VASARI'S WORDS

The *Lives of the Artists* as a History of Ideas in the Italian Renaissance

In this book, Douglas Biow analyzes Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*—often considered the first great work of art history in the modern era—from a new perspective. He focuses on keywords and shows how they address a variety of compelling, culturally determined ideas circulating in late Renaissance Italy. The keywords chosen for this study investigate five seemingly divergent, yet still interconnected, ideas. What does it mean to have a "profession," *professione*, and possess "genius," *ingegno*, in the visual arts? How is "speed," *prestezza*, valued among visual artists of the period and how is "time," *tempo*, conceptualized in Vasari's narrative and descriptions of visual art? Finally, how is the "night," *notte*, conceived and visually represented as a distinct span of time in the *Lives*? Written in an engaging manner for specialists and non-specialists alike, *Vasari's Words* places the *Lives*—a truly foundational and innovative book of Western culture—within the context of the modern discipline of intellectual history.

Douglas Biow is the Superior Oil Company-Linward Shivers Centennial Professor in Medieval and Renaissance Studies and Director of the Center for European Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of five prior books, including most recently *The Culture of Cleanliness in Renaissance Italy* (2006), *In Your Face: Professional Improprieties and the Art of Being Conspicuous* (2010), and *On the Importance of Being an Individual: Men, Their Professions, and Their Beards* (2015). He has been the recipient of a number of scholarly awards, including NEH, Delmas, and Guggenheim fellowships.

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For my mother,

Margot H. Feely

(in light of her love for printed books and the visual arts,

as a once-upon-a-time copyeditor, production editor, and book editor,

first at the Spiral Press and then the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

with gratitude and love for all that she has done

for me

Without a doubt those who are the inventors of anything notable receive the greatest attention from the pens of writers of histories [*Senza dubbio coloro che sono inventori d'alcuna cosa notabile hanno grandissima parte nelle penne di chi scrive l'istorie*].

—Giorgio Vasari, "The Life of Duccio, Painter of Siena," the *Lives* (1568)

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PREFACE

This book was drafted initially with some urgency. Not because there was a deadline for it. And not because I was coming up for tenure or promotion and needed a book in print to show for myself. It was drafted originally with some urgency because it came into being while I faced the possibility of death. Not my death, to be sure, but my mother's. And nothing so sharpens the mind, I've discovered, as facing the real possibility that someone who has been there for you your entire life might actually be dying. So while I stayed in the hospital for days on end and commuted by airplane between Austin and NYC for roughly a month and a half, I did what I suppose a research scholar does instinctively as a coping mechanism, especially while suspended in that sort of Magic Mountain-like limbo world of the modern American hospital and the modern American jetliner, where a sense of time eerily disappears and one hour, one day, one week starts to blend almost imperceptibly into another. I disassociated, writing away on the plane, stuffed into a cramped chair with my laptop propped open before me, or tapping away on the keyboard in the hospital, sometimes through the long insomniac nights. Needless to say, while it didn't help my mother that I busily read and wrote (she eventually survived her illness thanks to the miracles of modern medicine), it did help me. Beyond keeping me creatively engaged through that troubling, frantic period, it allowed me to feel that I was honoring, perhaps even memorializing in some measure, two of the things she cared about in her own professional life and still cares about deeply: printed books and visual art. In any event, that was the genesis of this book, which is dedicated exclusively to Giorgio Vasari's landmark *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (*The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 1550/68)—a pioneering book that has determined the course of modern thinking about the visual arts and still remains, in the words of the art historian Alina Payne, an "indestructible palimpsest." Indeed, as Payne

puts it in terms suited to this entire study, "we still rely on [Vasari's] information, we are still guided by his judgments, and we still tacitly perpetuate his prejudices. More important—and this applies to the field at large, not only to Renaissance scholarship—we also depend on his model of historical interpretation of the arts, on his choice of how to reconcile or appear to reconcile the domains of reality and writing."[1]

