

Introduction

The modern understanding of the individual is usually associated with independence, self-consciousness, and the right to self-realization, of which following one's own personal inclinations and interests are important facets.¹ Renaissance Italy, and particularly Florence, is traditionally thought to have prepared the social, political, and economic grounds for the rise of modern individualism. The historian Jacob Burckhardt expressed this view most famously in his *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* in 1860. According to Burckhardt, in the Middle Ages man was conscious of himself only insofar as being a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation, whereas Renaissance Italy gave birth to a new kind of man, who "became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such."² It goes without saying that Burckhardt's assumptions have been severely criticized since at least the beginning of the 20th century. To say that the individual was discovered during a circumscribed area of space and time not only leads to historical simplifications by ignoring other places and periods, but also demonstrates a lack of interest in the prevailing continuities between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As has been shown by recent scholarship, there was little the Florentines of the 15th and 16th centuries feared more than a self-sufficient life devoid of any social interactions or institutional affiliations. Rather they considered themselves as weak and fragile beings whose identities resulted from their place in networks and social groups.³

1 Cfr. Borsche 1976.

2 Burckhardt 1860, p. 131: "Im Mittelalter lagen die beiden Seiten des Bewußtseins – nach der Welt hin und nach dem Innern des Menschen selbst – wie unter einem gemeinsamen Schleier träumend oder halbwach. Der Schleier war gewoben aus Glauben, Kindesbefangenheit und Wahn; durch ihn hindurchgesehen erschienen Welt und Geschichte wundersam gefärbt, der Mensch aber erkannte sich nur als Race, Volk, Partei, Corporation, Familie oder sonst in irgend einer Form des Allgemeinen. In Italien zuerst verweht dieser Schleier in die Lüfte; es erwacht eine objective Betrachtung und Behandlung des Staates und der sämtlichen Dinge dieser Welt überhaupt; daneben aber erhebt sich mit voller Macht das Subjective; der Mensch wird geistiges Individuum und erkennt sich als solches."

3 Connell 2002, p. 5.

Nevertheless, Burckhardt's important study pointed to a series of events and phenomena that continue to shape our modern understanding of the rise of the individual as a historical figure. The large amount of biographical writing produced during the Quattro- and Cinquecento, including pen portraits of historical rulers as well as biographies of contemporary statesmen, poets, and musicians, proves that there was an increasing interest in the individual. This radical shift of attention was mirrored by the visual arts. Portraits were no longer a privilege of rulers and saints but became fashionable amongst wealthy merchants and famous humanists as well. Focused on individual likenesses, these paintings, busts, or statues were not only careful studies in physiognomy; they showed an equal interest in the representation of the sitter's spiritual state of mind.⁴ The substantial changes in the appreciation of individual character and personality also had consequences for the psycho-social dynamics of that time. While the dominant models for conduct and behaviour were traditionally provided by a theological interpretation of man and nature, Renaissance humanism contemplated individual forms of expression and fostered self-fashioning.⁵ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's famous speech in *De dignitate hominis* (1486) can be seen as a paradigmatic shift towards an emancipation from religious patterns of understanding that led to an increase in individual autonomy. Though still within a religious framework, Mirandola suggested that when creating man, God said to Adam, "we have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer."⁶

Amongst the individuals who proudly shaped their own beings and fashioned themselves in their preferred forms, the artists of Renaissance Italy figured prominently. Although the notion of an anonymous and impersonal art of the Middle Ages has long been discarded as superficial and indiscriminating,⁷ it is only during the Quattrocento that we begin to encounter signs of a new quality of artistic self-consciousness. Painters and sculptors were not only eager to develop innovative methods and genres of pictorial representation, including the use of linear perspective and autonomous self-portraits, but they also began to reflect on

4 For the rise of the Renaissance portrait see Christiansen/Rubin/Weppelmann 2011.

5 The term "self-fashioning", coined by Stephen Greenblatt, describes the increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable artful process during the 16th century (Greenblatt 1980, p. 2). Initially applied to the analysis of literary works, the term made its appearance in several other academic disciplines and is now considered to be a pervasive facet of Renaissance culture.

