In Pietro Aretino’s uproarious, relentlessly bawdy dialogue Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia, Nanna, a former prostitute, regales her friend Antonia, another aging whore, with an anecdote stemming from her youthful residence in a convent, where “orgiastic antics” took place on a daily basis. Here, the father general, simultaneously dildling a young nun and caressing a young friar, is portrayed as “keeping one hand in the lovely little angel’s box and with the other fondling the cherub’s buttocks, now kissing him, now her,” while wearing “the frowning face which that marble figure at the Belvedere gives to the serpents that are murdering him between his sons.” Anyone acquainted with Aretino’s distinctive brand of ribaldry, as well as with the Renaissance penchant for satirizing the clergy, will presumably read this passage with a smile, a shake of the head, and a sense of recognition. What may be surprising to the art historian, however, is the reference to the “marble figure at the Belvedere,” which, of course, was Aretino’s way of describing the Laocoön. Nor was this the only time that Aretino used the famous statue to make a literary image more vivid. In a letter to his friend, the physician Agostino Ricchi, he satirizes princes, just as he satirized monks and nuns and friars: “Why, the gout and syphilis, which twist them into the gestures of a Laocoön, do not even permit them to eat, sleep, or fornicate, so what pleasures have they?” The pairing of gout and syphilis, incidentally, was no coincidence, for Aretino regarded them as siblings. As the title character of his comedy Il Marescalco puts it with scornful misogyny, “I’ve even heard it said that it’s less painful to have the French disease, with all its paraphernalia of eruptions, blisters, and pains, or even its sister, the gout, than to have a wife.”

Many of Aretino’s references to art and artists are well known, among them his roster of famous painters, sculptors, and architects in the “Great Names Scene” of Il Marescalco, his letter to Michelangelo attacking the Last Judgment for indecency, or his invocation of Titian upon witnessing a sunset over the Grand Canal. But familiar passages such as these play no role in the present article, which calls attention to an assortment of lesser-known artistic allusions in Renaissance literature. Moreover, instead of culling them from the standard body of art-historical texts—say, Vasari’s Vitae, Pino’s Dialogo della pittura, or Borghini’s Il Riposo—I have chosen my citations from the work of Aretino and other writers of fiction. In so doing, I hope to shed light on attitudes toward, and assumptions about, art and architecture that were shared by a wider segment of the Renaissance public than those whose interest in the visual arts might have prompted them to read Vasari, Pino, or Borghini. And, since there still remain far too many allusions of this sort to attempt a comprehensive survey, I focus mainly on examples of the type already cited—those like Aretino’s, which are either pornographic (intended to arouse lust),
erotic (a milder, “softer” form of pornography), lewd or obscene (intended to provoke shock or disgust), bawdy or ribald (intended to stimulate amusement), or some combination thereof.\(^6\) If nothing else, I hope to provide a certain amount of entertainment for the reader, to trigger an occasional chuckle, and also perhaps to elicit stronger reactions by using language seldom encountered in the pages of a scholarly journal. Should anyone take offense, I plead my case with the words that Giambattista Marino employed in the prologue to Canto VIII of \(L’Adone\), his great epic poem of 1623, to forestall criticism of the canto’s erotic content: “If innocent, the author need not care / that on his page immodest strains appear.”\(^7\)

One of Aretino’s typical combinations of the lewd and the ribald involves classical statuary other than the \(Laocoön\). Nanna, reminiscing about a lover from her younger days, recalls how “he used to go crazy when he looked at my thing,” comparing it to “those pretty little mouths that those marble statues of women, found here and there around Rome, keep so tightly pursed; and he used to say that it smiled just like those mouths seem to do.”\(^8\) One can only guess what statues Aretino was thinking of, but there is no doubt about which monument of the ancient world he had in mind when describing how Nanna, all worked up from spying on the sexual frolics in the convent of her youth, relieves her itch by plunging a glass dildo into her coliseo,\(^9\) or when she herself describes the perfect rear end of a lovely young whore as a coliseco—the pun between culo (ass) and colosseo (Colosseum) being irresistible.\(^10\) Needless to belaboring the point, Antonio Vignali concocted a raunchy etymology for the Colosseum in his outspokenly obscene and homoerotic dialogue \(La Cazzaria\), composed in Siena around 1525. “And if you want to see and understand what a worthy and perfect thing the ass is,” says Arsiccio, Vignali’s alter ego, “remember that the Romans, . . . having made such a marvelous and stupendous work,” and “wanting to give it a name equal to its grandeur and nobility”—not to mention its resemblance to a colossal toilet—“called it \(Culiseo\), that is, \(Culi Seggio\) [seat of asses], and that name is said to be fitting for such a great work.”\(^11\)

