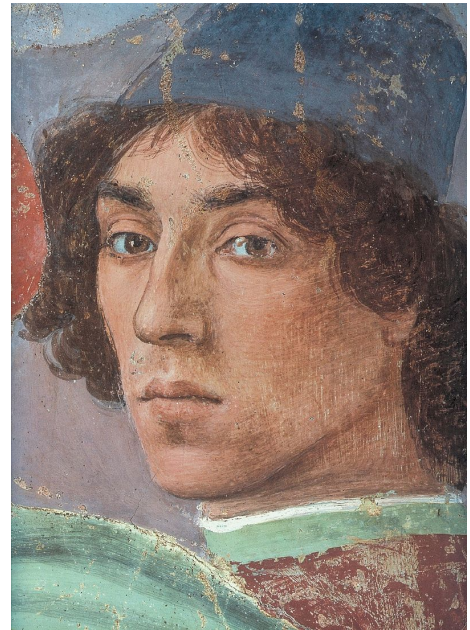


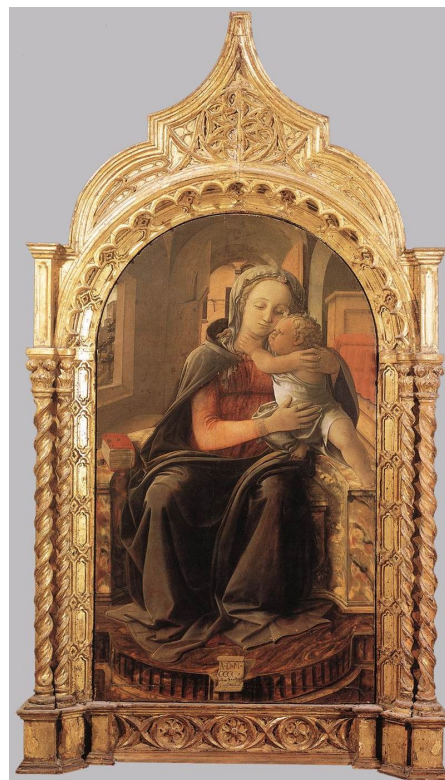
## Robert Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" (ca.1853; 1855)

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!  
You need not clap your torches to my face.  
Zooks, what's to blame? you think you see a monk!  
What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,  
And here you catch me at an alley's end 5  
Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?  
The Carmine's my cloister: hunt it up,  
Do,--harry out, if you must show your zeal,  
Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,  
And nip each softling of a wee white mouse, 10  
Weke, weke, that's crept to keep him company!  
Aha, you know your betters! Then, you'll take  
Your hand away that's fiddling on my throat,  
And please to know me likewise. Who am I?  
Why, one, sir, who is lodging with a friend 15  
Three streets off--he's a certain . . . how d'ye call?  
Master--a ...Cosimo of the Medici,  
I' the house that caps the corner. Boh! you were best!  
Remember and tell me, the day you're hanged,  
How you affected such a gullet's-gripe! 20  
But you, sir, it concerns you that your knaves  
Pick up a manner nor discredit you:  
Zooks, are we pilchards, that they sweep the streets  
And count fair price what comes into their net?  
He's Judas to a tittle, that man is! 25  
Just such a face! Why, sir, you make amends.  
Lord, I'm not angry! Bid your hang-dogs go  
Drink out this quarter-florin to the health  
Of the munificent House that harbours me  
(And many more beside, lads! more beside!) 30  
And all's come square again. I'd like his face--  
His, elbowing on his comrade in the door  
With the pike and lantern,--for the slave that holds  
John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair  
With one hand ("Look you, now," as who should say) 35  
And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!  
It's not your chance to have a bit of chalk,  
A wood-coal or the like? or you should see!  
Yes, I'm the painter, since you style me so.  
What, brother Lippo's doings, up and down, 40  
You know them and they take you? like enough!  
I saw the proper twinkle in your eye--  
'Tell you, I liked your looks at very first.  
Let's sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch.  
Here's spring come, and the nights one makes up bands 45  
To roam the town and sing out carnival,  
And I've been three weeks shut within my mew,  
A-painting for the great man, saints and saints  
And saints again. I could not paint all night--



self-portrait, detail from *The Dispute with Simon Magus* (1481-82) / fresco / Brancacci Chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine (Florence, Italy)

Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air. 50  
 There came a hurry of feet and little feet,  
 A sweep of lute strings, laughs, and whiffs of song, --  
 Flower o' the broom,  
 Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!  
 Flower o' the quince, 55  
 I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?  
 Flower o' the thyme--and so on. Round they went.  
 Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter  
 Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight,--three slim shapes,  
 And a face that looked up . . . zooks, sir, flesh and blood, 60  
 That's all I'm made of! Into shreds it went,  
 Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,  
 All the bed-furniture--a dozen knots,  
 There was a ladder! Down I let myself,  
 Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped, 65  
 And after them. I came up with the fun  
 Hard by Saint Laurence, hail fellow, well met,--  
 Flower o' the rose,  
 If I've been merry, what matter who knows?  
 And so as I was stealing back again 70  
 To get to bed and have a bit of sleep  
 Ere I rise up to-morrow and go work  
 On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast  
 With his great round stone to subdue the flesh,  
 You snap me of the sudden. Ah, I see! 75  
 Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your head--  
 Mine's shaved--a monk, you say--the sting's in that!  
 If Master Cosimo announced himself,  
 Mum's the word naturally; but a monk!  
 Come, what am I a beast for? tell us, now! 80  
 I was a baby when my mother died  
 And father died and left me in the street.  
 I starved there, God knows how, a year or two  
 On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,  
 Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day, 85  
 My stomach being empty as your hat,  
 The wind doubled me up and down I went.  
 Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,  
 (Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)  
 And so along the wall, over the bridge, 90  
 By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,  
 While I stood munching my first bread that month:  
 "So, boy, you're minded," quoth the good fat father  
 Wiping his own mouth, 'twas refection-time,--  
 "To quit this very miserable world? 95  
 Will you renounce" . . . "the mouthful of bread?" thought I;  
 By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;  
 I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,  
 Palace, farm, villa, shop, and banking-house,  
 Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici 100



*Madonna & Child Enthroned (1437)*

Have given their hearts to--all at eight years old.  
 Well, sir, I found in time, you may be sure,  
 'Twas not for nothing--the good bellyful,  
 The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,  
 And day-long blessed idleness beside! 105  
 "Let's see what the urchin's fit for"--that came next.  
 Not overmuch their way, I must confess.  
 Such a to-do! They tried me with their books:  
 Lord, they'd have taught me Latin in pure waste!  
 Flower o' the clove. 110  
 All the Latin I construe is, "amo" I love!  
 But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets  
 Eight years together, as my fortune was,  
 Watching folk's faces to know who will fling  
 The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires, 115  
 And who will curse or kick him for his pains,--  
 Which gentleman processional and fine,  
 Holding a candle to the Sacrament,  
 Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch  
 The droppings of the wax to sell again, 120  
 Or holla for the Eight and have him whipped,--  
 How say I?--nay, which dog bites, which lets drop  
 His bone from the heap of offal in the street,--  
 Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,  
 He learns the look of things, and none the less 125  
 For admonition from the hunger-pinch.  
 I had a store of such remarks, be sure,  
 Which, after I found leisure, turned to use.  
 I drew men's faces on my copy-books,  
 Scrawled them within the antiphony's marge, 130  
 Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,  
 Found eyes and nose and chin for A's and B's,  
 And made a string of pictures of the world  
 Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,  
 On the wall, the bench, the door. The monks looked black. 135  
 "Nay," quoth the Prior, "turn him out, d'ye say?  
 In no wise. Lose a crow and catch a lark.  
 What if at last we get our man of parts,  
 We Carmelites, like those Camaldolese  
 And Preaching Friars, to do our church up fine 140  
 And put the front on it that ought to be!"  
 And hereupon he bade me daub away.  
 Thank you! my head being crammed, the walls a blank,  
 Never was such prompt disemburdening.  
 First, every sort of monk, the black and white, 145  
 I drew them, fat and lean: then, folk at church,  
 From good old gossips waiting to confess  
 Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends,--  
 To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,  
 Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there 150  
 With the little children round him in a row



