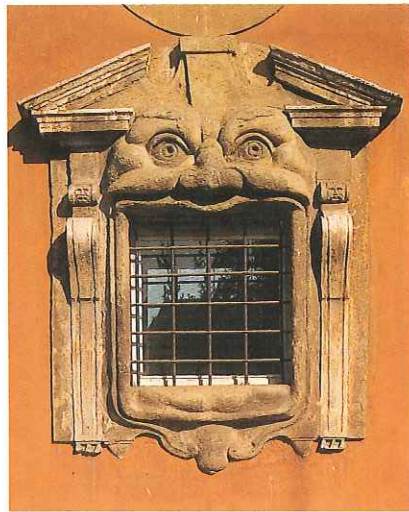


## A CRISIS OF ART

*Europe, later sixteenth century*

Round about 1520 all lovers of art in the Italian cities seemed to agree that painting had reached the peak of perfection. Men such as Michelangelo and Raphael, Titian and Leonardo had actually done everything that former generations had tried to do. No problem of draughtsmanship seemed too difficult for them, no subject-matter too complicated. They had shown how to combine beauty and harmony with correctness, and had even surpassed – so it was said – the most renowned statues of Greek and Roman antiquity. For a boy who wanted one day to become a great painter himself, this general opinion was perhaps not altogether pleasant to listen to. However much he may have admired the works of the great living masters, he must have wondered whether it was true that nothing remained to be done because everything art could possibly do had been achieved. Some appeared to accept this idea as inevitable, and studied hard to learn what Michelangelo had learned, and to imitate his manner as best they could. Michelangelo had loved to draw nudes in complicated attitudes – well, if that was the right thing to do, they would copy his nudes, and put them into their pictures whether they fitted or not. The results were sometimes slightly ludicrous – the sacred scenes from the Bible were crowded out by what appeared to be a training team of young athletes. Later critics, who saw that these young painters had gone wrong since they merely imitated the manner of Michelangelo because it was in fashion, have called this the period of Mannerism. But not all young artists of this period were so foolish as to believe that all that was asked of art was a collection of nudes in difficult postures. Many, indeed, doubted whether art could ever come to a standstill, whether it was not possible, after all, to surpass the famous masters of the former generation, if not in their handling of human forms, then, perhaps, in some other respect. Some wanted to outdo them in the matter of invention. They wanted to paint pictures full of significance and wisdom – such wisdom, indeed, that it should remain obscure, save to the most learned scholars. Their works almost resemble picture puzzles which cannot be solved save by those who know what the scholars of the time believed to be the true meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphs, and of many



half-forgotten ancient writers. Others, again, wanted to attract attention by making their works less natural, less obvious, less simple and harmonious than the works of the great masters. These works, they seem to have argued, are indeed perfect – but perfection is not for ever interesting. Once you are familiar with it, it ceases to excite you. We will aim at the startling, the unexpected, the unheard-of. Of course, there was something slightly unsound in this obsession of the young artists with the task of outdoing the classical

masters – it led even the best among them to strange, sophisticated experiments. But in a way, these frantic efforts to go one better were the greatest tribute they could pay to the older artists. Had not Leonardo himself said: ‘It is a wretched pupil who does not surpass his master’? To some extent, the great ‘classical’ artists had themselves begun and encouraged new and unfamiliar experiments; their very fame, and the credit they enjoyed in their later years, had enabled them to try out novel, unorthodox effects in arrangement or colouring, and to explore new possibilities of art. Michelangelo in particular had occasionally shown a bold disregard for all conventions – nowhere more than in architecture, where he sometimes abandoned the sacrosanct rules of classical tradition to follow his own moods and whims. It was he himself who accustomed the public to admire an artist’s ‘caprices’ and ‘inventions’, and who set the example of a genius not satisfied with the matchless perfection of his own early masterpieces, but constantly and restlessly searching for new methods and modes of expression.

It was only natural that young artists should regard this as a licence to startle the public with their own ‘original’ inventions. Their efforts resulted in some amusing pieces of design. The window in the form of a face, *figure 231*, designed by an architect and painter, Federico Zuccaro (1543?–1609), gives a good idea of this type of caprice.

Other architects, again, were more intent on displaying their great learning and their knowledge of classical authors in which they did, in fact, surpass the masters of Bramante’s generation. The greatest and most learned of these was the architect Andrea Palladio (1508–80). *Figure 232* shows his famous Villa Rotonda, or round villa, near Vicenza. In a way,

231

Federico Zuccaro  
*Window of the Palazzo  
 Zuccari, Rome, 1592*

it, too, is a 'caprice', for it has four identical sides, each with a porch in the form of a temple façade, grouped round a central hall which recalls the Roman Pantheon, *page 120, figure 75*. However beautiful the combination may be, it is hardly a building which one would like to live in. The search for novelty and effect has interfered with the ordinary purpose of architecture.

A typical artist of this period was the Florentine sculptor and goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini (1500–71). Cellini has described his own life in a famous book, which gives an immensely colourful and vivid picture of his age. He was boastful, ruthless and vain, but it is hard to be cross with him because he tells the story of his adventures and exploits with such gusto that you think you are reading a novel by Dumas. In his vanity and conceit and in his restlessness, which drove him from town to town and from court to court, picking quarrels and earning laurels, Cellini is a real product of his time. For him, to be an artist was no longer to be a respectable and sedate owner of a workshop: it was to be a 'virtuoso' for whose favour princes and cardinals should compete. One of the few works by his hand which have come down to us is a golden salt-cellar, made for

