

Giorgio Vasari

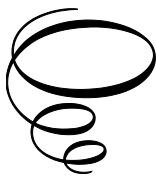
Giorgio Vasari:

The Quest of a Painter

By

Liana De Girolami Cheney

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Giorgio Vasari: The Quest of a Painter

By Liana De Girolami Cheney

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BB-Vasari: Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite* ... Ed. Rossana Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols. text plus 3 vols. commentaries, addenda, index (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1966–2002).

Ficino-Vitale: Marsilio Ficino, *Teologia Platonica*, ed. and trans. Errico Vitale (Milan: Bompiano/RCS, 2011), p. 969.

Frey-Vasari: K. Frey, ed., *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*, 2 vols. (Munich: George Müller, 1923, 1930).

Milanesi-Vasari: Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori* (1550, 1568), ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1970–1974).

Vere-Vasari: Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Gaston Du C. de Vere, 3 vols. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979).

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The author is appreciative of the many private and public collections, museums, libraries, galleries, and publishing companies that have given permission to consult and publish reproductions of specific works in their collections on Giorgio Vasari and other artists included in this book, such as the Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientale of Arezzo, Florence, Rome and Naples in Italy; the Cabinet des Dessins at the Musée du Louvre, the Foundation Custodia of the Collection F. Lugt, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Musée du Louvre in France; the Museo del Prado in Madrid in Spain; the Wallace Collection and the British Museum Library in England; and in the United States, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Art Museum, the Saint Louis Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Visual media companies such as Art Resource, Almay Photos, Bridgeman Images, Wikipedia, Wikimedia, and Meisterdrucke Fine Arts were also gracious with their support.

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previously published materials.

My love for Giorgio Vasari and fascination with his iconography and iconology began early in my career in a seminar on Cesare Ripa by Richard Wallace at Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Throughout the years, I continued my studies thanks to the encouragement of my mentors Paola Barocchi, Philipp Fehl, Wolfram Prinz, Scott Shaefer, and Craig H. Smyth. My philosophical mentor at the University of Miami in Florida, the Platonist Edith Watson Skipper, inspired me to study Renaissance Neoplatonism and relate it to art history. Subsequently, I received a PhD in Art History from Boston University in Massachusetts. Grant support and sabbatical leaves from the University of Massachusetts Lowell, where I became a full professor in Art History, made it possible to travel to consult and study the works of Vasari at archives, churches, collections, museums, and palaces in Italy, Europe, and USA. I continue to be grateful for the intellectual and moral support of friends and scholars such as Damiano Acciarino, Alessandra Baroni, Tina Bizzarro, Lynette Bosch, Eliana Carrara, David Cast, Pino Cascione, Yael Even, Daniela Galoppi, Josef Grabski, Ellen Longworth, Michele Loffredo, Sonia Bonetti Michelotti, Emilie Passignat, Massimiliano Rossi, Marco Ruffini, Brian Steel, and especially, Brendan Cole.

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniably true that if the artists of our own time were justly
rewarded,
They would produce even more outstanding works of art,
Far superior to those of the ancient world.
—Giorgio Vasari, *Vite*¹

It is almost impossible to imagine the history of Italian art without the Tuscan painter, architect, art collector, writer, and impresario Giorgio Vasari, so fundamental is his book *Vite* (*Lives—Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors of Italy, from Cimabue to the Present Time* or *Vite—Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori e scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri*), which was first published in 1550, followed in 1568 by an enlarged edition illustrated with woodcuts of portraits of artists.²

This sixteenth-century Italian work is the first manual and autonomous history of art because of its monumental encompassing of all of the following: preambles of explanatory data on the function of the text; integration of individual biographies (with anecdotal, gossipy, and amusing commentaries); a theory of art with articulations about artistic creativity and intentionality; and inclusion of explanations of the function and types of creative materials as well as the applications and techniques necessary for the productivity of art forms—that is, a formation of an instruction manual for artists and the manual's application to material culture in the sixteenth century.

¹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori* (1550, 1568), ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1970–1974), VIII, p. 87. Hereafter cited as Milanesi-Vasari.

² Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, eds. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1971–1986), IV, p. 12, hereafter referred to as BB-Vasari. Vasari's *Vite* editions that I consulted are: BB-Vasari; Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston Du C. de Vere, 3 vols. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), hereafter cited as Vere-Vasari; and Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori*, ed. Pio Pecchiai, 3 vols. (Milan: Sonzogno, 1928), Introduction, pp. vii–xxvi, one of the earliest scholarly discussions of the sources and influences on Vasari's *Vite*.

