Mines of Misinformation: George Eliot and Old Master Paintings: Berlin, Munich, Vienna and Dresden, 1854-5 and 1858

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This article is a ‘footnote’ to two classic works on George Eliot: Hugh Witemeyer’s *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* and *The Journals of George Eliot*, edited by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston. When I began to follow the progress of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes round the major art galleries of Western Europe, I soon discovered that many of the paintings which George Eliot mentions in her journal were not what she believed them to be. Some have been reattributed since her lifetime, and others, while still bearing the name of the artist she gave them, were not of the subjects she supposed. One such painting was the *Beatrice Cenci* in the Barberini Gallery in Rome, which was then believed to be by Guido Reni. This work deceived every writer who looked at it, from Shelley to Dickens, to Nathaniel Hawthorne. In 1881, Thomas Adolphus Trollope even published an article declaring that, although new research had convinced him that Beatrice was not the sitter for the famous portrait, there could be no doubt at all that the artist was Guido Reni.  It is not surprising that George Eliot studied the painting with particular interest when she visited Rome in 1860.

This is a well-documented example of a misattribution, but George Eliot’s account of her travels in Europe in 1854 and 1858 is surprisingly full of comparable ‘errors’. Nineteenth-century curators felt the need to put a name onto a frame, and, in the contemporary state of scholarship, it was frequently the wrong one. The identity of the painter and the subject of the painting were of considerable importance to George Eliot, and her ‘mistakes’ can tell us something about her approach to the whole question of artistic creation. It is worth stressing that these errors occurred through no fault of the novelist. We know that Dr Johann Fischer gave her a copy of Franz Kugler’s *Handbook of Painting* in Berlin in January 1855. This must have been a German version of Kugler’s volume on the ‘German, Flemish, Dutch, Spanish and French Schools’, rather than the English translation by Margaret Hutton, originally published by John Murray in 1846 with notes by Sir Edmund Head. Many of Head’s notes correct mistakes in Kugler and it is clear that Eliot and Lewes did not know of these. As my title implies, George Eliot, instructed by the guidebooks and manuals with which she travelled, and by the labels on the paintings themselves, was simply, and frequently, misinformed.

The first of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes’s European expeditions took them to Germany. They left London together in July 1854 and did not return until March 1855. Appropriately enough, this ‘eloping’ couple began their life together, the very day after disembarking from the ferry in Antwerp, by looking at a famous painting, Rubens’s *Descent from the Cross*. This powerful image, with its strong diagonal emphasis, was a ‘must’ for all those who travelled to the continent through Belgium. By chance, although neither party mentions it, Matthew Arnold was there in the same week, paying his respects to the masterpiece. Presumably neither saw the other. Both British writers came on the *Descent*, not in the Cathedral, but in a studio nearby where, with the *Elevation of the Cross* by the same painter, it was being restored. George Eliot thought the face of Christ in the *Elevation* ‘sublime in its..."
expression of agony and trust in the divine. It is certainly the finest conception of the suffering Christ I have ever seen. The rest of the picture [a crowd of mourners and soldiers] gave me no pleasure.

The Descent, by contrast, lived up to all her expectations: ‘colour, form and expression alike impressed me with the sense of grandeur and beauty’ (Journals, 15).

Eliot and Lewes saw one Rubens painting hanging as an altarpiece in the Cathedral, The Assumption of the Virgin, where, in a traditional format, the mother of God soars upwards from her empty tomb. Eliot reports that it ‘did not please us much’ (Journals, 14). On the following day they looked at other works by Rubens, in the Antwerp Museum and in the city’s churches. In St Jacques, they saw the altarpiece of the Madonna and Saints in which Rubens had painted himself with his two wives, Isabella Brant and Helena Fourment. The Crucifixion, in the Museum, seemed to George Eliot ‘even more beautiful’ than the Descent from the Cross (Journals, 15), and both paintings increased her sense of disillusion with the work of living artists, unable to rise to the mastery shown by the Flemish painter.

However impressed they were by the greatness of Rubens’s paintings in Antwerp, Lewes and George Eliot continued to turn discriminating eyes upon the quality of the artist’s work. The head of a bull in The Adoration of the Magi, much praised by Ruskin in the first volume of Modern Painters, ‘rather disappointed’ them, ‘since they thought the texture and the brush-work much heavier and more laboured than Ruskin had led them to expect.

In her account of the Museum, George Eliot comments on a far less famous work of art: ‘A picture of Card-players by Valentin was the only thing that delighted us here, besides the Crucifixion’ (Journals, 16). This reference is the earliest example of a misattribution in Eliot’s journal. Valentin de Boulogne was a seventeenth-century French artist much influenced by Caravaggio, and famous for the striking chiaroscuro of his genre scenes. There are comparable paintings of card players by Valentin and it is easy to see how the ‘optimistic’ attribution of the Antwerp Museum’s painting came about. The 1865 catalogue of the Museum ascribes the painting, Le Brelan (Card Players), to Valentin, but it is now known to be an important work by a Flemish artist and near contemporary of Valentin, Theodor Rombouts.

