

8 Giovanni Morelli

Italian Painters, 1890

Giovanni Morelli (1816–91) was an Italian patriot who made his mark as much in politics as in the attribution of works of art. After serving in the army during the Risorgimento in the 1860s he rose to membership of the Senate in the newly independent Italy in the 1870s, heading a number of commissions on the arts, in particular one which introduced legislation banning the sale of works of art from public institutions and churches. He studied medicine in Switzerland and Germany, as his Protestant upbringing in Bergamo prevented him from attending a university in Italy. This familiarity with the German academic world helped him to argue with the German art historians of his day on their own terms, while the study of medicine led him to develop methods based on the minute examination of the works, like an anatomist or pathologist, in contrast to the more theoretical and academic studies of his art-historical contemporaries, such as the prominent Berlin gallery director Wilhelm von Bode. His reattributions were extensive and met with a large degree of success.

In terms of the analysis of paintings it is no exaggeration to say that the work of Morelli represents the first thorough reassessment of the techniques and standards of connoisseurship since they were established by Vasari in the sixteenth century. Although there had been many developments in the methods of the history of art in the intervening period, these had for the most part concerned the practice of thinking about the subject in broadly philosophical terms, such as constructing new models of history or making new bodies of work, like the Gothic, accessible to study.

Morelli only began publishing his views late in life, after reaching the age of sixty. In 1890 he wrote in German critical accounts of the paintings in the major galleries of Rome, Dresden, Berlin and Rome, published under the pseudonym Ivan Lermolieff (an anagram of his name with a Russian ending), posing as an untutored Russian aristocrat. His real identity was soon revealed, but his disguise forms an integral part of the text reprinted here. This introduction to the book reprinted here is couched in the form of a conversation between himself as Lermolieff, the narrator, and an educated Italian who teaches him the fundamentals of Morellian method. This format permits him to offer unusually uninhibited comments on the worth of art historians, German professors, connoisseurs and critics, as he enjoys himself with numerous asides at the expense of his professional rivals. The reader therefore needs to remember that Morelli is the educated Italian who sets out his real views, and in addition to avoid being misled by the tone of the essay into dismissing the views expressed as lacking in weight.

disguise

Morelli's innovation was to analyse paintings with a much greater attention to detail than had previously been the case, that is, by examining aspects which were considered unimportant and which the artist was unlikely to have reassessed for each particular painting, such as the rendering of an ear or fingernail. On this basis Morelli questioned large numbers of universally accepted attributions (see for example fig. 16). The two protagonists, examining works in the Uffizi, provide examples of how this method works, with the Italian reattributing works to Botticelli and Titian, while his Russian pupil recribes a sheet of drawings in Oxford from Raphael to a Northern master. This last example is argued on the basis of the shape of the thumbnail, 'which we never find in Italian pictures though it frequently occurs in Northern paintings. It resembles a section of an octagon more than anything else, and appears as if it had had three clean cuts with the scissors.'

Morelli's new method can be further understood by examining two criticisms made of it by his contemporaries and his means of rebutting them. The first is the claim that his method is unimportant because it has already been used by other scholars. Morelli's response to this is brief and as 'empirical as the method itself: it may well be that it has been applied by others before him, but if so where are the works which have been successfully reattributed on the basis of its intervention? He makes the fundamental point that almost every question may indeed be reducible to a matter of method, but method is not enough in itself; it has to be applied.

The second criticism approaches his work from the opposite direction and is much more important: Morelli's method is ridiculous because it renders him 'insensible to every deeper quality in a work of art' and takes account only of 'external features', as he quotes his antagonists as saying.² His defence in this case is that his kind of study provides a training which enables him to discern 'the deeper qualities of the mind' and to distinguish fundamental forms from mannerisms. This reply, however, runs counter to his main argument, as it relies on purely intuitive distinctions. He would have been more consistent if he had answered once again that the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and by pointing out that in examining a particular aspect to answer a particular question, he was acting like a scientist testing the age of a canvas.

He is also open to criticism even on his own terms in some of the ways in which he applies his method, as for instance when he reattributes a painting from Italy to Northern Europe because it has a 'hard fixed eye and badly modelled mouth ... [a] thumb of the right hand which is completely out of drawing, and ... crude colours'. While a hard fixed eye *may* be an independently identifiable characteristic, on what grounds can incompetence be taken as a proof of a non-Italian provenance? Morelli's critics therefore seem to be justified in their second criticism.

