

4 Giorgio Vasari's *Vite* and Automimesis

While the previous chapter explored recurrent features in the style of a painter, the following chapter discusses the use of recurrent narrative models in the lives of artists. One of the causes of their persistent importance lies in the great impact caused by the publication of Giorgio Vasari's *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* in 1550, re-published in a revised and extended form in 1568. The following chapter describes Vasari's method of constructing the *Vite* by analyzing his use of literary figures and topoi. Special interest will be paid to automimesis, to the rhetorical motif of a similarity between the artist and his artworks, and to other natural philosophical ideas that played with the interchangeability of producer and product and were fashionable during Vasari's time.

Since antiquity, biography was one of the many ways to write history. The personal lives of emperors, philosophers or poets not only provided biographical details but also structured the narrative of important historical events. Mostly written by historians, biographies provided some sort of outline for intertwining biographical anecdotes and historical facts. The accounts of famous men were therefore an interdependently organized mixture of macro- and microhistory, the biographical part of which was often fictitious or based on tropes and word-of-mouth evidence.¹ Similarly, in the discipline of art history, artist's *Lives* constitute one of the most enduring genres. A relatively new invention, biographies of artists remained a stable component from their first appearance in the 15th century. Be it Antonio Manetti's *Vita di Brunelleschi* (ca. 1488), Giovan Pietro Bellori's *Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni* (1672) or Arnold Houbraken's *Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (1718–1721), the description of the artist's life was always combined with the description of his works and *vice versa*.² But this method of analyzing art, based on the individual achievements of the single artist rather than on the socio-cultural dynamics of his time, did not go unquestioned. One of the first authors to distrust this genre of art history was Johann Joachim Winckelmann. In his *Geschichte der Kunst des*

1 For a discussion of fiction in classical biography see Fairweather 1974.

2 Cfr. Soussloff 1990, p. 158 and Soussloff 1997, pp. 43–72.

Altertums (1764), he stressed the importance of focussing on the history of the art rather than on the history of the artist.³ His interest in the succession of styles led to an abandonment of biographical patterns of narration, which was also due to the general process of scientification and historization in the humanities at the end of the 18th century.⁴

Winckelmann's approach found an enduring echo in the intellectual climate of the more recent past. The idea of the coherent evolution of a single life, which starts with the birth of the artist and ends with his death, suggests a determinate *telos* which is independent from historical events and social configurations. Siegfried Kracauer⁵ and later Pierre Bourdieu⁶ have therefore criticized biographical historiography as an illusion: by constructing the *Life*, the biographer gives meaning to the events in the life of an individual and the biography develops as if it were a linear and self-sufficient process. These critical considerations were accompanied by literary theories that questioned the authority of the author. Roland Barthes (*La mort de l'auteur*, 1968) and Michel Foucault (*Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, 1969), based on similar ideas expressed by Umberto Eco (*L'opera aperta*, 1962), argued that the writer of prose or history is unable to control the meaning of his textual production. By focussing on the recipient, they underscored the ephemeral and unstable character of a text. Rather than the intentional ideas of the author, the discursive practices of his time or of the time of the reader were considered relevant for the allocation of meaning.⁷

Regardless of the methodological problems of writing art history by looking through the lens of an individual life or author, early modern biographies still constitute an important category for today's academic research. As it happens, the legacy of post-structuralism has led to an extensive discussion of literary models and tropes that were used when writing history. In particular, the historiography of the art literature of the Renaissance greatly benefitted from the vast number of studies that were published in the last few decades. Following the early

3 Winckelmann 1764, vol. 1, p. X: "Das Wesen der Kunst aber ist in diesem sowohl als in jenem Teile [the first and the second part of the 'Geschichte des Kunst des Altertums'] der vornehmste Entzweck, in welches die Geschichte der Künstler wenig Einfluß hat, und diese, welche von anderen zusammengetragen worden, hat man also hier nicht zu suchen: es sind hingegen auch in dem zweyten Teile diejenigen Denkmale der Kunst, welche irgend zur Erläuterung dienen können, sorgfältig angezeigt. Die Geschichte der Kunst soll den Ursprung, das Wachsthum, die Veränderung und den Fall derselben, nebst dem verschiedenen Stile der Völker, Zeiten und Künstler lehren, und dieses aus den übriggebliebenen Werken des Alterthums, so viel möglich ist, beweisen."

4 Hellwig 2005, p. 15.

5 Kracauer 1977.

6 Bourdieu 1986, pp. 70–71.

7 For a discussion and a reprint of these seminal texts see Jannidis 2000.

examples in the works of Gaetano Milanesi, Wolfgang Kallab, and Ernst Kris' and Otto Kurz'⁸, rhetorical structures in the *Lives* of Renaissance artists were identified,⁹ recurring topoi classified¹⁰, and the literary sources and personal motives of the author were carefully examined.¹¹ Despite the great attention that was paid to the literary conventions of the artist's life, his life's details often continued to affect the interpretation of the works of art. The personal events in a painter's life influenced the understanding of his paintings, and his paintings were used to illuminate aspects of his biography. Or, as Martin Kemp puts it in his discussion of the conventions of monographic art history: "Our perception of what evidence is relevant to the interpretation of art is deeply affected by our enduring models of the 'Life of an artist', which is in turn founded on our image of the 'artist as cultural hero'."¹²

4.1 Art History and Biography

The first edition of the *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* was published in two volumes in 1550 by the printer Lorenzo Torrentino. A revised and expanded edition was issued in 1568 in three volumes under the slightly altered title *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* by the Giunti print shop in Florence. It contained the description of the lives and works of more than 160 artists and was preceded by a historical and technical introduction to the three arts: architecture, painting, and sculpture. The lives, ranging from the time of Cimabue to the time of Vasari, were arranged in chronological order and divided into three historical parts, each of which was introduced by a *proemio* summarizing the achievements and shortcomings of that age.¹³

Vasari's *Vite* constitutes one of the most important works in early-modern biography. His book provided a vast amount of information, gathered by Vasari himself and various other contributors. It was written in the Tuscan vernacular and organized in a methodological manner. More importantly, it established a

8 Milanesi 1878–1885, Kallab 1908, Kris/Kurz 1934.

9 See for example Barocchi 1960–62 and 1971–1977, Goldstein 1991.

10 Wittkower 1963, Pfisterer/Seidel 2003.

11 Agosti/Ginzburg/Nova 2013, Jonietz/Nova 2016.

12 Kemp 1992b, p. 168.

13 For the genetic process of writing the two editions of the *Vite* see the excellent discussion by Ruffini 2011, pp. 72–103.

genre of its own. Preceding biographies were primarily concerned with historical figures, dealing exclusively with the lives of rulers, philosophers, saints, or poets and often dating back to antiquity. By choosing architects, painters, and sculptors from his own time as the subject of his opus, Vasari gave written evidence of the changing status of the artist in 16th century Florence. His *Vite* is the first autonomous work entirely devoted to the rise and triumph of the visual artist in the Renaissance.¹⁴

However, Vasari's *Vite* was not entirely without precedent. Antonio Manetti, Bartolomeo Fazio, and Cristoforo Landino contributed to the genre of the artist's life when they wrote about Florentine artists in the 15th century. Similarly, Antonio Billi, the Anonimo Magliabechiano, and Giovanni Battista Gelli (to name but a few), provided useful information in the Cinquecento which was often appreciated by Vasari when composing his *Vite*.¹⁵ But their writings, often in manuscript form, represented a rhetorical exercise rather than a systematic approach to the visual arts. In any case, theirs were much shorter biographies, often combined – and sometimes included in larger works about the history of Florence that primarily served to enhance the fame of the city, not of the artist.¹⁶

When starting to compose the *Vite*, Vasari could not rely on any of these literary models. Instead he turned to antique compilations of lives that became prominent amongst the humanists of Florence. The historian and bishop Paolo Giovio, himself the author of an early version of the lives of Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo, became one of Vasari's advisors during this important stage of the project at the beginning of the 1540s.¹⁷ As he states in the dedicatory letter of his *Uomini illustri* from 1546, Giovio modelled his own biographies loosely on Plutarch's *Lives*, which he must have deemed a suitable model for Vasari's *Vite* as well. Contrary to the traditional humanist biography, in which the individual develops according to the personal and historical events in his life, the Plutarchan biography draws on early signs that predetermine the character of a person. Thus, the narrative elements of a life serve to underscore the progressive trajectory of an individual's character development. As Plutarch himself puts it in the life of Alexander, his aim was not to write histories, but lives.¹⁸ Notably, as is ap-

14 Cfr. Watts 1995, pp. 63 ff.

15 Artists' lives prior to Vasari's work are analyzed by Tanturli 1976.

16 For the discussion of epideictic rhetoric and its impact on writing artist's biographies in Florence see Goldstein 1991.

17 For the impact of Giovio on the art literature of 16th century Florence see Agosti 2008, pp. 34–96.

18 Cfr. Zimmermann 1995, p. 40. For Plutarch's methods see Wardman 1971. Vasari's life of Michelangelo, beginning with prenatal signs, is a good example for this method of constructing a biography.

parent from his work, Vasari did not constrain himself to use only one literary model. Diogenes Laertius *Lives of of Illustrious Philosophers* served as an example for the geographical order of the *Vite*. Following Diogenes' standard, Vasari grouped masters and pupils according to schools, thus giving a chronological structure to the development of the art of painting in Italy.¹⁹ Suetonius was no less an influence on Vasari. The Roman historian, whose *Lives of the twelve Caesars* circulated in various copies in Renaissance Florence, described the ruler's career, followed by an extensive discussion of his temperament and character. By inserting facts and vignettes into his *Lives*, he gave a moralizing pen portrait of each respective sovereign.²⁰ Similarly, the popular genre of the lives of the saints, most prominently exemplified by Jacobus de Voragine's seminal *Legenda aurea*, stimulated the treatment of the artist's life in Vasari's *Vite*.²¹ Heavenly inspiration and divine providence were part of his programme to promote the social status of the artists who were deemed worthy of long-lasting commemoration.²² Last but not least, Vasari borrowed heavily from Pliny's *Historia naturalis*²³ – not only for the vast number of biographical anecdotes, but also for the general idea of artistic progress in the *Vite*.²⁴

While the general structure of a Vasarian life was indebted to the aforementioned models, the frequently used motif of resemblance between an artist, his life, and his artworks can be traced back to the genre of poets' biographies. Early works derived most of their data from the plays and poems of the author. By using fictional text as biographical fact, the poet was increasingly identified with the content and character of his works, including the *dramatis personae* – as is the case, for instance, in the classical life of Aristophanes. Based on quotations from the *Ranae* and the *Acharnians*, Aristophanes' political and moral views in his biography are fashioned according to the events and characters of his plays. Similarly, the life of Euripides is modelled upon anecdotes found in his dramatic

19 Kemp 1987, p. 16 and Watts 1995, p. 64.

20 Watts 1995, p. 65.

21 For Vasari's use of hagiography see Barolsky 1990, pp. 55–58 and Rubin 1995, p. 162.

22 The life of Michelangelo is a good example: when his body was examined in Florence several months after his death in February 1564, it was not decayed – a sign of sanctity that was also a typical element in the lives of saints.

23 McHam 2011.

24 Vasari's ideas on progress have been frequently discussed. The succession of the three *età* of artists has been paralleled to the physical development of a human being, to the *aescesis* to Divine Revelation in Dante's *Divina commedia*, and, more recently, to a theological model of periodization (*ante legem – sub lege – sub gratia*). For a discussion of the latter see Blum 2010.

inventions.²⁵ Thus, the central methodological problem of early Greek biography is described by Bruno Gentili and Giovanni Cerri as a problematic conflation of identities:

“Una poesia, dunque, che si presentava come il piú immediato punto di riferimento per il biografo, il quale d'altra parte doveva vagliare il dato offerto dal testo sulla base di altre testimonianze, tenendo conto della prospettiva necessariamente personale e soggettiva del poeta, oscillante tra verità e finzione. S'intende che questo procedimento era viziato dalla tendenza a non discernere sempre con la dovuta attenzione l'*io* della *persona loquens* dall'*io* dell'autore.”²⁶

This method of composing the *Lives* drew heavily on the interchangeability of poetry and poet. Like his poetry, Euripides is described as persuasive, elusive, and immoral; and like his plays, Aeschylus is described as being weighty, traditional, and pious.²⁷ An ancient proverb coined this narrative principle of many antique plays: “As are his characters, so is the man.”²⁸

Just as these classical works were available in print by the time Vasari started working on the *Vite*, the *Lives* of the Italian poets Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio, written on the threshold of the Renaissance, served as a blueprint for his *magnum opus*. Because the earliest *Lives* of artists were not written until the end of the Quattrocento, Vasari had to turn to the *Lives* of poets which had already begun to appear in the 14th century. Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante*, for instance, is not only an account of biographical details, written in the vernacular, but also concerned with the character, style, and content of Dante's works. Traditionally published as a preamble to Dante's *Divina commedia*, it served as an introduction to the epic poem. This example was followed by many other authors of Dante's biography, such as Cristoforo Landino and Giannozzo Manetti. Contrary to the classical *Lives*, Boccaccio and his disciples were aware of methodological problems, however. By meticulously distinguishing between *vita* and *commento* in their *Vita di Dante*, they deliberately separated the biographical part from the narrative and stylistic analysis of the author's work.²⁹

When Vasari was looking for a model for his book, these biographies constituted an important reference point. But the division of the *Vita* into two sepa-

25 Lefkowitz 1978, p. 459.

26 Gentili/Cerri 1978, p. 54, italics by the original authors.

27 Lefkowitz 1978, p. 464.

28 For this proverb in relation to Aristophanes' method of constructing identity see Muecke 1982, pp. 50–53.

29 Soussloff 1990, pp. 156 f.

ate genres, on one hand the discussion of the life of the artist and on the other hand the discussion of his works, was dismissed. Not able to include the original works of the visual artists themselves, Vasari had to transform frescoes, paintings, and statues into text by means of ekphrastic description.³⁰ Thus, the neat separation between *vita* and *commento* was abandoned in favour of a conjunctive model of biography, in which the life and work of each artist was discussed in an identical textual corpus.³¹ Nevertheless, as has been shown by Patricia Lee Rubin³² and Catherine M. Soussloff,³³ preceding models and biographies continued to influence the structure of the *Vite*. The division of a Vasarian *vita* into birth, youth, maturity, and death, along with the discussion of the fate of his body and his works (including the education of students), is highly indebted to these preceding models.

