INTRODUCTION

Meanwhile, the Lord Duke Cosimo desiring that the Book of the Lives, already brought almost to completion with the greatest diligence that I had found possible, and with the assistance of some of my friends [*già condotto quasi al fine con quella maggior diligenza che a me era stato possibile e con l'aiuto d'alcuni miei amici*], should be given to the printers, I gave it to Lorenzo Torrentino, printer to the Duke, and so the printing was begun [*e così fu cominiciato a stamparsi*].[1]

—Giorgio Vasari, "Description of the Works of Giorgio Vasari," the *Lives* (1568)

At one point in his discussion of Raphael Sanzio's life, Giorgio Vasari (fig. 1) turns to identify the various philosophers peopling the *School of Athens* (fig. 2),[2] doing so in a manner we can only presume viewers in his own time would have done. In the center of the painting, Vasari points out, is the brooding, white-bearded Plato holding a copy of the *Timaeus* as he gestures upwards toward the transcendent, abstract realm of Ideas; striding beside him is the meditative, frowning, dark-bearded Aristotle with his *Ethics* in his hand as he gestures instead downward, toward the sublunary physical world and, presumably, the imminent realm not of metaphysics but of virtuous behavior and praiseworthy action; below them both is the cynic Diogenes, stretched out half-naked across the steps, indiscreetly lounging about with his tell-tale cup by his side; and diagonally across is the white-robed astrologer Zoroaster bearing a star-studded globe of the cosmos. Note as well, Vasari observes, that Raphael (1483–1520) has cleverly incorporated into the painting, in typical Renaissance fashion, the likenesses of several contemporaries: Federigo II, the Duke of Mantua; the architect Donato Bramante; and, tellingly, his own self-portrait. The painting thus functions at one level as a sort of guessing game. It has been ingeniously designed for those inquisitive readers who, pausing to take a break in a lull of scholarly concentration, lift their heads up

1. Followers of Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), *Portrait* (ca. 1550–66/8). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

from their books in Julius II's personal library and take a moment to wonder who those different, pensive figures depicted on the wall really were in classical antiquity, even as a number of them do not carry antique scrolls but anachronistically and therefore puzzlingly hold bound volumes (not unlike the ones stacked up on low shelves in the Stanza della Segnatura itself).[3]

But whatever those learned readers may or may not have thought, for Vasari the *School of Athens* was designed to dramatize how the visual artist who actually painted the fresco, and whose self-portrait conspicuously appears in it, should be thought of as a maker of ideas, a sort of philosopher himself through the very process of painting, in which he deployed various strategies for rendering those ideas, and the world itself, visible to the eye.[4] Or to put the matter differently, for the artist Vasari authoring the *Lives*, the painting of frescoes based on the mastery of *disegno*, as Raphael so evidently did, should be viewed as no less an expression of ideas than writing them down in books. The *School of Athens* should therefore be viewed not as the simple illustration of an idea but as a material object that, like a seminal book of philosophy, generates ideas on its own. It is a visionary work to ponder,[5] like the precious bound books in Julius II's private library, precisely because it is the inventive product of a contemplative visual artist with ideas of his own and a deep grounding in *disegno* conceived not just as a mechanical but also, more importantly, as an intellectual art—an art that requires extensive planning, forethought, and complex problem-solving. Or, as Vasari at one point summarily puts it early in the *Lives*, "*disegno*"—rooted as it is in the deft manual ability to draw and craft sharp, accurate outlines—"is none other than a visible expression and declaration of a concept that is there

2. Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio, 1483–1520), *The School of Athens* (ca. 1510–12). Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

3. Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio, 1483–1520), *The School of Athens* (ca. 1510–12). Detail of Pythagoras grouping and tablet. Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

in one's mind [*una apparente espressione e dichiarazione del concetto che si ha nell'animo*] and of that which others have imagined and fashioned as an idea in their minds [*e di quello che altri si è nella mente imaginato e fabricato nell'idea*]" (G1.111). The emphasis here is placed, and shall be in the context of this study, on the last crucial word: *idea*.

