EXCERPTS FROM THE COUNCIL OF TRENT ON RELIGIOUS ART

The Council of Trent

In reaction to the Protestants' attacks against images, the Council of Trent, restating the ideas of the 15th century "Catholic Reformation," required art to regain dignity in its forms and coherence in its iconography.

The artists of the second half of the century often had to pay for their recently acquired professional emancipation by a more or less willing submission as propagandists for Princes or for the Church. In each case they had to obey some sort of code, the Church's implying mainly decorum and prudishness. An historical example makes these restrictions manifest in the cases of religious painters: Veronese's trial. Veronese's trial was benign and devoid of practical consequences, but only because the artist found powerful help in the Venetian Republic, which was very keen an asserting its independence.

The Council of Trent on Religious Art

The official text which contains the Catholic doctrine on images was voted during the last session of the Council of Trent, along with the decisions on the cult of the saints and of relics; in fact, these questions were linked in the polemics of the Protestants against the paganism and superstition of the Church.

The text established the difference between idolatry and the proper veneration of images. In order to stress this difference in practice, one had to purify both iconography and the customs of the faithful; ecclesiastical authorities had to look to the orthodoxy and the Christian dignity of the pictures. By defining the aim of images (to instruct the believers, to incite piety) the text implies certain concrete indications to future artists. All this tended toward an art rather traditional in its forms, without individual initiative, clear as to its subject, respecting classical decorum as well as modern decency, but aiming, however, at a dramatic or pathetic effect.

Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent

Twenty-fifth session, December 3 and 4, 1563. . . On the invocation, veneration and relics of saints, and on sacred images.

The holy council commands all bishops and others who hold the office of teaching and have charge of the cura animarum, that in accordance with the usage of the Catholic and Apostolic Church, received from the primitive times of the Christian religion, and with the unanimous teaching of the holy Fathers and the decrees of sacred councils, they above all instruct the faithful diligently in matters relating to intercession and invocation of the saints, the veneration of relics, and the legitimate use of images. . . Moreover, that the images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints are to be placed and retained especially in the churches, and that due honor and veneration is to be given them; not, however, that any divinity or virtue is believed to be in them by reason of which they are to be venerated, or that something is to be asked of them, or that trust is to be placed in images, as was done of old by the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols; but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which they represent, so that by means of the images which we kiss and before which we uncover the head and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ and venerate the saints whose likeness they bear. That is what was defined by the decrees of the councils, especially of the Second Council of Nicaea, against the opponents of images.

Moreover, let the bishops diligently teach that by means of the stories of the mysteries of our redemption portrayed in paintings and other representations the people are instructed and confirmed in the articles of faith, which ought to be borne in mind and constantly reflected upon; also that great profit is
derived from all holy images, not only because the people are thereby reminded of the benefits and gifts bestowed on them by Christ, but also because through the saints the miracles of God and salutary examples are set before the eyes of the faithful, so that they may give God thanks for those things, may fashion their own life and conduct in imitation of the saints and be moved to adore and love God and cultivate piety. But if anyone should teach or maintain anything contrary to these decrees, let him be anathema.

If any abuses shall have found their way into these holy and salutary observances, the holy council desires earnestly that they be completely removed, so that no representation of false doctrines and such as might be the occasion of grave error to the uneducated be exhibited. And if at times it happens, when this is beneficial to the illiterate, that the stories and narratives of the Holy Scriptures are portrayed and exhibited, the people should be instructed that not for that reason is the divinity represented in picture as if it can be seen with bodily eyes or expressed in colors or figures….

That these things may be the more faithfully observed, the holy council decrees that no one is permitted to erect or cause to be erected in any place or church, howsoever exempt, any unusual image unless it has been approved by the bishop; also that no new miracles be accepted and no relics recognized unless they have been investigated and approved by the same bishop, who, as soon as he has obtained any knowledge of such matters, shall, after consulting theologians and other pious men, act thereon as he shall judge consonant with truth and piety. But if any doubtful or grave abuse is to be eradicated, or if indeed any graver question concerning these matters should arise, the bishop, before he settles the controversy, shall await the decision of the metropolitan and of the bishops of the province in a provincial synod; so, however, that nothing new or anything that has not hitherto been in use in the Church, shall be decided upon without having first consulted the most holy Roman pontiff.

The Didactic Task of Painting

The Council of Trent had entrusted the application of the decree on images to the bishops. The Bishop of Bologna, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, proposed to develop it into a kind of complete legislative digest. His Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane—in fact the collective work of a commission—was to comprise five books of which only two ever appeared (1582).

The first one deals with generalities; the second and more interesting concerns the errors of sacred and profane artists (for the Church must rule the one as well as the other). The following books were to treat of licentious pictures, of a constructive iconography of sacred subjects, and finally of the uses of works of art.

