But now I will turn my attention exclusively to you, my dear Albrecht. Comparison is a serious impediment to any appreciation, and even the most sublime beauty in art makes its full and proper impact on us only when our gaze is not distracted by other beauties. Heaven has so distributed its gifts among the great artists of the world that we must pause before each one and pay to each his fair share of our respect.

Genuine art may flourish not only under Italian skies or under majestic domes and Corinthian columns—but under pointed arches, fantastically ornamented buildings, and Gothic spires.

Peace be with your bones, my dear Albrecht! And may you come to know how I love you and how in these latter days which you have never known I have become the herald of your fame. Blessed be your golden age, Nuremberg!—the only age when Germany could boast its own national art. Yet ages of splendor pass away from the earth and vanish like sun-drenched clouds passing over the vault of heaven. They fade and are forgotten; they live on in the hearts of only a few, called to life by their passionate love, by dusty books, or timeless works of art.

Of Two Wonderful Languages and Their Mysterious Power

The language of words is a precious gift of Heaven, and it was to our everlasting benefit that the Creator loosed the tongue of our first ancestor so that he might name all the things which the Almighty had put in the world around him, and all the spiritual images which He had implanted in his soul and so enrich his spirit by endlessly combining this wealth of names. By means of words we have dominion over all of nature; by means of words we acquire with ease all the treasures of the earth. Yet words cannot call down into our hearts the invisible spirit which reigns above us.

We gain power over worldly things by naming them; but if we hear of God's boundless goodness or of the virtues of the saints—subjects which should overwhelm our whole being—our ears merely ring with empty sound and our spirits are not uplifted as they should be.

Yet I know of two wonderful languages through which the Creator has granted man the means of grasping and comprehending the Divine in all its force, at least (not to appear presumptuous) insofar as that is at all possible for poor mortals. These languages speak to our inner selves, but not in words; suddenly and in wondrous fashion they invade our whole being, permeating every nerve and every drop of blood in our veins. One of these wonderful languages is spoken by God alone; the other is spoken only by a few chosen men whom He has anointed as His favorites. They are: Nature and Art.
Since my early youth, when I first encountered God our Heavenly Father in our ancient books of holy scripture, I have always looked to Nature for the fullest and clearest explanation of His being and His attributes. The rustling of treetops in a forest or the rolling of thunder told me mysterious things about Him which I cannot put into words. A lovely valley enclosed by fearsome crags, or willows reflected in a smooth-flowing stream, or a meadow, green and serene, beneath a clear blue sky—ah! these things thrilled me more wonderfully, infused my heart more deeply with the infinite power and bounty of God, and purified and exalted my soul far more than words can ever do. Language, it seems to me, is too worldly and clumsy a tool to convey things of the spirit as well as material things.

I find in this great cause to praise the power and benevolence of the Creator. He has surrounded us mortals with an infinite variety of things, each of which has its own reality and none of which we can understand or comprehend. We do not know what a tree is, or what a meadow is, or what a rock is; we cannot talk to them in our language and we are capable of communication only among ourselves. And yet the Creator has instilled in us such a marvellous sympathy for these things that they fill our hearts in unknown ways with feelings or sentiments or whatever we may wish to call those intimations which not even the most precise words can convey to us.

The worldly-wise have been led astray by an otherwise admirable love of truth. In their desire to uncover the secrets of Heaven and to bring them down to earth and cast earthly light upon them, they have banished from their breasts those vague feelings which they once had for them, and they have justified this procedure quite vehemently. —Can puny man explain the secrets of Heaven? Can he drag into the light of day what God has veiled in darkness? Can he in his arrogance dismiss those indistinct feelings which descend to us from Heaven like angels in disguise?—I honor them in deep humility; for it is only by divine grace that these genuine witnesses of truth come down to us. I fold my hands in adoration.

Art is a language quite different from nature, but it too, in similar mysterious and secret ways, exercises a marvellous power over the human heart. Art speaks through pictorial representations of men; that is, it employs a hieroglyphic language whose signs we recognize and understand on sight. But in the figures which it presents, the spiritual and the sensuous are merged in such an effective and admirable fashion that the whole of our selves and every fiber of our being is doubly moved and shaken utterly. It would be no exaggeration to say that many paintings portraying Christ's Passion or the Holy Virgin or the lives of the Saints have purged my soul more pure, and inspired more divinely virtuous sentiments in my heart than systems of moral philosophy or pious sermons ever have. One work among others which I still recall with emotion is an exquisite painting of Saint Sebastian standing naked and bound to a tree while an angel draws the arrows from his breast and another angel descends from heaven with a garland of flowers for his head. To this painting I owe the most profound and lasting Christian sentiments, and even yet I can scarcely recall its details without tears coming to my eyes.

