

Giorgio Vasari. Art and History. By Patricia Lee Rubin. 448 pp. incl. 20 col. pls. + 120 b. & w. ills. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995), £35. ISBN 0-300-04909-9.

The rhetorical foundations and fictional aspects of the writing of history have been greatly emphasised over the last three decades.¹ It is therefore inevitable that Giorgio Vasari's *Le Vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori italiani da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* of 1550,² a quintessentially rhetorical enterprise which is enlivened by the author's enormous talent for delightfully entertaining narratives, should be finally analysed for what it mostly is, a superb historical construction. In recent times Vasari's brilliant text has been relentlessly scrutinised, although it must be added that some of these studies, being based on a rather serious misunderstanding of its aims, have often reached partial and debateable results.³ What characterises the excellent, very readable book under review – by far the best introduction to Vasari's life and work available in English – is its systematic

approach, the relevance of the questions asked, and the wide-ranging implications of the research.

After a useful introduction, in which Rubin briefly outlines the most important contributions to Vasari scholarship, she organises her material in nine chapters. Chapter One ('The Invention of Identity') compares the 'true' Vasari – or rather what we know about him through the well over one thousand surviving letters and other archival records – with the self-created image of the artist, the way in which he chose to be known. Chapter Two shows how Vasari's early life had an effect on the way in which the *Lives* are structured and on the choice of the artists he discusses. In other words, Vasari's literary and artistic education put him in contact from an early age with numerous networks who helped him, directly as well as indirectly, shape his most important creation. Vasari's early schooling took place in Arezzo under the supervision of the humanist Giovanni Lap-poli, while Guillaume de Marcillat, *retour de Rome*, could provide at least an up-to-date version of the visual models developed by Michelangelo and Raphael. As he entered the Medici entourage, Vasari could take advantage of Pierio Valeriano's teaching because the latter, the author of the celebrated *Hieroglyphica*, was the tutor of Ippolito and Alessandro. Moreover, Vasari's friendship with his fellow-countryman Pietro Aretino, with several members of the Farnese circle and with Ottaviano de' Medici – a major figure, and *éminence grise* who deserves a detailed monographic study

contributed to the development of his distinct social and literary values. Equally important were the artist's networks of monastic patrons, above all the Camaldolense and the Olivetans, as well as his contacts with many colleagues: Vittorio Ghiberti, who sold him a part of the important drawing collection put together by Lorenzo; his teachers Andrea del Sarto and Bandinelli; his 'mentor' Rosso, who lived in Arezzo and its surroundings after the Sack of Rome; and his friends, such as Francesco Salviati, who shared the discomforts of a rigorous artistic training. These encounters had a major impact on Vasari's fictionalisation of his profession. As Rubin points out (p.105): 'The *Lives* are a very personal projection of stylistic and social ideals. Central Italian artists are predominant, and artists from other regions are appraised using standards based on the style prevalent in Rome in the 1530s and 1540s when Vasari came to artistic maturity'. From these first two chapters Vasari emerges as an indefatigable and ambitious social climber, but in Rubin's skilful narrative we are already well-disposed towards this hard worker of relatively humble origins: his future material success is not explained as the result of his compromises with Cosimo de' Medici's brusque, sometimes even brutal absolutist power, but as the outcome of his merit, commitment to work and reliability.²

Chapter Three ('Memory's itinerary: research and publication') deals with the evolution of the first edition of the *Lives* during the 1540s. Chapter Four ('Vasari and the "Writers of Histories"') is probably the