*Madonna and Child (1440-45)*

Of admiration, half for his beard and half  
 For that white anger of his victim's son  
 Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,  
 Signing himself with the other because of Christ 155  
 (Whose sad face on the cross sees only this  
 After the passion of a thousand years)  
 Till some poor girl, her apron o'er her head,  
 (Which the intense eyes looked through) came at eve 160  
 On tiptoe, said a word, dropped in a loaf,  
 Her pair of earrings and a bunch of flowers  
 (The brute took growling), prayed, and so was gone.  
 I painted all, then cried " 'Tis ask and have;  
 Choose, for more's ready!"--laid the ladder flat,  
 And showed my covered bit of cloister-wall. 165  
 The monks closed in a circle and praised lou  
 Till checked, taught what to see and not to see,  
 Being simple bodies,--"That's the very man!  
 Look at the boy who stoops to pat the dog!  
 That woman's like the Prior's niece who comes 170  
 To care about his asthma: it's the life!"  
 But there my triumph's straw-fire flared and funk'd;  
 Their betters took their turn to see and say:  
 The Prior and the learned pulled a face  
 And stopped all that in no time. "How? what's here?  
 Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!  
 Faces, arms, legs, and bodies like the true  
 As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!  
 Your business is not to catch men with show,  
 With homage to the perishable clay, 180  
 But lift them over it, ignore it all,  
 Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.  
 Your business is to paint the souls of men--  
 Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke . . . no, it's not . . .  
 It's vapour done up like a new-born babe-- 185  
 (In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)  
 It's . . . well, what matters talking, it's the soul!  
 Give us no more of body than shows soul!  
 Here's Giotto, with his Saint a-praising God,  
 That sets us praising--why not stop with him? 190  
 Why put all thoughts of praise out of our head  
 With wonder at lines, colours, and what not?  
 Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!  
 Rub all out, try at it a second time.  
 Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts, 195  
 She's just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say,--  
 Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!  
 Have it all out!" Now, is this sense, I ask?  
 A fine way to paint soul, by painting body  
 So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further 200  
 And can't fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white  
 When what you put for yellow's simply black,



*Madonna with the Child and Scenes  
 from the Life of St. Anne (c.1452-53) /  
 tempera on wood / Pitti Palace / Uffizi  
 Gallery (Florence, Italy)*

And any sort of meaning looks intense  
 When all beside itself means and looks nought.  
 Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn, 205  
 Left foot and right foot, go a double step,  
 Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,  
 Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,  
 The Prior's niece . . . patron-saint--is it so pretty  
 You can't discover if it means hope, fear, 210  
 Sorrow or joy? won't beauty go with these?  
 Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,  
 Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,  
 And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?  
 Or say there's beauty with no soul at all-- 215  
 (I never saw it--put the case the same--)  
 If you get simple beauty and nought else,  
 You get about the best thing God invents:  
 That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed,  
 Within yourself, when you return him thanks. 220  
 "Rub all out!" Well, well, there's my life, in short,  
 And so the thing has gone on ever since.  
 I'm grown a man no doubt, I've broken bounds:  
 You should not take a fellow eight years old  
 And make him swear to never kiss the girls. 225  
 I'm my own master, paint *now* as I please--  
 Having a friend, you see, in the Corner-house!  
 Lord, it's fast holding by the rings in front--  
 Those great rings serve more purposes than just  
 To plant a flag in, or tie up a horse! 230  
 And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes  
 Are peeping o'er my shoulder as I work,  
 The heads shake still--"It's art's decline, my son!  
 You're not of the true painters, great and old;  
 Brother Angelico's the man, you'll find;  
 Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:  
 Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third!"  
 Flower o' the pine,  
 You keep your mistr ... manners, and I'll stick to mine!  
 I'm not the third, then: bless us, they must know! 240  
 Don't you think they're the likeliest to know,  
 They with their Latin? So, I swallow my rage,  
 Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint  
 To please them--*sometimes do* and *sometimes don't*;  
 For, doing most, there's pretty sure to come 245  
 A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints--  
 A laugh, a cry, the business of the world--  
 (Flower o' the peach  
 Death for us all, and his own life for each!)  
 And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over, 250  
 The world and life's too big to pass for a dream,  
 And I do these wild things in sheer despite,  
 And play the fooleries you catch me at,



Madonna and Child with Two Angels  
 (c.1450-1465) / tempera on panel / Uffizi  
 Gallery, Florence

In pure rage! The old mill-horse, out at grass  
 After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so, 255  
 Although the miller does not preach to him  
 The only good of grass is to make chaff.  
 What would men have? Do they like grass or no--  
 May they or mayn't they? all I want's the thing  
 Settled for ever one way. As it is, 260  
 You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:  
 You don't like what you only like too much,  
 You do like what, if given you at your word,  
 You find abundantly detestable.  
*For me*, I think I speak as I was taught; 265  
 I always see the garden and God there  
 A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,  
 The *value and significance of flesh*,  
 I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.



Massaccio's *The Tribute Money* (1425) / fresco / Brancacci Chapel (Florence, Italy) / "Guidi" (1.276) and "Hulking Tom" (1.277) refer to Massaccio (Tommaso di Giovanni Guidi)

You understand me: I'm a beast, I know. 270  
 But see, now--why, I see as certainly  
 As that the morning-star's about to shine,  
 What will hap some day. We've a youngster here  
 Comes to our convent, studies what I do,  
 Slouches and stares and lets no atom drop: 275  
 His name is Guidi--he'll not mind the monks--  
 They call him Hulking Tom, he lets them talk--  
 He picks my practice up--he'll paint apace.  
 I hope so--though I never live so long,  
 I know what's sure to follow. You be judge! 280  
 You speak no Latin more than I, belike;  
 However, you're my man, you've seen the world  
 --The beauty and the wonder and the power,  
 The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,

Changes, surprises,--and God made it all! 285  
 --For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,  
 For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,  
 The mountain round it and the sky above,  
 Much more the figures of man, woman, child,  
 These are the frame to? What's it all about? 290  
 To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,  
 Wondered at? oh, this last of course!--you say.



