
Baldesar Castiglione

EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK OF THE COURTIER, 1528

26. "Therefore he who wishes to be a good pupil, besides performing his tasks well, must put forth every effort to resemble his master, and, if it were possible, to transform himself into his master. And when he feels that he has made some progress, it will be very profitable to observe different men of the same calling, and governing himself with that good judgment which must ever be his guide, to go about selecting now this thing from one and that thing from another. And as the bee in the green meadows is ever wont to rob the flowers among the grass, so our Courtier must steal this grace from all who seem to possess it, taking from each that part which shall most be worthy praise; and not act like a friend of ours whom you all know, who thought he greatly resembled King Ferdinand the Younger of Aragon, and made it his care to imitate the latter in nothing but a certain trick of continually raising the head and twisting one side of the mouth, which the king had contracted from some infirmity. And there are many such, who think they gain a point if only they be like a great man in some thing; and frequently they devote themselves to that which is his only fault.

"But having before now often considered whence this grace springs, laying aside those men who have it by nature, I find one universal rule concerning it, which seems to me worth more in this matter than any other in all things human that are done or said: and that is to avoid affectation to the uttermost and as it were a very sharp and dangerous rock; and, to use possibly a new word, to practise in everything a certain nonchalance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought. From this I believe grace is in large measure derived, because everyone knows the difficulty of those things that are rare and well done, and therefore facility in them excites the highest admiration; while on the other hand, to strive and as the saying is to drag by the hair, is extremely ungraceful, and makes us esteem everything slightly, however great it be.

"Accordingly we may affirm that to be true art which does not appear to be art; nor to anything must we give greater care than to conceal art, for if it is discovered, it quite destroys our credit and brings us into small esteem. And I remember having once read that there were several very excellent orators of antiquity, who among their other devices strove to make everyone believe that they had no knowledge of letters; and hiding their knowledge they pretended that their orations were composed very simply and as if springing rather from nature and truth than from study and art; the which, if it had been detected, would have made men wary of being duped by it.

"Thus you see how the exhibition of art and study so intense destroys the grace in everything. Which of you is there who does not laugh when our friend messer Pierpaolo dances in his peculiar way, with those capers of his, legs stiff to the toe and head motionless, as if he were a stick, and with such intentness that he actually seems to be counting the steps? What eye so blind as not to see in this the ungracefulness of affectation,-and in many men and women who are here present, the grace of that nonchalant ease (for in the case of bodily movements many call it thus), showing by word or laugh or gesture that they have no care and are thinking more of everything else than of that, to make the onlooker think they can hardly go amiss?"

27. Messer Bernardo Bibbiena here said, without waiting:

"Now at last our friend messer Roberto has found someone to praise the manner of his dancing, as all the rest of you seem to value it lightly; because if this merit consists in nonchalance, and in appearing to take no heed and to be thinking more of everything else than of what you are doing, messer Roberto in dancing has no peer on earth; for to show plainly that he is not thinking about it, he often lets the cloak drop from his shoulders and the slippers from his feet, and still goes on dancing without picking up either the one or the other."

Then the Count replied:

"Since you insist on my talking, I will speak further of our faults. Do you not perceive that what you call nonchalance in messer Roberto, is really affectation? For it is clearly seen that he is striving with all his might to seem to be taking no thought, and this is taking too much thought; and since it passes the true limits of moderation, his nonchalance is affected and unbecoming; and it is a thing that works precisely the reverse of the effect intended, that is the concealment of art. Thus in nonchalance (which is praiseworthy in itself), I do not think that it is less a vice of affectation to let the clothes fall from one's back, than in care of dress (which also is praiseworthy in itself) to hold the head stiff for fear of disarranging one's locks, or to carry a mirror in the peak of one's cap and a comb in one's sleeve, and to have a valet follow one about the streets with sponge and brush: for such care in dress and such nonchalance both touch upon excess, which is always offensive and contrary to that pure and charming simplicity which is so pleasing to the human mind.

"You see how ungraceful a rider is who strives to sit bolt upright in the saddle after the manner we are

wont to call Venetian, as compared with another who seems not to be thinking about it, and sits his horse as free and steady as if he were afoot. How much more pleasing and how much more praised is a gentleman who carries arms, if he be modest, speak little and boast little, than another who is forever sounding his own praises, and with blasphemy and bluster seems to be hurling defiance at the world! This too is naught but affectation of wishing to appear bold. And so it is with every exercise, nay with everything that can be done or said in the world."

