

Chapter from: Vasari Lives of the Painters 1550

ANDREA DAL CASTAGNO of Mugello and
DOMENICO VINIZIANO, Painters (?1410-1457; c. 1400-1461)

WHAT words can express the vileness of the vice of envy in distinguished men, bad in any person? How dreadful and horrible a thing it is to endeavour, under the guise of a false friendship, to extinguish not only the fame and glory of others, but their very life, for the baseness of the act surpasses all the resources of the tongue, however eloquent it may be. Yet without going any further into this matter, I will content myself with saying that those who do such things are not only inhuman and cruel, but altogether diabolical, so far removed from every trace of virtue that the offenders are inhuman, inferior to the brutes, and unworthy to live. Just as loyal emulation and competition, which aim at progress rather than at glory and honour, are worthy and valuable, being necessary and useful to the world, so on the contrary such villainous envy is infamous and odious. For when it is unable to bear that honour and rewards should be given to others, it proposes to take the life of those whom it cannot deprive of glory, as did the vile Andrea dal Castagno. His painting and design were indeed excellent, but far greater were the rancour and envy which he bore to the other painters, so that the darkness of his sin has obscured the splendour of his genius.

Born in a small township called Il Castagno in the Mugello, in the territory of Florence, Andrea took it as his surname when he came to live in Florence, and this happened in the following manner. Left without a father in his earliest childhood, he was adopted by an uncle, who kept him for many years to look after cattle, for he found him so ready, wide-awake and capable that he was able to manage not only the animals but the pastures and everything that concerned his interests. Such was his occupation when one day he happened to take refuge from the rain in a house where one of those country painters, who work for very little, happened to be painting a tabernacle for a rustic. Andrea, who had never seen the like, was struck with wonder, and attentively looked on, observing the method of the work, so that he immediately became possessed of the desire to practise the art. Without losing any time he began on the wall with a piece of coal or the point of his knife, scratching and drawing animals and figures so well that he aroused no small wonder in those who saw him. The fame of this new study of Andrea began to spread about the country, and, as chance willed, came to the ears of a Florentine nobleman called Bernardetto de' Medici, who had property there, and who wished to see the child. After seeing him and hearing him speak with much intelligence, he asked the boy if he would like to be a painter. Andrea replied that he desired nothing better. In order that he might be perfected in the art, Bernardetto took the lad to Florence, and put him to work with one of the masters then most in repute. In this way Andrea studied the art of painting, and by devoting himself entirely to it he showed the greatest intelligence in the difficulties of the art, and especially in design. He did not make equal progress in the colouring of his works, which, being somewhat crude and hard, detracted considerably from the excellence and grace of his pictures, chiefly because it lacks a certain charm.

The movements of his figures were bold and the heads of the men and women striking, of grave aspect, and correctly drawn. In his early youth he painted in the cloister of S. Miniato al Monte, as one descends from the church to the convent, the parting of St. Miniato and St. Cresci from their parents, in fresco. In St. Benedetto—a fine monastery outside the Pinti gate, there were many paintings by Andrea's hand in a cloister and in the church, which it is not necessary to describe, as they were knocked down during the siege of Florence. Inside the city, in the monastery of the monks of the Angeli, in the first cloister opposite the principal door, he painted the Crucifixion, which is still there, Our Lady, St. John, St. Benedict and St. Romuald. At the end of the cloister above the garden he made another like it, with variations in the heads and a few other details. In S. Trinita,

beside the Chapel of Maestro Luca, he made a St. Andrew. At Legnaia he painted for Pandolfo Pandolfini a number of illustrious men in a hall,¹ and a standard for the company of the Evangelist, considered very fine, to be carried in procession. For the services of that city he decorated three flat niches in some chapels, one containing events from the life of St. Julian, with a good number of figures, and a dog foreshortened, which has been much admired. Above this, in the chapel dedicated to St. Jerome, he painted that saint, shrivelled and clean shaven, with good design and much care. Over this he made a Trinity with a foreshortened crucifix, so well done that Andrea deserves high praise for it, because he made the foreshortening in a much better and far more modern style than his predecessors. But his painting can no longer be seen because a picture has been placed over it by the family of Montaguti. In the third, which is beside the one below the organ, erected by M. Orlando de' the Magdalene. Medici, he painted Lazarus, Martha and for the nuns of S. Giuliano he did a Crucifixion in fresco over the door, a Madonna, St. Dominic, St. Julian and St. John. All artists agree in admiring this painting, which is one of his best. In the chapel of the Cavalcanti at S. Croce he did a St. John the Baptist and St. Francis, considered excellent figures.