The strength of Morelli's method lies in its specificity, in the fact that he examined this physical detail in this particular painting. Speaking as Lermoloeff he notes how his Italian mentor's way of identifying a work of art 'by the help of external signs savoured more of an anatomist than of a student of art', and there is a great deal of truth and no shame in the jibe of one of his detractors that, as a former student of medicine, he was 'a mere empiric'.³

Since for Morelli the study of art must be based primarily on the works, he considers reading not only a distraction but something which could be positively inimical to a true understanding of the subject. Thus 'the history of art can only be studied properly before the works of art themselves. Books are apt to warp a man's judgement.' His criticism of reading extends to those who rely on

ears
thumbnails

16 Titian, *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*, 1512–15. Oil on canvas, 90 x 72 cm. Galleria Doria-Pamphili, Rome

This painting, previously thought to be by Pordenone, is an example of a work reattributed by Morelli on the basis of comparisons between features such as ear lobes and fingernails, rather than on the basis of documentary evidence, the overall character of the style, or the reputation of the piece.



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the documentary evidence: if there is a conflict between it and the physical evidence of the object, 'the only true record ... is the work of art itself!'

He parallels these contrasted approaches with the differences between connoisseurs and art historians: 'the art historian only needs the testimony of a written document to arrive at complete certainty as to the authorship of a painting'; 'even to look at a painting imitates them'; and 'It is absolutely necessary for a man to be a connoisseur before he can become an art historian, and to lay the foundations of his history in the gallery and not in the library.' Elsewhere, in an even more dismissive response, he adds intuition and an awareness of the general impression to the art historian's tools, leading to the conclusion that art historians are simply expendable, as where he comments that under certain conditions 'your art historian will gradually disappear, no great loss either; you will admit.'

Key'
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diphthong
con +
auth

Morelli's approach can therefore be described as narrowly focused, to the extent that he places as little importance on context as Vasari had done. Lermolieff says of the Pitti Palace that it is hard to believe so magnificent an edifice could have been built under a Republic, but Morelli replies that art is not dependent on forms of government. He only allows that historians should consider the history of civilization alongside the works of art, and that the history of culture does explain some changes of style, but 'such cases are not so common as is usually asserted.'⁴

1 Giovanni Morelli, *Italian Painters: Critical Studies of their Works* (1890; Preface written in 1889), translated by C.J. Foulkes, London, 1892, Preface, pp. 43–4. For an up-to-date edition of *Italian Painters* see Giovanni Morelli, *Della Pittura italiana, studi storici-critici: le gallerie Borghese e Doria-Pamphili in Roma*, Jaynie Anderson, ed., Milan, 1991.

2 *Italian Painters*, op. cit., pp. 44–5.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 46. Morelli's method has been linked to Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Cardboard Box*, in which Sherlock Holmes receives a package containing two severed ears, from which he deduces important information. Conan Doyle also published an article on the significance of differences between shapes of ears: see Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, New Haven and London, 1991, p. 93.

4 For a critical assessment of Morelli's method see Richard Wollheim, 'Giovanni Morelli and the Origins of Scientific Connoisseurship', in his *On Art and the Mind, Essays and Lectures*, London, 1973, pp. 177–201.

Italian Painters, 1890

Giovanni Morelli (Ivan Lermolieff),
Kunstkritische Studien über italienische Malerei: die Galerien Borghese und Doria-Pamfilj in Rom,
 Leipzig, 1890. Excerpts from 'Principles and Method', in *Italian Painters: Critical Studies of their Works*, translated by C.J. Ffoulkes, London, 1892, pp. 1–58.

As I was leaving the Pitti one afternoon, I found myself descending the stairs in company with an elderly gentleman, apparently an Italian of the better class. I had frequently noticed him in the galleries, either alone or with several younger companions, and his unusual intelligence in observing and discussing pictures had often struck me. On that particular afternoon I was greatly impressed by all I had seen: by the splendour of the rooms, by the masterpieces of art, more especially a landscape by Rubens which I had studied just before leaving, and by the beauty of the gardens with their pines, cypresses, and ilex groves. As we left the palace, I could not refrain from expressing to this gentleman my admiration of Brunelleschi's stately pile.