At first glance, it is hard to see why this painting captured the imagination of the novelist who, two decades later, condemned gambling as unethical in Daniel Deronda. Le Brelan shows three soldiers, two of them playing cards for money while an older man looks on. On the right, an old woman speaks with the third soldier. The moral has been variously interpreted, but the painting presumably incorporates a warning against such worldly pursuits. For all the dramatic rendering of the episode, it was probably the naturalistic treatment of the two elderly figures which caught George Eliot’s attention. Throughout her travels she consistently admired realistic representations of older people, an aspect of the truthfulness which she commends in Chapter Seventeen of Adam Bede.

From Antwerp, Eliot and Lewes travelled to Brussels and then on into Germany. After a period at Weimar, they arrived in Berlin on 4 November 1854. Nearly a week elapsed before they paid their first visit to the Picture Gallery for old master paintings. On this, as on subsequent
occasions, George Eliot describes her liking for certain works there: ‘three gems which remain in the imagination’.

One of these was a picture then called Titian’s Daughter, a sumptuous painting of a young girl holding up a silver bowl of fruit and flowers. It is undoubtedly by Titian, but is no longer thought to be a portrait of his daughter, Lavinia, merely one of a number of half-length studies of young women. The appeal of the picture for Eliot was no doubt the fact that it was said to represent the artist’s daughter. Such human interest was a major factor in her taste for certain works of art and she may well have speculated on the close relationship between painter and subject.

The second of George Eliot’s ‘gems’ has lost not only its title but its painter. The so-called Schweisstuch (Veronica’s Handkerchief) was famous because it had once hung in the private chapel of the early nineteenth-century Emperor Frederick William III, whose favourite painting it was said to be. Then thought to be by the great sixteenth-century Emilian artist, Correggio, it shows the head of Christ crowned with thorns and as if imprinted upon a cloth, but it is now regarded as a work of little interest by an unknown artist. Veronica and her handkerchief had a special appeal for George Eliot, whose admiration was often stirred by paintings with female subjects, including the Virgin Mary and St Barbara. Seeing an early German painting of St Veronica in the Frauenkirche in Nuremburg in 1858, she wrote: ‘Nothing could be more wretched as art… Yet it touched me deeply, and the thought of the Man of Sorrows seemed a very close thing – not a faint hearsay’ (Journals, 308).

George Eliot’s third favourite was another work then attributed to Correggio, Io, an erotic painting of the nymph in the embrace of a cloud-wrapped Jove. Unfortunately, the Berlin Io, which once belonged to Queen Christina of Sweden, is now known to be no more than a copy of the painting in Vienna. George Eliot must have seen a real Correggio in Berlin, Leda, which represents Jove, in the form of a swan, making love to yet another nymph. An eighteenth-century owner of both paintings, Louis, Duc d’Orleans, cut out the heads of the nymphs in a fit of religious enthusiasm. The present heads were added by nineteenth-century artists as part of a restoration. As will become apparent, George Eliot had no prudish objections to paintings of the nude, and this seems to have been a straightforward response to the power of Correggio’s image. Surprisingly, however, she does not mention the original work in her account of her time in Vienna. Dorothea Brooke, in Chapter Nine of Middlemarch, takes a harder line when she finds her uncle’s ‘smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities … painfully inexplicable’.

The director of the Berlin art gallery was the pioneer art historian, Gustav Waagen, whose account of his tour of the galleries and private collections of Britain is an invaluable resource for scholars. George Eliot approved of his historically based ‘hang’ in Berlin, and noted that ‘the collection though not rich is instructive’ (Journals, 251). Murray’s Handbook for Travellers on the Continent for 1854 also praises Waagen’s ‘arrangement, combining the chronological order with the classification according to schools’. Not everyone would agree with George Eliot that the Berlin collection was ‘not rich’ although it was to be greatly expanded in the following years. Among its holdings at the time of George Eliot’s visit were some
fine early Flemish paintings, a number of important works by Rubens, several Rembrandts, and five Raphaels, the fifth of which was acquired in the year of her arrival, 1854. There was also a painting to which she was to refer directly in Romola, Piero di Cosimo’s Venus, Mars and Cupid.

That George Eliot was aware of the practice of introducing ‘real’ works of art into fiction, is clear from her response to Paternal Admonition by the seventeenth century Dutch genre artist, Gerard Ter Borch. She had read of this work in Goethe’s Elective Affinities where a group of the characters present it as a tableau vivant. In her journal she describes the painting as by the artist’s contemporary, Jan Steen. It is, however, described as a Ter Borch both in Elective Affinities and in contemporary accounts of the Berlin gallery and this is perhaps a case of simple forgetfulness. George Eliot, not surprisingly, accepts Goethe’s reading of the painting: ‘It is the daughter being reproved by her father, while the mother is emptying her wine glass’ (Journals, 251). Goethe knew the painting from an engraving made in 1765 by J. G. Wille who supplied a title, ‘Instruction Paternelle’. Modern critics, however, read the work quite differently, noting that the ‘father’ is a young man, and that his gesture of holding up money shows that this a scene of prostitution, not admonition, a reading amply confirmed by the presence of a bed in the background.

