

# Introduction



Perhaps the most persistent cliché about the Italian Renaissance is that it witnessed the emergence of the concept of individual genius. Like many clichés, it is both true and false. Even a cursory glance at the *Lives of the Artists* by Giorgio Vasari, one of the period’s chief mythmakers, confirms that the notion of divinely inspired genius was of pressing concern. Vasari’s assessment of Leonardo da Vinci offers a case in point: The artist was so incomparably graced by heaven that “each of his actions is so divine that, leaving all other men behind, he makes it clear that this is a gift from God, and not acquired by human art.”<sup>1</sup> One of the pleasures of Vasari’s text is that such extremely rare individuals appear with some frequency in the *terza età*, an age uncommonly blessed with artists whose divine election was made manifest in their every action, from the beauty of their form and character to the works of their hands. In his infinite wisdom, God saw fit not only to anoint Leonardo, but also to grant Raphael all those gifts usually meted out to different people over time, thus raising him to the status of a “mortal god.”<sup>2</sup> Yet even these extraordinary individuals pale in comparison with heaven’s greatest gift, the truly “divine Michelangelo.”<sup>3</sup>

This model of divinely inspired genius is, of course, not a Renaissance invention, but rather a recovery and elaboration of concepts inherited from classical



antiquity and filtered through early Christian thought. The early modern discourse on divine inspiration rejected the notion that it was the exclusive province of the prophets and evangelists in favor of a more classical model that embraced philosophers and poets and finally culminated, as Vasari amply demonstrates, in a novel claim for the inclusion of artists among these privileged ranks.<sup>4</sup>

I begin with Vasari because, thus far, this important shift in definitions of intellectual achievement and artistic identity has been traced primarily through texts such as his. The work of Michael Baxandall, Martin Kemp, and David Summers, in particular, has illuminated the language of Renaissance art criticism, theory, and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> In sources ranging from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* to courtly dialogues and artists' correspondence, we see the emergence of new criteria for judging the success of creative endeavors and changes in the meaning of words such as *ingegno*, *fantasia*, and *invenzione*. The linguistic evidence reflects the adoption of a new model of inspiration, one derived not from practice and sensory experience, not from "human art," but from the irrational and emotional rapture of divine union, a concept rooted in Platonic philosophy. As notions of inspiration developed and the category of the divinely inspired was expanded to include an elite group of visual artists, is the only evidence of this change to be found in language? Considering the enormously significant role that images played in early modern culture, one might reasonably expect that they, too, would articulate this shift.<sup>6</sup> The aim of this book is to trace the development of the *pictorial* vocabulary of divine inspiration, examining how themes of spiritual, intellectual, and ultimately artistic transcendence were given visual form.

Vasari speaks of gifts "rained down" from heaven; the Neoplatonists promoted the concept of *furor*, a moment of divine union characterized by the loss of reason.<sup>7</sup> In both instances, the inspired individual is a passive recipient. In the pages that follow, I argue that the imagery of sleep offered a powerful visual sign for this conception of inspiration. Sleep involves the suspension of physical sensation and, equally, of rational thought. These qualities always adhere to sleep, but they are not always valued.<sup>8</sup> In a Renaissance context, the abandon and abstraction of sleep were understood to provide the ideal conditions for divine union, an experience frequently realized through a dream.<sup>9</sup> Sleep thus could offer a simple visual sign for a particular kind of intellectual experience, carrying implications not of sloth, but of divine inspiration. Sleep also inflected the practice

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of looking, allowing the viewer a contemplative voyeuristic experience, rather than a fictive dialogue with an image.

