Prefiguring Ripa: Vasari’s Virtues in the Chamber of Fortune

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“Vasari Adiuvat Ripam” ("Vasari Helps Ripa")

Giorgio Vasari’s importance in pioneering the codification of artistic and compositional elements within the emblematic tradition has long been overlooked. Yet his encyclopedic approach to the assimilation of the emblematic tradition establishes him as a forerunner of the iconographer, Cesare Ripa. Vasari’s educational background and association with Renaissance humanists engendered his familiarity with the language and imagery of the emblematic tradition. This knowledge prompted him to appropriate and subsume some of these images in his work, anticipating Ripa’s figurazioni or emblems in his 1593 Iconologia.1 Vasari’s paintings in the Casa Vasari at Arezzo, especially in the Chamber of Fortune (1548), a room in his home, best illustrate the connection that enables us to regard Vasari as Ripa’s precursor. Vasari’s referential approach to the emblematic tradition can particularly be seen in his depiction of the allegorical virtues in this chamber.

As Vasari recounts in his autobiography, his knowledge of emblems derives from his formal education in the classics with the humanists, Giovanni Pollastra and Pierio Valeriano; his contact with Andrea Alciato in 1540, when Vasari was painting the Refectory of San Michele in Bosco in Bologna; and his interactions with the humanists, Vincenzo Borghini, Annibale Caro, and Paolo Giovio, when Vasari was decorating the Sala dei Cento Giorni in Rome in 1546. As a consequence of his schooling and these contacts, Vasari became aware of the literary tradition associated with emblematic and mythographic sources such as Andrea Alciato’s 1546 Emblemata, Francesco Colonna’s 1499 Hypnertomachia Poliphili, Horopollo’s Hieroglyphica of 1505, and Pierio Valeriano’s 1556 Hieroglyphicae. Mythological manuals also provided a vital source for Vasari’s visual conceiti (conceits): Boccaccio’s Geneologia de gli Dei (1547), Natali Conti’s Mythologiae (1551), Lilio Gregorio Giraldi’s De deis gentium (1548), and Vincenzo Cartari’s Imagini dell’ Dei de gl’ Antichi (1556). Such compilations of medieval mythographies, hieroglyphs, and numismatic sources served as commonplace books for Cinquecento humanists and artists. These figurative encyclopedias or

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“dictionary-albums” allowed for easy consultation when time was lacking for reading primary texts. Since these manuals were so well known to Cinquecento artists and literati, humanists copied information directly from them without feeling need to credit their sources. Throughout the Renaissance, painters used these manuals as they assembled, assimilated, and adapted subjects from classical mythology into complex and allusive schemes.

In addition, the Greek Anthology, a series of anonymous Greek lyric and epigrammatic poems with a moral message, greatly influenced these sources, especially Alciato. In 1494 Janus Lascaris, a renowned Hellenist, first published the Greek Anthology in Florence. In 1522 Alciato translated it into Latin and assimilated its moral implications in his emblem book. Other literary and epigrammatic sources for Vasari’s imagery and symbolism are Paolo Giovio’s Dialogo delle imprese militare et amorose (1551) and the 1522 Ragionamento delle Imprese (Zimmermann; Caldwell) as well as Vincenzo Borghini’s numerous letters and explanatory texts on programs of decorative cycles and literary subjects, published as Discorsi in 1584 (see Manni).

For sixteenth-century theorists the merit of the iconographical invenzioni (allegeries, emblems, and imprese) lay in the artist’s original and ingenious interpretation of a familiar myth or allegory (see Scorza). Vasari, in the prefaces to his Vite, and Ripa, in his Iconologia, concur that the image should provide visual interest by showing beautiful elements and that its motto should be brief, containing two or three words or a line of verse left suggestively incomplete to intrigue or tease the audience—in sum, a Maniera conceit. In their writings both Vasari and Ripa strongly emphasize that an allegory (emblem) must visually and verbally assimilate its ancient sources. Such emblematic sources provided Vasari with an extensive repertoire of images that he collected and employed in the iconography of the Casa Vasari in Arezzo and expanded in such later commissions as the decorative cycles of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.

Vasari’s composition of images as a compendium of iconography for a decorative program was similar to the literary practices of Alciato, Valeriano, and Cartari and follows Giovio’s advice on depicting an emblematic image or imprese. According to Giovio an imprese or badge must contain a figure and motto, its meaning should not be too obscure or too obvious, the imagery must be pleasant to look at, and the motto must be brief, inventive, and unambiguous.

Later Ripa captured the symbolic meaning of an image by fusing the Cinquecento visual and literary traditions in his emblem book, Iconologia. He refers to the emblematic image as figurazione. In Ripa’s fig-