6 Mirandola (1956), p. 7.

7 For the self-representations of artists during the Middle Ages see Legner 2009.

their inner selves and included witty allusions to the process of artistic creation in their works. Further, they published letters, poems, or entire treatises on art and wrote biographies of artists. Rather than being concerned with technical questions, these writings were often philosophical and introspective studies which examined the precepts and limits of an aesthetic imitation of nature. As part of a process of awareness-raising and upward mobility, artists established pictorial principles and provided orientation, as well as aiming at a social re-evaluation of painting and sculpture, which were still looked down on as belonging to the mechanical arts, which relied on physical rather than intellectual effort.⁸

Survey of Literature

Due to its character as historical and personal evidence, the pictorial and textual production of Renaissance artists has been frequently referred to when treating the rise of the modern, self-conscious individual. One of the oldest and most enduring fields of study is understandably concerned with self-portraiture.⁹ In recent decades, research has contributed to a broader understanding of the development of this genre and focussed particularly on the artists' capacity to constantly stage and alter their identities.¹⁰ Joanna Woods-Marsden's study on Renaissance self-portraiture and the visual construction of identity is an excellent work on this topic.¹¹ Many studies have also analysed the participant self-portrait, or the artists' depictions of their own likenesses within history paintings, often referred to as crypto-portraits.¹² Another area of equal importance in recent studies is that of the origin and development of hand drawing.¹³ Since drawings are sometimes un-

8 The same applied to treatises on art that were written by humanists. Much less interested in practical questions, they were particularly concerned with theoretical issues and established a form of art criticism that was highly indebted to the works of Aristotle and Horace. The treatises on the art of poetry of the ancient philosophers being the only extensive works on artistic subjects which had survived from antiquity, they provided an important blueprint for Renaissance art theory. Cfr. Lee 1940, pp. 199 ff.

9 For self-portraiture see Marschke 1998, Pfisterer/von Rosen 2005, Calabrese 2006, and Hall 2014.

10 For a critical discussion of the various concepts of artistic self-referentiality see Pietrass 2012, pp. 22–25.

11 Woods-Marsden 1998.

12 Roesler-Friedenthal 1996, Mai 2002, and Horký 2003, for embedded self-portraits in Renaissance Italy see Rejaie 2006.

13 Rosand 2002, pp. 61–111, and Löhr 2008.

derstood as an immediate expression of the painter's personality, the discussion of Quattro- and Cinquecento drawings and the theory of *disegno* have proved to be an important facet of the interpretation of the artist's individual ideas and inclinations.¹⁴ The renewed interest in the study of the history of personal style can be seen as a consequence of these investigations. In contrast to many academics of the 19th and early 20th centuries, who evaluated styles according to a system of different classes, recent scholarship has emphasized the influence of humanist writing on the perception of artistic distinctiveness and has been pre-eminently interested in a social history of style.¹⁵ Furthermore, many authors have drawn attention to the recurrent, often hidden references to classical topoi of artistic self-referentiality in paintings. By alluding to witty anecdotes from Pliny's *Historia naturalis* or by depicting their famous predecessors, the artists aimed at social self-promotion as well as demonstrating an increasing awareness of the mimetic marvels of their art.¹⁶ The use of signatures has also been discussed in this context.¹⁷ As has been repeatedly shown, many Renaissance artworks can in fact be taken as examples of an unfolding of artistic self-reflexivity, insofar as the paintings themselves began to comment on the art of pictorial representation.¹⁸

The art literature of the Renaissance was analysed thoroughly, too. Many authors have underlined the importance of self-reflexive and autobiographical writing for the configuration of the modern artist.¹⁹ Artists' biographies and treatises,²⁰ foremost of which is Giorgio Vasari's seminal *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*,²¹ received particular philological attention.²² Rather than