As a biographer and critic who discussed the genesis of his work with humanistic advisors such as Paolo Giovio, Vincenzo Borghini, and Annibale Caro, Vasari was well aware of his role as a historiographer of art. The preface to the second part of the *Vite* is a vital account of his tasks as a historian; he reflects on the importance not only of discussing the works of the artists, but also of describing their lives and the causes of their different styles:

“[...] mi sono ingegnato non solo di dire quel che hanno fatto [i.e., the artists], ma di scegliere ancora scorrendo il meglio dal buono e l’ottimo dal migliore, e notare un poco diligentemente i modi, le arie, le maniere, i tratti e le fantasie de’ pittori e degli scultori; investigando, quanto più diligentemente ho saputo, di far conoscere a queglii che questo per se stessi non sanno fare, le cause e le radici delle maniere e del miglioramento e peggioramento delle arti accaduto in diversi tempi et in diverse persone.”³⁴

As a first-hand source, this passage illuminates Vasari’s self-conception as a historian and artist who is interested in the development and progress of art according to the time and place of its origin. Furthermore, it elicits his aim to treat the personal character of the single artist along with the development of his individual style or *maniera*. Thus, in the process of conflating *vita* and *commento*, he united the analysis of the life with the analysis of the work. Thus the personal character and the personal work of an artist were inextricably intertwined.

30 For Vasari and the use of ekphrasis see Alpers 1960.

31 Soussloff 1990, p. 158.

32 Rubin 1995, pp. 148–186.

33 Soussloff 1997, p. 2, pp. 43–72.

34 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 2, p. 94.

4.2 The Artwork as a Reflection of the Artist's Mind

Before starting to compose the *Vite*, Vasari had to gather information about his subjects. In some cases he could rely on preceding biographies and art treatises which provided useful material.³⁵ After the first edition of the *Vite* was printed in 1550, several other works became accessible. Ascanio Condivi wrote the first monograph on Michelangelo (1553), Lodovico Dolce (1557) was interested in the artists of Venice, and Gilio da Fabriano (1564) was specifically concerned with the spirituality of the Renaissance artist. Vasari tried to incorporate most of the new material into the second edition of his work.

But the most important contributor to the *Vite* was Vasari himself. His research was not only based on journeys to various cities where he visited chapels and churches, but also rooted in a large network of informants who provided important details on the lives of the painters. In the concluding remarks to the *Vita di Fra Giocondo e Liberale ed altri Veronesi*, he acknowledges the importance of these often anonymous collaborators and friends, who were helpful when gathering information on the artists of Verona.³⁶ By collecting anecdotes, word-of-mouth evidence, historical records, and autobiographical notes of the artists themselves, he assembled a vast corpus of material – an immense effort that took him more than ten years.³⁷

35 This was the case, for instance, with Leon Battista Alberti's *Della pittura* (1436), Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Commentarii* (1447), or the collection of artists' lives by Bartolomeo Fazio (1456). In the Cinquecento available information began to increase. Antonio Billi, Giovanni Battista Gelli, and Paolo Giovio, to name but a few, reported on the artists of Florence, and art theorists such as Pietro Aretino, Paolo Pino, and Antonio Francesco Doni wrote influential letters and dialogues on the art of painting.

36 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 5, p. 334: "Io sapeva bene alcune cose dei sopradetti eccellenti e nobili artefici veronesi: ma tutto quello che n'ho raccontato non arei già saputo interamente, se la molta bontà e diligenza del reverendo e dottissimo fra' Marco de' Medici veronese, et uomo pratichissimo in tutte le più nobili arti e scienze, et insieme il Danese Cataneo da Carrara eccellentissimo scultore, e miei amicissimi, non me n'avessero dato quell'intero e perfetto ragguaglio che di sopra, come ho saputo il meglio, ho scritto a utile e commodo di chi leggerà queste nostre *Vite*; nelle quali mi sono stati e sono di grande aiuto le cortesie di molti amici, che per compiacermi e giovare al mondo si sono in ricercar questa cosa affaticati."

37 Rubin 1995, pp. 106 ff. In the concluding remarks of the first edition of the *Vite*, Vasari gives an account of this laborious process. Vasari 1550 (1966–1997), vol. 6, p. 409: "[...] non pensava io però da principio distender mai volume sì largo, od allontanarmi nella ampiezza di quel gran pelago: dove la troppo bramosa voglia di satifare a chi brama i primi principii delle nostre arti, e le calde persuasioni di molti amici, che, per lo amore ch'e' mi portano, molto più si promettevano forse di me che non possono le forze mie, et i cenni di alcuni padroni, che mi sono più di comandamenti, finalmente, contra mio grado, m'hanno condotto."

Because Vasari's inquiries were usually based on personal experience and acquaintance, the quantity and quality of his information varied according to the place and time. Whereas he was very well informed of the artists of Tuscany, his knowledge diminished when he considered the lives of artists who were active in the north and south of Italy. The same applied to painters active in Vasari's own time, when compared to the artists of the late Middle Ages. It goes without saying that the lives of painters of the Cinquecento were described in much more detail than the lives of the artists of the 14th and 15th century. Due to the abundance of information, but also because of their major relevance to Vasari's conception of artistic progress that culminated in the substantial *Vita di Michelangelo*, personal details and biographical anecdotes were first and foremost the privilege of artists of the *terza età*. And obviously, the different amounts of information and material available influenced his narrative models regarding the life of an artist. This is especially true for the motif of automimesis, since a similarity between artist and artwork can be discussed only if the personal life and character of an artist, as well as his works, are known to the author.

But the lack of information on artists of the 14th century was not necessarily an impediment to looking at the similarity between the life and work of an artist. Although automimetic motifs begin to increase in the third part of the *Vite*, Vasari also drew on analogies in the preceding parts of his work, which he was able to do because of his general conception of the *idea* as an indispensable tool for artistic creation. His characterisation of the medieval artists at the beginning of the *Vita di Donato* is a good example in this regard, defining his conception of the artistic *idea* for the entire *Vite*. According to the Aretine author, their works were mediocre and clumsy (*tonde*), because the medieval sculptors themselves had clumsy minds (*spiriti tondi*):

“Gli scultori che noi abbiamo chiamati vecchi ma non antichi, sbigottiti dalle molte difficoltà della arte, conducevano le figure loro sì mal composte di artificio e di bellezza, che, o di metallo o di marmo che elle si fussino, altro non erano però che tonde, sì come avevano essi ancora tondi gli spiriti e gli ingegni stupidi e grossi: e nasceva tutto da questo, che ritraendosi esprimevano se medesimi, e se medesimi assomigliavano. E così le povere cose loro erano in tutto prive de la perfezzione del disegno e della vivezza, essendo veramente al tutto impossibile che chi non ha una cosa la possa dare.”³⁸

The purpose of the opening of the *Vita di Donato* is to introduce Donatello as a new kind of artist, one acquainted with the imitation of nature and the expres-

38 Vasari 1550 (1966–1997), vol. 3, p. 201.

sion of ideas. As Vasari states in the following lines, nature was so shocked by the artistic creations of the medieval sculptors that she decided to generate artists worthy of representing her beauty.³⁹ In this regard, the rhetorical structure of the life of the sculptor Donatello is comparable to the life of the painter Giotto. Just as the former marks the boundary to the Middle Ages, the latter is said to have brought to light the art of painting, which had been buried for many centuries. Furthermore, the intrinsic connection between their lives is indicated by the use of the adjective *tondo*, which in the Tuscan vernacular means “round” as well as “clumsy”.⁴⁰ This ambiguous meaning of the term was explained by Vasari in the preceding *Vita di Giotto* when describing the painter’s ability to draw perfect circles without using a compass. Besides its traditional significance, Vasari states, *tondo* was also employed to indicate, “tardità e grossezza d’ingegno” (slowness and dullness/clumsiness of mind), a pejorative meaning also shown by the proverb, “Tu sei più tondo che l’O di Giotto” (You are rounder than the O of Giotto).⁴¹

Vasari’s negative characterisation of the artists of the Middle Ages as clumsy or *tondo* was directly associated with his conception of *disegno*. This technical term described the improved imitation of the beauty of nature as a process of mental invention and material execution that was exclusively mastered by the artists of the Renaissance. Because Vasari considered the medieval sculptors as less experienced and talented than the artists of his own time, their lack of *disegno* was a major defect which resulted in a rudimentary form of mimesis. Accordingly, he describes their works as lifeless, ill-proportioned, and ugly. That Vasari drew especially on the capacity of the artists to express their mental ideas is also shown by his allusion to a famous principle of Roman and early modern jurisdiction. The

39 Vasari 1550 (1966–1997), vol. 3, p. 201: “Per la qual cosa la Natura, giustamente sdegnata per vedersi quasi beffare da le strane figure che costoro [i.e., the medieval sculptors] lasciavano al mondo, deliberò far nascere chi operando riducesse ad ottima forma, con buona grazia e proporzione, i male arrivati bronzi et i poveri marmi, da lei, come da madre benigna, et amati e tenuti cari sì come cose da’llei prodotte con lunga diligenza e cura grandissima.”

40 Cfr. Giovanni di Gherardo da Prato’s *Paradiso degli Alberti*, as cited in Löhr 2008, p. 172: “Noi sappiamo quanta è la fama di Giotto nell’arte della pittura; diremo noi ch’una lumaca l’avanzi nell’arte, ché dipigne al buio, e Giotto non saprebbe menare pennello senza lume? Dé, andate, ché voi avete troppo del tondo a avere così detto.”

41 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 1, pp. 283 f.: “Giotto, che garbatissimo era, prese un foglio et in quello con un pennello tinto di rosso, fermato il braccio al fianco per farne compasso e girato la mano, fece un tondo sì pari di sesto e di profilo che fu a vederlo una meraviglia. (...) Divolgatasi poi questa cosa, ne nacque il proverbio che ancora è in uso dirsi agl’uomini di grossa pasta: *Tu sei più tondo che l’O di Giotto*. Il qual proverbio non solo per lo caso donde nacque si può dir bello, ma molto più per lo suo significato, che consiste nell’ambiguo, pigliandosi *tondo* in Toscana, oltre alla figura circolare perfetta, per tardità e grossezza d’ingegno.”

rule, “Nemo dat quod non habet” (No one gives what he does not possess) was meant in a materialistic sense as the prohibition to sell property that is not in one's possession. Vasari interpreted this principle in a very different way. When stating that, “Chi non ha una cosa la possa dare” in the last clause of the passage cited above, he refers to the intellectual property of the artist, which consists of the ideas of his mind. In this way he also paraphrased the famous poem *Le dolci rime d'amor ch'io solia* by Dante, in which the poet underlined the importance of mental images. The lines similar to Vasari's statement are contained in the fourth book of Dante's *Convivio*, written between 1303 and 1308: “poi chi pinge figura / se non può esser lei, non la può porre”⁴².

As has been shown by Paolo D'Angelo, these verses do not indicate that a painter portrays himself physically or psychologically in his figures. Rather they imply that a painter can only realize those figures that are contained in his mind; i.e., figures in his possession.⁴³ Dante himself suggests such a reading of the verse in a commentary to the poem, in which he states that, “no painter could depict any form if he did not first conceive in his imagination how he wishes it to be.”⁴⁴ It was probably his friend and advisor Vincenzo Borghini who proposed to Vasari the allusion to Dante's poem. In his *Selva di notizie*, written in 1564, he discussed it himself when mocking the artist Benvenuto Cellini for his lack of imagination.⁴⁵

42 Dante (1988), p. 505 (*Convivio*, IV, III, 52–53).

43 D'Angelo 1991, p. 218. For a discussion of Dante's theory of the arts and Dante's poem see also von Schlosser 1924 (1956), p. 88.

44 Dante (1988), p. 505 f.: “nullo dipintore potrebbe porre alcuna figura, se intenzionalmente non si facesse prima tale, quale la figura esser dee.” (*Convivio*, IV, X, 11).