'I never should have believed', I added, 'that so magnificent an edifice could have been erected under a Republic.'

'And why not?' enquired my companion smiling. 'Do you suppose that art is dependent on the form of government? Provided outward circumstances be favourable, I should imagine that art, like religion, will flourish equally under republican or despotic rule. As you seem to appreciate our great architect,' he continued, 'may I invite you to accompany me to the Villa Ruciciano, also built by Brunelleschi for his wealthy fellow-citizen, Luca Pitti? It is not far off, and the evening is fine and balmy.'

I thanked him for his kind proposal, and observed that, being a Russian, and in Italy for the first time, I had never heard of the Villa, which was not even mentioned in my guidebook ...

'I travelled [I said] from Munich to Florence, via Verona and Bologna, and did not stop to see either of these places even superficially, though no doubt they are both full of interest. As an excuse, I must plead that the endless books on art and aesthetics which I read in Germany and Paris had given me such a positive distaste for the subject and all connected with it, that I came to Italy vowing not to visit a single church or picture gallery. Florence, however, soon forced me to abandon this resolution.'

'Then you were formerly an admirer of art, and it was your sojourn in

Germany and Paris which gave rise to this aversion to it?

'Distaste, perhaps, but scarcely aversion,' I rejoined.

'Brought on probably by too much reading,' said my new friend. 'The truth is, art must be seen, if we are to derive either instruction or pleasure from it.'

'A very different view is taken in Germany, my dear sir,' said I. 'There people will only read, and art must be brought to public notice, not through the medium of brush or chisel, but through that of the printing press.'...

'Don't speak to me of art connoisseurs. I read so many controversial publications about them when in Germany, that I am sick of the subject. You must know', I added, seeing that my friend seemed startled by my vehemence, 'that the professors who bring out volumes on the history of art are the bitterest foes of the connoisseurs, while the painters in their turn abuse both. It has been said, sarcastically, that the art connoisseur is distinguished from the art historian by knowing something of early art. If he happens to be of the better sort he abstains from writing on the subject. On the other hand, the art historian, although writing much upon art, really knows nothing about it; while the painters who boast of their technical knowledge are neither competent critics nor competent historians.'

The Italian, who apparently had never heard of this paper war in Germany, laughed heartily at my description, but observed, as he paused for an instant to muse on the matter, that the subject seemed likely to foster an interesting controversy. Then he went on his way for a time in thoughtful silence, till, reaching a green spot near the Arno, he suggested that we should sit down and rest. It was a beautiful autumn evening; the dark slender tower of the Palazzo Vecchio shot up proudly into the sky; in the distance lay the blue hills of Pistoia and Pescia, bathed in golden light.

As we sat down, he began again: 'You say that in Germany and Paris art historians do not acknowledge art connoisseurs, and vice versa?'

'No, no,' I said, 'art connoisseurs say of art historians that they write about what they do not understand; art historians, on their side, disparage the connoisseurs, and only look upon them as the drudges who collect materials for them, but who personally have not the slightest knowledge of the physiology of art.'

'It appears to me,' said my companion, 'that the French and German professors have been rather hasty in their judgement, and have hardly given the matter due attention. The controversy is one of very long standing, and by no means without interest, but deserves unbiased and impartial criticism. What is an art connoisseur after all,' he added, 'but one who understands art?'

'Decidedly so, to judge by the name,' I said. 'An art historian, on the other hand,' I continued, 'is one who traces the history of art from its earliest development to its final decay, and who describes the process to us. Is it not so?'

'It certainly ought to be,' rejoined the Italian. 'But in order to write or discourse about the development of any subject, we ought first to be thoroughly acquainted with it. No one, for instance, would dream of writing on physiology without having first mastered anatomy.'...

'In former days' ... said the Italian, 'the history of art was then commonly taught by men absolutely devoid of any real feeling for art, mostly aesthetic literati

art profess
vs
connoisseurs

or pedantic archaeologists, who had gleaned all their information from the writings of their predecessors, or had picked it up from the discourses of the professors in the academies. But nowadays, I hear, things are very different in England and France, and especially in Germany, where every university has its art professorship filled by distinguished and learned men, who year by year train up a certain number of able scholars to follow in their steps.' ...