The Colosseum, however, was only one of many ancient Roman landmarks to provide Renaissance authors with imagery to use in bawdy, lewd, or pornographic contexts. Close to Aretino’s brand of humor than to Vignali’s (which is seldom very funny at all) is that of Giambattista Basile, the early seventeenth-century Neapolitan writer whose delightful anthology of fifty stories, crosses between fairytales and novellas in the Boccaccian tradition, bears a title, \(Lo Cunto de li cunti\), that sounds as though it were invented expressly for this article, at least until one realizes that it translates as \(The Tale of Tales\) in the dialect of the author’s home town. Basile’s imagination is as rich as Aretino’s, his powers of invention are just as amazing, and his language, which may be characterized as bawdy or ribald rather than lewd or obscene, is every bit as colorful. Among the numerous metaphors relating to painting, sculpture, and architecture found throughout the stories is one involving a scheme to test whether the girl Belluccia in “The Garlic Patch” (3.6), disguised as a man, is male or female—or, as Basile puts it, employing Freudian symbolism \(avant la lettre\), whether she is the Circus Maximus or the Column of Trajan.\(^12\)

Needless to say, humorous, satirical, and/or ribald allusions to contemporary art
are also widespread in Renaissance literature. An odd but intriguing example pertaining to Michelangelo’s David occurs in Machiavelli’s little-known satire of fashionable society, the Articles for a Pleasure Company (Capitoli per una compagnia di piacere). Among the rules by which members of this fictitious association must abide is one stipulating that “the women of the said company may not wear farthingales or anything else beneath [their skirts] that might offer obstruction; and all the men must go without laces, and instead of them wear pins [to hold up their pants?], which the women are prohibited to wear, under penalty of having to look with spectacles at the Giant of the piazza.”13 Although the meaning of the passage is not entirely clear, perhaps its reference to women regarding the David with spectacles is merely a silly type of exaggeration. After all, who needs glasses to see the “Giant” in the Piazza della Signoria? On the other hand, given the sartorial context of the phrase, cryptic though it may be, and the inescapable prominence of the Giant’s giant cazzo, exaggerated by the inevitable view from below, there is good reason to think that Machiavelli, ever inclined toward irony, meant to introduce a note of salaciousness. Such was certainly the case with what I take to be a similar joke involving Raphael, published in Lodovico Domenichi’s mid-sixteenth-century compilation of facezie—paragraph-length nuggets of Renaissance wit that now often seem much less amusing than they must have been when first thought up and written down. The one in question, which still has the power to provoke laughter, is unaccountably filled with errors but nonetheless delightful. It centers on Raphael’s frescoes in “the loggia in the garden of Agostin Chisi [sic],” better known as the Villa Farnesina, where “he had made many figures of gods and graces, and among others a very large Polyphemus and a thirteen-year-old Mercury.”14 The knowledgeable reader needs to overlook the fact that Raphael’s Mercury is somewhat older than thirteen, that the figure of Polyphemus is located in the Sala di Galatea rather than the Loggia di Psiche, and that it is not by Raphael but by Sebastiano del Piombo. Be all that as it may, Raphael is approached by a pretentious lady who, after admiring and praising the paintings, says:

Certainly all these figures are most excellent, but I could have wished, Signor Raffaello, that for the sake of your integrity [onestà] you had painted a nice rose or perhaps a fig leaf over the shame of Mercury. To which Raphael, smiling, replied: Pardon me, Madonna, for not having considered this. And then he added: But why did you not say that I should have done the same to Polyphemus, for whom you praised me so much and whose shame is so much greater?15

Here, too, in order to appreciate the joke, one must overlook a major blunder. Although Raphael’s Mercury is indeed rather well endowed, the same cannot be said about Sebastiano’s Polyphemus, whose loins are decorously covered. In any event, like Machiavelli’s not-so-witty witticism, the facezia derives its humor from an alleged female fascination with a gigantic male member. Is it true, as they say, that size matters? Apparently so, at least in the annals of Renaissance comedy.