best part of the book. The declared aim of Rubin's research (p.5) is 'to study the motivations and consequences' of Vasari's choice of biography as his model of historical writing. This chapter is devoted to the identification and analysis of Vasari's most important sources as well as of his major innovations. Cicero, Quintilian, Pliny, Villani, Ghiberti, Antonio Billi, Albertini, Giovo, the genres of the Tuscan *novella* and of the lives of *uomini famosi* were of course among Vasari's most important models and sources, but Rubin reminds us that we should not overlook Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers*, which offered a master-pupil pattern easily applicable to Vasari's interests, or Aretino's letters, which gave important examples of descriptive strategies. The models for Vasari's historiography and narrative techniques were the classical sources, the modern classics (Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio), and modern historians (not only his friend Giovo, but also Bruni and Machiavelli). The *Lives* were a complex product, and to this list we should also add Angelo Firenzuola, who is quoted on p.271, because, as Philip Sohm has recently pointed out, the most important passage in the celebrated prologue to the third part of the *Lives* is a paraphrase of one of Firenzuola's dialogues. In any case, Vasari's original contribution is more important: he added to this heterogeneous material his personal research – mostly 'interviews' with colleagues, patrons and collectors – and his own visual experiences. This was an entirely original idea, and in this way he created a new form of literary text. As Rubin deftly points out, Vasari's contemporaries were baffled by this new product: Annibale Caro called it a '*commentario*', Don Miniato Pitti an '*istoria della pittura*', and Paolo Pino '*le vite, et opere de più chiari pittori*'.

Chapter Five analyses the fundamental changes introduced in the second edition, or rather in the new book, for the new version is three times longer than the first. The *Lives* are no longer the product of Vasari's Roman experiences in the elegant Farnese circle of the 1540s, but the response to the more austere ambience of Cosimo I's court. The influence of the pedantic Vincenzo Borghini imposed greater 'historical accuracy' not only on the text but also on Vasari's artistic output: for example, in 1567 Giorgio sent Giovanni Battista Naldini to sketch the sites of the battles that they were to fresco in the Salone dei Cinquecento.

Chapter Six discusses with new insights the critical language used and created by Vasari. In the last three chapters Rubin selects one life for each part of the *Lives* (Giotto, Donatello, and Raphael) in order to test Vasari's 'historical and critical method'. These essays contain many important observations and are good models for similar future enterprises, but are somewhat isolated from the rest of the book. Moreover, one misses a discussion of Michelangelo. It is easy to sympathise with the author's decision to reduce the obtrusive presence of the older master: we have heard this story many times before. It was a brave choice, and Rubin has certainly other, more profound

reasons to justify it: yet this is a major lacuna in the otherwise well-organised structure of her book.

One last point needs to be discussed. As Rubin herself has brilliantly demonstrated, Vasari's *Lives* is a collective project. The artist was able to give shape to the concerns of an entire society and to a tradition of 'art-historical' writing which, though long-established, had been unable to transform itself into a more complex literary form. Yet on the very last page of the book Vasari is somewhat mythologised as 'the Author', whose passion and love created the greatest invention of his life. Of course, up to a point this is 'true', but one cannot help thinking that Vasari has once again succeeded in his skilful self-promotion. The exposure of his rhetorical and narrative strategies has not removed the statue from its pedestal. Vasari is more than ever in the spotlight. The central Italian paradigm still dominates our narratives, and this example shows how difficult it is to free ourselves from the fictional representations that populate our subject, no matter how hard we try.

This is one of the best books ever written on Vasari, and it will certainly reach that mixed audience of novices and experts envisaged in the introduction. It is informative, accurate and engaging. One of its many merits is to stimulate discussion.

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'The most original, challenging and intriguing text remains M. DE CERTEAU: *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris [1975], which was translated into English after the author's untimely death as *The Writing of History*, ed. T. CONLEY, New York [1988].

'It is always worth stressing that the second edition (1568) has a very different title: *Le Vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*. Painters now come before architects and Vasari has abolished the adjective Italian, possibly because he had added an essay on '*diversi artefici fiamminghi*', but perhaps also because he had developed a more ambitious 'universal' model.

'In her informative appendix on the several editions of Vasari's *Lives* Rubin reminds us that at present there is no complete critical edition in English and not even a reliable translation.

'The introduction deals with the philological work of Gaetano Milanese and his friends as well as with Wolfgang Kallab's pioneering *Vasari Studien*. However, Paola Barocchi, who has played a major rôle in the renewed interest in Vasari, deserved more credit than a footnote.

'Rubin is certainly correct when she writes (p.417) in the introduction to her select bibliography that 'a complete Vasari' is an historical impossibility, but I did miss certain references, and in particular K.W. FORSTER: 'Metaphors of Rule. Political Ideology and History in the Portraits of Cosimo I de' Medici', *Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, XV [1971], pp.65-104.