

Bronzino's *Del pennello* and the Pleasures of Art

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1 First published in 1538 in *Le terze rime di messer Giovanni Della Casa de messer Bino et d'altri* (Venice: Curtio Navo et fratelli). The modern edition is *Agnolo Bronzino. Rime in burla*, ed. Franca Petrucci Nardelli (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1988), which can be found at the site: www.bibliotecaitaliana.it. The translation found in the text and appendix is my own. I would like to thank Gian Mario Cao for his important contributions, through discussions that were both learned and lively, and whose insight helped to clarify many of the troublesome passages.

In his poem *Del pennello*, Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) presents a scurrilous, witty, and complex discourse in praise of the paintbrush.¹ The elaborate apostrophe of a humble object was a convention deployed in the burlesque sonnets that found their most enthusiastic practitioners in Florence during the 15th and 16th centuries. Domenico di Giovanni, known as Burchiello (1404-1448), developed the genre in which the modest object chosen for tribute is always given a double valence, with its second signification generally having a sexual meaning. In the hands of a skilled writer, the combination of bombastic praise and obscenity produces a hilarity that is still contagious centuries later. Bronzino was as clever a technician in his poetry as he was a virtuoso in painting so that his burlesque verses sparkle with ribaldry as intensely as his courtly portraits shine in their refinement. *Del pennello* is a powerful example of Bronzino's particular blend of talent in both art and literature, extolling the painter's craft by its subject and

2 For the most recent discussions of Bronzino's work see the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition in Florence at Palazzo Strozzi, *Bronzino: Artist and Poet at the Court of the Medici*, eds. Carlo Falciani and Antonio Natali (Florence: Mandragora, 2010). Giorgio Vasari, in his biography of Bronzino, praises the artist's portraits in several passages for being "natural," and on one occasion as being "like reality." See Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, vol. 2, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1996), 868-76.

demonstrating the writer's dexterity through its medium.

From the outset, the verses of *Del pennello* convey an intimate voice; the narrator speaks in the first person, framing the discussion by recounting a recent experience. The poem begins with an anecdote about buying a painting realized by a noble tool, and ends with the narrator wanting to exhibit his own *pennello*, justified by the fact that in the course of the poem the speaker reveals himself to be a painter. The painter / narrator of *Del pennello* and Bronzino the artist / poet therefore share a common profile.

Del pennello commences with the fiction of the narrator's purchase of a work of art that is so accomplished as to demand some praise for its creator:

Recently I saw a good portrait
of a man and a woman. They were nude,
painted together in a pleasurable act.
I paid a lot for it—a couple of *scudi*—
because it was obvious that it contained everything
that can be learned from nature or long study.
I stayed looking at it for a while, engrossed,
because it seemed I could see them wriggling
as though well-contented. (...)

The worth of the painting is emphasized by stating the amount paid for the panel. If we consider the two *scudi* price tag, we discover that the cost of the conjectural work was indeed considerable. Documents list Bronzino's monthly wages in the court of Cosimo I de' Medici to have been 6 *scudi* in 1540 (only a few years after the poem was written, with first publication in 1538) (Piliod 17). Therefore the *coppia di scudi* mentioned is an imposing sum, something on the order of 1 / 3 of a month's income for a court artist.

While we can imagine that this was, in part, an artist's wishful and teasing aggrandizement of the stature of his profession, it is probably a bit too grand. I would understand the price quotation as placing an emphasis on *coppia*, punning on the *coppia* paid for the *coppia* received as delineated in the painting's subject.

