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The Problem of the Unfinished and the Shaping of the Canon of Finiteness in the Italian Renaissance[1]

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Abstract

This essay addresses the debate on the unfinished in the visual arts from classical antiquity to the Italian Renaissance and its aesthetic implications. It is divided into two sections. The first section analyses the history of the unfinished, focusing on the debate that unfinished sculptures and paintings have stirred among theorists, artists, and the public. This provides a definition, or a series of definitions, of the notion of the unfinished and enables us to recognise the formation of what I call the *canon of finiteness* in visual works of art. In this regard, based on historical sources, I propose that the aesthetic of finiteness can be divided into three categories: 'finished', 'unfinished', and 'over-finished'. Finally, the second section explores the various solutions that have been adopted in dealing with unfinished works of art – namely, keeping them as such or completing them through the efforts of other, later artists – in accordance with the canon of finiteness that gradually takes shape.

Introduction

What do we not know about the unfinished? What does it mean to investigate the unfinished today? These are the first questions we should ask in a study of the phenomenon of the unfinished in the visual arts, especially if we wish to give it a more complete definition and a fresh interpretation that employs contemporary epistemological resources. Considering the history of the phenomenon of the unfinished in Western art, two aspects remain to be investigated, one from an aesthetic perspective and the other from a neuroaesthetic perspective.[2]

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[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Professor David Freedberg (Columbia University in the City of New York) for his thoughtful comments on this text.

[2] I have started to investigate this second aspect in Fabio Tononi, 'Aesthetic Response to the Unfinished: Empathy, Imagination and Imitation Learning', in *Aisthesis: Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico*, 13(1) (2020), 135-153.

The investigation of the first aspect, the aesthetic, includes the following questions: What is the unfinished? What are the aesthetic implications of the unfinished? And how many types of unfinished works of art can be identified? A clear and exhaustive definition of this phenomenon and its implications for art and its beholders has never been accomplished. To define the unfinished also means to identify, and then analyse, its morphologies, and to clarify the causes of its appearances. Aesthetic reflection on the unfinished may begin with three writings by three different scholars: Monroe C. Beardsley, Paisley Livingston, and Darren Hudson Hick.[3] Particularly relevant is Paisley Livingston's distinction between the concepts of 'genetic completion' and 'aesthetic completion', which seems to clarify the relationship, or discrepancy, between the aesthetic appearance of an artwork and the beholder's perception of it.[4] This distinction encourages us to reflect more carefully on the process of image-making and the method undertaken by a given artist.[5] Furthermore, the history of the phenomenon of the unfinished, analysed from an aesthetic point of view, leads us to read the debate on the unfinished as revelatory of the shaping of an aesthetic canon that refers to the status of finiteness in visual works of art: the canon of finiteness.

Before addressing these issues, it is worth observing that there exist visual representations of the phenomenon of the unfinished, which complement the literature on the subject. One illustrative example is a marble bas-relief by Andrea Pisano (c. 1290–1348/1349), *Phidias or the Art of Sculpture* (Figure 1), dated 1337–1341 and executed for Giotto's Campanile in Florence. The scene shows a sculptor (Phidias) dealing with the creation of a statue with its face still missing. The second example is by Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), in his Casa Vasari fresco cycle in Florence. In the scene of the *Stories of Zeuxis* (Figure 2), the bottom part of the figure that an artist is painting is only outlined, thus leaving an empty space in place of the legs. The third example is an etching by Albertus Clouwet (1636–1679), which represents the personification of the notion of Idea, who is painting on an almost blank board (Figure 3). The depiction of the unfinished shows us that artists have always had to deal with it, since it is inherent in the image-making process itself. The fact that the representation of the unfinished often coincides with a specific feature, that is, the inclusion of blank spaces, as these three examples show, is meaningful. The reason for this choice can probably be that a void best epitomises unfinishedness. Maybe this feature helps beholders to recognise it more easily.

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[3] See Monroe C. Beardsley, 'On the Creation of Art', in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 23 (1965), 291-304; Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005); and Darren Hudson Hick, 'When is a Work of Art Finished?', in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 66 (2008), 67-76.

[4] See Livingston, *Art and Intention*.

[5] See Tononi, *Aesthetic Response to the Unfinished*.

1 A Systematisation of the Terminologies Related to the Unfinished: From Cicero and Pliny the Elder to the Italian Renaissance

What is the unfinished? What are the aesthetic implications of the unfinished? To answer these questions, this section analyses the history of the debate on the phenomenon of the unfinished in the visual arts from classical antiquity to the Italian Renaissance, which, I claim, shows the existence of an aesthetic canon referring to the status of finiteness of works of art – that is, the level of smoothness of an artwork's surface. As sources suggest, the canon of finiteness is not stable, but instead varies with different centuries and cultural contexts, and sometimes from artist to artist and from viewer to viewer. From the discussions on the finiteness of artworks belonging to the periods and contexts included in the present study, we may deduce that the decision about what is finished and what is not is something that concerns the artist as well as the beholder. Whereas the former may deliberately decide to leave his or her work unfinished for reasons linked to stylistic innovations, the latter, when (s)he perceives it as such, may be subject to a particular aesthetic response that may involve his or her memory as well as his or her imagination. For this reason, a neuroaesthetic perspective may shed new light on the phenomenon of the unfinished, pointing to the elements that give this phenomenon its power.[6] But first, it is worth exploring the texts that inaugurated the aesthetic debate on the unfinished and, I argue, structured the formation of the canon of finiteness in Western art.

The attention to the general category of the finiteness of works of art and, consequently, to the phenomenon of the unfinished, has a long history, which spans from classical antiquity to the present day. Both the interest in incomplete works of art and the reflection on the phenomenon of finiteness in the visual arts have been documented since the writings of Cicero (106 BC–43 BC) and Pliny the Elder (23–79).[7] The term 'unfinished' refers to a particular condition of a work of art; in this condition, the work features figures or forms that have not been completed by the artist. This condition can be the result of either an involuntary interruption or a deliberate choice. In the Italian Renaissance, the

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[6] See, for example, Fabio Tononi, 'The Aesthetics of Freud: Movement, Embodiment and Imagination', in *Reti, saperi, linguaggi: Italian Journal of Cognitive Sciences*, 1 (2021), 125-154; Fabio Tononi, 'Andrea Mantegna and the Iconography of Mourners: Aby Warburg's Notion of *Pathosformeln* and the Theory of Aesthetic Response', in *IKON: Journal of Iconographic Studies*, 13 (2020), 79-94; Tononi, *Aesthetic Response to the Unfinished*; Fabio Tononi, 'Intermediality and Immersion in Gaudenzio Ferrari's *Adoration of the Magi* in Chapel V of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo', in *PsicoArt: Rivista di Arte e Psicologia*, 10 (2020), 1-18; Vittorio Gallese, 'Embodied Simulation. Its Bearing on Aesthetic Experience and the Dialogue between Neuroscience and the Humanities', in *Gestalt Theory*, 41 (2019), 113-128; David Freedberg, 'From Absorption to Judgment: Empathy in Aesthetic Response', in *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-Historical Perspectives of a Cross-Disciplinary Concept*, ed. by Vanessa Lux and Sigrid Weigel (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), pp. 139-180; and David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, 'Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Aesthetic Experience', in *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*, 11 (2007), 197-203.

[7] See Cicero, 'Letter 20. Cicero to Lentulus Spinther', in id., *Letters to Friend*, trans. and ed. by David R. Shackleton Bailey, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), I, pp. 116-152; and Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. by Harris Rackham, 10 vols (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann, 1938–1967).

unfinished as an aesthetic choice was pioneered by Donatello (1386–1466) in Florence and by Titian (1488/1490–1576) and Jacopo Tintoretto (c. 1518–1594) in Venice; whereas the majority of the sculptures of Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) may, I believe, be taken to epitomise the unfinished as a result of unforeseen circumstances. In both cases, the unfinished can refer to different degrees of finiteness, ranging from an artwork that has not been refined to the highest degree to works that include blank spaces in place of some significant parts of a figure – contours, faces, limbs, etc.

