

I. Conditions of trade

I. A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY painting is the deposit of a social relationship. On one side there was a painter who made the picture, or at least supervised its making. On the other side there was somebody else who asked him to make it, provided funds for him to make it and, after he had made it, reckoned on using it in some way or other. Both parties worked within institutions and conventions—commercial, religious, perceptual, in the widest sense social—that were different from ours and influenced the forms of what they together made.

The man who asked for, paid for, and found a use for the painting might be called the *patron*, except that this is a term that carries many overtones from other and rather different situations. This second party is an active, determining and not necessarily benevolent agent in the transaction of which the painting is the result: we can fairly call him a *client*. The better sort of fifteenth-century painting was made on a bespoke basis, the client asking for a manufacture after his own specifications. Ready-made pictures were limited to such things as run-of-the-mill Madonnas and marriage chests painted by the less sought after artists in slack periods; the altar-pieces and frescoes that most interest us were done to order, and the client and the artist commonly entered into a legal agreement in which the latter committed himself to delivering what the former, with a greater or lesser amount of detail, had laid down.

The client paid for the work, then as now, but he allotted his funds in a fifteenth-century way and this could affect the character of the paintings. The relationship of which the painting is the deposit was among other things a commercial relationship, and some of the economic practices of the period are quite concretely embodied in the paintings. Money is very important in the history of art. It acts on painting not only in the matter of a client being willing to spend money on a work, but in the details of how he hands it over. A client like Borso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, who makes a point of paying for his paintings by the square foot—for the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia Borso's rate was ten Bolognese *lire* for the square *piede*—will tend to get a different

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sort of painting from a commercially more refined man like the Florentine merchant Giovanni de' Bardi who pays the painter for his materials and his time. Fifteenth-century modes of costing manufactures, and fifteenth-century differential payments of masters and journeymen, are both deeply involved in the style of the paintings as we see them now: paintings are among other things fossils of economic life.

And again, pictures were designed for the client's use. It is not very profitable to speculate about individual clients' motives in commissioning pictures: each man's motives are mixed and the mixture is a little different in each case. One active employer of painters, the Florentine merchant Giovanni Rucellai, noted he had in his house works by Domenico Veneziano, Filippo Lippi, Verrocchio, Pollaiuolo, Andrea del Castagno and Paolo Uccello—along with those of a number of goldsmiths and sculptors—the best masters there have been for a long time not only in Florence but in Italy. His satisfaction about personally owning what is good is obvious. Elsewhere, speaking now more of his very large expenditure on building and decorating churches and houses, Rucellai suggests three more motives: these things give him the greatest contentment and the greatest pleasure because they serve the glory of God, the honour of the city, and the commemoration of myself. In varying degrees these must have been powerful motives in many painting commissions; an altarpiece in a church or a fresco cycle in a chapel certainly served all three. And then Rucellai introduces a fifth motive: buying such things is an outlet for the pleasure and virtue of spending money well, a pleasure greater than the admittedly substantial one of making money. It is a less whimsical remark than it seems at first. For a conspicuously wealthy man, particularly someone like Rucellai who had made money by charging interest, by usury indeed, spending money on such public amenities as churches and works of art was a necessary virtue and pleasure, an expected repayment to society, something between a charitable donation and the payment of taxes or church dues. As such gestures went, one is bound to say, a painting had the advantage of being both noticeable and cheap: bells, marble paving, brocade hangings or other such gifts to a church were more expensive. Finally, there is a sixth motive which Rucellai—a man whose descriptions of things and whose record as a builder are not those of a visually insensitive person—does not mention but which one is ready to attribute to him, an element of enjoyment in looking at good paintings: in another context he might not have been shy of speaking about this.

The pleasure of possession, an active piety, civic consciousness of one or another kind, self-commemoration and perhaps self-advertisement, the rich man's necessary virtue and pleasure of reparation, a taste for pictures: in fact, the client need not analyse his own motives much because he generally worked through institutional forms—the altarpiece, the frescoed family chapel, the Madonna in the bedroom, the cultured wall-furniture in the study—which implicitly rationalized his motives for him, usually in quite flattering ways, and also went far towards briefing the painter on what was needed. And anyway for our purpose it is usually enough to know the obvious, that the primary use of the picture was for looking at: they were designed for the client and people he esteemed to look at, with a view to receiving pleasing and memorable and even profitable stimulations.

These are all points this book will return to. For the moment, the one general point to be insisted on is that in the fifteenth century painting was still too important to be left to the painters. The picture trade was a quite different thing from that in our own late romantic condition, in which painters paint what they think best and then look round for a buyer. We buy our pictures ready-made now; this need not be a matter of our having more respect for the artist's individual talent than fifteenth-century people like Giovanni Rucellai did, so much as of our living in a different sort of commercial society. The pattern of the picture trade tends to assimilate itself to that of more substantial manufactures: post-romantic is also post-Industrial Revolution, and most of us now buy our furniture ready-made too. The fifteenth century was a period of bespoke painting, however, and this book is about the customer's participation in it.

2. In 1457 Filippo Lippi painted a triptych for Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici; it was intended as a gift to King Alfonso V of Naples, a minor ploy in Medici diplomacy. Filippo Lippi worked in Florence, Giovanni was sometimes out of the city, and Filippo tried to keep in touch by letter:

I have done what you told me on the painting, and applied myself scrupulously to each thing. The figure of St. Michael is now so near finishing that, since his armour is to be of silver and gold and his other garments too, I have been to see Bartolomeo Martelli: he said he would speak with Francesco Cantasanti about the gold and what you want, and that I should do exactly what you wish. And he chided me, making out that I have wronged you.

Now, Giovanni, I am altogether your servant here, and shall be so in deed. I have had fourteen florins from you, and I wrote to you that my expenses would come to thirty florins, and it comes to that much because the picture is rich in its ornament. I beg you to arrange with Martelli to be your agent in this work, and if I need something to speed the work along, I may go to him and it will be seen to . . .

If you agree . . . to give me sixty florins to include materials, gold, gilding and painting, with Bartolomeo acting as I suggest, I will for my part, so as to cause you less trouble, have the picture finished completely by 20 August, with Bartolomeo as my guarantor . . . And to keep you informed, I send a drawing of how the triptych is made of wood, and with its height and breadth. Out of friendship to you I do not want to take more than the labour costs of 100 florins for this: I ask no more. I beg you to reply, because I am languishing here and want to leave Florence when I am finished. If I have presumed too much in writing to you, forgive me. I shall always do what you want in every respect, great and small.

Valeta. 20 July 1457.
Fra Filippo the painter, in Florence.

Underneath the letter Filippo Lippi provided a sketch of the triptych as planned (plate 1). Left to right, he sketched a St.

1. Filippo Lippi. *Sketch of an Altarpiece* (1457). Florence, Archivio di Stato (Med. av. Pr., VI, no. 258). Pen.



Bernard, an Adoration of the Child, and a St. Michael; the frame of the altarpiece, the point about which he is particularly asking approval, is drawn in a more finished way.

