

## INTRODUCTION

# DRAWING DEVOTION, IMITATING NATURE IN CINQUECENTO FLORENCE

**S**HORTLY AFTER HIS RETURN TO FLORENCE IN 1501, LEONARDO DA Vinci executed a cartoon for the Servite friars of Santissima Annunziata that was put on public display to great acclaim. According to Giorgio Vasari's later account, "This work not only won the astonished admiration of all the artists but when finished for two days it attracted to the room where it was exhibited a crowd of men and women, young and old, who flocked there, as if they were attending a great festival, to gaze in amazement at the marvels he had created." While this description initially appears to emphasize the cartoon's visual appeal, noting first that it won the approval of fellow artists, it then goes on to use language that recalls the type of viewing commonly associated with miraculous or cult images: teeming crowds throng the Annunziata as though "attending a great festival" in order appreciate the "marvels" wrought by the painter's hand. The fine line between religious worship and aesthetic admiration is suggestively blurred due to Leonardo's ability to portray "all the simplicity and loveliness and grace that can be conferred on the mother of Christ," thus capturing "the humility and modesty appropriate to an image of the Virgin who is overflowing with joy at seeing the beauty of her Son."<sup>1</sup>

Writing roughly fifty years earlier, Leonardo evoked a similar scene in his own defense of the superiority of painting over the other imitative arts:

Do we not see that paintings which represent divine deities are continuously kept covered with the most expensive coverings, and that when

they are uncovered first great ecclesiastical solemnities are held, with various songs accompanied by different instruments? At the moment of unveiling, the great multitude of people who have assembled there immediately throw themselves to the ground, worshipping the painting and praying to the one who is figured in it, in order to acquire the health that they have lost or for their eternal salvation, as if in their minds such a god were alive and present. This does not happen with any other science or other works of man, and if you would claim that this is not due to the virtue of the painter, but to the inherent virtue of the thing imitated, it may be implied that if that were the case, the minds of men could be satisfied by staying in bed, rather than going either to tiring and dangerous places or on pilgrimages as one continually sees being done. Now if these pilgrimages continue to take place, who moves [people] without necessity? Certainly you will confess that it is this simulacrum, which does what all the writings cannot do – to potently figure the virtue of such a Deity in an effigy. So it seems that the Deity loves such a painting and loves whoever loves and reveres it, and takes more delight in being adored by that [simulacrum] than by any other figure of imitation; and thus bestows grace and gifts of salvation in accordance with the faith of those who assemble in that place.<sup>2</sup>

In both of these accounts, artistry is not set against Christian veneration, but rather, serves to enhance the experience of the devout Renaissance beholder.<sup>3</sup> This offers a vision contrary to the critical paradigm proposed in Hans Belting's seminal 1990 work *Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*.<sup>4</sup> Contravening many elements underlying Jacob Burckhardt's notion of a secular Renaissance, Belting nonetheless reinforced the concept that a fundamental shift occurred in Italy in the sixteenth century, during which "the holy image could not escape its metamorphosis into a work of art."<sup>5</sup> Scholarship in recent decades has convincingly countered this stark dichotomy, especially in relation to the first half of the Cinquecento, highlighting the complex interactions between two crucial historical phenomena: the changing status of the artist and increasing naturalism of art, on the one hand, and the exhaustive reevaluation of Catholic practices and doctrines that occurred concomitant with the Reformation, on the other.<sup>6</sup> Yet crucial avenues remain unexplored, particularly in studies of Florence, the city that, even allowing for art historical bias and exaggeration, remains most firmly associated with the development of Renaissance art. This book addresses this lacuna by offering a new interpretation of the painter Jacopo Carucci, known as Pontormo, whose work tackled the very core of these issues.

Pontormo spent the entirety of his life in Florence and its environs. His working years, spanning from 1512 to 1557, are roughly bracketed by critical events in religious history – Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses of 1517, and the Council of Trent, convened intermittently between 1545 and 1563.