From classical antiquity to the Renaissance, different terminologies referring to the unfinished in all its different configurations were employed. Cicero, for example, talking about Apelles' *Venus*, a statue, describes the part of the figure under the bust being in an 'unfinished' (*incohatam*) state, adding that the artist left it 'imperfect' (*imperfectum*) and 'rough' (*rude*):

> Certain persons in my case have followed the example of Apelles, who applied the utmost refinement of his art to perfecting the head and bust of his Venus, but left the rest of the body a mere sketch – they made a finished job of the capital section only, leaving the rest unfinished and rough.[8] (20.15)

This passage represents not only the first source on the unfinished that we know, but also the first statement that attributes the status of *unfinished* to a work of art that is sketched out, or rough, in some of its parts. This excerpt also indicates – particularly in the words 'utmost refinement' (*politissima*) and 'perfecting' (*perfecit*) – the official canon of finiteness that must be adopted by artists and accepted by viewers. As the words 'finished job' suggest, the aesthetic requires presenting a polished surface.

Pliny, in the *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*), provided more information on the phenomenon of the unfinished in the visual arts. He adopted the term 'imperfect' (*inperfecta*) to refer to unfinished, or incomplete, works of art (Preface. 26), whereas he used the term 'perfect' (*perfecta*) to refer to complete artifacts (XXXV. XL. 145).[9] The examples of the unfinished that Pliny mentioned are now lost. Therefore, we do not know what the incomplete paintings he discussed looked like or in what degree of finiteness they were. An excerpt suggests that the works must have been abandoned at an early stage:

> It is also a very unusual and memorable fact that the last works of artists and their unfinished pictures such as the Iris of Aristides, the Tyndarus' Children of Nicomachus, the Medea of Timomachus and the Aphrodite of Apelles which we have mentioned, are more admired than those which they finished, because in them are seen the preliminary drawings left visible and the artists' actual thoughts, and in the midst of approval's

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[8] Cicero, *Letter 20. Cicero to Lentulus Spinther*, p. 134: 'nunc, ut Apelles Veneris caput et summa pectoris politissima arte perfecit, reliquam partem corporis incohatam reliquit, sic quidam homines in capite meo solum elaborarunt, reliquum corpus imperfectum ac rude reliquerunt'. Translated in ibid., p. 135.

[9] Pliny, *Natural History*, I, p. 16; and ibid., IX, p. 366.

beguilement we feel regret that the artist's hand while engaged in the work was removed by death.[10] (XXXV. XL. 145)

From Pliny's account, it emerges that unfinished works of art were more praised than finished ones, because they allowed the beholder to learn more about the techniques used, the process of the works' creation, and the origin of the artists' thoughts. For these reasons, we can assume that those paintings, the underlying drawings of which were evidently visible, were partly finished and probably similar to (for instance) the unfinished *Adoration of the Magi* (1481) by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), where the preliminary drawings are still evident (Figure 4). Significantly, whereas in Cicero the unfinished has a negative connotation, in Pliny it has a positive nuance because of the interesting information about the work of art that can be deduced through it.

Three ancient sculptures are revelatory of the kind of information that the unfinished may offer to the viewer. The first example is the *Kouros of Apollonas* (Figure 5), dating from Archaic period of ancient Greece, between the seventh and sixth centuries BC. The figure is roughly carved, though the body, head with beard, ears, and the beginning of the hair are approximately recognisable. The arms have been cut by the sculptor as rudimentary rectangles, and the shaping of the feet had been begun. The second sculpture is an unfinished bas-relief on a stone base (Figure 6), dating early first century BC. The scene shows the silhouette of two just begun figures, with very few details. This exemplifies the early stages adopted by an ancient artist: the first task was to outline the entire figures, adding details progressively in the following passages. The last example, a garland sarcophagus (Figure 7) probably datable to the late second or the third century, presents a singular situation: the front side is fully finished, the rear side is only sketched out, and both states of finiteness emerge in the short sides.[11] Considering one of the short sides, on the left is the (almost) finished version, on the right is the early stage of the carving process, both showing the sequences of tools employed. On the right, the basic geometric form of the garland was marked out into the flat surface and the surrounding area carved back to the background plane. The carver responsible for this sarcophagus employed a wide range of tools and structured his work in a highly methodical manner, roughing out the basic design with a tooth chisel before beginning on more detailed carving. The details were then finely shaped with a flat chisel. Further definition of the grapes was achieved with a drill, the marks of which can be seen on the left. The drill was employed after fine shaping of the forms to accentuate details of the relief and give it a certain depth.

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[10] Ibid., IX, p. 366: 'illud vero perquam rarum ac memoria dignum est, suprema opera artificum inperfectasque tabulas, sicut Irim Aristidis, Tyndaridas Nicomachi, Mediam Timomachi et quam diximus Venerem Apellis, in maiore admiratione esse quam perfecta, quippe in iis liniamenta reliqua ipsaeque cogitationes artificum spectantur, atque in lenocinio commendationis dolor est manus, cum id ageret, exstinctae'. Translated in ibid., IX, p. 367.

[11] For more on this sarcophagus, see Will Wootton, Ben Russell and Peter Rockwell, 'Stoneworking Techniques and Processes', in *The Art of Making in Antiquity: Stoneworking in the Roman World* (2013), 1-35 (2). <http://www.artofmaking.ac.uk/content/essays/3-stoneworking-techniques-and-processes-w-wootton-b-russell-p-rockwell/> [accessed 14 April 2020].

In his *Natural History*, Pliny mentioned another relevant term related to the phenomenon of the unfinished. In the Preface, he informs us about the ancient practice of inscribing works of art that were not completed yet with a specific and provisional inscription: *faciebat*, meaning 'worked on by…'.[12] This inscription offered two important indications: (*i*) the prerogative enjoyed by the artist to tweak the painting if some meritorious criticism were to be offered, and (*ii*) the conviction that no work of art can really be considered finished:

> And so as not to seem a downright adversary of the Greeks, I should like to be accepted on the lines of those founders of painting and sculpture who, as you will find in these volumes, used to inscribe their finished works, even the masterpieces which we can never be tired of admiring, with a provisional title such as *Worked on by Apelles* or *Polyclitus*, as though art was always a thing in process and not completed, so that when faced by the vagaries of criticism the artist might have left him a line of retreat to indulgence, by implying that he intended, if not interrupted, to correct any defect noted.[13] (Preface. 26)

As Pliny suggests, the inscription *faciebat* can also be interpreted as an expression of modesty on the part of the artists who employed it, inasmuch as, with this inscription, they recognise their own fallibility: 'Hence it is exceedingly modest of them to have inscribed all their works in a manner suggesting that they were their latest, and as though they had been snatched away from each of them by fate' (Preface. 27).[14]

These passages open up the discussion on both the meaning of the unfinished and the problem of the finiteness of works of art, raising the following questions: How can we recognise the unfinished in a visual work of art? When can an artwork be said to be finished? Who is entitled to decide when a work is finished? What are the implications of the unfinished in the traditional canon of finiteness? and How do beholders respond to the unfinished? To answer these queries we need to expand our investigation of how the notion of the unfinished was employed, with its varying terminologies, in the Renaissance, when most of the topics addressed by Cicero and Pliny were further developed, starting with the so-called Plinian signature.