In examining how sleep and dreams came to function as attributes of the creative self, I have looked to primary sources, both literary and visual. My approach is fundamentally iconographic and owes much to the work of Erwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind, but the insights of other modes of art-historical inquiry, notably semiotics and feminist theory, have been equally influential. The textual evidence provides the context for interpreting the imagery of sleep in its many manifestations in Renaissance visual culture, but it works in tandem with the images. I intend to demonstrate that images were not simply illustrative of an early modern discourse on sleep, dreams, and inspiration, but that they formed a central component of and commentary on that discourse. They provided a visual vocabulary that disseminated ideas about individual genius, giving concrete form to such abstractions as “inspiration” and “creativity.” In a departure from more traditional iconographic studies, I often argue for ambiguity, complexity, and multiplicity of meaning rather than a single, fixed “solution” for the problem of interpretation. I see the encounter between viewer and image as dynamic, a relationship that artists could exploit and shape in the creation of their works.

Relying on primary sources, including poems invoking sleep, handbooks of dream interpretation, and the recorded dreams of poets and artists, I seek to recapture a pre-Freudian conception of the nature of sleep and dreams and their relation to divine inspiration. Although such evidence might seem to call for (and potentially reward) a psychoanalytic approach, my aim is to address accounts of dreams as rhetorical tools, to place them in a larger social and historical context in which sleep and dreams were seen as mechanisms for communication with the divine. The result is a sense of the associations that sleep and dreams might generate for Renaissance artists and viewers. I have brought together images from a variety of media, including portrait medals, engravings, paintings, and drawings. These works imply diverse, although consistently elite, audiences, from the carefully selected circle of intimate friends who might have had access to Michelangelo’s finished drawings to the largely anonymous clientele for engravings. This range of images and audiences suggests the importance and popularity of the imagery of sleep in early modern visual culture and the flexibility of sleep as a visual sign. In interpreting the imagery of sleep, I am concerned with both



creators and viewers; the symbiotic relationship that develops between them is essential to understanding the new model of divine inspiration.

The book begins with the members of Plato's elect: philosophers and poets. In Chapter One, *The Sleep of Reason*, I investigate the use of the sleeping male nude in portraits of intellectuals. Tracing the connection between sleep and inspiration to Platonic philosophy, this chapter reveals how sleep functioned as a visible manifestation of *vacatio*, a state of rapture in which the inspired individual is freed from the senses to experience divine union. It also addresses the concept of the dream, using sources from antiquity to the Renaissance to establish early modern perceptions of the dream as a mechanism for poetic inspiration.

Sleep invokes the moment of inspired madness, but cannot articulate its fulfillment in productive activity. In Chapter Two, *Sleep and Waking/Rapture and Reason*, I tackle the problems presented by sleep as a visual sign, examining images that juxtapose sleep (and the comparable state of drunken stupor) and waking in light of ongoing Renaissance debates that pitted divine inspiration against disciplined labor and study as the true foundation for artistic creativity. The visual antithesis of sleep and waking articulated the tension between Platonic and Aristotelian models of inspiration, resulting in pictorial commentaries on the nature of creative experience.

In Chapter Three, *Pregnant Poets*, I shift my attention to the metaphoric uses of gender and their intersection with theories of inspiration, tracing an often-ignored phenomenon in the discourse on inspiration, the use of metaphors of sexual generation to describe intellectual activity, to demonstrate that inspiration and creation were gendered terms. I then follow the thread of sexual metaphors to the discourse on love and its relation to inspiration, considering the role of the female body as the inspiration for both sexual desire and intellectual achievement.

Building on the work of Chapter Three, which demonstrates an analogous relationship between woman and sleep in textual discourse, I turn to their intersection in visual form, in images of the sleeping female nude. Chapter Four, *Sleeping Beauties*, proposes that the sleeping female nude served both as a sign of artistic achievement and as an inspirational icon for the ideal viewer. I consider both the effect of sleep on the phenomenology of viewing and precedents for the sleeping female nude in literature and the visual arts.

The final two chapters turn to the dream as metaphor for artistic invention. In Chapter Five, *The Dream of Raphael*, my concern is the place of dreaming as

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a *topos* in artistic discourse. Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving, known as the *Dream of Raphael*, focuses the discussion of the depiction of dreams as I situate the work within the artist’s own experimentations with the theme.