14 For *disegno* theory see Kemp 1974, Williams 1997, pp. 29–72, and Schulze Altcapenberg/Thimann 2007.

15 For a discussion of the intellectual history of personal style see for example Sohm 2001 and Pfisterer 2002.

16 Illuminating examples are provided by Winner 1992, Asemissen/Schweikhart 1994, Horký 2002, and Christadler 2007.

17 For a general discussion of artists' signatures see Burg 2007, Gludovatz 2011 and Karnatz/Kirchberger 2019; for two particular examples Periti 2004 and Hegener 2006.

18 For the so-called metapainting see Stoichiță 1998, von Rosen 2001 and Bokody/Nagel 2020.

19 A pioneering work is von Schlosser 1924; for further references see Schweikhart 1998.

20 For critical editions of art treatises from the 16th century see, for example, the invaluable work of Paola Barocchi, the *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento* (1960–1962), the *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento* (1971–1977), and her editions of Vasari's *Vita di Michelangelo* (1962) and of Vasari's entire *Vite* (1966–1997).

21 A good introduction to the genesis of Vasari's *Vite* is provided by Pozzi/Mattioda 2006 and Ruffini 2011. For particular studies on Vasari's *Vite*, see the excellent volumes by Burzer/Feser/Davis/Nova 2010 and Agosti/Ginzburg/Nova 2013. For early research on Vasari's *Vite* see Kallab 1908.

22 Pfisterer/Seidel 2003.

being merely accurate descriptions of the history of art or the impartial account of an artist's life, art literature was also indebted to rhetorical structures and stylistic means (from antiquity and the Middle Ages) that were inherited and enriched by Renaissance authors, often driven by personal interests.²³ The use of recurrent narrative patterns and anecdotal stereotypes was a typical element of Renaissance art literature. In this regard, the aforementioned studies followed the influential works *Legend, myth and magic in the image of the artist* by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz and *Born under Saturn: the character and conduct of artists* by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower.²⁴ Recent scholarship has reinvigorated the efforts to analyse the language and vocabulary of Renaissance art literature, contributing to a broader understanding of its theoretical concepts.²⁵ Large editorial projects on Vasari's *Vite*,²⁶ Giovan Pietro Bellori's *Vite*,²⁷ Joachim von Sandrart's *Teutsche Academie*,²⁸ and Carlo Cesare Malvasia's *Felsina pittrice*²⁹ have not only shown the enduring persistence of narrative models, but have also helped us to critically re-evaluate our contemporary understanding of the rise of the individual. In fact, many myths and tales that were shaped in the early modern period still continue to affect our modern ideas on the autonomy of the artist.

23 Rhein 2008, Steinemann 2006, Dubus 2011, Bättschmann/Weddigen 2013, and Farago 2009.

24 Kris/Kurz 1934, and Wittkower/Wittkower 1963.

25 The key terminology of Renaissance Art Theory is discussed by Feser/Nova 2001. For an expanded version see also Burioni 2010. For an analysis of the impact and afterlife of Vasari and his terminology see Jonietz/Nova 2016.

26 The translation of Vasari's *Vite* into German, enriched with a critical commentary, has been coordinated by Alessandro Nova and published by the Wagenbach-Verlag, Berlin from 2004–2015.

27 The editorial project on Bellori's *Vite de' pittori scultori ed architetti moderni* (1672) is located at the University of Mainz and supervised by Elisabeth Oy-Marra.

28 Sandrart's work has been published in a commented online edition by Thomas Kirchner, Alessandro Nova, Carsten Blüm, Anna Schreurs, and Thorsten Wübbena in the years 2008–2012. It is accessible via <http://ta.sandrart.net>.