A distinction between 'public' and 'private' does not fit the functions of fifteenth-century painting very well. Private men's commissions often had very public roles, often in public places; an altarpiece or a fresco cycle in the side-chapel of a church is not private in any useful sense. A more relevant distinction is between commissions controlled by large corporate institutions like the offices of cathedral works and commissions from individual men or small groups of people: collective or communal undertakings on the one hand, personal initiatives on the other. The painter was typically, though not invariably, employed and controlled by an individual or small group.

It is important that this should have been so, because it means that he was usually exposed to a fairly direct relationship with a lay client—a private citizen, or the prior of a confraternity or monastery, or a prince, or a prince's officer; even in the most complex cases the painter normally worked for somebody identifiable, who had initiated the work, chosen an artist, had an end in view, and saw the picture through to completion. In this he differed from the sculptor, who often worked for large communal enterprises—as Donatello worked so long for the Wool Guild's administration of the Cathedral works in Florence—where lay control was less personal and probably very much less complete. The painter was more exposed than the sculptor, though in the nature of things clients' day-to-day interference is not usually recorded; Filippo Lippi's letter to Giovanni de' Medici is one of rather few cases where one can clearly sense the weight of the client's hand. But in what areas of the art did the client directly intervene?

There is a class of formal documents recording the bare bones of the relationship from which a painting came, written agreements about the main contractual obligations of each party. Several hundred of these survive, though the greater part refer to paintings that are now lost. Some are full-dress contracts drawn up by a notary, others are less elaborate *ricordi*, memoranda to be held by each side: the latter have less notarial rhetoric but still had some contractual weight. Both tended to the same range of clauses.

There are no completely typical contracts because there was no fixed form, even within one town. One agreement less untypical than many was between the Florentine painter, Domenico

Ghirlandajo, and the Prior of the Spedale degli Innocenti at Florence; it is the contract for the *Adoration of the Magi* (1488) still at the Spedale (plate 2):

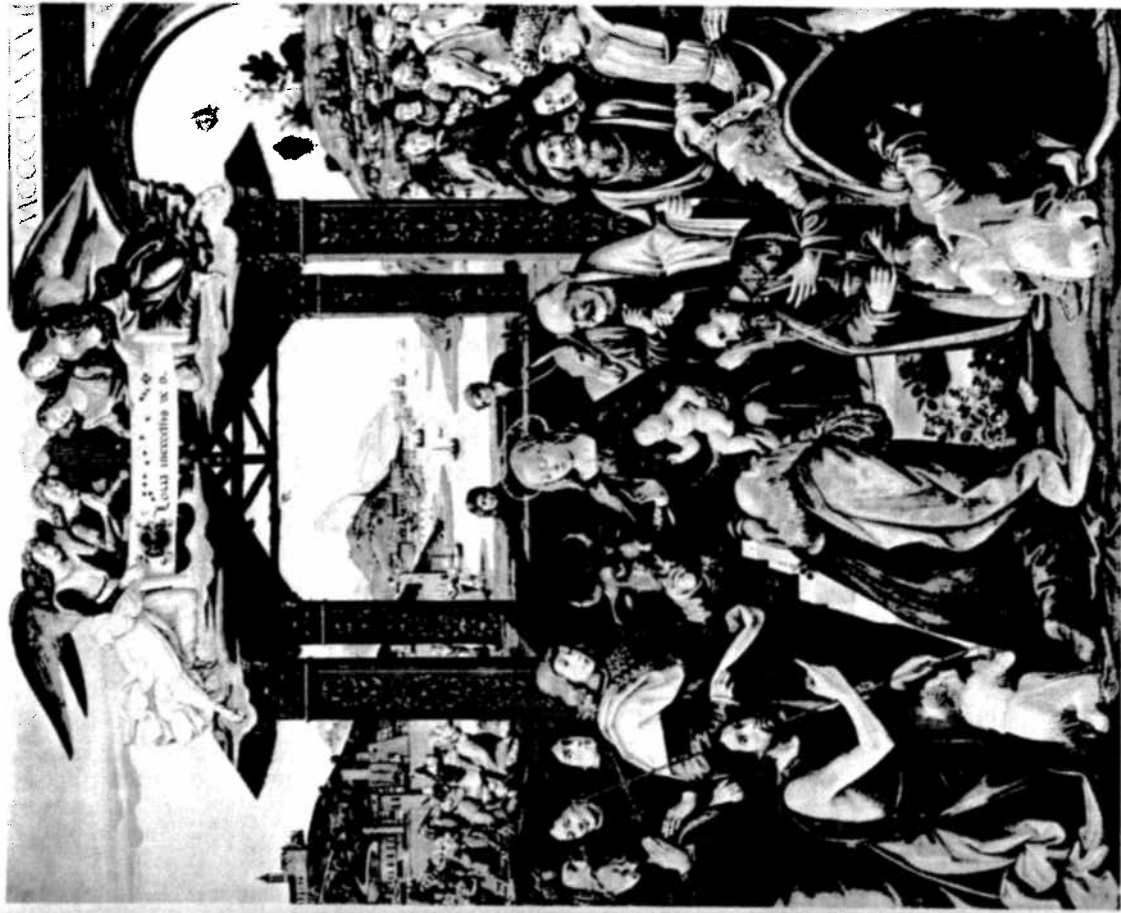
Be it known and manifest to whoever sees or reads this document that, at the request of the reverend Messer Francesco di Giovanni Tesori, presently Prior of the Spedale degli Innocenti at Florence, and of Domenico di Tomaso di Curado [Ghirlandajo], painter, I, Fra Bernardo di Francesco of Florence, Jesuate Brother, have drawn up this document with my own hand as agreement contract and commission for an altar panel to go in the church of the abovesaid Spedale degli Innocenti with the agreements and stipulations stated below, namely:

That this day 23 October 1485 the said Francesco commits and entrusts to the said Domenico the painting of a panel which the said Francesco has had made and has provided; the which panel the said Domenico is to make good, that is, pay for; and he is to colour and paint the said panel all with his own hand in the manner shown in a drawing on paper with those figures and in that manner shown in it, in every particular according to what I, Fra Bernardo, think best; not departing from the manner and composition of the said drawing; and he must colour the panel at his own expense with good colours and with powdered gold on such ornaments as demand it, with any other expense incurred on the same panel, and the blue must be ultramarine of the value about four florins the ounce; and he must have made and delivered complete the said panel within thirty months from today; and he must receive as the price of the panel as here described (made at his, that is, the said Domenico's, expense throughout) 115 large florins if it seems to me, the abovesaid Fra Bernardo, that it is worth it; and I can go to whoever I think best for an opinion on its value or workmanship, and if it does not seem to me worth the stated price, he shall receive as much less as I, Fra Bernardo, think right; and he must within the terms of the agreement paint the predella of the said panel as I, Fra Bernardo, think good; and he shall receive payment as follows—the said Messer Francesco must give the abovesaid Domenico three large florins every month, starting from 1 November 1485 and continuing after as is stated, every month three large florins. . . .

