

*Letter 21*

TO THE PAINTER JACOPO TINTORETTO

Signor Tintoretto, I can't bear to listen to people who praise ancient times so much and find such fault with our own, who claim that nature was a loving mother to men of antiquity but that she is a cruel stepmother to men today. How far this is from the truth I leave people of good judgment to decide, less biased, I think, than these. Among the other things they use to raise the ancients up to heaven is whichever art is most beautiful and noble, be it painting, sculpture, or bas relief, claiming that no one is found in the world today who matches the excellence of Apelles, Zeuxis, Phydias, Praxiteles, and other noble and famous painters and sculptors of those times—though on what basis, I don't know. I have heard gentlemen expert in antiquity and highly knowledgeable about these arts say that in our era and even today, there are painters and sculptors who must be acknowledged not only to equal but to surpass those of ancient times, as Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and others did, and as you do today



FIGURE 4 A portrait of Veronica Franco by Jacopo Tintoretto. Oil on canvas, sixteenth century (1575?). Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass., Austin S. and Sarah C. Garver Fund.

I don't say this to flatter you, you know, because it's common knowledge. If it doesn't seem so to you, it's because you close your ears to praise and don't care to know what men think of you, as other artists—painters and others—do. I think this happens because, having reached the summit of your art and knowing that no one else has

gone so far, like a man who refuses a guide who has never traveled his path before, you pay no attention to other people's judgments, whether they praise or blame. You concentrate entirely on methods of imitating—no, rather of outdoing—nature, not only in what can be imitated by modeling the human figure, nude or clothed, adding color, shading, contour, features, muscles, movements, actions, postures, curves, and structure conforming to nature, but by expressing emotional states as well. I don't think that Roscius<sup>4</sup> was able to act as many feelings on stage as your wonderful, immortal brush paints on panels, walls, canvas, and other surfaces.

I swear to you that when I saw my portrait, the work of your divine hand, I wondered for a while whether it was a painting or an apparition set before me by some trickery of the devil, not to make me fall in love with myself, as happened to Narcissus<sup>5</sup> (because, thank God, I don't consider myself so beautiful that I'm afraid to go mad over my own charms), but for some other reason unknown to me. So I say to you, and rest assured of this, that divine nature sees how skillfully you imitate, even surpass her, so much that what you gain in honor through your immortal works is her loss. So she will never dare grant to men of our time the high, bold intelligence required to explain in full the excellence of your art. In this way she hopes to avoid shame, in word and deed, in every age to come. And I, certain not to succeed in such a great enterprise myself, lay down my pen and pray to our blessed Lord for your happiness.