I. Introduction

Francisco de Holanda (Lisbon, c. 1517–1584), the famous Portuguese artist and humanist, is far better known for his writings – especially the so-called Dialogues in Rome – than for his art works. The Dialogues are the second part of the Pintura Antigua, an art treatise divided into 44 chapters which, as Francisco himself points out in his preface to king Dom João III, is the first work on painting written in Portuguese.¹ In the book, Holanda centralizes the humanistic topoi of the antiqua novitas, emphasizing the practice of imitation of ancient paradigms and stressing the need of increasing the fundaments of art theory in Portugal. His discourses, varied as they are, insist on Portugal’s backwardness and the low esteem in which Portuguese artists are held in their homeland, as compared to their Italian counterparts.

The relevance of Holanda’s works is most commonly associated to their quality of being considered a direct source for studies on Michelangelo, who appears as one of the central figures of the three first dialogues; perhaps of even greater transcendence, though, is the fact that both his literary and his artistic production project direct light on tensions and contradictions which were only hinted at by his contemporaries.

¹ The book was begun during Francisco’s Roman sojourn and finished in the second half of 1548. The original manuscript was lost; we know it through an eighteenth-century copy presently kept at the Academia das Ciências in Lisbon. In 1563, the Portuguese painter Manuel Denis finished a Spanish translation of the manuscript, which would be published in 1921. The Dialogues in Rome were published separately much more often than the Pintura Antigua as a whole: in the nineteenth century there were several editions and translations of it, including among others an edition in French in 1846 (August Roquemont), German in 1860 (Herman Grimm), and Italian in 1875 (Aurelio Gotti). The Pintura Antigua was published for the first time as a whole in 1918 by Joaquim de Vasconcellos.
The most emphatic discourse on the sixteenth-century Flemish-Italian artistic confrontation, for example, is probably the one attributed to Michelangelo in the first book of the *Dialogues in Rome*:

In Flanders, they paint to fool the exterior eye, or things that would cheer you or of which you could not speak ill, as for example saints and prophets. They paint stuffs, masonry, green fields, the shadow of trees, and rivers, and bridges, which they call landscapes, with many people here and many there. And all this, though it could please some eyes, is in fact done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skilful choice or clarity, and finally, without any substance or nerve [...]. Only the works produced in Italy can we really name true painting, and that is why we call good painting Italian [...]. I do affirm that no nation or people (except for one or two Spaniards) can perfectly attain or imitate the Italian way of painting (which is itself the ancient Greek) without being easily discovered, no matter how much they strive and work.²

Francisco openly constructs an extreme comparison between Flemish and Italian art, associating to each one particular concepts and characteristics; the former is manual and made to ‘fool the exterior eye’, limited as it is to landscapes and representing an excessive amount of particular elements, while the latter is intellectual and essential. Although Francisco’s discourse is certainly part of a long dualistic tradition which has been developed at least since the beginning of the sixteenth century,³ the confrontation of principles associated to the Italian and Flemish art had never before been expressed so emphatically. This confrontation, manifest as it was in the visual arts themselves, was approached only indirectly by contemporary

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² ‘Pintam em Flandres propriamente para enganar a vista exterior, ou cousas que vos alegrem ou de que não possaes dizer mal, assi como santos e profetas. O seu pintar é trapos, maçanarias, verduras de campos, sombras de árvores, e rios e pontes, a que chamam paisagens, e muitas figuras para cá e muitas para acolá. E tudo isto, ainda que pareça bem a alguns olhos, na verdade é feito sem razão nem arte, sem simetria nem proporção, sem advertência do escolher nem despejo, e finalmente sem nenhuma substância nem nervo [...]. Somente às obras que se fazem em Itália podemos chamar quase verdadeira pintura, e por isso à boa chamamos italiana [...] nenhuma nação nem gente (deixo estar um ou dois espanhóis) pode perfeitamente fartar, nem imitar o modo de pintar de Itália, que é o grego antigo, que logo não seja conhecido facilmente por alheio, por mais que se nisso esforce e trabalhe’. Holanda Francisco de, *Da Pintura Antigua*, ed. A. González García (Lisbon: 1983) 235–237.