Four years after this journey to Weimar and Berlin, Lewes and George Eliot were once again in Germany, where they saw the galleries at Munich and Dresden, as well as those in Vienna. On this occasion George Eliot was greatly struck by the Rubens paintings in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. She writes at length of the fourth room of the gallery, the Rubens Saal, and particularly admired three works there: Samson and Delilah, a Crucifixion and The Last Judgement. Of Samson and Delilah Eliot gives a very detailed and accurate account:

Delighted afresh in the picture of Samson and Delilah, both for the painting and character of the figures. Delilah, a magnificent blond, seated in a chair, with a transparent white shift lightly covering her body and a rich red piece of drapery round her legs, leans forward with one hand resting on her thigh, the other, holding the cunning shears, resting on the chair – a posture which shows to perfection the full round living arms. She turns her head aside to look with sly triumph at Samson, a tawny giant, his legs caught in the red drapery, shorn of his long locks, furious with the consciousness that the Philistines are upon him, and that this time he cannot shake them off. Above the group of malicious faces and grappling arms, a hand holds a flaming torch. Behind Delilah, and grasping her arm leans forward an old woman with hard features full of exultation. (Journals, 311)

It is hard to believe that the account of Rubens’s dark Crucifixion which follows was written by a committed non-Christian, but it is important to notice how George Eliot employs the word ‘real’ here, and also to see how she stresses Rubens’s excellence in ‘rendering’ the form of the body, convicingly presented in this painting as that of a dead man:
Jesus alone hanging dead on the cross, darkness over the whole earth. One can desire nothing in this picture – the grand, sweet calm of the dead face, calm and satisfied amidst all the traces of anguish, the real, livid flesh, the thorough mastery with which the whole form is rendered, and the isolation of the supreme sufferer, make a picture that haunts one like a remembrance of a friend’s death-bed. (Journals, 311)

‘His are such real, breathing men and women’, George Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell from Munich, ‘men and women moved by passions, not mincing and grimacing and posing in mere apery of passion! What a grand, glowing, forceful thing life looks in his pictures – the men such grand bearded grappling beings fit to do the work of the world, the women such real mothers.’

George Eliot singled out for particular praise another of the outstanding works in the Munich collection, Dürer’s haunting self-portrait in a fur-edged coat, with his long hair falling over his shoulders. Dürer confronts the viewer in the manner of a secular Christ. George Eliot comments that there were some ‘very bad’ and some ‘fine’ Dürers in the gallery (Journals, 315). Among the ‘very good’ was one of a pair of large paintings of saints. St Paul, bearded and with a book, stands in the foreground, while the dark, and seemingly angry, head of St Mark looms out from behind him. George Eliot’s ‘bad’ Dürers may have included a birth and a burial of Christ, with relatively tiny figures, as well as a portrait of a gaunt young man, dating from 1500. A problem arises with George Eliot’s reference to a ‘striking’ ‘Christ carrying his Cross’ by Albert Dürer (Journals, 315). Such a work is mentioned in the 1839 catalogue, but doubts about its authenticity were raised at the time, and it does not appear in subsequent volumes. It must have been the work of a follower or an adaptation of an original Dürer design.

Less famous than the Dürers, but a telling choice for the woman who was writing Adam Bede, was another ‘admired’ painting, a rural genre scene by the seventeenth-century Flemish painter, Jacob Jordaens:

‘A Satyr eating with a peasant shows him that he can blow hot and cold at the same time’; the old grandmother nursing the child, the father with the key in his hand with which he has been amusing baby, looking curiously at the Satyr, the handsome wife still more eager in her curiosity, the quiet cow, the little boy, the dog and cat – all are charmingly conceived. (Journals, 313)

It is strange that George Eliot, in her journal and in other accounts of her time at Munich, should speak only of certain areas of the art gallery, the two first rooms, where German and Flemish paintings were hanging, the fourth room, the Rubens Saal, and some of the small cabinets. She does not mention the rooms dedicated to the Italian masters, where hung three famous Raphaels, the Madonna Tempi, the Madonna Tenda and a Holy Family. Remarks by Eliot comparing Rubens to Raphael, made in a letter written to Sara Hennell not long after her arrival in Munich, may indicate a lack of enthusiasm for the Italian master. ‘Rubens’,
wrote, 'gives me more pleasure than any other painter, whether that is right or wrong. To be sure, I have not seen so many pictures and pictures of so high a rank, by any other great master. I feel sure that when I have seen as much of Raffaelle, I shall like him better, but at present Rubens more than any one else makes me feel that painting is a great art and that he was a great artist' (Letters, II, 451). There is no indication here or elsewhere, however, that Eliot was influenced by Ruskin’s defence of the Pre-Raphaelites in her approach to Raphael, rather she conveys a sense of difficulty in grasping the quality of Raphael’s painting.

