EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS BY MARSILIO FICINO

My immense love for you, excellent Lorenzo, has long prompted me to make you an immense present. For anyone who contemplates the heavens, nothing he sets eyes upon seems immense, but the heavens themselves. If, therefore, I make you a present of the heavens themselves what would be its price? But I would rather not talk of the price; for Love, born from the Graces, gives and accepts everything gratis; nor indeed can anything under heaven fairly balance against heaven itself.

The astrologers have it that he is the happiest man for whom Fate has so disposed the heavenly signs that Luna is in no bad aspect to Mars and Saturn, that furthermore she is in favourable aspect to Sol and Jupiter, Mercury and Venus. And just as the astrologers call happy the man for whom fate has thus arranged the heavenly bodies, so the theologians deem him happy who has disposed his own self in a similar way. You may well wonder whether this is not asking too much--it certainly is much, but nevertheless, my gifted Lorenzo, go forward to the task with good cheer, for he who made you is greater than the heavens, and you too will be greater than the heavens as soon as you resolve to face them. We must not look for these matters outside ourselves, for all the heavens are within us and the fiery vigour in us testifies to our heavenly origin.

First Luna--what else can she signify in us but that continuous motion of the soul and of the body? Mars stands for speed, Saturn for tardiness, Sol for God, Jupiter for the Law, Mercury for Reason, and Venus for Humanity (Humanitas).

Onward, then, great-minded youth, gird yourself, and, together with me, dispose your own heavens. Your Luna--the continuous motion of your soul and body--should avoid the excessive speed of Mars and the tardiness of Saturn, that is, it should leave everything to the right and opportune moment, and should not hasten unduly, nor tarry too long. Furthermore this Luna within you should continuously behold the Sun, that is God Himself, from whom she ever receives the life-giving rays, for you must honour Him above all things, to whom you are beholden, and make yourself worthy of the honour. Your Luna should also behold Jupiter, the laws human and divine, which should never be transgressed--for a deviation from the laws by which all things are governed is tantamount to perdition. She should also direct her gaze on Mercury, that is on good counsel, reason and knowledge, for nothing should be undertaken without consulting the wise, nor should anything be said or done for which no plausible reason can be adduced. A man not versed in science and letters is considered blind and deaf. Finally she should fix her eyes on Venus herself, that is to say on Humanity (Humanitas). This serves us as an exhortation and a reminder that we cannot possess anything great on this earth without possessing the men themselves from whose favour all earthly things spring. Men, moreover, cannot be caught by any other bait but that of Humanity (Humanitas). Be careful, therefore, not to despise it, thinking perhaps that 'humanitas' is of earthy origin ('forse existimans humanitatem humi natam').

For Humanity (Humanitas) herself is a nymph of excellent comeliness born of heaven and more than others beloved by God all highest. Her soul and mind are Love and Charity, her eyes Dignity and Magnanimity, the hands Liberality and Magnificence, the feet Comeliness and Modesty. The whole, then, is Temperance and Honesty, Charm and Splendour. Oh, what exquisite beauty! How beautiful to behold My dear Lorenzo, a nymph of such nobility has been wholly given into your power. If you were to unite with her in wedlock and claim her as yours she would make all your years sweet and make you the father of fine children.

In fine, then, to speak briefly, if you thus dispose the heavenly signs and your gifts in this way, you will escape all the threats of fortune, and, under divine favour, will live happy and free from cares.

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In his commentary on Plato's Philebus Ficino explains the myth of Venus' birth in his customary manner as a cosmogonic mystery. It stands for the birth of beauty within the Neo-Platonic system of emanations:
The story told by Hesiod in the Theogony of how Saturn castrated Heaven and threw the testicles into the sea, out of the agitated foam of which Venus was born, we should perhaps understand as referring to the potential fecundity of all things which lies latent in the first principle. This the divine spirit drinks and first unfolds within himself; after which he pours it forth into the soul and matter, which is called the sea, because of the motion, time, and humour of generation. As soon as the soul is thus fertilized, it creates Beauty within itself; by an upward movement of conversion towards supra-intelligible things; and by a downward movement it gives birth to the charm of sensible things in matter. This conversion into Beauty and its birth from the soul is called Venus. And as in all aspects and in all generation of Beauty there is pleasure, and as all generation is from the soul, which is called Venus, many thought that Venus herself was Pleasure.

**EXCERPTS FROM SERMONS BY GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA--ON PAINTING**

The strict ascetic movement among Dominican monks reached its climax in the famous Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), resident of the same Florentine convent of San Marco founded by Antonino. His success as an evangelist swept Florence on to abolish secular government, in effect, until counterforces crushed him. In his many hundreds of sermons, his darting mind often alludes to painting, partly no doubt from the early influence of his grandfather, Michele Savonarola. Besides the famous condemnation of irreligious art, his sermons also downgrade painting in more intellectually complex ways, using the ideas of its advocates against them: If painting is fine because it imitates nature, then nature is always better; if the birds are deceived by the painted grapes, it is because birds lack sense. Savonarola's remarks are significant not, as with other preachers, because they reflect the culture, but on their own account.


Art imitates nature as far as it can. I will cite for you as an example the painter and his pupil. What does the pupil look for in the master? I'll tell you. The master draws from his mind an image which his hands trace on paper and it carries the imprint of his idea. The pupil studies the drawing, and tries to imitate it. Little by little, in this way, he appropriates the style of his master. That is how all natural things, and all creatures, have derived from the divine intellect.... Come now, we want to imitate God, whom we do not see. How then shall we do it? We will look at the designs, the exemplars, and the images that he has sent forth, that is, we will imitate natural things, as the painter does when he draws the image from the tree or from the man as an exemplar. Note, though, that art cannot imitate nature entirely, even if the artist is perfect, because, even if a painter makes something similar to man in everything, yet it will not have life.