The teachings of the wise stir only our intellects, only one half of our selves. But the two wonderful languages
whose power I here proclaim touch our senses as well as our minds, or rather (I cannot express the thought otherwise) appear in the process to merge every part of our being (so mysterious to us) into one single new organ of perception, which in this twofold way grasps and comprehends heavenly mysteries.

One of these languages, which the Almighty Himself speaks from everlasting to everlasting—eternal, infinite Nature—, raises us through the immensities of space into the presence of God Himself. Art, however, which by the meaningful combination of colored earth and a little moisture recreates the human shape in ideal form within a narrow, limited sphere (a kind of creative power which was vouchsafed to mortals)—art reveals to us the treasures of the human breast, turns our gaze inward, and shows us the Invisible, I mean all that is noble, sublime, and divine in human form.

When I leave the consecrated chapel of our cloister where I have been meditating upon Christ on the cross and step out into the open air where the sun shines down from a blue sky, enveloping me in its warmth and vitality, and when the beauties of the landscape with its mountains, streams, and trees impinge upon my vision, then I see a unique and divine world unfolding before me and feel great things stirring strangely in my breast. And when I leave the outdoors and enter the chapel again, and with earnest fervor contemplate the painting of Christ on the cross, then I see another unique but different divine world unfolding before me and feel great things stirring in my breast in a similarly strange yet different fashion.

Art depicts man in his most perfect form. Nature—at least as much of it as is visible to our mortal eye—is like a fragmentary oracular utterance from the mouth of the Divinity. If one may speak so familiarly of such things, one might perhaps say that in a sense the world of nature or the entire universe is to God what a work of art is to man.

Of Two Wonderful Languages

Concerning the Peculiarities of the Ancient Painter
Piero di Cosimo of the Florentine School

Nature, in her ceaseless diligence, creates with her ever-active hands a million creatures of every species and casts them into life on earth. Playfully and whimsically, she takes whatever substances are available and blindly mixes them in countless different ways, regardless of how they combine, then abandons each creature which proceeds from her hands to its own peculiar joys and torments. And just as in the realm of the inanimate she sometimes willfully creates strange and monstrous forms amidst a host of commonplace objects, so too every few centuries she produces a few oddities among the human race, whom she hides among thousands of normal people. Yet these strange beings perish and are forgotten like the most prosaic of men. Later generations whose curiosity has been aroused collect scattered, stammered words in chronicles, and these are supposed to describe them to us. Yet we can form no coherent picture, and never fully learn to understand them. After all, even those who saw them with their own eyes could not fully understand them; indeed, they
How and in What Manner We Ought Properly to Contemplate the Works of the World's Great Artists and Employ Them for the Benefit of Our Souls

I continually hear foolish and frivolous persons lament that God has bestowed so few truly outstanding artists upon the world, and these same vulgar minds stare impatiently into the future to see whether the Heavenly Father might not be about to create a new race of brilliant painters. I, however, declare that the earth has suffered no dearth of excellent masters. Some, indeed, are such that a mortal might spend his whole life contemplating and comprehending just one of them. What is only too true, however, is that there are far, far too few people capable of really understanding or (what amounts to the same thing) sincerely venerating the works of those beings formed of a nobler clay.

Picture galleries are commonly regarded as fairs at which we can judge, praise, or condemn new wares in passing, while they ought to be temples where, in serene and self-effacing silence and in solitary exaltation, we may admire the great artists, those most sublime of mortals, and warm ourselves in the sunshine of rapturous thoughts and sentiments in prolonged and tranquil contemplation of their works.

The appreciation of sublime artworks is akin to prayer. God takes no pleasure in the man who speaks to Him only to absolve himself of a daily duty, counting every word mindlessly, and boastfully measuring out his piety on the beads of his rosary. Yet Heaven smiles upon the man who in yearning submission awaits the chosen hour when the divine light gently descends upon him unforced, shattering the shell of earthly imperfection which commonly overlies the human spirit, and dissolving and laying bare his nobler self. Kneeling down, he opens his heart and turns it in silent rapture toward the divine radiance, filling it with celestial light. Then, when he arises, he feels at once happier and more wistful, lighter and yet fuller of heart, and turns his hand to good and noble works. That is what I consider true prayer to be.