It is well known that George Eliot derived great pleasure from some of the smaller rooms or cabinets, hung with Dutch sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings. To Sara Hennell she writes of ‘a little Gerard Dow … hanging in a corner of one of the cabinets’ (Letters, II, 455) and in Adam Bede this small painting by the Dutch seventeenth-century artist, Gerrit Dou, Grace Before Meat, makes an appearance in Chapter Seventeen, George Eliot’s defence of realist art: ‘an old woman … eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her’.

On Sunday 2 May 1858, George Eliot and Lewes made a return visit to the first two rooms of the gallery. An early catalogue of the collection reveals that a number of paintings in these rooms were attributed to Michael Wolgemut, an artist chiefly known as the teacher of Albrecht Dürer whose portrait of his master is in the Munich collection. George Eliot describes one of these ‘Wolgemsuts’ in a striking word picture:

One extremely grotesque by Wohlgemuth, Dürer’s master, of Christ risen from the dead and standing something like a propped wooden doll with a frightened expression by the stone grave, the Roman guard (of two men asleep in the foreground), and an angel with the air of a school-girl in the middle distance. Others of Wohlgemuth have much more merit. (Journals, 315)

From this witty description, it is possible to identify the painting as one wing of an altarpiece, now attributed to the workshop of a fellow Nuremberg artist, Hans Pleydenwurff. Wolgemut, who married Pleydenwurff’s widow, may have contributed to this painting and to others. At the time of her visit in 1858, several early German religious paintings were ascribed to Wolgemut, but today not a single painting in the Munich collection is confidently attributed to him.

George Eliot writes of another early German painting, by Böhme, ‘a very elaborate composition’ of a ‘woman raised from the dead by the imposition of the Cross … in which the faces are of first rate excellence’ (Journals, 315). The subject comes from the legend of St Helena who found the three crosses from Christ’s crucifixion, but was unable to tell on which one Christ had been crucified. All three were taken to the bedside of a dying woman, and placed over her one by one. The first two worsened her condition, but the third revived her, so proving it to be the true cross. The painter of The Legend of the Holy Cross is more accurate-
Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
Ily described as Barthel Beham, better known as a portraitist, and this work, dating from 1530, was part of a group of history paintings commissioned for the Residenz in Munich. It now seems slightly grotesque, if bright, with a late mediaeval German city, meant for Jerusalem, standing out clearly behind the figures.

A modern reader of George Eliot’s Journal, on entering the early Flemish and German rooms at the Alte Pinakothek, may wonder why she seems not to refer to the magnificent and brilliantly coloured Adoration of the Magi by Roger van der Weyden. She can be exonerated, however, for, in her day, it was attributed to Jan van Eyck. The novelist describes it as ‘very striking’ ‘with much merit in the colouring, perspective and figures’ (Journals, 315).

From Munich, George Eliot and Lewes made a journey through Austria to Vienna and Prague. During their short time in Vienna, they saw two famous collections of old masters, the Imperial gallery at the Upper Belvedere and the Prince of Liechtenstein’s collection, now in the Castle at Vaduz, but then at the Liechtenstein Palace, which they visited twice.

Among the Liechtenstein paintings, George Eliot praises the series of six large tapestry cartoons designed by Rubens as a life history of the Roman general Decius. These are splendidly vigorous works, exemplifying the Roman virtues of stoicism and fidelity unto death, and ‘more magnificent even than he usually is in colour’ as George Eliot noted in her journal (Journals, 323). Predictably, she also liked Rubens’s delightful painting of his two young sons, Albert and Nicholas.

Rubens’s ‘glorious’ Assumption of the Virgin also brought a warm response (Journals, 323). This painting is very close in design to the painter’s treatment of the same subject in Antwerp, which Eliot and Lewes had so disliked four years before. Possibly it was the contrast with the Descent from the Cross, the Elevation and the Crucifixion which made the Antwerp Assumption seem trivial to their eyes. Without the direct competition from such a series of masterpieces, the Liechtenstein painting could be seen on its own merits. The Liechtenstein Assumption is almost certainly the painting to which George Eliot refers in Chapter Seventeen of Adam Bede, where she contrasts ‘a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory’ to the Dutch genre works of Dou and others. Twelve years later, when Eliot and Lewes returned to Vienna and revisited the Liechtenstein collection, Lewes’s comment was: ‘Disappointed now with Rubens’ Assumption’ (Letters, V, 89). On this later occasion he wrote in his journal of a ‘Marvellous Rembrandt – portrait of a plump pleasant gentleman in a velvet cape, with hat half shadowing his face. The modelling and flesh painting surpasses anything I remember of his’ (Letters, V, 89). In fact, although Lewes clearly did not know it, this was a self-portrait, showing the middle-aged artist in a velvet hat with a huge feather and an elaborately decorated cape.

While they were in Munich, George Eliot had failed to comment on a remarkable collection of paintings by Van Dyck, but, in Vienna, her attention was caught by his portrait of an Italian nobleman with ‘a pale delicate face … blue eyes and auburn locks’ (Journals, 323), identified in her lifetime as the likeness of Wallenstein, the famous commander of the Catholic forces in
the Thirty Years War. Once again a misapplied name gave spurious interest to a portrait she might otherwise have passed by. It had the beneficial effect of opening George Eliot’s eyes to other ‘fine portraits by Vandyke’ (*Journals*, 323).