But the work which excited the greatest admiration of the artists was a Christ at the Column in the new cloister of that convent, at the end opposite the door, where he introduced a loggia with columns in perspective, the crossing of the vaults diminishing and the walls with their oval compartments depicted with such art and so much study that it is clear that he was as completely master of the difficulties of perspective as of design. In the same scene the attitudes of those who are scourging the Christ are free and bold, displaying hatred and fury in their faces, while the Christ is all patience and humility. In the attitude of His body bound to the column with the ropes Andrea seems to have attempted to show the suffering of the flesh, and the divinity hidden in the body preserving a certain splendour of nobility which move Pilate, who is seated among his councillors, to seek some means of setting Him free. In short, this picture is so fine that if it had not been scratched and damaged, owing to the neglect of those in charge, by children and other simple persons, who have scratched all the heads and arms, and almost every other part of the Jews, as if to avenge the sufferings of the Saviour upon them, it would certainly be the most beautiful of Andrea's works. If Nature had only given him a tenderness of colouring comparable to his invention and design, he would truly have been a marvel.

In S. Maria del Fiore he painted the effigy of Niccolo da Toentino on horseback [Niccolo died in 1434; a monument was voted in 1435; the fresco was painted in 1456.], and because a child in passing shook the ladder while he was at work, he fell into such a rage that, like the brutal man lie was, he got down and chased him as far as the corner of the Pazzi.

In the cemetery of S. Maria Nuova, below the charnelhouse, he did a St. Andrew, which gave such satisfaction that he was afterwards employed to paint the Last Supper in the refectory [in 1457.] where the servants and other ministers eat. By this work he found favour with the house of the Portinari and with the master, being employed to paint a part of the principal chapel, the remainder being allotted to Alesso Baldovinetti, and to the then very celebrated painter Domenico Veneziano, who had been invited to Florence because of his new method of colouring in oil. Thus each of them attended to his section, but Andrea was most envious of Domenico, because although he knew that he excelled him in design, yet it offended him that a foreigner should be caressed and entertained by the citizens, and so strong was his anger and rage that he began to plot to get rid of Domenico by some means. Now Andrea was not less skilful in dissimulating than in painting, could make his face appear merry at will, was quick of tongue and proud in spirit, and resolute in every action both of the body and of the mind. He was animated by the same spirit towards other artists as well as Domenico, and used to scratch their works secretly with his nails if he found a fault. In his youth, when his works were blamed, he would be even with his critics by blows and insults, to show them that he was always both able and willing to vindicate himself.

But before coming to the work of the chapel I will first speak of Domenico. Previous to his visit to Florence he had painted some things with much grace in the sacristy of S. Maria di Loreto in conjunction with Piero della Francesca. These things, together with his works in other places, such as a chamber in the house of the Baglioni

in Perugia, now destroyed, had made him known at Florence by repute. Being invited to Florence, the first thing which he did there was to paint a Madonna in fresco in a tabernacle surrounded by other saints on the side of the Carnesecchi, at the junction of the two ways, one leading to the new and the other to the old piazza of S. Maria Novella. Because this work gave great satisfaction and was much admired by the citizens and artists of the time, the envy and wrath in the vile mind of Andrea only increased against poor Domenico. Accordingly he determined to accomplish by deceit and treason what he could not do openly without manifest danger. He feigned himself to be friendly to Domenico, who, being a good fellow and amiable¹ who sang and was fond of playing the lute, received him willingly into his friendship, thinking Andrea a clever and amusing companion. This friendship, real on one side but feigned on the other, went on so that they were together every night, making good cheer and serenading their loves.

This gave great pleasure to Domenico, who unfeignedly loved Andrea and taught him the method of colouring in oils, which was not then known in Tuscany. But to take things in order: Andrea did an Annunciation on the front of the chapel of S. Maria Nuova, which was considered very beautiful because he painted the angel in the air, which had not been customary before. But a much finer work is his Virgin ascending the steps of the Temple, representing many poor people, and among others one who hits another on the head with a tankard; not only this figure but all the others being entirely admirable, for he devoted great labour to them out of emulation with Domenico.

Here also may be seen in perspective in the middle of a piazza an octagonal temple, standing alone and full of pilasters and niches, beautifully adorned on its facade with marble figures, and a number of fine buildings round the piazza on which the sun is throwing the shadow of the temple, the whole beautifully and artistically contrived. On the other side Maestro Domenico did the meeting of Joachim and Anna his wife, with the Nativity of the Virgin below, representing a very ornate chamber and a boy knocking at the door of the room, with much grace. Below this he made the Marriage of the Virgin, with a good number of portraits comprising M. Bernardetto de' Medici, constable of the Florentines, in a red cap, Bernardo Guadagni the gonfaloniere, Folco Portinari, and other members of that family. He also introduced a dwarf breaking a staff with much animation and some women in uncommonly delightful and graceful draperies, such as were in use at the time. But this work was left unfinished for reasons which will be related below.