The Plinian signature was much used in the Renaissance. One of the most emblematic examples of its use is represented by Titian's *Annunciation* (Figure 8), dated 1559–1564 and commissioned by Antonio Cornovi for his chapel in the church of San Salvador in Venice. Titian interrupted his work on this painting for a while, as the inscription at the bottom, on the first step, suggests. As if it were carved, it reads, in the

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[12] Pliny, *Natural History*, I, p. 16.

[13] Ibid.: 'Et ne in totum videar Graecos insectari, ex illis nos velim intellegi pingendi fingendique conditoribus quos in libellis his invenies absoluta opera, et illa quoque quae mirando non satiamur, pendenti titulo inscripsisse, ut *Apelles faciebat* aut *Polyclitus*, tamquam inchoata semper arte et inperfecta, ut contra indiciorum varietates superesset artifici regressus ad veniam, velut emendaturo quicquid desideraretur si non esset interceptus'. Translated in ibid., p. 17.

[14] Ibid., p. 16: 'Quare plenum verecundiae illud est quod omnia opera tamquam novissima inscripsere et tamquam singulis fato adempti'. Translated in ibid., p. 17.

perfect tense, '*Titianus fecit fecit*' (Titian made it, made it). Reflectographic analysis revealed that this writing overlaps another one which reads, this time in the imperfect tense, '*Titianus faciebat*' (Titian was making), implying a different status for this painting (Figure 9).[15] Whereas the first sentence (*Titianus fecit fecit*), which refers to the actual state of the painting, indicates that the painting is complete, the second one (*Titianus faciebat*) suggested that, even though for the artist the work was finished, he was available 'to correct any defect noted'; in other words, he was disposed to put in question his work's status as finished, according to the canon of finiteness commonly accepted.[16]

Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494) was one of the first in the Italian Renaissance to comment on artists' habit of indicating the level of finiteness in their works of art. In examining the Plinian signature on a pedestal, Poliziano states that it was

> as if art were always something begun and unfinished: thus, in the face of changes in taste, the artist had recourse as he had indicated that he was ready to correct all the faults brought to his attention, if death did not interrupt him.[17]

What is interesting in this passage is that Poliziano interprets the Plinian signature as indicating the difficulty inherent in considering any work of art finished. The reasons for this difficulty may be (*i*) the artist's (human) lack of perfection; (*ii*) variation in the tastes of observers, at least some of whom may desire changes in the artwork; and (*iii*) variations in, or intolerance to, the (established) canon of finiteness.

But during the Renaissance the unfinished was not always praised, and theorists were scrupulous in advising artists to avoid it when not necessary. Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), for instance, in *On Painting* (*De pictura*), first published in 1435, warned artists to finish their works, and to do it at the right stage of the process.[18] He also introduced the term 'over-polished' (*troppo pulito*) to refer to the results of over-working one's artistic projects; Alberti suggested that artists avoid this.[19] Furthermore, like Pliny, Alberti used specific words to name a complete work of art, such as 'completed' (*compiuto*) and 'perfect' (*perfetto*).[20] However, Alberti dealt with the phenomenon of the unfinished

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[15] See Luisa Attardi, 'Titian: The Annunciation', in *Titian*, ed. by Giovanni C. F. Villa (Cinisello Balsamo and Milan: Silvana, 2013), pp. 228-231; and Natalino Bonazza, 'Annunciation', in *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting*, ed. by Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (Venice: Marsilio, 2008), pp. 257-259.

[16] Pliny, *Natural History*, I, p. 16: 'velut emendaturo quicquid desideraretur'. Translated in ibid., p. 17. On Pliny's comments on inscriptions, see Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the Natural History* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 183-203, 346-350.

[17] Angelo Poliziano, *Angeli Politiani Miscellaneorum centuria prima* (Chiusi, Siena: Luì, 1994), p. 264: 'tanquam incohata semper arte, et imperfecta, ut contra iudiciorum uarietates superesset artifici regressus ad ueniam, uelut emendaturo quicquid desideraretur, si non esset interceptus'. Translated in Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance*, p. 185.

[18] Leon Battista Alberti, *Il nuovo De pictura di Leon Battista Alberti / The New De pictura of Leon Battista Alberti*, ed. by Rocco Sinisgalli (Rome: Kappa, 2006), p. 267.

[19] Ibid., pp. 268-269.

[20] Ibid., pp. 267-268.

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generally, neither mentioning any example of incompleteness nor explaining the different degrees of the unfinished. It is precisely in the equilibrium between the unfinished and the over-polished, I argue, that Alberti circumscribed, without actually describing it, the canon of finiteness for sculptures and paintings.

Leonardo da Vinci, in his *Treatise on Painting* (*Trattato della pittura*), echoed Alberti when warning artists not to over-work their paintings. In the chapter called 'Precept around the design of the sketch stories and figures' (*Precetto intorno al disegno dello schizzare storie e figure*), Leonardo states that 'the sketch of the stories has to be ready, and the execution of limbs does not have to be too much finished; be happy only to the parts of those limbs, which then you can finish as you please'.[21] Then, in the chapter entitled 'Of incarnations and remote figures from the eye' (*Delle incarnazioni e figure remote dall'occhio*), he suggests that figures located far from the eye have to be painted with spots of colour, looking, as a result, 'not finished' (*non terminate*) at a closer view.[22] From this we can deduce that, for Leonardo, an artist has to find a balance between the excessively unfinished and the over-worked; moreover, on some occasions, judicious use of the unfinished can help ensure the correct perception of figures.

Vasari, in the chapter dedicated to sculpture in *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (*Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*), dated 1550 and 1568, contrasts the term 'drafts' (*bozze*) with the terms 'finished' (*finito*) and 'finiteness' (*finimento*), and advises artists not to finish sculptures intended for placement far from the beholder.[23] Therefore, we can assume that he judged the drafts as unfinished works of art; this is confirmed by the works that he considered incomplete, starting with Donatello's output. In this regard, Vasari compared the *Singing Gallery* (Figure 10) by Donatello (1386–1466), dated 1433–1438, with the *Singing Gallery* (Figure 11) by Luca della Robbia (c. 1400–1482), dated 1431–1438, both created for the Florentine Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.[24]

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[21] Leonardo da Vinci, *Trattato della pittura*, ed. by Ettore Camesasca (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2000), p. 55: 'Il bozzar delle storie sia pronto, e il membrificare non sia troppo finito; sta contento solamente a' siti di esse membra, le quali poi a bell'agio piacendoti potrai finire'. Unless noted otherwise, subsequent translations are my own.

[22] Ibid., p. 241: 'Devesi per lo pittore porre nelle figure e cose remote dall'occhio solamente le macchie, non terminate, ma di confusi termini'.

[23] Giorgio Vasari, 'Della scultura', in id., *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori: nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1966), I, pp. 82-110 (84): 'Debbono le figure, così di rilievo come dipinte, esser condotte più con il giudicio che con la mano, avendo a stare in altezza dove sia una gran distanza, perché la diligenza dell'ultimo finimento non si vede da lontano, ma si conosce bene la bella forma delle braccia e delle gambe et il buon giudicio nelle falde de' panni con poche pieghe, perché nella semplicità del poco si mostra l'acutezza dell'ingegno. E per questo le figure di marmo o di bronzo che vanno un poco alte vogliono essere traforate gagliarde, acciò che il marmo che è bianco et il bronzo che ha del nero piglino all'aria della oscurità, e per quella apparisca da lontano il lavoro esser finito e d'appresso si vegga lasciato in bozze'. Translated in Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, trans. by Louisa S. Maclehose, ed. by Gerard B. Brown (New York: Dover, 1960), p. 145.

[24] See Vasari, 'Vita di Luca della Robbia', in id., *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, III, pp. 49-58 (51).