45 Borghini (1971–1977), p. 640: “Dante, che fu veramente in tutte le cose divino, disse quelle belle parole: *E chi pinge figura, se non è prima lei, non la può fare*. Nelle quali non solo come platonico, ma come vero e natural filosofo conobbe che da l'intelletto nostro non puo uscire operazione alcuna perfetta, mediante le mani artefici, se non ha prima conceputo l'idea di quella tal cosa.”

The same verse had already been cited by Pico della Mirandola when discussing the Platonic ideas, as cited in Garin 1942, pp. 467–468: “È da sapere che ogni causa che con arte o con intelletto opera qualche effetto, ha prima in sè la forma di quella cosa che vuole produrre, come un architetto ha in sè e nella mente sua la forma dello edificio che vuole fabbricare, e riguardando a quella come a esempio, ad imitazione sua produce e compone l'opera sua. Questa tale forma chiamano e' Platonici Idea e esemplare e vogliono che la forma dello edificio, che ha l'artefice nella mente sua, abbia essere più perfetto e più vero che l'artificio poi da colui prodotto nella materia conveniente, cioè o di pietre o di legni o altre cose simile. [...] e questo è quello che il nostro poeta Dante tocca in una sua canzone, dove dice: ‘poi chi pigne figura, se non può esser lei, non la può porre.’ Dicono adunque e' Platonici che benchè Dio producessi una sola creatura, nondimeno produsse ogni cosa, perchè in quella mente produsse le idee e le forme d'ogni cosa.”

Vasari's characterisation of the medieval artists is thus an exemplary case for his heuristic method of deducing the quality of an artist from the quality of his works. Although he never met artists from the Middle Ages in person, he is able to give a critical judgement of their capacities and personalities on the basis of their surviving sculptures and paintings. The same method for guessing an artist's character from his work was applied by Vasari in several other cases. But whereas the medieval sculptors were treated as a homogeneous crowd, summarized under the adjective *tondo*, and disentitled to bear individual names, artists from the more recent past were endowed with a bunch of singular traits and personal characteristics. As the artists became more self-conscious and the interest in individual forms of expression began to increase, their personal characters and lives received more attention.

Beautiful Artists, Beautiful Art?

Vasari's characterisation of medieval artists has been discussed in detail because it represents Vasari's conception of the interdependence of artist and artwork *in nuce*. The individual *ingegno* of the artist reflects itself in the generation of the *idea*, which then translates into the *disegno*, the first draft or design of the work of art. Besides this general correlation between the artist and his artworks, Vasari used other rhetorical devices to underscore his conviction that every work of art is a reflection of the individual artist: his physical appearance, social manners, and ethical traits played an important role and often served as a blueprint for the discussion of his paintings or sculptures.

Probably the most intriguing example for the parallelisation of corporeal beauty, moral virtues, and the excellence of art is contained in the *Vita di Leonardo*, the first life in the third part of the *Vite*. It discusses the works of an artist who was considered the first to have mastered the acquisitions of the *terza età*, which consisted of the refinement of *regola* (measurement), *ordine* (order), *misure* (proportion), *disegno* (design), and *maniera* (style).⁴⁶ In the *Proemio alla terza parte*, Vasari also introduced the category of *grazia divina* (divine grace), which is said to be an attribute of Leonardo's work.⁴⁷ When Vasari gave a pen portrait

46 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 4, pp. 7ff. For a thorough discussion of Vasari's five categories in the third *proemio* see Pinelli 1993, pp. 105–109.

47 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 4, p. 11: "Ma lo errore di costoro [i.e., the preceding artists] dimostrarono poi chiaramente le opere di Lionardo da Vinci, il quale, dando principio a quella terza maniera, che noi vogliamo chiamare la moderna, oltre la gagliardezza e bravazza del disegno, et oltre il contraffare sottilissimamente tutte le minuzie della na-

of the artist at the beginning of his life, it is precisely this last category which he used to describe Leonardo's physical amenities and social habits. The extraordinary beauty of his body and his refined manners and social skills were described as bearing infinite grace.⁴⁸ Vasari's description of Leonardo was not only inspired by Castiglione's *Libro del cortegiano*, who described the perfect courtier as being interested in beauty, grace, and virtue, but was also a reference to the idea that a beautiful mind is supposed to produce beautiful works of art.⁴⁹ Of course, this did not mean that Vasari believed Leonardo to be limited to merely reproducing nature's beauty. As if he wanted to underscore the exceptional mimetic capacities of the artist, Vasari discussed Leonardo's perfect knowledge of human proportions as well as his bizarre inventions, which included disgusting representations of spiders, bats, and lizards.⁵⁰ In accordance with Aristotle, who admired images of flies or even dead bodies because of their aesthetic value and artistic quality,⁵¹ Vasari thus emphasized the universality of artistic expression, which was a main characteristic of the first painter of the *terza età*: The beauty of body and mind did not necessarily impede the imitation of nature's less charming elements.⁵²

The same narrative principles used in the life of Leonardo were also used in the *Vita di Piero di Cosimo*, although in a somewhat different way. Whereas the corporeal beauty of Leonardo served as a blueprint to discuss the exceptional beauty of his works, Piero's pictorial representations were employed to illustrate the bizarre character of the painter. Described as an artist who was less man than beast, who loved to work in isolation, who never swept his house and abandoned the crops in his garden to wilderness, Piero becomes the counterpart of the well-educated courtier, who is trained in refined manners and conversation.⁵³ The problematic nature of the artist is further stressed by Vasari's discussion of Piero's habits, which consisted of the strange custom of eating extraordinary numbers of

tura così appunto, come elle sono, con buona regola, miglior ordine, retta misura, disegno perfetto e grazia divina, abbondantissimo di copie e profondissimo di arte, dette veramente alle sue figure il moto et il fiato."

48 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 4, p. 17: "Questo lo videro gli uomini in Lionardo da Vinci, nel quale oltre la bellezza del corpo, non lodata mai abastanza, era la grazia più che infinita in qualunque sua azione; e tanta e sì fatta poi la virtù, che dovunque l'animo volse nelle cose difficili, con facilità le rendeva assolute."

49 Cfr. Rubin 1990.

50 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 4, p. 24.

51 As cited in Sörbom 1994, p. 40: "Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies." (*Poetics*, 1448b). For a discussion of this passage in relation to the works of Quattrocento artists see Pfisterer 1996, p. 119.

52 For the ideal of the artist as beauty in Vasari's *Vite* see Rogers 1998.

53 Cfr. Lüdemann 2010, p. 121.

boiled eggs and of despising the crying of children and the sound of church bells and chanting friars. These *stranezze* of Piero were an evident sign of his individual character, just as his paintings were a visible representation of the personal inclinations of his mind. Interested in the eccentric, Piero not only studied the most abnormal manifestations of nature but also used to invent new compositions by gazing at a wall against which sick people had been discharging their spittle (a sneaky allusion to Leonardo, who watched clouds instead). Not surprisingly, one of Piero's works discussed by Vasari represents a marine monster, which is described as "so extravagant, bizarre, and fantastic in its deformity, that it seems impossible that Nature should produce anything so deformed and strange among her creations."⁵⁴ And the most fascinating passage about Piero's life probably consists of the description of a triumphal chariot with marching skeletons, illustrating the unusual and macabre ideas of the Florentine artist.

Although Vasari praised his *bizzarrissime fantasie*, his use of colour, and the naturalness of his figures, Piero's life as a whole is nevertheless treated as an *exemplum vitiosum*, both ethically and artistically. Neither his misanthropic constitution nor his achievements as a painter were deemed satisfactory by Vasari. Having spent his life with bizarre interests, in solitude, Piero had wasted a once promising youth and ended his career in unproductive agony and despair. Furthermore, Piero never acquired a unique style but changed his *maniera* frequently.⁵⁵ Vasari leaves the reader with no doubt as to the inevitable causes for this lability. Having had strange fantasies, Piero was bound to lead a strange life which ended with his death at the foot of a staircase (and not at the top, we may add).⁵⁶ In the first edition of the *Vite*, Vasari emphasized this motif of similarity between the artist's life and work by quoting an epitaph, which reads as follows:

54 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 4, p. 138: "E certamente che simil' cose non credo che nessuno le facesse meglio di lui né le immaginasse a gran pezzo, come ne può render testimonio un mostro marino che egli fece e donò al magnifico Giuliano de' Medici, che per la deformità sua è tanto stravagante, bizzarro e fantastico, che pare impossibile che la natura usasse e tanta deformità e tanta stranezza nelle cose sue."

55 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 4, p. 134: "[...] per che bene si può dire che e' la [i.e., la maniera] mutasse quasi a ciò ch'e' faceva. E se Piero non fusse stato tanto astratto e avesse tenuto più conto di sé nella vita che egli non fece, avrebbe fatto conoscere il grande ingegno che egli aveva, di maniera che sarebbe stato adorato, dove egli per la bestialità sua fu più tosto tenuto pazzo, ancora che egli non facesse male se non a sé solo nella fine, e beneficio et utile con le opere a l'arte sua. Per la qual cosa dovrebbe sempre ogni buono ingegno et ogni eccellente artefice, ammaestrato da questi esempli, aver gli occhi alla fine."

56 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 4, p. 143: "Laonde per sì strane sue fantasie vivendo stranamente, si condusse a tale, che una mattina fu trovato morto appiè d'una scala, l'anno MDXXI; et in San Pier Maggiore gli fu dato sepoltura."

“Piero di Cosimo Pittor F.
 S’io strano e strane fur le mie figure,
 Diedi in tale stranezza e grazia et arte,
 e chi strana il disegno a parte a parte
 dà moto forza e spirito alle pitture.”⁵⁷

Presumably fictitious and from the hand of Vasari or of one of his collaborators,⁵⁸ the epitaph at the end of the *Vita di Piero di Cosimo* thus underlines the conception of the *Vite* as a literary work which is meant for discussing artworks as a direct manifestation of the artist’s personal *ingegno*.

4.3 Rhetorical Strategies for the Description of Style

Vasari’s technique of drawing on the physical appearance, the social behaviour, and the events which occurred in the life of an artist (i.e., his personal experience) was not only meant to provide a narrative pattern for his *Vite* but served another purpose as well: it provided a way to describe an artist’s style at a time when a critical vocabulary had yet to be developed.⁵⁹ As has been shown by Michael Baxandall and others, the epideictic discussion of artworks became a wide-spread custom amongst humanists at the end of the 14th century. By describing the great variety of objects and attitudes in the artworks of contemporary artists, they improved their rhetorical skills and demonstrated their own intellectual capabilities.⁶⁰ Vasari continued in the opposite direction. As an artist who became an art historian as well, Vasari was interested in promoting the public role of the artists. One means of enhancing their social status was the literary description of their works, in which every artist was treated as an individual.

Compared with artists’ lives from the Quattrocento, which were less detailed and explicit when it came to the question of artistic distinctiveness and individuality, Vasari’s *Vite* bursts with adjectives that try to capture the unique character and style of the artists. Almost every painter is rhetorically equipped with a repertoire of particular features or a combination of varying attributes which try to transform the visual encounter with his artworks into a literary experience for the readers of Vasari’s text. The abundance of terms such as *grande*, *minuta*, *cruda*,

57 Vasari 1550 (1966–1997), vol. 4, p. 71.

58 Rubin 1995, p. 227.

59 Zimmerman 1995, p. 51.

60 Baxandall 1971, pp. 90 ff.

tagliante, delicata, dolce, pastosa, unita, gagliarda, leggiadria, diligente, facile, affaticata, soda, giudiziosa, and sciagurata, often used in superlative form and never before employed in the context of the visual arts, is an indicator of his pursuit of accuracy and originality when it came to the question of describing the particularities of an artist.⁶¹ Still, in contrast to the peculiarities of a painting or a sculpture, these words were limited in their semantic power and hardly ever expressed the entire idea of the style of a painter that Vasari might have had in mind. The lack of an appropriate language with a critical vocabulary to illustrate the individual style of a painter made it necessary to recruit other rhetorical means, which served to underline stylistic differences between artists.⁶²

The introduction of biographical reports, bodily features, and personal anecdotes (even of dubious authenticity) thus served as a second semiotic layer against which the character of the artist's work was rendered more visible. By relying on the accidental properties of the single artist, Vasari provided a pen portrait of the artist's interior ideas and patterns of pictorial representation, which was perceivable even for those unaccustomed to the rhetorical principles of ekphrasis and epideictic: The external appearance and behaviour of the artist operated as an amplifier for the characterisation of his art.⁶³ If we consider that Vasari introduced himself on the title page of the 1550 edition of the *Vite* as a Tuscan painter who writes about the artists of his own age in the vernacular, we might suppose that he addressed an audience of readers who were more interested in fashionable entertainment than in humanist traditions. It is therefore no coincidence that his *Vite* is highly indebted to the popular genre of the humorous novel.⁶⁴

A good example of the use of witty anecdotes to characterise the style of a master can be found in the life of Parri Spinelli. Described as a melancholic artist who used to paint elongated figures with intensified facial expressions, Parri's particular *maniera* is conceived as the result of an assault by some of his relatives while he was painting a fresco in S. Domenico in Arezzo:

“Mentre che Parri faceva quest'opera, fu assaltato da certi suoi parenti armati con i quali piativa non so che dote; ma perché vi sopraggiunsono subito alcuni, fu soccorso

61 Cfr. Freeman 1867, who provides an uncommented catalogue of these adjectives that were often used in relation to the word *maniera*.

