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## Introduction

*It is undeniably true that if the artists of our own time were justly rewarded they would produce even greater works of art, far superior to those of the ancient world.*

—Giorgio Vasari, *Vite* (Preface III).<sup>1</sup>

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) is one of the most important cultural figures in Italy during the middle of the sixteenth century, having achieved prominence as an art critic, historian, architect, aesthete, painter and impresario. His accomplishments in all these capacities have long been the subject of extensive study, including his work as an iconographer, a precursor of the emblematic tradition, and promoter of the classical tradition in art, theory of art, philosophy and literature.

In many respects, he is an exemplary case of what Baldassare Castiglione called *renaissance man*,<sup>2</sup> as noted in the writings of Paola Barocchi, T. S. R. Boas, Paul Barolsky, Patricia Rubin, Wolfram Prinz, and, in particular Einar Rud.

Vasari's artistic training and studies with Rosso Fiorentino, Baccio Bandinelli and Michelangelo, and early humanistic learning in the classics with Giovanni Pollastra provide a dynamic interdependence of conceits, which are manifested in his early works and directly relate to the fruitful maturity of his late decorative cycles and his other art forms. His passion for deciphering mystery has much to do with the efforts of mythographers and antiquarians (Andrea Alciato, Pierio Valeriano, Vincenzo Cartari, Paolo Giovio, Cosimo Bartoli and Cesare Ripa), who study the manifestation of the visual arts in ancient and Christian art, as represented in ancient coins, reliefs sculpture, works of art, and music, as well as the commentaries of classical and Christian scholars (Pliny the Elder, Vitruvius and Church Fathers). The philosophical revival of classical text and figures (Plato, Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus) by Renaissance Neoplatonists (Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola) facilitate the quest for composing conceits. Artists and humanists of sixteenth century who, in turn, are also fascinated by the exploration, collection and expression of the innovations and discoveries in their century assimilate this intellectual ardor. And Vasari is an exponent of such zeal.

This impetus or *furor poeticus* for ancient hieroglyphs, symbols and emblems is prompted and promulgated by Quattrocento and Cinquecento or Renaissance Neoplatonists. These philosophers (Ficino and Pico della Mirandola) encourage the search for alternatives to language in visual symbols, which could offer an image for the immediacy of experience with verbal language could not offer. As Ernest Gombrich explains, the visual image for these humanists is based on conventional or private traditions.<sup>3</sup> The image contains three distinct

levels of meaning. First, a painting may represent an object of the visible world, such as a woman holding a balance or a snake. Second, the image may also symbolize an idea, such as Justice—a traditional allusion of a woman with the balance—or Envy—a depiction of an elderly woman holding a snake. Both of these meanings rely on conventional understandings incorporated into the cultural milieu of the time. The third meaning expresses the artist's conscious or unconscious mind. It is a personal reference to the representation of the image, e.g., the image of a snake may symbolize the sin of pride (original sin) in Christian symbolism or wisdom in ancient mythology. The balance may allude to the virtue of Temperance in Renaissance iconography or the judgment of souls in Egyptian symbolism.

Vasari's art and theory is conceived from the classical and Cinquecento artistic traditions where the essence of creativity is imparted by God and manifested in the conception of *disegno* (drawing). Under the influence of Renaissance Neoplatonism and Christian Renaissance religious conventions, Vasari's artistic notion is conceived by God and then projected into the artist's soul. From the artist's mind/soul, the artistic conception is then visualized into a practical form, a drawing of the idea or an imagery. From the imagery, the artistic notion expands into the conception of a *history painting*, a single narrative, a program or a decorative cycle. Thus, God (artistic notion) and artist (*disegno*) are an artistic conception, which is manifested through the elaboration of the history of cultural imagery and the association of humanistic and philosophical ideals.

In his art, Vasari constructs an elaboration based on Leon Battista Alberti's concept of *istoria* (dramatic narrative), a *history painting*. I coin this term "history painting" to mean the depiction of painted scenes with narrative content from classical history, Christian history, and mythology, as well as depicting the historical events of the far or near past. These include paintings with religious, mythological, historical, literary and allegorical subjects. Vasari's history paintings may embody some interpretation of life or convey a moral or intellectual message. Thus, a *history painting* is a single visual narrative or a decorative cycle with cultural, emblematic and humanistic implications. These implications are interconnected with didactic and moral messages as well as with a literary and philosophical conceits. Vasari is proud to come from an artistic Florentine tradition that produced creative individuals such as Alberti, Leonardo, Michelangelo Dante, and Ficino. Thus, Vasari's imagery and writings attest to his Florentine artistic and intellectual lineage.