Naturally, Renaissance authors often refer to works of contemporary art in nonerotic contexts, although even the most serious paintings or sculptures are liable to serve as
grist for the satirist’s or the humorist’s mill. Ariosto, for example, in the third of his seven rhymed satires, composed in 1518, uses one of Michelangelo’s prophets on the Sistine ceiling in such a way, referring sarcastically to “as many mitres and diadems as Jonah of the Chapel ever sees assembled at a Papal Mass.” The reference, however, is inadvertently ironic, for of all the prophets that Ariosto might have chosen, Jonah is the only one who gazes upward—toward the scene God Separating Light from Darkness, in fact—and away from the mitred and diadem-dressed clergy that would have congregated on the pavement below.

At the other end of the spectrum from such mild sarcasm is the broad scatological humor of Anton Francesco Grazzini, alias il Lasca or “The Roach”—not the insect, but the fish—a sixteenth-century composer of burlesque poetry, lusty comedies, and Boccaccio-style novellas. I take my example from the novella said to be the masterpiece among his collection of twenty-one entitled Le Cene (The Suppers), written after 1549 but never finished or published during the author’s lifetime. It is one of three that feature Lo Scheggia (“The Splinter”), an early sixteenth-century Florentine painter who bore the same nickname as his grandfather, who happened to be Masaccio’s younger brother, and Scheggia’s sidekick Pilucca (Paolo Geri), a minor sculptor of the same period. These practical jokers, descendants of Buffalmacco and Bruno, the artist-pranksters of Boccaccio’s Decameron and Franco Sacchetti’s Trecentonovelle, play a cruel, elaborate trick on a hapless hatmaker named Giansimone. When the latter soils his pants from fright, Lo Scheggia turns to him and says, “Giansimone, must I tell you that your pants are full of shit?” “Even Cimabue, who was born blind, would see that,” added Pilucca; “don’t you smell how he stinks?” Thus, at precisely the same time that Vasari was hailing Cimabue as the man born to “give the first light to the art of painting,” Grazzini was voicing quite the opposite opinion. For him, Cimabue’s blindness was not only congenital but proverbial, so that it could be invoked for the sake of a tasteless joke and even permit him to confound logic by conflating the senses of sight and smell.

Examples of the kind that have been quoted in this article could be multiplied indefinitely. The somewhat motley collection assembled here may or may not add up to anything more than the sum of the items it comprises, but I have nevertheless wanted to bring these tasty morsels to the attention of fellow art historians and encourage them to sample from the vast smorgasbord of Renaissance literature more often than they usually do. It is an extraordinarily rich table of delights on which, from time to time, one encounters an unexpected tidbit: an allusion to an artist, to a work of art, or to art in general that may, if nothing else, provide the perfect condiment for our studies, whose main courses could certainly profit from an occasional pinch of literary spice.
1. I borrow the expression “orgiastic antics” from Linda Wolk-Simon’s essay in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Andrea Bayer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 48. This massive volume, which accompanied a landmark exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, may now serve as an ideal point of reference for anyone whose interests include erotic imagery in Renaissance art.


3. Since general readers, unlike professional art historians, would not be expected to recognize the allusion, Rosenthal substitutes the phrase “Vatican Museum” for “Belvedere.”


6. I have drawn these useful distinctions, which often overlap with one another, from David O. Frantz, *Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), p. 4, quoting Roger Thompson, *Unfit for Modest Ears: A Study of Pornographic, Obscene, and Bawdy Works Written or Published in England in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. ix–x. However, Thompson defines the term erotic more dubiously as “intended to place sex within the context of love, mutuality and affection.”


8. Aretino, *Ragionamento: Dialogo*, p. 271, I.3: “Ah! Ah! Mi ricordo vederlo impazito nel mirarmela . . . la assimigliava a una di queste boccuccie che tengono serrate le figure delle donne di marmo che sono in qua e in là per Roma; e diceva che ella rideva come par ridano le bocche d’esse.”


terarie di Niccolò Machiavelli, ed. Guido Mazzoni and Mario Casella (Florence: Barèra, 1929), p. 782: “Non possino le donne di detta compagnia portare fal- diglie, o altra cosa sotto, che dia impedimento; e gli uomini tutti debbino ire sanza stringhe e, in luogo di quelle, usino gli spiletti; i quali sieno proibiti a por- tare alle donne, sotto pena di avere a guardare con gli occhiali il Gigante di piazza.”


15. Ibid. Oddly enough, the anecdote appears to be missing from John Shearman’s comprehensive Raphael in Early Modern Sources, 1483–1602, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