62 Sohm 2001, pp. 86–114 analyses Vasari's art criticism in the context of other early modern examples.

63 Cfr. Alpers 1960, p. 213.

64 Franco Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle* and Boccaccio's *Decamerone* provide good examples for satirical remarks about art and artists. For a general analysis of the use of wit and humor in Renaissance art and in the genre of the so-called *facezie, burle, detti, and motti* see Barolsky 1978.

di maniera che non gli feciono alcun male; ma fu nondimeno, secondo che si dice, la paura che egli ebbe cagione che, oltre al fare le figure pendenti in sur un lato, le fece quasi sempre da indi in poi spaventatice.”⁶⁵

As is shown by a fresco of the *Crucifixion* with a seemingly receding Mary exhibited in the Palazzo Comunale in Arezzo, visual evidence seems to confirm Vasari’s observations (Fig. 29). As an Aretine author he was certainly familiar with Parri’s



Figure 29 Parri Spinelli, *Crucifixion*, 1430s, Arezzo, Palazzo Comunale

works and the biographical tales that circulated in his hometown. More importantly, this passage shows how Vasari used personal events and characteristics to illustrate the *maniera* of an artist. Whereas an abstract discussion of Parri’s stylistic repertoire would have demanded a set of various adjectives, the anecdote

65 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 2, p. 284.

provided a suggestive idea of his paintings in one single glimpse. The reader of Vasari's text was thus able to link Parri's works with his own emotional experiences, allowing him to appreciate a work of art that was only available in a derivative, verbatim form.⁶⁶

Similar examples can be found throughout the *Vite*. Pontormo's unconventional lifestyle was correlated to his work, the strangeness of his mind mirrored in the entangled nudes, that he painted in S. Lorenzo and which Vasari deemed incomprehensible.⁶⁷ The rugged and coarse personality of Andrea del Castagno was demonstrated by the rude and assertive style of his paintings, a narrative chosen by Vasari because he groundlessly assumed that Andrea murdered his companion Domenico Veneziano out of jealousy.⁶⁸ And Andrea del Sarto's works, painted in a simple style, were a reflection of his timid and simple character.⁶⁹ It is obvious that these examples fulfill different purposes and that they address problems of artistic expression as well as political issues. Vasari was not only an objective observer and historiographer of the artistic life in Renaissance Florence, but as an artist he was also involved in courtly animosities and motivated by personal interests. Pontormo's frescoes in S. Lorenzo, for instance, were dismissed, not only because of their confusing style, but also because their iconography was influenced by reformatory ideas too – a fact that could have hardly been ignored by Vasari during the first stage of the Counter-Reformation in Florence.⁷⁰ What connects these

66 For a discussion of Parri's *Vita* regarding questions of style and personality see Zucker 1979.

67 Pinelli 1993, pp. 5–32, discusses Vasari's *Vita* of Pontormo in detail. It is interesting to note that Francesco Bocchi observed a similar concordance between Pontormo's confusing concepts and his *difforme* personality. See Bocchi 1584 (1960–1962), p. 185: “Mirabile è l'artificio, all'incontro, ma il soggetto senza grazia, che si vede nelle figure di Iacopo da Pontormo in San Lorenzo; perché egli è tanto lontano nel suo Diluvio da ogni ragione, anzi in sé stesso tanto *difforme*, che la maniera della pittura, comeché sia di pregio, mostra tuttavia il poco senno di questo artefice, che, volendo in questa opera tutti gli altri superare, non arrivò a gran pezzo a quelle lodi che quasi nella sua fanciullezza si avea partorito.”

68 For a discussion of the *Vite* of Andrea del Castagno and Domenico Veneziano and Vasari's use of jealousy as a narrative means see Graul 2012.

69 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 5, p. 6: “Ma una certa timidità d'animo et una sua certa natura dimessa e semplice, non lasciò mai vedere in lui un certo vivace ardore né quella fierezza che, aggiunta all'altre sue parti, l'arebbe fatto essere nella pittura veramente divino [...]. Sono nondimeno le sue figure, se bene semplici e pure, bene intese, senza errori, e in tutti i conti di somma perfezione. [...] e se bene disegnò semplicemente, sono nondimeno i colori suoi rari e veramente divini.”

70 Pinelli 1993, pp. 13 ff., has shown, that the iconographic program of Pontormo's fresco cycle was indebted to the *Beneficio di cristo*, a treatise popular amongst the adherents of the various reformist tendencies in the Catholic Church.

examples from his *Vite* is the recurrent motif of a unity between the external appearance or behaviour of an artist, his mental constitution, and finally his works. Following this tripartite scheme, Vasari not only provided a new, personalised model for the ekphrastic description of artwork, but he also remodelled physiognomic theory according to his own needs as an art historian.

4.4 Physiognomic Theory

In addition to their suggestive explanatory power, the above-discussed examples retain strong ties to physiognomic theories, which partly explains why Vasari's characterisation of artists remained unquestioned for a long time. The basic idea of physiognomy consists of the belief that the ethical quality of an individual is mirrored in his/her outward appearance. Because the individual soul of each man was considered the constructor and governor of the body (a fact that became visible every time a man felt anger, joy, or sorrow), its moral attributes were directly related to the corporeal features of the individual. Thus the more beautiful a person, the more beautiful his soul. According to this simple heuristic principle, the reverse was also true: physical shortcomings and deviations from the social norms of beauty were interpreted as signs of a deteriorated character.⁷¹

Deeply rooted in ancient thought and mainly influenced by the re-discovery of the Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*, physiognomy became one of the most popular theories in Renaissance Italy.⁷² It was closely related to the mysteries of the human body and the immortality of the soul, and thus provided orientation in questions of faith and religion as well as in the judgement of people. Girolamo Manfredi's *Liber de homine*, a highly influential treatise written in 1474 which had the self-declared scope to answer the most important questions of human physiology, was amongst the first printed works to discuss physiognomic prin-

71 Physiognomic theory and its relation to the art literature of the Renaissance has been discussed by Reißer 1997. The widespread principle to judge the inward qualities of a person by evaluating their external appearance is exemplified by Bernardino of Siena around 1430 in the following way, Bernardino da Siena (1911), p. 160. "A che si cognosce una donna quando ella è buona? A la portatura sua. Così si cognosce la bottiga di quello lanaiuolo al suo segno. Così il mercatante si cognosce la sua buttiga al segno. E' frati a che si cognoscono? Pure al lor segno. El monaco a che il cognosci quando elli è nero o bigio o bianco? Al segno loro. Quello di fuore dimostra quello che è dentro. A lo strinsico puoi cognoscere lo intrinseco."

72 For Aristotle's *Physiognomonica* in Renaissance Italy see Vogt 1999.

ciples. Writing on the similarity between the face of a person and his ethical traits, Manfredi argues that the character of a man is best shown in his facial features. Because the face is highly saturated with the blood and thus the spirit of a man, the qualities of his character and disposition become especially visible in this part of the human body.⁷³ Accordingly, an ugly and deformed face can only be seen as the sign of a bad soul.

“Perché chi ha la faza deforme e bruta non può essere buono se non rare volte’ La bontà del’anima seguita la bontà dela complexione e la cattività del’anima seguita la cattività de essa complexione. E perché la deformità e bruteza dela faza non procede se non da mala complexione de tutto il corpo, imperhò significa tal faccia sopra la malatia del’anima, de che tal’huomo rare volte può esser buono.”⁷⁴

Although physiognomic theories usually concentrate on similarities between the face and soul, Manfredi’s remarks reveal the relevance of this concept for the whole corporeal constitution of man. The complexion of an individual, i.e., the beauty of his entire body as guaranteed by a well-balanced mixture of the elements, was seen as an exterior symptom of the qualities of his soul.⁷⁵ Or, as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola put it in a slightly different context: A perfect soul resonates even in the terrestrial components of the human body.⁷⁶ Similar ideas and notions continued to influence the 16th century and were popularized by various humanists such as Andrea Vesalius (*De humani corporis fabrica*, 1543), Francesco Sansovino (*L’edificio del corpo humano*, 1550), and most prominently by Giambattista della Porta (*De humana physiognomia*, 1586). Even the art theo-

73 Manfredi 1474 (1988), p. 207: “Perché l’uomo è di simili costumi come se asomiglia la sua faza, zoèchi ha la faza simile al’ebrio se de’ inebriare e chi l’ha simile al’iracundo se debbe spesso corrizzare, e cussi dele altre cose.’ La dispositione di tutto il corpo del’huomo più se dimesotra nela faza che in nesuno altro luoco, perché la faza è un membro nobile, al qual manda la natura molto sangue e spirito. Secundo adunque la similtudine dela faza noi havemo a iudicare la dispositione e costumi de tutto il corpo. Chi adonque se asimiglia al’ebrio over iracundo nella faza debbe havere simili costumi e dispositione.” (*Liber de homine*, II, IV, 7).

74 Manfredi 1474 (1988), p. 208 (*Liber de homine*, II, IV, 12).

75 For the term *complexione* and the understanding of the human body in early modern europe cfr. Groebner 2004 and Stolberg 2001.

76 Benivieni/Mirandola 1522, p. 63: “Credo che dapoi che tale effetto [i.e., the effect of beauty] dal corpo non procede, necessariamente debba attribuirsi all’ Anima, laquale quando in se è molto perfetta & lucida, credo che insino nel corpo terrestre qualche raggio del suo splendore trasfonda, & in questo convengono tutti gli antichi philosophi & Theologi [...]”

rist Pomponio Gaurico included a lesson on physiognomy in his *De sculptura*, because he considered the knowledge of facial features and their meaning to be necessary for the ability to represent different character types and figures. He understood that a spiky nose is the sign of an angry man, and small ears are the sign of a malicious individual.⁷⁷

As an artist and historiographer, Vasari was well aware of these ideas. By applying the principles of physiognomy not only to the corporeal appearance and ethical traits, but also to the works of an artist, he enlarged its semiotic potential. This transfer of analytical patterns was made possible by Vasari's conception of the incorporeal *idea* as the primary cause for a work of art. Like the body of the artist, this idea was generated by his individual soul and provided the basis for the execution of the *disegno*, the first material draft for a painting or a sculpture. In short, Vasari's theory can be summarized like this: Both the body and the artwork of an artist are fashioned by identical generative principles of his individual soul and thus necessarily share the same characteristics.⁷⁸

Interestingly, Vasari applied these principles in an unsystematic way and even made fun of the diagnostic capacities of physiognomy.⁷⁹ His pen portrait of the painter Jacopo di Giovanni di Francesco in the life of Aristotile da Sangallo, however, shows that he employed this theory to characterise artists and their art. Commonly known by the name Jacone, the painter was part of a clique of artists infamous for their excessive and vulgar behaviour in public. As Vasari claims, they indulged in quarrel and defamation, and never washed their hands, faces, or heads. Furthermore, they never cut their beards, nor did they sweep their houses. Furthermore, when they prepared dinner, the tables were laid with the cartoons for their pictures and they drank directly from the flask or the jug. In short, under the pretence of living the finest life in the world, they lived like pigs.⁸⁰ Vasari did not doubt that their appearance and behaviour were to be seen as reflections of their inner selves:

77 Gaurico 1504 (1999), pp. 186, 190.

78 See also his characterisation of the medieval artists as *tondo* at the beginning of this chapter.

79 When Michelangelo was once approached by an old friend who was dressed in a penitential robe, he sarkastically remarked: "Oh, voi siete bello! Se fossi così drento come io vi veggo di fuori, buon per l'anima vostra." (Vasari 1568 (1878–1885) vol. 7, p. 279).

80 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 6, p. 451: "[...] viveano come porci e come bestie: non si lavavano mai nè mani nè viso nè capo nè barba, non spazzavano la casa e non rifacevano il letto se non ogni due mesi una volta, apparecchiavano con i cartoni delle pitture le tavole, e non beevano se non al fiasco et al boccale: e questa loro meschinità, e vivere, come si dice, alla carlona, era da loro tenuta la più bella vita del mondo."

“Ma perché il di fuori suol esser indizio di quello di dentro, e dimostrare quali sieno gli animi nostri, crederò, come s'è detto altra volta, che così fossero costoro lordi e brutti nell'animo, come di fuori apparivano.”⁸¹

Given this statement, it is no surprise that Vasari was similarly disappointed by Jacone's artistic career. Although he is said to have executed beautiful altar pieces and paintings, Vasari portrays him as an artist who spent most of his time with his friends in the taverns of Florence, where he insulted more respectable painters. He did not execute many works, was very bizarre in the posing of his figures, and contented himself with the little that his idleness allowed him to do. Wasting his promising talents with arguments and feasts, Jacone finally ended his unproductive and deviant life in misery in the small hovel that he had never cleaned.⁸²

As has been argued by Antonio Pinelli, Vasari's characterisation of Jacone can be seen as the result of Vasari's struggle for artistic engagement at the court of the Medici in the 1540s.⁸³ Artists such as Jacopo Pontormo, Agnolo Bronzino, and Baccio Bandinelli (but even painters of minor importance such as Jacone), belonged to a circle of artists that were favoured by the majordomo of Cosimo I de' Medici, Pierfrancesco Riccio. Responsible for the selection, supervision, and payment of the artists, he was the central figure when it came to the placing of commissions.⁸⁴ But as Vasari claims in the life of Niccolò Tribolo, Riccio abused his authority by choosing the same old artists over new talent, thus excluding virtuous and excellent artists like Vasari himself from well-deserved success.⁸⁵ In the eyes of Vasari, Jacone thus represented an artist who was chosen not because of artistic diligence and refined manners, but because of friendly affiliations.