332  
 Andrea Palladio  
 Villa Rotonda, near  
 Vicenza, 1550  
 An Italian sixteenth-  
 century villa





233

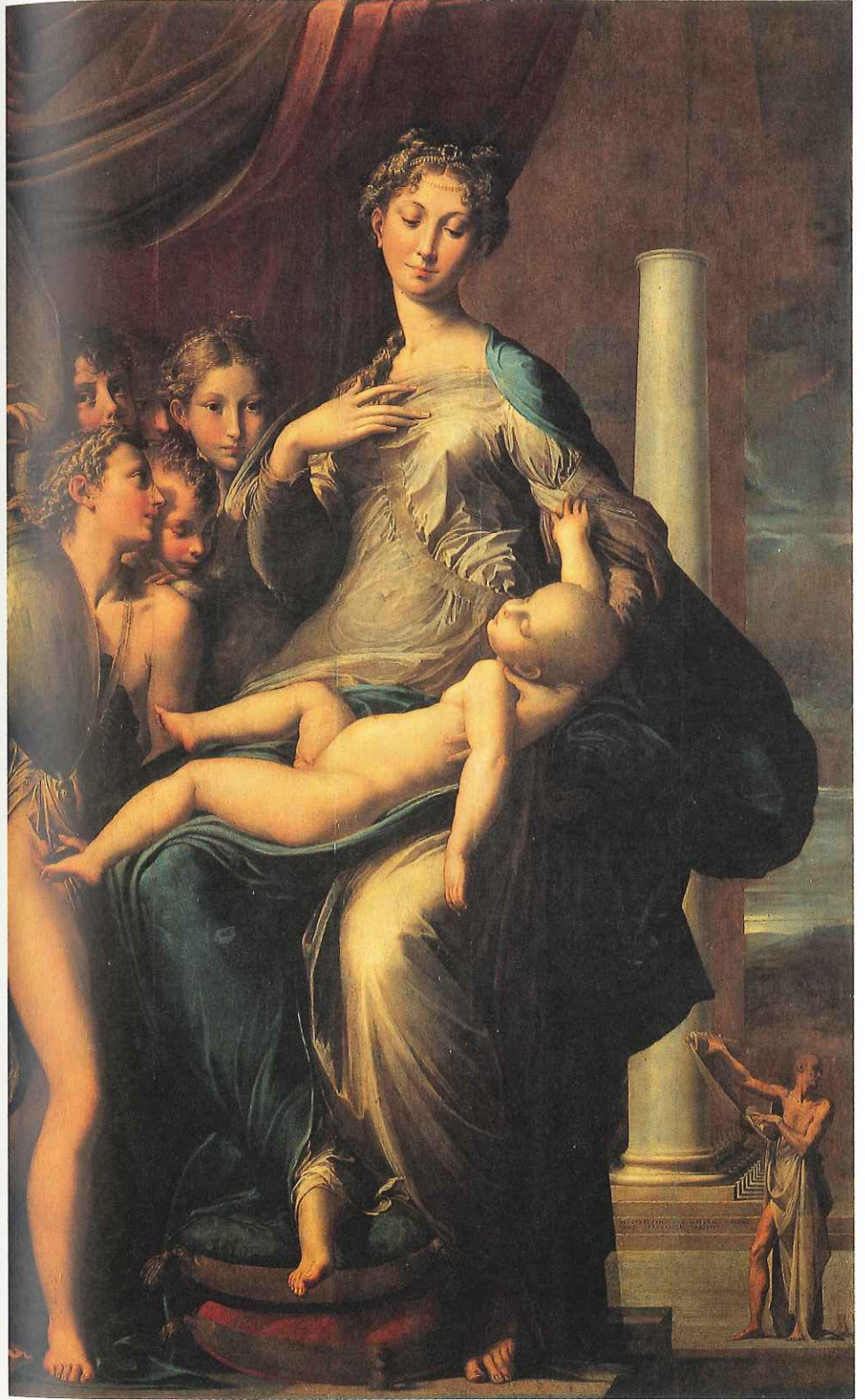
Benvenuto Cellini  
*Salt-cellar*, 1543Chased gold and enamel  
on ebony base, length  
33.5 cm, 13¼ in;  
Kunsthistorisches  
Museum, Vienna

the King of France in 1543, *figure 233*. Cellini tells us the story in great detail. We hear how he snubbed two famous scholars who ventured to suggest a subject to him, how he made a model in wax of his own invention representing the Earth and the Sea. To show how the Earth and the Sea interpenetrate he made the legs of the two figures interlock: 'The Sea, fashioned as a man, held a finely wrought ship which could hold enough salt, beneath I had put four sea-horses and I had given the figure a trident. The Earth I fashioned as a fair woman, as graceful as I could do it. Beside her I placed a richly decorated temple to hold the pepper.' But all this subtle invention makes less interesting reading than the story of how Cellini carried the gold from the King's treasurer and was attacked by four bandits, all of whom he put to flight single-handed. To some of us the smooth elegance of Cellini's figures may look a little over-elaborate and affected. Perhaps it is a consolation to know that their master had enough of that healthy robustness which his work seems to lack.

Cellini's outlook is typical of the restless and hectic attempts of the period to create something more interesting and unusual than former generations had done. We find the same spirit in the paintings of one of Correggio's followers, Parmigianino (1503–40). I can well imagine that some may find his *Madonna*, *figure 234*, almost offensive because of the affectation and sophistication with which a sacred subject is treated. There is nothing in it of the ease and simplicity with which Raphael had treated that ancient theme. The picture is called the 'Madonna with the long neck' because the painter, in his eagerness to make the Holy Virgin look graceful and elegant, has given her a neck like that of a swan. He has

234

Parmigianino  
*Madonna with the long  
neck*, 1534–40Left unfinished at the  
artist's death; oil on wood,  
216 × 132 cm, 85 × 52 in;  
Uffizi, Florence





stretched and lengthened the proportions of the human body in a strangely capricious way. The hand of the Virgin with its long delicate fingers, the long leg of the angel in the foreground, the lean, haggard prophet with a scroll of parchment – we see them all as through a distorting mirror. And yet there can be no doubt that the artist achieved this effect through neither ignorance nor indifference. He has taken care to show us that he liked these unnaturally elongated forms, for, to make doubly sure of his effect, he placed an oddly shaped high column of equally unusual proportions in the background of the painting. As for the arrangement of the picture, he also showed us that he did not believe in conventional harmonies. Instead of distributing his figures in equal pairs on both sides of the Madonna, he crammed a jostling crowd of angels into a narrow corner, and left the other side wide open to show the tall figure of the prophet, so reduced in size through the distance that he hardly reaches the Madonna's knee. There can be no doubt, then, that if this be madness there is method in it. The painter wanted to be unorthodox. He wanted to show that the classical solution of perfect harmony is not the only solution conceivable; that natural simplicity is one way of achieving beauty, but that there are less direct ways of getting interesting effects for sophisticated lovers of art. Whether we like or dislike the road he took, we must admit that he was consistent. Indeed, Parmigianino and all the artists of his time who deliberately sought to create something new and unexpected, even at the expense of the 'natural' beauty established by the great masters, were perhaps the first 'modern' artists. We shall see, indeed, that what is now called 'modern' art may have had its roots in a similar urge to avoid the obvious and achieve effects which differ from conventional natural beauty.

