days?

(11. 149-165)

¹⁰Vasari's Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects, ed. by Edmund Fuller (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968), p. 317.

At this one period in his life under the munificence of the French King and with the approval of the entire court, Andrea had painted, combining talent and creativeness to such an extent that he had achieved, at times, work comparable to Raphael's. Further increasing the pleasure he took in his work at this time was the thought that, back in Florence, Lucrezia was waiting for him. It is the memory of this early work that now brings such pleasure to the aging, failing artist.

Still recounting this past event, Andrea goes on to recall that Lucrezia had grown restless and that he, despite the brilliant work he was producing, had gone to her, considering her a greater reward than achievement in his work:

And had you not grown restless. . .but I know--
 'Tis done and past; 't was right, my instinct said;
 Too live the life grew, golden and not grey,
 And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt
 Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.
 How could it end in any other way?
 You called me, and I came home to your heart.
 The triumph was--to reach and stay there; since
 I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost?

(ll. 166-174)

Praising the beauty of Lucrezia, Andrea persuades himself that men, seeing her beauty on canvas and knowing that she is his wife, will understand his actions and pardon them. Again trying to rationalize his faults, Andrea speaks of her physical beauty and admits that other Madonnas are better to pray by, thus intimating a lack of spirituality in

Lucrezia and setting up a parallel to his own work: just as Lucrezia is physically beautiful and spiritually deficient so Andrea's art is technically perfect but spiritually dead.¹¹

Unable to shift the subject from his loss of integrity, Andrea recalls a compliment paid him years ago by Michael-angelo; the recollection so fires him that he dares to change, momentarily, the line of one of Raphael's paintings. Then, overcome by the knowledge of Raphael's spiritual supremacy, he is shamed and marks the correction out:

--And indeed the arm is wrong.
I hardly dare...yet, only you to see,
Give the chalk here--quick, thus the line should go!
Ay, but the soul! he's Raphael! rub it out!
(11. 194-197)

Notwithstanding the glory that might have been his, Andrea now desires only that his sacrifice has caused Lucrezia to be--not daring the word "grateful"--more pleased with him:

Still, all I care for, if he spoke the truth,
If really there was such a chance, so lost,--
Is, whether you're--not grateful--but more
pleased.
Well, let me think so.
(11. 198-203)

After Andrea's words, Lucrezia smiles, and Andrea, perhaps encouraged by the smile and grateful for the hour's

¹¹Poston, p. 209.

rest with her, tells her he could accomplish more, give her more if she would sit by him each evening like this, but then he notes that night has come:

And you smile indeed!
 This hour has been an hour! Another smile?
 If you would sit thus by me every night
 I should work better, do you comprehend?
 I mean that I should earn more, give you more.
 See, it is settled dusk now; there's a star;
 Morello's gone, the watch-lights show the wall,
 The cue-owls speak the name we call them by.
(11. 203-210)

It is significant to note that nightfall comes immediately after Andrea defines his meaning of "to work better." By the phrase Andrea means not to paint greater pictures but to paint more pictures and to earn more money. At this stage in his life, a stage that corresponds not only to the dying day but also to the waning Renaissance, Andrea cleaves to the flesh; he works for Lucrezia and for money.

Attempting to prolong the time of intimacy he thinks the two of them have shared, Andrea tries to draw Lucrezia into their little house that, at times, causes him to feel a sense of guilt:

Come from the window, love,--come in, at last,
 Inside the melancholy little house
 We built to be so gay with. God is just.
 King Francis may forgive me: oft at nights
 When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
 The walls become illumined, brick from brick
 Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold,
 That gold of his I did cement them with!
 Let us but love each other.
(11. 211-219)

Lucrezia, however, rejects Andrea's plea, telling him that her cousin is waiting outside to see her and needs more money. Andrea, in accepting the word "cousin" for the euphemism it is, once again allows himself to be deceived by Lucrezia. In tracing the meaning of the word "cousin," Waldo F. McNair states:

The word cousin had a special sense in the Renaissance that Browning evidently understood and intended. There can be no doubt that such a well-read, word-conscious, oddly-dictioned poet knew the etymological kinship of cousin and cozen, the latter derived from the former and hence meaning literally to deceive through a pretext of consanguinity.¹²

Investigating the "cousin's" historical authenticity, McNair states: "Lucrezia's 'cousin' is a dramatic invention, since no such lover is mentioned by Vasari in his life of Andrea del Sarto."¹³ Barbara Melchiori, however, suggests a possible source for the "cousin" used by Browning in a French play, André del Sarto, by Alfred De Musset. According to Melchiori, both Browning and De Musset used Vasari's Le Vite dei Piu Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architetti, in which no mention is made of a lover, as the source of information about the painter and his life, but she believes Browning borrowed

¹²"Lucrezia's 'cousin' in Browning's 'Andrea Del Sarto,'" Notes and Queries, CCI (January-December, 1956), 501.

¹³McNair, p. 500.

certain points, notably the existence of a "cousin," from De Musset.¹⁴

At any rate, Andrea's use of the euphemism demonstrates again his desire to yield rather than struggle. Andrea is not in the least deceived by Lucrezia, the "cousin," or himself; he is willing to pay the price of loss of hope, loss of self-respect, and loss of values in order to keep Lucrezia:

Well, let smiles buy me! have you more to spend?
While hand and eye and something of a heart
Are left me, work's my ware, and what's it worth?
I'll pay my fancy.