'Really competent professors of the history of art [said the Italian] are very scarce in Europe, and for the simple reason that men still go on in the old groove – studying art from books only, instead of from the works of art themselves.'

'This may be one reason,' I replied; 'the superficial dabbler, who causes confusion and anarchy in science, just as much as in politics, owes his existence to the pernicious influence of many inferior teachers.'

'Very true,' returned my companion; 'I have always felt that men who set up to teach others should first get a clear idea themselves of the works which practically constitute art, should study these works, be they of painting, sculpture, or architecture, with intelligence, analyse them, distinguish between good and bad specimens – in a word, should thoroughly understand them.'

'I suppose you refer to what may be termed "art morphology", that is, to the understanding of the outward forms in a work of art; and in a measure, I allow that you are right. But a German art philosopher would tell you that the idea existed in the mind of the artist long before the visible part of his work took shape; that the task of the art historian is to grasp, fathom, and explain this idea – the main problem he has to solve being how to attain to a fundamental understanding of a work of art. The historian himself would tell you that the history of art should direct attention, not so much to the works of art themselves, as to the culture of the people under whose influence and auspices these works originated.'

'Then, in that case,' rejoined the Italian, 'setting aside the fact that it is almost impossible to penetrate to the inward part of anything without being first acquainted with its outward conditions, the history of art may be said to resolve itself into a physiological treatise on art on the one hand, and a history of civilization on the other; both excellent branches of philosophy in their way, but scarcely adapted to promote a taste for art, or to further its knowledge. I do not deny that the causes of certain changes in style can only be satisfactorily explained by reference to the history of culture, though such cases are not so common as is usually asserted ...

'The study of the works of Raphael or Leonardo [he continued] presupposes a thorough acquaintance with all the other Italian schools. To gain a more intimate knowledge of these two great artists, to form a right judgement of their merits, and to be able to indicate what special benefits they conferred on their schools in point of conception, representation, and technique, we must both study every example of the school whence these masters emanated, and must learn to estimate the merits of their predecessors and contemporaries, as well as of their immediate scholars. Unless our judgement rests on this sure and solid foundation, it will always remain one-sided and deficient, and we cannot lay claim to any real understanding of art.'

morphology
to day
form or
style

'But, my dear sir,' I broke in, 'the elaborate and tedious course of study which you appear to think incumbent on an art-historian would end by turning him into a mere connoisseur, and would leave him no time at all for studying the history of art itself.'

The Italian smiled. 'You have hit the right nail on the head,' he said; 'true enough, your art historian will gradually disappear (no great loss either, you will admit), and in due course of time, as the larva develops into the butterfly, the connoisseur will emerge from his chrysalis state.'

This triumphant rejoinder caused me rather an unpleasant surprise. 'I cannot agree with you here,' I said, 'and as a proof that you are in the wrong, or, at all events, that you expect far too much from art historians, let me mention two of the most recent publications about Raphael, which have appeared respectively in Paris and Berlin – the two great centres of all historical research in matters of art. The first is a magnificent volume, and was received with acclamation, not only in Paris, but I may almost say throughout the whole civilized world. The second, the work of a professor of art at Berlin, was greeted with rapturous applause, at all events on the banks of the Spree. Both writers are art historians of the first water, but by no means connoisseurs; indeed, both would be mortally offended if you were to characterize them as such, for even to look at pictures irritates them.'

The Italian burst out laughing. 'I should never dream of such a thing,' he said. 'No, no, my dear sir,' he continued with growing excitement, 'it is only after profound and earnest study that a lover of art develops, gradually and insensibly, into a connoisseur, and finally into an art historian, provided he has it in him, which of course is a *conditio sine qua non*. Every young man may begin life with the intention of becoming a priest, a lawyer, a professor, an engineer, a land-surveyor, or a doctor; if he be well off he may even aspire to become a deputy to the Parliament; but it would be simply ludicrous if a youth of twenty or twenty-four were to say: 'I am going to be an art critic, or perhaps even an art historian.''

'And yet,' I observed, 'this is what constantly occurs, especially when a man has been unsuccessful in other professions.'