Meanwhile Andrea on his wall had painted in oils the Death of Our Lady, on which, owing to his rivalry with Domenico and because he wished to show his capabilities, he bestowed great diligence in foreshortening the bier on which the dead Virgin rests. It seems to be three braccia long, although it is no more than one and a half. About her are the Apostles, their faces displaying joy at seeing their Madonna carried to heaven by Jesus Christ, but at the same time their sorrow at remaining on the earth without her. Among the Apostles are some angels holding burning lights, their heads so finely executed that it is clear that Andrea could employ the medium of oils as successfully as his rival Domenico. In these paintings Andrea drew the portraits of the Itinaldo degli Albizzi, Puccio Pucci, Il Falgavaccio, who was the instrument of the release of Cosimo de' Medici, together with Federigo Malevolti, who kept the keys of the inn. He also drew there M. Bemardo di Domenico della Volta, master of that place, kneeling, who seems to breathe, and in a medallion at the head of the work he painted himself as Judas Iscariot, whom he resembled in appearance and in deed.

Having brought this work to a good stage, but blinded by envy and by the praises which he heard bestowed upon Domenico; Andrea determined to rid himself of his rival', and after thinking upon many ways, he effected his purpose in the following manner. One summer evening, according to his custom, Domenico took his lute and went out of S. Maria Nuova, leaving Andrea drawing in his room, as he would not accept the invitation to go out with him to enjoy themselves, pretending that he had some designs of importance to make. Accordingly, when Domenico had gone out alone to his pleasures, Andrea, unknown to him, laid in wait for him round a corner, and when Domenico reached the spot in returning home Andrea smashed both his lute and his stomach with some lead. But not feeling certain that he had been killed, he also struck him on the head, and,

leaving him on the ground, returned to his apartments at S. Maria Nuova, and after fastening the door continued drawing just as Domenico had left him. Meanwhile the alarm was raised and the servants came to tell the bad news to the murderer and traitor himself. Andrea hastened to where they were standing about Pomenico, and would not be comforted, repeating, "Alas! my brother." At length Domenico expired in his arms, and in spite of every effort it was never known who had killed him, and it would never have been discovered had not Andrea confessed it on his deathbed [In 1449].

[The difficulty in the way of accepting this story is that Andrea died four years before Domenico. However another painter, Domenico di Matteo, was murdered in Florence in 1448].

In S. Miniato, between the towers of Florence, Andrea painted a picture containing an Assumption of Our Lady, with two figures, and a Madonna in a tabernacle in the nave at Lanchetta outside the Croce gate. He also painted in the house of the Carducci, now of the Pandolfini, the portraits of some famous men, partly imaginary and partly from life. Among these are Filippo Spano degli Scolari, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and others. Over the door of the vicar's palace at the Scarperia in Mugello he painted a very fine nude Charity. which was afterwards ruined. In the year 1478, when Giuliano de' Medici was killed in S. Maria del Fiore by the family of the Pazzi and their adherents and fellow-conspirators, and his brother Lorenzo wounded, the Signoria resolved that all those who had taken part in the conspiracy should be painted upon the wall of the Podesta palace. This work was offered to Andrea, and he accepted it willingly, being the servant of the house of the Medici and under obligations to them.

He made the figures so well that the people were amazed, it being impossible to exaggerate the art and judgment displayed in the most natural portraits of these men hung up (impiccati) by their feet in extraordinary attitudes, all different and very fine. This thing pleased all the city, and especially those who took an interest in painting, and ever afterwards they called the artist not Andrea dal Castagno, but Andrea degl' Impiccati. Andrea lived sumptuously, but as he spent a great deal, especially in clothing himself and in maintaining his house, he left little property when he died at the age of seventy-one. As his wickedness to his friend Domenico became disclosed after his death, he was buried with ignominious obsequies in S. Maria Nuova, where his victim had been laid at the age of fifty-six, his work begun in S. Maria Nuova remaining incomplete. But he finished shortly before the picture of the high altar of S. Lucia de' Bardi, in which a Madonna with the Child in her arms is executed with great diligence, and so are St. John the Baptist, St. Nicliolas, St. Francis and St. Lucy. The pupils of Andrea were Jacopo del Corsi, a meritorious master, Pisanello, Il Marchino, Piero del Pollaiuolo and Giovanni da Rovezzano.