Giotto as an Ugly Genius: A Study in Self-Portrayal

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son d'esser bruto
—Michelangelo, Poem 172

A fundamental assumption in Renaissance thinking about works of art is that they mirror the artists who created them.¹ This belief is expressed in widely divergent contexts by a variety of people from almost every corner of Renaissance society. For example, the phrase “ogni dipintore dipinge se” (“every painter paints himself”), which succinctly sums up the assumption, appears in a list of aphorisms thought to be by the poet Angelo Poliziano, who attributes it to Cosimo de’ Medici (Poliziano 67; Chastel 102 n 4)²; Savonarola used it in at least one of his sermons (“e si dice che ogni dipintore dipinge se medisimo”) (Chastel 103 n 4)³; and according to Vasari, Michelangelo, when asked why a certain painter had made a picture in which the best representation was that of an ox, answered “every painter is good at portraying himself” (“ogni pittore ritrae se medesimo bene”) (Vasari 6: 280).⁴ As is generally the case with aphorisms, this one says a great deal in very few words, but it does not tell us how every painter paints himself.

Leonardo da Vinci, who did not record the phrase in his extant notebooks, nevertheless also believed that art reflects its creator and explained his belief in some detail, telling us how and in what sense he found it to be true. For him one of the powers of the human soul (“anima”) is giudizio or judgment, and the soul creates its material body according to that power (Pedretti 35).⁵ When an artist draws or paints, his hand is guided by his judgment, which will cause him perforce to invent figures that look like his own body. Thus, Leonardo warns, an ugly artist will give his figures ugly faces, and a painter with awkward hands (“goffe mani”) will paint similar hands in his paintings. Leonardo also believed that artists should be aware of their physical defects and
strive to overcome them so that the figures in their works will not resemble their creator (Richter 1: 342–43).

Apparently Isabella d’Este, one of Leonardo’s patrons, also held the opinion that a work of art reflects its creator, but in a way other than that described by Leonardo. Isabella believed that art mirrors the artist’s nature or character rather than his physical appearance. In 1501 she wrote to Fra Pietro da Novellara, a friar in the church of Sta. Croce in Florence, seeking his assistance in obtaining from Leonardo a painting for her famous studiolo in Mantua. If the artist agrees to paint the picture, she explains, she will leave the subject matter to him. If he declines the commission, Fra Pietro is to induce Leonardo, she says, “to paint a small picture of the Madonna, as sweet and devout as is his own nature” (“indurlo a farne uno quadretto de la Madonna devotro e dolce como è il suo naturale”) (Beltrami 65 doc. 106). A few years later, Isabella wrote directly to Leonardo asking for a painting of the youthful Christ, painted “with that sweetness and charm of atmosphere that you have as the particular excellence of your art” (“cum quella dolceza et suavità de aiere che haveti per arte peculiare in excellentia”) (Beltrami 80 doc. 142). What Isabella valued most in Leonardo’s works was their particular, inimitable “air,” a reflection of his “sweet” and “devout” nature, that he alone could impart to a painting. Isabella, who met the artist in Mantua in 1499 when he drew her portrait (now in Paris, Louvre), saw Leonardo’s art as a reflection of his character, rather than of his body.

Vasari, too, discusses art as a reflection of the artist in, for example, his vita of Filippo Brunelleschi, who appears in the guise of a Christianized Socrates—in the Symposium (215–16) he is said to be outwardly ugly but divine and beautiful within. Vasari begins his biography of the architect with the observation that looks can be deceiving. There are some men, he explains, who are small in stature and plain-looking, yet endowed with a noble spirit and a courageous heart. These men are capable of great accomplishments. Veins of gold, as the proverb goes, are sometimes hidden beneath the earth, and we should never snub people, particularly artists, who lack physical grace and charm, for they can achieve marvelous results. Brunelleschi is just such a person. He was less than handsome but overcame the ugliness of his body (“la brutezza del corpo”) with the force and quality of his genius