Vasari argues that Donatello conducted his work 'almost entirely in drafts' and that the work was 'not finished cleanly' (Figure 12) – as opposed to that of Della Robbia (Figure 13) – in order to create a better effect from a certain distance.[25] By contrast, Della Robbia's *Singing Gallery*, which stands out for its 'smoothness' (*pulitezza*) and 'finiteness' (*finimento*), does not appear in all its splendor to the beholder's eye – as Donatello's work does, inasmuch as it is 'almost only sketched' (*abbozzata*).[26] Vasari's version of the canon of finiteness seems to be similar to the version outlined by Leonardo, who defined the appropriate level of finiteness in relation to the distance between the figures represented and the beholder's eyes.

A further contribution to the discussion on the unfinished in relation to the distance between works of art and observers derives from Michelangelo's biographer Ascanio Condivi (1525–1574), who, in his 1553 work *Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* (*Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*), registered Michelangelo's admiration for Donatello's *David* and, at the same time, his skepticism regarding its rough surface:

> What you see in the middle of the courtyard of the Signori palace is made by Donatello, excellent man in that art and much praised by Michelangelo, except in one thing, that he had no patience in polishing his works, so that, looking wonderful from a distance, at a closer gaze they lost their reputation.[27]

This passage confirms that the unfinished in the medium of sculpture was acceptable to the Renaissance beholder when it was justified by the distance of the work from the beholder's space. However, the witness of the Florentine sculptor and architect Tiberio Calcagni (1532–1565), a collaborator of Michelangelo's, contradicts Condivi's assertion. Calcagni stated that Michelangelo's comment on polishing was instead directed at Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes*, dated c. 1457–1464, which also presents an uneven surface but which was probably made for the small garden of Medici Palace. Moreover, Calcagni is

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[25] Ibid.: 'per avere egli quell'opera condotta quasi tutta in bozze e non finita pulitamente, acciò che apparisse di lontano assai meglio, come fa, che quella di Luca'. Translated in Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. by Gaston du C. de Vere, 10 vols (London: Macmillan and The Medici Society, 1912–1915), II, p. 121.

[26] Vasari, *Vita di Luca della Robbia*, p. 51: 'se ben fatta con buon disegno e diligenza, ella fa nondimeno con la sua pulitezza e finimento che l'occhio per la lontananza la perde e non la scorge bene come si fa quella di Donato, quasi solamente abbozzata'. Translated in Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, II, p. 121.

[27] Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, ed. by Giovanni Nencioni (Florence: Studio per edizioni scelte, 1998), p. 22: 'Quel che si vede nel mezzo della corte del palazzo de' Signori è di mano di Donatello, uomo in tal arte eccellente e molto da Michelangelo lodato, se non in una cosa, ch'egli non aveva pacienza in repulir le sue opere, di sorte che, riuscendo mirabili a vista lontana, da presso perdevono riputazione'.

more accurate, as having said, in opposition to Condivi's view, that Michelangelo meant to say that 'when sculptures are good they do not need so much polishing'.[28]

Raffaello Borghini (1537–1588), in *The Rest* (*Il riposo*), published in 1584, following Leonardo's and Vasari's principles but without mentioning any example, suggests that figures depicted as far from the beholder must be left 'sketched' (*abbozzate*) and, therefore, 'unfinished' (*non finite*), because at that distance the details are not visible, as is the case in real life.[29] Also in Borghini, as in Leonardo and Vasari, the terms 'sketched' and 'unfinished' coincide, indicating that a draft is nothing other than an incomplete work of art. In emphasising the relationship between the figures and the space around them, it is evident that Borghini is concerned with problems linked to the mechanisms of vision, which is the same concern shown by Leonardo and Vasari. Borghini's view on the unfinished is a further confirmation that Italian Renaissance artists and theorists were formulating a consistent canon of finiteness, characterised by equilibrium between the unfinished and the over-polished.

Another topic related to the unfinished is the interruption of an artwork as a consequence of an irreparable mistake or a dissatisfaction. Considering Leonardo's production, for example, Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554), in *The Second Book of Perspective* (*Il Secondo Libro di Prospettiva*), dated c. 1551, states that most of the time Leonardo did not bring his works to 'perfection' (*perfettione*) because of his dissatisfaction in himself: 'Leonardo Vinci was never satisfied about anything he produced, and he concluded very few works, and he often said that the cause of this was that his hand could not reach his intellect'.[30] As previously seen, 'perfection' is synonymous with 'finish'. Serlio's ascertainment is confirmed by the *Book of Antonio Billi* (*Libro di Antonio Billi*), dated 1516–1530, which explains the reasons for Leonardo's frequent interruptions, namely his dissatisfaction:

> He surpassed all others in drawing and made beautiful inventions, but he did not colour many things, because nothing however beautiful ever satisfied him; that is why there are

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[28] For Tiberio Calcagni's manuscript note, see Condivi, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, XXI, *postilla* 9: 'quando son buone non ci occorre tanti pulimenti'. For the documentation regarding the placement of Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes*, see John Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello Sculptor* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), pp. 247: fn. 19, 280.

[29] Raffaello Borghini, *Il riposo,* ed. by Mario Rosci, 2 vols (Milan: Labor, 1967), I, pp. 178-179: 'Perciò che le figure, che appariscono di forma più piccole che l'altre, ciò adiviene perché esse sono lontane dall'occhio, e per conseguente fra esse, & il riguardante è molta aria, la quale impedisce il discernere le particelle degli obietti. Perciò bisogna che il pittore faccia le figure piccole solamente abbozzate, e non finite, perché altramente si contrafarebbe alla natura maestra dell'arte'.

[30] Sebastiano Serlio, *Il secondo libro di prospettiva* (Venice: Francesco Senese and Zuane Krugher Alemanno, 1566), p. 27r: 'Leonardo Vinci non si contentava mai di cosa ch'ei facesse, et pochissime opere condusse a perfettione, et diceva sovente la causa esser questa: che la sua mano non poteva giungere all'intelletto'.

few things by him, because the awareness of his mistakes did not let him produce very much.[31]

Serlio's and Billi's passages point out that there are some factors, inherent in the process of creation, that can bring a work of art to such a state that the artist is no longer able to carry it on.

If Leonardo abandoned some of his works incomplete for reasons related to his dissatisfaction, Michelangelo abandoned many of his paintings and sculptures in the middle of their creation for reasons related to an overlapping of commissions (there is no evidence that he ever did so for aesthetic reasons). In fact, as Vasari said, Michelangelo left the majority of his works 'imperfect' (*imperfette*), so that few of them are 'finished' (*finite*).[32] For instance, describing Michelangelo's *St Matthew* (Figure 14), a statue dated 1506 and carved for Santa Maria del Fiore, Vasari adopts the adjective 'sketched' (*abbozzata*) to refer to its unfinished state, saying that 'this statue teaches sculptors in what manner figures can be carved out of marble without their coming out misshapen'.[33]

Benedetto Varchi (1503–1565), on 14 July 1564, delivered a funeral oration for Michelangelo in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence. The text was published later the same year, offering another contribution to the debate on the unfinished in Michelangelo's output. Varchi examines, in addition to the 'not finished' (*non fornito*) *St Matthew*, Michelangelo's two *Tondi*, that is, the *Taddei Tondo* (Figure 15) and the *Pitti Tondo* (Figure 16), both begun between 1504 and 1506 circa and carved for Bartolomeo Pitti and presumably Taddeo Taddei, respectively.[34] Varchi considers these bas-reliefs 'sketched' (*abbozzati*) and,

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[31] Antonio Billi, *Il libro di Antonio Billi*, ed. by Karl Frey (Berlin: Grote'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1892), pp. 51-52: 'Costui in disegno avanzò gli altri et ebbe inventioni bellissime, ma non colorí molte cose, perché mai in niente anchor che belle satisfecie a se medesimo; et però ci sono poche cose di suo, che il suo tanto conosciere gli errori non lo lasciò fare'.

