

Conclusion

The present study has offered a broad examination of the literary motif of the similarity between artist and artwork in the context of the art literature of the Italian Renaissance. Rather than claiming to be a definitive study on the subject, this dissertation has explored specific examples that have proven to be particularly illuminating for the genesis and later development of the discussion of automimesis and artistic self-referentiality in the art theory of the early modern period. The choice to explore the history of the idea of automimesis through individual case studies was important because it allowed me to focus on the specific circumstances that surrounded each case of unwitting, unwelcome, or even voluntary forms of self-portrayal.

Despite its focus on specific examples, the thesis allows us to derive some general assumptions on the process of artistic emancipation and self-reflection during the Quattro- and Cinquecento. As we have seen in the first chapter, the poetic theory of ancient Greece was indebted to the idea of a hierarchical relationship between the single human and the Goddesses. The poet's individual nature and creativity were conceived as a mere reflection of the divine, acquired through the communication with celestial powers, the muses. In the Quattrocento, when humanists and artists began to contemplate individual forms of expression in terms of style, they discussed the *ingegno* of each artist in a very similar way. The ubiquitous presence of God in creation was not only mirrored by the great variety of objects, animals, and plants, but also echoed in the individual nature of each artist, resulting in different personal styles. When Filarete links the infinity of God to the infinity of *maniere* in his treatise on architecture around 1460, he is clearly referring to this theological model of artistic creativity.¹

It is only during the course of the Cinquecento that the artist was understood as an independent authority with equal powers. As an *alter deus*, or *divino artista*, he had the capacity to enhance and alter the beauty of nature through the works of his art. This separation of individual creativity from religious patterns of un-

1 See Chapter 2.2.

derstanding prepared the way for a paradigmatic shift. Whereas the artists of the early Renaissance were judged on the basis of their capacity to imitate nature as closely as possible, the Cinquecento can be characterized as a century in which individual preferences, personal inclinations, and the will to self-fashion became dominant motives. As so often occurs during times of social and cultural transformation, the increasing autonomy of the arts brought a feeling of uncertainty and instability. Established principles for the evaluation and appreciation of art were slowly being abandoned, and new explanations for processes of creation and productivity had to be found. The ambiguity in the discussion of repetitive features in a painter's style mirrors these fundamental changes in the appreciation of art. At the same time, Vasari's *Vite* constitutes the first major step towards a methodological art history during the 16th century. By referring to theories that were largely fashioned by a humanist elite, including contemporary ideas on procreation and physiognomy, he explained artists' individual works on the basis of their physical constitution, personal knowledge and experience, and other individual traits – rather than following pantheistic ideas.² Against this background, the literary figure of the similarity between artist and artwork was used to characterise a new kind of artist, who was self-sufficient and autonomous. On the other hand, Vasari was aware of the problems that could arise from unrestrained subjectivity. When he likened the small size of Topolino's statues to the size of his body, Vasari stressed the importance of training, self-discipline, and intellectual effort over repetitive biological patterns. The implicit principles and rules that were laid down in Vasari's *Vite* thus replaced traditional aesthetic models, constituting a new, secularized meshwork of norms and forms of individual expression.

The self-conscious artists of the Cinquecento were overwhelmed by the increased freedom of expression and in need of these new guidelines and restrictive rules. This attitude is probably best shown by Vincenzo Borghini's attack on the sculptor Benvenuto Cellini in the *Selva di notizie*. Cellini was known for his self-fashioning as a sophisticated *uomo universale*, and had declared that artists should embody the qualities of rhetors, warriors, or musicians if they were to make statues of rhetors, warriors, or musicians. Borghini harshly criticized him for this presumptuous and self-referential theory of imitation. Rather than knowing how to speak well in public or how to use a weapon during a tournament, artists should stick to their traditional duties as craftsmen in the service of wealthy patrons. As a conservative humanist, Borghini was less interested in the promotion of the social status of artists than the painter Vasari was; Borghini's crit-

2 For style and mobility in Italian early modern art theory see Kim 2014.

icism of artistic self-referentiality can probably claim more objectivity than any other criticism of the time. Furthermore, his opinion is likely to have been shared by the general, less well educated public of the Cinquecento. The comparison of Vasari's and Borghini's discussions of automimesis gives us an idea of the antagonism between modern and traditional points of view on individual expression, which became particularly vivid in a period of transition and social mobility. The increasing lacuna left by the gradual disappearance of religious patterns of understanding gave way to a time of experimentation and research that proved to be especially fruitful for the arts and the sciences. The art literature of the Italian Renaissance is a perfect example of this process, as it combines the contemplation of personality and character with findings from the optical sciences, alchemy, and astrology.

