

Letter of Ludovico Gonzaga to Andrea Mantegna, 15 April 1458¹

Ludovico Gonzaga's desire to be in the lead among princely patrons inspired him to lure Mantegna from Padua to be his resident court painter. He had already made overtures in the previous year, though Mantegna was slow to commit himself while still working on the famous altarpiece of San Zeno, Verona, for the Protonotary Gregorio Correr. The terms offered were certainly generous: 180 ducats a year was a considerable salary to accompany the other perquisites. It is not clear, however, whether on acceptance Mantegna protected himself by a formal contract; the following letter suggests he did not. He finally arrived in the summer of 1459; his mind may have been made up by the Congress held in Mantua that year (the same event which brought Alberti to the Gonzaga court), with its opportunities of further patronage.

To the painter Andrea Mantegna

Our most esteemed friend:

Messer Luca Tagliapietra has returned to us and has described on your behalf how great is your desire, and how you persevere in your original intention, to enter our service. It pleases us greatly to know this and we received it gladly; and so that you may know at once our good will towards you we advise you that our own intention is to reserve for you in good faith everything which we have promised you in our letter at other times, and still more; that is to say, 15 ducats a month, the provision of rooms where you can live with your family, enough food each year to feed six, and enough firewood for your use. Do not have the slightest doubt about all this; and so that you may not incur any expense in bringing your family here, we are happy to promise that at the time you want to come we shall send down a small ship at our expense to move you and your household and bring you here so that it will not cost you anything. And because Maestro Luca tells us you would dearly like to

wait another six months in order to finish the work for the Reverend protonotary of Verona and dispatch the rest of your business, we are very content, and if these six months are not enough for you, take seven or eight, so that you can finish everything you have begun and come here with your mind at rest. Two or three months are not going to make any difference to us provided that we have the certainty from you that when the time comes you will not fail to enter our service, and if you come next January you would still be in good time. We deeply beg that by that time without fail you will want to come, as we hope. Have no doubt that if our offer seems little to you and if you are not content and inform us, we shall seek in every way to satisfy your desire, because as we have written to you on other occasions, if you come as we hope and bear yourself in this manner, we shall make certain that you will find this arrangement seems only the least of the rewards you will receive from us. And although other people may have told you otherwise, we by the grace of God have never yet broken our promise, and as you are young you will be able to prove this for yourself; we shall show you who tells the truth, them or us, and whether deeds correspond to words. But this is our hope: that every day you will rest more happy and satisfied for having been brought into our service. We wanted to write you this letter to assure you that we have the same disposition towards you as always, waiting to hear from you the precise time when you can move to us with your household. Nor is there any need for you to take the trouble to come here, as Maestro Luca wanted you to do; for us, it will be quite enough to hear from you of your intention by letter without your coming, by means of this gentleman of

¹ All the letters in this packet are from D.S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance* (University of S. Carolina Press, 1971), 116-131.

ours who has to ride as far as Venice. We beg you that on his return he may have your reply to carry here. Farewell. Mantua, 15 April 1458

Letter of Federico I Gonzaga to Bona of Savoy, Duchess of Milan, 20 June 1480

Lady Duchess of Milan:

Most illustrious Excellency, I have received the portrait painting that Your Excellency sent me and have done my utmost to make Mantegna make a small reproduction in elegant form. He says this would almost be the work of a miniature-painter, and because he is not accustomed to painting small figures he would much rather do a Madonna, or something the length of a *braccia* or a *braccia* and a half, if it were pleasing to Your Most Illustrious Highness. My Lady, if I might know what Your Ladyship wants me to do, I shall endeavor to satisfy your wish, but usually these painters have a touch of the fantastic and it is advisable to take what they offer one; but if Your Ladyship is not served as quickly as you wished, I beseech you to excuse me; in your good grace, etc. Mantua, 20 June 1480

Letter of Michele Vianello to Isabella d'Este, 25 June, 1501

[Michele Vianello was one of Isabella d'Este's agents who negotiated with artists on her behalf.]

My most illustrious Lady

Today I have received your letter from Ziprian, Your Excellency's courier, and from the same I received 25 ducats to give Giovanni Bellini, who is at his villa. He will be back at his house here, they tell me, within five days. I will be with him immediately, and that Your Excellency may

know that I have your service in mind, I have spoken to him several times about this picture. He told me that he was very anxious to serve Your Ladyship, but about the story² Your Ladyship gave him, words cannot express how badly he has taken it, because he knows Your Ladyship will judge it in comparison with the work of Master Andrea [Mantegna], and for this reason he wants to do his best. He said that in the story he cannot devise anything good out of the subject at all, and he takes it as badly as one can say, so that I doubt whether he will serve Your Excellency as you wish. So if it should seem better to you to allow him to do what he likes, I am most certain that Your Ladyship will be very much better served. Therefore I beg Your Ladyship will be pleased to give me your views, because he will not do anything until I hear from you. From Your Ladyship's servant Michele Vianello

Letter of Isabella d'Este to Michele Vianello, 28 June, 1501

Messer Michele

If Giovanni Bellini is so unwilling to do this story as you write, we are content to leave the subject to his judgement, so long as he paints some ancient story or fable with a beautiful meaning. We should be very glad if you would urge him to make a start on this work, so that we have it within the time he has estimated, and sooner if possible. The size of the picture has not been altered since you were here and saw the place where it was to go in the studio. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side I am sending you the measurements again, and Gian Cristoforo our sculptor will write to you about this. Mantua, 28 June 1501

² That is, Isabella had proposed a fable or scene that she wanted illustrated.