To my mind, we ought to approach masterpieces of art in like manner in order fittingly to employ them for the benefit of our souls. It is nothing short of blasphemy for a man to reel away from the ringing laughter of his friends in a worldly hour so that he may talk for a few minutes with God in a nearby church out of mere habit. It is no less blasphemous in such an hour to cross the threshold of the building where—in silent testimony to the dignity of the human race—are preserved for eternity the most admirable creations which the hand of man has wrought. Wait, as you would do in praying, for those moments of bliss when divine grace illumines your soul with a nobler revelation, for only then will your soul merge into one with the works of the artists. Their magical figures remain silent and uncommunicative when you look at them coldly. Your heart must first address them forcefully if they are to speak to you and exercise all their power over you.

Artworks are by their very nature as little part of the common flow of life as is the thought of God. They transcend what is ordinary and commonplace, and we must
Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar

raise ourselves up to their level in the fullness of our hearts for them to become in our eyes, all too often dimmed by the fog of our worldliness, what they truly and sublimely are.

Anyone can learn to read the letters of the alphabet; anyone can read and retell the histories of bygone ages recorded in learned chronicles; and anyone, too, can study a scientific system and grasp propositions and truths—for letters exist only so that the eye may recognize their shapes, and propositions and happenings command our attention only for as long as our inner eye takes to grasp and comprehend them. As soon as we have assimilated them, our mental activity is at an end, and we delight in an indolent and profitless survey of our treasures only as often as this gives us pleasure. Not so with the works of sublime artists. They are not there so that the eye may see them, but so that we may enter them sympathetically, and live and breathe in them. An exquisite painting is not like a paragraph in a textbook, which I can cast aside like a worthless shell as soon as I have extracted its meaning with a little effort; rather does the pleasure to be derived from superb artworks last on and never end. We imagine that we are penetrating them more and more deeply, and yet they are forever exciting our senses anew, and we can see no end to their possibilities. There burns in them a vital oil which will not be extinguished in all eternity.

I hasten impatiently over first impressions, for the surprise of the new has always seemed to me a necessary evil involved in seeing a work for the first time, though there are many who, eager for an ever-changing variety of delights, would declare this to be the main purpose of art. Genuine enjoyment requires a calm and tranquil state of mind and expresses itself not in loud exclamations or in the clapping of hands, but solely through inner excitement. It is a holy day of celebration for me when, earnest and composed, I go to look at sublime artworks. I return to them again and again, and they remain firmly imprinted upon my senses. As long as I walk this earth I will carry them around in my imagination as a kind of spiritual talisman, for they comfort and revive my spirit, and I will take them with me to the grave.

Once a man's finer sensibilities have been touched and become receptive to the mysterious charm inherent in art, his soul will often be deeply moved where another man will pass by with indifference. For as long as he lives, his soul will know the joy of having frequent cause to be moved and excited beneficially. When, occupied with other thoughts, I am passing through some great and splendid portal, and my eyes are instinctively drawn to the mighty and majestic columns with all their sweet sublimity, so that my inner self is filled with wondrous sentiment, I am often conscious of bowing inwardly before them and of continuing on my way with my heart lightened and my soul enriched.

The most important thing is that in our arrogance we should not raise ourselves above the spirit of sublime artists and presume to pass judgment on them. This is a foolish manifestation of man's vanity and pride. Art is above man, and we can only admire and revere the splendid works of its votaries and open up our hearts to them so that all our feelings may be dissolved and purified.
painters may well ask in astonishment and admiration who painted before him as he did. Where did he acquire that unprecedented grandeur which no eye beheld before him? And who directed him to these untrodden paths?

There is in the world of art no nobler object, and no object more worthy of veneration, than an original genius. To work with diligence and application, with objectivity and intelligence is human; but to penetrate the very essence of art with a new vision, to approach it from a completely different direction as it were, is divine.

It is, however, the destiny of genius to spawn a horde of despicable imitators, a fate which Michelangelo correctly foretold for himself. With one bold leap the genius propels himself to the farthest reaches of his art, and stands there boldly and firmly, holding up to our gaze what is extraordinary and wonderful. But given man's limited intellect, there is scarcely anything extraordinary and wonderful which may not inspire mere foolishness and insipidity. These lamentable imitators, lacking the strength to stand firmly on their own feet, wander around blindly, and their imitations, if they are ever more than pitiful shadows of the original, are distorted exaggerations.