Finally, Chapter Six, *The Dream* of Michelangelo, considers *Il Sogno*, or *The Dream*, one of Michelangelo’s best-known presentation drawings. My reading of the drawing links it to Michelangelo’s own thoughts on dreaming as revealed in his letters and poems. Suggesting that the drawing functions as an idealized self-representation, the final chapter links the pictorial rhetoric of inspired dreaming to the individual who most fully embodied Vasari’s model of the divinely inspired artist.

CHAPTER ONE

*The Sleep of Reason*



*T*ito Strozzi (1424–1505), a poet at the Este court at Ferrara, Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), the Venetian author of prose and verse, and Benedetto Varchi (1503–1565), the Florentine historian best known for his lectures to the Accademia Fiorentina on the *paragone*, were men of letters, professional intellectuals. The obverse of each of their portrait medals (Figs. 1–3), in keeping with convention, bears a profile portrait of its subject.<sup>1</sup> On each medal, the sitter appears again on the reverse, as a sleeping nude.<sup>2</sup> Strozzi sleeps, head in hand, seated at the base of a tree. Likewise placed in landscapes, Bembo and Varchi both recline, stretched out like river gods. Given their common professional identity, it is not altogether surprising that their portrait medals should partake of the same imagery, but the imagery itself is unexpected. None of these men is famous for his dreams or has any obvious connection to sleep that might explain the use of sleep as an element in his portraiture, nor is it easy to account for the choice to be depicted in the nude. Instead, as the appearance of similar nude sleepers in two prints that take intellectuals as their subject suggests, the sleeping male nude appears to be a sign of generic, rather than individual, identity, an attribute of the intellectual type.<sup>3</sup>



1. Sperandio of Mantua, *Tito Vespasiano Strozzi*, ca. 1476 (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). Photo: Courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

The sleeping male nude seems a curious choice to represent intellectual accomplishment. Yet each of the images considered here reveals very real connections between sleep and the intellectual character. The medals of Tito Strozzi and Pietro Bembo, portraits of creative thinkers, demonstrate how the sleeping male nude invoked the Platonic model of divine inspiration and implied the presence of an inspirational dream, articulating a new vision of the life of the mind.<sup>4</sup> Engravings depicting sleeping philosophers further develop the meaning of sleep, emphasizing its likeness to drunkenness and to death. The fact that all of these sleepers are male nudes raises important questions about the function of nudity as an attribute in portraiture and about the relationship between masculinity and intellectual identity. Produced at different times for various functions, these works reveal diverse, but complementary, aspects of the associations generated by sleep, male nudity, and their connection to Renaissance conceptions of the intellectual. Their imagery alludes to a discourse on the nature of sleep and dreams that can be traced through sources both visual and textual. To pull apart the threads of meaning woven into these works, I move back and forth between images and texts, seeking



2. Valerio Belli, *Pietro Bembo*, 1532 (The British Museum, London). Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.

to recover the complexity of that discourse and its expression in Renaissance culture.



The medal of Tito Vespasiano Strozzi (Fig. 1) links the sleeping male nude both to an identifiable individual and to a well-established figure type. Produced in the mid-1470s, it is the earliest work in the group under consideration, and it is also perhaps the most readily legible, for it uses sleep to inflect the traditional iconography of melancholy. A work by Sperandio of Mantua, the medal is one of three known portraits of Strozzi, and the only one that moves beyond the limitations of the profile portrait.<sup>5</sup>

Portrait medals offer a unique vehicle for the communication of identity, as their two sides allow an artist to separate physical likeness and allegorical content.<sup>6</sup> The profile portrait, traditionally displayed on the obverse, records the sitter's outward appearance (and often his or her name), literally reproducing the face he or she shows the world. The reverse, an allegorical device or scene, reflects more abstract attributes of the individual. These convey a sense of the ideal self, emphasizing personal virtues or other achievements. The portrait is split in two; a complete image of the subject depends on the viewer's own activity, turning the medal back and forth, revealing first one, then another, aspect of the sitter.