(ll. 223-226)

At this point, Andrea desires now only peace and a final chance to paint a great picture:

Only let me sit
The grey remainder of the evening out,
Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly
How I could paint, were I but back in France,
One picture, just one more--the Virgin's face,
Not yours this time!

(ll. 226-231)

As L. Robert Stevens has noted in regard to Andrea's dream, the "'faultless painter,' like Lippo, envisions 'One picture, just one more--the Virgin's face,/Not yours this time!'" But, unlike Lippo, he falls away from the task, for he cannot do it without Lucrezia--whose cousin whistles. He lacks the

¹⁴"Browning's 'Andrea Del Sarto': A French Source in De Musset," Victorian Poetry, IV (Spring, 1964), 136.

inner resource which will generate the grand vision within him."¹⁵

Although he dreams grandiosely, Andrea is fully aware of the spiritual deficiency that mars his paintings, for he seeks, in his work, not to create but to please Lucrezia:

To-morrow, satisfy your friend.
I take the subjects for his corridor,
Finish the portrait out of hand--there, there,
And throw him in another thing or two
If he demurs; the whole should prove enough
To pay for this same Cousin's freak. Beside,
What's better and what's all I care about,
Get you the thirteen scudi for the ruff!
Love, does that please you?

(11. 234-243)

Ending his period of meditation, Andrea accepts, fatalistically, his lot:

I am grown peaceful as old age to-night.
I regret little, I would change still less.
Since there my past life lies, why alter it?

(11. 244-246)

In spite of realizing all that he has thrown away, Andrea is not concerned. Could he live the past over again, he would act the same. His morals have become so debased that he feels no sorrow; as a matter of fact, he damns himself even more by his final rationalization:

The very wrong to Francis!--it is true
I took his coin, was tempted and complied,
And built this house and sinned, and all is said.
My father and my mother died of want.

¹⁵Stevens, p. 24.

Well, had I riches of my own? you see
 How one gets rich! Let each one bear his lot.
 They were born poor, lived poor, and poor they
 died:

And I have laboured somewhat in my time
 And not been paid profusely. Some good son
 Paint my two hundred pictures--let him try!
 No doubt, there's something strikes a balance.
 (11. 247-257)

Crediting himself for having worked hard all his life, Andrea discounts his betrayal of the French King and excuses his part in the deaths of his parents from poverty. According to Andrea, he was tempted, and he sinned; however, as a result of his many works of art, he has somewhat made up for his acts.

Andrea, though, in his work, realizes his spiritual inadequacy in comparison to the three masters of Renaissance art, and yet he yearns to be identified with them. He thinks, briefly, that perhaps his chance will come in heaven, but, finally, he admits that, even there, he cannot subdue his own nature; even there, he will choose Lucrezia:

What would one have?
 In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more
 chance--
 Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
 Meted on each side by the angel's reed,
 For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me
 To cover--the three first without a wife,
 While I have mine! So--still they overcome
 Because there's still Lucrezia,--as I choose.

Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my love.
 (11. 259-267)

By his submission to Lucrezia's way of life and its inherent values, Andrea del Sarto fails to achieve the eminence in painting that should have been his, if judged solely on the basis of his technical skill. He fails because he lacks the ability to strive and to create. As Daniel Dorchester has stated: "Andrea del Sarto, it is true, occasionally rises to a great dignity of expression, but the general level of his art, as of his life, was low, stereotyped, and sordid."¹⁶ Certainly, the life a man lives cannot fail to influence his work, and Andrea's life, with values thrown away, parents sacrificed unfeelingly, and talent prostituted, is a representation of the spiritual decline that was taking place during the late Renaissance.

¹⁶Dorchester, p. 107.

CONCLUSION

Painting held a deep significance for Robert Browning. From the time he was a child, poring over art books in his father's library, through the years spent in Italy, that treasure-house of artistic achievement, until his return to England, Robert Browning never lost his enthusiasm for art. Knowing a great deal about the history of art and about the famous artists as well as lesser-known ones, quite naturally Browning treated the subject of art in his poetry, and in three of his art poems, Browning presents studies of artists that depict, in their lives and characters, certain distinguishing characteristics that appeared at different stages in the development of Italian art in the Renaissance.

In "Pictor Ignotus" Robert Browning portrays a painter faced with the choice of adopting the newer, more realistic art or clinging to the older, more symbolic style of the medieval artist. The painter, as undoubtedly did so many in the early Renaissance, chose to stay with the old form. On the other hand, "Fra Lippo Lippi" represents the middle Renaissance, a time when art was characterized by a combination of spiritualism and naturalism, two qualities that, when joined in an artist, produced the masterpieces of the

Italian Renaissance. Unlike the positive qualities portrayed in these poems, "Andrea Del Sarto" depicts a spiritually spent artist of the late Renaissance, a time when the creative force of the Renaissance had exhausted itself.

Of the three painters, only Fra Lippo Lippi was able to achieve the balance of spirit and flesh that enabled him to paint whole works. Pictor Ignotus, because of a fear of being judged by the world, chose the safe way; he retired from life to paint in the gloom of the churches. Andrea, however, had lost his moral integrity and thereby crippled his art. As the portraits of these three artists reveal, Robert Browning has captured the anxieties, the exuberance, and the frustrations that marked the birth, growth, and decay of one of the most monumental periods of art ever recorded.

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