Giorgio Vasari at 500: An Homage

Liana De Girolami Cheney

Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), Tuscan painter, architect, art collector and writer, is best known for his Le Vite de’ piú eccellenti architetti, pittori e scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a’ tempi nostri (Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors of Italy, from Cimabue to the present time).¹ This first volume published in 1550 was followed in 1568 by an enlarged edition illustrated with woodcuts of artists’ portraits.² By virtue of this text, Vasari is known as “the first art historian” (Rud 1 and 11)³ since the time of Pliny the Elder’s Naturalis Historiae (Natural History, c. 79). It is almost impossible to imagine the history of Italian art without Vasari, so fundamental is his Lives. It is the first real and autonomous history of art both because of its monumental scope and because of the integration of the individual biographies into a whole.

According to his own account, Vasari, as a young man, was an apprentice to Andrea del Sarto, Rosso Fiorentino, and Baccio Bandinelli in Florence. Vasari’s career is well documented, the fullest source of information being the autobiography or vita added to the 1568 edition of his Lives (Vasari, Vite, ed. Bettarini and Barocchi 369–413).⁴

Vasari had an extremely active artistic career, but much of his time was spent as an impresario devising decorations for courtly festivals and similar ephemera. He praised the Medici family for promoting his career from childhood, and much of his work was done for Cosimo I, Duke of Tuscany. Vasari was not only a prolific painter in the mannerist style, but also an active architect and decorator. He supervised the building of Pope Julius III’s Villa Giulia in Rome, but his architectural masterpiece is the reconstruction of the Uffizi picture gallery in Florence (from 1560), originally the offices of the Medici administration. In addition, he established the first Florentine Academy of Design in 1563. He died in 1574. Originally, his tomb was in Santa Maria della Pieve in Arezzo. Today, he is buried in an unknown location.

Vasari, as an artist, writer, and collector of the art of the Cinquecento, viewed himself as “huomo buono et docto in buon letter” (“a fine and learned man”) (Wittkower and Wittkower 16; Cheney, The Homes of Giorgio Vasari 187; Cheney, Vasari Teachers 3).⁵ In choosing to practice various arts such as writing treatises and designing buildings, contemporary humanists regard the Cinquecento artist Vasari as a virtuoso.

Vasari’s intellectual curiosity, enthusiasm and artistic ability made it possible for him to present a novel view of art that expresses a concern for success, a fascination with the antique, and a delight in virtuosity as first manifested in his homes, Casa Vasari of 1542–54, in Arezzo, and Casa Vasari of 1560–62, in Florence (Cheney The Homes Giorgio Vasari 187–93; Cecchi 37–4).⁶ His artistic ability extended to his architectural interests as well, for example the Galleria degli Uffizi in 1560 for the Duke of Florence.

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By traveling and becoming acquainted with the various arts in other centers, Vasari thinks that artists could improve on, change, or assimilate different styles, and could instruct their patrons about art. These experiences cause artists to not only admire the works of fellow artists, but to collect them as well. The exchange of drawings assists artists in valuing their art and in transmitting their artistic conceits to other artists and patrons. Moreover, their friendship and personal contact with patrons make them and advance the recognition of their work. The new artistic freedom and the spirit of competition began to challenge and question the validity and meaning of the arts. Artists began to write treatises explaining and defining various concepts such as imitation, invention, concetto (conceit) and disegno (drawing) (Battisti 175-215; Barocchi Vol. 1; Summers 336-61; Cheney, Prefaces xl-xliv, lvi). In addition, drawing is viewed as the first manifestation of artistic expression, thus valuing drawing as the most genuine art form. Vasari honors the art of drawing at such a level that he began collecting drawings earlier in his career and later masterfully compiles an artists' drawing collection in Il Libro de' Disegni (Collobi-Ragghianti 10-20). Then, as writer, he highly praises the artistic invention and imitation of disegno throughout the editions of the Vite. This book is the foundation of modern art historiography and the prototype for most, if not all, biographies of artists, and culminates with the formation of the Florentine Academy of Disegno in 1563.

Vasari's concept of collection incorporates the mental faculty of the art of memory, to remember visually and verbally the extraordinary artistic enterprise of artists, thus recalling ancient writers and ancient painters, who loved nature and transmitted this appreciation into an art form, poetry or painting. He also reflects on the manifestations of art according to Renaissance writers and his fellow artists. In the Renaissance, in particular the Cinquecento, artists like the ancient painters, also manifest in their art the collection of both ideas and visual forms, i.e., their art is the visualization of ideas into images as well as the formation of images into conceits.

Vasari's manifestation of collecting is a fusion between the love of disegno and abstract conceits on how to capture nature. This artist's quest evolved from the artists' processes and techniques of painting, sculpture, and architecture. The mastery of these types of collecting is for glorifying those artists who with furor divinus and furor artisticus are able to capture through disegno the beauty of nature in art. This is why for Vasari, the artist's brush is more powerful than the pen, as he writes:

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\text{Hac sospite nunquam hos perisee,} \\
\text{Viros victos avt morte fatebor.}
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(“While history lives, it would never be said
That artists' work has perished”).