Vasari: Between the Paragone and the Portraits of Himself
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For most critics, now and in the past, Giorgio Vasari is—first and foremost—the author of *Le vite de' piú eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*. Vasari's artistic work—in particular, his painting—has instead remained rather at the edge of the attention of scholars, when compared to the immense literature that continues to fuel the bibliography of his *Le Vite*, undoubtedly a work of undeniable and fundamental importance. Vasari's long and ambiguous fate among critics is marked by some bias: on the one hand, it stems from his parochialism in *Le Vite*, in favor of the Tuscans; on the other hand, it originates in the unanimous condemnation of Mannerism during past centuries, reevaluated only during the twentieth century. Yet Vasari's work has never remained unnoticed through the years; it has always become a fundamental point of reference.

In 2011 on the occasion of the five hundreth anniversary of his birth, Vasari was heavily discussed with an approach much less bound and conditioned by the ideas of the critics in the past. There were so many celebrations organized in his honor that we can call it a pure and true consecration. Almost as it were a myth, and a myth is not born by itself. Much of this success should primarily be attributed to the artist himself.

Vasari was an incomparable artisan of his own image, in passing it on to posterity, supported in this effort by his acquaintances he chose accurately, and later because of the work and contributions of his heirs, which are still unappreciated to this day.¹ In light of these observations, the scope of this essay is to highlight the fact that Vasari might not have entrusted the task of the artists' posthumous fame, and the claim of their new social status obtained in the sixteenth century, only to his *Le Vite*, but also how, through his entire artistic career and under different forms of communication, he was deeply committed and dedicated to achieving these goals. Indeed, this essay is about investigating Vasari’s self-portrayal: how he describes himself in relation to his own art, thus proposing an interpretation more cross-sectional of the style in which Vasari builds his own image through the years; observing more attentively his portraits, self-portraits, and some of his works painted in residences in Arezzo and Florence; and finally, by considering the important work the Ragionamenti.

Two Self-portraits in the Palazzo Vecchio

One of the first portrayals of Vasari’s face is hidden in the paintings in the Palazzo Vecchio (Fig. 1), in Cosimo’s I hall. This *tondo*, where Cosimo is surrounded by his architects, engineers and sculptors, places

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itself in an ideal continuation of two previous paintings: Cosimo Pater Patriae circondato da letterati e artisti, located in the hall of Cosimo the Elder, and Lorenzo de’ Medici fra filosofi e letterati, located in the hall of Lorenzo the Magnificent. These three works form a triptych of the good management of the arts and letters, to exalt the beneficent, generous, and long-lived patronage of the Medicis. To help the observer in the identification of the characters represented, Vasari wrote their names in precise places: in the small model of the logge del Mercato Nuovo, presented to the Duke by Tasso; in the band that runs on the chest of Tribolo, the Duke’s sculptor and hydraulic engineer; or in the cap of Francesco di Ser Jacopo, at that time Superintendent General of the Ducal Factories. Other examples are Nanni Unghero, a military engineer who worked for Cosimo in the fortifications of several cities in Tuscany; Giovan Battista Belluci from San Marino, another engineer and an expert in fortifications; the sculptors Baccio Bandinelli and Benvenuto Cellini; Luca Martini, Superintendent of the trenches, prisons, and fortresses in Pisa; and Bartolomeo Ammannati, a sculptor and Vasari’s friend, who subsequently would also prove himself to be a great architect (Chandler Kirwin 155–20).²

Fig. 1. Giorgio Vasari, Cosimo Among His Artists, 1555–1558, fresco. Firenze, Palazzo Vecchio, Sala di Cosimo I. Photo credit: Emilie Passignat, with permission of the Musei Civici Fiorentini.