Riccio died in 1564, and by the time of the second edition of the *Vite*, the tables had finally turned. Vasari had acquired an important position at the court, which

81 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 6, p. 451.

82 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 6, pp. 452ff.: “La somma è che Iacone spese il miglior tempo di sua vita in baie, andandosene in considerazioni et in dir male di questo e di quello, essendo in que' tempi ridotta in Fiorenza l'arte del disegno in una compagnia di persone che più attendevano a far baie et a godere che a lavorare, e lo studio de' quali era ragunarsi per le botteghe et in altri luoghi, e quivi malignamente e con loro gerghi attendere a biasimare l'opere d'alcuni che erano eccellenti e vivevano civilmente e come uomini onorati. Capi di questi erano Iacone, il Piloto orefice et il Tasso legnaiuolo; ma il peggiore di tutti era Iacone [...]. Finalmente essendo stato Iacone da una infermità mal condotto, essendo povero, senza governo e rattappato delle gambe senza potere aiutarsi, si morì di stento in una sua casipola che aveva in una piccola strada overo chiasso, detto Codarimessa, l'anno 1553.”

83 Pinelli 1988, p. 8 ff.

84 For Riccio's role at the court of Cosimo I see Pinelli 1988 and Cecchi 1998.

85 Cfr. Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 6, p. 91.

granted him a generous salary, a good reputation, and power. His position also gave him the opportunity to attack the conduct of Jacone and his fellows. An episode in the life of Aristotile which recounts Vasari's relationship to the moral standards and social manners of his artistic antagonists was omitted in the first edition of the *Vite* but later included.⁸⁶ Riding back to Florence on the back of his horse one day in 1541, Vasari was approached by Jacone who tried to insult him at the Canto de' Medici. Responding to Jacone's vain attempt to engage in an embittered conversation with the painter, Vasari showed his disdain:

“Perchè entrato egli così a cavallo fra loro, gli disse Iacone: ‘Orbè, Giorgio’, disse, ‘come va ella?’ ‘Va bene, Iacone mio’, rispose Giorgio. ‘Io ero già povero come tutti voi, ed ora mi trovo tre mila scudi, o meglio; ero tenuto da voi goffo, ed i frati e’ preti mi tengono valentuomo; io già serviva voi altri, ed ora questo famiglio che è qui serve me, e governa questo cavallo; vestiva di que’ panni che vestono i dipintori che son poveri, ed ora son vestito di velluto; andava già a piedi, ed or vo’ a cavallo: sicchè, Iacon mio, ella va bene affatto: rimanti con Dio.’ Quando il povero Iacone senti a un tratto tante cose, perdè ogni invenzione, e si rimase senza dir altro tutto stordito, quasi considerando la sua miseria, e che le più volte rimane l’ingannatore a piè dell’ingannato.”⁸⁷

Vasari's pejorative portrayal of the demeanor and conduct of Jacone marks the beginning of a new era in the artistic life of Renaissance Florence. Although the works of Jacone and his fellows like Battista Tasso and Giovanni di Baldassare were esteemed as valuable and precious, they were nevertheless the products of a group of individuals who violated the social norms introduced and established by the examples of Vasari and his highly sophisticated friends. In contrast to the artisan of the *Quattrocento*, engaged in manual labor and covered with the stains of his pigments or the chips of his marble, the artist of the *Cinquecento* was an ally of the philosophers and humanists at the courts of Renaissance Italy. As Vasari's account suggests, the modern artist is assisted by a servant, rides on horseback, dresses in velvet robes, and is generally more interested in the liberal arts than the mechanical arts. This process of social emancipation had to be accompanied by a refinement of habits and manners by the aspiring new artists. Their instincts and needs had to be controlled and regulated by superior powers and values. Only the emulation of the distinct behavioural patterns of an intellectual elite, as described by Baldassare Castiglione and suggested to the artists by humanists and

86 For a discussion of this episode see Pinelli 1988, p. 6, for a general history of the courtly artist see Warnke 1985.

87 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 6, pp. 453 f.

artists such as Leon Battista Alberti,⁸⁸ Leonardo,⁸⁹ or Paolo Pino,⁹⁰ allowed artists to flourish in the courtly spheres of Florence.

The portrayal of Jacone can thus be seen as a counterpoint to the life of Leonardo, or all the more to the life of Raphael. Whereas Jacone engages in quarrels, Raphael engages in friendly conversations with everyone who approaches him; whereas Jacone is described as uncivilized and rough, Raphael is described as a beautiful and graceful artist; and whereas Jacone paints in a bizarre style, Raphael's paintings are famous for their lovely and harmonious compositions.⁹¹ It is therefore no coincidence that Vasari modelled his own biography at the end of the second edition of the *Vite* upon the example of Raphael. Both his manners and *maniera*, i.e., his life as a courtier and as an artist, represented an ideal that Vasari tried to incorporate which became the role model for the artists of the Accademia del disegno, the first modern academy of the arts, founded in 1563 and devoted to the demands of Cosimo I de' Medici.⁹²

As is shown by these examples, the identity of body, soul, and moral virtue was thus a recurrent motif that pervaded the entire *Vite*. Physiognomic conceits served as an interpretative scheme to enhance the social status of the artists and also complemented the ekphrastic description of their works of art, providing a common language for an easily accessible stock of attributes. Rather than reporting on the (often identical) iconographic subjects in lengthy passages, Vasari portrayed the artist's habits instead, because he knew that his reader would be able

88 Alberti (2002), p. 150: "Ma piacerammi sia il pittore, per bene potere tenere tutte queste cose, uomo buono e dotto in buone lettere. E sa ciascuno quanto la bontà dell'uomo molto più vaglia che ogni industria o arte ad acquistarsi benivolenza da' cittadini, e niuno dubita la benivolenza di molti molto all'artefice giovare a lode insieme e al guadagno. E interviene spesso che i ricchi, mossi più da benivolenza che da maravigliarsi d'altrui arte, prima danno guadagno a costui modesto e buono, lassando adrieto quell'altro pittore forse migliore in arte ma non sì buono in costumi. Adunque conviensi all'artefice molto porgersi costumato, massime da umanità e facilità, e così arà benivolenza, fermo aiuto contro la povertà, e guadagni, ottimo aiuto a bene imparare sua arte."

89 Leonardo (1995), pp. 33 f.: "[...] il pittore con grande agio siede dinanzi alla sua opera ben vestito e muove il lievissimo pennello co' vaghi colori, ed ornato di vestimenti come a lui piace; ed è l'abitazione sua piena di vaghe pitture, e pulita, ed accompagnata spesse volte di musiche, o lettori di varie e belle opere, le quali, senza strepito di martelli od altro rumore misto, sono con gran piacere udite."

90 Pino 1548 (1960–1962), p. 137: "Né apparisca il nostro maestro con le mani empiistrate de tutti i colori, con li drappi lerci e camise succide, come guataro; ma sia delicato e netto, usando cose odorose, come confortatrici del cerebro." For a discussion of Pino's dependance upon Castiglione see the edition of his treatise by Dubus 2011.

91 Cfr. Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 4, pp. 315 ff.

92 Cfr. Rubin 1995, pp. 357–401, Irle 1997, pp. 67 ff., and Brückle 2001.

to guess the style of his works from the depiction of his character (and *vice versa*). With rare exceptions, the characterisations of painting and painter were thus interchangeable. The great success of Vasari's *Vite* is therefore also indebted to its exploitation of popular theories, used in a new and often humorous context. It was not until the Seicento, with its *Vite* by Giovan Pietro Bellori (1672) and Filippo Baldinucci (1681–1728), that academic art criticism was brought to a new analytical level. Without abandoning the idea of a unity between artist and artwork, their ekphrastic models established a different form of art historiography.⁹³

4.5 Artistic Procreativity

Vasari's use of rhetorical patterns which draw on analogies between the artist and his works would have been incomplete if he had ignored the motif of parental resemblance. As has been shown by Ernst Robert Curtius, the metaphor labelling the works of an author as his biological offspring was already applied by ancient authors. Plato differentiated between those men who give birth by means of their bodies, and those who give birth by means of their minds. "Who, when he thinks of Homer and Hesiod and other great poets, would not rather have their children than ordinary human ones? Who would not emulate them in the creation of children such as theirs, which have preserved their memory and given them everlasting glory?"⁹⁴ Whereas the first method resulted in the creation of mortal children, only the latter method assured the everlasting immortality and fame of the author. Following the example of Plato, Ovid labelled his work as offspring (*progenies*) generated without the aid of a mother (*sine mater creata*); similar terms such as birth (*partus*) or even litter (*fetura*) were used throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages to describe the literary production of an author.⁹⁵

It is clear from Ovid's reference to the female that these metaphors were based on a classical idea of procreation that continued to be in vogue during the Italian Renaissance. Its main element consisted of a strict discrimination between the male and the female contributions to the act of reproduction. Whereas the semen of the father contained the entire blueprint for the construction of the new human being, the mother merely provided the nourishment of the embryo, consisting of the menstrual blood – or *katamenia*, as Aristotle would have called it. Given

93 For Bellori's and Baldinucci's use of the equation of artist and artwork see Chapter 7.4.

94 Plato, *Symposium*, 177d, see also *Symposium*, 210a, *Phaedrus*, 278a and 275b, and *Republic*, 330.

95 Curtius 1948, p. 141. Cfr. also Pfisterer 2001, p. 306.

the ideal case of a lossless transmission of the male predispositions to the female matter, one must think of the resulting progeny as an exact copy of the father, identical both in the form of his body and the characteristics of his soul.⁹⁶ Thus, the function of the male was identified with an active, shape-giving principle, while the function of the female was characterized by a passive, form-receiving principle.⁹⁷ Accordingly, one of these procreative ideas, the so-called encephalomyelogenic theory later illustrated by Leonardo (Fig. 30), localized the production



Figure 30 Leonardo da Vinci, Hemisection of a Man and Woman in the Act of Coition, ca. 1490–1492, Windsor, Royal Collection

96 Balme 1990, p. 27. Aristotle develops his theory of procreation extensively in *De generatione animalium*, I, XIX–XXII and IV, III. Considering the existence of female offspring a necessity for the endurance of man, he nevertheless assigns some of the form-giving powers to the female as well. If the male seed is weak or if the father is old, women might contribute to the form of their children as well. Aristotle (1908–1952), vol. 5: “For even he who does not resemble his parents is already in a certain sense a monstrosity; for in these cases Nature has in a way departed from the type. The first departure indeed is that the offspring should become female instead of male; this, however, is a natural necessity. For the class of animals divided into sexes must be preserved, and as it is possible for the male sometimes not to prevail over the female in the mixture of the two elements, either through youth or age or some other such cause, it is necessary that animals should produce female young. And the monstrosity, though not necessary in regard of a final cause and an end, yet is necessary accidentally.” (*De generatione animalium*, 767b5–15).

97 For classical theories of procreation see Nardi 1938 and Lesky 1951, especially regarding Renaissance art theory Jacobs 1997, pp. 27–63.

of sperm in the male brain, the center of human physiology and creativity. Passing through the spinal canal and the penis, it was finally absorbed by the womb of the female, where it started to model the form of the embryo.