I have organized the content of this book following Vasari's life (*vita*) and achievements as described in the 1568 edition of his book called *Vite*. For clarity, I will refer to Vasari's book as the *Vite* and the individual biography or life of the artist as *vita*.

By his book, Vasari is known as “the first art historian” since the time of the ancient Roman art historian, naturalist, and philosopher Gaius Plinius Secundus (23 BCE–79 CE), known as Pliny the Elder. Before he died in 79 CE, Pliny wrote about the history of art in Book 35 of his remarkable encyclopedic book on *Naturalis Historiae* [*Natural History*].³ In 1960, Einar Rud (1892–1980), a Danish biographer and a scholar of Vasari, characterized Vasari as the “first art historian.”⁴ Despite containing various errors regarding the chronology of artists' lives, historical data, and the location of artworks, as well as a biased approach towards the importance of Tuscan art, Vasari's *Vite* holds significance as the first written opus magnum about the history of art and their creators, penned by an artist from the sixteenth century in Italy.⁵ He enlightened the reader about artistic creations by expounding on the biographies of artists (*vitae*) and the versatility of their creative careers, narrating anecdotal stories about their quirks with whimsicality and a Florentine sense of delight, humor and sarcasm—and, most of all, acknowledging and recording their accomplishments as artists, not mere artisans.

Vasari's approach allows for a comprehensive and detailed exploration of the life and work of these artists, providing readers with a deeper understanding of his perspective and the artistic landscape of the time. Whether you are a scholar, student, or art enthusiast, this book offers a unique and insightful journey into the world of Mannerist art and its most prominent protagonist.

This book has two primary intentions. First, a carefully assembled collection of drawings illustrates Vasari's quest as an artistic creator, a painter, and a lover of drawing (*disegno*). This is further manifested in some of the early compositions, particularly the paintings in his residences in Arezzo and Florence. The second objective is to demonstrate Vasari's

³ Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁴ Einar Rud, *Vasari's Life and Lives: The First Art Historian* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), Introduction. For a recent edition, see Liana De Girolami Cheney, ed., Preface to Einar Rud, *Giorgio Vasari's Life and Lives: The First Art Historian* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2011).

⁵ Eliana Carrara, “Reconsidering the Authorship of the ‘Lives.’ Some Observations and Methodological Questions on Vasari as a Writer,” *Studi di Memofonte* 15 (2015), pp. 53–90.

capacity for creative thinking and his pursuit of knowledge in his visual art and his adroitness as a painter-philosopher. In his book *Vite*, Vasari comprehensively analyzed the artist's pivotal role in creating art and the painter's relentless pursuit of beauty and excellence.

Throughout the book, including prefaces, dedicatory letters, and technical manuals, he verbally explains this quest and visualizes his experience as a painter. With his extensive knowledge and expertise, Vasari provides valuable insights into the creative process and the importance of artistic expression. The focus here is not on biographical, etymological, historiographical, or stylistic aspects but, instead on a particular study of Vasari's aim to articulate visual concepts through drawing, revealing symbolic meanings rooted in biblical, ancient, and Renaissance artistic traditions, exemplified in works like the personification of Prudence.⁶

Vasari's conception of artistic creativity is related to his theory of painting.⁷ As an artist, he created a set of five art components, which he called *i cinque aggiunti*. These components include order, rule, proportion, drawing (*disegno*), and style (*maniera*), and they are used to explain the creation of a work of art. He further proposed two alternatives in a painter's development and achievement of artistic creativity: imitation (*imitazione*) and invention (*invenzione*). Imitation is copying art as a learning method, whereas invention is independent of imitation and constitutes the means for conceiving artistic ideas. Imitation guides and teaches the artist how to compose and create perfection. Vasari maintains that artists must study Antiquity and ancient artists to learn how others acquired the experience of imitating nature. For Vasari, imitation draws upon three different sources: the first two are copying from nature (*copia dal vero*), and the third is selecting from one's own work (*imitare se stessi*). He emphasized that copying from nature is essential for artists so that they may learn to create forms that are alive as visualized in the arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture. Studying nature helps the artist learn how to draw so that,

⁶ Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Allegory of Prudence*: Mirroring Alciato and Valeriano's Emblems," *Emblem Studies* 7 (2009), pp. 26–37; and Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Justice*: Symbol of Medicean Prudence," *Iconocrazia*, Università di Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy (Winter 2016). <http://www.iconocrazia.it>.