28. Then my lord Magnifico said:

"This is true also with music, wherein it is a very great fault to place two perfect consonances one after the other, so that our very sense of hearing abhors it and often enjoys a second or seventh, which in itself is a harsh and intolerable discord. And the reason is that repetition of perfect consonances begets satiety and exhibits a too affected harmony; which is avoided by introducing imperfect consonances, and thus a kind of contrast is given, whereby our ears are held more in suspense, and more eagerly await and enjoy the perfect consonances, and sometimes delight in that discord of the second or seventh, as in something unpremeditated."

"You see then," replied the Count, "the harmful effect of affectation in this as in other things. It is said also to have been proverbial among some very excellent painters of antiquity, that over diligence is harmful, and Protogenes is said to have been censured by Apelles because he did not know when to take his hand from the tablet."

Then messer Cesare said:

"Methinks our friend fra Serafino has this same fault, of not knowing when to take his hands from the table, at least until all the food has been taken from it too."

The Count laughed, and continued:

"Apelles meant that in his painting Protogenes did not know when he had finished, which was the same thing as reproving him for being affected in his work. Thus this excellence, which is the opposite of affectation and which for the present we call nonchalance, besides being the true fountain from which grace springs, carries with it another ornament, which, in accompanying any human action whatever and however trifling it be, not only at once reveals the knowledge of him who performs it, but often leads us to rate his knowledge as much greater than in fact often it is; because it impresses upon the minds of the bystanders the idea that he who does well so easily, knows much more than he does, and that if he were to use care and effort in what he did, he could do it far better.

"And to multiply like examples, here is a man who handles weapons, either about to throw a dart or holding a sword in his hand or other weapon; if he nimbly and without thinking puts himself in an attitude of readiness, with such ease that his body and all his members seem to fall into that posture naturally and quite without effort, although he do no more, he will prove himself to everyone to be perfect in that exercise. Likewise in dancing, a single step, a single movement of the person that is graceful and not forced, soon shows the knowledge of the dancer. A musician who in singing utters a single note ending with sweet tone in a little group of four notes with such ease as to seem spontaneous, shows by that single touch that he can do much more than he is doing. Often too in painting, a single line not laboured, a single brush-stroke easily drawn, so that it seems as if the hand moves unbidden to its aim according to the painter's wish, without being guided by care or any skill, clearly reveals the excellence of the craftsman, which every man appreciates according to his capacity for judging. And the same is true of nearly everything else.

"Our Courtier then will be esteemed excellent and will attain grace in everything, particularly in speaking, if he avoids affectation; into which fault many fall, and often more than others, some of us Lombards; who, if they have been a year away from home, on their return at once begin to speak Roman, sometimes Spanish or French, and God knows how. And all this comes from over zeal to appear widely informed; in such fashion do men devote care and assiduity to acquiring a very odious fault. And truly it would be no light task for me, if I were to try in these discussions of ours to use those antique Tuscan words that are quite rejected by the usage of the Tuscans of to-day; and besides I think everyone would laugh at me."

49. Then the Count said: . . . ,

"Before we enter upon that subject, I wish to discuss another matter, which I deem of great importance and therefore think our Courtier ought by no means to omit: and this is to know how to draw and to have acquaintance with the very art of painting.

"And do not marvel that I desire this art, which to-day may seem to savour of the artisan and little to befit a gentleman; for I remember having read that the ancients, especially throughout Greece, had their boys of gentle birth study painting in school as an honourable and necessary thing, and it was admitted to the first rank of liberal arts; while by public edict they forbade that it be taught to slaves. Among the Romans too, it was held in highest honour, and the very noble family of the Fabii took their name from it; for the first Fabius was given the name Pictor, because, being indeed a most excellent painter, and so devoted to painting that when he painted the walls

of the temple of Health, he inscribed his own name thereon;" for although he was born of a family thus renowned and honoured with so many consular titles, triumphs and other dignities, and although he was a man of letters and learned in the law, and numbered among the orators, yet he thought to add splendour and ornament to his fame by leaving a memorial that he had been a painter. Nor is there lack of many other men of illustrious family, celebrated in this art; which besides being very noble and worthy in itself, is of great utility, and especially in war for drawing places, sites, rivers, bridges, rocks, fortresses, and the like; since however well we may keep them in memory (which is very difficult), we cannot show them to others.