Moreover, it is also worth noting the lingering echoes of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola's calls for reform (and critiques of religious art) that continued to reverberate through the city in the decades after his death at the stake in 1498, four years after the painter's birth.<sup>7</sup> Over the course of this substantial career, Pontormo received a wide range of prestigious commissions – from private altarpieces to cloister decorations to, finally, the entire choir of the church of San Lorenzo – that marked him as the most sought-after religious painter in Florence during this fraught period.

His exceptional success, however, has been consistently overshadowed by his historiographic legacy. First shaped by Vasari's description of the artist published in the 1568 edition of the *Lives*, more recent scholarly opinion has been bound by the constraints of the art historical concept of mannerism. As a result, Pontormo's sacred works, which are characterized by an evident pictorial eclecticism, are generally interpreted as objects that reflect either pure aesthetic experimentation or personal and cultural anxiety. This book proposes instead that Pontormo deliberately employed stylistic change for novel devotional purposes. As a painter, he was interested in the various modes of expressivity and communication – direct address, tactile evocation, affective incitement – embodied in a wide spectrum of devotional media, including performance, sculpture, rhetoric, and poetics. He then translated these modes into fresco, oil, and tempera.

To return briefly to Vasari and Leonardo's cartoon, it is worth examining this incident in greater depth, as it distills many of the critical issues of the period. Now lost, the image portrayed the Madonna and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist with a lamb, variations of which appear in a number of the artist's extant studies and works, including the nearly contemporaneous *Burlington House Cartoon* at the National Gallery in London (Figure 1). This work offers an instructive parallel in that it too, like the *Santissima Annunziata* image, was a cartoon and not a finished painting. Leonardo's inability or unwillingness to complete the majority of the projects he undertook is by now a universally acknowledged aspect of the artist's career, but the fact that such admiration was directed at a cartoon at this historical moment is revealing of a new attitude toward artistic production, presaging the incredible fame that would be attained by two unfinished works only a few years later: the *Battle of Anghiari*, partially executed but never completed by Leonardo, and the *Battle of Cascina* cartoon by Michelangelo, which both Giorgio Vasari and Benvenuto Cellini would subsequently refer to as a "school" for artists.<sup>8</sup>

As the *Burlington House Cartoon* clearly demonstrates, this type of preliminary exploration functions very differently than a completed painting; rather than being obscured, the confrontation between illusionism and the intervention of the artist's hand is revealed. In certain passages, such as the more fully rendered heads of the Virgin and Saint Anne, Leonardo has already built up careful layers of tonal



1. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Burlington House Cartoon*. Charcoal (and wash?), heightened with white chalk. 141.5 x 104.6 cm. About 1499–1500. London: National Gallery. Photo © The National Gallery, London.

modeling with charcoal and white chalk, both to create a sense of convincing three-dimensional presence and to inflect the expressions of loving intimacy on the two women's faces. Immediately adjacent sections, including the rocky background landscape and Anne's gesturing left hand, are only cursorily indicated with quick black outlines. The beholder is thus offered a vision in tension, one in which an intellectual awareness of the artist at work exists alongside the emotional response elicited by the devotional tenderness of the image.

Alexander Nagel has highlighted a further tension that is not merely exposed, but essentially created by such preparatory works, namely the "idea

that figurations could live a life in between iconographic codes or in a register below them.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike completed paintings, drawings were not fixed, but labile. “It is as if, in opening up the register beneath the surface of the finished work, the expansion of the drawing phase had revealed an underworld of shifting identities.”<sup>10</sup> In formulating his compelling argument that this era presents art in a state of controversy, Nagel links this kind of ambiguity, which had the power to destabilize the function of religious art, directly to experimental approaches to medium and its limitations. Often, such mechanisms were most productively laid bare within the context of intramedial comparison or evocation, as is evident in Pontormo’s three major religious commissions – the Certosa del Galluzzo (Chapter 1), the Capponi Chapel (Chapter 2), and the choir of San Lorenzo (Chapter 3) – that form the core of this study.