⁷ Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giorgio Vasari's *Fine Arts*: Neoplatonic Visualization of Invention, Imitation, and Beauty," in *Figura. Studi sull'immagine nella tradizione classica*, ed. Luiz Marquez (2012), <https://doi.org/10.20396/figura.v1i0.10198> <https://econtents.bc.unicamp.br/inpec/index.php/figura/article/view/10198>; and Mario Pozzi and Enrico Mattioda, *Giorgio Vasari Storico e Critico* (Florence: Leo Olschki, 2006), pp. 79–105 and 129–147.

eventually, he can draw anything from memory without needing a model. It also trains the mind to make selections and judgments (*giudizio*) about the act of visualization.

Vasari's explanation of artistic creativity is based fundamentally on the Italian Renaissance tradition, which considers creativity a faculty present in all human activity. As Vasari noted, "Many painters achieve a certain level of excellence and boldness in their initial conception of a design (*disegno*) for their work, as if guided by an inspirational fire (*furor*). However, this boldness often fades away as they move on to creating a finished drawing."⁸ He adds that his conception of creativity can be explained as a historical construct composed of an organic scheme or historical progression as well as defining art history as "the true mirror of human life."⁹

Vasari devised his own artistic inventions (*invenzioni*) as an admirer of ancient art and culture, fascinated with symbolic imagery. Vasari created a new genre in art, *history painting*, with conceits filled with emblematic, mythographic, symbolic, and didactic significance, elaborating on Leon Battista Alberti's concept of *istoria*¹⁰ and Leonardo da Vinci's invention and narrative compositions.¹¹ With the creation of a design for the foundations of art history and a theory of art and criticism, he originated his history painting through the development of a convention for decorative cycles, including the appropriation of classical art, the establishment of a symbolic tradition, and the fusion between patronage and culture as a humanistic pursuit.

This concise volume presents a distinct perspective on Vasari as a creative thinker, a "thinking painter," or a "painter-philosopher." It spotlights instances from his oeuvre that underscore his imaginative concepts as visualized in some of his drawings and paintings within an emblematic and mythological context. The book also delves into some of his philosophical

⁸ Milanesi-Vasari, V, p. 260; Liana De Girolami Cheney, *The Paintings of the Casa Vasari* (PhD diss., Boston University, MA, 1978; New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), pp. 119–122 and 201.

⁹ BB-Vasari, III, pp. 3–20.

¹⁰ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. J.R. Spencer (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 56–57; Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy: 1450–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 86–102, for the impact of Alberti's notions of art on Vasari's theory of art, including the concept of *istoria*. See Alice Kramer, "Giorgio Vasari" (PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 1990), chap. 2, section 2 on Teaching the Technique of Art: *Della pittura*.

¹¹ Martin Kemp, ed. and trans., *Leonardo On Painting* (London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 220.

tenets concerning creativity and art theory and his moral messages, such as the soul's delight in contemplating a beautiful image.¹²

This book is composed of this Introduction, summarizing Vasari's quest as a painter, a Prolegomena providing an overview of Vasari's artistic concepts—which are frequently reiterated in the book to better support or enhance the discussion—followed by five chapters and a Coda & Continuum. Chapter One deals with information about Vasari's family. Chapter Two focuses on his artistic development, training, and early interest in collecting drawings. Chapter Three considers his humanist and cultural education. His creative and humanistic formation was rooted in three sources: his classical and Latin education; his assimilation of mythographic writings; and the symbolic moral allusions of emblems. Other essential influences include influential humanists of his times.

Chapter Four addresses Vasari's formation as an art historian. His humanistic experiences influenced his earlier works and written commentaries about art, history, and theory. Thus, the chapter provides an overview of Giorgio Vasari's life and career as a painter, architect, writer, art collector, impresario, and historian. Chapter Five deals with his Art Theory, considering his concepts of invention, imitation, judgment, and beauty interlaced with conceits about *camera picta*, *ekphrasis*, *history painting*, and *paragone*. The Coda & Continuum reflects some aspects of the legacy of Vasari's contributions.

Finally, Vasari's contributions as a thinking painter were expressed in many artistic ideas. He also had a stylistic approach to creative forms, which he discussed in his writings, such as the *Vite* and later in *I Ragionamenti*. Still, most significantly, he reveals them in his drawings and paintings.