With the assistance of his teachers, humanists and patrons of the time, Vasari carefully studies classical writings on art by Pliny and Vitruvius. In his decorative cycles and imagery, Vasari projects an assimilation of their artistic descriptions and theories. From Pliny, he learns to recall the ancient artists and to record their lives; from Vitruvius, he extracts his theory of art in terms of five principles (*disegno* or drawing, rule, proportion, order, and *maniera* or style). From Alberti, Vasari conceives the concept of beauty, which he transforms into a theory of Mannerism in relation to Neoplatonic notions of Beauty and Good.

Vasari emphasizes in his writings, particularly in the prefaces of the *Vite*, that an allegory or symbol must assimilate, visually and verbally, its ancient sources. Such emblematic sources provide him with an extensive repertoire of images, which he collects and uses in the iconography of his paintings. Vasari's symbols embody aesthetic theories and philosophical concerns of the cultural milieu of his time. His legacy to the humanistic endeavors and the

emblematic tradition produces a symbolic heritage in art, literature and music during the Cinquecento. His significance for the humanistic and emblematic traditions relies on defining and explaining artistic concepts such invention, imagination and judgment. His questioning of the use and meaning of terms in the visual depiction influences the art of the sixteenth century, and this method of artistic inquiry continues beyond his time.

Other issues considered by Vasari in the manifestation of art are the interpretation of classical myth, interconnecting with Christian attributes and non-Christian symbols known in the sixteenth century. This mythical tradition is assimilated and incorporated in art, in particular, in the sacred and profane decorative cycles of the Cinquecento. The visual tradition of symbols assists the artist in creating conceits for humanists, enlightened individuals, and artists themselves. With the intellectual assistance of the literati, artists could compose conceits with elusive meaning of myth, allegory and personification. Thus transforming the role of an artist from mere laborer into mythmaker and validating the intellectual potentials of the artist, who could conceive and unravel these conceits. Vasari is able to provide this new ground for the Cinquecento artist because he has assimilated and learned from the ancient and modern masters, their instructions about inventing art, imitating art, and judging the merits of creating art.

As Vasari learns about the formulation of inventions of image from his teachers, he also creates a new vocabulary in art—an encyclopedia of images and symbols—by using emblematic sources for his paintings. This visual repertoire becomes an educational instrument for artists and humanists, offering instructional guidance to the mystery of images. Vasari's method of systematized images for the use of the artist paves the way for Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593) and demonstrates the assimilation of the classical, humanistic and emblematic traditions in Italian paintings of the sixteenth century. The learner, Vasari, becomes the teacher of composing images, enlightening his fellow artists as well as those for centuries to come.

The purpose of this collection is to celebrate the 500 year anniversary of Vasari's birth (1511-1574). To honor this historical event, I selected articles in this book: some published, some revised and expanded, some never published. These articles demonstrate the immense contribution that Vasari makes in the history of art. His extraordinary impact in the culture of sixteenth century art and art theory is still stimulating and intellectually challenging, is his influence in later imagery, art theories, and formulations on approaches to the study of art history.

Another aim of this book is to reveal the many important artistic and art historical issues associated with the paintings and writings of Vasari. These include his artistic achievements as an emblemist, with an emphasis on his decorative paintings, and more specifically his role in the redefinition of *history painting*; his work in the development of new formal conventions for decorative cycles; his augmentation of the classical and emblematic traditions; and, his formulation of the foundations of art history as an academic discipline and a humanist pursuit in the sixteenth century.

As a leading artist of his day, Vasari reveals his notions about art from his early works, the imagery focuses on the most significant artistic, intellectual, cultural, and political forces, affecting the origins and development of his mature iconography programs, decorative style, and history of art. The essays consist of two elements: the first group of six essays focuses on

the early decorative and secular cycles, while the second groups of five essays address moral and religious issues.

These essays emphasize how Vasari's humanist milieu influences the formal characteristics and visual imagery of his early works, as well as his written commentaries on art theory. The impact of his emblematic training with Pierio Valeriano and Andrea Alciato contribute to his artistic emblematic formation. Vasari employs the artistic and intellectual strategies of his early period in working through a concept of *history painting*.

Vasari emerges as an artist with a profound humanistic interest. This particularly holds true in the analysis of his early decorative cycles, namely, the Bolognese paintings of San Michele in Bosco, 1539-40; the Venetian paintings, 1541; Case Vasari in Arezzo and Florence 1542-1555; the Neapolitan paintings for the Refectory of Monteoliveto, 1545; and the Roman paintings for the Palazzo della Cancelleria, Sala dei Cento Giorni, 1546. The studies of these early decorative cycles are included in the first part of the book. These early decorative cycles represent a prelude to Vasari's later works, for example, the decorative cycles for the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, the fresco paintings for the Dome of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence and for the Sala Regia in Rome, because Vasari repeats and elaborates his earlier emblematic, iconographical, and artistic inventions. In addition, he applies these artistic inventions to his religious paintings as well, which are essays in the second part of the book.

