GIOVANNI PIETRO BELLORI: EXCERPTS FROM THE IDEA OF THE PAINTER, SCULPTOR, AND ARCHITECT

The highest and eternal intellect, author of nature, in fashioning his marvelous works looked deeply into himself and constituted the first forms, called Ideas, in such a way that each species was expressed by that original Idea, giving form to the marvelous context of things created. But the celestial bodies above the moon, not subject to change, remained forever beautiful and well-ordered, so that we come to know them from their measured spheres and from the splendor of their aspects as being eternally most just and most beautiful. Sublunar bodies on the contrary are subject to change and deformity; and although nature always intends to produce excellent effects, nevertheless, because of the inequality of matter the forms change, and human beauty is especially disarranged, as we see from the infinite deformities and disproportions that are in us.

For this reason the noble Painters and Sculptors imitating that first maker, also form in their minds an example of superior beauty, and in beholding it they emend nature with faultless color or line. This Idea, or truly the Goddess of Painting and Sculpture when the sacred curtains of tine lofty genius of a Daedalus or an Apelles are parted, is revealed to us and enters the marble and the canvases. Born from nature it overcomes its origin and becomes the model of art; measured with the compass of the intellect it becomes the measure of the hand; and animated by fantasy it gives life to the image. Certainly, according to the statements of the major philosophers, the exemplary motives reside with assurance in the spirits of the artists forever most beautiful and most perfect. The Idea of the Painter and the Sculptor is that perfect and excellent example of the mind, to which imagined form, imitating, all things that come into sight assimilate themselves: such is Cicero's fiction in his book on the orator, dedicated to Brutus: *Ut igitur in formis et figuris est aliquid perfectum et excellens, cuius ad excogitatam speciem imitando referuntur ea quae sub oculis ipsa cadunt, sic perfectae eloquentiae speciem animo videmus, effigiem auribus quaerimus.*

Thus the Idea constitutes the perfection of natural beauty and unites the truth with the verisimilitude of what appears to the eye, always aspiring to the best and the most marvelous, thereby not emulating but making itself superior to nature, revealing to us its elegant and perfect works, which nature does not usually show us as perfect in every part. Procles confirms this value in *Timaeus* when he says that if you take a man fashioned by nature and another formed by sculptural art, the natural one will be less excellent, because art fashions more accurately. But Zeuxis, who formed with a choice of five virgins the most famous image of Helen, given as an example by Cicero in the *Orator*, teaches both the Painter and the Sculptor to contemplate the Idea of the best natural forms in making a choice among various bodies, selecting the most elegant.

Hence I do not believe that he could find in one body alone all these perfections that he sought for in the extraordinary beauty of Helen, since nature makes no particular thing perfect in all its parts. *Nedue enim pitavit omnia, quae quaereret ad venustatem uno in corpore se reperire posse, ideo quod nihil simplici in genere omnibus ex partibus natura expoluit.* Thus Maximus Tyrius claims that the image of the Painters taken this way from different bodies produces a beauty such as may not be found in any natural body that approaches the beautiful statues. Parrhasius concealed the same to Socrates, that the Painter who has placed before him natural beauty in each of its forms must take from various bodies together what each has most perfect in its individual parts, since it is impossible to find a perfect being by itself. Thus nature is for this reason so inferior to art that the copyist artists and imitators of bodies in everything, without selectivity and
the choice of an Idea, were criticized. Demetrius was told that he was too natural, Dionysius was blamed for having painted men resembling us and was commonly called *anthropographos*, that is, painter of men. Pausanias and Peiraikos were condemned even more for having irritated the worst and the most vile, just as it our time Michelangelo da Caravaggio was criticized for being too natural in painting likenesses, and Bamboccio was considered worse than Michel Angelo da Caravaggio.

