The Bizarre as Burlesque in Giorgio Vasari’s 
*Vita* of Piero di Cosimo

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In his *vita* of the Florentine painter Piero di Cosimo (ca. 1462-1521), Vasari tells us that the artist reduced himself to eating only boiled eggs, which, to economize on fuel, he would cook fifty at a time while preparing his glue.1 This is only one story in a biography full of arresting, sometimes comic, anecdotes which together form an unforgettable picture of an eccentric artist. According to Vasari, Piero had great powers of *fantasia* and penetrating insights into nature and could have been a famous painter in the manner of Leonardo da Vinci (1454-1519) if his art had not obsessed him to such an extent that he refused to live as a civilized human being.2 His house was filthy; his garden ran “wild, like his own nature”; his misanthropy drove away friends and assistants; and his relentless experiments in art caused him not only to neglect all social niceties, but also to fail to develop a consistent, grand style of painting.3

As a testament to Vasari’s authorial power, Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) said that we know more about Piero than almost any other artist.4 Panofsky could only have been speaking of the artist’s supposed personality, because until recently the documented existence of Piero was slim. Archival work has uncovered new information, however, and much of what has been learned runs counter to Vasari’s captivating vision. Just a few examples will show this.

Vasari claims that Piero was a fiercely unsocial soul who was “less man than beast.”5 However, in a time when having a surname was a mark of distinction, documents show that Piero adopted the last name “Ubaldini,” suggesting he was interested in elevating his social position.6 Vasari also portrays Piero as markedly deficient in collegiality, saying he alternately shunned or made himself unbearable to his fellow artists. Until recently, the earliest known mention of Piero’s membership in the Company of St. Luke was 1503, when Piero was forty-one years old. Modern scholars had been content to examine this information through Vasari’s lens, concluding that the misanthropic artist did not join the painter’s guild until relatively late in life.7 New research shows, however,
that Piero was a member of the Company of Saint Luke from at least the age of twenty. His supposedly hermit-like existence and eccentric personality have also been belied by recently discovered records of cordial interactions with his neighbors, and of a probable life-long relationship with his pupil Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557). Finally, Piero did not die, as Vasari insists, miserable and alone with no preparations for death; instead, the precise time of his demise has been uncovered, suggesting, as Louis Waldman notes, that he was attended. Piero also left some of the most careful funeral instructions that we have on record from any artist. He specified who would attend his funeral and where he would be interred, and left funds for twenty-five years of annual masses to be said, additionally stipulating that his continued remembrance with these observances be marked in the record books of the Confraternity of the Annunziata, the group to which he and many fellow artists belonged.

The new documents show us an active guild member, an engaged neighbor, and an upstanding Christian concerned with posterity. In other words, the documents represent a man who was very much a part of his society. This social Piero is so at odds with Vasari's biography that we must assume Vasari embellished or invented the anecdotes he tells. We may also assume that he did so for a purpose. Wanting Piero's life to serve as a moralizing tale, Vasari began the 1550 edition of the artist's vita with a clear and lengthy injunction to painters to learn from Piero's example. Painters, he says, should not allow either their love for art or a "certain rouguishness" to cause them to forget the tasks of cultivating both fame and their social status. Vasari goes on to demonstrate the mistakes Piero made in those two respects, recounting a series of memorable, occasionally grotesque, details about the painter's behavior. His vivid record of Piero's life makes the lessons of the biography both more convincing and more entertaining than they otherwise might have been. But Vasari did not invent the idea of an eccentric artist living at odds with societal conventions, and some of the stories he tells about Piero have precedent in another literary genre, as an analysis of burlesque poetry, and, in particular, of certain poems by the Florentine painter and poet Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) will show.

For instance, Vasari records that Piero hated to hear bells ringing. Likewise, Bronzino wrote a burlesque poem ("Capitolo contro a le campane") filled with invectives against bells. Piero, Vasari says, was an irreligious misanthrope who despised the shrieks of children and the chanting of priests. Bronzino wrote a humorous poem against noises ("I romori"), declaring that "a good part" of his mind had been taken away by unpleasant sounds like those made by children and praying friars.