Fra Filippo Lippi's *The Annunciation* (c. 1449-59) / tempera on wood / National Gallery (London, UK)

But why not do as well as say,--paint these  
 Just as they are, careless what comes of it?  
 God's works--paint any one, and count it crime 295  
 To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works  
 Are here already; nature is complete:  
 Suppose you reproduce her--(which you can't)  
 There's no advantage! you must beat her, then."  
 For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love 300  
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;  
 And so they are better, painted--better to us,  
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;  
 God uses us to help each other so, 305  
 Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,  
 Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,  
 And trust me but you should, though! How much more,  
 If I drew higher things with the same truth!  
 That were to take the Prior's pulpit-place, 310  
 Interpret God to all of you! Oh, oh,  
 It makes me mad to see what men shall do  
 And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us,  
 Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:  
 To find its meaning is my meat and drink. 315

"Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!"  
 Strikes in the Prior: "when your meaning's plain  
 It does not say to folk--remember matins,  
 Or, mind you fast next Friday!" Why, for this  
 What need of art at all? A skull and bones, 320  
 Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what's best,  
 A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.  
 I painted a Saint Laurence six months since  
 At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:  
 "How looks my painting, now the scaffold's down?" 325  
 I ask a brother: "Hugely," he returns--  
 "Already not one phiz of your three slaves  
 Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,  
 But's scratched and prodded to our heart's content,  
 The pious people have so eased their own 330  
 With coming to say prayers there in a rage:  
 We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.  
 Expect another job this time next year,  
 For pity and religion grow i' the crowd--  
 Your painting serves its purpose!" Hang the fools! 335

--That is--you'll not mistake an idle word  
 Spoke in a huff by a poor monk, God wot,  
 Tasting the air this spicy night which turns  
 The unaccustomed head like Chianti wine!  
 Oh, the church knows! don't misreport me, now! 340  
 It's natural a poor monk out of bounds  
 Should have his apt word to excuse himself:  
 And hearken how I plot to make amends.  
 I have bethought me: I shall paint a piece  
 ... There's for you! Give me six months, then go, see 345  
 Something in Sant' Ambrogio's! Bless the nuns!  
 They want a cast o' my office. I shall paint  
 God in the midst, Madonna and her babe,  
 Ringed by a bowery, flowery angel-brood,  
 Lilies and vestments and white faces, sweet 350  
 As puff on puff of grated orris-root  
 When ladies crowd to Church at midsummer.  
 And then i' the front, of course a saint or two--  
 Saint John' because he saves the Florentines,  
 Saint Ambrose, who puts down in black and white 355  
 The convent's friends and gives them a long day,  
 And Job, I must have him there past mistake,  
 The man of Uz (and Us without the z,  
 Painters who need his patience). Well, all these  
 Secured at their devotion, up shall come 360  
 Out of a corner when you least expect,  
 As one by a dark stair into a great light,  
 Music and talking, who but Lippo! I!--  
 Mazed, motionless, and moonstruck--I'm the man!  
 Back I shrink--what is this I see and hear? 365



Fra Filippo Lippi's *Portrait of a Woman* (c.1445) / on poplar wood / Gemäldegalerie



I, caught up with my monk's-things by mistake,  
My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,  
I, in this presence, this pure company!  
Where's a hole, where's a corner for escape?  
Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing  
Forward, puts out a soft palm--"Not so fast!"  
--Addresses the celestial presence, "nay--  
He made you and devised you, after all,  
Though he's none of you! Could Saint John there draw--  
His camel-hair make up a painting brush?  
We come to brother Lippo for all that,  
*Iste perfecit opus!* So, all smile--  
I shuffle sideways with my blushing face  
Under the cover of a hundred wings  
Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you're gay  
And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,  
Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops  
The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off  
To some safe bench behind, not letting go  
The palm of her, the little lily thing  
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,  
Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say.  
And so all's saved for me, and for the church  
A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!  
Your hand, sir, and good-bye: no lights, no lights!  
The street's hushed, and I know my own way back,  
Don't fear me! There's the grey beginning. Zooks!

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Fra Filippo Lippi's *Portrait of a Man and Woman at a Casement* (c.1440) / Metropolitan Museum of Art / NY