Letter of Isabella d'Este to Michele Vianello, 15 September 1502

Messer Michele

You may remember that many months ago we gave Giovanni Bellini a commission to paint a picture for the decoration of our studio, and when it ought to have been finished we found it was not yet begun. Since it seemed clear that we should never obtain what we desired, we told him to abandon the work, and give you back the 25 ducats which we had sent him before, but now he begs us to leave him the work and promises to finish it soon. As till now he has given us nothing but words, we beg that you will tell him in our name that we no longer care to have the picture, but that if instead he would paint a Nativity, we should be well content, as long as he does not keep us waiting any longer, and will count the 25 ducats which he has already received as half payment. This, it appears to us, is really more than he deserves, but we are content to leave this to your judgement. We want this Nativity to contain the Madonna and Our Lord God and St Joseph, together with a St John the Baptist and the [usual] animals. If he refuses to agree to this, you will ask him to return the 25 ducats, and if he will not give back the money you will take proceedings.

Letter of Michele Vianello to Isabella d'Este, 3 November 1502

Most illustrious and excellent Lady

I have just received a letter from Your Ladyship in which you tell me about the picture by Giovanni Bellini. I have had the measurements of the picture from Messer Battista Scola and I at once went to find him and tell him Your Ladyship's wish about the Nativity scene, and that Your

Ladyship wished a St John the Baptist to appear in the scene. He replied that he was happy to serve Your Excellency, but that the said saint seemed out of place in this Nativity, and that if it pleases Your illustrious Ladyship he will do a work with the infant Christ and St John the Baptist and something in the background with other fantasies which would be much better. So we left it at that: if this pleases Your Ladyship please let me know, because I will do whatever Your Ladyship commands. As to the price, he agreed to take 50 ducats, and anything more which may seem fair to Your Excellency. So I ordered the canvas to be primed and he promised to begin very soon.

Letter of Isabella d'Este to Michele Vianello, 12 November 1502

Messer Michele

As Bellini is resolved on doing a picture of the Madonna and Child and St John the Baptist in place of the Nativity scene, I should be glad if he would also include a St. Jerome with the other subjects which occur to him; and about the price of 50 ducats we are content, but above all urge him to serve us quickly and well.

Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550), Preface³

Vasari was himself a painter and architect, and in 1550, he published a voluminous series of biographies of artists, starting with Cimabue (c. 1240-c.1302) and continuing up to his own time.

[He discusses the ancient origins of sculpture and painting.]

But we will now pass over these matters, which are too vague on account of their antiquity, and we will proceed to deal with clearer questions, namely, the rise of the arts to perfection, their decline and their restoration or rather renaissance, and here we stand on much firmer ground. The practice of the arts began late in Rome...But although the arts of painting and sculpture continued to flourish until the death of the last of the twelve Caesars, yet they did not maintain that perfection and excellence which had characterised them before, as we see by the buildings of the time under successive emperors. The arts declined steadily from day to day, until at length by a gradual process they entirely lost all perfection of design. Clear testimony to this is afforded by the works in sculpture and architecture produced in Rome in the time of Constantine, notably in the triumphal arch made for him by the Roman people at the Colosseum, where we see, that for lack of good masters not only did they make use of marble reliefs carved in the time of Trajan, but also of spoils brought to Rome from various places...

Besides all this, in order to build churches for the use of the Christians, not only were the most honoured temples of the idols destroyed, but in order to ennoble and decorate S. Pietro [Paolo] with more ornaments than it then possessed, they took away the stone columns from the mold of Hadrian, now the castle of

³ Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* transl. Gaston De Vere (Florence, 1550). Accessed via the online edition adapted by Adrienne DeAngelis; <http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariLives.html>

Sant' Angelo, as well as many other things which we now see in ruins. Now, although the Christian religion did not act thus from any hatred for talent, but only in order to condemn and overthrow the heathen gods, yet the utter ruin of these honourable professions, which entirely lost their form, was nonetheless entirely due to this burning zeal...

...From such beginnings design and a general improvement in the arts began to make headway in Tuscany, as in the year 1016 when the Pisans began to erect their Duomo...As the men of the age were not accustomed to see any excellence or greater perfection than the things thus produced, they greatly admired them, and considered them to be the type of perfection, barbarous as they were. Yet some rising spirits, aided by some quality in the air of certain places, so far purged themselves of this crude style that in 1250 Heaven took compassion on the fine minds that the Tuscan soil was producing every day, and directed them to the original forms. For although the preceding generations had before them the remains of arches, colossi, statues, pillars or carved stone columns which were left after the plunder, ruin and fire which Rome had passed through, yet they could never make use of them or derive any profit from them until the period named. Those who came after were able to distinguish the good from the bad, and abandoning the old style they began to copy the ancients with all ardour and industry....I wish to be of service to the artists of our own day, by showing them how a small beginning leads to the highest elevation, and how from so noble a situation, it is possible to fall to utterest ruin, and consequently, how these arts resemble nature as shown in our human bodies; and have their birth, growth, age and death, and I hope by this means they will be enabled more easily to recognise the progress of the renaissance of the arts, and the perfection to which they have attained in our own time.