"And truly he who does not esteem this art, seems to me very unreasonable; for this universal fabric that we see, with the vast heaven so richly adorned with shining stars, and in the midst the earth girdled by the seas, varied with mountains, valleys and rivers, and bedecked with so many divers trees, beautiful flowers and grasses,-may be said to be a great and noble picture, composed by the hand of nature and of God; and whoever is able to imitate it, seems to me deserving of great praise: nor can it be imitated without knowledge of many things, as he knows well who tries. Hence the ancients greatly prized both the art and the artist, which thus attained the summit of highest excellence; very sure proof of which may be found in the antique marble and bronze statues that yet are seen. And although painting is different from sculpture, both the one and the other spring from the same source, which is good design. Therefore, as the statues are divine, so we may believe the pictures were also; the more indeed because they are susceptible of greater skill."

50. – Then my lady Emilia turned to Giancristoforo Romano, who was sitting with the others there, and said:

"What think you of this opinion? Do you admit that painting is susceptible of greater skill than sculpture?"

Giancristoforo replied:

"I, my Lady, think that sculpture needs more pains, more skill, and is of greater dignity than painting."

The Count rejoined:

"In that statues are more enduring, perhaps we might say they are of greater dignity; for being made as memorials, they fulfil better than painting the purpose for which they are made. But besides serving as memorials, both painting and sculpture serve also to beautify, and in this respect painting is much superior; for if less diuturnal (so to speak) than sculpture, yet it is of very long life, and is far more charming so long as it endures."

Then Giancristoforo replied:

I really think that you are speaking against your convictions and that you are doing so solely for the sake of your friend Raphael; and perhaps too the excellence you find in his painting seems to you so consummate that sculpture cannot rival it: but consider that this is praise of an artist and not of his art."

Then he continued:

"It seems clear to me that both the one and the other are artificial imitations of nature; but I do not see how you can say that truth, such as nature makes it, is not better imitated in a marble or bronze statue, wherein the members are round, formed and measured, as nature makes them,-than in a painting, where we see nothing but the surface and those colours that cheat the eyes; nor will you tell me, surely, that being is not nearer truth than seeming. Moreover I think sculpture is more difficult, because if a slip is made, it cannot be corrected (since marble cannot be patched again), but another statue must be made anew; which does not happen with painting, for one may change a thousand times, and add and take away, improving always."

51. – The Count said, laughing:

"I am not speaking for Raphael's sake; nor ought you to repute me so ignorant as not to know the excellence of Michelangelo in sculpture, your own, and others.' But I am speaking of the art, and not of the artists."

"You say very truly that both the one and the other are imitations of nature; but it is not true that painting seems, and sculpture is. For while statues are round as in life and painting is seen only on the surface, statues lack many things that paintings do not lack, and especially light and shade. Thus flesh has one tone and marble another; and this the painter imitates to the life by chiaroscuro, greater or less according to the need, which the sculptor cannot do. And although the painter does not make his figure round, he presents the muscles and members rounded in such fashion as so to join the parts which are not seen, that we can discern very well that the painter knows and understands these also. And in this, another and greater skill is needed to represent those members that are foreshortened and grow smaller in proportion to the distance by reason of perspective; which, by means of measured lines, colours, lights and shades, shows you foreground and distance all on the single surface of an upright wall, in such proportion as he chooses. Do you really think it of small moment to imitate the natural colours, in representing flesh or stuffs or any other coloured thing? The sculptor certainly cannot do this, or express the grace of black eyes or blue, with the splendour of their amorous beams. He cannot show the colour of fair hair, or the gleam of weapons, or a dark night, or a storm at sea, or its lightnings and thunderbolts, or the burning, of a city, or the birth of rosy dawn with its rays of gold and purple. In short, he cannot show sky, sea, earth, mountains, woods, meadows, gardens, rivers, cities, or houses, all of which the painter shows."