29 The commented translation of Carlo Cesare Malvasia's *Felsina pittrice* (1678) is coordinated by Elizabeth Cropper, Charles Demspey, Lorenzo Pericolo, and Giovanna Perini at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Approach and Methodology

At this point, it might prove useful to define the core elements of the present study and examine its methodological aims and limits. The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the literary motif of a similarity between the artist and his artwork in the art literature of the Italian Renaissance – that is, the notion that painters and sculptors were increasingly identified with specific characteristics of their works (and *vice versa*). By analysing the way in which artists and humanists looked at paintings and sculptures and established rhetorical means for the description of art, the study aims at a better understanding of what precisely was at stake when Renaissance men discussed artistic distinctiveness and individuality. The study will therefore not only discuss the increasing autonomy of the artist, but also focus on examples in which artistic forms of self-referentiality were harshly attacked and criticized. It will be shown that the process of artistic emancipation was not as continuous and linear as is sometimes suggested by the literature. As its empirical basis, the study considers printed treatises and biographies, as well as poems, letters, and unpublished manuscripts from the 15th and (mainly) the 16th centuries. Moreover, the discussion of selected paintings, prints, and sculptures will show that artists used their works to make witty remarks on art-theoretical discourses.

When discussing the literary motif of a similarity between artist and artwork, one of the methodological problems that suddenly appears is related to language. The broad spectrum of meanings that are associated with a term like similarity makes it seem reasonable to take a look at how it was used in Renaissance thought. As has been stressed by Michel Foucault, the 16th century was characterized by a system of knowledge that was based on different concepts of resemblance, including analogy, sympathy, and *convenientia*.³⁰ These different forms of resemblance or *similitudo* (as Renaissance humanists put it) provided an important model of interpretation for the endless phenomena of nature and led people to compare one thing to another.³¹ The phenomenon of automimesis as expressed in the Florentine proverb *Ogni pittore dipinge sé* (every painter paints himself) is a good example of the application of these patterns of understanding.³² Due to its semantic flexibility, the proverb was frequently used by Quattro- and Cinque-

30 Foucault 1974, pp. 46–56, 82–89. For a critical discussion of Foucault's description of concepts of resemblance in the Renaissance see Otto 1992.

31 Cfr. Endres 2012.

32 For the history of the proverb see the main articles by Kemp 1976 and Zöllner 1992. For further references see Chapters 2.2 and 7.4.

cento authors; it could address many different issues, ranging from the personal style of a painter to the pictorial representation of his individual ideas, the involuntary reproduction of his own physical features in his works, or the production of self-portraits. As has been underlined by recent studies, similarity and resemblance were fluid, not static, concepts for the description of the world of the 16th century.³³

Despite, or rather because of, its obvious ambiguity, the literary motif of a similarity between artist and artwork was frequently voiced in the art literature of the Renaissance, either explicitly or in the form of hidden allusions. Its volatile and adaptive character made it the ideal blueprint for metaphors and anecdotes that play on the equation and interchangeability of painter and painting. The present study is therefore not only an account of the literary variety of the art theory of the Renaissance, but is also meant to broaden our perspective on the history of what has recently been labelled as autopoiesis. Originally, the term was presented by the neurobiologist Humberto Maturana to draw attention to the defining features of living systems, i.e., their circular, self-referential organization or autonomy. According to Maturana, there is no separation between producer and product: the being and doing of an autopoietic unity are inseparable and this symmetry constitutes their specific type of organization.³⁴ Maturana's studies on autopoiesis were later adopted by sociologists, who fostered the idea of social constructivism and described the existing reality as the mere imagination of the individual.³⁵ Media theory³⁶ and, more recently, art history have implemented similar theories and stressed the importance of cognitive processes for the perception and creation of images, paintings, or other visual devices.³⁷ In fact, automimesis in art can be seen as an early example of these models of self-referentiality. As a kind of unwitting self-portraiture, it was often understood as a phenomenon which escaped the will of the artist. Even if artists wanted to control their artistic creations, they could not help but involuntarily express themselves in their works. During the course of the Cinquecento, this form of autopoiesis was subject to a fundamental change in attitude and can thus be interpreted as an

33 Cfr. Kohl/Gaier/Saviello 2012.

34 Maturana/Varela 1987, p. 56.

35 The social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann (see, for example, Luhmann 1987) is probably the most famous example of the use of autopoietic models.