It should hardly be surprising, then, that over time, as I turned from the initial spark of inspiration to the persistence of scholarly dedication, I gradually became aware that Vasari's *Lives* is not just a book full of stories about visual artists, some reasonably entertaining, some not. Nor is it just a book full of biased judgments that (not without some heated controversy) have set the direction of most art historical narratives of the Italian Renaissance since its first appearance in print in precisely the middle of the sixteenth century. Nor is it just a book full of facts from time to time mined by scholars as a quarry of information and misinformation about the visual art of the period. Vasari's *Lives*, I came to realize, is also a book about ideas—or at least what we might call "cultural values" or "cultural concerns" or "culturally shared forms of solving difficult artistic problems through the actual material making of visual art." In Vasari's hands those ideas are developed so that they thematically permeate the *Lives* from beginning to end. And this fascinated me. Never before had I come across a book in the vernacular that could lay claim to being the origin of so many different ideas that had long captured my imagination regarding the Italian Renaissance in general and the visual arts in particular. These ideas, which have found their way into various books and articles I have authored over my career, concern such things as the connections between professionalism and humanism; the links between art, genius, and institutionalized training; the relationship between allegory and realism, teleology and timelessness, exemplarity and inimitability, practice and theory, the visual and the verbal; the complex ties binding productivity, speed, facility, industriousness, and labor in a period of conspicuous consumption; the way men belonging to or aspiring to be part of the cultural elite felt compelled to behave in a manner that allowed them to stand out without appearing too indecorously conspicuous in the context of court culture; and the dialectical interplay between the individual and the community.

The more I worked on this book, however, the more I became aware that Vasari helped originate ideas about the visual arts I had never seriously considered before, such as what it means to represent the night visually during a period that had also become increasingly invested economically, socially, and culturally in conquering—or in the words of one scholar,

"colonizing"—the pervasive darkness of the night as a distinct span of time. Put differently, I came to discover that Vasari may not have been a profoundly original thinker—he was certainly not a philosopher like Marsilio Ficino and Pietro Pomponazzi, and he was by no means a deep-thinking humanist like Lorenzo Valla and Angelo Poliziano—but he was nevertheless a great synthesizer, developer, and disseminator of fascinating ideas that were circulating in the period. Additionally, the more I read the *Lives*, the more I became convinced that Vasari came upon those ideas not just through his interactions with members of the cultural elite but also through the fundamental process of having been a practitioner himself, a thoughtful and accomplished, if not pathbreaking, maker of visual art. Moreover, Vasari gave voice to those ideas for the first time in a single, comprehensive, massive book dedicated specifically to tracing the development of the visual arts over roughly three hundred years. And so he can be said to stand historically at the origin of certain strands of thought and concerns and values and artistic problem-solving that helped define the Italian Renaissance in the visual arts. In this respect, Vasari was not just an important biographer and mythographer, crafting (with the help of others) a host of lasting verbal portraits of artists whose lives he both recounts and invents. Indeed, in the second edition of his book he even included the novelty of reproducing visual portraits of those artists when he could locate reasonable likenesses of them. He was also someone who laced his entire book with ideas, so many of which necessarily derived from his long involvement with the practice of making visual art himself and above all from his deep investment in *disegno* ("design"), conceived as both a mechanical *and* an intellectual art. What is more, all those ideas that are laced throughout Vasari's book—ideas such as the generative concept of *disegno* itself—were associated with a host of artists discussed within the *Lives*, even though predictably enough they find their fullest formulation ultimately in the now legendary figures whom he was most bent on mythologizing, namely Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. So it is with this book. While it cuts through the *Lives* from beginning to end and covers a host of artists, both familiar and unfamiliar, canonical and not, it necessarily devotes many more pages to those whom Vasari considered to be the most transformative and exceptional. Those were the visual artists around whom a number of key ideas inevitably coalesced.

In presenting Vasari's *Lives* as a history of compelling ideas that grow out of his reflections on the changing nature of the visual arts and the professional identities of their creators in the period, I have sought to write this book in an economical, anti-pedantic, anti-polemical, and sometimes even breezy, down-to-earth manner, largely in an effort to try to reach the

broadest possible audience, including someone just like my mother, who was trained at Vassar College in art history long ago and worked for years as a book editor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For while Vasari may be a household name for scholars working on the Renaissance, and especially those in the field of art history, his *Lives* itself is rarely read, much less in its entirety.[2] And the scholarship dedicated to the *Lives*, a good deal of which has been synthesized in this book, does not always help broaden his appeal to those who are not highly specialized scholars devoted to such academic pursuits as tracking down Vasari's sources and making selective use of his text as a fund of information for artists about whom we sometimes have absolutely no other data. Those dedicated and often eloquent scholars have also dutifully examined Vasari's elaborate network of social relations and artistic connections; they have detected how much of the *Lives* may or may not have been actually written by him; and they have painstakingly documented who his collaborators were in the making of both editions of the book as well as identified the ways in which they contributed to it. Along with that, they have explored the dynamic and complex connections between the visual and the verbal; investigated his thoughts about periodization, historical development, style, biographical writing, and exemplarity; and, among other worthy endeavors, offered intricate and sometimes brilliant close readings of his prose.