Eliot’s most telling mistake (not her own) concerned the portrait called *Lucrezia Borgia* ‘with the cruel, cruel eyes’, and attributed to Giorgione (*Journals*, 323). Because he was a legendary name with a small oeuvre, mis-attributions to Giorgione were rife in the nineteenth century. Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Southern Germany*, in both the 1855 and 1858 editions, confidently identifies the sitter of this painting in the Liechtenstein collection as Lucrezia Borgia and the artist as Giorgione.9 The name of Lucrezia Borgia had been added to that of Lucretia, the Roman heroine, a drawing of whom is held out to view by the woman in the picture. The artist of what was once described as *Lucretia Borgia regarding a sketch of Lucretia, with an inscription* is now known to have been the sixteenth-century Venetian, Lorenzo Lotto. The Liechtenstein painting is merely a copy of a work by Lotto now in the National Gallery, London, and entitled, *A Lady with a Drawing of Lucretia*.10 George Eliot was seduced by the name of the subject, and incorporated her memory of the work into Chapter One of *The Lifted Veil* where Latimer sees in it a strange parallel with his wife, Bertha:

> This morning I had been looking at Giorgione’s picture of the cruel-eyed woman, said to be a likeness of Lucrezia Borgia. I had stood long alone before it, fascinated by the terrible reality of that cunning, relentless face, till I felt a strange poisoned sensation, as if I had long been inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of its effects.

In admiring Rubens’s portrait of ‘his lovely wife going to the bath with brown drapery round her’,11 a full-length study of Helene Fourment, naked apart from a fur coat loosely draping her body, George Eliot was ahead of her time. As Jennifer Fletcher notes: ‘The painting was not popular with nineteenth century critics, who found it vulgar and under-idealised, and who resented Rubens’ seeming exposure of his wife and private life’.12 One exception to this was Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Southern Germany* which describes the painting as one of Rubens’s ‘most exquisite portraits, for the careful execution and brilliancy of colouring’.13 This comment, together with George Eliot’s choice of paintings for particular studying in Dresden and Vienna, is probably an indication that she owned this volume.

The confusion in George Eliot’s memory about the location of the *Lucrezia Borgia* and Helene Fourment paintings, which she places in the wrong galleries, probably resulted from her disappointment in being able to see the Upper Belvedere only once: ‘the gallery being shut up on the Wednesday, and so many pictures have faded from my memory even of those which I had time to distinguish’.14

One recollection which remained with her suggests that she was receptive to mythic, and often erotic, subject-matter. ‘Titian’s Danae was one that delighted us’, she says, referring to a painting which shows the nude Danae, propped against cushions, as Jove falls on her in a shower of golden coins (*Journals*, 323). Eliot was less enthusiastic about Titian’s *Ecce Homo*, a pic-
ture of Pontius Pilate displaying Christ to the people:

There is an Ecce Homo by Titian, which is thought highly of, and is splendid in composition and colour, but the Christ is abject, the Pontius Pilate vulgar: amazing that they could have been painted by the same Man who conceived and executed the Christo del Moneta [the Tribute Money]! (Journals, 323)

Hers is an idiosyncratic view, running counter to received wisdom. In her brief time at the Upper Belvedere, George Eliot’s interest was concentrated on the Venetian School. As well as the two Titians which have been mentioned, she also noted some ‘huge Veroneses too, splendid and uninteresting’ (Journals, 323). These are mainly Biblical scenes with a handful of mythological subjects.

George Eliot noted one misattributed painting in the Belvedere gallery, ‘the remarkable head of Christ – a proud Italian face in a red garment, I think by Correggio’ (Journals, 323). This striking painting of Christ carrying the cross has been attributed to a number of different artists, Giorgione, Correggio, Andrea Solario and Palma Vecchio among them. Now said to be by ‘a Venetian artist’, it is nevertheless a fine work.

In spite of her hurry, it is unlikely that George Eliot would have missed an exceptional group of Dutch genre works in the Vienna gallery. Old Woman with a Jug at a Window by Gerrit Dou, painted in the 1660s, would surely have held her attention. This image of a plain elderly woman tending a plant has recently been interpreted as a warning against avarice, but George Eliot would have read it as a representation of simple homely virtue. The painting (with another at Dresden mentioned below) is a probable source for the passage in Chapter Seventeen of Adam Bede where George Eliot praises Dutch artists who are happy to paint an ‘old woman bending over her flower-pot’. George Eliot saw such paintings as evidence of realism in the arts, a concept which she and Lewes had been discussing and defining together during the 1850s. Franz Kugler’s discussion of the work of Dou would have appealed to her. Writing of him as a painter of the ‘lower classes – housemaids, and retailers of articles in daily use’, Kugler concludes that such subject matter is introduced here without a descent into ‘vulgar feeling’. In a general account of Dou’s subject matter, Kugler even writes of the ‘cheerful apartment of an old woman engaged in spinning’, a possible reference to Grace before Meat, the painting to which George Eliot refers in Adam Bede.