The age of Michelangelo, the earliest period of Italian painting, is the only period in history possessing truly original painters. Who painted like Correggio before Correggio, or like Raphael before Raphael? Yet one would think that nature, in her prodigality, had squandered all her wealth of artistic genius during this period, for with very few exceptions the outstanding masters of later years, down to and including the present day, have had no objective other than to imitate one or another (or even several together) of those early original standard-setting painters, and they have not easily achieved greatness except through the excellence of their imitations. Even the considerable and deserved fame which the reformers Caracci and their school earned for themselves rests on no merit other than that by offering worthy examples, they restored to eminence the art of imitation which had fallen into decay. And whom did the old masters themselves imitate? They created all that unprecedented splendor out of themselves.

Letter from a Young German Painter in Rome to His Friend in Nuremberg

Dear Brother and Comrade,

An age, I know, has passed since I last wrote to you, though I have often thought of you with tender affection. There are times in our lives when external events follow upon each other too slowly for our speeding thoughts, when the soul is consumed with new ideas, and for that very reason nothing outward occurs. I have just lived through such a period, and now that my tranquility has been restored somewhat I will immediately reach for my pen and report to you, my beloved Sebastian, trustiest friend of my youth, how I have fared and what has befallen me.

Shall I describe at length conditions in the Promised Land of Italy and pour out my heart in incoherent praise? Words cannot fully express what I feel,
for how can I, so totally unskilled in writing, ade­quately portray the bright skies and the vast pros­pects of this paradise fanned by playful and refreshing zephyrs, when even in my own craft I can scarcely find colors or brushstrokes to sketch onto the canvas what I see and grasp with my inner eye.

Different though everything is here in heaven and earth, however, it can be more easily sensed and credited than what I have to tell you about the country's art. You, my dear Sebastian, and our beloved teacher Albrecht Dürer may paint as meticulously as you please up there in Germany, but if you were suddenly transported to this place you would truly be like two departed souls who had not yet adjusted to Heaven. In my thoughts I can see the artful Master Albrecht sitting on his stool, carving an intricate little piece of wood with childish, almost touching diligence, reflecting ponderously on his subject and its effectuation, and looking again and again at the artwork which he has begun. I can see his spacious paneled room with its round-paned windows, and you copying one of his works with boundless industry and fidelity. I can see, too, the younger appren­tices walking to and fro, and old Master Dürer inter­jecting many a wise and many a merry word. Then I see Mistress Dürer come in, or the eloquent Willi­bald Pirckheimer, who inspects the paintings and drawings and begins a lively dispute with Albrecht. And when I imagine all of this in detail I really cannot understand how I have come to this place and how everything is so different here.

Do you still remember when we were first en­trusted to our master as apprentices and we simply could not understand how a face or a tree could grow out of the colors which we were grinding? With what astonishment did we then watch Master Albrecht, who always knew how to employ everything so well and was never at a loss how to execute his greatest works! I was often as if in a dream when I left the workroom to buy wine or bread for him, and when other, unartistic men, such as tradesmen or farmers, passed me by in the street I often could not help thinking that he must surely be a magician that life­less matter should take shape at his command and come to life as it were.

Yet Heaven alone knows what I would have said or felt then if Raphael's transfigured faces had been revealed to my childish eyes. Ah! my dear Sebastian, if I had understood them I would surely have sunk to my knees and in the fullness of my young heart would have dissolved in devotion, tears, and adora­tion. Despite everything, you see, one can still per­ceive the earthly element in our great Dürer. One can understand how an artful and skillful man might light upon these faces or arrive at these inventions, and if we look very closely at his pictures we can almost dismiss their painted figures and uncover the empty, unadorned panel beneath. With Raphael, on the other hand, my dear Sebastian, everything is con­trived so wonderfully that you quite forget that there is any such thing as paint or painting, and inwardly you can feel only humility and the warmest love for his heavenly and yet so profoundly human figures and devote your heart and soul to them. Do not imag-
ine that I am exaggerating out of youthful ardor, for you cannot imagine or grasp these things unless you come and see them with your own eyes.

Altogether, my dear Sebastian, art makes of this earth the most splendid and delightful of abodes. Only now have I come to feel how there dwells in our hearts an invisible spirit which is irresistibly moved by great works of art. And if I am to tell you everything, dear friend of my youth (as indeed I must, for I feel an overwhelming impulse to do so), then I must reveal that I am now in love with a girl who is dearer to my heart than all other things, and I am loved by her in return. My senses, then, whirl intoxicated through the glories of an eternal springtime, and in moments of rapture I am almost capable of believing that the world and the sun in the sky borrow their brilliance from me, if it were not too presumptuous to express my joy in such a way. I have long been fervently seeking her features in the best paintings and have always found them in my favorite masters. I am betrothed to her, and in a few days we will celebrate our marriage. You can understand then that I have no desire to return to our native Germany, but I hope to embrace you soon here in Rome.