36 For constructivism in media studies see Schmidt 1994.

37 Neurobiological interpretations of art have been put forward by Onians 1998 and Onians 2007. The importance of neurons which mirror the feelings and behaviour of a reality observed by an individual has been stressed by Freedberg 2007. For similar observations with regard to portraiture see Gombrich 1972.

indicator of a paradigmatic shift towards individualism in art: whereas Leonardo condemned unwitting forms of personal expression as a lack of *imitatio naturae*, later authors stressed the positive facets of an art that mirrored the individuality of the artist.

The present study was begun with the intention of providing a catalogue of the topos of automimesis and self-referentiality in the European art literature from the 16th to the 18th century, primarily concentrating on Italy, the Netherlands, and France. As the quantity of historical sources rose and time went by, I decided to focus solely on the art literature of the Italian Renaissance. Not only does the art theory of Italy provide a vitally important idea of the contemporary discourses on character and personality, it also contains many important themes *in nuce* that only came to be extensively discussed in later centuries, such as physiognomic theory in the art literature of 18th-century France.³⁸ This new distribution of time and attention allowed me to address the inconsistent yet progressive process of artistic self-emancipation more thoroughly by considering a greater number of writings that were circulating in print or manuscript form on the Italian peninsula.

Chapter Structure

In line with the methodological problems and questions discussed above, this book discusses the problem of unwitting self-portraiture in seven chapters, which will follow a roughly chronological order. Chapter One is devoted to sources of classical antiquity and discusses early examples of the equation of artist and artwork – or rather, the equation of playwright and theatre play. Aristophanes provides the first aesthetic theory influenced by this idea: a beautiful poet will compose beautiful poems and an unattractive poet will compose unattractive poems. Following this notion, the Roman orators postulated a similar relationship between a man and his work: “As the character is, such is the speech.”

Chapter Two discusses the discovery of individual expression in Renaissance painting. At first considered a lack of *imitatio naturae*, the style or *maniera* of a painter became increasingly important during the Cinquecento and was understood as a reflection of his distinct personality. Whereas many painters of the 15th century were bound to imitate the style of one master, the art theorists of the Cinquecento invited painters to develop their own taste, interests, and style by

38 For physiognomic theory in the art literature of 18th century art see Kirchner 1991.

choosing from multiple sources. The previously mentioned proverb *Ogni pittore dipinge sé* provides an indication of this paradigm shift during the Renaissance. Based on Aristotelian and Thomistic principles of self-reproduction, the saying points to the accelerating process of artistic emancipation and indicates the increasing appreciation of individual expression.

Chapter Three explores the presumed downsides of individual style: monotony, repetitiveness, and routine. Although artists were urged to vary their figures according to the principle of *varietà*, many painters still used a standardized vocabulary of forms. Leon Battista Alberti was a fervent persecutor of repetitive patterns and associated monotonous paintings with the art of the Middle Ages. Later authors accused painters who re-used cartoons or re-cycled compositions for their commissions of lacking intelligence and creativity. Particularly in the field of portraiture, where individual likeness was crucial, physiognomic homogeneity was therefore seen as a major defect for a painter. On the other hand, these repetitive forms of expression served as an individual mark that underlined the *ingegno* of an artist and showed his ability to choose from a great variety of objects. In this regard, Vincenzo Danti interpreted Michelangelo's female figures not as uniform repetitions, but as the result of a synthesized process of selection resulting in ideal beauty.

