



Maniera

**PONTORMO, BRONZINO AND
MEDICI FLORENCE**

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GIORGIO VASARI (Arezzo 1511–1574 Florence)
Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori
(Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors
and Architects), 3 vols., Florence: Giunti 1568

Frankfurt am Main, Städel Museum, Library, 111

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Kibiki, 1999; Vasari, Settembrini and Cini, 1961; 1967; Baring, 1979; Kahn, 1993; Borsari, 1996; Vasari, 2001; 2011; Toppe, 2009; Banti, 2010; Barzanti, 2012; Vasari, 2016; Banti, 2011, pp. 11–114; Vasari, 2011; Banti, 2011; Vasari, 2011, pp. 201–

The painter and architect Giorgio Vasari was the founder of modern art history. His *Vite*, or *Lives*, first published in Florence in 1550, are the first printed book to be devoted exclusively to the history of painting, sculpture and architecture. In 1568, he published the second, considerably enlarged edition, likewise in Florence, six years before his death. In the introductory section of this work Vasari also proposed the earliest theory of all three sister arts. The *Vite* are the first detailed portrayal of Italian art as a whole since Cimabue and Giotto, described by Vasari as a process of the *rinascita* ('rebirth') of antiquity, sometimes referring to it as the *maniera moderna*.¹ He divides these almost three hundred years of art history into three epochs: the first covering the fourteenth century, or what might be called the pre-Renaissance; the second, beginning in the second quarter of the fifteenth century – what we today call the Early Renaissance; and finally, the third epoch of perfection, the true *maniera moderna*, culminating in the sixteenth century. We refer to the latter today using the terms High Renaissance and Mannerism.

Vasari's *Vite* are the first comprehensive compendium of artists' biographies. They are divided into three series corresponding with the three epochs of the *rinascita*. Aided by co-authors,² Vasari wrote prefaces to each of these three series in which he expounded a "grand narrative"³ of the history of the *arte del disegno* meaning both "drawing" and "design". His *Vite* raise the artist – mainly men, but a few women – to the intellectual and social level of philosophers and poets.

The *arti del disegno* are also placed above craftsmanship ('*arti*') and guilds – which were also called *arti*': the practice, customary since the eighteenth century, of referring to art as "die Kunst" – as a "metatechné"⁴ superior to other techniques and manual skills has its origin in Vasari's definition of the *arti del disegno* as autonomous cultural techniques with their own rules and their own history.

The first edition of Vasari's *Vite*, the so-called "Torrentiniana", was published by the ducal court printer Torrentino. It contained only one biography of a living artist, Michelangelo. Some principal artists of the *maniera* featured in this exhibition – Andrea del Sarto – one of Vasari's teachers – and Rosso Fiorentino – had already died in 1530 and 1540, respectively. Their biographies in the *Vite* of 1550 are an important source of information about their lives and work. At the same time, the Torrentiniana confronted the living representatives of the *maniera*, such as Pontormo and Bronzino, with a first summary of the history of art in the modern era in which they still had to find their place. Vasari conceived his history of art of 1550 as a teleological progression culminating in the oeuvre of Michelangelo. For Vasari, the art of his time achieved a state of unparalleled perfection in the works of Michelangelo and in the mature works of Raphael.

Only in the 1568 edition, the so-called "Giuntina", did Vasari formulate an answer to the question of how contemporary artistic creativity could be pursued in any meaningful way, given that such a state of perfection had already been achieved. With respect to this "fourth epoch", which he had already proclaimed in the dedication of the 1550 edition, he called for collective authorship and for education and

artistic collaboration under the supervision of the newly founded Florentine *Accademia del disegno*, the first Academy of Fine Arts, that he co-founded in 1563. By contrast, he rejected the expressly individual and bizarre styles developed by the artists of the *maniera* since the 1520s – as evidenced in his biographies of Pontormo and Rosso, whom he deemed to have failed.

Vasari weaves humanistic and Christian ideas into the historiographic structure of his *Vite*, adopting the ancient pagan idea of the four stages of childhood, youth, manhood and old age, on which he bases his account of ancient oriental, Greek and Roman art history until its decline in late antiquity. Following a humanist tradition since Petrarch, he divides art history into Classical Antiquity, the barbaric Middle Ages and the *rinascita* (modern term: Renaissance) of the antique that began from the time of Giotto. In Vasari's paradoxical coining of the term "progress of the Renaissance" / *progresso della rinascita* there resonates a reference to the progress-oriented way of thinking that informed the Christian theology of history – he certainly does not interpret the *rinascita* as a historic *punctum*, as was recently asserted.⁵ Vasari's summary of art history since Genesis is a systematic and progressive history of the *arti del disegno* and includes numerous anecdotes within his biographies of individual artists – initially 133, subsequently 169.⁶ The second edition contains more than double the volume of text, partly owing to extensive collective biographies. Comprehensive indices provide a guide to the text. But the basic contours of his sweeping narrative of art history culminating in Michelangelo, told according to the model of the "grand narration" of the Bible and the world chronicles, are preserved.⁷