And if Domenico has not delivered the panel within the abovesaid period of time, he will be liable to a penalty of fifteen large florins; and correspondingly if Messer Francesco does not keep to the abovesaid monthly payments he will be liable to a penalty of the whole amount, that is, once the panel is finished he will have to pay complete and in full the balance of the sum due.

Both parties sign the agreement.

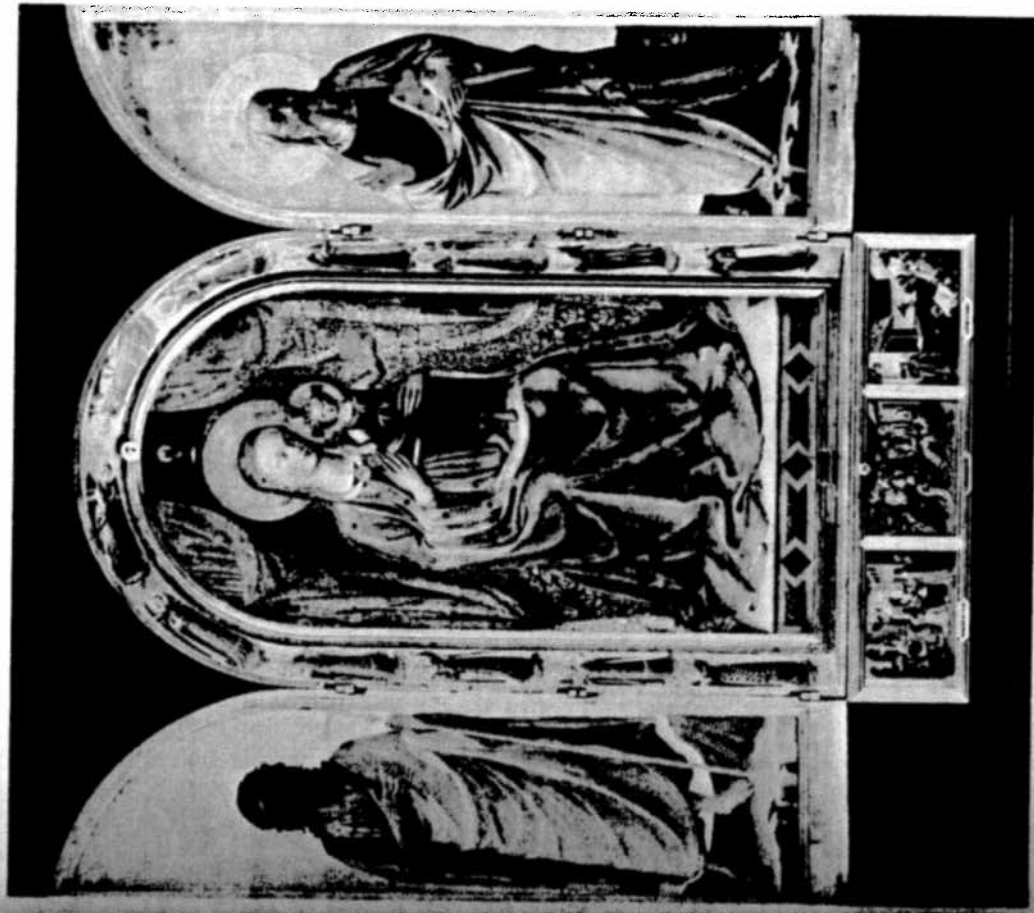
This contract contains the three main themes of such agreements: (i) it specifies what the painter is to paint, in this case through his commitment to an agreed drawing; (ii) it is explicit



about how and when the client is to pay, and when the painter is to deliver; (iii) it insists on the painter using a good quality of colours, specially gold and ultramarine. Details and exactness varied from contract to contract.

Instructions about the subject of a picture do not often go into great detail. A few contracts enumerate the individual figures to be represented, but the commitment to a drawing is more usual and was clearly more effective: words do not lend themselves to very clear indication of the sorts of figure wanted. The commitment was usually a serious one. Fra Angelico's altarpiece of 1433 for the Linen-maker's Guild at Florence was of this kind (plate 3); in view of the sanctity of his life the matter of price was exceptionally entrusted to his conscience—190 florins or however much less he considers proper—but, saintliness only trusted so far, he is bound not to deviate from his drawing. Around the drawing there would have been discussion between the two sides. In 1469 Pietro Calzetta contracted to paint frescoes in the Gattamelata chapel of S. Antonio at Padua, and the stages by which agreement would be reached are clearly stated in the contract. The donor's representative, Antonfrancesco de' Dotti, is to state the subjects to be painted; Calzetta will agree to these subjects; he will produce a design (*designum cum fantasia seu istoria*) and give it to Antonfrancesco; on the basis of this Antonfrancesco will give further instructions on the painting and finally decide whether the finished product is acceptable. If there was difficulty in describing the sort of finish wanted, this could often be done by reference to another picture: for example, Neri di Bicci of Florence undertook in 1454 to colour and finish an altarpiece in S. Trinita after the same fashion as the altarpiece he had made for a Carlo Benizi in S. Felicità in 1453.