For all intents and purposes, then, Vasari seems to be a perfectly reliable guide as he identifies one ancient man of ideas after another and invites us to do the same, had we ever been admitted into Julius II's private library in the sixteenth century and had the privilege of seeing the fresco firsthand, perhaps in the process of consulting some of those rare bound books, which included many precious ones dedicated to pagan philosophy. But then Vasari suddenly botches the job. He has been recalling the group of figures positioned at the bottom left of the fresco, just where the stairs begin to move up toward the basilica-like structure (fig. 3), which is perhaps even intended to allude to what the new St. Peter's under construction might

4. Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio, 1483–1520), *La Disputa, Theology* (ca. 1510–12). Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Palace, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

look like when finished, and he then makes the following rather bizarre observation:

> Behind St. Matthew [*sic*], who is copying the characters from the tablet wherein are the figures (which is held before him by an angel [*sic*]), and writing them down in a book, he painted an old man who, having placed a piece of paper on his knee, is copying all that St. Matthew writes down; and while intent on his work in that uncomfortable position, he seems to twist his head and his jaws in time with the motion of the pen. (1.718, G4.167)

Vasari has here egregiously blundered. Or so it would seem. The crouched man writing in the book is not St. Matthew but Pythagoras, as any undergraduate student with ready access to Wikipedia can immediately tell you. And there is not an angel to be seen in the entire fresco. If you want angels, look to the facing wall, to the *Disputation of the Holy Sacrament* (fig. 4). There are six of them there, divided into two groups of three on either side of Christ in heaven, not to mention all those winged, floating putti incorporated into both the billowy clouds forming a cushioned bench for the saints and the gilded representation of the abstract realm of the blessed.