The narrator links the considerable financial outlay for the painting to its formal richness ("it contained everything that can be learned from nature or long study"), which incorporates the two poles of contemporary artistic practice: studied artifice and the imitation of nature. This conjoining of two apparently opposed techniques is a hallmark of Bronzino's painting style, which in art historical criticism results in some scholars discussing the artist's 'naturalism' while others analyze his 'Mannerism' or artificiality, especially with regard to his portraits. Both views can be justified, as they focus on different specific components of his work, or privilege one prism of Bronzino's multi-faceted but fully synthesized portrait style.² The reconciliation of two discrete approaches to imagery also operates in the technique Bronzino employed in composing *Del pennello*, where the ribald material of the sonnet is interwoven with a more cerebral, if humorous, consideration of the elements that go into the successful creation of art. In this combination the study of nature centers on the human operation of coupling, imitating life in a particularly piquant situation. The imitation of art provides an equally important motif for the sonnet, since, as we will see, Bronzino provides an extended ekphrasis of a fellow-artist's work.

Insider jokes about the artist's profession abound, and in several different categories. For example, even before the narrator discloses his *métier*, he addresses an imaginary audience of colleagues with an oration of surging movement and lubricious impact:

It excites me to speak with you, oh painters,
since it seems that by nature you have been endowed
with a large talent, both firm and solid.
When it seems to you good work has been done,
pay attention to it for more than just a few strokes,
because it will never work for an ingrate.
And when you sketch a woman or a man
in order to paint them later,
keep in mind what that fellow said,
so you won't do it in a bad style:
"When you are able to find a beautiful body, work with it.
If another is better from behind, then take it." (...)

3 The letter was composed sometime around 1514, published by Lodovico Dolce in 1554, but certainly in circulation before then, probably as an open letter to Baldassare Castiglione, with the ostensible recipient perhaps co-author. See Ettore Camesasca, *Raffaello, Gli scritti* (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1993), 154-67. Shearman questions the date and other aspects of the letter's composition. However, its internal evidence ties the date to Raphael's appointment as architect of Saint Peter's, the painting of the *Galatea*, and Castiglione's residence in Rome, all of which makes the artist's collaboration with Castiglione and the 1514 date conclusive in my opinion. The translation is my own.

4 Talvacchia discusses the *modi* more elaborately in her *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (eds.).

Here the narrator unveils the poem's ruling double entendre between the *pennello* and the *pene*, the artist's paintbrush and his sexual organ. He avers that painters have been endowed with large ones that are firm and solid, which must be stroked for a job well done or they will not work anymore for them. From this bawdy business Bronzino moves to a professional word of advice, but does not use his own authority. Rather, he cites the wisdom of another fellow (*colui*), implicitly a fellow artist, introducing the maxim by *disse*, something said in the past: "When you are able to find a beautiful body, work with it; if another is better from behind, then take it." This thought follows the logic of the language in *Del pennello*, working on two levels. The sexual innuendo is crystal clear. When lucky enough to find a beautiful body, make use of it in the usual way; if you find another that is better from behind, take it from there.

As Deborah Parker has pointed out in her book on Bronzino's poetry, this scenario evokes the story of Zeuxis and the five maidens of Croton, which from Pliny's text found its way into the literature on art (107). The legend recounts how the ancient Greek artist selected the most beautiful aspects of several maidens and united them into a composite figure. Zeuxis thus was able to represent Helen of Troy, fabled as the comeliest woman in the world. This establishing narrative had enormous influence on later ideas and theories about art, not least during the 16th century. I believe that Bronzino's citation, while closely tied to the story of Zeuxis, additionally made a more specific and more contemporary reference. I understand the witticism to be a specific reference to a much admired Italian artist, who in his turn had fabricated a famous *conchetto* about the process of art

by appropriating the approach of Zeuxis. “That fellow” of course, was Raphael.