It is no coincidence that many natural philosophers paralleled the process of procreation with the generation of works of art. When Aristotle described biological actions, he repeatedly referred to the principles of craftsmanship; i.e., he evoked the world of *techne*. Like the male semen, a carpenter who builds a chair using wood, or a builder who constructs a house using stones, transforms shapeless matter into moulded form by realizing an idea that was first conceived in his mind (*De generatione animalium*, 730b20).⁹⁸ Or, as Aristotle puts it in the *Metaphysics*: “It is the same with natural formations as it is with the products of art. For the seed produces just as do those things which function by art. It contains the form potentially, and that from which the seed comes has in some sense the same name as the product.”⁹⁹

In his *De naturalibus facultatibus* Galen expressed the same thought by commenting on the works of the sculptor Phidias. Just as the male seed contains the future progeny in potentia, he possessed the form of his sculptures before touching the material.¹⁰⁰ Similar notions can be found in the works of Albertus Magnus (*De animalibus*, XV, IV, 86 and XVI, VIII, 50), Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologica*, III, XXXII, 4), and Isidor of Seville.¹⁰¹ The child metaphor was thus a figure of speech which granted the author of written works both male and female powers, since not only did he generate the ideas for his poems, letters, or narrations, but he also gave form to their material existence by producing the text. Felice Figliucci, a Paduan humanist who was later active in Florence, explained this singular quality of writers in his important commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, published in 1551:

“Gl’altri artefici [i.e., those who do not write] non fanno la materia, ne la quale inducano la forma, ma la pigliano fatta, come dire, lo scultore non fa il marmo, ma solo intaglia in quello la figura, e però gli altri artefici amano le opere solamente per la forma, che loro hanno data, ma li poeti ritruovano per loro stessi la materia, e quella formano,

98 Cfr. Lesky 1951, pp. 135 f. For the parallelisation of art and nature in Aristotle in general see Fiedler 1978.

99 Aristotle (1908–1952), vol. 8, 1034b. For this passage see also Oehler 1963 and Pfisterer 2001, p. 307.

100 See Pfisterer 2001, p. 307. For the parallelisation of art and nature in Galen in general see Kovačić 2003.

101 Isidor of Seville (2006), p. 206: “A mother is so named because something is made from her, for the term ‘mother’ is as if the word were ‘matter’, but the father is the cause.” (*Etymologiae*, IX, V, 6).

e dispongono distintamente, e con artificio dandole quella più leggiadra forma, che possono, e però amano li lor poemi, non solo per havergli data la forma, ma ancora per haver ritrovata la materia.”¹⁰²

Renaissance humanists and poets were especially aware of their exceptional capacity and did not hesitate to defend their procreative privilege against other artists who tried to claim the same status for their own works. Consequently, sculptors and painters, who had to rely on alien material such as marble, canvases, and various kinds of pigments to realize their ideas, were often deemed ignoble if they referred to their works of art as children. This is shown in a letter by Marsilio Ficino which was edited in *volgare* by the same Felice Figliucci who provided the above cited explanation. Writing to the Venetian cardinal Marco Barbo in 1487, Ficino claims that only books represent the true likeness of an author, because they alone reveal the true and transparent image of his self.

“Sogliono a le volte i padri così efficacemente l’immagin loro ne i figliuoli imprimere, che colui che il figliuolo vede, vede similmente il padre. Questa cosa hora vorrei io, che dal cielo mi fusse concessa, e vorrei con la mente una epistola tanto a me simile generare, [...] perche i libri soli tra tutte le opere de l’arti figliuoli son detti: perche quelli solo simili a gli autori loro si mostrano, e sono certo più simili che la pittura non sarebbe, perche questa sola una ombratile figura de la persona nostra dimostra [...]”¹⁰³

In contrast to a painting, which merely reproduces the external appearance, a book was thus considered the only way to preserve the entirety of the mind by the humanists.¹⁰⁴

102 Figliucci 1551, p. 416.

103 Ficino (1546–1548), vol. 2, fol. 112r. For the Latin version see Ficino 1495, fol. 142r.: “Solent aliquando genitores adeo efficaciter imaginem suam filio prorsus imprimere, ut qui natum videat viderit et parentem. Id equidem dari mihi nunc divinitus opto, ut epistolam mente in praesentia procreem adeo mei similem [...]. Solus enim liber ex omnibus operibus artium liberi tanquam filii nomine nuncupatur, quia solus prodit simillimus auctori, certe similior quam pictura, haec enim solam refert umbratilem personae nostrae figuram, siquidem homines ipsos, id est animos, Plotinus mundanam hanc tragoediam ingredi putat corporibus personatos.”

104 Although the art of painting claimed to be able to reveal the motions of the sitter’s mind since the time of Alberti as well, most humanists remained sceptical. Epigrammatical inscriptions that were accompanying many portraits of erudites in the 16th century thus emphasize that the true likeness and effigy of the sitter is only realized in his writings. Cfr. Ludwig 1998, pp. 124 ff.

Despite the exclusiveness demanded by Ficino, many sculptors and painters of the Italian Renaissance began to think of their works as the result of a procreative act as well. Around 1460, the architect and sculptor Filarete imagines himself as a hybrid being, who gives birth to a tiny architectural model after having thought about its design for a time of up to nine months.¹⁰⁵ Leonardo often used verbs such as *partorire* (to give birth), *nascere* (to be born), or *generare* (to generate), when writing about the creation of his works.¹⁰⁶ These analogies between reproductive and productive processes may also have been suggested by the etymology of the Italian term *pennello* (paintbrush), which derived from the Latin *peniculus* (small penis), a connection which particularly interested the painter Agnolo Bronzino.¹⁰⁷ Michelangelo refused to have a wife and considered his works to be his children: “Io ho moglie troppa, che è questa arte, che m’ha fatto sempre tribolare, ed i miei figliuoli saranno le opere che lasserò.”¹⁰⁸ Titian gave visual evidence to these ideas by comparing his works to the offspring of a bear, traditionally believed to be unformed on birth: His *impresa* shows the animal licking its cub into shape (Fig. 31). The motto *Natura potentior ars* (Art is more powerful than nature) and the accompanying poem, probably written by Pietro Aretino or Lodovico Dolce, allude to the notion that his works are an improvement upon the imperfect forms of nature.¹⁰⁹ By the time of the publication of Cristoforo Sorte’s *Osservazioni sulla pittura* in 1573, painters often applied the child metaphor self-consciously to their works, thus assuming a position equal to the poets. As if the objections by Ficino and Figliucci had never existed, Sorte understood the realization of a painting as the manifestation of a mental conception or *idea* that displayed a strong resemblance to the character of the artist, like a child does to its parent.¹¹⁰

105 Filarete (1972), vol. 2, p. 40: “L’architetto debba nove o sette mesi fantasticare e pensare e rivoltarselo per la memoria in più modi, e fare varii disegni nella sua mente [...] così l’architetto è madre a portare questo ingeneramento, e secondo la sua volontà, quando l’ha bene ruminato e considerato e in molti modi pensato, debbe poi eleggere quello gli pare che sia più comodo e più bello secondo la terminazione del generante; e fatto questo, partorirlo, cioè farne uno disegno piccolo rilevato di legname, misurato e proporzionato come che ha a essere fatto poi [...]”

106 Cfr. Kemp 1977, p. 381.

107 For the etymology of *pennello* in art theory see Pfisterer 2005, p. 45 and Quiviger 2003b.

108 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 7, p. 281.

109 For Titian’s motto see Garrard 2010, pp. 207–211 and Bohde 2003, pp. 116 f.

110 Sorte 1580 (1960–1962), p. 299: “E questa naturale Idea o vogliamo dire più tosto celeste ammaestramento, in noi da superiori corpi a questo proposito infuso, non solamente ci aiuta ad operare, ma nelle maggiori e più perfette eccellenze con imperio signoreggia; onde quella istessa libertà hanno i pittori, che si suole concedere per ordinario ai poeti, e come questi nelle invenzioni e nello stile differenti l’uno da l’altro si conoscano, così



Figure 31 Titian's Impresa from the 1568 Edition of Battista Pittoni's *Imprese di diversi prencipi, duchi, signori, e d'altri personaggi*

Vasari's conception of the *disegno* is clearly indebted to these theories. Although direct and explicit allusions to a similarity between reproductive and productive processes are rather rare, he defined *disegno* as the father of the three arts (architecture, painting, and sculpture).¹¹¹ Similarly, painting and sculpture are said

a quelli parimente avviene. E di qui è che le immagini o figure che fanno si dicono essere loro figliuoli, perciocché ritengono ordinariamente della loro Idea; e perciò nelle immagini di alcuni pittori si vede la melanconia, in alcuni altri la modestia, et in altri una certa vivacità di spiriti accompagnata da una graziosa e perfetta imitazione, com'io ho osservato in M. Giacomo Tentoreto [...]."

111 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 1, pp. 168 f.: "Perché il disegno, padre delle tre arti nostre architettura, scultura e pittura, procedendo dall'intelletto cava di molte cose un giudizio universale simile a una forma ovvero idea di tutte le cose della natura [...], e perché da questa cognizione nasce un certo concetto e giudizio, che si forma nella mente quella tal cosa che poi espressa con le mani si chiama disegno, si può concludere che esso disegno altro non sia che una apparente espressione e dichiarazione del concetto che si ha nell'animo, e di quello che altri si è nella mente immaginato e fabricato nell'idea."

to be twin sisters, born from one father at one and the same birth.¹¹² Because he gendered the mental creation of artworks as male, he implicitly associated the matter, i.e., paint or marble, with female characteristics. Following the traditional Aristotelian model of procreation, which attributed the principle of form to the male, a work of art was thus conceived as a combination of its conceptual blueprint, provided by the male artist, and its material substance, provided by the female nature.¹¹³

One of Vasari's frescoes in the Casa Vasari in Florence seems to confirm this division of artistic labour programmatically. Painted between 1569 and 1573, Vasari's frescoes in the *Sala grande* allude to specific artistic issues, such as the invention of painting or the methods of amending errors in a painting. The fresco cycle also includes an illustration of the process of artistic invention, exemplified by a representation of the painter Zeuxis in his studio (Fig. 32). Surrounded by female models, the famous artist is shown in the act of painting an image of Diana. By skillfully using his paintbrush on the canvas, he gives form to his conception of the ancient goddess of the hunt, the animal kingdom, and fertility.¹¹⁴



Figure 32 Giorgio Vasari, *Zeuxis paints Diana in his Studio*, 1569–1573, Florence, Casa Vasari

112 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 1, p. 103: “Dico adunque, che la scultura e la pittura per il vero sono sorelle, nate di un padre, che è il disegno, in un sol parto e ad un tempo [...]”

113 Jacobs 1994, pp. 81 f.

114 For the similarity of Diana with Helena and Juno see Nardinocchi 2011, p. 142. Nardinocchi also discusses the sources for the iconographic program, mainly based on Pliny, and the impact of Vasari's advisors.

That Vasari understood this fresco as an illustration of the concept of *disegno* is shown by two statues to the right of the artist's studio: The one on the far right represents the abundance of nature, symbolized by a statue of the many-breasted goddess Diana Ephesia; the other, situated on a decorative panel in the center between the artist's studio and its entrance area, being an allegory of *disegno* with a *caput trifrons*, embodying the three arts.¹¹⁵ The iconographic program may thus be read as follows: By picking the most beautiful forms from nature, the artist creates something entirely new. Vasari's fresco is focused on the intellectual act in which the substance is provided by the abundant female nature, while it is the virile mind of the artist, symbolized by the allegory of *disegno*, which actively fashions the amorphous material.

4.6 Michelangelo's Mouse. Who is an Artist?

Obviously, Vasari tried to incorporate allusions to the biological process of reproduction in his *Vite*. The *disegno*, linked to the mind of the artist, became a reflection of his individual soul and *ingegno* in just the same way that a child was believed to mirror the features of its father. Usually Vasari's analogies are based on a similarity between the character of the artist and the style of his paintings, but sometimes Vasari drew on corporeal analogies as well. A particular example of the latter is the case of the stonemason Topolino (It. "little mouse"), narrated in the life of Michelangelo. According to Vasari, the clumsy assistant Topolino, instructed to send blocks of marble from the rough hills of Carrara to Michelangelo's workshop in Florence, also made small statues, that he showed the famous sculptor for his consideration. When Michelangelo saw one of these unpolished *figurine*, a statue of Mercury with extremely short legs, he burst out laughing and told Topolino that he had made a dwarf of his Mercury. Topolino's remedy – to lengthen the legs of Mercury by making him a pair of marble boots – was considered unsatisfactory by Michelangelo, who was surprised by the naive solution of his unschooled assistant:

“[Michelangelo] Amò parimente Topolino scarpellino, il quale aveva fantasia d'essere valente scultore, ma era debolissimo. Costui stette nelle montagne di Carrara molti anni a mandar marmi a Michelagnolo; né arebbe mai mandato una scafa carica, che non avessi mandato sopra tre o quattro figurine bozzate di sua mano, che Michelagnolo

115 Kemp 1974, pp. 227 f.

moriva delle risa. Finalmente ritornato et avendo bozzato un Mercurio in un marmo, si messe Topolino a finirlo; et un dì che ci mancava poco, volse Michelagnolo lo vedessi e strettamente operò li dicessi l'openion sua. 'Tu sei un pazzo, Topolino' gli disse Michelagnolo, 'a volere far figure. Non vedi che a questo Mercurio dalle ginocchia alli piedi ci manca più di un terzo di braccio, che gli è nano e che tu l'hai storpiato?'. 'Oh, questo non è niente: s'ella non ha altro, io ci rimedierò; lassate fare a me'. Rise di nuovo della semplicità sua Michelagnolo; e partito, prese un poco di marmo Topolino, e tagliato il Mercurio sotto le ginocchia un quarto, lo incassò nel marmo e lo comesse gentilmente, facendo un paio di stivaletti a Mercurio, che il fine passava la commettitura, e lo allungò il bisogno; che fatto venire poi Michelagnolo e mòstrogli l'opera sua, di nuovo rise e si maravigliò che tali goffi, stretti dalla necessità, piglion di quelle risoluzioni che non fanno i valenti uomini."¹¹⁶

As so often occurs in the *Vite*, Vasari based his anecdote on a mix of facts and fictional elements. Domenico di Giovanni da Settignano, nicknamed Topolino, was actually in charge of procuring marble in the quarries of Carrara and (at least temporarily) assumed the role of an artistic assistant to Michelangelo, responsible for the first processing of undressed stone blocks. As is shown by his correspondence with Michelangelo in the years 1518–1526, he was given the task of choosing the marble for the Medici chapel in Florence. Furthermore, a drawing by Michelangelo, giving indications as how to cut the marble for one of the river gods in the chapel, was supposedly made for Topolino (Fig. 33).¹¹⁷ His nickname seems to have pointed to these activities. As has been argued by Eric Scigliano, the name might have referred to a particularly agile *cavatore* of small stature, who could scurry up rocks and crawl through tight passages in the mountains of Carrara as nimble as a mouse.¹¹⁸ In fact, just as Domenico da Settignano himself used to sign many of his letters with the honorific nickname, both his colleagues and collaborators, including Michelangelo, referred to him as Topolino.¹¹⁹ Although Vasari did not describe the physical characteristics of Topolino, his name suggests that he was small. The contemporary reader, acquainted with the procreative theories of the time, was therefore able to establish a connection between the small stature of Topolino and his tiny figures or *figurine*.¹²⁰ That Vasari intended such a

116 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 7, p. 282. See also the commentary by Paola Barocchi in Vasari (1962), vol. 4, pp. 2123–2127.