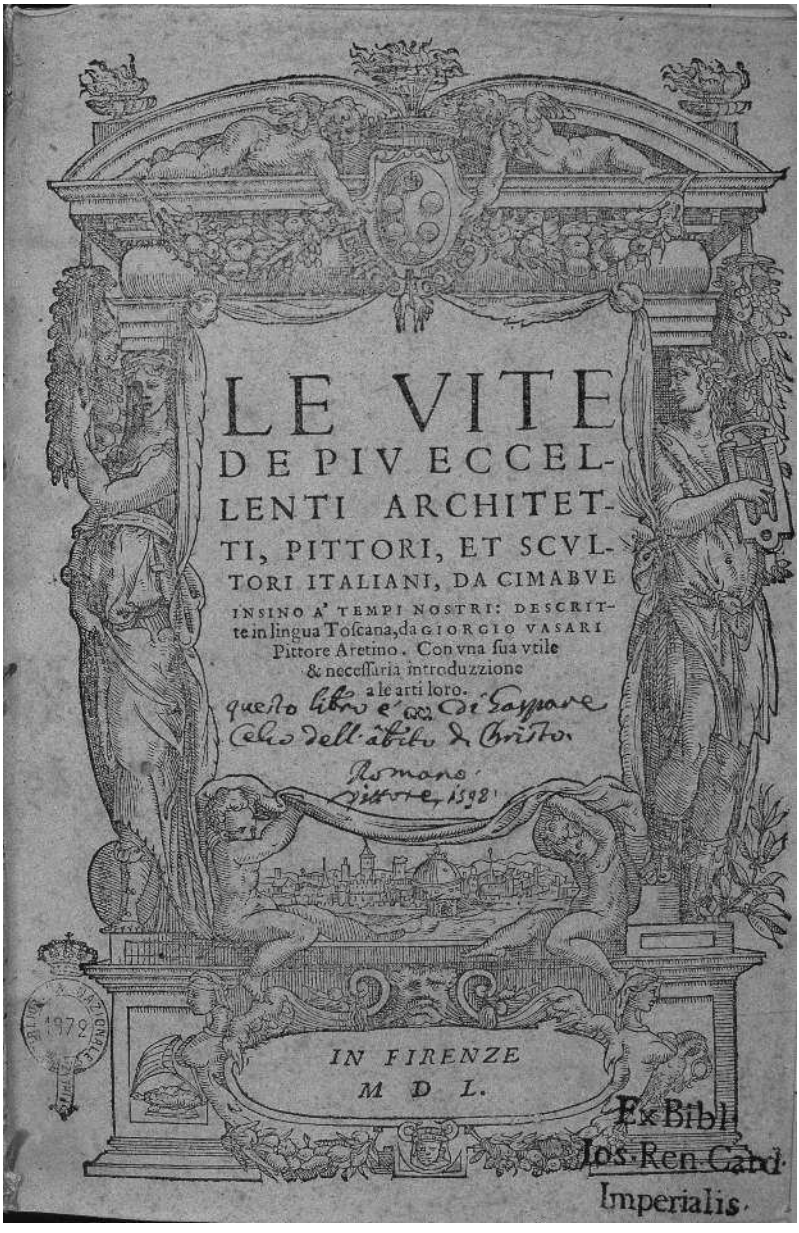
How, then, could this have possibly happened? How could a trained and learned practitioner, who was able to reconstitute a host of images in his book by relying so often on the power of his prodigious memory alone, get things so right in one moment and so wrong in another? This particular question may seem all the more pressing in the case of this specific secular image of the *School of Athens*, which over time has become so iconic that it encapsulates in our own era the genius of Raphael as a contemplative, visionary painter and the High Renaissance generally as a period when so many texts of pagan philosophy were being dutifully recovered, printed, and studied.[6] For Raphael's *School of Athens*, so full of pagans suavely staged here and there, is self-evidently *not*, I think it is safe to say, about evangelists—at least not on the surface. And yet Vasari's confusion makes some sense within the larger historical/typological context that makes up the integrated series of frescoes forming the entire Stanza della Segnatura, leaving aside the fact that, as Giovanni Pietro Bellori observed long ago,[7] an intermediary source almost certainly muddled Vasari's recollection. In describing Raphael's *School of Athens*, Vasari was no doubt "looking," as Marcia B. Hall has likewise observed, "at the 1523 print by Agostino Veneziano (ca. 1490–ca. 1540), in which Matthew was substituted for Pythagoras."[8] And yet, whatever the cause of Vasari's blunder, whether he had simply failed to recall the painting correctly in his mind's eye or far more probably was working from an inexact source as the basis for his slightly flawed description, the *School of Athens* is clearly about illumination. In literary terms, it is about the sort of natural light associated with the pagans in the *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*, 1321), whose author, Dante Alighieri, also happens to be the one poet who makes an appearance in *both* the *Parnassus* and the *Disputation* of the Stanza della Segnatura: he is at once a muse-inspired writer of fantastical, imaginative literature *and* a *poeta theologus* (poet theologian) of divinely inspired, Christian verbal art. Accordingly, just as Dante's Virgil in the *Divine Comedy* effectively sees through a glass darkly as he advances, Moses-like, toward the promised land of revelation but can never witness it as soon as Beatrice (typologically configured as Christ) descends into the redeemed garden of Eden, so too Raphael's enlightened yet still confused pagans advance—as Plato and Aristotle do—toward the truth of Christian theology and the mystery of the sacrament on the opposite wall, fueled by their own longing for revelation in their pursuit of wisdom. Guided by their pagan ideas, they can arguably see this truth through a glass darkly but they cannot really comprehend what they see. Nor can they fully bear witness to it as they stride through the basilica-like structure, moving against the current of the dynamic orthogonals while debating complex ideas, just as peripatetic philosophers were wont to do in antiquity.