¹² See the bibliography for archival documentation, art criticisms, biographical, historiographical, and literary sources about the *Vite* and *I Ragionamenti*.

PROLEGOMENA

Let us come to less obscure matters: the attainment of
perfection in the arts, their ruin, their restoration,
or, better put, better still, their rebirth.
—Giorgio Vasari, *Vite*.¹

To provide readers with a clear understanding of the breadth of this book, I am including these *prolegomena* regarding the significance of Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) as an intellectual (**Figs. P1 and P2**). While his intellectual standing has been questioned in scholarly circles, Vasari's extensive humanist education allowed him to develop a substantial body of art theory, evident in the Prefaces of *The Lives of the Artists (Vite)*, *The Dialogues (I Ragionamenti)*, and his visual art (**Figs. P3–P5**). This book aims to comprehend further how Vasari shaped the perception of successful artists in sixteenth-century Italy. Certain critical concepts attributed to Vasari are reiterated throughout the text to highlight his intellectual agility. His profound grounding in classical studies, humanism, and art combined with his exceptional intellectual curiosity, enthusiasm, and creative prowess empowered him to offer a bold perspective on art and its history. With the endorsement of fellow artists, humanists, and influential patrons of his time, Vasari irrevocably redefined the quest of a painter as well as the role of the artist, establishing them as the creators and conveyors of images that communicate profound moral and intellectual messages, thus making an

¹ Vasari continued: "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." BB-Vasari, Preface One, II, p. 13. See the invaluable comparative study of Rossana Bettarini and Paola Barocchi in BB-Vasari. For Vasari's English translations, I consulted Vere-Vasari. In addition, I studied Mrs. Jonathan Foster's *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects by Giorgio Vasari*, translation from the Italian (London: H.G. Bohn, 1855) and an expanded version of the latter, Mrs. Jonathan Foster, *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects by Giorgio Vasari*, ed. and annotated by E. H., E. W. Blashfield, and A.A. Hopkins (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902); and repr. Mrs. Jonathan Foster, *Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1902–1907). Nevertheless, I edited and provided my own translation in some instances.

enduring impact on how artistic culture is preserved.

The Florentine architect, painter, and art historian Giorgio Vasari (**Fig. P1**) was a Mannerist painter of Italian sixteenth-century art. The style emerged after 1520 in Florence and continued until Vasari's death, with variations known as Early Mannerism, *Maniera*, and Late Mannerism throughout Italy. The term "Mannerism" was coined by Vasari in the *Vite* when he identified the style of an artist (precisely Michelangelo's style), described the style of a painter in a normative manner (Michelangelo's beautiful style), and considered the location and timeline from where the artists originated or geographically practiced their art (Michelangelo's Florentine style or Italian Renaissance style).²

Vasari wrote two editions of the *Lives of the Artists*, known as the *Vite*, between 1550 and 1568. The first was an abridged version called *La Torrentina* (the Torrentino version), published in 1550 (**Fig. P3**); the second, *La Giunti* (the Giunti version), which I focus on here, was released in 1568 (**Fig. P4**).

As a painter, Vasari begins to define the art of painting in the first section of the Introduction to the Three Arts of Drawing, Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture: "A painting is a plane covered with fields of color on the surface of a panel, wall, or canvas, encircled by various contours that define the image by a good design of turning lines."³ The *Vite* is divided into two main sections. The first section is a preamble containing six items: 1) two dedicatory letters from Vasari to Cosimo I de' Medici, one as Duke of Florence, the other as Duke of Florence and Siena; 2) a letter from Pope Pius V; 3) Preface to the Whole Work (*Proemio alle Vite*); 4) an Introduction to the Three Arts of Drawing, Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture (*Introduzione alle Tre Arti del Disegno cioè Architettura, Pittura e Scultura*); 5) a Note to His Fellow Artists (*Agli Artefici del Disegno*); and 6) a letter from the humanist Giovanni Battista Adriani to Vasari (*Lettera di Messer Giovambattista di Messer Marcello Adriani a Messer Giorgio Vasari*).⁴

² Liana De Girolami Cheney, ed., *Readings in Italian Mannerism I*, with a foreword by Craig Hugh Smyth (New York/London: Peter Lang, 1997, 2004), pp. 1–8, on Mannerism, and pp. 9–25, on Vasari as a Mannerist painter.