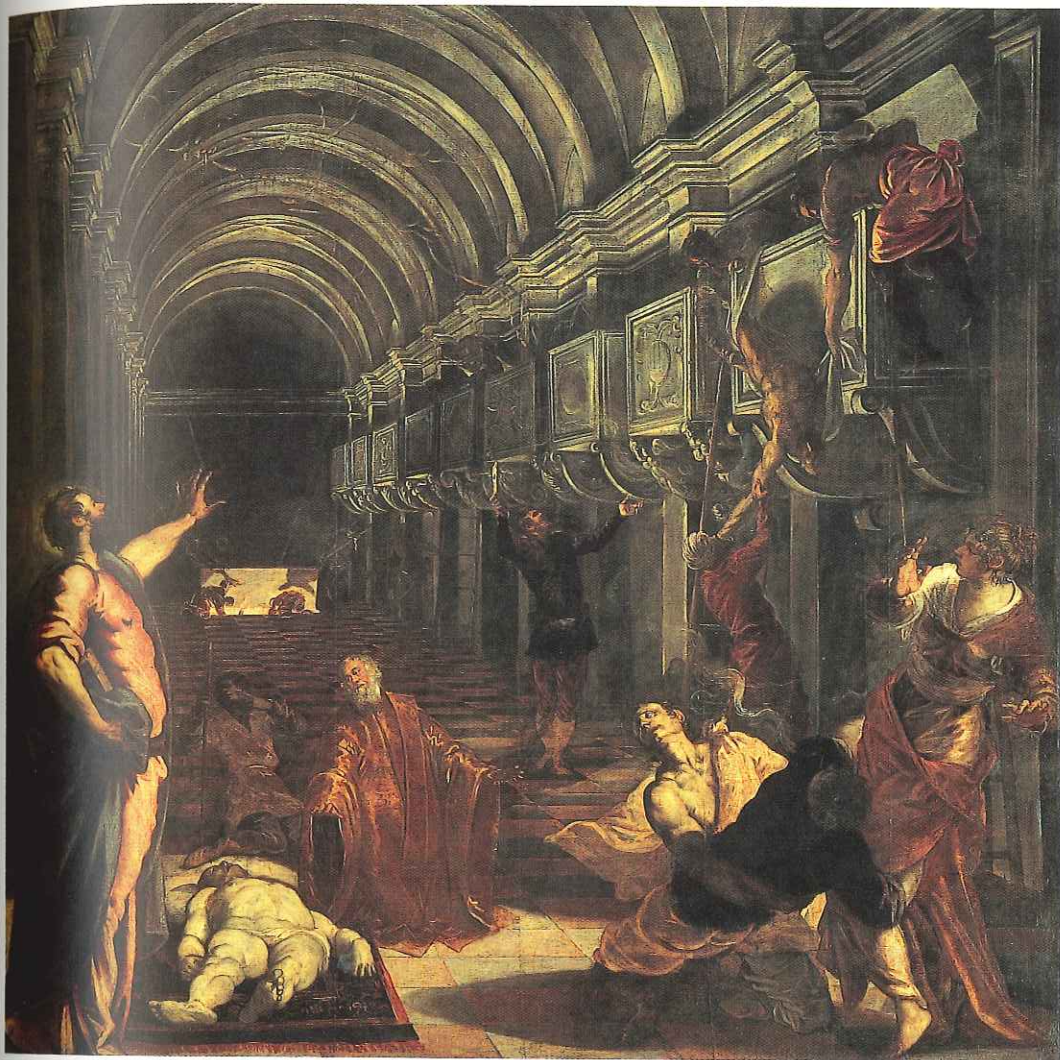
Other artists of this strange period, in the shadow of the giants of art, were less despairing of surpassing them by ordinary standards of skill and virtuosity. We may not agree with all they did, but here, too, we are forced to admit that some of their efforts are startling enough. A typical example is the statue of Mercury, the messenger of the gods, by a Flemish sculptor, Jean de Boulogne (1529–1608), whom the Italians called Giovanni da Bologna or Giambologna, *figure 235*. He had set himself the task of achieving the impossible – a statue which overcomes the weight of dead matter and which creates the sensation of a rapid flight through the air. And to a certain extent he was successful. Only with a tip of his toe does his famous Mercury touch the ground – rather, not the ground, but a gush of air which comes out of the mouth of a mask representing the South Wind. The whole statue is so carefully balanced that it really seems to hover in the air – almost to speed through it, with swiftness and grace. Perhaps a classical sculptor, or even Michelangelo, might have found such an effect unbecoming to a

235  
Giambologna  
*Mercury*, 1580  
Bronze, height 187 cm, 67  
Museo Nazionale del  
Bargello, Florence

statue which should remind one of the heavy block of matter out of which it was shaped – but Giambologna, no less than Parmigianino, preferred to defy these well-established rules and to show what surprising effects could be achieved.

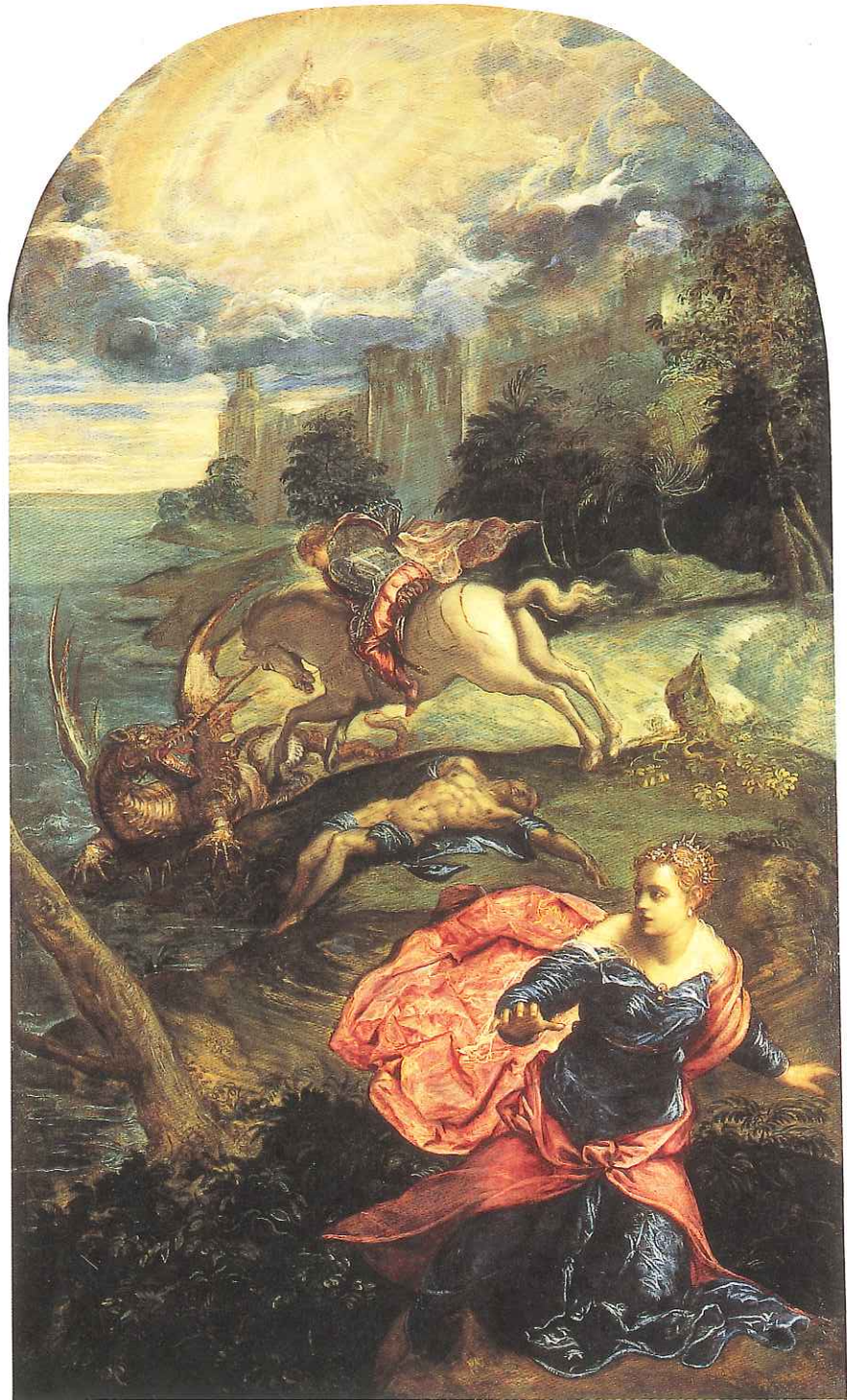
Perhaps the greatest of all these masters of the latter part of the sixteenth century lived in Venice. He was called Jacopo Robusti, but nicknamed Tintoretto (1518–94). He too had tired of the simple beauty in forms and colours which Titian had shown to the Venetians – but his discontent must have been more than a mere desire to accomplish the unusual. He seems to have felt that, however incomparable Titian was as a painter of beauty, his pictures tended to be more pleasing than moving; that they were not sufficiently exciting to make the great stories of the Bible and the sacred legends live for us. Whether he was right in this or not, he must, at any rate, have been resolved to tell these stories in a different way, to make the spectator feel the thrill and tense drama of the events he painted. *Figure 236* shows that he did indeed succeed in making his pictures unusual and captivating. At first glance this painting looks confused and confusing. Instead of a clear arrangement of the main figures in the plane of the picture, such as Raphael had achieved, we look into the depths of a strange vault. There is a tall man with a halo at the left corner, raising his arm as if to stop something that is happening – and if we follow his gesture we can see that he is concerned with what is going on high under the roof of the vault on the other side of the picture. There are two men about to lower a dead body from a tomb – they have lifted its lid – and a third man in a turban is helping them, while a nobleman in the background with a torch is trying to read the inscription on another tomb. These men are evidently plundering a catacomb. One of the bodies is stretched out on a carpet in strange foreshortening, while a dignified old man in a gorgeous costume kneels beside it and looks at it. In the right corner there is a group of gesticulating men and women, looking with astonishment at the saint – for a saint the figure with the halo must be. If we look more closely we see that he carries a book – he is St Mark the Evangelist, the patron saint of Venice. What is happening? The picture represents the story of how the relics of St Mark were brought from Alexandria (the town of the ‘infidel’ Muslims) to Venice, where the famous shrine of the church of St Mark was built to house them. The story goes that St Mark had been bishop at Alexandria and had been buried in one of the catacombs there. When the Venetian party had broken into the catacomb on the pious errand of finding the body of the saint, they did not know which of the many tombs contained the treasured relic. But when they came upon the right one, St Mark suddenly appeared and revealed the remains of his earthly existence. That is the moment which Tintoretto selected. The saint commands the men not to continue