THE SLEEP OF REASON



Although a lighthearted take on the enterprise, the Cinquecento parlor game of *Rovesci* [Reverses] mimics many of the conditions of the portrait medal's production and consumption.<sup>7</sup> The game calls on participants to devise reverses for portrait medals of others in the group. The competition to create the most original and appropriate reverse reflects the high degree of invention and innovation characteristic of Renaissance portrait medals.<sup>8</sup> The very nature of the game recalls the collaborative efforts of patrons and artists on the designs for a medal's reverse, choosing subjects ranging from conventional personifications of virtues to newly invented personal emblems.<sup>9</sup> As an evening's entertainment for a group of presumably elite friends, *Rovesci* reproduces the exclusivity of the portrait medal's distribution and reception. Merely being in possession of a medal implies a certain level of intimacy with its subject, as medals were produced in limited numbers and carefully distributed to a select circle of admirers and acquaintances. The act of viewing was also an intimate matter; medals are miniature relief sculptures whose variations in texture encourage a tactile encounter.<sup>10</sup> The material responds to the heat of the hand, becoming warmer the longer it is handled. This physical engagement with the medal enhances its function, bringing the viewer into personal contact with the portrait and, by extension, its subject.<sup>11</sup>

Tito Strozzi belonged to the social milieu in which portrait medals were created, given, and received. As a member of the Este court at Ferrara, where Pisanello labored on a number of portrait medals for Leonello d'Este and his circle, he would have been acutely aware of the significance of the medal as



3. Domenico Poggini, *Benedetto Varchi*, ca. 1561 (Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). Photo: © 2002 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.



personal statement. By the time his medal was executed, Strozzi had achieved considerable fame as a writer of Latin verse, but had also suffered personal and professional hardships, circumstances that form the subtext of his medal's imagery. Strozzi appears on both sides of his portrait medal, the doubling of his image emphatically asserting his presence. Both the obverse profile portrait and the image of a sleeping, seminude Strozzi on the medal's reverse proclaim his calling as a poet.

The grandson of Carlo Strozzi, who was exiled from Florence in 1378, Tito Strozzi was a member of the cultural and political elite of Quattrocento Ferrara.<sup>12</sup> He was a pupil of Guarino da Verona, the humanist who served Leonello d'Este as a tutor and trained many young scholars in Greek and Latin.<sup>13</sup> Under Guarino's tutelage, Strozzi was composing epigrams in the classical style by the time he was sixteen and rapidly progressed to the writing of love poetry in Latin.<sup>14</sup> The first collection of his work, which appeared in 1443 with a dedication to Leonello d'Este, comprised both an Ovidian fable and a series of poems recounting his love for a certain "Anthia" in language that fused ancient and Petrarchan models.<sup>15</sup> This early work marked the beginning of a lifelong association with the ruling family of Ferrara, whom Strozzi celebrated in verse and served in a number of political and diplomatic capacities.

By 1460, Strozzi was well known as a poet and had embarked on what would prove to be his life's work. Although he continued to write shorter poems in the pastoral style and panegyrics dedicated to friends, Strozzi's major project was the *Borsiad*, an epic poem tracing the mythical history of the Este family and the achievements of Borso d'Este.<sup>16</sup> In addition to his literary accomplishments, Strozzi participated in civic life. He was appointed to a number of significant political posts, serving as governor of Rovigo and as a member of the Dodici Savi, the highest civil office in Ferrara. At his death in 1505, Strozzi had completed ten of the projected twelve books of the *Borsiad*, and the bulk of his other poems had been organized into two collections, the *Eroticon* and the *Aeolosticha*. A posthumous edition of his poetry, together with that of his son, Ercole, was published by Aldus Manutius in 1513.<sup>17</sup>

The obverse of his portrait medal shows Strozzi in profile, facing left. The customary inscription of the sitter's name is replaced with a wreath of laurel and ivy, emphasizing his identity as a poet and implicitly suggesting that the medal was intended only for Strozzi's immediate circle of friends and family. The garland