From *The Simplicity of Christian Life*, 1496; *original text in 1959 edition*, pp. 61-64.

Nature does all things simply, and has no need of human artifice... yet the latter hopes to imitate nature. And since it cannot equal her, we say those things are "art" which artificers do, and they do not actually imitate nature. Thus in everyday speech we say of the painter who wants to proceed with too much artifice, that is, when he shows too much art, that he does not really imitate nature.

[Works of nature are more beautiful than man's artificial works, so the latter try to imitate nature.] If artificers could make their artificial works natural, there is no doubt they would. So we see they try to conceal their art. Orators, and likewise painters, try to conceal art, so that their works will seem natural. [Children's words please because they are without art; preachers who use art fail, in contrast with inspired apostles.] And though works of art seem to please men, yet if we consider, we find that those please more which imitate nature more. So people praising paintings say: "See, these animals seem to be alive, these flowers seem natural."
[Taverns should be closed to children, especially in Lent.] Aristotle, who was a pagan, says in his Politics that figures which are unchaste for children to see should not be painted, because they become lustful when they see them. But what am I to say of you, Christian painters, who make those shameless figures there, which is not proper? Make them no more! You, whose duty it is, should have those figures whitewashed and destroyed which you have in your houses that are painted unchastely, and you would perform a work that would greatly please God and the Virgin Mary.

[God needs no body and no temple.] So these material churches here below are made for you, O Man, although in God's honor, not that the stones or altars are holy, but they are made thus to be of use to you and in honor of God, because when you go into a church you honor God, which is in turn of use to you. You see that saint there in that church, and say; I want to lead a good life and be like him. And this is done for you, and turns out to be of use to you. But when God sees you have no reverence for what is done for you, though in his honor, and that you profane the churches and make them stalls and fill them with filth, then he obliterates all that is done for you.

Have you offered your sacrifices to me, says God, will you see that you are sacrificing to yourself and not to me? Look at the habits of Florence, how the women of Florence have married off their daughters, they put them on show and doll them up so they look like nymphs, and the first thing they take them to the Cathedral. These are your idols, whom you have put in my temple. The images of your Gods are the images and likenesses of the figures you have painted in churches, and then the young men go around saying to this girl and that girl, "That girl is the Magdalene, that other girl is Saint John," because you have the figures in churches painted in the likeness of this woman or that other one, which is ill done and in great dishonor of what is God's. You painters do an ill thing; if you knew what I know and the scandal it produces you would not paint them. You put all the vanities in the churches. Do you believe the Virgin Mary went dressed this way, as you paint her? I tell you she went dressed as a poor woman, simply, and so covered that her face could hardly be seen, and likewise Saint Elizabeth went dressed simply. You would do well to cancel these figures that are painted so unchastely. You make the Virgin Mary seem dressed like a whore. . . Look at all the convents. You will find them all filled with the coats of arms of those who have built them. I lift my head to look above that! door, I think there is a crucifix, but there is a coat of arms: further on, lift your head, another coat of arms. I put on a vestment, I think there is a painted crucifix on it, it is a coat of arms, and you know they have put coats of arms on the back of vestments, so that when the priest stands at the altar, the arms can be seen well by all the people.

[Sight and the other senses have three objects, particular, general, and incidental.] Incidental is, when you see one thing with your outward sense, imagination gives you another, for instance, I see you here with my eyes, and my imagination tells my mind that you are alive, not that the eye can see life, but because the eye sees the image and color and movements and gives them to the mind; the mind then judges life, though life is not seen, thus if you say: "I see you are alive," but this seeing is called incidental. And that's where I want you.

... So to make a good judgment, one must have a good eye, good judgment, and good imagination, otherwise one could not judge well. For instance, there are certain painters who make figures that appear alive; a person who has good judgment and good imagination judges as soon as he sees this figure that it is dead, not alive, but anyone with a poor eye might be deceived some of the time, and if he saw a figure of a man there a little far off might judge that it was a living man. You see the little bird that does not have a good eye, and sees a scarecrow in the field and thinks it is a live man....

... So to judge what is God's, one must have a spiritual eye, and whoever does not have it cannot well see whether he is going the right way or not, and whether his ways are God's or not. But he who has a spiritual eye has a penetrating sight that passes through to the very marrow, and knows if he is going right or not, and judges with penetrating mind full of spiritual light whether it is good, like a person who has a good natural eye and sees the real and the painted grapes, and knows at once which is real and which is
false. But the little bird that does not have a good eye sometimes is deceived, and believes the painted grapes are natural.


Would you like to see that this of the philosophers was vain knowledge? . . . Would you like to see? They say that every painter paints himself. He does not paint himself as being a man, because he makes images of lions, horses, men, and women that are not himself, but he paints himself as being a painter, that is, according to his concept. And though they may be different fancies and figures of the painters that they paint, yet they are all according to his concept. So too the philosophers, because they were proud, described God in haughty and swollen ways....

You see that when the soul is taken away, the body remains pale and spoiled, and there is no beauty in it any more. And again, you see when a painter makes a figure from life, the live will always be more beautiful than the painted, and he may be a good master in his way, but he cannot give them a certain liveliness that the live has, and art cannot imitate nature in everything. So, since the soul is the cause of the beauty of the body, it must be more beautiful.