Thus Lysippus reproached the vulgarity of the Sculptors who made men as they are found in nature, and prided himself for forming them as they should be, following the advice given by Aristotle to Poets as well its Painters. This shortcoming was not attributed to Phidias, on the other hand, who made marvels of the forms of heroes and gods and imitated the Idea rather than nature. Cicero asserts that Phidias, in shaping Jupiter and Minerva, did not look at any object that he could have taken for a likeness, but conceived a form full of beauty, in whose fixed image he guided his mind and hand to achieve a likeness. "Nec vero ille artifex cum faceret lovis forman aut Minerve, contemplabatur aliquem, a quo similitudinem duceret, sed ipsius in mente insidebat species pulchritudinis eximia quaedam, guam intuens in eaque defixus ad illius similitudinem artem et manum dirigebat." Hence it appeared to Seneca, although he was a Stoic and a severe judge of our arts, to be a great thing, and he marveled at how this Sculptor, never having seen either Jupiter or Minerva, had nevertheless conceived their divine forms in his mind. "Non vidit Phidias Iovem, fecit tamen velut tonantem, nec stetit ante oculos eius Minerva, dignus tamen illa arte animus et concepit Deos et exhibuit." Apollonius of Tyana teaches us the same thing, that fantasy makes the Painter wiser than imitation, because the latter creates only those things that are seen, while fantasy creates even those that are unseen.

Now if we want to confront the precepts of the sages of antiquity with the best methods of our modern teachers, Leone Battista Alberti maintains that we love in all things not only the likeness but mainly the beauty, and that we must select the most praiseworthy parts from the most beautiful bodies. Thus Leonardo da Vinci taught the painter to form this Idea, to consider what he saw and to consult himself, choosing the most excellent parts of everything. Raphael of Urbino, the great master among those who know, wrote thus to Castiglione of his Galatea: "In order to paint a beauty I would have to see several beauties, but since there is a scarcity of beautiful women, I use a certain Idea that comes to my mind." Guido Reni, who surpasses all the other artists of our century in creating beauty, wrote to Monsignor Massani, housemaster for Urban VIII, when he sent the painting of Saint Michael to Rome for the Church of the Capuchins: "I would have liked to have had the brush of an angel, or forms from Paradise, to fashion the Archangel and to see him in Heaven, but I could not ascend that high, and I searched for him in vain on earth. So I looked at the form whose Idea I myself established. An Idea of ugliness may also be found, but that I leave to the devil to explain, because I flee from it even in thought, nor do I care to keep it in my mind." Thus Guido also boasted that he painted beauty, not as it appeared to his eyes, but as he saw it in the Idea; hence his beautiful abducted Helen was esteemed as an equal of that by Zeuxis.

But Helen was not as beautiful as they pretended, for she was found to have defects and shortcomings, so that it is believed that she never did sail for Troy but that her statue was taken there in her stead, for whose beauty the Greeks and the Trojans made war for ten years. It is though therefore that Homer, in order to satisfy the Greeks and to make his subject of the Trojan War more celebrated, paid homage in his poem to a woman who was not divine, in the same way that he augmented the strength and intelligence of Achilles and Ulysses. Hence Helen with her natural beauty did not equal the forms of Zeuxis and Homer; nor was there ever a woman who had so much extraordinary beauty as the Venus of Cnidos or the Athenian Minerva, known as the beautiful form; nor did a man exist of the strength of the Farnese Hercules by Glycon, nor any woman who equaled its beauty the Medicean Venus of Cleomenes.
For this reason the best Poets and Orators, when they wanted to celebrate more sublime beauty, turned to a comparison of statues and paintings. Ovid, describing Cyllarus, the most beautiful Centaur, praises him as most like the most famous statues:

Gratus in ore vigor, cervix, humerique, Manusque
Pectoraque Artificum laudatis proxima signis.

And elsewhere he wrote in high praise of Venus that if Apelles had not painted her, she would have remained until now submerged in the sea where she was born:

Si Venerem Cois numquam pinxisset Apelles
Mersa sub aequoreis illa lateret aquis.

Philostратus upholds the beauty of Euphorbus as similar to statues of Apollo and he claims that Achilles surpassed the beauty of Neoptolemus, his son, as beauties are surpassed by statues. Ariosto, in creating the beauty of Angelica tied to the rock, likens her to something moulded by the hands of an artist:

That she was feigned, a thing of alabaster
Or finest marble, so Ruggiero thought,
And that thus to the rock in this way bound,
Through artifice a clever sculptor wrought.