52. – "Therefore painting seems to me nobler and more susceptible of skill, than sculpture. And I think that it, like other things, reached the summit of excellence among the ancients: which still is seen in the few slight

remains that are left, especially in the grottoes of Rome; but much more clearly may it be perceived in the ancient authors, wherein is such honoured and frequent mention both of works and of masters, and whereby we learn how highly they were always honoured by great lords and by commonwealths.

"Thus we read that Alexander loved Apelles of Ephesus dearly, -so dearly, that having caused the artist to paint a portrait of his favourite slave undraped, and hearing that the worthy painter had become most ardently enamoured of her by reason of her marvellous beauty, he gave her to Apelles without hesitation: -munificence truly worthy of Alexander, to sacrifice not only treasure and states but his very affections and desires; and sign of exceeding love for Apelles, in order to please the artist, not to hesitate at displeasing the woman he dearly loved, who (we may believe) was sorely grieved to change so great a king for a painter. Many other signs also are told of Alexander's favour to Apelles; but he very clearly showed how highly he esteemed the painter, in commanding by public edict that none other should presume to paint his portrait.

"Here I could tell you of the rivalries of many noble painters, which filled nearly the whole world with praise and wonderment. I could tell you with what solemnity ancient emperors adorned their triumphs with pictures, and set them up in public places, and how dearly bought them; and that there were some painters who gave their works as gifts, esteeming gold and silver inadequate to pay for them; and how a painting by Protogenes was prized so highly, that when Demetrius laid siege to Rhodes and could have gained an entrance by setting fire to the quarter where he knew the painting was, he refrained from giving battle so that it might not be burned, and thus did not capture the place; and that Metrodorus, a philosopher and very excellent painter, was sent by the Athenians to Lucius Paulus to teach his children and to adorn the triumph that he was about to receive. Moreover many noble authors have written about this art, which is a great sign of the esteem in which it was held; but I do not wish to enlarge further upon it in this discussion.

"So let it be enough to say that it is fitting for our Courtier to have knowledge of painting also, as being honourable and useful and highly prized in those times when men were of far greater worth than now they are. And if he should never derive from it other use or pleasure than the help it affords in judging the merit of statues ancient and modern, of vases, buildings, medals, cameos, intaglios, and the like, it also enables him to appreciate the beauty of living bodies, not only as to delicacy of face but as to symmetry of all the other parts, both in men and in every other creature. Thus you see how a knowledge of painting is a source of very great pleasure. And let those think of this, who so delight in contemplating a woman's beauty that they seem to be in paradise, and yet cannot paint; which if they could do, they would have much greater pleasure, because they would more perfectly appreciate that beauty which engenders such satisfaction in their hearts."

53. – Here messer Cesare Gonzaga laughed, and said:

"Certainly I am no painter; yet I am sure I have greater pleasure in looking upon a woman than that admirable Apelles, whom you just mentioned, would have if he were now come back to life."

The Count replied:

"This pleasure of yours is not derived wholly from her beauty, but from the affection that perhaps you bear her; and if you will say the truth, the first time you saw that woman you did not feel a thousandth part of the pleasure that you did afterwards, although her beauty was the same. Thus you may see how much more affection had to do with your pleasure, than beauty had."

"I do not deny this," said messer Cesare; "but just as my pleasure is born of affection so is affection born of beauty. Thus it may still be said that beauty is the cause of my pleasure."

The Count replied:

"Many other causes also inflame our minds, besides beauty: such as manners, knowledge, speech, gesture, and a thousand other things which in a way perhaps might also be called beauties; but above all, the consciousness of being loved. So it is possible to love very ardently even without that beauty you speak of; but the love that springs from the outward bodily beauty which we see, will doubtless give far greater pleasure to him who appreciates it more than to him who appreciates it less. Therefore, to return to our subject, I think that Apelles enjoyed the contemplation of Campaspe's beauty far more than Alexander did: for we may easily believe that both men's love sprang only from her beauty; and perhaps it was partly on this account that Alexander resolved to give her to him who seemed fitted to appreciate her most perfectly.

"Have you not read that those five maidens of Crotona, whom the painter Zeuxis chose above the others of that city for the purpose of forming from them all a single type of surpassing beauty, were celebrated by many poets as having been adjudged beautiful by one who must have been a consummate judge of beauty?"

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