³ BB-Vasari 1, p. 113. "La pittura e un piano coperto di campi di colori, in superficie o di tavola o di muro o di tela, intorno a diversi lineamenti, i quali per virtù di un buon disegno di linee girate circondano la figura." In the section on Sculpture, Vasari also opens with a short definition: "Sculpture is an art which, by removing the excess of a given material, reduces it to that form of the body designed in the mind of the artist ("che levando il superfluo dalla materia soggetta, la riduce a quella forma di corpo che nella idea dello artefice e disegnata")." BB-Vasari, 1, p. 82.

⁴ Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Prefaces: Art and Theory* (New

The second section of *La Giunti* discusses Vasari's theory of art and describes the lives of artists. It consists of three parts, each containing a preface (*proemio*) and a collection of artist's biographies (*vite*) organized historically. As a whole, Vasari's *Vite* is about the artists who create the fine arts, but in the Prefaces, he delineates his own artistic quest and theory of art.

Vasari composed four Prefaces (*proemi*) in the *Vite*. The Preface to the Whole is a prolegomenon to the *Vite*. The other three are explanatory essays on the nature of art, each preceding a particular section of the biographies. These Prefaces, as well as the dedicatory letters, are principally concerned with the following topics: 1) divine and human creativity; 2) influences of artistic and humanistic sources on the work of artists; 3) criteria for judging the fine arts, including the supremacy of drawing (design or *disegno*) in the fine arts, which Vasari refers to as the arts of design; and 4) the creation of aesthetic standards for beauty.

Vasari commented on artists' intellectual and scientific ability by emphasizing their interest in mathematics, perspective, proportion, and anatomy. However, by the sixteenth century, something more was in play: artists, including Vasari himself, claimed that their work was the result of divine inspiration and that they were creative *virtuosi*—skillful in their creations. These artists believed that they worked like God and did not just imitate nature but created a new nature (surpassing nature) and a new beauty through inspired contact with God. These ideas had enormous repercussions on the role of artists and art in the sixteenth century.

Vasari compared the artist's creation of art with God's act of creating the world, identifying God as an artist and teacher who makes nature and instructs on how to observe and study it. For Vasari, artistic success originates from divine inspiration but also from innate talent, diligence, and hard work:

Now, the material in which God worked to fashion the first man was a lump of clay, and this was not without reason, for the Divine Architect of time and of nature, being wholly perfect, wanted to show how to create by process of removing from and adding to, material that was imperfect in the same way that good sculptors and painters do when, by adding and taking away, they bring their rough models and sketches to the final perfection for which they are striving.⁵

Moreover, with a Renaissance Neoplatonic emphasis, Vasari started his *vita* by thanking God, *La Divina Bontà*, for having provided him with

York/London: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), pp. 21–66. This letter was translated into English for the first time.

⁵ BB-Vasari, Preface One, II, p. 4; Paul Barolsky, "The Theology of Vasari," *Notes*

ingegno (Neoplatonic *nous* or mind) for the creation of artistry. Vasari's opening remarks in the dedicatory letter of 9 January 1568 to Cosimo I de' Medici, Duke of Florence and Tuscany, also addresses this invocation for divine inspiration. Vasari wrote:

Accept then, most Illustrious Excellency, this my book, or rather indeed your book, of the *Vite* of the artisans of design; and like the Almighty God, looking instead at my soul and my good intentions than at my work, take from me with right good will not what I would which and ought to give, but what I can.⁶

And in the Preface to the Whole Work in the *Vite*, Vasari also praised God as "Almighty God created the great body of the world, Our Father, the first artist and divine architect of time and nature."⁷ Hence the justification for creativity is based on an artist's spiritual and natural potential. Creativity originates with God, the supreme designer and architect of the universe. In Christianity, the artist, created in God's image, becomes a designer and an imitator of the natural world: God infuses the artist's mind with His divine intellect. In the natural world, artists compose art, and patrons promote and protect the fine arts.

Vasari's explanation of artistic creativity is based on the Italian Renaissance tradition, which considers creativity to be present in all human activities. He envisioned two stages of artistic creation. The first concerns what the painting, sculpture, or building (architecture) will look like. God provides this idea to artists through "divine rapture or *furor divinus*."⁸ The second stage is when the artist executes his invention, when his skilled hand projects his invented concept onto paper. The stress on the imaginative and intellectual effort involved in art, which is what Vasari usually meant by

(2000), pp. 1–6.

