
SIGNPOSTS OF INVENTION: ARTISTS' SIGNATURES IN ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ART

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At the opening of the *Divine Comedy*, the figure of Dante announces that 'Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood.'¹ Dark as the wood might be, the declaration of authorial voice and the identification of the poet's experience with the reader's in the first lines of the *Divine Comedy* are clear. The possessive ('*nostra vita*') and the pronominal ('*mi ritrovai*') establish complicity from the outset of the poem's reading and the pilgrim's journey. This is a matter of perspective. The reader is explicitly positioned in relation to the text. All things manifested to the character Dante in his journey of revelation are addressed to the inner eyes of the poet's imagined reader so that they may in turn be impressed upon the reader's imagination: 'Let him imagine, who would rightly grasp what I new beheld (and while I speak, let him hold the image firm as a rock).'² The reader is written into Dante's book of memory.

Dante's demands upon his audience – to sharpen their eyes, to observe his style, to reflect with sympathy – find parallels in the visual arts.³ This is not coincidental. Dante was a keen and influential observer and his poem was not only widely read but it was fully absorbed into the cultural discourses debating the nature and status of the arts. Praised and blamed, read, recited and repeated, he was a protagonist in polemics about language, poetry and the arts from his time to the mid-sixteenth century and beyond: 'Dante, who knew all and who wrote all' (to quote Benedetto Varchi).⁴

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is indicative and indexical of wider artistic concerns. It provides a starting point, as originator and as enduring reference, for a consideration of some of the ways that Renaissance artists inscribed themselves within their works so as to embed their names in the perception of their works both in the moment of viewing and in the long overview of history. The location of the figure of Dante in the poem can be related to the legibility of identity in the visual arts. In a basic sense, location can refer simply to the physical placement of artists' identifying marks. But it can also be taken as a metaphor for series of positions: that of the signature within traditions of signification; that of the artist



3.1 Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1498–1500. Marble, 174 × 195 (base) × 64 (depth) cm. Rome, Città del Vaticano: St Peter's. Photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.

as expressed by the signature form; and that of the notional observer called upon to acknowledge the artist as a feature of the field of representation.

What follows here takes examples by Michelangelo, Fra Filippo Lippi, Donatello and Titian to analyse the ways that signatures can signpost ambition. Representing painting and sculpture, sacred and secular art, Central and North Italian artists, the chosen cases span iconography, geography and chronology. Formally separate, the examples are united structurally by the artists' inventive use of their names to direct the appreciation of their artistry. These instances are

set within the context of the general conventions and practices of self-inscription, whose origins and implications are outlined. The historical definition of this category of labeling allows for a more refined reading of its messages regarding the nature of authorship in the visual arts of the Renaissance.

The challenge issued in canto 12 of *Purgatory* – 'What master was he of brush or of stylus who drew the forms and lineaments which there would make every subtle genius wonder?' – was variously answered by artists who were also aware that the correct response to Dante's question was actually the divine master, God.⁵ To

look at one, probably direct, reply:

'Dead the dead, and the living seemed alive', the next line in Dante's verse, may well have been in Michelangelo's mind when he carved the *Pietà* (plates 3.1 and 3.2). It certainly came to the mind of the statue's beholders. Benedetto Varchi quoted it, asking if anyone could see the *Pietà* without seeing in a 'true and living marble that sentence that showed Dante to be not less a painter than a poet'.⁶

An early gambit in Michelangelo's own bid for divinity, when it was commissioned the young sculptor promised that the statue would be 'the most beautiful work in marble in Rome today'.⁷ As Vasari noted, he did here what he did in no other work, 'he left his name written across a belt that binds the Virgin's breasts'.⁸ It

reads 'MICHELANGELOVS BVONAROTVS FLOR-
ENTINVS FACIEBA ...'.

The sculptor's bold move was shrewdly framed within a trope of modesty. The end of the verb '*faciebat*' is hidden beneath the Virgin's veil. The verb form has reasonably been associated with Pliny's own disclaimer in the preface to his *Natural History*, where he asks

to be accepted on the lines of those founders of painting and sculpture who, as you will find in these volumes, used to inscribe their finished works, even the masterpieces which we can never be tired of admiring, with a provisional title such as *Worked on by Apelles* or *Polycritus* [*Apelles faciebat* aut *Polycritus*], as though art was always a thing in process and not completed.⁹



3.2 Detail of Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1498–1500.

Rome, Città del Vaticano: St Peter's.

Photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.

The most exquisitely polished of his works, undoubtedly conceived as a masterpiece, its commissioned subject was 'a *Pietà*', but its title became 'MICHELANGELOVS BVONAROTVS.'¹⁰

'Reader, here sharpen well your eyes to the truth, for this veil is now indeed so thin that to pass within it is easy.' (*Purgatorio*, 8:19–20) Michelangelo's ambition, figuratively veiled, is also transparent. It could even be said that the promised beautiful work took a prophetic form. Michelangelo may have recalled the Agrippan Sibyl designed by his teacher, Domenico Ghirlandaio, for the vault of the Sassetti Chapel (plate 3.3). Michelangelo had his own almost obsessive interest in ties that bind (straps, belts, winding sheets), but the band crossing the Virgin's chest and its lettering style are like the sibyl's, whose message regards the generation of the invisible truth ('the invisible truth will laboriously sprout'; 'INVISIBILE VERBUM PALPABITUR GERMINABAT').

There are a number of paradoxes here: the finished statue that is forever in the process of being made, the promised truth of the incarnated Christ made visible in a dead body that has been given life by the sculptor. The text that explains the fabrication of the sculpture and that is part of its fabric actually tears through the representation of the subject to become a comment on the act of representation and the subjectivity of the artist as pious supplicant and proud maker. This is a significant, even perilous, reconfiguration of the functioning of a sacred work and it was recognized as such in its time. 'Inventor of filth, saving himself through his art and not through devotion', was one reaction.¹¹ 'A revelation of all the potentialities and force of the art of sculpture', was another.¹² However received, the statue's identity was inseparable from its authorship.

Artists called attention to themselves in many and various ways, urging the beholders of their works to 'look up', 'lift up their eyes', 'look fixedly' (to borrow some of Dante's phrases). Making direct eye contact in self-portraits was a particularly effective mode of self-commemoration. Style itself, in the broadest sense of recognizable idiom and in the specific sense of idiosyncratic devices, constitutes another key strategy of singularity. Such assertions of individual identity are not in the least negligible, nor have they been neglected in the study of the status of artists in the Renaissance.¹³ The concern here, however, is not to examine how artists represented themselves in or through their works, but to look at how they used their names to identify themselves with their work. Precisely because they are attached to products of ingenuity and invention, the rules that might be suggested about signing have many exceptions, but some general practices or principles can be given.¹⁴ Any survey must come with the caveat that frames often bore both donor and author inscriptions, and therefore the destruction and disappearance of most frames means that quantitative analysis is inevitably and irreparably skewed.

Artists' names were regularly inscribed on the religious works which made up the major part of their production and which could be viewed as offerings to the glory of God. Even after the development of other genres, such as portraits and