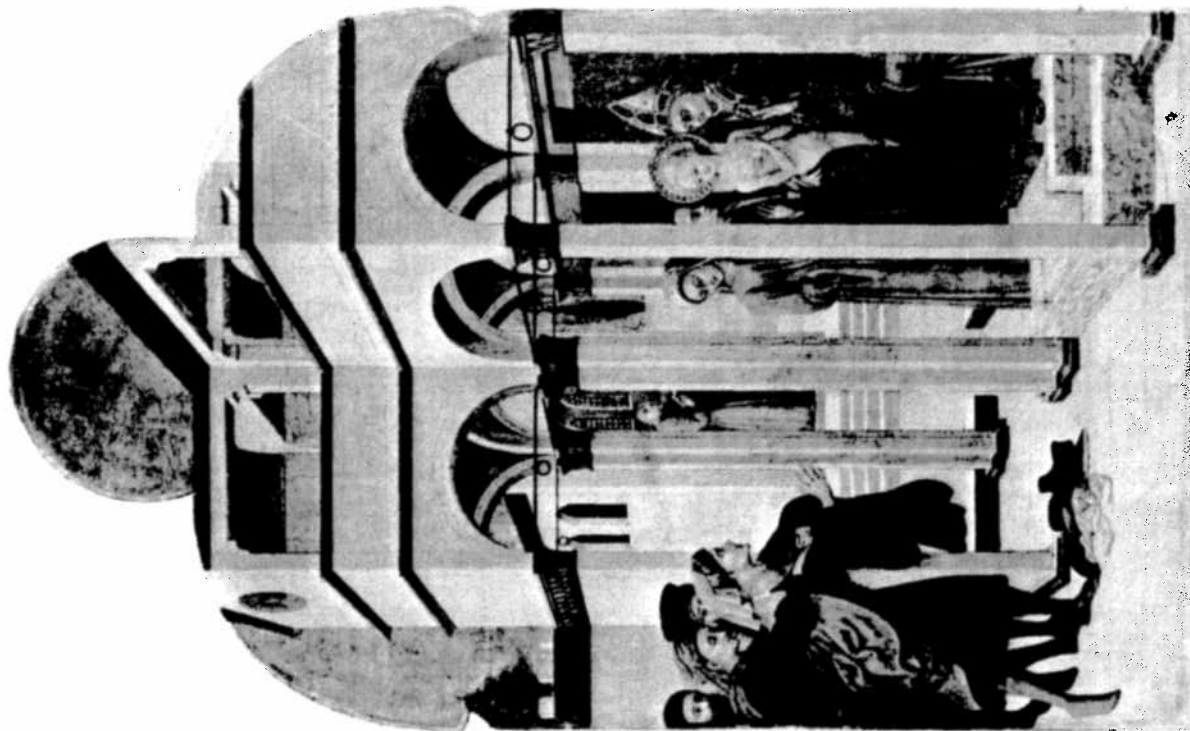
Payment was usually in the form of one inclusive sum paid in instalments, as in Ghirlandaio's case, but sometimes the painter's expenses were distinguished from his labour. A client might provide the costlier pigments and pay the painter for his time and skill: when Filippino Lippi painted the life of St. Thomas in S. Maria sopra Minerva at Rome (1488-93) Cardinal Caraffa gave him 2,000 ducats for his personal part and paid for his assistants and the ultramarine separately. In any case the two headings of expenses and of the painter's labour were the basis for calculating payment: as Neri de' Bicci noted, he was 'paid for gold and for applying it and for colours and for my workmanship.' The sum agreed in a contract was not quite inflexible, and



if a painter found himself making a loss on a contract he could usually renegotiate: in the event Ghirlandaio, who had undertaken to provide a predella for the Innocenti altarpiece under the original 115 florins, got a supplementary seven florins for this. If the painter and client could not agree on the final sum, professional painters could act as arbitrators, but usually matters did not come to this point.

Ghirlandaio's contract insists on the painter using a good quality of colours and particularly of ultramarine. The contracts' general anxiety about the quality of blue pigment as well as of gold was reasonable. After gold and silver, ultramarine was the most expensive and difficult colour the painter used. There were cheap and dear grades and there were even cheaper substitutes, generally referred to as German blue. (Ultramarine was made from powdered lapis lazuli expensively imported from the Levant; the powder was soaked several times to draw off the colour and the first yield—a rich violet blue—was the best and most expensive. German blue was just carbonate of copper; it was less splendid in its colour and, much more seriously, unstable in use, particularly in fresco.) To avoid being let down about blues, clients specified ultramarine; more prudent clients stipulated a particular grade—ultramarine at one or two or four florins an ounce. The painters and their public were alert to all this and the exotic and dangerous character of ultramarine was a means of accent that we, for whom dark blue is probably no more striking than scarlet or vermillion, are liable to miss. We can follow well enough when it is used simply to pick out the principal figure of Christ or Mary in a biblical scene, but the interesting uses are more subtle than this. In Sassetta's panel of *St. Francis Renouncing his Heritage* in the National Gallery (plate 4) the gown St. Francis discards is an ultramarine gown. In Masaccio's expensively pigmented *Crucifixion*, the vital narrative gesture of St. John's right arm is an ultramarine gesture. And so on. Even beyond this the contracts point to a sophistication about blues, a capacity to discriminate between one and another, with which our own culture does not equip us. In 1408 Gherardo Starnina contracted to paint in S. Stefano at Empoli frescoes, now lost, of the *Life of the Virgin*. The contract is meticulous about blue: the ultramarine used for Mary is to be of the quality of two florins to the ounce, while for the rest of the picture ultramarine at one florin to the ounce will do. Importance is registered with a violet tinge.

Of course, not all artists worked within institutions of this kind;



4. Stefano di Giovanni, called Sassetta. *St. Francis Renouncing his Heritage* (1437/44). London, National Gallery. Panel.

in particular, some artists worked for princes who paid them a salary. Mantegna, who worked from 1460 until his death in 1506 for the Gonzaga Marquises of Mantua, is a well documented case and Lodovico Gonzaga's offer to him in April 1458 is very clear: 'I intend to give you fifteen ducats monthly as salary, to provide lodgings where you can live comfortably with your family, to give you enough grain each year to cover generously the feeding of six mouths, and also the firewood you need for your own use. . . . Mantegna, after much hesitation, accepted and in return for his salary not only painted frescoes and panels for the Gonzagas (plate 5), but filled other functions as well. Lodovico Gonzaga to Mantegna, 1469:

I desire that you see to drawing two turkeys from the life, one cock and one hen, and send them to me here, since I want to have them woven by my tapesters: you can have a look at the turkeys in the garden at Mantua.

Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga to Lodovico Gonzaga, 1472:

. . . I beg you to order Andrea Mantegna . . . to come and stay with me [at Foligno]. With him I shall entertain myself by showing him my engraved gems, figures of bronze and other fine antiques; we will study and discuss them together.

Duke of Milan to Federico Gonzaga, 1480:

I am sending you some designs for pictures which I beg you to have painted by your Andrea Mantegna, the famous painter . . .

Federico Gonzaga to Duke of Milan, 1480:

I received the design you sent and urged Andrea Mantegna to turn it into a finished form. He says it is more a book illuminator's job than his, because he is not used to painting little figures. He would do much better a Madonna or something, a foot or a foot and half long, say, if you are willing . . .

Lancillotto de Andreatis to Federico Gonzaga, 1483:

I have bargained with the goldsmith Gian Marco Cavalli about making the bowls and beakers after Andrea Mantegna's design. Gian Marco asks three lire, ten soldi for the bowls and one and a half lire for the beakers . . . I am sending you the design made by Mantegna for the flask, so that you can judge the shape before it is begun.

In practice Mantegna's position was not quite as tidy as Gonzaga's offer proposed. His salary was not always regularly paid; on the other hand, he was given occasional privileges and gifts of land

5. Andrea Mantegna. *Marchese Lodovico Gonzaga Greeting his Son Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga* (1474). Mantua, Palazzo Ducale, Camera degli Sposi. Fresco.



or money, and fees from outside patrons. But Mantegna's position was unusual among the great Quattrocento painters; even those who produced paintings for princes were more commonly paid for a piece of work than as permanent salaried retainers. It was the commercial practice expounded in the contracts, and seen at its clearest in Florence, that set the tone of Quattrocento patronage.