In a letter addressed to ‘Signor Conte,’ most likely Baldassare Castiglione, Raphael articulates his thoughts on the question of ideal forms:

And I tell you that to paint one beautiful woman, it is necessary for me to see many [...]. But since there is a scarcity [...] of beautiful women, I make use of a certain Idea, which comes into my mind. Whether this, in and of itself, has any artistic value, I do not know. But I work very hard to have it. (Sheaman 734-41)³

Bronzino’s bantering variation on Raphael’s concept of painting flawless bodies ends up by changing formal selectivity into sexual promiscuity: “if another is better from behind, then take it,” in the sense of taking what is on offer, and in the sexual position that is most alluring according to the varying attributes of each partner. Raphael’s encomium of the power of the imaginative mind to perfect nature is faintly echoed in the poet’s cautionary formulation “*sia mente*,” or to “keep in mind” this view when preparing a painting. It is interesting to observe that Raphael’s letter began by informing Castiglione that he had made drawings around the patron’s invention in “*più maniere*” or many different ways; but still the artist fears that none will satisfy Castiglione’s demanding standards. It is an instance—one of the many in the literature of art—where *varietas* is considered a fundamental part of the virtuoso’s ability to create at the highest level of achievement. Bronzino’s willful toying with this concept is sustained in the lines immediately following the profanation of Raphael’s high minded “*certa Iddea*.” Here we are in essence given an elucidation of the good that comes from following the axiom, but in language full of licentious overtones: “And it’s not ever tiresome either on bottom or on top, as long as art and ingenuity are shown in every position, when the *pennello*, along with a good eye, gets to work.”

The sexual implications of the description come across loud and clear when art and ingenuity are called forth to demonstrate “*tutti i modi*,” that is to say, “all of the positions.” I understand Bronzino’s phrase to be a reference to the celebrated and notorious *Modi*, the drawings of sexual acts designed by Giulio Romano, engraved by Marc Antonio Raimondi, and marketed by Baviera in Rome during the mid-1520s (Talvacchia 257).⁴ That is to say, the project was a major enterprise of the key players in the high-profile workshop and business network established by Raphael in the papal city. A venture that challenged cultural norms—and sparked intense reactions—through the novel

and relatively uncontrolled circulation of erotic imagery in the print medium. In the previous decade Raphael and his associates had begun to exploit the commercial possibilities of prints to diffuse the artist's interpretation of the *all'antica* figural style, with great success. Publication of the less "legitimate" subject matter of the *Modi* was carried out shortly after the master's death, when his associates were scrambling to keep the business going, and looking to Raphael's artistic heirs for collaborative material.

In fact Bronzino's verses extolling the ingenuity of the *pennello* to delineate a great assortment of positions ("And it's not ever tiresome either on bottom / as long as art and ingenuity are shown in every position") immediately follow the evocation of Raphael's "certain Idea," and thus makes a smooth transition of allusion from the master to the student. The discussion departs from Raphael's noble concept of *varietà* to its vulgarization (both in the sense of diffusion and debasement) in Giulio Romano's drawings (upon which the eventual engraved *Modi* were based), without however naming the artist or his notorious compositions. The passage presents a parallel to the long descriptive sequence at the start of the poem where the narrator launches into his praise of the *pennello*. The earlier passage can be read as a kind of jocular ekphrasis, one suggested by the hilarious *varietà* of the sexual postures produced by Giulio Romano's fertile *fantasia*, in which each description corresponds to attitudes shown in the drawings:

Who has himself portrayed on a bed,
 or assuming strenuous positions, straight up or on his derrière;
 who's got something in hand, who's hiding it;
 Who wants to be seen behind someone;
 who wants to be painted in front of another;
 who holds firm; who makes a show of collapsing.
 From among the thousand, I wouldn't know how to recount
 even one of the different, fantastic acts and positions;
 you know that everyone likes variety.
 It is enough to say that to do them from behind, or frontally,
 obliquely, foreshortened, or in perspective,
 the artist applies his *pennello* to all of them. (vv. 19-30)