The Discourse is exclusively a work of moral theology. It deals with art in the abstract and never attempts a criticism of existing works. Although the authors have read such writers as Pliny, Durer, and Vasari, they considered only the subjects and the moral and didactic value of works of art.

The chapter on obscure pictures which we translate is part of a section on "errors common to sacred and profane images." Obscurity was considered to be a sin against the essential didactic function of any art, and could not be tolerated even for the most profound mysteries of faith. The aesthetic taste for obscurity was no more commendable than obscurity caused by ignorance.

Pictures with Obscure and Difficult Meaning

One of the main praises that we give to a writer or a practitioner of any liberal art is that he knows how to explain his ideas clearly, and that even if his subject is lofty and difficult, he knows how to make it plain and intelligible to all by his easy discourse. We can state the same of the painter in general, all the more because his works are used mostly as books for the illiterate, to whom we must always speak openly and clearly: Since many people do not pay attention to this, it happens every day that in all sorts of places, and most of all in churches, one sees paintings so obscure and ambiguous, that while they should, by illuminating the intelligence, both incite devotion and sting the heart, in fact they confuse the mind, pull it in a thousand directions, and keep it busy sorting out what each figure is, not without loss of devotion.
Thus whatever good intention that has been brought to the church is wasted, and often one subject is taken for another; so much so that, instead of being instructed, one remains confused and deceived.

To obviate such a great ill, one must look carefully for the roots of that error, which we shall find comes from one of three things: either the painter or the patron that commissions the work lacks will, or knowledge, or ability; and in this we take an example from the writers, in so far as their art is on this point comparable to the painters.

As to intention, it must seem strange that there are persons who like to be obscure and not to be understood, but it is true; and for this reason, Heraclitus, in antiquity, was called σχοτεινός for his obscurity, and Quintilian tells us that there once was a rhetorician who did not teach his disciples anything but to make their speech obscure, and would say: σχότισουν, σχότισουν; which means: "be obscure, be obscure." But we must point out that there are two kinds of voluntary obscurity, one praiseworthy, the other reprehensible: the first was practiced since the time of the Hebrews and the Egyptians by philosophers and others when they wanted to discuss sacred matters which, for that reason, they called mysteries because of the meaning of the word in Greek, which is "to conceal"; for they considered that the lofty secrets of God should not be disclosed to the profane multitude, but should be handled through enigmas and allegorical meanings; this was accepted by our holy doctors in the principal mysteries of our religion; they wanted, in the same way that a thin cloth or a transparent crystal is put in front of the sacred relics, the great secrets of things eternal to be protected in their majesty, and also, by this means, the people more efficiently kept in due reverence.

But this argument of the theologians could not have much relevance to painters who, in such matters, only represent what is proposed by holy doctors and accepted unanimously by the Church, without adding, removing, or changing anything, either in content, or as to the way of expression or other particulars.

Therefore we shall proceed to the second kind of obscurity, which is blamed because it may come from a hidden pride and the affected vanity of being considered great and admirable for not exposing and painting trivial objects, but sublime ideas and ones, so to speak, taken from the third heaven. This is a most foolish stupidity, not only because its one and only end is one's own and vain reputation, but also because it perverts the course of the science or the art that one practices, as St. Augustine says: Loquendi omnino nulla est causa, si quid loquimur homines non intelligunt (There is no reason at all to speak unless people understand what one says). Whence those vain people should be told what was said to the author that was chided for his obscurity: Si non vis intelligi, nec intelligaris (If you do not want to be understood, you will not be).

Sometimes also this happens when one wants to display one's knowledge of nature and one's familiarity with different parts of the world; thus one represents animals without any reason, or plants or technical devices used only in foreign countries and unknown in our part of the world. This introduces obscurity.

In other cases the cause is that one wants to be brief, and embrace much in few words or little space; wherefrom springs the popular saying: Brevis esse laboro, obscurae fio (I strive to be short, I become obscure). Therefore, to avoid all this, the good painter must propose to try and be useful to others first of all, and to use a manner convenient to this end, expressing the necessary particulars and thereby avoiding misunderstandings or any ambiguous figures, as much as possible.