236  
 Tintoretto  
*The finding of  
 St Mark's remains*,  
 c. 1562  
 Oil on canvas, 405 × 405  
 cm, 159½ × 159½ in;  
 Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

searching the tombs. His body is found; it lies at his feet, bathed in light, and already its presence is working miracles. The writhing man on the right is freed from a demon who had possessed him and who is seen escaping from his mouth like a wisp of smoke. The nobleman who kneels down in gratitude and adoration is the Donor, a member of the religious confraternity who had commissioned the painting. No doubt the whole picture must have struck contemporaries as eccentric. They may have been rather shocked by the clashing contrasts of light and shade, of closeness and distance, by the lack of harmony in gestures and movement. Yet they must soon have understood that with more ordinary methods Tintoretto could



not have created the impression of a tremendous mystery unfolding before our eyes. To achieve this purpose Tintoretto even sacrificed that mellow beauty of colour that had been the proudest achievement of Venetian painting, of Giorgione and Titian. His painting of St George's fight with the dragon, in London, *figure 237*, shows how the weird light and the broken tones add to the feeling of tension and excitement. We feel the drama has just reached its climax. The princess seems to be rushing right out of the picture towards us while the hero is removed, against all rules, far into the background of the scene.

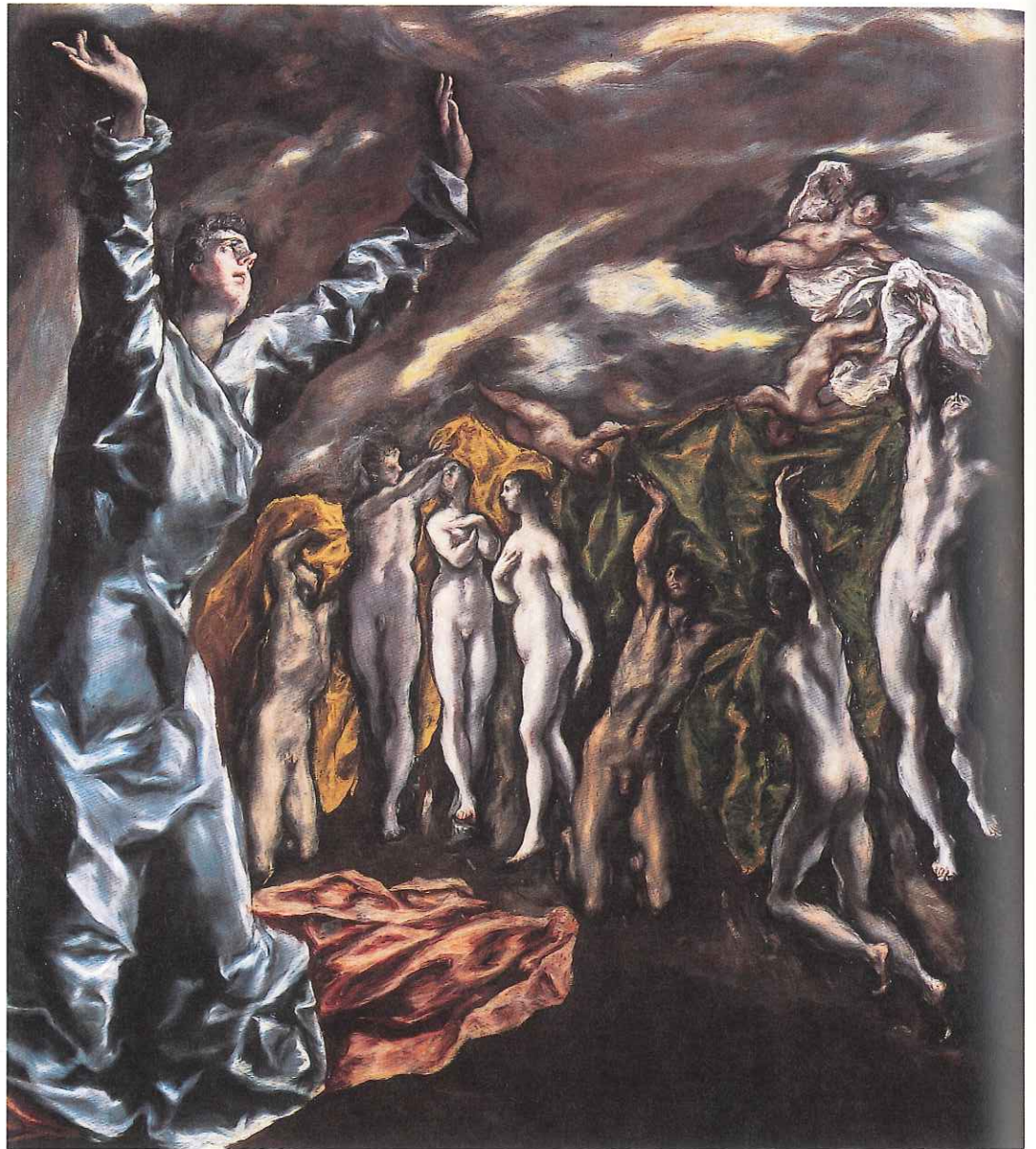
Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), the great Florentine critic and biographer of the period, wrote of Tintoretto that 'had he not abandoned the beaten track but rather followed the beautiful style of his predecessors, he would have become one of the greatest painters seen in Venice'. As it was, Vasari thought his work was marred by careless execution and eccentric taste. He was puzzled by the lack of 'finish' Tintoretto gave his work. 'His sketches', he says, 'are so crude that his pencil strokes show more force than judgement and seem to have been made by chance.' It is a reproach which from that time onwards has often been made against modern artists. Perhaps this is not altogether surprising, for these great innovators in art have often concentrated on the essential things and refused to worry about technical perfection in the usual sense. In periods like that of Tintoretto, technical excellence had reached such a high standard that anyone with some mechanical aptitude could master some of its tricks. A man like Tintoretto wanted to show things in a new light, he wanted to explore new ways of representing the legends and myths of the past. He considered his painting complete when he had conveyed his vision of the legendary scene. A smooth and careful finish did not interest him, for it did not serve his purpose. On the contrary – it might have distracted our attention from the dramatic happenings of the picture. So he left it at that, and left people wondering.