117 Perrig/Güse 1997, p. 129.

118 Scigliano 2005, p. 153.

119 See for example Buonarroti (1965–1983), vol. 2, pp. 124, 158, 359, 362.

120 A similar method was applied to the painter Pieter van Laer, the so-called *bamboccio*, by the Roman painter and art historian Giovanni Battista Passeri. When writing his *Vite de pittori, scultori e architetti* during the 1670s, he drew on analogies between the



Figure 33 Michelangelo, Instructional Sheet with River Gods for Topolino, 1525, London, British Museum

reading of the episode can be proven by investigating its literary origins. As has been shown by Gaetano Milanesi, Vasari's account was based on a similar novel by Antonio Francesco Doni written in the winter of 1544. Doni's *mezza novella* describes an encounter between Michelangelo and a *scarpellino* from Fiesole, who had made a deformed statue of Jupiter.¹²¹ Although the Fiesolean Jupiter had a broken shoulder and thin legs, Vasari adapted the account to the corporeal features of Topolino by shortening the statue's legs, thus making it a dwarf like his creator.¹²²

size of the painter and the size of his figures. See Passeri 1772 (1934), pp. 73f.: "Questi [i.e., the Oltramontani], perche era gobbo, mal disposto, e di sconcertata propotione, il chiamarono Bamboccio, e con questo nome fù da allhora riconosciuto, e chiamato per sempre; e fù una fatalità, perche il suo genio nella pittura fù solo dipingere bambocci, e bambocciate, et introdusse quelli soggetti vili di baronate [...]. Dimorò in Roma qualche tempo, facendo giornalmente quadri a varie misure, ma di figure picciole, in propotione della grandezza d'un palmo, e non passò mai questa misura, e vi rappresentava tutti gli avvenimenti [...]."

121 For a commented edition of the *novella* see Doni 1544 (2002), pp. 394–397.

122 A similar account, featuring the sculptor Mino da Fiesole, is reported in Domenichi 1548, fol. 9v.: "Mino scultore lavorando una statua di San Paolo a Papa Paolo, l'assottigliò tanto, che gliela guastò, hora sendo sdegnato il Papa, e narrando questo à messer Battista Alberti, disse detto Messer; che Mino non haveva errato; che questa era la mi-

Vasari's allusion to the similarity between Topolino's body and the size of his statues had a particular pedagogic purpose. Far from being simply a reference to procreative theories and a humorous occurrence in the life of Michelangelo, the account was meant to illustrate various artistic issues. First and foremost it underlined the *difficoltà* of sculpture. Contrary to the art of painting, statues could not be repaired or amended as easily as paintings. The artist had to shape the form of his statues without being able to add new material.¹²³ Or, as Vasari puts it: "La scultura è una arte che levando il superfluo dalla materia suggetta, la riduce a quella forma di corpo che nella idea dello artefice è disegnata."¹²⁴ In the context of the contemporary *paragone* between painting and sculpture, the episode thus draws attention to the artistic superiority of Michelangelo, who excelled in both arts.

Furthermore, it exemplified the importance of artistic judgement or *giudizio*, a concept that lies at the very core of Vasari's art theory. In comparison to his predecessors from the Quattrocento, Vasari granted the modern artist a major understanding of perspective and proportions, thus conceding him the right to determine the right disposition of his figures without applying mathematical methods. This artistic autonomy or *licenzia* was highly dependent on the artist's ability to discern the good from the bad, and although it could be improved by meticulous studies of the beauty of nature, it was ultimately believed to be a part of the individual *ingenium*, i.e., a god-given gift.¹²⁵ Artists endowed with judgement were thus able to create beautiful works of art; their sculptures and paintings were not as crude and arithmetical as the works of the 15th century, but disposed of a harmonious grace in which the different parts were fitted together perfectly.¹²⁶

glier cosa che facesse mai." In later editions Domenichi added an explanation of Alberti's witty answer in brackets: "Percioche egli [Mino] era avezzo à errar sempre." For other sources of Vasari's account see Doni 1544 (2002), p. 394, fn. 1.

123 Vasari describes this difficulty of sculpture in his *Introduzione alle tre arti del disegno*, stating that patching statues would be considered a lack of artistic excellence. See Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 1, pp. 154 f.: "Per che quelli che hanno fretta a lavorare e che bucano il sasso da principio e levano la pietra dinanzi e di dietro risolutamente, non hanno poi luogo dove ritirarsi, bisognandoli: e di qui nascono molti errori che sono nelle statue; chè, per la voglia c' ha l'artefice del vedere le figure tonde fuor del sasso a un tratto, spesso si gli scuopre un errore che non può rimediarsi se non vi si mettono pezzi commessi, come abbiamo visto costumare a molti artefici moderni; il quale rattoppamento è da ciabattini e non da uomini eccellenti o maestri rari; et è cosa vilissima e brutta e di grandissimo biasimo."

124 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 1, p. 148.

125 Klein 1961, p. 108. Further analysis of the artistic judgement in the Renaissance is provided by Summers 1981, pp. 368–379, and Summers 1987.

126 Pinelli 1993, pp. 107 f.

Michelangelo represented this artistic ideal *par excellence*. In addition to Vasari, who was particularly fond of the judgmental capabilities of the Florentine sculptor, the Venetian poet Pietro Aretino¹²⁷ also expressed admiration for Michelangelo's exceptional *giudizio*.¹²⁸ As stated by the Aretine author, Michelangelo had internalized the rules of measuring and possessed a *giudizio dell'occhio* which gave him the ability to work without using scale tapes and compasses.¹²⁹ Michelangelo's instant understanding of sculpture and painting becomes even the more visible if compared to the artistic practice of his untrained assistant Topolino, forced to rework and alter his statues continuously. As was observed by Antonio Francesco Doni in 1549, many artists who tried to imitate the great master failed and instead of making their figures harmonious they reduced them to cripples.¹³⁰ That Topolino erred was even the more obvious because he failed to make even a small statue. Compared to monumental sculptures or large drawings, in which disproportions became suddenly visible, small works concealed their compositional errors and were considered easy to execute.¹³¹ The contemporary reader

127 Pietro Aretino in a letter to Francesco Pocopanno from November 24, 1537, as cited in Kliemann 2006, p. 224.

128 Frey (1923–1940), vol. 2, p. 520 f.: “Bisogna avere le seste negli occhi e non in mano, perché le mani operano e l'occhio giudica.” (Vasari in a letter to Martino Bassi from August 1570). The same dictum was cited by Vasari in Michelangelo's *Vita* (Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 7, p. 270).

129 Cfr. for Michelangelo's concept of eyesight and *giudizio* Clements 1954.

130 Doni 1549, fol. 8r f.: “Ben è vero che molti [artisti] si son posti a volere avanzarlo [i.e., Michelangelo], con lor misure et arti, & in cambio di far giuste le figure l'hanno storpiate, & questo donde nasce che le misure non corrispondono? [...] Percio che nelle figure humane nelle quali consiste maggior dignità che in nessun altra figura, si vede certo che le contengono in loro innumerabili misure, che le non si possono con alcuno ordine geometrico ridurre; come si vede per ogni membro minimo che varia di punto in punto nelle sue grossezze, & larghezze: però è necessario acompagnare (per far simil corpi) la virtù del giudicio con quella gratia di che la natura ci ha fatto capaci; & questa ti credo sia una difficoltà grandissima.”

131 Cfr. Alberti (2002), p. 158: “Ma guarda non fare come molti, quali imparano disegnare in picciole tavolette. Voglio te esserciti disegnando cose grandi, quasi pari al ripresentare la grandezza di quello che tu disegni, però che nei piccioli disegni facile s'asconde ogni gran vizio, nei grandi molto i bene minimi vizi si veggono. Scrive Galieno medico avere ne' suoi tempi veduto scolpito in uno anello Fetonte portato da quattro cavalli, dei quali suoi freni, petto e tutti i piedi distinti si vedeano. Ma i nostri pittori lassino queste lode agli scultori delle gemme; loro vero si spassino in campi maggiori di lode. Chi saprà ben dipignere una gran figura, molto facile in uno solo colpo potrà quest'altre cose minute ben formare. Ma chi in questi piccioli vezzi e monili arà usato suo mano e ingegno, costui facile errerà in cose maggiori.” For a contemporary example see Pino 1548 (1960–1962), p. 115: “[...] far nell'opere figure grandi, per ch'in esse si può perfettamente ordinare la proporzione dal vivo.” For a recapitulation of this practice see also Lana Terzi 1670, p. 148: “Devo anche ricordare [...] che [i pittori] si avvezino da princi-

might well have been able to associate Topolino's lack of *giudizio* with his supposedly small stature and head. According to anatomical treatises of Vasari's time, a small brain indicated a defect of the central cerebral ventricle, where judgement was traditionally situated.¹³² Francesco Sansovino exemplified this connection between the corporeal diminutiveness and the lack of intellectual sensibility by remembering Thersites, the vulgar and small-headed soldier from Homer's *Iliad*.¹³³

Topolino's disproportionate statue of Mercury may thus symbolize his unsuccessful attempts to become a proper artist not only in a literal, but also in a metaphorical, sense. As a mythological deity and personification of the planet, Mercury was a patron of the arts as well as the traditional protector of sculptors and painters. His astral influences guaranteed the success of an artist and ensured his fame and fortune.¹³⁴ An autobiographical woodcut from Cesare Cesariano's edition of Vitruvius' *De architectura* illustrates the huge impact that was attributed to Mercury in artistic matters (Fig. 34). The allegorical self-portrait from 1521 shows Cesariano protected by the personification of *Audacia* (audacity). Ignoring *Invidia* (envy) and *Ignorantia* (ignorance) to his left, he looks to the heavenly spheres of artistry where he finally shares direct eye contact with Mercury. In an etching from 1592, Bartholomeus Spranger employed a similar motif that was later copied by Jan Harmensz Muller (Fig. 35). Guided by Mercury and dressed in oxhide, the artist receives his laurel wreath, symbol of immortal fame, from the caring hand of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom. Furthermore, the long and winding road to artistic success is symbolized by various attributes that appear in the background of the etching. We can identify, among others, a personification of ar-

pio a disegnare in grande, cioè conforme al naturale: poiche in un' imagine piccola ben spesso vi stanno nascosti errori grandi, la dove in un' imagine grande si scopre ogni benche minimo difetto; che altri scolpisca in un anello Fetonte tirato da quattro cavalli, non merita altra lode che di fermezza di mano, acutezza di vista, e pazienza nell'operare, e questa è più propria de' scultori, che de pittori; i quali se apprenderanno bene il modo di formar imagini grandi, facilmente poi formeranno ancora le piccole; la dove coloro, che hanno avvezza la mano a lavori minuti, rare volte riescono nei grandi."

132 For a physiognomic interpretation of small heads see Gaurico 1504 (1999), p. 188: "Caput valde parvum quiquis habuerit, is ab omni erit sensu humanoque captu alienior [...]. Caput volunt id sensibus caeterisque rebus videri perfectum quod mediocre fuerit, quod rectum, quod et intra mensum constiterit ac ζ Graecae litterae figuram habuerit." For the ventricles of the human brain see Kemp 1971, p. 134.

133 Sansovino 1550, p. 5: "A proportione del corpo il capo grande è lodato, il picciolo & acuto dimostra la temperatura del cerebro manca e imperfetta. Però Homero biasimando Thersite tra l'altre cose gli oppose ch'egli avesse il capo acuto, volendo per questo significare ch'ei non aveva giudizio, il che non puo d'altro procedere che dal ventricolo di mezzo del cerebro, il quale non ben situato & ristretto per l'acutezza del capo impedisce il discorso." Cfr. Homer, *Iliad*, II, 212–277.