Even more exact in their realism were the paintings of Balthasar Denner, an artist whom George Eliot greatly admired. In the Upper Belvedere she saw ‘two heads by Denner, the most wonderful of all his wonderful heads that I have seen’. The eighteenth century German artist achieved fame in his own lifetime with studies of old men and women like these two paintings in the Upper Belvedere. George Eliot, attracted by his compassionate realism, could have seen a similar pair of heads in Munich and two more, both of old women, in the gallery at Dresden. Murray writes in almost identical terms of the Munich and Vienna examples, ‘remarkable for the microscopic minuteness with which every hair and wrinkle is made out’.

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Balthasar Denner. Head of an Old Woman. c.1726.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
When Lewes and George Eliot returned to Vienna in 1870, George Eliot was not well enough
to accompany George Henry Lewes on his visit to the Upper Belvedere. In his journal, he sim­
The introduction of Velasquez here is revealing. The Hapsburg connection has resulted in a
group of Velasquez pictures of the Spanish royal family and their children ending up in Vienna.
These were not mentioned by Eliot and Lewes in 1858. By 1870, they had been to Spain, and
had discovered the artist for themselves.

From Vienna the couple travelled to Prague where they spent a single day. Both cities were
stopping points on their way to Dresden, where they were to stay for six weeks. Dresden
housed one of Europe’s greatest galleries, and Eliot and Lewes visited it on three days each
week, remaining there from twelve to one. It was in Dresden that George Eliot fell in love with
Italian art. She had experienced pleasure in individual paintings, a Titian and two pictures
attributed to Correggio, in Berlin, but not the passion which marked her first sight of Raphael’s
Sistine Madonna, the acknowledged masterpiece of the Dresden gallery. The einzige
Madonna, as Eliot described it, was a turning point for her, and she was to regard this as the
world’s greatest masterpiece for the rest of her life. In her day, the Madonna, bought for
Dresden by Augustus the Strong in 1753-4, hung in a separate room, with a special setting
resembling an altarpiece in a chapel. On her first visit, during a crowded Sunday, George Eliot
was so struck that she found herself overcome with emotion and had to leave the room. There
is a hint of this in Chapter Twenty-six of Adam Bede, where the narrator compares Seth Bede,
looking for Dinah Morris in a crowd of women to the experience of feeling the ‘beauty and
the greatness of a pictured Madonna the more, when it has been for a moment screened from
us by a vulgar head in a bonnet’. The Sistine Madonna reappears in Book V Chapter I of The
Mill on the Floss, when Philip Wakem speaks of the painting to Maggie Tulliver, hoping to
inspire an idea of the mysterious in her:

The greatest of painters only once painted a mysteriously divine child; he
couldn’t have told how he did it, and we can’t tell why we feel it to be divine.
I think there are stores laid up in our human nature that our understandings can
make no complete inventory of.

In the 1850s, the Sistine Madonna was one of the most famous paintings in the world. Many
visitors travelled to Dresden specifically to see it. Today its iconic status has been replaced by
that of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, and Raphael’s name has been tarnished as a result of
his association with academicism. The city of Dresden, behind the ‘iron curtain’ for most of
the second half of the twentieth century, was, until comparatively recently, inaccessible to all
but the most determined tourists. Its baroque splendour was wrecked by allied bombing.
Raphael’s Madonna has been forgotten too, apart from the two mischievous angels at the bot­
tom of the picture who are endlessly reproduced.

Almost as famous as the Raphael Madonna was the Notte, a nativity scene by Correggio, one
of four large altarpieces by him in the picture gallery. George Eliot knew the painting well, but
probably drew her brilliant image for Maggie Tulliver’s quiet cousin, Lucy Deane, from anoth­
er of the Correggio quartet: ‘Lucy, with a face breathing playful joy, like one of Correggio’s cherubs, breathed forth her triumphant revelation’ (Book V, Chapter IX). George Eliot’s own favourite Correggio was the Madonna with St Sebastian ‘with the little cherub riding a cloud’ in the centre of the composition (Journals, 325). She speaks of a ‘Madonna with St Hubert’, by which she presumably means the Madonna with St George, and of a fourth altarpiece, the The Madonna with St Francis. This last George Eliot describes as a ‘very grave and sweet’ Madonna (Journals, 325). It was not, as she believed, painted when the artist was only nineteen, but dates from 1514/5 when Correggio was twenty-five. Nevertheless, Eliot is right to detect a greater restraint in the more conventional rendering of this religious image. ‘They are full of life’, George Eliot says of the altarpieces in her journal, ‘though the life is not of a high order, and I should have surmised without any previous knowledge, that the painter was among the first masters of technique’ (Journals, 325). It is not entirely clear what George Eliot means by ‘life of a high order’ here. Perhaps her point is that, for all Correggio’s technical gifts, the paintings do not have the grandeur of the Raphael Madonna. Or it may be that they did not strike her as life-like enough, a fundamental requirement in all the paintings which George Eliot admired.