[32] Vasari, 'Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarruoti Fiorentino', in id., *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, VI, pp. 3-141 (92): 'delle sue statue se ne vede poche finite nella sua virilità, che le finite affatto sono state condotte da lui nella gioventù…l'altre, dico sono [re]state imperfette, e son molte maggiormente'. Translated in Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, IX, p. 83.

[33] Vasari, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarruoti Fiorentino*, p. 22: 'la quale statua cosí abbozzata mostra la sua perfezzione et insegna agli scultori in che maniera si cavano le figure de' marmi senza che venghino storpiate'. Translated in Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, IX, p. 18.

[34] On Michelangelo's *Pitti Tondo*, see Frank Zöllner, 'Catalogue of Sculptures', in *Michelangelo: Complete Works,* ed. by Frank Zöllner, Christof Thoenes and Thomas Pöpper (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), pp. 366-403. On Michelangelo's *Taddei Tondo*, see Michael Hirst, 'The Marble for Michelangelo's *Taddei Tondo*', in *The Burlington Magazine*, 1229 (2005), 548-549.

therefore, unfinished.[35] In fact, the roughed out parts of these bas-reliefs show that both were carved with a chisel starting from the Madonna and child, leaving the background, and in the case of the *Pitti Tondo* also St John, indefinite. Michelangelo may have abandoned the two *Tondi* for his departure to Rome, in 1505, to work for Pope Julius II. In the case of the *Taddei Tondo*, a further reason for its interruption could be damage created by the chiseling of a previous artist, which became more apparent after the work was well advanced.[36]

The fact that artists and theorists of the time described, in one way or another, all these works of art as unfinished shows that the canon of finiteness was very clear: completed figures, in some cases with a polished surface (when situated close to the viewers), in others with a slightly rough surface (when placed far from the viewer), but never over-polished and never too roughly sketched. This is confirmed by the artistic debate that took place in another important Renaissance city: Venice.

In the second part of the sixteenth century, there was a group of Venetian artists who intentionally left a good number of their paintings unfinished, as an aesthetic choice. For example, Titian and Tintoretto executed many of their paintings in a freer way than the Florentine masters, with visible brushstrokes. Further, compositional adjustments (*pentimenti*) are often seen in their paintings, creating, most of the time, sketchy images. In this sense, the *Carta del navegar pitoresco* (1660) by Marco Boschini (1613–1678), which relies on the testimony of the Venetian painter Palma il Giovane (1548/50–1628), reveals that Titian, late in his life, after having sketched out his main ideas with large brushstrokes, would complete his paintings using his fingers:

> But the condiment of the finishing touches was to combine from time to time with gashes made with fingers the ends of the lights, coming closer to the halftones, and combining a shade with the other; other times, with a pure scratch made with fingers he placed a stroke of dark in some corner, to reinforce it, as well as some reddish scratch…in this way he

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35 Benedetto Varchi, *Orazione funerale di Messer Benedetto Varchi fatta, e recitata da lui pubblicamente nell'essequie di Michelagnolo Buonarroti in Firenze nella chiesa di San Lorenzo,* ed. by Charles Davis (Florence: Giunti, 2008), p. 28: 'E per dir prima de' marmi, molte, e diverse statue si ritruovano di suo in molti, e diversi luoghi: come…qui in Firenze un san Matteo Appostolo, il quale è nell'opera di Santa Maria del Fiore: e se bene egli non è fornito; gli schizzi di Michelagnolo nella Pittura, e le bozze nella Scultura mostravavano, e mostrano la profondità, ed eccellenza dell'intelletto, e ingegno suo; e maggiore stima si faceva di loro, che dell'Altrui opere, quantunque perfette. Due tondi similmente abbozzati; uno fatto à Taddeo Taddei; il quale è nella casa degli Heredi, e Discendenti suoi; e uno fatto à Bartolommeo Pitti, il quale (per don Miniato di quella famiglia, buono, e virtuoso Monaco di Monte Uliveto lo donò à Luigi) è nella casa di M. Piero Guicciardini, suo Nipote'.

36 On the technical analysis of the *Taddei Tondo*, see Hirst, *The Marble for Michelangelo's* Taddei Tondo.

perfected his animated figures. Palma attested to me that, for truth, during the finishing touches he painted more with his fingers than with brushes.[37]

This passage offers a contemporary insight into the artistic technique used by Titian in his later paintings, emphasising an approach that is far from being unwanted: 'I see a poultice, a contempt of brush', added Boschini.[38] Thus, Titian's and Tintoretto's sketchy paintings (which they considered finished, as evidenced by the fact that they delivered some of them), challenged the canon of finiteness that Florence was consolidating. One episode in particular may illustrate this assumption.

The episode in question concerns Titian's portrait of Pietro Aretino (1492–1556), who commissioned the painting in 1545. Once received, Aretino disliked the portrait (Figure 17) because it was realised with large and visible brushworks, particularly in the rendering of the light areas and the folds of his clothes. Upon delivery, Aretino sent the portrait from Venice to the Duke Cosimo I de' Medici in Florence, in October 1545, along with a letter reading, in part: '[I]f I had given him more money, the drapes would have been truly shining, soft and rigid like satin, velvet and brocade'.[39] Between these lines, Aretino's disappointment with his portrait is evident. In another letter, which he wrote in the same month, addressed this time to Titian, he clarifies the reason for his disillusionment: '[M]y portrait is more sketched than finished'.[40] He judged the painting unfinished because it seemed to him like a sketch. It is worth noting that, once again, the terms 'sketched' and 'unfinished' coincide. But why was Aretino so dissatisfied with his portrait? Put differently, why did he consider it unfinished? The reason may be connected to the fact that he was a Tuscan Renaissance writer linked to the Medici family, with an aesthetic taste shaped by the style of art favored by that family. At that time, the Medici aesthetic was epitomised by (though not limited to) Bronzino's highly finished artworks. For this reason, Aretino could not, at least at first sight, appreciate, or accept as finished, a painting made in the Venetian 'old-age style', as the last productions by Titian have recently been called.[41]

In this matter, Vasari echoed Aretino, saying that Titian sometimes left the 'drafts' (*bozze*) for 'finished' (*finite*) works, resulting in a work so 'roughed' (*sgrossate*) 'that

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[37] Marco Boschini, *Carta del navegar pitoresco*, ed. by Anna Pallucchini (Venice: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1966), p. 712: 'Ma il condimento de gli ultimi ritocchi era andar di quando in quando unendo con sfregazzi delle dita negli estremi de' chiari, avicinandosi alle meze tinte, ed unendo una tinta con l'altra; altre volte, con un striscio delle dita pure poneva un colpo d'oscuro in qualche angolo, per rinforzarlo, oltre qualche striscio di rossetto…e così andava a riducendo a perfezione le sue animate figure. Ed il Palma mi attestava, per verità, che nei finimenti dipingeva più con le dita che co' pennelli'.

[38] Ibid., p. 327: 'Vedo un impasto, un sprezzo de penelo'.

[39] Pietro Aretino, *Lettere sull'arte di Pietro Aretino*, ed. by Ettore Camesasca, 3 vols (Milan: Edizioni del Milione, 1957–1960), II, pp. 107-108 (108): 'se più fussero stati gli scudi che gliene ho conti, in vero i drappi sarieno lucidi, morbidi e rigidi come il da senno raso, il velluto e il broccato'.

[40] Titian, *Le Lettere*, ed. by Clemente Gandini (Pieve di Cadore: Magnifica Comunità di Cadore, 1977), p. 81: 'il mio ritratto più tosto abbozzato che fornito'.