'Such cases are of no great consequence,' said my companion, 'so long as they are the exception and not the rule; they will occur in every department of knowledge, in science as well as in art. But, to resume our discussion. All that I wish to contend is that the germ of the art historian, if it exist at all, can only develop and ripen in the brain of the connoisseur; in other words, it is absolutely necessary for a man to be a connoisseur before he can become an art historian, and to lay the foundations of his history in the gallery and not in the library.'

'In these days,' he resumed, 'a more intelligent and unbiased method of criticism has done something towards dispelling some of these pointless and even childish fabrications; but much still remains to be done. For the present we may leave this comparatively subordinate study alone, and go back to our former theory – that the history of art can only be studied properly before the works of art themselves. Books are apt to warp a man's judgement, though at the same time I am quite ready to admit that good reproductions and representations of the art of the Egyptians, the Hindus, the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Phœnicians, Persians, etc., and of the earliest examples of Greek art, are of the greatest value from an

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educational point of view, and as a means of deepening and increasing our feeling for art. But the art which we can best understand and appreciate is that which stands in the closest relation to our own era of civilization, and books and documents will not suffice for studying it; we must go to the works of art themselves, and, what is more, to the country itself, tread the same soil and breathe the same air, where they were produced and developed. For does not Goethe say? "Wer den Dichter verstehen muss in Dichters Lande gehen." [Whoever wishes to understand the poet must go to the poet's land.]

★ 'Your theory, then,' I observed, 'is that a true knowledge of art is only to be attained by a continuous and untiring study of form and technique, that no one should venture into the domain of the history of art without being first an art connoisseur. All your arguments may be correct enough, but my own studies are too elementary for me either to agree with, or to differ from, you at present. One thing, however, I may confidently affirm, namely, that all the art historians and connoisseurs whom I have met in Europe would treat with contempt your theories. They would tell you that he whom Nature had destined for a true art historian or critic, need not think of troubling himself about the details upon which you lay so much stress; in his eyes it would be sheer waste of time, and would simply deaden his intellect to do so. The *general impression* produced upon him by a work of art, be it picture or statue, is quite sufficient to enable him to recognize the master at the first glance, and beyond this general impression or intuition, and tradition, he only needs the testimony of a *written document* to arrive at complete certainty as to its author. All other expedients could, at most, be of service only to those who know nothing of their business – like the lifebelt to the man who cannot swim – if, indeed, they do not make confusion worse confounded in the study of art, and foster "the most fatal diletantism".'

→ 'The same objections are raised here,' replied the Italian, 'against the study of form and technique – that is, against analytical research; and the loudest protests are made by those who have neither the disposition, nor the capacity, for studying anything thoroughly. I know persons, by no means deficient in intelligence or culture, who consider that understanding a subject means degrading it, and are as violently opposed to the study of form and technique in works of art as are priests, for the most part, to physical science. Let us weigh the matter dispassionately. You say, if I have rightly understood you, that art historians in Germany and Paris only attach importance to intuition, and to documentary evidence, and regard the study of works of art as purposeless and a waste of time. It is quite possible, I admit, that the general impression or intuition may often be sufficient to enable an astute and well-trained eye to guess at the authorship of a work of art. But the Italian proverb is frequently verified in these cases: "l'apparenza inganna" – appearances are deceitful. I maintain, therefore, and could support my assertion by any amount of evidence, that, so long as we trust only to the general impression for identifying a work of art, instead of seeking the surer testimony of the forms peculiar to each great master with which observation and experience have made us familiar, we shall continue in the same atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty, and the foundations of the history of art will be built as heretofore on shifting sands ...

For a more detailed focus connoisseurs.

'All art historians, from Vasari down to our own day [he went on], have only made use of two tests to aid them in deciding the authorship of a work of art – intuition, or the so-called general impression, and documentary evidence; with what result you have seen for yourself. You say that, after reading much literature on art and art criticism in Paris and Germany, you came to the conclusion that every critic thinks it necessary to set up a theory of his own.'

documentary
evidence

'Yes, unhappily this is the case,' I replied; 'all these books and pamphlets had the effect of setting me against the study of art.'