No one in the sixteenth century took these methods further than a painter from the Greek island of Crete, Domenikos Theotokopoulos (1541?–1614), who was called El Greco ('the Greek') for short. He had come to Venice from an isolated part of the world which had not developed any new kind of art since the Middle Ages. In his homeland, he must have been used to seeing the images of saints in the ancient Byzantine manner – solemn, rigid and remote from any semblance of natural appearance. Not being trained to look at pictures for their correct design, he found nothing shocking in Tintoretto's art, but much that was fascinating. For he too, it seems, was a passionate and devout man, and he felt an urge to tell the sacred stories in a new and stirring manner. After his stay in Venice he settled in a distant part of Europe – in Toledo, Spain,

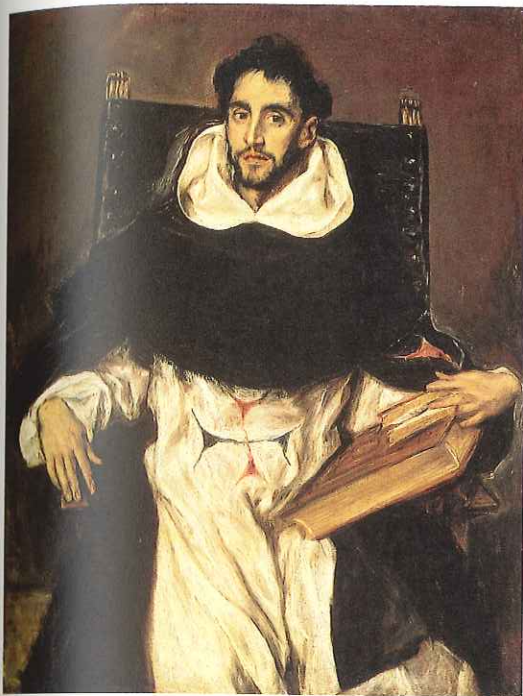
237

Tintoretto  
*St George and the  
dragon, c. 1555–8*

Oil on canvas, 157.5 ×  
100.3 cm, 62 × 39½ in;  
National Gallery, London



where again he was not likely to be disturbed and harried by critics asking for correct and natural design – for in Spain, too, the medieval ideas on art still lingered on. This may explain why El Greco's art surpasses even Tintoretto's in its bold disregard of natural forms and colours, and in its stirring and dramatic vision. *Figure 238* is one of his most startling and



239  
El Greco  
*Brother Hortensio Felix  
Paravicino*, 1609  
Oil on canvas, 113 × 86  
cm, 44½ × 33¾ in;  
Museum of Fine Arts,  
Boston

238  
El Greco  
*The opening of the Fifth  
Seal of the Apocalypse*,  
c. 1608–14  
Oil on canvas, 224.5 ×  
192.8 cm, 88½ × 76 in;  
Metropolitan Museum of  
Art, New York

exciting pictures. It represents a passage from the Revelation of St John, and it is St John himself whom we see on one side of the picture in visionary rapture, looking towards Heaven and raising his arms in a prophetic gesture.

The passage is the one in which the Lamb summons St John to 'Come and see' the opening of the seven seals. 'And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" And white robes were given unto every one of them' (Rev. vi. 9–11). The nude figures, with their excited gestures, are therefore the martyrs who rise to receive the heavenly gift of white robes. Surely no exact and

accurate drawing could ever have expressed with such an uncanny and convincing force that terrible vision of doomsday, when the very saints call for the destruction of this world. It is not difficult to see that El Greco had learned much from Tintoretto's unorthodox method of lopsided composition, and that he had also adopted the mannerism of over-long figures like that of Parmigianino's sophisticated Madonna, *figure 234*. But we also realize that El Greco employed this artistic method with a new purpose. He lived in Spain, where religion had a mystic fervour found hardly anywhere else. In this atmosphere, the sophisticated art of Mannerism lost much of its character of an art for connoisseurs. Though his work strikes us as incredibly 'modern', his contemporaries in Spain do not seem to have raised any objections such as Vasari did to Tintoretto's works. His greatest portraits, *figure 239*, can indeed stand beside those of Titian, *page 333*, *figure 212*. His studio was always fully employed. He seems to have engaged a number of assistants to cope with the many orders he received, and that may explain why not all the works that bear his name are equally good. It was only a generation later that people began to criticize his unnatural forms and colours, and to regard his pictures as something like a bad joke; and only after the First World War, when modern artists had taught us not to apply the same standards of 'correctness' to all works of art, was El Greco's art rediscovered and understood.

In the northern countries, in Germany, Holland and England, artists were confronted with a much more real crisis than their colleagues in Italy and Spain. For these southerners had only to deal with the problem of how to paint in a new and startling manner. In the North the question soon faced them whether painting could and should continue at all. This great crisis was brought about by the Reformation. Many Protestants objected to pictures or statues of saints in churches and regarded them as a sign of Popish idolatry. Thus the painters in Protestant regions lost their best source of income, the painting of altar-panels. The stricter among the Calvinists even objected to other kinds of luxury such as gay decorations of houses, and even where these were permitted in theory, the climate and the style of buildings were usually unsuited to large fresco decorations such as Italian nobles commissioned for their palaces. All that remained as a regular source of income for artists was book illustration and portrait painting, and it was doubtful whether these would suffice to make a living.

We can witness the effect of this crisis in the career of the greatest German painter of this generation, in the life of Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543). Holbein was twenty-six years younger than Dürer and only three years older than Cellini. He was born in Augsburg, a rich merchant city with close trading relations with Italy; he soon moved to Basle, a renowned centre of the New Learning.