To return to the contracts, though one can generalize this far about them, their details vary a great deal from case to case; and, what is more interesting, there are gradual changes of emphasis in the course of the century. What was very important in 1410 was sometimes less important in 1490: what 1410 had not specially concerned itself with sometimes demanded an explicit commitment in 1490. Two of these shifts of emphasis—one towards less insistence, the other towards more—are very important, and one of the keys to the Quattrocento lies in recognizing that they are associated in an inverse relationship. While precious pigments become less prominent, a demand for pictorial skill becomes more so.

3. As the century progressed contracts became less eloquent than before about gold and ultramarine. They are still commonly mentioned and the grade of ultramarine may even be specified in terms of florins to the ounce—nobody could want the blue to flake off their picture—but they are less and less the centre of attention and the gold is increasingly intended for the frame. Starnina's undertaking of 1408 about different grades of blue for different parts of the picture is very much of his moment: there is nothing quite like it in the second half of the century. This lessening preoccupation with the precious pigments is quite consistent with the paintings as we see them now. It seems that clients were becoming less anxious to flaunt sheer opulence of material before the public than they had previously been.

It would be futile to try to account for this sort of development simply within the history of art. The diminishing role of gold in paintings is part of a general movement in western Europe at this time towards a kind of selective inhibition about display, and this shows itself in many other kinds of behaviour too. It was just as conspicuous in the client's clothes, for instance, which were abandoning gilt fabrics and gaudy hues for the restrained black of Burgundy. This was a fashion with elusive moral overtones; the atmosphere of the mid-century is caught very well in an anecdote told about King Alfonso of Naples by the Florentine bookseller Vespasiano da Bisticci:

There was a Sieneſe ambaffador at Naples who was, as the Sieneſe tend to be, very grand. Now King Alfonso uſually dressed in black, with juſt a buckle in his cap and a gold chain round his neck; he did not uſe brocades or ſilk clothes much. This ambaffador however dressed in gold brocade, very rich, and when he came to ſee the King he always wore this gold brocade. Among his own people the King often made fun of theſe brocade clothes. One day he ſaid, laughing to one of his gentlemen, 'I think we ſhould change the colour of that brocade.' So he arranged to give audience one day in a mean little room, ſummoned all the ambaffadors, and alſo arranged with ſome of his own people that in the through everyone ſhould jostle againſt the Sieneſe ambaffador and rub againſt his brocade. And on the day it was ſo handled and rubbed, not juſt by the other ambaffadors, but by the King himſelf, that when they came out of the room no-one could help laughing when they ſaw the brocade, becauſe it was crimſon now, with the pile all cruſhed and the gold fallen off it, juſt yellow ſilk left: it looked the ugliest rag in the world. When he ſaw him go out of the room with his brocade all ruined and meſſed, the King could not ſtop laughing. . . .

The general ſhift away from gilt ſplendour muſt have had very complex and diſcrete ſources indeed—a frightening ſocial mobility with its problem of diſſociating oneſelf from the flaſhy new rich; the acute physical ſhortage of gold in the fifteenth century; a claſſical diſtaſte for ſenſuous licence now ſeeping out from neo-Ciceronian humaniſm, reinforcing the more acceſſible reaſons for the beſt qualities of Dutch cloth being black anyway; above all, perhaps, the sheer rhythm of fashionable reaſon. Many ſuch factors muſt have coincided here. And the inhibition is not part of a comprehensive ſhift away from public opulence: it was ſelective. Philippe le Bon of Burgundy and Alfonso of Naples were as luſh as ever—if not more ſo—in many other facets of their public lives. Even within the limitation of black coſtume one could be as conſpicuouſly expensive as before, cutting the fineſt Netherlandiſh fabrics waſtefully on the croſs. The orientation of diſplay ſhifted—one direction inhibited, another developed—and diſplay itſelf went on.

The caſe of painting was ſimilar. As the conſpicuous conſumption of gold and ultramarine became leſs important in the con- tracts, its place was filled by references to an equally conſpicuous conſumption of ſomething elſe—ſkill. To ſee how this was ſo— how ſkill could be the natural alternative to precious pigment, and how ſkill could be clearly underſtood as a conſpicuous index of conſumption—one muſt return to the money of painting.

A diſtinction between the value of precious material on the

one hand and the value of skilful working of materials on the other is now rather critical to the argument. It is a distinction that is not alien to us, is indeed fully comprehensible, though it is not usually central to our own thinking about pictures. In the early Renaissance, however, it was *the* centre. The dichotomy between quality of material and quality of skill was the most consistently and prominently recurring motif in everybody's discussion of painting and sculpture, and this is true whether the discussion is ascetic, deploring public enjoyment of works of art, or affirmative, as in texts of art theory. At one extreme one finds the figure of Reason using it to condemn the effect on us of works of art in Petrarch's dialogue *Physic against Fortune*: 'it is the *preciousness*, as I suppose, and not the *art* that pleases you.'

At the other extreme Alberti uses it in his treatise *On painting* to argue for the painter representing even golden objects not with gold itself but through a skilful application of yellow and white pigments:

There are painters who use much gold in their pictures (plate 6), because they think it gives them majesty: I do not praise this. Even if you were painting Virgil's Dido—with her gold quiver, her golden hair fastened with a gold clasp, purple dress with a gold girdle, the reins and all her horse's trappings of gold—even then I would not want you to use any gold, because to represent the glitter of gold with plain colours brings the craftsman more admiration and praise.

One could multiply instances almost indefinitely, the most heterogeneous opinions being united only by their dependence on the same dichotomy between material and skill.

But intellectual concepts are one thing and crass practice is something else: the action of one on the other is usually difficult to demonstrate because it is not likely to be direct or simple. What gave Petrarch's and Alberti's distinction its special charge and geared it immediately into the dimension of practical business was that the same distinction was the whole basis of costing a picture, as indeed any manufacture. One paid for a picture under these same two headings, matter and skill, material and labour, as Giovanni d'Agnolo de' Bardi paid Botticelli for an altarpiece (plate 7) to go in the family chapel at S. Spirito:

Wednesday 3 August 1485:

At the chapel at S. Spirito seventy-eight florins fifteen soldi in payment of seventy-five gold florins in gold, paid to Sandro Botticelli on his reckoning, as follows—two florins for ultramarine, thirty-eight florins for

gold and preparation of the panel, and thirty-five florins for his brush [*pel suo pennello*].

There was a neat and unusual equivalence between the values of the theoretical and the practical. On the one hand, ultramarine, gold for painting with and for the frame, timber for the panel (material); on the other Botticelli's brush (labour and skill).