'I allow', continued my companion, 'that a general impression is sometimes sufficient to determine whether a work of art be Italian, Flemish, or German; and, if Italian, whether of the Florentine, Venetian, or Umbrian school; and that intuition alone may occasionally enable a practised eye to identify the author of a painting or statue (even the most ordinary art dealer possesses this kind of shrewdness), for in all intellectual matters the general conditions govern the particular. If this main question be settled, and it be assumed that the painting, or drawing, belongs to the early Florentine school, we must then make up our mind whether it be by Fra Filippo Lippi, Pesellino, Sandro Botticelli, or Filippino Lippi, or by one of the many imitators of these masters. Further, if the general impression convinces us that the painting is of the Venetian school, we must then decide if it be of the school of Venice itself or that of Padua, or, again, if it belong to that of Ferrara, or to that of Verona, etc. To arrive at a conclusion (often by no means an easy matter) the general impression is not sufficient ... Only by gaining a thorough knowledge of the characteristics of each painter – of his forms and of his colouring – shall we ever succeed in distinguishing the genuine works of the great masters from those of their pupils and imitators, or even from copies; and though this method may not always lead to absolute conviction, it at least brings us to the threshold.'

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formalism
Key A

'That may be,' said I, 'but you must recollect that every human eye sees form differently.'

'Exactly so,' said the Italian, 'and, for this very reason, every great artist sees and represents these forms in his own distinctive manner; hence, for him they become characteristic. For they are by no means the result of accident or caprice, but of internal conditions. You had better say', he continued, smiling, 'that most persons, and pre-eminently art historians, and "art philosophers" as you call them, do not see these various forms at all. Preferring, as their practice is, mere abstract theories to practical examination, it is their wont to look at a picture as if it were a mirror, in which, as a rule, they see nothing but the reflection of their own minds.'

It is no easy matter, I admit, to see form correctly – I might almost say to feel it aright; this is partly due to the physical conformation of the eye' ...

'I am quite of your opinion on that score,' replied my companion quietly. 'The nearer the copyist, who, of course, reproduces the original after his own manner, approaches to the taste and feeling of our own day, the greater will be the appreciation of his work by the public. Correggio's *Magdalen*, and the Holbein *Madonna* at Dresden, are instances of this, and I could cite many others equally striking.'

'I have long had the same opinion', I said warmly, 'of the people one comes across in picture galleries.'

– yes

'We have rather drifted away from our subject,' said the Italian as he rose from the bench. 'I think, however, we are pretty well agreed, both as to the value of what is termed "tradition", and as to the state of indecision in which the general impression leaves us when we wish to identify an old picture.'

'Say, rather, we are entirely agreed,' I rejoined. 'I suppose, however, that you respect documentary evidence?'

'Written documents', he replied, 'are only of value in the hands of a scientifically trained and competent critic; in those of a novice in the study of art, or of a keeper of archives who understands nothing of the subject, they are not only useless, but misleading.'

'Do you mean to say', I exclaimed, 'that you are even going to cast doubts upon the value of records which all art historians prize so highly?'

'The only true record for the connoisseur', he replied calmly, 'is the work of art itself. You may think this a bold and sweeping assertion, but I can assure you that it is not so, and I can prove it by several examples. Is there any document more likely to inspire confidence, more apparent to every spectator, than that bearing the master's own name on a picture, which we call in Italian a *cartellino*?'

'Well,' I replied, 'if every painting were signed with its author's name, there would certainly be no great merit in being a connoisseur.'

'There I cannot agree with you,' said the Italian; 'art historians and gallery directors are still duped by records and cartellini, just as in the good old days, when passports were an absolute necessity, the police were taken in by the greatest scoundrels. I could mention dozens of forged cartellini, of old standing and of recent date, on pictures in some of the principal galleries ... On [a] Ferrarese painting, representing St Sebastian, has been inscribed by some forger the name "Laurentius Costa" in Hebrew characters. Everyone accordingly assigned the picture to this master, though a practised eye would have seen at a glance that it was by Cosimo Tura, of whom, moreover, it is a most characteristic example. I could enumerate many more such "documents" which have been wrongly interpreted by the unlearned, and many signatures which were inscribed upon pictures even centuries ago with intent to deceive. Art historians consider that their antiquity attests their genuineness; and base profound and elaborate dissertations upon them.'

'The less we understand of a subject,' I observed, 'the louder and more emphatic will be the admiration we express for it.'