The knowledge which Dürer strove for so passionately throughout his life thus came more naturally to Holbein. Coming from a painter's family (his father was a respected master) and being exceedingly alert, he soon absorbed the achievements of both the northern and the Italian artists. He was hardly over thirty when he painted the wonderful altar-painting of the Virgin with the family of the burgomaster of Basle as donors, *figure 240*. The form was traditional in all countries, and we have seen it applied in the Wilton Diptych, *pages 216–17, figure 143*, and Titian's 'Pesaro Madonna', *page 330, figure 210*. But Holbein's painting is still one of the most perfect examples of its kind. The way in which the donors are arranged in seemingly effortless groups on both sides of the Virgin, whose calm and majestic figure is framed by a niche of classical forms, reminds us of the most harmonious compositions of the Italian Renaissance, of Giovanni Bellini, *page 327, figure 208*, and Raphael, *page 317, figure 203*. The careful attention to detail, on the other hand, and a certain indifference to conventional beauty, show that Holbein had learned his trade in the North. He was on his way to becoming the leading master of the German-speaking countries when the turmoil of the Reformation put an end to all such hopes. In 1526 he left Switzerland for England with a letter of recommendation from the great scholar, Erasmus

240

Hans Holbein  
the Younger  
*The Virgin and Child  
with the family of  
Burgomaster Meyer,*  
1528

Altar-painting; oil on  
wood. 146.5 × 102 cm,  
57½ × 40½ in;  
Schlossmuseum,  
Darmstadt





of Rotterdam. 'The arts here are freezing,' Erasmus wrote commending the painter to his friends, among whom was Sir Thomas More. One of Holbein's first jobs in England was to prepare a large portrait of that other great scholar's family, and some detailed studies for this work are still preserved at Windsor Castle, *figure 241*. If Holbein had hoped to get away from the turmoil of the Reformation he must have been disappointed by later events, but when he finally settled in England for good and was given the official title of Court Painter by Henry VIII he had at least found a sphere of activity which allowed him to live and work. He could no longer paint Madonnas, but the tasks of a Court Painter were exceedingly manifold. He designed jewellery and furniture, costumes for pageantries and decorations for halls, weapons and goblets. His main job, however, was to paint portraits of the royal household, and it is due to Holbein's unfailing eye that we still have such a vivid picture of the men and women of Henry VIII's period. *Figure 242* shows his portrait of Sir Richard Southwell, a courtier and official who took part in the dissolution of the monasteries. There is nothing dramatic in these portraits of Holbein, nothing to catch the eye, but the longer we look at them the more they seem to reveal of the sitter's mind and personality. We do not doubt for a moment that they are in fact faithful records of what Holbein saw, drawn without fear or favour. The way in which Holbein has placed the figure in the picture shows the sure touch of the master. Nothing seems left to chance; the whole composition is so perfectly balanced that it may easily

241

Hans Holbein  
the Younger  
*Anne Cresacre, Sir  
Thomas More's  
daughter-in-law, 1528*

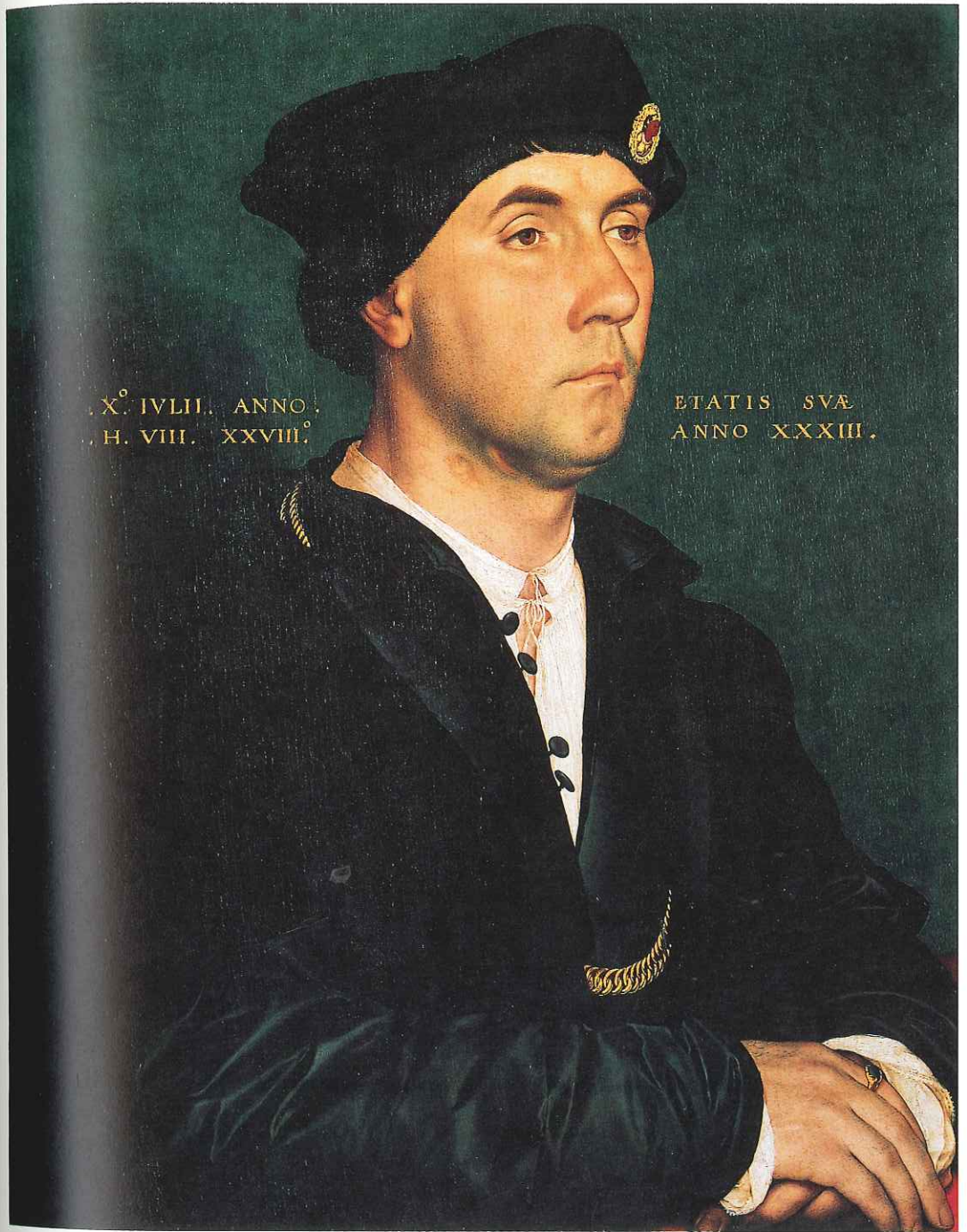
Black and coloured chalks  
on paper, 37.9 × 26.9 cm,  
1.47/8 × 10 1/2 in; Royal  
Library, Windsor Castle