Chapter Four focusses on the motif of similarity between artist and artwork in Giorgio Vasari's *Vite*. As is shown by many of Vasari's biographies of artists, the personality and life of a painter was often equated with his work. Be it Parri Spinelli's figures, which resembled his character, Andrea del Sarto's frescoes, which expressed his timidity, or Topolino's small statues, which mirrored the size of his body, the interchangeability of artist and artwork was a recurrent feature in the description of the lives of the artists. By analysing Vasari's dependence upon physiognomic and procreative theory when treating the works of an artist, the chapter aims at a better understanding of his artistic ideals. Rather than simply following their natural inclinations, Vasari's artists had to control themselves and cope with certain standards of social behaviour and artistic universality.

Chapter Five is concerned with artistic strategies against excessive self-indulgence and self-referentiality. As can be shown by Daniele da Volterra's stucco reliefs in the Orsini chapel, the artists of the Renaissance were aware of their individual inclinations and developed mechanisms against repetitive patterns or compositional errors which resulted from their personal preferences. In particular, the natural affection and love for their creations made a critical approach to their works difficult. By relying on the advice of learned friends, by referring to proportion theory, or by inverting their perception through the use of mirrors, painters and sculptors trained their artistic judgement and established rational methods for the creation and evaluation of works of art.

Chapter Six discusses the art theory of Vincenzo Borghini. As *luogotenente* of the newly founded Accademia del disegno and an important advisor to Vasari, his conception of the relationship between artist and artwork was crucial for the artists of Florence. In his *Selva di notizie* he argued in favour of a strict discrimination between the artist's individual inclinations and his duties as a craftsman: rather than expressing personal interests in his works, an artist should concentrate on the interests of his commissioners and patrons. Examining Borghini's argument with the sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, the chapter shows how the Florentine academy re-structured the production of art by stressing the importance of productivity, discipline, and obedience.

The last chapter, Chapter Seven, traces how the ideal of the *artefice cristiano* influenced the equation of artist and artwork. Whereas Borghini aimed at a separation of product and producer, the art theory of the Counter-Reformation tended to promote the similarity of artist and artwork: religious painters were considered a necessary prerequisite for the production of religious paintings. Authors like Giovanni Andrea Gilio and Gabriele Paleotti promoted an authoritarian model of the arts that was in accordance with the persuasive aims of the Catholic Church: only if endowed with a deep faith and a thorough understanding of the Christian mysteries might an artist be able to create effective religious art. Although the rise of the *artefice cristiano* thus actually caused the suppression of individual means of expression, it nevertheless established the union of image and artist officially for the first time.

Clearly, the goal of the present study is not to provide a complete history of automimesis in the art literature of the Renaissance. It would be impossible to collect and discuss all of the instances that refer to a similarity of artist and artwork in treatises, letters, and poems, which would in any case devolve into a monotonous catalogue of ekphrastic descriptions and character portraits. Instead, the dissertation's aim is to concentrate on the inherent antagonisms between individual forms of expression and the predominant rules (both socially and culturally constructed) that lie at the very core of Renaissance aesthetics. Out of the many possible ways of looking at this theme, I have chosen to focus on some particularly illustrative examples and case studies that exemplify the limits of artistic freedom in the form of contradictions between thesis and antithesis.

Although all the chapters of this thesis discuss different aspects of artistic self-referentiality, they have one thing in common. Each chapter shows that the most prominent artists strove for autonomy and demonstrated a craving for personal expression. The way in which art theorists responded to this demand not only gives us an impression of how artistic subjectivity was legitimized during the Renaissance, but also demonstrates that this process is still ongoing today. As has been argued by Jürgen Habermas, the concept of modernity consists of the

“relentless development of the objectivating sciences, of the universalistic foundations of morality and law, and of autonomous art, all in accord with their own immanent logic.”³⁹

39 Habermas 1997, p. 45.