'Now,' continued my companion, 'I must mention another kind of document – those in archives which are constantly being reclaimed from dust and oblivion by diligent and praiseworthy enquirers. Keepers of archives, in Italy and Belgium especially, have been most indefatigable in their search for documents relating to artists and their works. Many of these records have already been, and no doubt may still be, the means of throwing light on obscure points, and of discovering the names of hitherto unknown artists ... On the other hand, many of these documents, interpreted by archivists in their own way, have been the means of propagating the gravest errors. It is, of course, hardly necessary to add that these records only make mention of large and important works executed for churches, or by order of princes. Paintings in public and private collections are



for the most part small easel pictures, and documents relating to their authorship and pedigrees will scarcely be forthcoming. We are thrown either upon tradition, or upon the general impression when we have to pass judgement on them, and as the intuitive faculties differ in each individual, the conclusions arrived at must necessarily be of the most varied nature. I will cite a few examples to show you that I have not exaggerated. About 1840 a large fresco of the "Last Supper" was discovered at Florence, in the suppressed convent of S. Onofrio, under a coating of whitewash. Writers on art, connoisseurs, and painters formed different opinions with regard to it; some even went so far as to ascribe it to Raphael, and it was engraved as his work by the late Signor Jesi. More judicious critics pronounced it to be of the school of Perugia. One day, however – in the Strozzi library, if I mistake not – a painter came upon a document from which it appeared that, in 1461, Neri di Bicci, an indifferent Florentine artist, had been commissioned to paint a "Last Supper" in the convent of S. Onofrio. *Eureka!* cried the happy finder, and immediately published his precious document. The more intelligent connoisseurs turned the discovery into ridicule. Indeed one of the best-known and most distinguished archivists in Italy considered it so absurd, that he thought it his duty to make an example of the discoverer by publicly taking him to task. At the same time he availed himself of the opportunity to express his own individual opinion that it was the work of Raffaellino del Garbo, a later Florentine painter, and a pupil of Filippino Lippi. But by doing so he showed that his own knowledge of art was on much the same level as that of the painter who, on the strength of his document, had maintained that Neri di Bicci was the author of the fresco.'

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'And to whom is the fresco now attributed?' I asked.

'Passavant gave it to Giovanni Spagna, Signor Cavalcaselle to Gerino da Pistoia; both critics therefore considered it to be by a pupil of Perugino ... I should like to draw your attention to two others which are attributed to Fra Filippo Lippi in the catalogue, though I consider one of them to be the work of his pupil Sandro Botticelli.'

I followed my active guide into the next room, where we found a small picture ... representing St Augustine in his study.

'Look at this painting carefully,' he said, as he placed me before it in the best light. 'Among Sandro Botticelli's characteristic forms I will mention the hand, with bony fingers – not beautiful, but always full of life; the nails, which, as you perceive in the thumb here, are square with black outlines, and the short nose with dilated nostrils, which you see exemplified in Botticelli's celebrated and undisputed work hanging close by – *The Calumny of Apelles* ... Note, too, the peculiar lengthened folds of the drapery, and the transparent golden red colour in both pictures. If you like, you may also compare the nimbus round the head of St Augustine, with the glories of other saints in *authentic* works of the same period by the master, and you will, I think, be forced to acknowledge that the painter of the *Calumny*, and of the large *Tondo* ... in the next room, must also have been the author of this St Augustine.'

This matter-of-fact way of identifying works of art by the help of such external signs savoured more of an anatomist, I thought, than of a student of art ...

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Morelli
Method
Botticelli's
fingers

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'To cite a few out of many instances [my companion proceeded], we find in Oxford a sheet containing, among other studies, the head of a young man and a hand, ascribed to Raphael and reproduced as such in the publications of the Grosvenor Gallery ... It is just this hand, however, which reveals the northern master, for the thumbnail is of a form which we never find in Italian pictures, though it frequently occurs in northern paintings. It resembles a section of an octagon more than anything else, and appears as if it had had three clean cuts with the scissors. At Chatsworth we also find a study of two hands, which, notwithstanding their decidedly northern character, are ascribed to Parmigianino ... Look at the hand in this portrait, particularly at the ball of the thumb, which is too strongly developed, and at the round form of the ear. In all his early works, and in most of those of his *middle period* till between 1540 and 1550, Titian adheres to the same round form of ear - for instance, in the *Three Ages*, and the *Holy Family* in the Bridgewater collection (the latter picture being wrongly attributed to Palma Vecchio); in the *Daughter of Herodias* in the Doria-Pamfili gallery ... This peculiarity in the ball of the thumb also frequently occurs in his other paintings and in his drawings ...'