242

Hans Holbein  
the Younger  
*Sir Richard Southwell,*  
1536

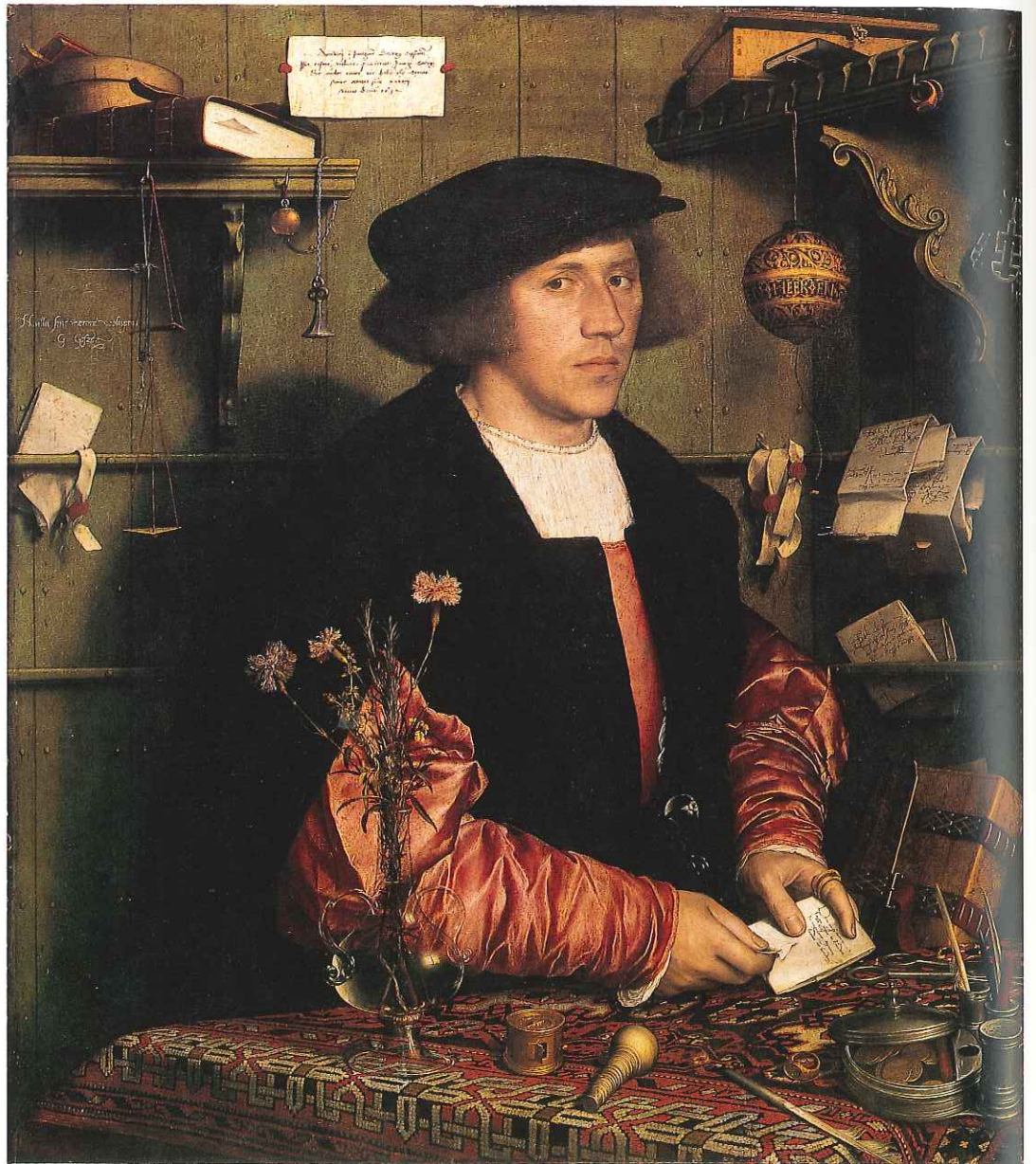
Oil on wood, 47.5 × 38  
cm, 18 × 15 in; Uffizi,  
Florence





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ANNO XXXIII.º





244  
Nicholas Hilliard  
*Young man among  
roses*, c. 1587  
Watercolour and gouache  
on vellum, 13.6 × 7.3 cm,  
5¼ × 2¾ in; Victoria and  
Albert Museum, London

243  
Hans Holbein  
the Younger  
*Georg Gisze, a  
German merchant in  
London*, 1532  
Oil on wood, 96.3 × 85.7  
cm, 38 × 33¼ in;  
Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche  
Museen, Berlin

seem 'obvious' to us. But this was Holbein's intention. In his earlier portraits he had still sought to display his wonderful skill in the rendering of details, to characterize a sitter through his setting, through the things among which he spent his life, *figure 243*. The older he grew and the more mature his art became, the less did he seem in need of any such tricks. He did not want to obtrude himself and to divert attention from the sitter. And it is precisely for this masterly restraint that we admire him most.

When Holbein had left the German-speaking countries, painting there began to decline to a frightening extent, and when Holbein died the arts were in a similar plight in England. In fact, the only branch of painting there that survived the Reformation was that of portrait painting, which Holbein had so firmly established. Even in this branch the fashions of southern Mannerism made themselves increasingly felt, and ideals of courtly refinement and elegance replaced the simpler style of Holbein.

The portrait of a young Elizabethan nobleman, *figure 244*, gives an idea of this new type of portraiture at its best. It is a 'miniature' by the famous English master

Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619), a contemporary of Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare. We may indeed think of Sidney's pastorals or Shakespeare's comedies when looking at this dainty youth who leans languidly against a tree, surrounded by thorny wild roses, his right hand pressed against his heart. Perhaps the miniature was intended as the young man's gift to the lady he was wooing, for it bears the Latin inscription 'Dat poenas laudata fides', which means roughly, 'my praised faith procures my pain'. We ought not to ask whether these pains were any more real than the painted thorns on the miniature. A young gallant in those days was expected to make a show of grief and unrequited love. These sighs and these sonnets were all part of a graceful and elaborate game, which nobody took too seriously but in which everybody wanted to shine by inventing new variations and new refinements.

If we look at Hilliard's miniature as an object designed for this game, it may no longer strike us as affected and artificial. Let us hope that when the maiden received this token of affection in a precious case and saw the pitiful pose of her elegant and noble wooer, his 'praised faith' had at last its reward.

There was only one Protestant country in Europe where art fully survived the crisis of the Reformation – that was the Netherlands. There,



245

Pieter Bruegel  
the Elder*The painter and the  
buyer, c. 1565*Pen and black ink on  
brown paper, 25 × 21.6  
cm, 9¾ × 8½ in; Albertina,  
Vienna

where painting had flourished for so long, artists found a way out of their predicament: instead of concentrating on portrait painting alone they specialized in all those types of subject-matter to which the Protestant Church could raise no objections. Since the early days of Van Eyck, the artists of the Netherlands had been recognized as perfect masters in the imitation of nature. While the Italians prided themselves on being unrivalled in the representation of the beautiful human figure in motion, they were ready to recognize that, for sheer patience and accuracy in depicting a flower, a tree, a barn or a flock of sheep, the 'Flemings' were apt to outstrip them. It was therefore quite natural that

the northern artists, who were no longer needed for the painting of altarpieces and other devotional pictures, tried to find a market for their recognized specialities and to paint pictures the main object of which was to display their stupendous skill in representing the surface of things. Specialization was not even quite new to the artists of these lands. We remember that Hieronymus Bosch, *page 358, figures 229–30*, had made a speciality of pictures of hell and of demons even before the crisis of art. Now, when the scope of painting had become more restricted, the painters went further along this road. They tried to develop the traditions of northern art which reach back to the time of the *drôleries* on the margins of medieval manuscripts, *page 211, figure 140*, and to the scenes of real life represented in fifteenth-century art, *page 274, figure 177*. Pictures in which the painters deliberately cultivated a certain branch or kind of subject, particularly scenes from daily life, later became known as ‘genre pictures’ (*genre* being the French word for branch or kind).