Obscurity can also come from ignorance….But we are concerned with the obscurity that comes from the painter's not understanding well the subject that he wants to represent; for, as Socrates said, the things that man knows well and understands completely, he also expresses them easily when he wants to; and on the contrary, who is not sure of his knowledge of something, often speaks about it confusedly, without order, and very imperfectly. Thus, in painting, he who has a good and sound knowledge of the subject of his picture, and who knows the aim of this holy action or the meaning of that figure, undoubtedly will be able to bring it out much more clearly and with greater expressiveness through the details that he will insert, than a painter who understands little. And in the same way that, in trying to resolve properly a question in any science, he who proceeds by distinguishing and studying different points, will succeed
much better and with these distinctions will in fact quiet the intellect that is in doubt; thus there are many sacred stories and mysteries such that if the painter has the intelligence to divide them in an orderly way, and to separate them in several panels or spaces, and if he refrains as much as possible from accumulating and pressing in a multitude of figures and events which confuse both sight and intellect, undoubtedly he will give more satisfaction to everybody and will show greater signs of his judgment and skill. For this end, it will be particularly useful to add in a convenient place the name of the holy action or of the saint, when it is not a well known figure (as we see it was done in ancient time according to St. Paulin's [of Nola] statement): *Martyribus mediam pictis pia nomina signant* (The middle entrance is inscribed with the holy names of the martyrs depicted); or else to indicate the passage of the author of the holy story which is represented, or even some short and significant quotations, taken from the same book of the author, and relevant to the action.

Finally, obscurity can come also from incompetence; because sometimes one tries to express things which by their nature can not be expressed, and are so recondite and difficult that one can not conveniently make people grasp them; such are the operations of spiritual beings, the secrets of Divine Providence, the mysteries of predestination, and so on: the safest remedy in this difficulty is to abstain from such subjects as much as possible, accepting them however internally with the faith, as we are admonished by St. Augustine with the words: *Sunt quaedam quae sua vi non intelliguntur, aut vix intelliguntur, quantumvis plenissime dicentis versentur eloquio, quae in populi audientiam, vel raro si aliquid urget, vel nunquam omnino mittenda sunt* (There are things which can not be understood by themselves, or can hardly be understood, however eloquently they are exposed; these should be brought up in public either rarely when necessary, or not at all)…

But such obscurity can also come from or be increased by the restriction of the space where the painting is located, as the space would not actually contain the multitude of things that should be represented, unless mixed and pressed together; on the other hand, the restriction shrinks the drawing, which by nature would require a larger field, as is the case of a painter who had painted a running horse with the bit in its mouth on a tiny panel; when the patron who had commissioned the work complained that the painter had added the bit, he answered that in such a tiny space it had been necessary to put the bit in the animal's mouth lest it should burst out.

We do not, however, deny that an excellent artist could express whatever he wants effectively in a minute space, as we read of one *qui Alexandrum ex equo venantem et beluam ferientem finxerat, cuicus magnitudo unguem digiti non superabat et tamen terrorem vultu incutiebat, et equus ipse consistere recusans arte moveri videbat* (who made a picture of Alexander hunting on horseback and wounding a beast, no larger than a fingernail; nevertheless, his face inspired terror and the horse itself, refusing to stop, seemed to be in motion by the strength of art). And Pliny tells of other astonishing examples. But we mention this only as a notable exception, because it can not be accomplished by everybody, and because a proportionate space makes things more successful.

THE INVESTIGATION OF PAOLO VERONESE BY THE INQUISITION TRIBUNAL

The examination of Paolo Veronese by the Holy Office was hardly a trial. The picture painted for the convent of SS. Giovanni e Paolo which was the origin of the convocation, represented a Last Supper or a Feast at the house of Simon (the subject does not seem to have been clear either to the painter, the monks, or the judges). In fact, the painter was not charged for his infidelity to the text but for the lack of decorum displayed in the picturesque accessories. Veronese did not comply with the order he had received to alter his work, but he was content, it seems, to change the title and make it the "Feast at the house of Levi."

The Inquisitors were much more lenient than Gilio in his concern for "historical truth." The rather liberal atmosphere of the discussion can be explained by the fact that in Venice, the Holy Office, worked under an agreement which gave the Republic a part in the trial and a right to withhold the sentence.
One will notice that to protect himself, Veronese used Aretino's charges against the Last judgment in the Sistine; the Inquisitors then felt obliged to defend Michelangelo.

Veronese Before the Holy Tribunal

Venice, July 18, 1573. The minutes of the session of the Inquisition Tribunal of Saturday, the 18th of July, 1573.

Today, Saturday, the 18th of the month of July, 1573, having been asked by the Holy Office to appear before the Holy Tribunal, Paolo Caliari of Verona, domiciled in the Parish Satin Samuel, being questioned about his name and surname, answered as above.