In these versus Ariosto imitated Ovid, describing the same Andromeda:

Quam simul ad duras religatam bracchia cautes
Vidit Abantiades, nisi quod levis aura capillos
Moverat, et tepido manabant lumina fletu,
Marmoreum ratusset opus.

Marino, in celebrating the Magdalena painted by Titian, hails the work in the same way and places the Idea of tile artist above natural things:

To what the learned artist feigned
Nature does yield, the Real gives way,
So fine, so live is that which from
His thoughts and soul he did portray.

It appears that Aristotle, on Tragedy, was unjustly criticized by Castelvetro, who maintains that the virtue of painting is not in creating a beautiful and perfect image, but in resembling the natural, either beautiful or deformed, for an excess of beauty lessens the likeness. This argument of Castelvetro is limited to icastic painters and portraitists will keep to no Idea and are subject to the ugliness of the face and body, unable to add beauty or correct natural deformities without violating the likeness. Otherwise the painting would be more beautiful and less accurate. The Philosopher does not mean such icastic imitation, but he teaches the tragedian the methods of the best, using the example of good Painters and Makers of perfect images, who rely on the Idea. These are his words: “Since tragedy is the imitation of the best, we should imitate the good painters, because, in expressing the form proper to their subjects, they create them more beautifully.”
However, making men more beautiful than they ordinarily are and choosing the perfect
conforms with the Idea. The Idea is not one beauty; its forms are various—strong, noble, joyful,
delicate, of any age and both sexes. We do not, however, praise with Paris on lovely Mount Ida
only soft Venus, or extol the tender Bacchus in the gardens of Nyssa, but we also admire in the
wearying games of Maenalos and Delos, the quiver-bearing Apollo and Diana the huntress. "The
beauty of Jupiter in Olympia and of Juno in Santos, as well as of Hercules in Lindos and Cupid is
Thespiae, was certainly different again. Thus different forms conform with different people, as
beauty is nothing else but what makes things as they are in their proper and perfect nature, which
the best Painters choose, contemplating the form of each. In addition to which we must consider
that Painting being at the same time the representation of human action, the Painter must keep in
mind the types of effects which correspond to these actions, in the same way that the Poet
conserves the Idea of the angry, the timid, the sad, the happy, as well as of the laughing and crying,
the fearful and the bold.

These emotions must remain more firmly fixed in the Artist's mind through a continual contemplation
of nature, since it would be impossible for him to draw them by hand from nature without first having
formed them in his imagination; and for this the greatest care is necessary, since the emotions are only
seen fleetingly in a sudden passing moment. So that when the Painter or Sculptor undertakes to reproduce
feelings, he cannot find them in the model before him, whose spirit as well as limbs languish in the pose
in which he is kept immobilized by another's will. It is therefore necessary to form an image of nature,
observing human emotions and accompanying the movements of the body with moods, in such a way that
each depends mutually upon the others. Moreover, in order not to exclude Architecture, it too uses its own
most perfect Idea: Philo says that God, as a good architect, looking at the Idea and at the example he had
conceived himself, made the visible, from the ideal and intelligible world. So that since Architecture
depends upon the example of reason, it also elevates itself above nature….

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Quintillian teaches us that all things perfected by art and human ingenuity have their origin in
the same nature, from which the true Idea springs. Hence those who without knowing the truth
follow common practice in everything create spectres instead of shapes; nor are they dissimilar
from those who borrow from the genius and copy the ideas of others, creating works that are not
natural children but bastards of nature, so that it seems as though they are wedded to the
paintbrushes of their masters. Added to this evil, arising from lack of genius or the inability to
select the best parts, is the fact that they choose the defects of their teachers and form an idea of
the worst. On the other hand, those who glory themselves with the name of Naturalists have no
idea whatever in their minds; they copy the defects of the bodies and satisfy themselves with
ugliness and errors, they, too, swearing by the model, as their teachers. If the model is taken from
their sight, their whole art disappears with it….Hence what is supreme intelligence and the Idea of
the best Painters, they would prefer to be common usage, equating ignorance with wisdom; but the
highminded spirits, elevating thought to the Idea of the beautiful, are enraptured by the latter alone
and consider it a divine thing. Yet the common people refer everything they see to the visual sense.
They praise things painted naturally, being used to such things; appreciate beautiful colors, not
beautiful forms, which they do not understand; tire of elegance and approve of novelty; disdain
reason, follow opinion, and walk away from the truth in art, on which, as on its own base, the most
noble monument of the Idea is built.