I cannot convey to you how unceasingly concerned for my spiritual welfare Maria was in her heart when she learned that I, too, had sympathies for the teachings of the Reformers. She often implored me to return to the old and true faith, and her loving speeches wrought havoc with my imagination and with all my supposed convictions. Tell our beloved Master Dürer nothing of what I am now about to relate to you, for

I know that it would only grieve his heart and would benefit neither him nor me.

Some time ago I went into the Rotunda, where, it being a feast day, a magnificent Latin mass was to be sung. Or perhaps my real reason for going was only to see my sweetheart among the worshippers and to derive inspiration from observing her at her pious devotions. The superb church, the crowds of people who came thronging in and who gathered around me in ever-increasing numbers, the splendors of the preparatory ceremonies—all of this made me peculiarly attentive. I felt very solemn, and even though—as is usual in such a tumult—I was unable to think clearly or distinctly, there was a strange turmoil within me, as if something extraordinary were about to happen. All at once the congregation fell silent, and above us the mighty music soared in long, slow, full notes, as if an invisible spirit were moving above our heads. The music surged over us, submerging us in ever-greater waves, like an ocean of sound, and drawing my very soul out of my body. My heart throbbed, and I felt an irresistible longing for something noble and sublime that I might embrace. My spirit was uplifted by the sonorous Latin anthem, which, rising and falling, made itself heard through the swelling of the music, like a ship sailing through the waves of the sea. And as the music permeated my whole being and coursed through my very veins, I raised my dreaming eyes and looked around me—and the whole church became alive to my gaze, so intoxicated was I by the music. At that moment the music stopped. A priest stepped up to the High Altar,
held up the Host with a rapturous gesture, and exposed it to the view of the multitude—and they all fell to their knees, and trumpets and I know not what other mighty instruments thundered and sounded, sending a shudder of divine ecstasy through me. Everyone around me knelt, and a power, mysterious and mystic, forced me irresistibly to my knees, and I could not have withstood it even though I had tried with all my might. And as I knelt with head bowed, my heart pounding in my breast, an unseen force lifted up my eyes again. I looked around, and it was as if all these Catholics, men and women, on bended knees, their gaze turned inward or raised to Heaven, crossing themselves fervently, striking their breasts, or moving their lips in prayer—it was as if this multitude around me were commending my soul to our Heavenly Father, as if they were praying for the one lost sheep in their midst, and in their pious devotion were irresistibly drawing me over to their faith. I looked to the side and caught sight of Maria. Her glance met mine, and I saw tears of holy compassion come to her blue eyes. I knew not how I felt, I could not bear her gaze, and I averted my eyes. They came to rest upon an altar with a painting of Christ on the cross who looked at me with inexpressible sorrow. And the mighty columns of the church, like venerable apostles and saints, gazed down upon me majestically with their capitals—and the vast dome hovered over me like the all-embracing heavens and gave its blessing to my pious resolve.

When the solemnities were over I could not leave the church. I threw myself down in a corner and wept, and with a heart full of remorse I looked at all the saints and all the paintings as if I were seeing them and honoring them for the first time.

I could not withstand the power which had been awakened within me. My dear Sebastian, I have now gone over to the Catholic faith, and my heart feels light and gay. It was the irresistible power of art which won me over, and I can honestly say that it is only now that I have begun to understand art and grasp its essence. If you can tell me what has so transformed me, what has moved my soul as if with the tongues of angels, then give it a name and enlighten me as to my own condition. I have followed only my instincts, the urgings of my blood, every drop of which now seems purer to me.

Ahl even in the old days, did I not believe those stories of saints and miracles which seem unfathomable to us? Can you rightly understand a sacred picture and look at it with pious devotion without at the same time believing in what it depicts? And what harm can come of it if this poetic force residing in sacred art is longer lasting in its effect on me?

Surely your heart will not turn away from mine, for that is not possible, Sebastian. And so, let us pray to the same God that henceforth He may enlighten our spirits more and more and pour down true piety upon us. What goes beyond this shall not and cannot separate us. Is that not so, friend of my youth?

Farewell, and convey my cordial greetings to our master. Even though you do not share my views, this letter must bring you joy, for it tells you that I am happy.