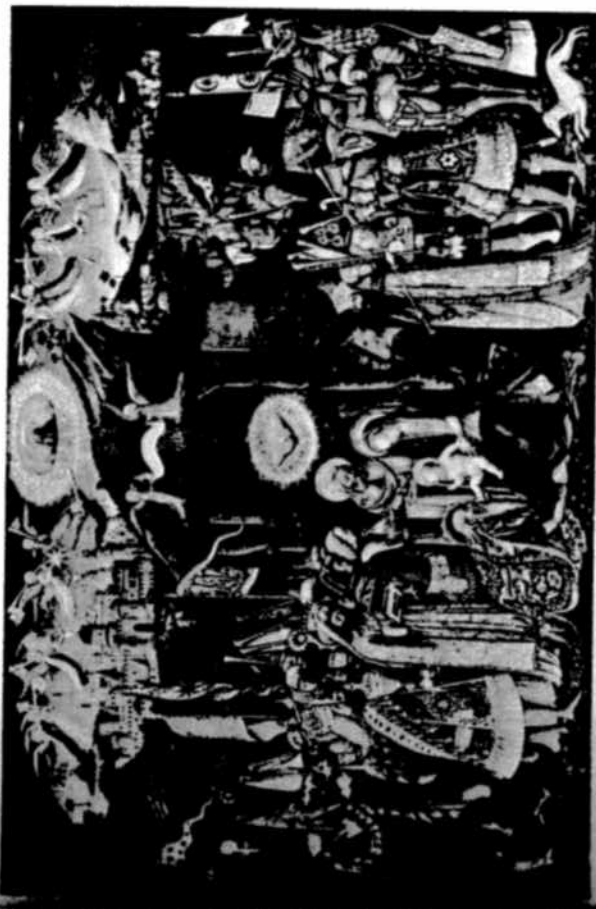
4. There were various ways for the discerning client to switch his funds from gold to 'brush'. For example, behind the figures in his picture he could specify landscapes instead of gilding:

The painter also undertakes to paint in the empty part of the pictures (plate 8)—or more precisely on the ground behind the figures—landscapes and skies [*paese et aere*] and all other grounds too where colour is put: except for the frames, to which gold is to be applied. . . .

(Pinturicchio at S. Maria de' Fossi, Perugia, 1495.)

A contract might even itemize what the client had in mind for his landscapes. When Ghirlandaio contracted in 1485 to paint frescoes for Giovanni Tornabuoni in the choir of S. Maria

6. Antonio Vivarini. *Epiplany* (about 1440). Berlin, Staatliche Museen. Panel.





7. Botticelli. *The Virgin and Child* (1485). Berlin, Staatliche Museen. Panel.

Novella at Florence he agreed to include 'figures, buildings, castles, cities, mountains, hills, plains, rocks, costumes, animals, birds, and beasts of every kind.' Such a demand ensured an expenditure of labour, if not skill.

There was another and more sure means of becoming an expensive purchaser of skill, already gaining ground in the middle of the century: this was the very great relative difference,

in any manufacture, in the value of the master's and the assistants' time within each workshop. We can see that with the painters this difference was substantial. For instance, in 1447 Fra Angelico was in Rome painting frescoes for the new Pope Nicholas V. His work was paid for not with the comprehensive figure usual in commissions from private men or small secular groups but on the basis of his and three assistants' time, materials being provided. An entry from the Vatican accounts will show the four men's respective rates:

23 May 1447.

To Fra Giovanni di Pietro of the Dominican Order, painter working on the chapel of St. Peter, on 23 May, forty-three ducats twenty-seven soldi, towards his allowance of 200 ducats per annum, for the period 13 March to the end of May . . .

To Benozzo da Leso, painter of Florence working in the abovesaid chapel, on the same day eighteen florins twelve soldi towards his allowance of seven florins the month for the period 13 March to the end of May . . .

To Giovanni d'Antonio della Checcha, painter in the same chapel, on the same day two ducats forty-two soldi, towards two and two-fifths

8. Bernardino Pinturicchio. *St. Augustine and the Child*, from the Pala di S. Maria de' Fossi (1495). Perugia, Galleria. Panel.



months at one florin the month, for the period up to the end of May . . .
 2 florins 42 soldi
 To Jacomo d'Antonio da Poli, painter in the same chapel, on 23 May, three florins, his allowance for three months to run up to the end of May at the rate of one florin the month . . .
 3 florins

The annual rate for each of the four, keep excluded, would therefore be:

Fra Angelico	200 florins
Benozzo Gozzoli	84 florins
Giovanni della Checha	12 florins
Jacomo da Poli	12 florins
	108 florins

When the team moved to Orvieto later in the year they got the same rates, except for Giovanni della Checha whose pay doubled from one to two florins the month. Clearly much money could be spent on skill if a disproportionate amount of a painting—disproportionate not by our standards but by theirs—were done by the master of a shop in place of his assistants.

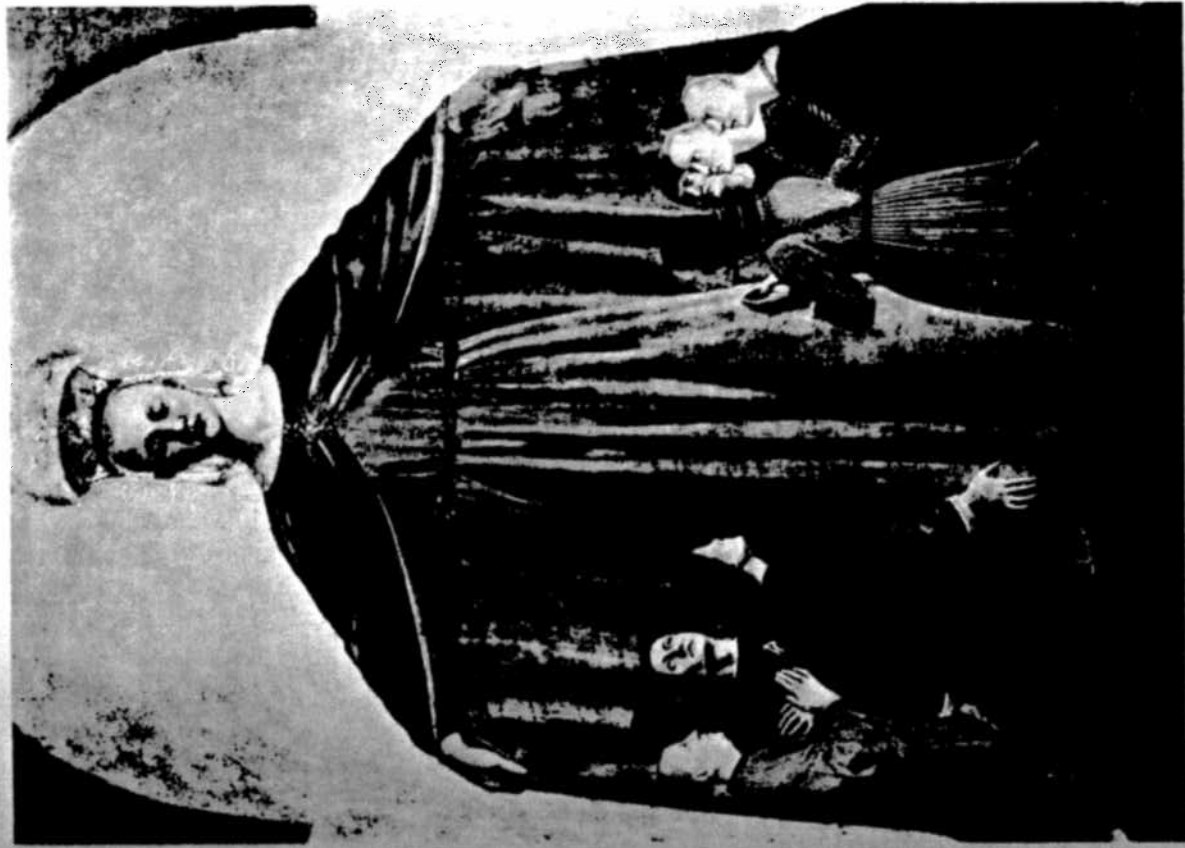
It was this that happened. The contract for Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia* (plate 9):