Given Bronzino's literary practice of extracting burlesque humor from a matrix of serious art, it is not surprising that a few of the descriptions also bring to mind positions assumed by sitters in portraits by Bronzino's own hand, especially those dating from the 1530s, thus

more or less contemporary with the poem. This indicates how closely Bronzino's *burle* can be read in relation to the more serious genres in which he operated, as true burlesques of weightier works of art. In an astute review that marked the publication in 1988 of the artist's *Rime in burla*, Carol Plazzotta singled out the *Portrait of Cosimo de' Medici as Orpheus* for being particularly linked to the spirit of the poetry, punning on the "cheeky" nature of the posture of the figure. It is in keeping with this approach that I have translated Bronzino's phrase as the "sitter" literally being posed "on his *derrière*," my attempt at retaining the reference to the buttocks, so prominently—and surprisingly—exposed in the *Orpheus*. The pun is clear in the Italian word *sedere*, which indicates the action of sitting as well as the part of the anatomy on which one sits.

Another unavoidable association mentioned by Plazzotta is the connection of the adjective *ritto* with the *Portrait of Guidobaldo Della Rovere*, also neatly featured by Patricia Simons in an essay dealing with conventions of masculinity in Renaissance portraiture. Simons stresses the difficulty in separating "issues of gender from issues of sexuality in the construction of identity" in these works (169). Several discussions have interpreted Guidobaldo's elaborate codpiece as symbolic of the virility and potency that the young man was at pains to express in a series of confrontations with his father. Indeed the central area of the portrait, with its nexus of enormous codpiece, massive dog's muzzle, and thrusting sword-hilt is a bit over-determined. Yet the striking outfit must also be understood as an accepted and widely popular fashion of the time. The cultural ideals that produced this custom and this costume, based in particular discourses around sexuality and a notable level of comfort with its display, should also be taken into consideration in assessing the character of the image, with its thrusting and aggressive depiction of the masculine subject.

To return, however, to the variety of Giulio Romano's sexual positions as a point of departure for striking attitudes, Bronzino was not the only inventive author to see the myriad possibilities for a novel sort of ekphrasis inherent in the *Modi*. Pietro Aretino was so inspired—"moved by the same spirit"—that he wrote a series of sonnets, one matching each position, and had them published by coupling the words with the images in a printed book (Talvacchia ch. 5). It is telling that Aretino composed detailed narratives, complete with dialogue, for a sequence of compositions that conspicuously lack narrative components. Aretino followed his own fantasy in imagining the verbal skirmishes engaged by partners who indulge in, demand, or impose athletic embraces upon their partners. He also found that the images provided

5 This description, reminiscent of catalogue entries, interests me because it ties into what I think was the primary conceptual model behind all of these Renaissance instances, a Hellenistic manual of sexual practices; see Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*, Chapter 3.

6 Raphael is also cited as the supreme model for application of Zexius's method by Vasari in his *vita*.

ample opportunity for him—with more or less plausibility—to imply that the couple engages in sodomy and other actions defined by his culture as “unnatural,” and by his religion as sinful.

In many ways Aretino's couplets are far more transgressive than Giulio's couples, since his dialogues are extremely explicit, especially with regard to acts *contra natura*, and for those in which he devises a voice for women whose announced desires dominate the activity. These two situations, of course, were vehemently denounced by both moral and social codes in Renaissance society. As in the original series of sixteen positions, Aretino revels in the delight of spinning out the many subversive variations of his invention on the theme of a man and a woman engaged in sexual union, which is, after all, finite in the sum of its possibilities.

The impact of the images on Aretino was not exhausted by his *sonetti* of the 1520s. He retained the memory of the *Modi* and arguably made another reference a decade or so later in his *Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia* of 1534. In the dialogue that purports to be the shocking behind-the-scene details of the life of a nun, Nanna talks of a room encountered during her novitiate, whose four walls were entirely covered with paintings that contained sexual narratives. The last displayed “*tutti i modi*” (the formulation that so forcefully recalls Giulio Romano's series) of the imaginable positions of intercourse. This time Aretino's inventiveness posited an educational use of a series of sexual positions: all of the novices had to assume each of the postures paraded in the frescoes, which in this way acted as a kind of manual so that none of the newcomers would behave “*goffe nel letto*,” that is, awkward in bed.⁵ The sequential nature of the assorted positions displayed is evoked through Aretino's ekphrasis, and elaborates

variations around a theme. It illustrates, through words that depict designs, the visual and verbal delight of rhythms that can be formed by creative repetition. The restatement is conditioned by variants, called forth by powerful imaginations that can abundantly spin out all of the discrete yet connected forms suggested by a central idea, composition, or thematic motif.