⁶ BB-Vasari, I, pp. 1–5.

⁷ BB-Vasari, I, pp. 1–5. "Altissimo Dio [che ha] fatto il grande corpo del mondo, Dio Padre primo artista e divino architetto del Tempio e della Natura."

⁸ Marsilio Ficino, *Meditation on the Soul: Selected Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. and ed. Clement Salaman (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1997), p. 70; André Chastel, *Marsile Ficin et L'Art* (Geneva: Droz, 1954, 1975), pp. 129–35, on poetic frenzy; Marieke J.E. Van den Doel, *Ficino and Fantasy: Imagination in Renaissance Art and Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 73–82 and 309–12. See also Marsilio Ficino, *Commentaries on Plato: Phaedrus and Ion*, trans. Michael J.B. Allen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, trans. Michael J.B. Allen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001–2006); Liana de Girolami Cheney, *The Paintings of the Casa Vasari* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), pp. 120–21 and 127.

invention, is part of the artist's rejection of the manual status of the medieval craftsman or artisan. The skilled draftsmanship or *disegno* that Vasari valued so highly makes the ideal concrete through a creative frenzy or *furor*. In his writings, Vasari related the concept of Platonic *furor poeticus* to *furor* in the creative visual arts. He observed that "many painters achieve in the first *disegno* of their work, as though guided by an inspirational fire, a measure of boldness; but afterward, in finishing it, the boldness vanishes."⁹ Vasari visually illustrated this type of creativity with two examples: one religious—*Saint Luke's Painting the Madonna and Child*—the other secular—*Zeuxis in his Study* (**Figs. P6a and P6b**).

In a religious context, Vasari portrayed himself as Saint Luke. In an elegant studio, the patron saint of painters—Saint Luke—is painting a Madonna and a Child on an easel.¹⁰ In the painter's imagination, angels appear in his atelier carrying the Madonna and Child in a celestial cloud. Divine guidance is observed in the Madonna's active participation and instruction to the painter on how to paint her. Her indicative action of pointing is mimed by her Son, whom she holds in her arms. Following his inspirational fire, the painter attentively visualizes receiving instructions from the holy group.

The second type of inspiration recalls the writings of Gaius Plinius Secundus (23–79 CE), known as Pliny the Elder. In *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historiae*, before 79 CE), Book 35, Pliny wrote about ancient painters like Zeuxis, who composed a painting of the most beautiful woman, the perfect female form, by selecting the best features from five different young women (**Fig. P7**).¹¹

⁹ Milanese-Vasari, V, p. 260. See Cheney, *The Paintings of the Casa*, pp. 119–22 and 201.

¹⁰ Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Giorgio Vasari's Teachers: Sacred and Profane Art* (New York/London: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 137–39.

¹¹ This story is in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Book 35, 36; Cicero, *De inventione*, trans. H.M. Hubbell as *On Invention. The Best Kind of Orator. Topic*, Loeb Classical Library 386 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. II.i.; II.2., pp. 4–5; and in Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting*, trans. J.R. Spencer (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 56–57. See Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy: 1450–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 86–102, for the impact of Alberti's notions of art on Vasari's theory of art, including the concept of *istoria*. See also Alice Kramer, "Giorgio Vasari" (PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 1990); Alice Kramer, Review, *Vasari's Florence: Artists and Literati at the Medicean Court*, 2000, ed. P. Jacks, in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXXI, 2, pp. 500–2; Alice Kramer, Review, comparing Introductions by D. Ekserdjian and K. Clark to two 1999 editions of Vasari's *Lives*, in *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXX (1996), pp. 234–37; and Alice Kramer, Review,

For Vasari, the artist captures creativity or creates art by employing an innate intellectual force (*ingegno*) that derives from God through invention (*invenzione*), which is composed of observation, imitation, and assimilation of nature and classical forms:

Art owes its origin to Nature herself; this beautiful creation, the world, supplied the first model, while the original teacher was that divine intelligence which has not only made us superior to the other animals but like God Himself, if I may venture to say it.¹²

How artists reveal invention has two components. The first involves a design or drawing (*disegno*). This visual element comprises color, proportion, rule, measurement, and *maniera* (the artist's style).¹³ Vasari explained further what he means by the visual elements of art (*i cinque aggiunti*):