These issues were not extrinsic to, but embedded within, the young artist’s training. Born in 1494, Pontormo moved to Florence at the age of thirteen, when Vasari claims that he was briefly placed in da Vinci’s workshop. There he may have seen the Santissima Annunziata cartoon, or others like it, and heard about the worshipful attitude of the Florentine citizenry. Certainly, he was part of the later pilgrimage to study Michelangelo’s *Battle of Cascina* cartoon when it hung in the Sala del Papa of Santa Maria Novella, where, it has been argued, the very concept of art making itself was put on intentional display.<sup>11</sup> The acclaim for this secular work, however, would not have raised the same critical concerns for the youthful painter as the popular adoration of Leonardo’s holy family. The stakes for religious images were much higher.

Many years later, in 1547, Pontormo wrote a letter on the *paragone* solicited by the Florentine humanist Benedetto Varchi; it is the only writing of his that directly addresses artistic theory. In it he expresses an ambivalence regarding the ontological stability of painting specifically in relation to the divine act of creation. Invoking God’s decision to craft man in the round, he chastises (and simultaneously applauds) the painter for his hubris.<sup>12</sup> Rather than shy away from the challenges he outlines, however, Pontormo foregrounded the productive potential inherent to the medium of painting throughout his religious works. Rapidly moving beyond entrenched traditions of representation and illusion, Pontormo’s engagement with other media enabled him to develop and constantly rethink a devotionally innovative pictorial language. Such an approach was clearly appealing to a wide range of patrons, cementing his lifelong success in Florence. Yet at the same time it was precisely these experiments – beginning with the Certosa del Galluzzo and culminating in the San Lorenzo choir – that would come under increasing criticism from his first, and most influential, biographer: Giorgio Vasari.

## PONTORMO AND VASARI

In the 1568 edition of *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, Vasari portrayed Pontormo as a painter who was endowed with natural skill, but also artistic restlessness – two traits that Vasari saw as in conflict, even from the outset of his career. For his first independent, public work, Pontormo was given the figures of Faith and Charity to fresco, which were to accompany a set of Leo X's arms gilded by Andrea di Cosimo. Vasari recounts that the young artist, initially carried away by his desire for fame as well as the “grace and fertility of genius” with which he had been endowed, worked rapidly and executed a work of “such perfection” that it could not have been surpassed even by an established master. At this point, however, “thinking that he could do a much better work, he took it into his head that he would throw to the ground all he had done, without saying a word to anyone, and paint it all over again after another design that he had in his brain.”<sup>13</sup>

While Pontormo was absent working on his new design, Andrea revealed the fresco to the astonished friars. Upon hearing this, Pontormo became enraged at Andrea, who merely pointed out the younger man's success, and indeed, Vasari described the figures as “the most beautiful work in fresco that had been seen up to that time.”<sup>14</sup> Refusing to learn from this incident, Pontormo again and again could not remain content with his work. At Poggio a Caiano, where he executed a fresco of *Vertumnus and Pomona* in 1520 for the Medici family, “he set himself to study with such diligence, that he overshot the mark, for the reason that, destroying and doing over again every day what he had done the day before, he racked his brains in such a manner that it was a tragedy.” This fresco, however, still bore fruitful results, as he “was always making new discoveries, which brought credit to himself and beauty to the work.”<sup>15</sup>

The definitive turning point in Vasari's narrative – the point at which Pontormo's creative searching finally came to undermine not only his reliability in executing works, but also his final artistic product – was at the Certosa del Galluzzo. In Pontormo's paintings at the Certosa, begun in 1522, Vasari famously saw the crippling influence of prints by Albrecht Dürer, whose German manner came to overwhelm Pontormo's own natural “sweetness and grace.”<sup>16</sup> From this moment onward, Pontormo is credited with very few achievements – the vault of the Capponi Chapel, a select number of portraits – and while he did move away from the style of Dürer, Vasari maintained that he only did so to continue his unending pursuit of novelty.