It is the same sensibility that spurs Bronzino to compose his own enthusiastic inventory of the “different, fantastic acts and positions,” celebrating the power of lovers and artists to “do” their subjects “from behind, or frontally, obliquely, foreshortened, or in perspective.” This sequence, so engaging in its obsessive iteration, takes its force from a cultural predisposition that placed enormous value on a creator’s skill in variation, in being able to think through a figural pose or an entire composition in many versions—all of them accomplished—from which the final formulation would then be chosen. In keeping with the metaphors of *Del pennello*, the very fertility of the artist’s imagination assured the virtuosity of his progeny. Any example that failed to measure up would be discarded, given the abundance of choices.

Once again Raphael was the acknowledged model for this approach to abundant creative effort. In his *True Precepts of the Art of Painting*, Giovan Battista Armenini cites what he understood to be Raphael’s method:

He would set out many of his own drawings which seemed near to the subject matter which he had already conceived in his mind in great part. Looking first at one drawing, then at another while sketching swiftly, Raphael thus created his entire invention which seemed to be born because the mind was helped in such a manner and was enriched by the multitude of drawings. (146)⁶

This system is particularly interesting for its constant re-mixture of the imagined *concetto* with its physical expression in art. From the initial, quick drawings (known as the *primi pensieri*), still further ones would be elicited, the invention of the mind engendering the production of the pen. Not surprisingly, Armenini describes this process through words connected to procreation, such as “conceived in his mind” and “invention which seemed to be born.” The privileged place of *varietà* in sixteenth-century evaluation of art operated in tandem with the related concept of copiousness, or abundance. Both attested to the fertility of the mind that could generate prolific content.

7 Barbara C. Bowen, *Humour and Humanism in the Renaissance*, (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2004), VII, 3 provides the following information: "This witticism from Macrobius can be found in Petrarch, Leonardo da Vinci ('un pittore'), Domenichi, several German collections, Bouchet's *Serées* in France, and *Tales and Quicke Answers* in England. It was also a medieval *exemplum*, with anonymous protagonists, and a rival version is in Benvenuto da Imola's commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy* and in several other places."

8 The first edition containing this anecdote was published in Florence by the Torrentino press in 1562. Domenichi's compilation had huge success and many subsequent editions and translations.

The potential of human creation was a forceful symbol, with obvious application to artists who could, through metaphor, equate artistic fabrication with procreation. One of the earliest commentators on Giotto's formidable achievement, Benvenuto da Imola, made use of the equation in his *Commentary on Dante's Divine Comedy* from the 1370s. In the midst of some fanciful scholarship, Benvenuto takes a comical jibe at the trope of artistic creation as procreation:

It once befell that, while Giotto (still quite a young man) was painting a chapel at Padua in a place where there was once a theatre (or maybe an arena), Dante arrived. Giotto greeted him with due deference and escorted him to his home. There Dante saw several of Giotto's little children, all extremely ugly and (not to labor the point) resembling their father very closely, and he enquired of Giotto: "Good master, since you are said to have no equal in the art of painting, I greatly wonder how it is that you make the appearance of others so attractive while your own family is so dreadful!" Giotto smiled at him and replied in a flash: "Because I create by daylight but procreate in the dark." (Schneider 31)