It remains to be said that since the Sculptors of antiquity used the marvelous Idea, as we have
indicated, a study of the most perfect antique sculptures is therefore necessary to guide us to the
emended beauties of nature and with the same purpose direct our eyes to contemplate the other
outstanding masters. But we will leave this matter to its own proper treatise on imitation, in order
to satisfy those who find fault with the study of the statues of antiquity.

So far as Architecture is concerned, we say that the Architect must conceive a noble Idea and
establish it in his mind, so that it can serve as law and reason for him, placing his inventions in the
order, in the disposition and in the measure and just proportion of the whole and of its parts. But
with regard to the decoration and ornamentation of the orders, he is certain to find the established
and confirmed Idea in the examples of the ancients, who established a successful method in this art
after long study. When the Greeks set the best limits and proportions for it, which have been
confirmed by the most educated centuries and by the consensus of a succession of learned men,
they became the laws for a marvelous Idea and an ultimate beauty. There being one beauty only for
each species, it cannot be changed without being destroyed. Hence, unfortunately, those who
change it with innovations deform it, since ugliness is close to beauty, just as vice touches on
virtue. We recognize such an evil in the fall of the Roman Empire, along with which fell all the
fine arts, and Architecture most of all, because the barbarian builders, having contempt for the
Greek and Roman models and Ideas as well as for the most beautiful monuments of antiquity,
adopted indiscriminately so many different fantastic caprices for orders that they made it
monstrous with the most unsightly confusion.

Bramante, Raphael, Baldassare, Giulio Romano and most recently Michelangelo have worked
tirelessly to restore antiquity to her original Idea and aspect from the heroic ruins, choosing the
most elegant forms from the ancient structures. But today, instead of giving thanks to these most
learned men, the latter are ungratefully vilified along with the Ancients, almost as though one had
copied from the other without esteem for genius or originality. Moreover, everyone conceives in
his mind a new Idea and appearance of Architecture in his own way, displaying it in the square and
on facades--men certainly devoid of any science that pertains to the Architect, whose name they
vainly bear. Not content with deforming buildings, cities and memories, they adopt crazy angles,
broken spaces and distorted lines, and discompose bases, capitals and columns with yokes of
stuccoes, fragments and disproportions; and yet Vitruvius condemns similar novelties and holds the
best examples up to them. But the good Architects retain the most excellent forms of the orders.

Painters and Sculptors, choosing the most elegant natural beauties, perfect the Idea, and their
works exceed and remain superior to nature--which is the ultimate value of these arts, as we have
shown. This is the origin of the veneration and awe of men with regard to statues and paintings,
and hence of the rewards and honors of the Artists; this was the glory of Timanthes, Apelles,
Phidias, Lysippus, and of so many others whose fame is renowned, all those who, elevated above
human forms, achieved with their ideas and works an admirable perfection. This Idea may then
well be called the perfection of Nature, miracle of art, foresight of the intellect, example of the
mind, light of the imagination, the rising sun which from the east inspires the statue of Menon, and
fire, which in life warms the monument of Prometheus. This is what induces Venus, the Graces and
the Cupids to leave the gardens of Idalus and the shores of Cythera and dwell in the hardness of
marble and in the emptiness of shadows. In its honor the Muses by the banks of Helicon tempered
colors to immortality; and for its glory Pallas scorned Babylonian cloth and vainly boasted of
Daedalian linens. But as the Idea of eloquence yields to the Idea of painting, just as a scene is
more efficacious than words, speech therefore fails me and I am silent.