The essays introduce Vasari to the reader of the many strengths of this peripatetic wall-painter whose decorative cycles are found in cities throughout Italy. His theory of art (rebirth, nature, classical and beauty) and criteria for art (imitation, invention, and judgment) are clearly articulated in these imageries as well as in the prefaces of Vasari's *Vite*. The frescoes located in Bologna, Venice, Arezzo, Florence, Naples and Rome, clearly indicate Vasari's understanding of the cultural taste of sixteenth-century patrons. Vasari collects and appropriates antique sources and he incorporates emblematic sources, such as the writings of Andrea Alciato, Vincenzo Cartari, and Pierio Valeriano, in these decorative cycles. Perhaps of greater importance, Vasari's pictorial imagery and personifications anticipates the influential emblematic encyclopedia of a later time, most notably Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1603.

Beyond my consideration of iconography and iconographical issues, Vasari's artistic achievements must be considered in light of his profound knowledge of antiquity and exposure to the ideas and ideals of Neoplatonism as well as his religious Christian tradition. The second set of articles in the second chapter address these manifestations. Finally, the influence of the intellectual and philosophical world of Renaissance humanism on Vasari, the demands of his patrons, his refined skill as a connoisseur, and his achievement in the making of pictures is revealed in these collection, not only with respect to how all these elements feed into the theoretical framing of his famous *Vite* of 1550 and 1568, but also in terms of a long-standing dialogue existing between the verbal and the visual which characterized Vasari's work from its germinal period.

The essays also shed light on Vasari in several new aspects. For example, philosophically, they reflect on Vasari's interpretation of humanist concepts such as Neoplatonism and Idealism, notions that are manifested in his writings, namely, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, 1550 and 1568, *I Ragionamenti* (1568-70), diaries and letters, as well as in his early decorative cycles of 1539-1554. Historically, these essays show how Vasari, in his *Vite*, prefaces

the formulation of art history and provides an art historical framework for the first time since antiquity (Pliny, Vitruvius). Vasari achieves this goal by classifying and documenting artists' works and lives from antiquity to the present.

Aesthetically, these essays reveal the contribution of Vasari to the theory of art in establishing criteria for assessing art as well as founding an academy of art to teach the principles of art. Iconographically, the essays analyze the nature of interpreting images. These images maybe depicted as allegories or personifications in relation to emblematic sources (Alciato, Cartari, Valeriano). Thus, the visual imagery of Vasari establishes a pictorial emblematic tradition in the Cinquecento. His pictorial emblemata anticipates the emblematic encyclopedia of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1603). Also, artistically, these essays reveal how Vasari fuses the ancient pictorial tradition (Pliny, Vitruvius) with Cinquecento's imagery (for example, Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, Raphael's Stanze, Perino del Vaga's Castel St' Angelo, Bronzino's Villa Imperiale; and Francesco Salviati's Sale Farnese), establishing a convention for decorative cycles in the sixteenth century

The essays manifest Vasari's extraordinary artistic and intellectual talents. In them, the emphasis on the cultural and emblematic tradition provides one more layered in the understanding of the motives of patrons, as well as of the didactic purpose and intent of many of Vasari's pictorial inventions. His approach links his artistic conceptions to the humanistic literary and philosophical traditions.

In view of the celebrated position of Vasari as a leading artist of his day, it is important to honor the 500 year anniversary of his birth (1511) and to consider his works by focusing with some care on the most significant artistic, intellectual, cultural, and political forces that affected the development of his religious and secular decorative program, and impacted the course of history of art, art theory and art criticism.

With these essays, the goal is to provide for the student of fine art, art history, classics, history and the humanities, and interested readers of European history, literature, decorative arts, and Italian visual culture, an insight and understanding of sixteenth-century art, artistic theories, and assimilation of the classics in Italy through the eyes and mind of a Renaissance accomplished artist and writer—Giorgio Vasari. Thus, this collection of essays contributes to the scholarship of sixteenth-century patronage, theories of art and criticism, and to the understanding of Giorgio Vasari's paintings.

## Notes

1. Vasari continues, "Instead, the artist today struggles to ward off famine rather than to win fame, and this crushes and buries his talent and obscures his name. This is a shame and disgrace to those who could come to his help but refuse to do so." *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1970-74), Preface III.

2. Baldassare Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano* (Venice: Aldus, 1528), 5.

3. Ernest Gombrich, *Simbolicae Questione* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972), 172.