This tale with the pungent punch-line was much appreciated in the Renaissance, and often recounted.⁷ Benvenuto's version is the most elaborated, specifically casting Giotto and Dante in the starring roles. Aside from its irresistible wit and relevance to contemporary notions about art during the Renaissance, its influence also derived from the fact that the anecdote was lifted and modified from a source with an excellent classical pedigree. The joke, as acknowledged by Benvenuto, is found in Macrobius's *Saturnalia* (II.2.10), featuring, however, an otherwise unknown protagonist:

Servius Geminus happened to be dining at the home of Lucius Mallius, then considered the best portrait painter in Rome, when he saw Mallius' two ugly sons: "You don't make children," he said, "the way you make pictures." "That," said Mallius, "is because I make children in the dark, pictures in the light." ("in tenebris enim fingo," inquit, "luce pingo.") (332-3)

The witty Latin original turns on the alliterative wordplay of *fingo* / *pingo* (I contrive / I paint), which explodes on impact, to be followed by a second wave of mirth as the sexual implication emerges. Benvenuto's Latin retains the original usage: "*Quia pingo de die, sed fingo de nocte.*" (Schneider 31). However, the sequence is changed, ending on and thus giving slightly more emphasis to the nocturnal reference. Some of the Renaissance versions in Italian also tend to bring the double entendre into relief by means of the verb *fare*, which has wide range of applications in the language, and can be used for making children as well as making art. Lodovico Domenichi's adaptation in his *Facetie, motti e burle* restores the Latin character names and word order, but loses the wordplay by substituting *fare*: "*facio i figliuoli la notte.*"⁸ Leonardo da Vinci's compact rendition simply concludes: "*le pitture le fecie di di, e i figlioli di notte*" ("I make paintings by day, children by night") (Richter 350). The jocular tradition that equates making paintings and making children inherently implies the *pennello* / *pene* analogy, providing Bronzino with well known sources that resonate with the theme of his poem, and his own play on words.

Similar metaphors were applied to literary conceptions, where the pen was understood to generate ideas. Bronzino, who engaged in both activities as a poet / artist, compiles the metaphor in *Del pennello* to present us with an extended and provocative equation of his own: the writer conceives images brought to life by his pen, the artist creates figures with his *pennello*, and humans propagate by the penis. It is this group of connections which, we might say, makes *Del pennello* pregnant with meaning.

But perhaps it is not proper to push this line of thought further, or to overstate the philosophical underpinnings of Bronzino's ribald treatment of the theme in *Del pennello*; we would not want to over-determine the systems of meaning where the raucous *rime in burlesca* are concerned. To say it with our narrator, "this doesn't, however, diminish the honor of the good *pennello*." The poet / artist closes his verse on this thought, and adds to it a final tease about his beloved instrument: "And if the light were not fading, I would let you see it, whereas I am not able." What prevents the narrator from allowing his readers a peek?

9 Carlo Falciani (as referenced, 29off) presents a reading of the imagery in the San Lorenzo fresco that interprets the scene in the key of burlesque. I differ on this point, believing that rules of decorum would disallow this reading of a sacred subject in church decoration. Vasari referred to the San Lorenzo fresco as demonstrating the artist's excellent "giudizio," hardly a compliment that would have been paid to a stylistic travesty. For other thoughts on this painting, see Stephen Campbell. "Counter-Reformation Polemic and Mannerist Counter-Aesthetics, Bronzino's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* in San Lorenzo." *Res* 46 (2004) 98-119.