In making the claim that Vasari's *Lives* should indeed be better read as a book of ideas, I am not suggesting that it is a particularly riveting book to read, either in English or, for that matter, in its original sixteenth-century Italian. I am not one of those scholars who finds Vasari to be a superb writer or storyteller, although I have spent much of the past few years reading and rereading the *Lives*, a few times from beginning to end, in an effort to detect overarching patterns of meaning as the book unfolds as a series of biographies modeled in part on works of classical antiquity, from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (ca. 100 CE), to Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars* (121 CE) or *Lives of Illustrious Men, Grammarians, and Rhetoricians*, to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (third century CE). Perhaps to the puzzlement of some, then, this book, whose title openly declares that it is about "Vasari's words," does not explore in any detail Vasari's narrative style. Vasari was certainly not a bad writer. And thanks no doubt in part to the rudimentary training he received early in his life in the classicizing educational and cultural program of the *studia humanitatis*—a program of studies devoted primarily to poetry, grammar, rhetoric, moral philosophy, and history—Vasari was unquestionably a far better writer than most of those concerned with the visual arts when it came to articulating his thoughts in a period when a

number of artists were taking on the role of author, such as Lorenzo Ghiberti in the fifteenth century or the immodest and belligerent Benvenuto Cellini in the sixteenth. But Vasari was definitely not, to my mind, a great or rhetorically gifted writer. There are excellent books and articles devoted to focusing on Vasari's style, and there are also excellent books and articles dedicated to arguing that Vasari was something of a formalist whose *Lives* is a tightly constructed narrative on a par with some of the greatest works of imaginative literature written in any language. This book is not one of them. By "Vasari's words" I mean not Vasari's prose style. Rather, in keeping with Raymond Williams's critical strategy for dissecting the "vocabulary of a culture and society,"[3] I mean instead Vasari's "keywords," or at least the handful of keywords I have selected for discussion, each of which serves to capture various cultural concerns and values and distinctly visual problems that I have labeled as "ideas"—ideas that grow out of his (as well as necessarily my) reflections on the professional identity of artists in his period. Nor, I should say in passing, is this book meant to be exhaustive in its treatment of its subject. The keywords I have chosen to focus on serve to open up a new way of coming to terms with an influential, canonical book and, just as important, a new way of understanding late Renaissance culture, with the hope that some of the insights arrived at through my approach to the *Lives* will also perhaps be of interest to art historians, even as the book undoubtedly covers terrain that will inevitably be familiar to some, particularly those devoted to studying Vasari. Consider it, then, a book that anatomizes the *Lives* in an effort to show how Vasari's interconnected practices of making visual art and writing about it shaped—and was shaped by—certain key ideas of the Italian Renaissance. It is also, I should add, a book that presumes some basic knowledge on the part of the reader about the Italian Renaissance generally and Italian Renaissance art specifically.[4]

Finally, a very brief word about Vasari's life and career. The son of a potter, Vasari was born on July 30, 1511 in Arezzo, an important provincial town not far from Florence. The painter Luca Signorelli, Vasari's cousin, recognized the young Vasari's talent early on and recommended him to the stained-glass maker Guillaume de Marçillat, who took him on as a pupil in Arezzo. In 1524, Cardinal Silvio Passerini, impressed with the thirteen-year-old Vasari's abilities and intellect, took him under his protection and brought him to Florence. There Vasari acquired a rudimentary humanistic education—alongside Ippolito and Alessandro de' Medici—under the tutelage of Pierio Valeriano, the author, among other works, of the dialogue *De litteratorum infelicitate* (*On the Ill Fortune of Learned Men*) and an early book on hieroglyphs. In Florence Vasari also became a lifelong devotee and

eventually mythologizer of Michelangelo. And in the same city he enjoyed being part of the circle of mannerist painters associated with Andrea del Sarto, Baccio Bandinelli, and Francesco Salviati. Because of his deep investment in Florence, Vasari would also later come to be associated closely with the city, both its artistic heritage and its cultural influence. He became a favored artist in the court of Cosimo I, eventually appointed to oversee the construction of such vast, imperial projects as the extensive pictorial decoration of much of Palazzo Vecchio and the building of the bureaucratically handsome architecture of the Uffizi, a monumental work of institutional architecture *par excellence*. Yet Vasari, it is important to stress, traveled far and wide throughout much of central and northern Italy, spending much time in Rome, where he also assiduously studied antiquities. He received numerous commissions, from Pisa to Pistoia, Naples to Venice, Bologna to Cortona, Camaldoli to Rome, some of them quite staggering in size and conception. And wherever he went in his far-reaching travels, he collected information and drawings, gradually building up a wide network of friends, correspondents, patrons, informants, humanists, literati, and colleagues who shared his cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic interests.