In this context, it is entirely fitting that Vasari mistakes Pythagoras for St. Matthew receiving the word of God as it is dictated to him, even if the direct cause for Vasari's blunder was that he was probably working from Veneziano's print as the contaminating source. For pagan illumination in this painting is meant to be seen as revelatory in its own right. It is a worldly, intellective light that instinctively yearns for, and thereby advances in its own right toward, the higher, sublime, revealed light and truth of the Gospels pictured on the facing wall and bound in the four opened volumes held aloft by the cheerful winged putti on either side of the Holy Ghost figured conventionally as a dove. Vasari's apparent blunder, albeit occasioned by relying on Veneziano's print, thus calls attention not to what is recognizably *in* the painting or *on* the surface of it, but what iconographically underpins it: the larger truth that pagan illumination and Christian enlightenment can and should be reconciled, with the former prefiguring the latter. Literally Vasari is wrong, but allegorically he is absolutely right. Pythagoras is a pagan prefiguration of Christian harmony, the very harmony that the entire fresco cycle serves to give concrete material shape to in pictorial form and that is worked out philosophically in the harmonic structures on the tablet as a visual configuration of musical and mathematical ideas.[9] As such, the act of painting in the library should be viewed as an expression on Raphael's part of the active, physical making and shaping of ideas visually.[10]

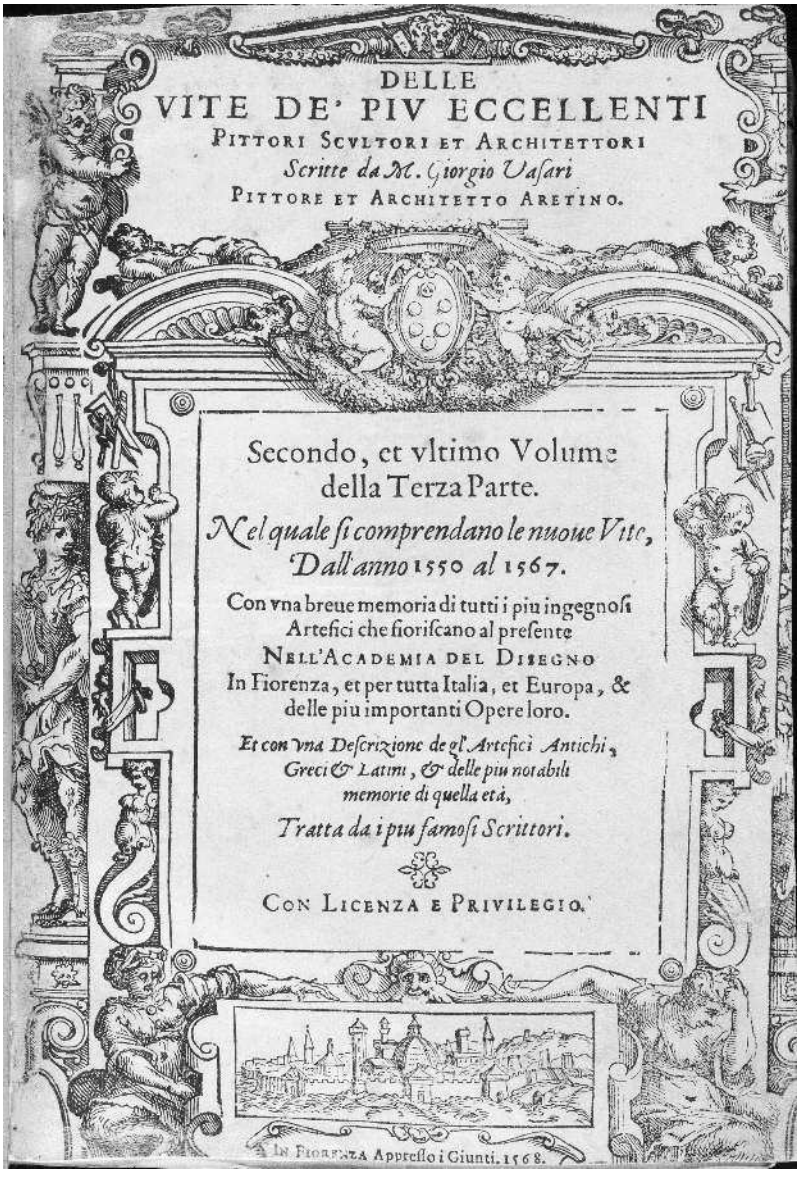
The core argument of *Vasari's Words* is that the *Lives of the Artists* should also be read, like the illuminating, visionary *School of Athens*, as itself an illuminating, visionary work that gives expression to ideas through the creative process of making tangible things—or, as I have preferred to call it in my subtitle, a history of ideas. Moreover, as a series of integrated biographies that collectively account for various developments within a well-defined period and serve to teach through examples, the *Lives* can be construed as a history in the highly rhetoricized and classicized conception of the term *historia/istoria* (history/story) in the Italian Renaissance.[11] And authoring a history was something that Vasari, inspired by the writings of various Renaissance humanists, considered one of the worthiest things anyone could do. History, after all, was largely understood in the Renaissance to be, rhetorically speaking, about teaching through examples. And Vasari aimed to teach, among other things, ideas through the hundreds of examples that make up the collective biographies of his *Lives* and, in the process, aggressively advance as a practitioner-writer a certain program of both making and looking at visual art. Directly related to this argument is the crucial notion underpinning this book that the ideas of the *Lives* can be profitably captured by focusing on keywords as a form of "semantic cultural analysis"

