"This splendid, noble art": Re-Viewing Fifteenth-Century Painting in Italy

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In this splendid, noble art
So many have been famous in our century,
They make any other age seem poor
In the art of painting. (trans. Baxandall 111)

These lines and the title of this article are taken from a poem praising art in Italy during the fifteenth century (Santi). The author is Giovanni Santi, famous as the father of Raphael. A man of many gifts, Santi was a courtier and playwright who created festive masques and triumphal processions for the fabled Duke of Urbino, Federigo da Montefeltro. Most importantly, Giovanni Santi was a painter whose portraits and religious works were coveted by rulers and nobility throughout northern Italy (Varese; Dubos; Fig. 1).²

Fig. 1. Giovanni Santi. Christ Supported by Two Angels. c. 1490. Oil on canvas. Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.
Although greatly esteemed in the fifteenth century, Santi and his works are little known today. As with many Italian masters, he has been excluded from the canon of Renaissance art, a narrative constructed nearly 450 years ago. The protagonists of this narrative are the city of Florence and its artists. Its author is Giorgio Vasari, the 500th anniversary of whose birth is being celebrated this year, 2011. Vasari was a painter, architect, court artist, collector, and writer whose view of Italian painting and the cult of fame have dominated our conception of Renaissance art to this day.

Considered the father of art history, Vasari formulated the paradigm by which Italian medieval and Renaissance artists have been judged ever since. His Vite—Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori (Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects)—was first published in 1550, and revised and expanded in 1568 (Vasari, ed. Milanesi). The multi-volume compendium comprises the most influential study of Italian art ever written (Barolsky; Burzer et al; Pozzi; Rubin). The Lives is epic in scope, surveying the brilliant achievements of artists from the late Middle Ages through the mid-sixteenth century. In overwhelming numbers, the majority of fifteenth-century artists immortalized in the Lives were Florentine. This representation surely was not coincidental. Vasari dedicated the Lives to his patron, the autocratic Cosimo I de’ Medici, Duke of Florence, whose family had dominated the city’s government and cultural life for more than a century. Although most sixteenth-century rulers in Italy traced their origins to long-established, noble families, Duke Cosimo was a descendent of merchants and bankers. Coming to power in 1434, the Medici were parvenus compared to the nobility whose alliances they sought. Yet they understood that commissioning art could elevate their social status immeasurably, as their concerted patronage of painters, sculptors, and architects in the fifteenth century and beyond demonstrates (Gombrich; Kent).

In homage to the duke, Vasari presented Florence as the crucible of artistic creativity, one that Cosimo’s “most illustrious ancestors...inspired and aided” through their enlightened patronage (1:1). Under the “most benevolent house” of the Medici, the arts “were recovered, ennobled, and made beautiful again” (1:2). Although Vasari had traveled widely in Italy before writing the Vite, he focused his praise primarily on the masters who were born or worked in the city on the Arno. His portrayal of Florentine supremacy in the Vite was motivated not only by personal conviction but also by his role as court artist to the Medici and the need to cultivate favor with an imperious patron.

Four and a half centuries after the publication of the Vite, many historians of Renaissance culture still accept Vasari’s appraisal of Florentine supremacy in the arts. Regarding Florence as the font of Renaissance art, these scholars have confined their research to the city’s already familiar masters and monuments. This myopic perspective has impoverished our understanding of visual culture during the Renaissance, an age of humanism, piety, and vibrant exchanges that extended beyond Tuscany and the city of Florence. The fifteenth century engendered a new appreciation of art and its creators that encompassed the entire Italian peninsula.