The historic part of the *Vite* traces the history of art and architecture since Genesis and the advanced civilisations of the Orient all the way to Vasari's own day. It begins with God as the creator of the architecture of the world and his "first sculpture", Adam, and ends with the *Last Judgement* by the "divine" Michelangelo, unveiled in 1541 – according to Vasari also to be seen as a judgement over all art, both ancient and modern. Vasari's "grand narrative" of art follows the important division of salvation history into three epochs of the traditional Christian interpretation of the Bible. The first epoch – *età*,

comprising the first series of artists' biographies, corresponds to the biblical epoch of the "time before the law" – *ante legem*. Giotto appears as the Abraham of a new art, learned only from nature and not from other masters, and as the founding father of a "family" of pupils and their pupils with many branches.⁸ Vasari equates the second epoch of the Renaissance – one passage in the *Vite* already uses the modern term *rinascimento* – with the Florentine Early Renaissance and its masters of the newly discovered rules of art. He praises their "rule, order, proportion, *disegno* and style" / *maniera*⁹ and extols their perfect command of perspective, of anatomically correct mimesis and of the architectural "orders" of antiquity. The second epoch is characterised, analogous with that of the Bible, as an epoch "under the law" – *sub lege*.

He writes that Leonardo founded the *terza maniera*, the third epoch of the Renaissance, achieving "divine grace" with his works. This epoch is crowned by the works of the "supremely graceful" Raphael, who was born and died on Good Friday, but above all by Michelangelo, the "divine", trinitarian father of the three sister arts, who reaches "a completely and truly gracious grace."¹⁰ Thanks to Michelangelo's achievements, including perfect *grazia*, Vasari asserts, the arts have attained their "utmost limit and end," reaching such admirable perfection that they surpass even nature itself and antiquity.¹¹ In the preface to the third section of the *Vite* this final epoch of the *rinascita* is charged with the traditional characteristics of the third epoch of salvation history "under grace" – *sub gratia*.¹² Its crowning masterpiece, Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, anticipates the eschatological end and telos of biblical time.

Only in the third epoch the mastery of the rules is amended with freedom – "licenzia" – that finally enables "perfect grace, surpassing all measure."

Only then, according to Vasari, was perfect imitation both achieved and surpassed; only then did the artists lend their figures a roundness and a gentle softness that "made them appear not as awkward as in reality." Correggio had already painted hair in a way that made it seem "even more beautiful than natural hair."¹³ Surpassing imitation, invention – *invenzione* – leads to new perfection.¹⁴

Here the artists of the *maniera* could certainly see themselves endorsed. At the same time, Vasari recommends collective authorship under the auspices of an academy of art. Just as after the passing of the Messiah the Church became the custodian of the means of salvation, so the *Accademia delle arti del disegno* was intended to administer and hold on to the insurmountable means of art, brought forth by Raphael and Michelangelo. The accomplishments of art now became both teachable and learnable. Collective authorship for Vasari was not so much about enhancing quality as about increasing efficiency and speed.¹⁵ Whereas previously it had taken six years to paint a panel, now, according to Vasari, six paintings could be made within a year.¹⁶

For the 1568 edition Vasari and co-authors, especially Vincenzo Borghini, not only expanded and completed the biographies already published but also added many "new *Vite*" as the frontispiece of the final volume states, including a collective *Vita* of the members of the new Florentine academy and the biography of the court painter Bronzino. Vasari is less critical of the latter than of Bronzino's teacher and friend Pontormo. Vasari's autobiography forms the keystone to the 1568 edition of the *Lives* – in which he contrasts the allegedly bizarre lifestyles of the likes of Parmigianino, Rosso and Pontormo with the ideal of the sociability of the artist.¹⁵

GERD BLUM

1 In the preface to part three, Vasari uses the term *maniera moderna* in the narrower sense of the art of the third epoch ("*terza maniera, che si consegue l'habituale perfezione*"), as in the preface to the manner in which he used to paint, see Giotto (Stato di Stefano Fiorentino) from part one) of art since Masaccio (preface to part four).

2 Regarding the collective authorship of the *Vite*, see Vasari, 1996; Toppe, 2009; Banti, 2010 and Banti, 2011.

3 Vasari, 1568.

4 Wolff, 1997.

5 The thesis was proposed by Fiori, Ghisleni and Deaglio, 2011, p. 1, and Banti, 2013, p. 27.

6 See the critical edition, 2016, p. 27. It is not only the repetitive biographies but also part of the history of the arts. Contemporary readers familiar with the traditional Christian theology of history from the writings of Augustine (in particular his city of God) and from the medieval and early modern sources of the epoch, as well as with the structural principle of the medieval history of art (superstition of the past, the present, the future), are familiar with the idea of the "grand narrative" of history and will find the proposed model, see Banti, 2010 and Banti, 2011, pp. 134–163, as well as in a Banti, 2011, p. 202, and Banti, 2011, p. 111.