Disembodied angel heads appear in all four of these paintings, but they are a particular feature of the St Francis and St Sebastian altarpieces. Eliot’s apt comparison of Lucy Deane with a Correggio is probably drawn from these two works. At the end of the novel, when Lucy makes her final appearance by Maggie’s tomb, it is as a smiling face, once more disembodied.

George Eliot saw a fifth painting by Correggio in the Dresden gallery. This celebrated work depicted the repentant but very fetching Mary Magdalen reading in the desert. Alfred Tennyson, never easy to please, especially admired it, but George Eliot damned it with faint praise. She thought it ‘sweet in conception’ but with less ‘than the usual merit of Correggio’s pictures as to painting’ (Journals, 325). The attribution of the Magdalen to Correggio has been disputed, although the balance of critical opinion is in its favour. The question must be left open as the painting, last seen at the end of the second world war, is now assumed to have been destroyed.

Titian’s Tribute Money is a third Dresden painting to make an appearance in George Eliot’s fiction. It provides a parallel for the narrator of Daniel Deronda when, in Chapter Forty, she attempts to express the contrast between the faces of Daniel and Mordecai Cohen: ‘I wish I could perpetuate those two faces, as Titian’s “Tribute Money” has perpetuated two types presenting another sort of contrast’. Daniel Deronda is a much later novel than either Adam Bede or The Mill on the Floss, but the National Gallery in London had acquired its own Titian painting of the subject in 1852, which may have refreshed George Eliot’s memory.19

The Dresden collection, largely put together in the eighteenth century, boasts two splendid recumbent Venuses, both by Venetian artists. At the time of George Eliot’s visit, one was attributed to Titian, the other was given, as it still is, to Palma Vecchio. Today, the ‘Titian’ is usually attributed to Giorgione, but said to have been finished by Titian. Writing in her journal, George Eliot is careful to point out that this nude Venus is ‘fit for its purity and sacred
loveliness to hang in a temple with Madonnas’ (Journals, 325). The Palma Vecchio painting, placed nearby, seemed to her ‘an excellent foil, because it is pretty and pure in itself, but beside the Titian it is common and unmeaning’ (Journals, 325). The comment is a very important one. George Eliot is asserting that the representation of the nude female form can be ‘pure’, even when, in her eyes, the picture is not of the highest quality. In the following decade the so-called ‘Battle of the Nude’ was to be waged among British painters, several of whom exhibited nudes with classical names, usually Venus, in order to avoid criticism.

George Eliot’s reference to mingling nudes with Madonnas is particularly appropriate to Dresden. Among the paintings in the gallery was a famous Madonna, then thought to have been painted by Hans Holbein for the Basle Burgermeister, Jakob Meyer. This celebrated work was the subject of an early attribution contest, when, in 1871, the two versions, from Dresden and Darmstadt, were hung side by side. As a result the Darmstadt version was proved to be the original, and the Dresden version a seventeenth-century copy. To George Eliot, happy in the thought that it was a Holbein, the Madonna was ‘very exquisite – a divinely gentle golden haired blond, with eyes cast down, in an attitude of unconscious easy grace – the loveliest of all the Madonnas in the Dresden Gallery, except the Sistine’ (Journals, 325).

Next to the Holbein copy hung a genuine painting by the artist, a portrait of Charles de Solier, Lord of Morette. Following the literature of her day, George Eliot believed this to be a portrait of Henry VIII’s goldsmith. (Nor was this the only story to have attached itself to the portrait; at an earlier stage it had been attributed to Leonardo da Vinci.) The sitter’s gesture of partially drawing his sword was interpreted as a sign of the subject’s pride in his own workmanship rather than military vanity. George Eliot’s comments suggest that, had she known that this was not a bourgeois sitter, her attitude to the portrait would have been very different: ‘a wonderful portrait by Holbein which I especially enjoyed looking at. It represents nothing more lofty than a plain weighty man of business, a goldsmith; but the eminently fine painting brings out all the weighty calm good sense that lies in a first rate character of that order’ (Journals, 325).

Dresden, like Munich and Berlin, is rich in small Dutch and Flemish genre paintings, so rich in fact that George Eliot was not able to ‘satisfy my appetite for the rich collection of Flemish and Dutch pictures here – for Teniers, Ryckaert, Gerard Dow, Terburg, Mieris and the rest’ (Journals, 326). Among these paintings was one by Frans Mieris showing an old woman tending a flower in a pot, another possible inspiration for the passage in Adam Bede already discussed.30