[41] See David Bomford, 'Old-Age Style and the *Non Finito*', in *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*, ed. by Kelly Baum et al. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), pp. 48-55, 265-266.

you see the brushstrokes made by chance and pride, rather than being well studied and made with common sense'.[42] From Vasari's harsh criticism of the sketchy style of Titian's painting, a question arises: why was the great admirer of Donatello's, Leonardo's and Michelangelo's incomplete works, and also the person who more than others encouraged the use of the unfinished in certain circumstances, so averse to Titian's use of the unfinished? One possible answer is that when the unfinished was employed intentionally to correct the visual perception, or represented an unwanted interruption that yielded pedagogical value, it was acceptable to Vasari. But when it became an aesthetic choice, as in Venice, without a particular (perceptual or pedagogical) justification, for him it represented an attack on the Florentine canon of finiteness that he helped to shape. In fact, Florentine artistic taste was perpetuated in Vasari's *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, in which he stressed the supremacy of the Florentine and ancient Roman artistic traditions because these were grounded in drawing.[43] Moreover, Vasari criticised Venetian artists for their habit of working directly on canvas, without the disciplined planning required by drawing.[44] This may be the reason why the Medici court never requested any paintings from Titian, inasmuch as his mode of execution increasingly emphasised the brushstroke.[45] I would argue that Aretino's and Vasari's negative views of Titian's 'unfinished' painting style have to do with the meaning of Titian's choice, namely, to undermine the traditional canon of finiteness. In this, Titian was supported by Lodovico Dolce (c. 1508–1568), who, in *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino* (1557), states, 'We must above all escape too much diligence, that in all things harms'.[46]

From this divergence of opinions emerges the discrepancy between the Florentine concept of finiteness and the Venetian, giving shape to two different canons of finiteness. The Roman author Francesco Sansovino (1521–1586) expressed the same concern raised by Aretino and Vasari regarding the unfinished. But this time Sansovino refers to Jacopo Tintoretto (1519–1594), more precisely to the work titled *Doge Alvise Mocenigo Presented to the Redeemer* (Figure 18), dated c. 1577. It is an unfinished draft for a painting – never begun because of the death of the patron – commissioned by Doge Alvise Mocenigo (1507–1577) for the Sala del Collegio in the Doge's Palace, in Venice. The painting shows a portico overlooking San Marco square, with the Doge's Palace on the left. At the center of the scene is Alvise Mocenigo, who is kneeling on the steps; on the left Christ is floating, surrounded by a group of angels (sketched in silhouette with white brushwork); and on the

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[42] Vasari, 'Vita di Battista Franco', in id., *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, V, pp. 459-473 (468-469): 'Ha costui alcuna volta lasciato le bozze per finite, tanto a fatica sgrossate, che si veggiono i colpi de' pennegli fatti dal caso e dalla fierezza, più tosto che dal disegno e dal giudizio'.

[43] Vasari, 'Dedica', in id., *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, I, pp. 1-5.

[44] Vasari, 'Descrizione dell'opere di Tiziano da Cador', in id., *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori*, VI, pp. 155-174 (155-156).

[45] On the Florentine's artistic taste of the time, see Alison Wright and Eckart Marchand (eds.), *With and Without the Medici: Studies in Tuscan Art and Patronage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

[46] Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino,* in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento: fra manierismo e Controriforma*, ed. by Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1960–1962), I, pp. 141-206 (185): 'Bisogna sopra tutto fuggire la troppa diligenza, che in tutte le cose nuoce'.

right there are the members of the Mocenigo family. In a large brown patch in the foreground is the underpainting for a lion. But the figures that capture our attention, because they are highly unfinished, are in the background, emerging from water. They are the brothers of Alvise, Giovanni and Niccolò Mocenigo. Referring to this level of unfinishedness, Sansovino, in the *Dialogue of all the Notable and Beautiful Things that are in Venice* (*Dialogo di tutte le cose notabili e belle che sono in Venetia*), published in 1556, states:

> I do not want to disregard Iacomo Tintorello, who is all spirit, and all readiness…people desire from him more diligence, for the rest he is excellent. S[tranger]: You say the truth: I have considered his painting too: it does not seem finished, so I believe it stems from his excessive rapidity.[47]

Even though the protagonists of Sansovino's dialogue were able to recognise Tintoretto's skills, they did not appreciate his sketchy style because they associated it with the unfinished. In this sense, Sansovino provided a (negative) definition of the unfinished, that is, a work realised with rapidity.

A rapid method of executing paintings was also in use in antiquity, as we know from Pliny, who described the activity of the painter Pausias of Sicyon, who was able 'to give his work also the reputation of speed he finished a picture in a single day' (XXXV, 124).[48] This passage closely recalls Tintoretto's fast working pace, confirmed by Aretino, who had already criticised Titian for his sketchy portrait. Aretino even suggested that Tintoretto should slow down in a letter to the painter dated April 1548:

> And blessed is your name, if you would substitute the rapidity of the working with the patience of doing. Though the years will help you in this little by little; for they, and not others, are quite sufficient to restrain the course of carelessness, which is so prevalent in the willing and quick youth.[49]

Giovanni Battista Armenini (1530–1609), in *Of the True Precepts of Painting* (*De' veri precetti della pittura*), published in Ravenna in 1587, is in line with what Sansovino said in the same year. He points out that, most of the time, Tintoretto did not draw before painting, leaving the 'drafts' (*bozze*) for 'finished' (*finite*) works.[50] In this way, the statements of Aretino,

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[47] Francesco Sansovino, *Dialogo di tutte le cose notabili e belle che sono in Venetia* (Venice: Tipografia Emiliana, 1861), pp. 13-14: 'Ne vi voglio lasciare a dietro Iacomo Tintorello, il quale è tutto spirito, e tutto prontezza…si desidera in lui più diligenza, che del resto è eccellente. F[orestiero]: Voi dite il vero: anch'io ho considerato il suo quadro: non pare finito, perciò credo che questo nasca dalla sua molta prestezza'.

[48] Pliny, *Natural History*, IX, p. 352: 'daturus ei celeritatis famam absolvit uno die tabellam quae vocata est hemeresios'. Translated in ibid., p. 353.

[49] Aretino, *Lettere sull'arte*, II, pp. 204-205 (205): 'E beato il nome vostro, se reduceste la prestezza del fatto in la pazienza del fare. Benché a poco a poco a ciò provederanno gli anni; conciosia ch'essi, e non altri, sono bastanti a raffrenare il corso de la trascuratezza, di che tanto si prevale la gioventù volenterosa e veloce'.

[50] Giovanni Battista Armenini, *De' veri precetti della pittura* (Ravenna: Francesco Tebaldini, 1587), p. 116: 'Costui ha fatto più volte senza i dissegni opere molto importanti lasciando le bozze per finite, e tanto a fatica sgrossate, che si veggono i colpi del pennello fatto dall'impeto, e dalla fierezza di lui, ne perciò sono poi da essere troppo considerate a minuto'.

Vasari, Sansovino, and Armenini – significantly, none of them are from Veneto – together show their resistance to any attempt to challenge the commonly accepted canon of finiteness: the Florentine one. In this regard, the Venetian debate on the unfinished reveals the emergence of two opposite canons of finiteness in the sixteenth century, one that prefers a smoother surface, and another that conceives the sketchy manner as constitutive of an original style.

2 To Finish, or Not to Finish?

Another subject of Renaissance reflection on the unfinished was whether work left unfinished due to external interruption ought to be completed by the artist's colleagues. Two options were available, and which was chosen depended upon the circumstances surrounding the interruption: (*i*) it could be preserved, though incomplete, or (*ii*) it could be completed by the hand of another artist, at the cost of losing its original authenticity. It is also in the substance of this debate that the canon of finiteness, as I call it, is anchored.