7 See Banti, 1996, p. 11.

8 See Vasari, 1568.

9 Vasari, 1568, in Vasari, 1996, p. 119 (B), p. 2.

10 These and following statements can be found in Banti, 2011, pp. 150–162, and in Banti, 2011, pp. 77–119.

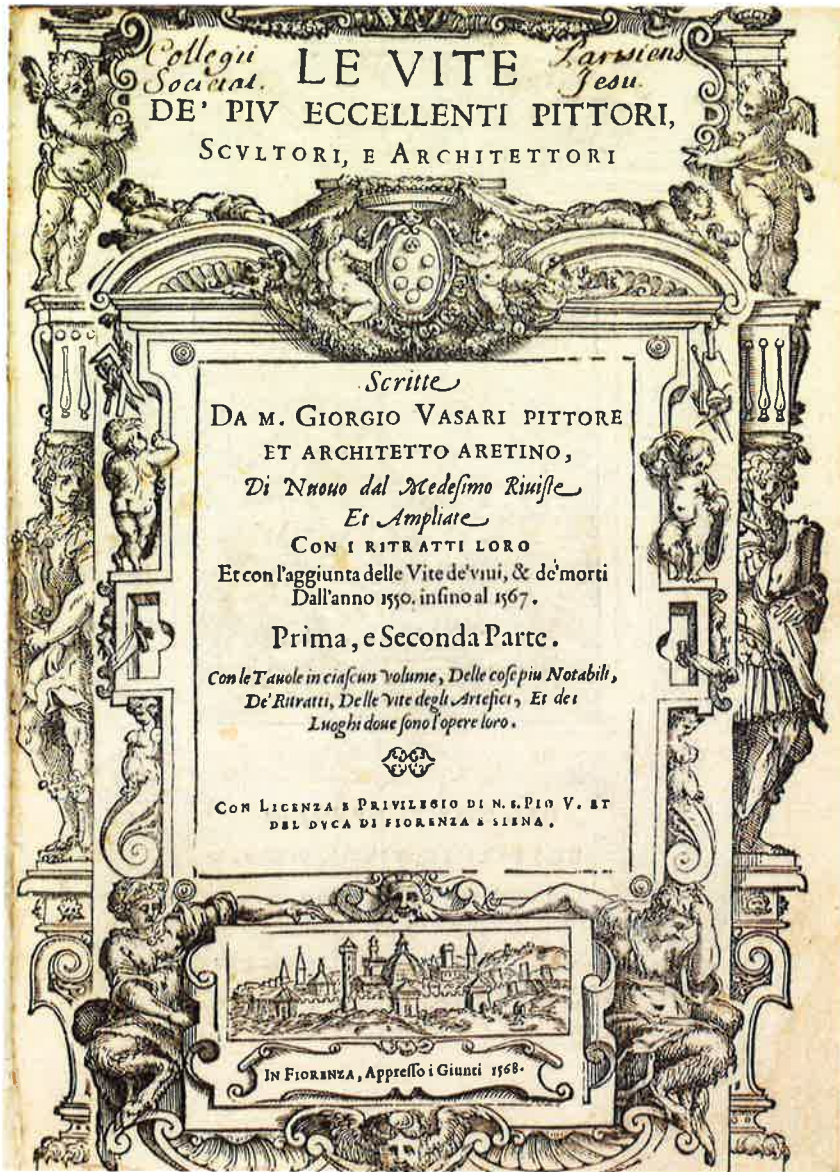
11 Vasari, 1568, in Vasari, 1996, p. 119 (B), p. 2.

12 Banti, p. 10. See also Banti, 1996, Banti, 2010, 2011, 2013, and *The Life of Michelangelo*.

13 See Wolff, 2011, and Banti, 2011, p. 22.

14 Vasari, 1568, in Vasari, 1996, p. 119 (B), p. 2.

15 See Banti, 1996, and Banti, 2011. Both editions of the *Vite* are published in the critical edition, which is available in the *Opera* of Vasari (Florence, 1996–2016). In the critical edition, Vasari, 2001, also includes the *Vite* of the artists who published their biographies in the *Vite* (see Vasari, 2001–2016).



Vol. 1, n. p. 1: the page of the 1550 edition.



Vol. 2, n. p. 1: beginning of the preface to part three of the 1568 edition.



Vol. 2, pp. 67B: beginning of the 'vite of Pontormo', together with his portrait.