We are left to wonder if the impossibility is due to the failing light, the indecorous nature of the sight, or maybe through the ambiguity of "not being able" we are meant to chuckle at the implied impotency of the narrator. Or, on a more high-minded, theoretical level, is it the case that if the narrator of the poem, who creates a verbal text, cannot display his *pennello*, the artist is able to do just this in his visual creations? Perhaps there is a playful *paragone* in operation here. While the pen of the writer remains invisible, the implement of the artist can be displayed. In light of the poem's ambiguous ending, it is intriguing to note that in fact Bronzino does show us, in one of his paintings, a related tool of creation, a *penna*. He proudly holds up for our view what appears to be an inked quill pen in a self-portrait, set in the company of his master and his student, unobtrusively placed in his fresco of the *Martyrdom of San Lorenzo*, in the church dedicated to this saint in Florence (Falciani and Natali 293). The symbol of the quill pen is most appropriate to Bronzino, since it was an instrument used both for writing and for drawing, a means to record the flow of either letters or lines. Cennino Cennini clearly specifies the dual purpose of the single utensil at the end of his instructions for carving a goose quill, whose point could be more thickly or more finely carved, "*o per disegnare o per iscrivere*" (Frezzato 72).

The generative tool, now devoid of all ribald references, becomes a signature of the artist / poet, one that can honorably be displayed in a sacred site. The symbol, taken out of the burlesque context, can in this instance decorously attest to the power of the writer / artist to bring forth their inventions in imitation of Divine creation, with the attendant status that the analogy confers.⁹ This transfer

reinforces a reading of Renaissance imagery in fluid movement from the profane to the sacred, and recalls to our attention that the tradition of *rime in burla* derives part of its power from turning convention on its head, transforming sober symbols into occasions for bawdy mirth. If Bronzino's *pennello* teases about the lascivious urges of life, his self-portrait with a *penna* is eloquent of the noble power of art.

Appendix

On the *pennello*

Recently I saw a good portrait
of a man and a woman. They were nude,
painted together in a pleasurable act.
I paid a lot for it—a couple of *scudi*—
because it was obvious that it contained everything
that can be learned from nature or long study.
I stayed looking at it for a while, engrossed,
because it seemed I could see them wriggling
as though well-contented.
Therefore I was forced to judge
the creator's tool worthy of praise.
And what I want to do is praise it, if I could find a way.
Who in the world does not like to discourse
about the things done by such a tool,
born of bristles or from a tail?
Nor does there exist a man or woman so bestial
as not to hope for some of its aura,
or to be captured *au naturel* by it.
Who has himself portrayed on a bed,
or assuming strenuous positions, straight up or on his *derrière*;
who's got something in hand, who's hiding it;
Who wants to be seen behind someone;
who wants to be painted in front of another;
who holds firm; who makes a show of collapsing.
From among the thousand, I wouldn't know how to recount
even one of the different, fantastic acts and positions;
you know that everyone likes variety.
It is enough to say that to do them from behind, or frontally,
obliquely, foreshortened, or in perspective,
the artist applies his *pennello* to all of them.
Among decent folk no art is more alive
than that which is stirred by the *pennello*

io The meaning of ‘Tre Pile’ is unclear. The context indicates it is a place name, having to do with water. A possible candidate is a structure at the Medici Villa of Castello, where Niccolò Tribolo, a sculptor in Vasari’s circle, was working on an elaborate project that called for a series of fountains fed by aqueducts pouring into the villa’s gardens. In his *Vita* of Tribolo, Vasari records the plan in exhaustive detail, at one point writing: “there was to be in the centre a grotto with three basins (tre pile), with water playing into them in imitation of rain”. (Trans. Gaston du C. de Vere. *Giorgio Vasari. Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. Vol. 2. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1996. 237). The incredibly grandiose project, never completed, would be a good target for Bronzino’s satire, and the reference works within the imagery of watery depths in the passage. I am grateful to Gian Mario Cao for discovering the ‘tre pile’ in Vasari’s text.