and "semantic critical analysis" of the sort described by the anthropological linguist Anna Wierzbicka, developed almost half a century ago in a memorable manner by the Marxist critic Raymond Williams, and recently practiced in cultural and intellectual history by Martin Jay and in literary and cultural studies by the comparatist Roland Greene.[12] In this respect the *Lives* is not just a history of ideas written *in* the Italian Renaissance, as the subtitle of this book announces, but also very much a history of ideas *about* the Italian Renaissance.

My secondary argument is that by examining those ideas through keywords, synthetically understood—in the encapsulating words of Wierzbicka—"as focal points around which entire cultural domains are organized,"[13] we can appreciate all the better how the *Lives* itself has a formal design, somewhat along the lines of how Vasari, at least in part, conceptualizes the Renaissance notion of *disegno* in the visual arts. Much as a good painting for Vasari is thought out in terms of its overall *disegno*, with hidden geometric forms typically underpinning the composition within a rationally and mathematically organized space, so too Vasari's *Lives* is thought out in terms of its overall *disegno*,[14] with a variety of compelling and complementary ideas providing an underlying thematic structure from beginning to end. To phrase the matter somewhat differently, the ideas permeating the book are not only interesting in and of themselves. In Renaissance rhetorical terms, which are also the terms that underpin Vasari's conception of *disegno*, he makes the ideas permeating the book work at the service of invention (*inventio*: the discovery of arguments) and disposition (*dispositio*: the arrangement of arguments), thereby providing a general, skeletal structure that gives shape to much of the *Lives* itself. A good work of visual art is grounded for Vasari in ideas that have been developed through the mechanical *and* intellectual process of *disegno*, of drawing as a way of generating and working out ideas, as a cognitive act fueled by the power of memory working at the service of an overall, unifying argument; so, too, I contend, does the *Lives* through the process of writing itself. Simply put, the book has a design to it, and the ideas both inform and arise out of that design. However, as for the book's overall linguistic style (in Renaissance rhetorical terms its *elocutio*), that is a different matter altogether, in no small measure because Vasari's words were not always in fact his own, as the art historians Charles Hope, Thomas Frangenberg, and Marco Ruffini have persuasively argued.[15] Less than half of the book in both the 1550 Torrentiniana and 1568 Giuntina editions may even, it appears, have been written by Vasari (figs. 5 and 6). And that makes issues related to matters of style all the more complex and intriguing when thinking about Vasari's words in the *Lives*—or rather, in many instances we might say "Vasari's"



5. Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), *Le vite dei piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri: descritte in lingua toscana, da Giorgio Vasari …; Con una sua utile & necessaria introduzzione a le arti loro*. Florence: Appresso Lorenzo Torrentino, 1550. Title page. Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, Italy. Photo: Sergio Anelli. Photo credit: Mondadori Portfolio/Art Resource, NY.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6. Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori, di nuouo dal medesimo riviste et ampliate con i ritratti loro et con l'aggiunta delle vite de' vivi, & de' morti dall'anno 1550 insino al 1567*. Florence: Appresso i Giunti, 1568. Biblioteca B. 2898 1–2. Title page. Casa Buonarroti, Florence, Italy. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.