Paolo Pino (active 1534–1565), for instance, in *Dialogue of Painting* (1548), suggested following the first option, that is, keeping the work unfinished as it is. He based his argument on a story about Apelles narrated by Pliny (XXXV, 92):

> Apelles...began a Venus, and reached by the cruel death, he left the figure imperfect, nor ever was found a painter who dared to finish it, and so imperfect it was for many years preserved by the community (as a marvelous thing).[51]

In this passage, Pino emphasises the fact that Apelles was so renowned during his time that no artist attempted to finish his painting, probably because the intervention of another artist would have meant losing the originality of Apelles' mastery. It is notable that Pino also mentions the second option, namely, the possibility of a second artist intervening to finish a commission interrupted by the original artist's death.

This was the solution sometimes pursued both in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, particularly in the situations where the canon of finiteness required a polished surface for both paintings and sculptures. An example of an artwork completed after a period of interruption is the fresco cycle of the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, which was begun by Masolino and Masaccio between 1423 and 1428 and was completed by Filippino Lippi in the early 1480s. In the gap between the two periods of work, large portions of the walls were blank, indicating the unfinished status of the frescoes.[52] Another, similar case of

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[51] Paolo Pino, *Dialogo di pittura*, ed. by Rodolfo and Anna Pallucchini (Venice: Guarnati, 1946), pp. 94-95: 'Apelle…cominciò una Venere, et sopragionto dalla crudel morte, lasciò la figura imperfetta, né mai fu trovato pittore, che ardisse di finirla, et così imperfetta fu dal comune molti anni (come cosa maravigliosa) conservata'; Pliny, *Natural History*, IX, p. 328.

[52] See Paul Joannides, *Masaccio and Masolino: A Complete Catalogue* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1993), pp. 313-349.

interruption is the *Pistoia Santa Trinità Altarpiece*, which was begun by Pesellino in 1455 and finished by Filippo Lippi and his workshop in 1460. In this case, the unfinished status of the artwork was evident in the different levels of finiteness present on the surface, including blank spaces.[53] For these reasons, it was considered necessary to establish a uniform canon of finiteness for the entire surface of the two works. The fact that they were left incomplete due to lack of funding is probably a further reason why their unfinished status was not appreciated, prompting a request for the intervention, years later, of other artists.[54]

The last painting of Titian, whose death did not allow him to finish it, had the same destiny as these two works. This is the *Pietà* (Figure 19), dated 1575–1576.[55] In 1648, Carlo Ridolfi informs us that the painting was created by Titian for the Cappella del Crocifisso of Santa Maria dei Frari, with the aim of having it placed over his own tomb. However, 'he did not complete it, but after his death it came in the Palma's hands, who finished it by adding some little Angels and this humble inscription: "Palma reverently completed the work that Titian began, and dedicated it to God"' (Figure 20).[56] In 1664, Marco Boschini recorded the intervention of Jacopo Palma il Giovane (1548/50–1628) – who was associated with Titian and knew how to imitate his art – on this painting, adding that 'the chiaroscuros are all by Titian, but the other figures are retouched and painted in different parts by Palma'.[57] These statements indicate both that the *Pietà* was considered unfinished at the time of Titian's death and that its new owner wanted to have it completed, even though this required altering Titian's original work. As scholars pointed out, Palma may have painted the flying angel at the top right, the other angel at the bottom left with the vase of perfumes of Mary Magdalene, and the lamps on the tympanum, which all appear more 'finished' than the other figures.[58] Therefore, Palma, in completing the work in some of its parts, precisely those which now seem smoother than the others, modified Titian's style, which, in that period, consisted in a sketchy effect.[59] As a consequence, by applying the traditional canon of finiteness on a sketchy painting, the extra intervention caused a polarity in the painting between a sketchy manner and a more finished surface.

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[53] See Dillian Gordon (ed.), *The Fifteenth Century. Italian Paintings*, 7 vols (London: National Gallery Company, 2003), I, pp. 260-287.

[54] See Nico van Hout, 'The Unfinished and the Eye of the Beholder', in *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*, ed. by Kelly Baum et al. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), pp. 56-61; and Nico van Hout, *The Unfinished Painting* (Antwerp: Ludion, 2012), p. 10.

[55] See Giovanna Nepi Scirè, 'La Pietà', in *Tiziano*, ed. by Francesco Valcanover et al. (Venice: Marsilio, 1990), pp. 373-375; and Harold E. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian: Complete Edition*, 3 vols (London: Phaidon, 1969), I, pp. 122-123.

[56] Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte: ovvero le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello stato descritte dal cav. Carlo Ridolfi*, 2 vols (Padua: Cartallier, 1835), I, p. 269.

[57] Marco Boschini, *Le ricche minere della pittura veneziana. Compendiosa informazione di Marco Boschini, non solo delle pitture publiche di Venezia, ma dell'isole ancora circonvicine* (Venice: Francesco Nicolini, 1674), p. 93.

[58] See Augusto Gentili, *Tiziano* (Milan: 24 ore cultura, 2012), pp. 382-386.

[59] See Philip L. Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artist in Italy, 1500–1800* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); and Bomford, *Old-Age Style and the* Non Finito, p. 50.

Conclusion

The analysis so far undertaken shows that the debate on the unfinished in the period framed in this research contributed to the identification of different level of finiteness: 'finished', 'unfinished' (with its different degrees of unfinishedness), and 'over-finished'. This very fruitful debate provides, first, a definition, or definitions, of the unfinished, pointing to its usefulness in different ambits – from pedagogy to perception. Second, the debate contributed to the formation of two specific and conflicting canons of finiteness: one that privileged a (more or less) smooth surface, both in paintings and in sculptures, and the other, particularly favored in Venice, that valued a more free (or sketchy) approach to the canvas and to materials proper to sculpture.

In sum, the authors who contributed significantly to the recognition and analysis of the phenomenon of the unfinished from classical antiquity to the Italian Renaissance – and who developed or reacted to the now-traditional canon of finiteness – were nineteen in number: Cicero, Pliny the Elder, Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Ascanio Condivi, Tiberio Calcagni, Angelo Poliziano, Sebastiano Serlio, Pietro Aretino, Benedetto Varchi, Giorgio Vasari, the author of the Book of Antonio Billi, Lodovico Dolce, Marco Boschini, Palma il Giovane, Francesco Sansovino, Giovanni Battista Armenini, and Raffaello Borghini. As this list makes evident, this discussion spans centuries and involves some of the greatest writers and artists in human history. The principal artists about which these luminaries debated are eleven, spanning from the classical Greek period to the Italian Renaissance: Apelles, Aristides, Nicomachus, Timomachus, Pausias of Sicyon, Donatello, Luca della Robbia, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Titian, and Jacopo Tintoretto. However, this does not mean that they were the only artists in these periods who left part of their production unfinished, either as a deliberate choice or due to an unforeseen event.

The terminology that the protagonists of this debate adopted to refer to the phenomenon of the unfinished in the visual arts has a core of thirteen words, both in Latin and in vernacular: *incohatus* (only begun, unfinished), *imperfectus* (imperfect, unfinished), *rudis* (unwrought, unformed, rough, raw), *faciebat* (worked on, was making), *non perfetto* (not perfect, imperfect, unfinished), *non finito* (not finished, unfinished), *non finita pulitamente* (not polished, unfinished), *non terminato* (not terminated, not finished, not complete, unfinished), *bozza* (draft), *abbozzato* (sketched out), *imperfetto* (imperfect, unfinished), *non fornito* (not finished, unfinished), and *sgrossato* (roughed). Though many of them are synonyms and refer to works of art at any stage of realisation, others represent specific degrees of unfinishedness. For instance, the word *incohatus* mainly suits for works of art on which efforts have only just begun. On the contrary, words such as *rudis* or *non finita pulitamente* may primarily refer to almost finished statues, the surface of which has not been polished. The great variety of this terminology, adopted in different centuries and contexts, mirrors the complexity of this phenomenon, its contradictions, and different morphologies. It also suggests the variety of implications the phenomenon of the

unfinished has had on the definition(s) of the canon(s) of finiteness. The systematic survey undertaken here represents the base from which to conduct an investigation into the polarisation between the visible (what is finished) and the invisible (what is not) and the responses it may arouse in the viewer.