11 June 1445.

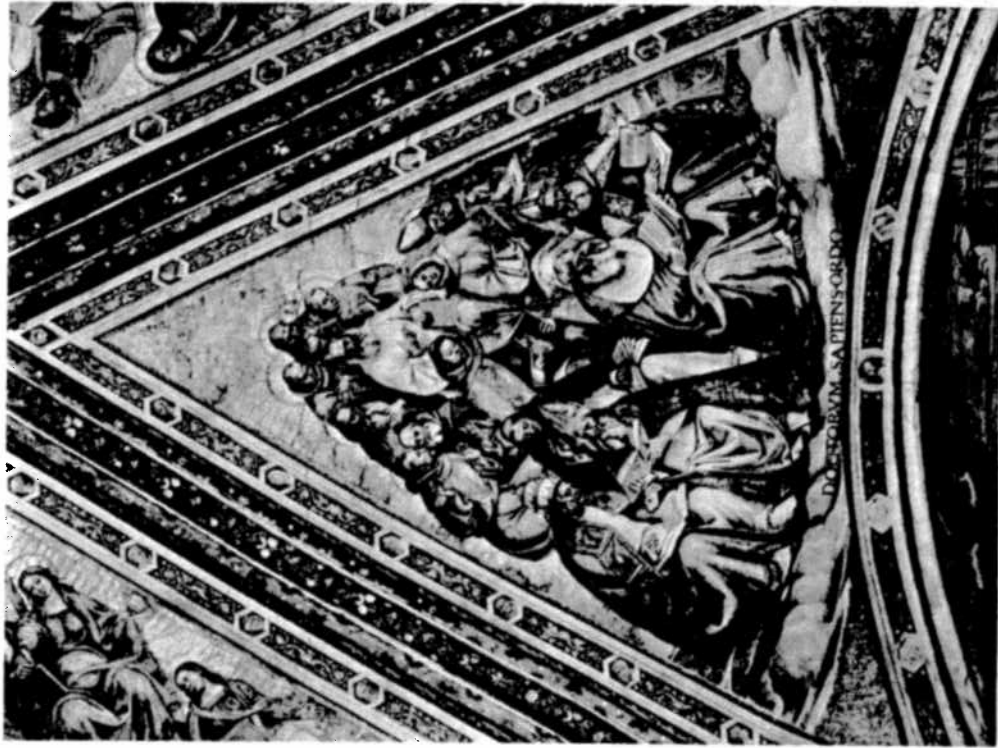
Piero di Luca, Prior, . . . [and seven others] in the behalf and name of the Fraternity and Members of S. Maria della Misericordia have committed to Piero di Benedetto, painter, the making and painting of a panel in the oratory and church of the said Fraternity, of the same form as the panel which is there now, with all the material for it and all the costs and expenses of the complete furnishing and preparation of its painting assembly and erection in the said oratory: with those images figures and ornaments stated and agreed with the abovesaid Prior and advisor or their successors in office and with the other abovesaid officers of the Fraternity; to be gilded with fine gold and coloured with fine colours, and specially with ultramarine blue: with this condition, that the said Piero should be bound to make good any defect the said panel shall develop or show with the passing of time through failure of material or of Piero himself, up to a limit of ten years. For all this they have agreed to pay 150 florins, at the rate of five lire five soldi the florin. Of which they have undertaken to give him on demand fifty florins now and the balance when the panel is finished. And the said Piero has undertaken to make paint decorate and assemble the said panel in the same breadth height and shape as the wooden panel there at present, and to deliver it complete assembled and set in place within the next three years; and that *no painter may put his hand to the brush other than Piero himself*.

This was a panel painting; for large scale fresco commissions the demand could be softened. When Filippino Lippi contracted in

Piero della Francesca. *Madonna della Misericordia* (1445/62). San Sepolcro, Galleria. Panel



1487 to paint frescoes in the Strozzi chapel of S. Maria Novella he undertook that the work should be '... all from his own hand, and particularly the figures' (*tutto di sua mano, e massime le figure*): the clause may be a little illogical, but the implication is obvious—that the figures, more important and difficult than architectural backgrounds, should have a relatively large component of Luca Signorelli. *The Doctors of the Church* (1499/1500). Orvieto, Cathedral, Cappella di S. Brizio. Fresco.



Filippino's personal handiwork in them. There is a precise and realistic clause in Signorelli's contract of 1499 for frescoes in Orvieto Cathedral (plate 10):

The said master Luca is bound and promises to paint [1] all the figures to be done on the said vault, and [2] especially the faces and all the parts of the figures from the middle of each figure upwards, and [3] that no painting should be done on it without Luca himself being present. . . . And it is agreed [4] that all the mixing of colours should be done by the said master Luca himself. . . .

This was one interpretation of how far a master should personally intervene in the carrying out of his designs, on a very large-scale fresco undertaking. And in general the intention of the later contracts is clear: the client will confer lustre on his picture not with gold but with mastery, the hand of the master himself.

By the middle of the century the expensiveness of pictorial skill was very well known. When St. Antoninus, Archbishop of Florence, discussed in his *Summa Theologica* the art of goldsmiths and their proper payment, he used the painters as an example of payment relative to individual skill: 'The goldsmith who endows his works with better skill should be paid more. As is the case in the art of painting, where a great master will demand much more pay—two or three times more—than an unskilled man for making the same type of figure.'