Questioned about his profession:
Answer: I paint and compose figures.
Question: Do you know the reason why you have been summoned?
A: No, sir.
Q: Can you imagine it?
A: I can well imagine.
Q: Say what you think the reason is.
A: According to what the Reverend Father, the Prior of the Convent of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, whose name I do not know, told me, he had been here and Your Lordships had ordered him to have painted [in the picture] a Magdalen in place of a dog. I answered him by saying I would gladly do everything necessary for my honor and for that of my painting, but that I did not understand how a figure of Magdalen would be suitable there for many reasons which I will give at any time, provided I am given an opportunity.
Q: What picture is this of which you have spoken?
A: This is a picture of the Last Supper that Jesus Christ took with His Apostles in the house of Simon.
Q: Where is this picture?
A: In the Refectory of the Convent of SS. Giovanni e Paolo.
Q: Is it on the wall, on a panel, or on canvas?
A: On canvas.
Q: What is its height?
A: It is about seventeen feet.
Q: How wide?
A: About thirty-nine feet.
Q: At this Supper of Our Lord have you painted other figures?
A: Yes, milords.
Q: Tell us how many people and describe the gestures of each.
A: There is the owner of the inn, Simon; besides this figure I have made a steward, who, I imagined, had come there for his own pleasure to see how the things were going at the table. There are many figures there which I cannot recall, as I painted the picture some time ago.
Q: Have you painted other Suppers besides this one?
A: Yes, milords.
Q: How many of them have you painted and where are they?
A: I painted one in Verona for the reverend monks at San Nazzaro which is in their refectory. Another I painted in the refectory of the reverend fathers of San Giorgio here in Venice.
Q: This is not a Supper. We are asking about a picture representing the Supper of the Lord.
A: I have painted one in the refectory of the Servi of Venice, another in the refectory of San Sebastiano in Venice. I painted one in Padua for the fathers of Santa Maddalena and I do not recall having painted any others.
Q: In this Supper which you made for SS. Giovanni e Paolo what is the significance of the man whose nose is bleeding?
A: I intended to represent a servant whose nose was bleeding because of some accident.
Q: What is the significance of those armed men dressed as Germans, each with a halberd in his hand?
A: This requires that I say twenty words
Q: Say them.
A: We painters take the same license the poets and the jesters take and I have represented these two halberdiers, one drinking and the other eating nearby on the stairs. They are placed there so that they might be of service because it seemed to me fitting, according to what I have been told, that the master of the house, who was great and rich should have such servants.
Q: And that man dressed as a buffoon with a parrot on his wrist, for what purpose did you paint him on that canvas?
A: For ornament, as is customary.
Q: Who are at the table of Our Lord?
A: The Twelve Apostles.
Q: Carving the lamb in order to pass it to the other end of the table.
Q: What is the Apostle next to him doing?
A: He is holding a dish in order to receive what St. Peter will give him.
Q: Tell us what the one next to this one is doing.
A: He has a toothpick and cleans his teeth.
Q: Who do you really believe was present at that Supper?
A: I believe one would find Christ with His Apostles. But if in a picture there is some space to spare I enrich it with figures according to the stories.
Q: Did any one commission you to paint Germans, buffoons, and similar things in that picture?
A: No, milords, but I received the commission to decorate the picture as I saw fit. It is large and, it seemed to me, it could hold many figures.
Q: Are not the decorations which you painters are accustomed to add to paintings or pictures supposed to be suitable and proper to the subject and the principal figures or are they for pleasure--simply what comes to your imagination without any discretion or judiciousness?
A: I paint pictures as I see fit and as well as my talent permits.
Q: Does it seem fitting at the Last Supper of the Lord to paint buffoons, drunkards, Germans, dwarfs and similar vulgarities?
A: No, milords.
Q: Do you not know that in Germany and in other places infected with heresy it is customary with various pictures full of scurrilousness and similar inventions to mock, vituperate, and scorn the things of the Holy Catholic Church in order to teach bad doctrines to foolish and ignorant people?
A: Yes that is wrong; but I return to what I have said, that I am obliged to follow what my superiors have done.
Q: What have your superiors done? Have they perhaps done similar things?
A: Michelangelo in Rome in the Pontifical Chapel painted Our Lord, Jesus Christ, His Mother, St. John, St. Peter, and the Heavenly Host. These are all represented in the nude--even the Virgin Mary--and in different poses with little reverence.
Q: Do you not know that in painting the Last judgment in which no garments or similar things are presumed, it was not necessary to paint garments, and that in those figures there is nothing that is not spiritual? There are neither buffoons, dogs, weapons, or similar buffoonery. And does it seem because of this or some other example that you did right to have painted this picture in the way you did and do you want to maintain that it is good and decent?
A: Illustrious Lords, I do not want to defend it, but I thought I was doing right. I did not consider so many things and I did not intend to confuse anyone, the more so as those figures of buffoons are outside of the place in a picture where Our Lord is represented.
After these things had been said, the judges announced that the above named Paolo would be obliged to improve and change his painting within a period of three months from the day of this admonition and that according to the opinion and decision of the Holy Tribunal all the corrections should be made at the expense of the painter and that if he did not correct the picture he would be liable to the penalties imposed by the Holy Tribunal. Thus they decreed in the best manner possible.