His paintings typically were well received in his own time, even if posterity has not been kind to them. Today art historians tend to view him as a largely derivative, though technically polished, thoughtful artist who had a predilection for incorporating learned allegories into his works of art and who contributed to the development of what has been called the relief-style mode of painting of the mannerist period that arose after the death of Raphael.[5] His monumentalizing visual art produced later in his life is also closely associated today with the formation of the Florentine/Tuscan grand-ducal, bureaucratic state and Duke Cosimo I's potent and transformative role in the formation of a sort of disciplinary state control over the arts. Vasari typically worked on a grand scale in both painting and architecture and was a relentless advocate, like Michelangelo, for the importance of *disegno* as the basis for making great art in the modern style, as opposed to, say, *colorito*, which privileged—as it was exemplified often in Venetian oil painting of the period—the deliberate blurring of contours and the gradual building up of form through the expressive, expansive, and studied application of paint. Finally, Vasari knew how to manage, as a sort of impresario, a large body of assistants as he completed one massive project after another. The best of his artwork displays a learned command of the visual language of Michelangelo and Raphael and classical antiquity. Exemplary in this regard are not his truly massive projects, impressive and sophisticated though they can be as complex visual programs. Rather,

he now is more appreciated for the sometimes elegant, stylish, and at times clever frescoes he designed for his own house in Arezzo, a house Vasari purchased in 1540 and whose interior design he began in 1542 and had mostly finished in 1548, about the time he earnestly began writing the first edition of the *Lives*. In his fashionably furnished house, Vasari surrounded himself with decorations that he felt conferred on him honor, fame, glory, and status, including a room full of portraits of Michelangelo and a variety of other distinguished visual artists whom he considered to be the greatest of his day and in whose midst he obviously felt he belonged. He died in Arezzo on June 27, 1574, roughly two months after Cosimo I, the patron to whom he dedicated both editions of the *Lives*, and whose Florence he helped transform visually into a monumental, bureaucratic state. Shortly afterwards he was buried in the church of Santa Maria della Pieve in Arezzo where, because of a major restoration in later years, not even a plaque remains today to identify his tomb.

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This book, like my others, could not have been written without the assistance of a number of people. First, my thanks to my hyper-efficient staff, Sally Dickson and Nhi Nguyen, for taking care of the Center for European Studies and covering for me during my prolonged absences in NYC and then, later, twice in Cornwall, CT. I am also indebted once again to Wayne Rebhorn for reading through the manuscript at various stages and assisting me greatly with the extensive and sometimes belabored revisions, as well as helping me to see, as he is so remarkably capable of seeing, the forest for the trees. I am also indebted to Mirka Benes, Julia Guernsey, Ann Johns, Eva Struhal, and Louis Waldman, five superb art historians who talked to me at length about a range of issues that have to do with visual art generally, read through the entire book in its various iterations, and generously assisted me with a number of key revisions. I am also greatly indebted to Daniela Bini for periodically checking and correcting, along with Wayne Rebhorn, the translations, and Cathy Brandewie, a clear, perceptive, and elegant writer, for copyediting parts of my manuscript and making helpful editorial suggestions. My thanks as well to Gerd Blum, Carl Blyth, Rita Comanducci, Clemente Fedele, Alison Frazier, Susan Gayland, Tracie Matysik, Walter Melion, Tom Pangle, Guy Raffa, Michael Schmidt, Jeff Smith, Nancy Struever, Tom Willette, and Paul Woodruff for taking the time to talk or write to me about a variety of issues as they arose while I worked on the project, although I recognize that my strategies for addressing certain issues, my decision to concentrate on certain areas of scholarship at the expense of others, and my overall conclusions will not always meet their satisfaction.

As always I am grateful to Wendy Nesmith and her ILL staff for tracking down various books for me and even purchasing some for the library collection. I am also grateful to Merry Burlingham for kindly heeding my request and purchasing some rather obscure books for the permanent

library collection as I worked on this project. The nucleus of Chapter 1 was delivered as a talk at the annual Renaissance Society of America Conference in March 2015 and then in a far more developed format at the conference "Translators and Printers in Renaissance Europe: Framing Identity and Agency" at the University of London in September 2016 organized by Andrea Rizzi. Chapter 3 was presented at a seminar devoted to European Art at the Newberry Library in April 2016. Some early formulations of Chapter 5 were presented in a truly inchoate format at my home university at different events organized by Brian Levack and Seth Garland for the Institute for Historical Studies, whose theme that year happened to be devoted to the topic of darkness and night; a much more fully developed version of Chapter 5 benefited greatly from being workshopped at a seminar for the Centre for Renaissance and Early Modern Studies at the University of York organized by Helen Smith in March 2017. My thanks to all those who attended those events and provided me with helpful feedback. Finally, I owe so very much to Beatrice Rehl for her sustained encouragement and interest in this project as it evolved, thanks in no small measure to her (often witty but always gracious) input, as well as Mark Rosen of The University of Texas at Dallas and the other extremely helpful (in this case anonymous) reader for the press.

