



ART AND ILLUSION

A STUDY IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF
PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION

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WITH 320 ILLUSTRATIONS

PHAIDON

III

Pygmalion's Power

Once there was an old man whose name was Nahokoboni. He was troubled in his mind because he had no daughter, and who could look after him if he had no son-in-law? Being a witch doctor, he therefore carved himself a daughter out of a plum tree. . . .

A fairy tale of the Guiana Indians

I

EVER SINCE the Greek philosophers called art an 'imitation of nature' their successors have been busy affirming, denying, or qualifying this definition. The first two chapters of this book have the same purpose. They try to show some of the limits of this aim toward a perfect 'imitation' set by the nature of the medium on the one hand and by the psychology of artistic procedure on the other. Everybody knows that this imitation has ceased to be the concern of artists today. But is this a new departure? Were the Greeks right even in their description of the aims of the artists in the past?

Their own mythology would have told them a different story. For it tells of an earlier and more awe-inspiring function of art when the artist did not aim at making a 'likeness' but at rivalling creation itself. The most famous of these myths that crystallize belief in the power of art to create rather than to portray is the story of Pygmalion. Ovid turned it into an erotic novelette, but even in his perfumed version we can feel something of the thrill which the artist's mysterious powers once gave to man.

In Ovid, Pygmalion is a sculptor who wants to fashion a woman after his own heart and falls in love with the statue he makes. He prays to Venus for a bride modelled after that image, and the goddess turns the cold ivory into a living body. It is a myth that has naturally captivated the imagination of artists, the solemn and somewhat maudlin dreams of Burne-Jones [62] no less than the irreverent mockery of Daumier [63]. Without the underlying promise of this myth, the secret hopes and fears that accompany the act of creation, there might be no art as we know it. One of the most original young painters of England, Lucien Freud, wrote very recently: 'A moment of complete happiness never occurs in the creation of a work of art. The promise of it is felt in the act of creation, but disappears towards the completion of the work. For it is then that the painter realises that it is only a picture he is painting. Until then he had almost dared to hope that the picture might spring to life.'



62. BURNE-JONES: *Pygmalion*. 1878



63. DAUMIER: *Pygmalion*. 1842. Lithograph

'Only a picture', says Lucien Freud. It is a motif we find in the whole history of Western art; Vasari tells of Donatello at work on his *Zuccone* [66] looking at it suddenly and threatening the stone with a dreadful curse, 'Speak, speak—*favella, favella, che ti venga il cacasanguie!*' And the greatest wizard of them all, Leonardo da Vinci, extolled the power of the artist to create. In that hymn of praise to painting, the 'Paragone', he calls the painter 'the Lord of all manner of people and of all things'. 'If the painter wishes to see beauties to fall in love with, it is in his power to bring them forth, and if he wants to see monstrous things that frighten or are foolish or laughable or indeed to be pitied, he is their Lord and God.' [64, 65].



64, 65. LEONARDO DA VINCI: *Grotesque heads*. About 1495. *Leda*. About 1509. Pen and ink



66. DONATELLO: 'Lo Zuccone'.
1423-1425. Marble



67. (Attributed to) LEONARDO DA VINCI: *Bacchus*.
About 1508-1513

Indeed, the power of art to rouse the passions is to him a token of its magic. Unlike the poet, he writes, the painter can so subdue the minds of men that they will fall in love with a painting that does not represent a real woman. 'It happened to me,' he continues, 'that I made a religious painting which was bought by one who so loved it that he wanted to remove the sacred representation so as to be able to kiss it without suspicion. Finally his conscience prevailed over his sighs and lust, but he had to remove the picture from his house.' If we think of a work like the *St. John* and its transformation into a *Bacchus* [67], we may accept the plausibility of Leonardo's account.

And yet Leonardo, if anyone, knew that the artist's desire to create, to bring forth a second reality, finds its inexorable limits in the restrictions of his medium. I feel we catch an echo of the disillusionment with having created only a picture

that we found in Lucien Freud when we read in Leonardo's notes: 'Painters often fall into despair . . . when they see that their paintings lack the roundness and the liveliness which we find in objects seen in the mirror . . . but it is impossible for a painting to look as rounded as a mirror image . . . except if you look at both with one eye only.'

Perhaps the passage betrays the ultimate reason for Leonardo's deep dissatisfaction with his art, his reluctance to reach the fatal moment of completion: all the artist's knowledge and imagination are of no avail, it is only a picture that he has been painting, and it will look flat. Small wonder that contemporaries describe him in his later years as most impatient of the brush and engrossed in mathematics. Mathematics was to help him to be the true maker. Today we read of Leonardo's project to build a 'flying machine', but if we look into Leonardo's notes we will not find such an expression. What he wants to make is a bird that will fly, and once more there is an exultant tone in the master's famous prophecy that the bird *would* fly. It did not. And shortly afterward we find Leonardo lodging in the Vatican—at the time when Michelangelo and Raphael were there creating their most renowned works—quarrelling with a German mirror-maker and fixing wings and a beard to a tame lizard in order to frighten his visitors. He made a dragon, but it was only a whimsical footnote to a Promethean life. The claim to be a creator, a maker of things, passed from the painter to the engineer—leaving to the artist only the small consolation of being a maker of dreams.