134 King 2007, pp. 191 ff.

MVNDI ELECTIVA CAESARIS CAESARIANI CONFIGVRATA



Et perho quilli che si confidono in Dio & che paclenteméte hano supportato como ha dicho Seneca: Multa fecit tulitq; puer sudavit & aliste
 Et si uirtuti dant cõta locum. Bene dicere possumus. Nunquam fugias fertur ad umbras Inclina uirtus: inuice fortes: I deo cõ sit uirtus q̄ exalat
 & uiros ad fidera tollit: Et perho quilli Pono dire ha uere feco le pmanéte possidde: & in ogni Cita essere Citadinicosi et e uerfo como ha
 dicho Vitruuio q̄lli che nõ hano le naturale dote nel aiosono fubditi a la cuedice de la fortuna enõ pono dire como al p̄tete et dice Vitruuio.
 M iiii

Figure 34 Cesare Cesariano, Allegorical Self-Portrait, from his 1521 Edition of Vitruvius' *De architectura*



Figure 35 Jan Harmensz Muller (after Bartholomeus Spranger), Mercury leading Young Artists to Minerva, 1592/1628, London, British Museum

chitecture carrying a compass, the traditional symbol of *giudizio*, as is shown by a woodcut from Cesare Ripa's influential *Iconologia* (Fig. 36). Against this iconographic background, Topolino's relationship with Mercury seems less fortunate.



Figure 36 Personification of the *Giudizio* from the 1603 Edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*

Even though he was granted the advice of Michelangelo, he did not manage to create an entirely perfect sculpture of his astral patron and protector. As is demonstrated by Vasari's account, the ambitious but untalented sculptor was bestowed with neither immortal fame nor artistic success.

In a more fundamental sense, Vasari's account illustrates the difference between artisans and artists (and between the rocky mountains of Carrara and the

civilised city of Florence). After painters and sculptors had been emancipated from their traditional status as craftsmen, they engaged in the stabilization of their new social position, drawing distinct lines between themselves and their former relatives. This process of separation was initiated in the 15th century, but was brought to a new academic level through the publication of Benedetto Varchi's *Lezzioni* in 1550.¹³⁵ Defining the essence of art, Varchi states that all artificial products are founded in the intellectual faculty of its creator. In contrast to animals, which are guided by their natural instincts when making nests or cobwebs, a true artist is able to use his mind by discharging his natural dispositions, which allows him to acquire new techniques of creation (see Chapter 3.3).¹³⁶ Whereas the medieval artisan followed a limited set of rules and patterns, Varchi's *artista* is dedicated to the divine ideas and innumerable fantasies of his mind. Varchi compared this process of artistic refinement with the education of the young. As they gradually improve their knowledge and skills, the development of their lives is similar to the arts, which once had humble beginnings.¹³⁷ According to Varchi, an art like painting or sculpture was thus highly dependent upon the moral virtues and intellectual capacities of an individual; simply repeating the same figures and forms was considered inappropriate for the modern artist of the Cinquecento. Due to this restrictive conception of the visual arts, Varchi could exclude the discussion of other

135 For Varchi's conception of the modern artist see Roggenkamp 1996.

136 Varchi 1550 (1960–1962), pp. 10 f.: “[...] l’arte non è altro che un abito intellettivo, che fa con certa e vera ragione (...). Dicesi ‘con vera ragione’ per due cagioni: prima, perché tutte l’arti sono infallibili, cioè non errano mai e sempre conseguiscono l’intendimento e fine loro; poi, perché mediante quelle parole se ne esclude e cava l’arte colla quale i ragnateli ordiscono le loro maravigliose tele, e le rondini et altri animali fanno il nido, e molte altre cose, le quali paiono bene fatte artificiosamente, ma nel vero non sono, perciocché, non essendo fatte per ragione ma per istinto naturale, non si possono chiamare arti veramente.” The same argument was used by various other humanists and even by artists, cfr. Martini (1967), vol. 2, p. 505: “[...] tutti li altri animali operando naturalmente sempre ad uno modo operano, come similmente ogni ironidine nidifica e similmente ogni ape ovvero aranea domifica, ma nell’intelletto umano essendo l’arte con la forza assegnata, tutte le opare sue, le quali sono infinite, infinito varia. Onde volendo esemplificare di tutti l’istrumenti che nella mente occorrono, saria uno processo infinito.”

137 Varchi 1550 (1960–1962), pp. 15, 26: “Ben è vero che nessuna arte fu trovata e compiuta o in un medesimo tempo o da un solo, ma di mano in mano e da diversi, perché sempre si va o aggiungendo o ripulendo o quello che manca o quello che è rozzo et imperfetto. [...] Quanto a’ dubbii e problemi che possono cadere in questa materia dell’arte, si dimanda prima onde è che i giovani ordinariamente non sono artefici perfetti; al che si risponde che alla perfezione dell’arte si ricerca non solamente la dottrina, cioè la cognizione universale delle cose appartenenti a essa arte, ma ancora l’uso e l’esercitazione, perché come la dottrina acuisce o vero assottiglia la mente, così l’esercitazione fa perfetta la mano, dove si ricerca non meno tempo che studio.”

forms of artistry that were based merely on manual labor. This becomes especially apparent when he denies an anonymous stonemason, whom we might consider the Roman brother of Topolino, the right to be called an artist:

“È ben vero che non ognuno che fa alcuna opera si può chiamare artefice, perché, se la facesse a caso o insegnato da un altro, non è artefice: come dimostrò quello scarpellino, il quale, avendo per ordine e coll'aiuto di Michelagnolo rifatto non so che membra a una statua antica, chiese un marmo a papa Clemente per lavorarlo, dicendo che infino allora non s'era avveduto mai d'essere scultore; et avutolo, non prima s'accorse dell'error suo che l'ebbe ridotto e consumato in iscaglie, non avendo l'arte, la quale è uno abito, come si disse, e secondo quello bisogna ch'e' s'operi.”¹³⁸

Varchi's and Vasari's accounts are thus to be seen in the light of the changing social status of sculptors and painters. Both authors were part of a courtly elite, which was interested in promoting the arts by enhancing the intellectual – not the manual – origin of a work of art. Vasari's *Vite* in particular can be seen as the literal manifestation of this process. Focussing on the individual *ingenium* of the artists, his biographies illustrate the importance of generating new motifs and ideas according to the principles of *invenzione*. The *disegno*, or first draft, containing the main outlines of an artwork, was considered the direct expression of the artist's mind. Although Vasari was aware of the necessity of manual training, his art theory evolves mainly from this conception of sculpture and painting as a mental act.¹³⁹

When the arts became an important facet of the political dominion of Cosimo I de' Medici, Vasari was entrusted with the foundation of an art academy, giving him the opportunity to organize the production of art in an efficient manner. Whereas the erudite members of the Florentine Accademia del disegno were often responsible for the intellectual conception of decorative programs, the execution of the final product was frequently abandoned to specialized assistants, who were used to working fast and steadily. Instead of making the existence of the traditional

138 Varchi 1550 (1960–1962), pp. 25 f. A similar account can be found in Vasari's *Vita* of Michelangelo, directly following the Topolino episode. Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 7, p. 284: “Mentre che egli [Michelagnolo] faceva finire la sepoltura di Giulio Secondo, fece a uno squadratore di marmi condurre un termine per porlo nella sepoltura di S. Piero in Vincola, con dire: ‘Lieva oggi questo, e spiana qui, pulisci qua’; di maniera che, senza che colui se n’avedessi, gli fe fare una figura; perchè, finita, colui maravigliosamente la guardava. Disse Michelagnolo: ‘Che te ne pare?’ ‘Parmi bene’, rispose colui, ‘e v’ho grande obbligo’. ‘Perchè?’, soggiunse Michelagnolo. ‘Perchè io ho ritrovato per mezzo vostro una virtù che io non sapeva d’averla.’”

139 Cfr. Kemp 1974.

craftsmen and artisans superfluous, the rise of the modern artist thus led to a diversification of their tasks and functions. Stonemasons like Topolino were therefore a vital part of the artistic life in Florence, but as is shown by the anecdotes by Vasari and Varchi, they had to obey the rules by sticking to their traditional duties, which consisted of manual labor.¹⁴⁰ Vasari finishes the account about Topolino with Michelangelo's remark, that *valenti uomini* would never have done what the untrained *scarpellino* did – implicitly referring to the differences between simple artisans and the artists of the Florentine academy.¹⁴¹ In contrast to the little statues made by the little stonemason, the artists of the academy were used to adapting their trained minds to the miscellaneous needs of the duke, who demanded the conception of ephemeral decorations as well as the execution of monumental statues and fresco cycles.

Ugly Artists, Ugly Art?

In this context, the negative example of Topolino is likely to have reminded Vasari's readers of the mental versatility of Giotto and Filippo Brunelleschi. Although both were infamous for their physical unattractiveness and the small size of their bodies, they figured as artists who were able to generate beautiful works of art. In contrast to Topolino (who mirrored his own physical shortcomings in his figures) and dissimilar to animals (who repeated identical patterns because of their natural instinct), they were not dependent upon the faculties of their bodies, but devoted to the beauty of their minds. In the teleological chronology of Vasari's *Vite*, they thus function as prefigurations of artistic virtues that were only entirely realized by the artists of the *terza età* in the Cinquecento.¹⁴²

Giotto's and Brunelleschi's unpleasant appearances had repeatedly been the subject of novels and humorous tales in the Renaissance.¹⁴³ Vasari referred to the physical qualities of the artists explicitly in the life of Brunelleschi. By mentioning Giotto and the famous jurist Forese da Rabatta in the same breath, he reminds the reader of Boccaccio's description of Giotto as an ugly genius.¹⁴⁴ Ac-

140 For the impact of the *Accademia* see Ważbiński 1987, Barzman 2000 and Pinelli 1993, esp. pp. 25 f., 158 ff.

141 For a discussion of the differences between *uomini intendenti* and artisans see Thomas 2000.

142 For a thorough discussion of the topos of the ugly artist who creates beautiful art in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance see Jonietz 2011 and Saviello 2012.

143 For a discussion of examples see Land 1997.

144 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 2, pp. 327 f.: “E molte volte nasce in questi che sono di spartutissime forme tanta generosità d’animo e tanta sincerità di cuore, che sendo mesco-

ording to Boccaccio's novel the *Decamerone*, a stranger would never believe Giotto to be the best painter in the world, nor would he believe the erudite Farese to be able to read, if he could see them.¹⁴⁵ Although Vasari does not draw particular attention to the physical shortcomings of the artist Giotto, Vasari's description is clearly indebted to Boccaccio's account. In the same way in which Vasari contradicts the principles of physiognomy by describing the beauty of Giotto's paintings, when discussing the works of Brunelleschi he contrasts them with his corporeal features. As is shown by his introduction to Brunelleschi's life, Vasari understood that the unpleasant appearance and small size of an artist who otherwise excelled in his profession was an exception to the rule. To compensate for their physical defects, such artists would often develop great talent, which allowed them to create marvelous works of art.¹⁴⁶ Vasari thus uses the small size of Brunelleschi's stature as a background against which the monumental dome of S. Maria del Fiore, Brunelleschi's architectural masterpiece, becomes even more impressive. In fact, Vasari compares the beauty of his mind with the beauty of the *cupola*, thus making the impressive church an intellectual self-portrait of the small-sized artist.¹⁴⁷

Considering the dominance of analogies in his *Vite*, Vasari's strategy behind the lives of Giotto and Brunelleschi is more than an exception to the rule; it follows a distinct motive. Instead of following the traditional parallelisation of external appearance and internal beauty, Vasari focuses on the dissimilarity between their bodies and minds. He thus emphasises the strength of cognitive and cerebral processes over the repetitive, reproductive cycles of nature. Whereas the act of procreation leaves the artist without any choice in the predetermined form and shape of his progeny, the acts of painting and sculpting gives the artist the opportunity to invent a great variety of figures. The biographies of artists such as Giotto

lata la nobiltà con esse, non può sperarsi da loro se non grandissime maraviglie; perciò che e' si sforzano di abbellire la bruttezza del corpo con la virtù dell'ingegno: come apertamente si vide in Filippo di ser Brunellesco, sparuto de la persona non meno che messer Forese da Rabatta e Giotto [...]."

145 For this novel see Land 2008, p. 16.

146 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 2, p. 327: "Molti sono creati dalla natura piccoli di persona e di fattezze, che hanno l'animo pieno di tanta grandezza et il cuore di sì smisurata terribilità, che se non cominciano cose difficili e quasi impossibili, e quelle non rendono finite con maraviglia di chi le vede, mai non danno requie alla vita loro; e tante cose quante l'occasione mette nelle mani di questi, per vili e basse che elle si siano, le fanno essi divenire in pregio et altezza. Laonde mai non si dovrebbe torcere il muso quando s'incontra in persone che in aspetto non hanno quella prima grazia o venustà che dovrebbe dare la natura nel venire al mondo a chi opera in qualche virtù, perché non è dubbio che sotto le zolle della terra si ascondono le vene dell'oro."

147 Vasari 1568 (1878–1885), vol. 2, p. 343.

and Brunelleschi thus illustrate the autonomy of the arts and serve as an example for the ongoing process of the emancipation of the artists. No longer bound to merely imitating nature, painters and sculptors were invited to manipulate, improve on, and exceed nature. To achieve these qualities they had to overcome their natural instincts and oppress their individual needs, devoting the capacities of their minds to the creation of works of art. In short, Giotto and Brunelleschi were the total opposite of Topolino, and thus figured as prefigurations of artistic ideals that were only achieved by their successors.