In his final, most maligned, commission for the choir of San Lorenzo, Pontormo, according to Vasari, imagined “in this work to have to surpass all other painters, and maybe, so it was said, Michelangelo,” but the results were such that one could not find “any order” in either the style of the frescoes or

their subject matter.<sup>17</sup> The indelible image Vasari bestows upon his reader is that of an artist both melancholy and strange, so perpetually in the grip of his own mental musings that on some days when he was meant to be working he would simply depart “without having done anything else all day but standing in thought.”<sup>18</sup> Even the woodcut portrait that accompanied his *Life*, as pointed out by Maria Loh, projects the image of an artist “marked by signs of utter exhaustion and despair, from the broken, uneven lines that dangle across his forehead to the pendulous bags sagging under his vacant, unfocused eyes” (Figure 2).<sup>19</sup>

Recent art historical scholarship has witnessed an increasingly rigorous analysis of the sources, contexts, and biases that informed Vasari in his



2. Giorgio Vasari, *Portrait of Pontormo* in *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architetti*. Woodcut. Florence: Giunti, 1568. Photo: Typ 525 68.864, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

composition of the two editions of the *Lives*, with the result that certain biographies in particular have benefitted from careful reexamination when viewed within the larger framework of Vasari's humanistic, pedagogical, and academic ambitions. Foremost among these is the *Life* of Pontormo.

In her 1995 monograph, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, Patricia Rubin demonstrated the ways in which Vasari's primary literary models – both antique and contemporary – were critical in shaping the structure and style of the *Lives*. It was not sufficient for his history merely to chronicle facts and events; rather, following ancient authors like Livy and Diodorus Siculus, he saw the primary role of history as providing morally instructive examples.<sup>20</sup> In selecting biography as his structural foundation, Vasari created a direct relationship between the model provided by the artist's character and his work. "The artists prove . . . their excellence or *virtù*, through the creation of objects that made them famous by being worthy of mention."<sup>21</sup> The explicit bond forged between personality and production could also be reversed, and thus any artist who did not provide an efficacious model to others would be discredited in the *Lives* personally as well as professionally. Understanding this goes a long way in clarifying the frequent, pointed attacks Vasari makes against Pontormo's character, in highlighting his "estrangement from human companionship" and his "bizarre and fantastic brain," and even describing his home as having "the aspect of a building put up by an eccentric recluse rather than of a well-appointed residence."<sup>22</sup>

It is well established that while Vasari's 1550 edition of the *Lives* followed a clear, teleological structure that placed Michelangelo at the pinnacle of Renaissance artistic achievement, the 1568 edition (in which Pontormo first appears) was both markedly more comprehensive in scope and less tightly focused in aim. Underlying many of the changes, however, was Vasari's desire to make the text align more closely with the principles of the Accademia del Disegno, founded in 1563.<sup>23</sup> This institutionalization of artistic practice, promoted under the auspices of the post-Tridentine Medici duchy, followed the general trend toward bureaucracy and consolidation that occurred across the peninsula in the second half of the Cinquecento.

Attempts to rehabilitate Pontormo's reputation have addressed the various ways in which the painter's career did not conform to Vasari's notion of a beneficial model for younger artists in the new era of the Academy. Elizabeth Pilliod, for example, has convincingly argued that Vasari's marginalization of Pontormo in his later years, as well as the historian's denial of Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori as a cogent artistic lineage, was a means of undermining "not only Pontormo's legacy, but also the strength of the independent *bottega* system."<sup>24</sup> Further, in uncovering records of Pontormo's court salary from 1545 to 1557, Pilliod confirms the painter's status within the city.<sup>25</sup> David Franklin has juxtaposed Pontormo's slow working method, which made



use of copious preparatory drawings in the tradition of Leonardo and Michelangelo, with Vasari's advocacy of rapid, collaborative execution perfected by Raphael's workshop in Rome and later employed by Vasari and his own *équipe* in their many decorative commissions in ducal Florence.<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, Marco Ruffini has suggested that Pontormo's paintings embodied "an emotional conception of art," as opposed to the "linguistic model" promoted by Vasari that emphasized the intellectual content and clarity of the work, and that was more suitable for large ensemble commissions executed by members of the Academy.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Sharon Gregory has contended that Pontormo was disparaged for his improper use of artistic imitation, and that "Vasari chose him as an example of what happens when an artist repeatedly subsumes his own artistic personality into that of an unsuitable, unsympathetic, but very powerful exemplar."<sup>28</sup>

Each of these issues – the methods of *bottega* and academy training, the roles played by both assistants and humanist advisors, the tenets of artistic imitation – offers a significant lens by which to analyze Pontormo's oeuvre. The last in particular can be further expanded to encompass the theme of imitation more broadly – of nature; of other exemplars (both ancient and modern); within literary, humanist, and artistic theory; in contrast to invention or *ingenium* – that forms a crucial leitmotif throughout the Pontormo literature, particularly that which engages with the concept of mannerism.