in every place where art meets nature.
 Nor is it necessary to be brainy to learn it.
 If you’re not as dumb as an ox,
 you can be taught, so long as you want it have it.
 But the important thing is to get down to it,
 or say “Whoever wants to, get out;
 I want to thrust in!” and be sure to give your all.
 The ones who do this employ action not words,
 and find the best technique in this art
 since it usually happens through perseverance.
 It excites me to speak with you, oh painters,
 since it seems that by nature you have been endowed
 with a large talent, both firm and solid.
 When it seems to you good work has been done,
 pay attention to it for more than just a few strokes,
 because it will never work for an ingrate.
 And when you sketch a woman or a man
 in order to paint them later,
 keep in mind what that fellow said,
 so you won’t do it in a bad style:
 “When you are able to find a beautiful body, work with it.
 If another is better from behind, then take it.”
 And it’s not ever tiresome either on bottom or on top,
 as long as art and ingenuity are shown in every position,
 when the *pennello*, along with a good eye, gets to work.
 When you hear someone praising you,
 don’t be a big-shot and don’t get involved;
 lie low and get out in time, and quietly enjoy.
 There are those who might find it useful to reason
 closely about this material,
 and others who give it wide berth in passing;
 I believe that it is better to get to bed.
 I meant to say who profits most from the *pennello*,
 but up to this point I don’t know if I’ve said it clearly;
 although it doesn’t matter. Rather, it is better
 sometimes in these cases
 to have a brotherly relationship with the Muses.
 At times you have to deal with certain empty heads
 that always aim for a target;
 and it’s not enough to shrug or find excuses.

11 The passage is obscure in the original: “*non resterei, ch’io avrei il capo biondo.*” I take the meaning to play on the artist’s nickname, Bronzino, presumably acquired due to the color of his hair. The joke would be that if he were able to express himself with complete satisfaction as a poet, he would no longer remain an artist.

However, it is advisable that I sharpen my intellect
and see to elevating my style
if I want to carry out my design.
O tool so noble and kind!
You thrust me into a thorny situation,
and into depths more profound than at the Tre Pile.¹⁰
But if I don’t emerge, I won’t claim damages.
I’ve been in deeper waters in the high seas,
even if my vessel is not as large as it appears.
How do kings, emperors,
nuns, monks, asses and oxen come into existence?
With this alone, dipped in colors!
What will we find always backing us up,
what so useful and gains such favor as this?
Nothing, take what you will.
Let us take, for instance, a woman who dies.
If she has herself painted and sketched,
she leaves that bequest, and that honor.
O blessed and singular thing!
You make us, like God, rise up in the world again,
and renew each day.
If I believed I could even get close to the bottom of things
with my rhymes, words, and such,
I would not remain [myself] but turn into ‘Blondie’;¹¹
Although when a thing is so valuable,
those who want to dissect it with their clever ideas
often think to do it good, and yet they do it harm
But what can leave a brighter and better mark
than everyone knowing almost the entire world
has been impregnated by your merit?
And because I also am a painter,
I want to explain
what a big *pennello*, a medium sized, and a little one are good for.
The short and thick are to the point
when it falls to him to work sopped in gouache—
be sure you are taking note of what I am saying.
But when, in other cases, you want to make it more cutting-edge,
it is necessary to have a reliable tool,
adapted to what you have to do.
And you must always remember this:

in great works and noble ones,
the *pennello* has to be rather sturdy.
When long and thin they bend at the tip and begin to twist
and become crooked, and are ignoble slackers.
I don't want to praise this sort under any
condition, because you have to stroke them for two hours
if you want to employ them in your business.
This does not, however, diminish the honor
of the good *pennello*, rather it grows increasingly large.
And if the light were not fading
I would let you see it, whereas I am not able.

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SUMMARY

Agnolo Bronzino was a Florentine artist in the sphere of the Medici court who was also an accomplished and recognized poet. His most appreciated poems were in the genres of parody and burlesque humor that often employed sexual puns and metaphors as expressive means. This article focuses on Bronzino's poem *Del pennello*, a hymn of praise for the artist's paintbrush, which through a pun on the term *pennello*, can be understood also to refer to the male sexual organ. The author's reading explores the meaning of the imagery and its relation to contemporary works of art. It also considers the poem's teasing subversion of concepts of artistic creation that underlay developing theories of art in the later Renaissance period.

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