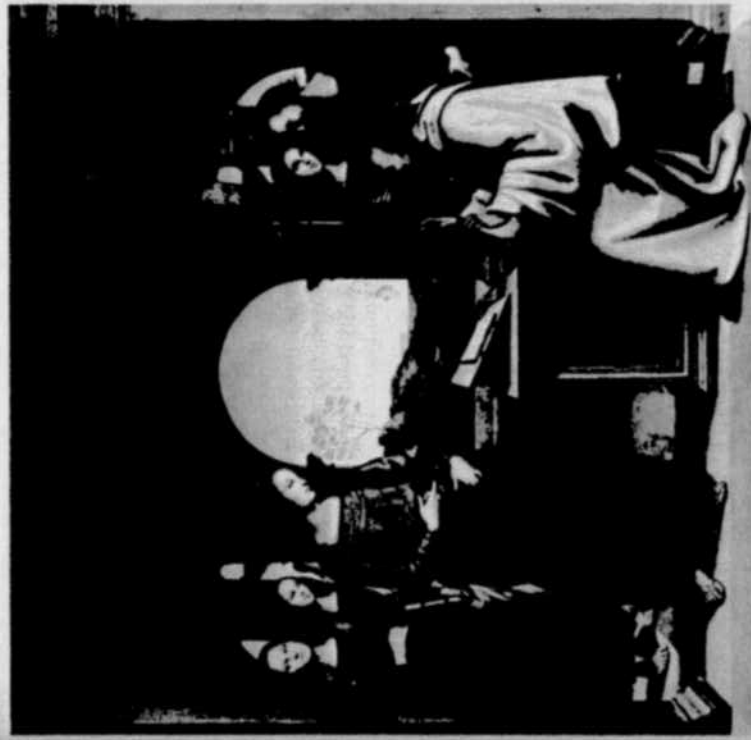
The fifteenth-century client seems to have made his opulent gestures more and more by becoming a conspicuous buyer of skill. Not all clients did so: the pattern described here is a perceptible drift in fifteenth-century contracts, not a norm with which they all comply. Borso d'Este was not the only princely primitive out of touch with the decent commercial practice of Florence and Sansepolcro. But there were enough enlightened buyers of skill, spurred on by an increasingly articulate sense of the artists' individuality, to make the public attitude to painters very different in 1490 from what it had been in 1410.

5. We have come this far with the documents: There were various ways of diverting funds from material to skill: one might direct that a panel have representational rather than gilt backgrounds; more radically, one could demand and pay for a relatively high proportion of the great master's expensive personal attention. For the picture still to make a handsome impression this expensive skill must manifest itself clearly to the beholder. In what specific characters it did this, what were recognized as hallmarks

of the skilled brush, the contracts do not tell us. There is no reason why they should, of course.

And at this point it would be convenient to turn to the records of public response to painting, if only these were not so disabblingly thin. The difficulty is that it is at any time eccentric to set down on paper a verbal response to the complex non-verbal stimulations paintings are designed to provide: the very fact of

11. Filippino Lippi. *The Vision of St. Bernard* (about 1486). Florence, Badia. Panel.



12. Perugino. *The Vision of St. Bernard* (about 1494). Munich, Alte Pinakothek. Panel.

doing so must make a man untypical. There are some fifteenth-century descriptions of the quality of painters, but there are very few indeed one can confidently see as representative of some fairly broad collective view. Some, like Ghiberti's Commentaries, are ineligible because they are written by men who are really artists; some are the work of learned men imitating the ancient art criticism of writers like the elder Pliny. Most of them, because they limit themselves to saying a picture is 'good' or 'skillful', are representative enough but from our point of view unhelpful.

An innocent account of paintings—the everyday vernacular way of talking about their qualities and differences happening to be put down on paper—is obviously something that would only occur under unusual circumstances. There is one specially good example. In about 1490 the Duke of Milan had it in mind

to employ some painters at the Certosa di Pavia and his agent in Florence sent in a memorandum about four painters known there — Botticelli (plate 7), Filippino Lippi (plate 11), Perugino (plate 12), Ghirlandaio (plate 2):

Sandro de Botticello pictore Excellentissimo in tavola et in muro: le cose sue hano aria virile et sono cum optima ragione et integra proportione. Philippino di Frati Philippo optimo: Discipulo del sopra dicto et figliolo del piu singulare maestro di tempo suoi: le sue cose hano aria piu dolce: non credo habiano tanta arte. El Perusino Maestro singulare: et maxime in muro: le sue cose hano aria angelica, et molto dolce. Dominico de Ghirlandaio bono maestro in tavola et piu in muro: le cose sue hano bona aria, et e homo expeditivo, et che conduce assai lavaro: Tutti questi predicti maestri hano facto prova di loro ne la capella di papa syxto excepto che philippino. Ma tutti poi alospedaletto del M^{co} Laur^o et la palma e quasi ambigua.

Sandro Botticelli, an excellent painter both on panel and on wall. His things have a *virile air* and are done with the best *method* and complete *proportion*.

Filippino, son of the very good painter Fra Filippo Lippi: a pupil of the above-mentioned Botticelli and son of the most outstanding master of his time. His things have a *sweeter air* than Botticelli's; I do not think they have as much *skill*.

Perugino, an exceptional master, and particularly on walls. His things have an *angelic air*, and very *sweet*.

Domenico Ghirlandaio, a good master on panels and even more so on walls. His things have a *good air*, and he is an expeditious man and one who gets through much work.

All these masters have made proof of themselves in the chapel of Pope Sixtus IV, except Filippino. All of them later also in the Spedaletto of Lorenzo il Magnifico, and the palm of victory is pretty much in doubt.

The chapel of Pope Sixtus IV refers to the frescoes on the wall of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican; the frescoes at Lorenzo de' Medici's villa of Spedaletto near Volterra have not survived.

A few obvious things emerge clearly: that the distinction between fresco and panel painting is sharp; that the painters are seen very much as individuals in competition; and, more subtly, that there are discriminations to be made not only about one artist being simply *better* than another, but also about one artist being *different* in character from another. But though the report is obviously a genuine attempt to inform, to convey, to Milan the differing qualities of each artist, it is curiously baffling. How much and what does the writer actually know about the painter's *method* or *ragione*? What does *manly* or *virile air* mean in relation to

the painting of Botticelli? In what form is *proportion* perceived in Botticelli? Is it some vague sense of rightness, or did the writer have the equipment to distinguish proportional relationships? What does *sweet air* mean in the context of Filippino, and how is it affected by a relative lack of *skill*? Is Perugino's *angelic air* some identifiable religious quality or a matter of general sentiment? When he speaks of Ghirlandaio's *good air* is this just un-specific praise, or does it refer to some particular stylishness in the area of the French and English versions of the phrase, *de-bon-air*? Of course, when we look at the paintings we can give a sense, our sense, to the Milanese agent's remarks, but it is unlikely that this sense is his. There is a verbal difficulty, the problem of *virile* and *sweet* and *air* having different nuances for him than for us, but there is also the difficulty that he saw the pictures differently from us.

And this is the problem next in order. Both the painter and his public, both Botticelli and the Milanese agent, belonged to a culture very unlike ours, and some areas of their visual activity had been much conditioned by it. This is something rather distinct from the matter we have so far been looking at, the general expectations of painting involved in the Quattrocento painter-client relationship. The first chapter has been concerned with more or less conscious responses by the painter to the conditions of the picture trade; and it has not isolated particular kinds of pictorial interest. The next chapter will have to enter the deeper water of how Quattrocento people, painters and public, attended to visual experience in distinctively Quattrocento ways, and how the quality of this attention became a part of their pictorial style.