The greatest of the Flemish sixteenth-century masters of genre was Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525?–69). We know little of his life except that he had been to Italy, like so many northern artists of his time, and that he lived and worked in Antwerp and Brussels, where he painted most of his pictures in the 1560s, the decade in which the stern Duke of Alva arrived in the Netherlands. The dignity of art and of artists was probably as important to him as it was to Dürer or Cellini, for in one of his splendid drawings he is clearly out to point a contrast between the proud painter and the stupid-looking bespectacled man who fumbles in his purse as he peers over the artist’s shoulder, *figure 245*.

The ‘kind’ of painting on which Bruegel concentrated was scenes from peasant life. He painted peasants merrymaking, feasting and working, and so people have come to think of him as one of the Flemish peasants. This is a common mistake which we are apt to make about artists. We are often inclined to confuse their work with their person. We think of Dickens as a member of Mr Pickwick’s jolly circle, or of Jules Verne as a daring inventor and traveller. If Bruegel had been a peasant himself he could not have painted them as he did. He certainly was a townsman and his attitude towards the rustic life of the village was very likely similar to that of Shakespeare, for whom Quince the Carpenter and Bottom the Weaver were a species of ‘clown’. It was the custom at that time to regard the country yokel as a figure of fun. I do not think that either Shakespeare or Bruegel accepted this custom out of snobbery, but in rustic life human nature was less disguised and covered up with a veneer of artificiality and convention than in the life and manners of the gentlemen Hilliard portrayed. Thus, when they wanted to show up the folly of humankind, playwrights and artists often took low life as their subject.



One of the most perfect of Bruegel's human comedies is his famous picture of a country wedding, *figure 246*. Like most pictures, it loses a great deal in reproduction: all details become much smaller, and we must therefore look at it with double care. The feast takes place in a barn, with straw stacked up high in the background. The bride sits in front of a piece of blue cloth, with a kind of crown suspended over her head. She sits quietly, with folded hands and a grin of utter contentment on her stupid face, *figure 247*. The old man in the chair and the woman beside her are probably her parents, while the man farther back, who is so busy gobbling his food with his spoon, may be the bridegroom. Most of the people at the table concentrate on eating and drinking, and we notice this is only the beginning. In the left-hand corner a man pours out beer – a good number of empty jugs are still in the basket – while two men with white aprons are carrying ten more platefuls of pie or porridge on an improvised tray. One of the guests passes the plates to the table. But much more is going on. There is the crowd in the background trying to get in; there are the musicians, one of them with a pathetic, forlorn and hungry look in his eyes, as he watches the food being carried past; there are the two outsiders at the corner of the table, the friar and the magistrate,

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Pieter Bruegel the Elder  
*Peasant wedding*,  
 c. 1568

Oil on wood, 114 × 164  
 cm, 45 × 64½ in;  
 Kunsthistorisches  
 Museum, Vienna

engrossed in their own conversation; and there is the child in the foreground, who has got hold of a plate, and a feathered cap much too large for its little head, and who is completely absorbed in licking the delicious food – a picture of innocent greed. But what is even more admirable than all this wealth of anecdote, wit and observation, is the way in which Bruegel has organized his picture so that it does not look crowded or confusing. Tintoretto himself could not have produced a more convincing picture of a crowded space than did Bruegel with his device of the table receding into the background and the movement of people starting with the crowd at the barn door, leading up to the foreground and the scene of the food carriers, and back again through the gesture of the man serving the table who leads our eyes directly to the small but central figure of the grinning bride.

In these gay, but by no means simple, pictures, Bruegel had discovered a new kingdom for art which the generations of Netherlandish painters after him were to explore to the full.

In France the crisis of art took again a different turn. Situated between Italy and the northern countries, it was influenced by both. The vigorous tradition of French medieval art was at first threatened by the inrush of the Italianate fashion, which French painters found as difficult to adapt as did their colleagues in the Netherlands, *page 357, figure 228*. The form in which

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Detail of figure 246





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Jean Goujon  
*Nymphs from the  
 Fontaine des Innocents,*  
 1547–9

Marble; each panel 240 x  
 63 cm, 94½ x 24¾ in;  
 Musée National des  
 Monuments Français, Paris

Italian art was finally accepted by high society was that of the elegant and refined Italian Mannerists of Cellini's type, *figure 233*. We can see its influence in the lively reliefs from a fountain by the French sculptor, Jean Goujon (died 1566?), *figure 248*. There is something both of Parmigianino's fastidious elegance and Giambologna's virtuosity in these exquisitely graceful figures and the way they are fitted into the narrow strips reserved for them.

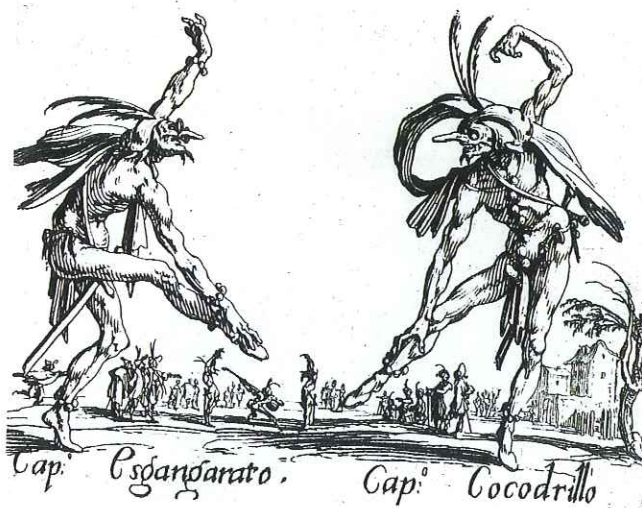
A generation later an artist arose in France in whose etchings the bizarre inventions of the Italian Mannerists were represented in the spirit of Pieter Bruegel: the Lorrainian, Jacques Callot (1592–1635). Like Tintoretto or



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Jacques Callot  
*Two Italian clowns,*  
 c. 1622

Detail of etching from the  
 series 'Balli di Sfessania'



even El Greco, he loved to show the most surprising combinations, of tall, gaunt figures and wide unexpected vistas; but, like Bruegel, he used these devices to portray the follies of mankind through scenes from the life of its outcasts, soldiers, cripples, beggars and strolling players, *figure 249*. But by the time Callot popularized these extravaganzas in his etchings most painters of his day had turned their attention to new problems, which filled the talk of the studios in Rome, Antwerp and Madrid.

Taddeo Zuccaro at work  
 on the scaffolding of a  
 palace. He is watched  
 with admiration by the  
 aged Michelangelo,  
 while the goddess of  
 Fame trumpets his  
 triumph all over the  
 world, c. 1590

Drawing by Federico  
 Zuccaro; pen and ink on  
 paper, 26.2 x 41 cm, 10 1/4  
 x 16 1/8 in; Albertina,  
 Vienna