'Suppose we examine this celebrated portrait [of a Cardinal, attributed to Raphael] a little more closely. The liquid character of its painting recalled the method of the German masters to Passavant; he even thought that Raphael might have been under the influence of some of Holbein's pictures when engaged upon it, which, however, I may observe incidentally, was a chronological impossibility. But there can be no doubt that the technique of the painting is not Italian; this must strike every connoisseur. Look at the hard fixed eye and badly modelled mouth, at the thumb of the right hand which is completely out of drawing, and at the crude colours of the book. You must acknowledge that no great master could have painted this portrait. However, to relieve your mind of all uncertainty, I may as well tell you at once, that the original is still in the possession of the Inghirami family at Volterra, and though ruined by modern restoration, it is still recognisable in parts as the work of Raphael.'

Of course there was nothing more to be said after this, and I was forced to give in, though I must confess that my guide's destructive criticism was as displeasing to me as were firearms to Ariosto's Orlando.

'On the opposite wall,' he continued, 'there is another portrait of a Cardinal, which is still given to Raphael, though Passavant rightly pronounced it the work of a scholar.' When I examined it I had no difficulty in perceiving that the eyes and the left hand were badly modelled, and that the ear was not of that round fleshy form which we had been noticing in Raphael's genuine portraits. 'Another similar work of the school, representing Cardinal Passerini, is in the Naples Museum,' he said, as, glancing at his watch, he prepared to leave. And I also was of the opinion that for the present this one lesson was quite enough. So we parted.

I remained in Florence some weeks longer, and made use of the time to follow up the teaching of my guide by studying form in painting, sculpture, and architecture. I soon came to the conclusion, however, that such a dry, uninteresting, and even pedantic, study may be all very well for a 'former student of medicine,' and might even be of service to dealers and experts, but in the end must prove

Copies
by pupils
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form

detrimental to the truer and more elevated conception of art. And so I left Florence dissatisfied.

On my return to Kasan I heard, to my surprise, that Prince Smaranzoff's celebrated collection of pictures, principally Italian of the best period, was shortly to be sold by auction. My first art-studies had been made in this gallery, as the château was only a few versts from the town, and I had often been there in my youth. I still had a lively recollection of the six Madonnas by Raphael which it contained, and I now felt a strong desire to see and study the pictures again before they were scattered to the four winds.

One bright December morning, therefore, I ordered my sleigh and started in high spirits. I found the splendid rooms swarming with Russians and foreigners – dealers, art connoisseurs, and directors of galleries. They were all examining the pictures one by one, with the greatest interest, and, as I thought at first, with immense knowledge, going into raptures first over one, then over another; identifying here a Verrocchio, there a Melozzo da Forli – even a Leonardo da Vinci – at the first glance. I listened curiously to their analytical remarks about the fine technical qualities of the Venetian pictures, and the excellent state of preservation of the Raphaels, and marvelled; but what was my astonishment, when at length I was able to approach, and critically to examine, all these Madonnas, with which I also had been enchanted some years before! The Raphaels in the Pitti were still fresh in my memory, and I could not refrain from testing these works of art by the method the Italian in Florence had taught me. I could hardly believe my eyes, and felt as if scales had suddenly fallen from them. The Madonnas, one and all, now appeared to me equally stiff and uninteresting, the children feeble if not positively absurd; as to the forms, they had not a trace of Raphael. In short, these pictures, which only a few years before had appeared to me admirable works by Raphael himself, did not satisfy me now, and on closer inspection I felt convinced that these much-vaunted productions were nothing but copies, or perhaps even counterfeits. The works attributed to Michaelangelo, Verrocchio, Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Lorenzo Lotto, and Palma Vecchio, made exactly the same impression upon me. I was overjoyed to find how satisfactory were the results of my hitherto short and superficial studies, even though the knowledge I had gained was so far only of a negative character. As I drove home, I determined to leave Gorlaw and return as speedily as possible to Germany, Paris, and Italy, in order to study in the galleries with renewed zeal, in accordance with the method the Italian had indicated to me, and which I had, at first, been inclined to disparage.