Rule, then, in architecture, is the process of taking measurements from antiquities and studying the ground-plans of ancient edifices to construct modern buildings. *Order* is the separation of one style from another so that each body should receive its proper members, with no more interchanging between Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Tuscan. *Proportion* is the universal law applying both to architecture and to sculpture, that all bodies should be made correct and accurate, with the members in proper harmony, and so, also, in painting. *Drawing* imitates the most beautiful parts of nature in all figures, whether in sculpture or painting. For this, it is necessary to have a hand and a mind able to reproduce with absolute accuracy and precision, on a level surface—whether by drawing on a paper, panel, or some other level surface—everything that the eye sees; and the same is true of relief in sculpture. *Manner* attains the most outstanding beauty by constantly copying the most beautiful objects and combining these most beautiful things, hands, heads, bodies, and legs, to make a figure of the greatest possible beauty. This practice was carried out in every workplace by all employees and was referred to as the beautiful manner (*la bella maniera*).¹⁴

The second invention component involves the ability to compose a visual narrative (*istoria*), referred to in this book as *history painting*. Vasari

P.L. Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 1996, XXVII/3, pp. 973–75; Silvia Baggio, Paola Benigni, and Diana Toccacfondi, *Giorgio Vasari, La Casa, Le Carte, Il Teatro della Memoria* (Florence: Leo Olschki, 2015).

¹² BB-Vasari, Preface One, II, p. 6; Cheney, *The Paintings of the Casa*, pp. 121–23; Mario Pozzi and Enrico Mattioda, *Giorgio Vasari Storico e Critico* (Florence: Leo Olschki, 2006), pp. 79–105 and 129–47.

¹³ BB-Vasari, Preface One, II, p. 12.

¹⁴ BB-Vasari, IV, p. 4.

added emblematic, mythographic, and philosophical ramifications and significations to Leon Batista Alberti's (1404–1472) description of the visual narrative¹⁵ and Leonardo da Vinci's (1452–1519) elements of narrative painting.¹⁶

Employing both Aristotelian and Neoplatonic approaches to writing art history, Vasari asserted that invention sparks from a divine conception. His Neoplatonic affinities reside in the humanistic approach that conceives art as a form of beauty (goodness) created by observing nature.¹⁷ This notion of creation attempts to reconcile the quest to assimilate Antiquity while maintaining Christian fervor: even if an artist creates beauty, the concept of beauty ultimately derives from God. Because God makes the individual, artists as human beings are imitations of God, and thus artists create because they imitate their creator. Vasari says the following in Preface One:

The first image of man was a lump of clay, and not without reason, seeing that the Divine Architect of time and nature, being Himself most perfect, wished to show in the imperfection of the material the way to add and to take away; in the same manner wherein the good sculptors and painters are wont to work, who, adding and taking away in their models, bring their perfect works of art to that final perfection which they desire.¹⁸

When Vasari postulated that art imitates nature, his ideas derive from Aristotle (384–322 BCE). In his *Poetics* (335 BCE), Aristotle introduces his theory of imitation (*mimesis*), the notion that art imitates nature,¹⁹ and from this develops a method of judgment and classification of art. Vasari's knowledge of Aristotle's theory of art was acquired through the writings of Alberti, mainly from Alberti's *Della Pittura* [*On Painting*, 1436], as well as from Annibale Caro's translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca. 1547). For

¹⁵ Cheney, *The Paintings of the Casa*, pp. 183–92; and Liana De Girolami Cheney, “Giorgio Vasari's *Fine Arts*: Neoplatonic Visualization of Invention, Imitation, and Beauty,” ed. Luiz Marquez, in *Figura. Studi sull'immagine nella tradizione classica* (2012), online <https://doi.org/10.20396/figura.v1i0.10198>
<https://econtents.bc.unicamp.br/inpec/index.php/figura/article/view/10198>.

¹⁶ Martin Kemp, ed. and trans. *Leonardo On Painting* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 220.

¹⁷ Liana De Girolami Cheney, “Giorgio Vasari's *The Toilet of Venus*: Neoplatonic Notion of Female Beauty,” in *Neoplatonism and Western Aesthetics*, ed. Aphrodite Alexandrakis (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 99–113.

¹⁸ BB-Vasari, Preface to the Whole Work, I, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008), Introduction. While writing his *Vite*, Vasari befriended and was assisted by the humanist Annibale Caro (1507–1566). He certainly became aware of Caro's translation of *Aristotle's Poetics* and Aristotle's notions of imitation and learning.