George Eliot and George Henry Lewes had studied Flemish, Dutch, German and Italian paintings in other galleries on their travels. In Dresden they seem to have discovered a new school, the Spanish. They warmly praised Saint Rodriguez by Murillo, which ‘we delighted in extremely … The attitude and expression are sublime, and strikingly distinguished from all other pictures of saints I have ever seen. He stands erect in his scarlet and white robes, with face upturned – the arms held simply downward, but the hands held open in a receptive attitude. The silly cupid-like angel holding the martyr’s crown in the corner spoils all’ (Journals, 325-6). It was almost certainly the serious expression of the saint’s face and the comparative
simplicity of the painting which pleased George Eliot. Murillo was also the artist of a popular Dresden Madonna, which had, George Eliot was told, been riddled with holes during the rising of 1848. Once again, the novelist responded with feeling to the humanity of this ‘simple, sad mother with her child, without the least divinity in it – suggesting a dead or sick father, and imperfect nourishment in a garret. In that light it is touching’ (Journals, 326). Murillo, known as a painter of genre scenes of Spanish lower class life, has, as George Eliot implies here, brought this same quality of truthfulness to a sacred work.

A few pictures in Dresden failed to please Eliot and Lewes. Although George Eliot admired the large altarpieces by Veronese for their size and grandeur, the Venetian artist seemed to her to be ‘ignoble as a painter of human beings’ (Journals, 326). This sweeping judgement, similar to one made about the same artist in Vienna, probably reflects the novelist’s dismay at the luxurious treatment of accessories and surroundings. Lewes, writing from Italy in 1864, described Titian as ‘to us the supreme painter’, but went on to say that, for all his ‘splendour’, ‘Veronese’s worldly sensual magnificence’ could not stand up to the competition of the early Venetian artist.21 For different reasons, but in similar vein, Eliot detested the heads of the crucified and suffering Christ by Guido Reni, a painter whom, with the rest of the seventeenth-century Bolognese School, Ruskin had taught her to despise. The two paintings (one of which has since been demoted) seemed to her to prove that Reni was ‘superlatively odious in his Christs, in agonized or ecstatic attitudes, much about the level of the accomplished London beggar’ (Journals, 326).

True to her prevailing interest in portraits of simple, elderly folk, George Eliot admired several of Rembrandt’s portraits at Dresden. Three were of old men, another a self portrait, and a fifth a portrait of his wife Saskia. She found the same artist’s Ganymede, rapt into the air by Jove in the form of an eagle and urinating in panic, ‘an offence’.22 Her old favourite Rubens ‘does not show to great advantage’, the exceptions being three works, Diana returning from the hunt, a scene with Satyrs and dead game, which George Eliot, rather surprisingly, found ‘charming’; the sketch for the Judgement of Paris which George Eliot would have known from the National Gallery in London (Journals, 326). The Love Garden is now described as a copy of a late Rubens painting, then in a private collection in Madrid and later bought by Baron Edmond de Rothschild, in which a group of well-dressed revellers at a fête champêtre are drawn together by winged cupids.

Rubens, with whom Eliot and Lewes began their travels, makes an appropriate point at which to leave them. In later years their travels were mostly to Italy. There, many works of art were still in their original settings in churches and palaces, and, if the stories told of them were frequently apocryphal, the attributions were generally correct. There were, of course, exceptions, like the Beatrice Cenci, but, on the whole, the art lover’s experience of Italian painting was more straightforward in Italy than out of it. George Eliot, as I have shown elsewhere, did make some mistakes when she wrote about Florentine art in Romola, but they were errors of dating and location, not of attribution or subject.23

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4. *Journals*, 251. She also admired a painting of a woman in a brown mantle, but, without the name of an artist or a better account of the subject, it is impossible to be sure what this might be.

On one occasion George Eliot calls the nymph ‘Semele’, the name of the mother of Bacchus, but she was presumably simply confusing two of Jove’s lovers. John Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers on the Continent* for 1854 (340) clearly states that the Berlin *Io* is a copy of Correggio’s painting in Vienna, one of several indications that George Eliot was not using this guidebook.


7. Possibly time ran out. George Eliot notes that ‘the German hours’ were ‘difficult to adjust to our occupations’ and she complains elsewhere that the galleries were often closed (*Letters*, II, 454 and 476). Murray notes that the opening hours were 9-3 in the summer and 9-2 in the winter.


9. This discovery was made by Helen Small, see her edition of *The Lifted Veil*, Oxford World’s Classics (1999), 18.

10. *Journals*, 323. This was inspired by a Titian painting of which Rubens made a copy, and which he may have seen in Charles I’s private apartments in Whitehall.


14 *Journals*, 323. The gallery opened from 9-4 on Tuesday and Friday, but Murray tells readers of his *Handbook for Travellers in Southern Germany* for 1855 (210) that ‘a small fee will procure admission on other days’.


17 *Journals*, 323. My thanks to Professor Barbara Hardy for reminding me that George Eliot used the name ‘Denner’ for Mrs Transome’s maid in *Felix Holt*.

18 *Handbook to Southern Germany* (1855), 211.


20 Another small work in the Dresden collection was a painting by Ter Borch of a woman, alone and seen from behind, identical to the central figure in *Parental Admonition*, the painting in Berlin which George Eliot associated with Goethe.


22 *Journals*, 326; see Witemeyer, 188, for George Eliot’s possible reference to this painting in *The Mill on the Floss*.