#### PONTORMO AND MANNERISM

When Frederick Mortimer Clapp published the last English monograph on Pontormo in 1916, renewed focus on redefining the term "mannerism" had not yet truly taken hold in scholarship, making Clapp's the last work on the painter in which this problematic term did not play a central role. Rather, Clapp's interpretation largely followed the themes outlined by Vasari; he saw Pontormo as painter possessed of a "strangely modern susceptibility to novelty" that ultimately led to artistic decline.<sup>29</sup> Yet this thirst for innovation was bound up with his fascination with other artists, and Michelangelo in particular, under whose spell "we watch him stagger" from 1530 onward.<sup>30</sup> In this regard Clapp highlights the ways in which the tension between imitation and innovation, as well as a sense of aesthetic self-reflexivity – both defining features in most literature on mannerism – were already present in Vasari's analysis of the artist.

Indeed, while the term *maniera* was not expressly used until the seventeenth century, by writers like Giovanni Pietro Bellori and Carlo Cesare Malvasia to describe what they considered to be the servile and derivative art that followed in the wake of Raphael and Michelangelo, already in the latter half of the sixteenth century authors and artists were lamenting the undue sway that Michelangelo held over subsequent generations.<sup>31</sup> The Carracci, in their *postille*

written in the margins of Vasari's *Lives*, repeatedly condemned the latter's bias toward Michelangelo and complained that the Florentine author did not understand how to work from nature, while in his 1587 *De' veri precetti della pittura*, Giovanni Battista Armenini has a fictionalized Michelangelo remark, upon seeing other artists copying the *Last Judgment*: "Oh, how many men this work of mine wishes to destroy."<sup>32</sup> Even Vasari himself, in the second edition of the *Lives* that the Carracci later excoriated, mitigated his previously unrestrained praise of Michelangelo as the greatest exemplar in all three of the arts – sculpture, architecture, and painting – cautioning that many young painters, "for having wanted only to follow the study of the works of Michelangelo and not imitating him, nor being able to reach his perfection . . . have made a very hard style, full of difficulty, without charm, without color and poor in invention."<sup>33</sup>

This prejudice persisted up until the early twentieth century, at which point a critical reevaluation of mannerism was first undertaken by a number of prominent German art historians.<sup>34</sup> In 1914, Walter Friedlaender gave his first lecture on the topic at the University of Freiberg, and his first essay, now translated as "The Anti-Classical Style," was published in German in 1925.<sup>35</sup> Friedlaender's contribution, as indicated by his use of the term "anti-classical," reframed this period of artistic production not as one of decline, but as a deliberate rebellion against the "high, idealistic, normative attitude" of painters like Raphael, Fra Bartolommeo, and Andrea del Sarto.<sup>36</sup> He also moved the time line of the anti-classical style to earlier in the century, locating its inception in the 1520s with works by Michelangelo, Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino, and Parmigianino. While Friedlaender's essay hinted at a link between newly developing styles and a deeper sense of psychological expression, it was Max Dvořák, in his famous lecture on El Greco in 1920, who definitively advocated for seeing mannerist works as emphatically subjective and revealing of widespread spiritual crisis, though his primary focus remained on the years 1560–1600.<sup>37</sup>

After this point, the literature on mannerism was often split between two poles; either it is defined in purely formal terms and severed from any notion of emotional expressivity or it is considered the manifestation of artistic subjectivity and cultural anxiety. These two tendencies have often been seen to follow a chronological breakdown in which the first phase of mannerism (also called proto-mannerism or anti-classicism to distinguish it from the later *maniera proper*) is considered to be a Tuscan phenomenon whose main protagonists are Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino. It is these artists who are seen to embody the more personal, agitated rhythms of contemporary society in a time of religious and political upheaval. Thus Arnold Hauser saw both Pontormo's Certosa frescoes and Capponi Chapel decorations as imbued with intense spiritual life that manifested the "general tension and sense of crisis from