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Figure 1. Andrea Pisano, *Phidias or the Art of Sculpture*, 1337–1341, marble (83 x 70 x 13 cm). Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. (Image in Public Domain)

Figure 2. Giorgio Vasari, *Stories of Zeuxis*, detail, 1572, fresco. Florence, Casa Vasari. (Image in Public Domain)

Figure 3. Albertus Clouwet, *Idea*, c. 1672, engraving. In Giovan Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scvltori et architetti moderni* (Rome: Per il success. al Mascardi, 1672), p. 3.

Figure 4. Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1481–1482, oil on panel (246 x 243 cm). Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi. (Image in Public Domain)

Figure 5. Anonymous, *Kouros of Apollonas*, between the seventh and sixth centuries BC, marble (h. 1070 cm). Apollonas. (Image in Public Domain)

Figure 6. Anonymous, *Base with Unfinished Relief*, early first century BC, marble. Delos. (© Ecole Française d'Archéologie, Athens)

Figure 7. Anonymous, *Garland Sarcophagus*, c. 120 AD or c. 250 AD, marble. Aphrodisias, Turkey. (© W. Wootton, B. Russell, P. Rockwell)

Figure 8. Titian, *Annunciation*, 1559–1564, oil on canvas (410 x 240 cm). Venice, Church of San Salvador. (Image in Public Domain)
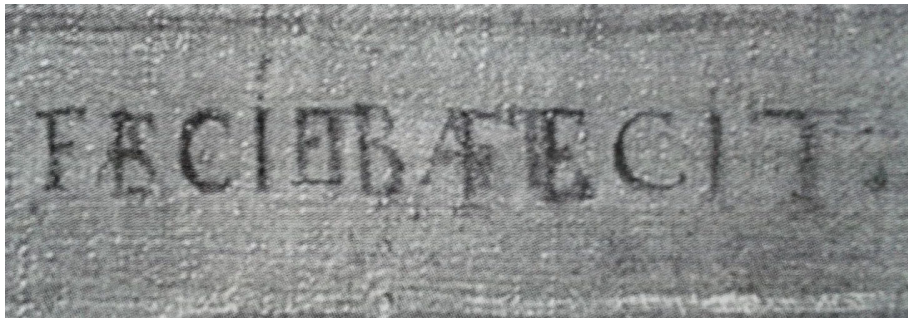
Figure 9. Titian, *Annunciation*, detail*, 1559–1564, oil on canvas (410 x 240 cm). Venice, Church of San Salvador. (Image in Public Domain)
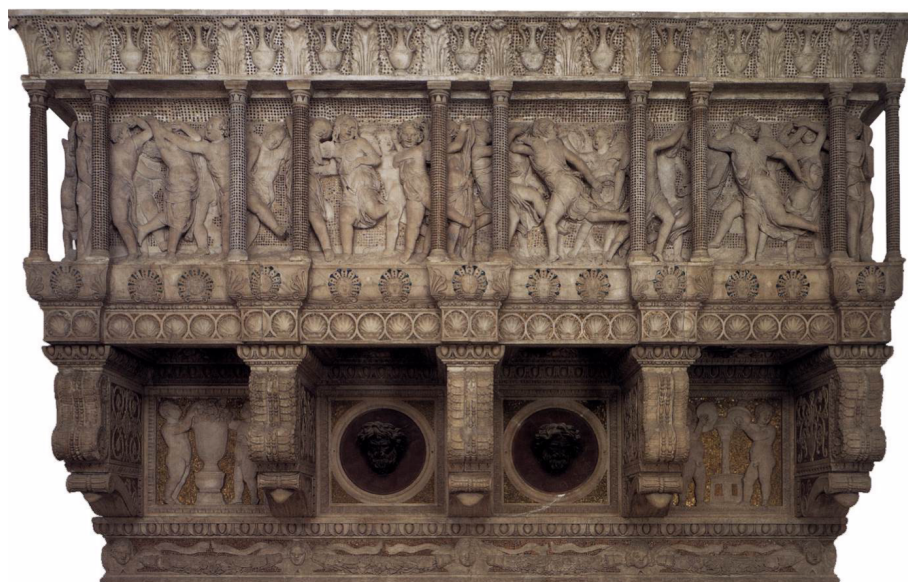
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Figure 11. Luca della Robbia, *Singing Gallery*, 1431–1438, marble (328 x 560 cm). Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. (© Web Gallery of Art)

Figure 12. Donatello, *Singing Gallery*, detail, 1433–1438, marble (348 x 570 x 98 cm). Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. (Image in Public Domain)

Figure 13. Luca della Robbia, *Singing Gallery*, detail, 1431–1438, marble (328 x 560 cm). Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. (© Web Gallery of Art)
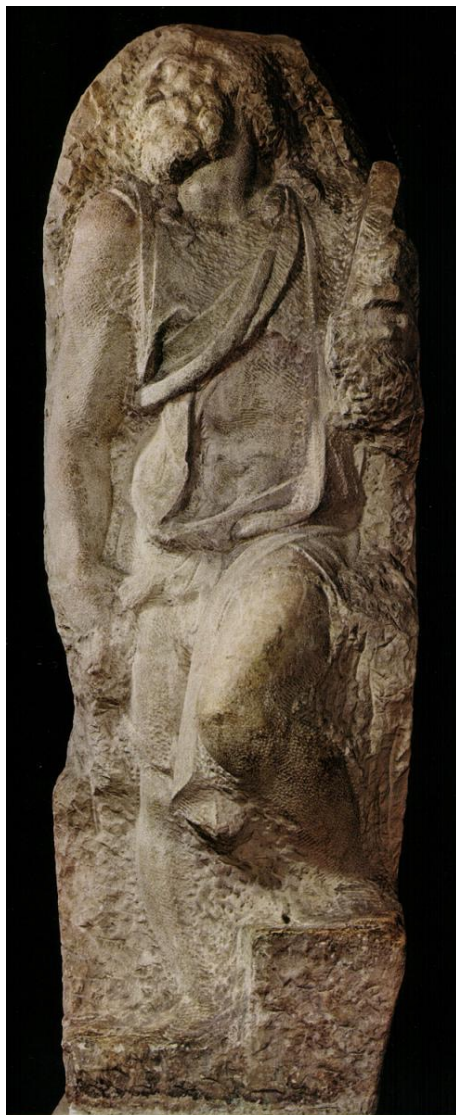
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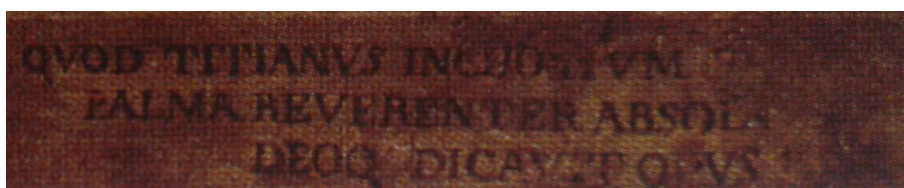
Figure 20. Titian, *Pietà*, detail, 1575–1576, oil on canvas (389 x 351 cm). Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia. (Image in Public Domain)