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This book is dedicated to my mother, who studied art history at Vassar College in the 1950s, who has had such a positive and guiding influence on my life, who has taught me how to survive and appreciate literature and art, and who has always been there for me through thick and thin.

NOTES ON TRANSLATION

Vasari's Words focuses on keywords as an organizing principle and investigative strategy for capturing ideas through a historically contextualized "close reading," rather than a laboratory-modeled, computer-generated, analytics-driven mode of "distant reading," to borrow Franco Moretti's phrase. Yet oddly enough it includes little Italian in its central portions. This is the case because it seemed to me cumbersome and distracting to provide the complete Italian in the actual body of the book for the English translations of the *Lives* contained within it, especially for Anglo-American readers who are not exactly fluent in sixteenth-century Italian prose yet are still curious about Vasari, the *Lives*, and the Italian Renaissance. Moreover, one of my aims in writing *Vasari's Words* was to reach a variety of readers, including those who may not understand Italian at all or, for that matter, have any particular interest whatsoever in Vasari, the *Lives*, or even the Italian Renaissance but are nevertheless interested in reflecting, as I have sought to do, on how to investigate a foundational book of a period and by extension its culture through a singular, thematic focus on keywords. In that context, including all the Italian for the translated passages in the body of my book seemed to me unwise for those readers as well. That said, I have highlighted a host of words, phrases, and sentences in Italian, bracketing as well as italicizing them, to underscore the importance of the frequency of those keywords in the *Lives*, to emphasize their sometimes pervasive but often subtle linguistic power, and/or to call attention to the cluster of associations they give rise to within Vasari's culture.

Additionally, I have left a few Italian words in the original language when I found them to be untranslatable. Consequently, *disegno*—a complex term that for Vasari encompasses everything from "drawing" to "design" to "forethought" to "invention" to "intention" to "plan" to the material realization of a highly developed "Idea" or set of ideas, and that is *not* in fact a crucial

keyword studied in this book since it has been so thoroughly examined elsewhere in the context of Vasari's *Lives*—largely remains italicized as *disegno* throughout, as does the term *sprezzatura*, yet another word for which I can find no apt English equivalent ("nonchalance" or "insouciance" or just "being cool" simply won't do). The same holds true for the word *grazia*, whose English cognate, "grace," only captures one aspect of the meaning of the complex Italian Renaissance term. Indeed, in sixteenth-century Italian, the word *grazia*—a loaded term in Baldassar Castiglione's lexicon of keywords, for instance—can mean everything from theological "grace," the sort of grace that is bestowed upon one from on high; to the suave "grace" of, say, a skilled charmer with words; to the "grace" of someone mysteriously born with a natural ability to do something ever-so-brilliantly without the slightest training whatsoever; to the "grace" one warmly receives as a favor—a sort of "gratuity" as an expression of thanks— from someone of rank and authority; to the "grace" one feels as a form of gratitude for protection, recognition, and reward. *Grazia*, to use one of Dante Alighieri's terms, is a "polysemous" word, which a number of scholars have already explored in depth and are still investigating.

Finally, unless otherwise indicated, all citations from the *Lives* are taken from Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1966–87). All translations, modified for accuracy, are from Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Gaston Du C. De Vere, intro. David Ekserdjian (New York, NY: Knopf, 1996). I have also consulted the rich commentary contained in the volumes of Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettiori*, 9 vols., ed. Paola della Pergola, Luigi Grassi, and Giovanni Previtali, revisions by Aldo Rossi, notes and bibliography by Giovanni Previtali and Paola Ceschi (Novara: Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 1967). References throughout, placed in parenthesis, are first to the English and then Italian versions of the text; abbreviations are as follows: G = Giuntina edition, T = Torrentiniana edition. For the sake of space, I have not registered where there are variations, as there often are as we move from the 1550 Torrentiniana to the 1568 Giuntina edition, but readers can readily compare them in the online Barocchi-Bettarini edition of Vasari 1966–87, http://vasari.sns.it/consultazione/Vasari/indice.html, where the two editions are conveniently set one above the other (the Giuntina above the Torrentiniana).