Although the idea of the similarity between artist and artwork was frequently voiced in the art theory of the Renaissance, it was never fully accepted. As part of a social system devoted to the maintenance of cultural norms, the painters and sculptors of the Cinquecento had to follow the *decorum* and had no obligation to promote the idea of an absolute art in the modern sense of the word.³ Artistic strategies to prevent unwitting forms of self-portraiture, such as the use of proportion theory or learned academic advice, give witness to this critical approach towards excessive subjectivity. A remarkable exception to this rule was formulated by the art theorists of the Counter-Reformation in the second half of the 16th century. By re-establishing the traditional explanation of artistic individuality, in which the artist figured as a mere reflection of the infinity of God, the union of image and artist was seen as completely positive. Inspired by divine grace and guided by the hand of God, the *artefice cristiano* was able to produce works of eternal beauty that were frequently associated with supernatural powers. It is probably due to the re-institutionalisation of these historical patterns of understanding that automimesis was legitimized in religious contexts, leading to its great acclamation by clerics and the general public (even if paintings by pious painters were often of mediocre quality). Later generations of artists who lived in periods of greater secularisation benefited from this development. Although the reactionary art theory of the Counter-Reformation caused a cultural backlash, it helped to popularize the idea of a similarity between artist and artwork.

As we have seen in the introduction, the modern understanding of the rise of the individual was partly inspired by Burckhardt's discussion of individuality in *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*. Mainly written in the 1850s, his work

3 For a historiography of the concept of absolute art, often circumscribed with the French slogan "L'art pour l'art", see Soussloff 1997.

describing Renaissance art and individualism was embedded in a cultural system that was still influenced by poetic theories of the 18th century. One of the main components of these influences was the Romantic period's emphasis on individual emotions and feelings as a source of aesthetic expression. Romantic theories stressed the importance of individual genius and the true autonomous self, embodying a movement which disagreed with the rational criteria and objective principles that had been put forward during the Enlightenment.⁴ When Burckhardt looked back at the Italian Renaissance from a distance of 300 years, he was probably seeing it through the lens of ideas about original authorship and creative genius that were partly fashioned during his own lifetime. Today, almost 200 years later, the perspective has changed only slightly. Artists like Leonardo, Michelangelo, or Caravaggio continue to dominate our modern understanding of individuality and creative genius – even if most of their works were made for patrons, not for personal pleasure. Our backward projection of these ideas of authorship is probably indebted to the suggestive works of art theorists like Giorgio Vasari. His chronicles of the lives of the most prominent artists of the Italian Renaissance provided a portrait of individuality and self-consciousness that still fascinates and touches the modern reader. In order to resolve this fixation on the artist as a cultural hero, it might prove useful to continue the study of literary topoi, anecdotes, and rhetorical structures along with the social history of art. Only if we try to escape the strictures of monographic art history might we gain a more detailed picture of what happened to the figure of the artist during the Cinquecento.

The present study was primarily focussed on examples of automimesis from the art literature of the Italian Renaissance. Periods prior to the Renaissance were largely neglected, for reasons of coherence, length, and time. A still-necessary discussion of texts from the Middle Ages would have probably shown that different modes of expression were in fact noticed, but they were explained by referring to theological models of understanding, not by referring to the personality of the artist.⁵ Further research should also concentrate on the mutual influences among theories that were written on behalf of poetry, acting, or music during the Cinquecento.⁶ As these arts are concerned with representing emotions and feelings, the empathy of the individual poet, actor, or musician was discussed as an important means of production. This is not only true for Renaissance Italy,

4 For a discussion of these theories and ideas see Abrams 1953.

5 For some important observations in this regard see Panofsky 1924, pp. 17–22, Pfisterer 2002, pp. 40–54, and Brückle 2004, pp. 63–64.

6 Cfr. Metzger 2004 and Hénin 2003.

but also valid for later centuries as well.⁷ When Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach discussed the art of playing the piano in his *Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen*, he advised the pianist to actually embody the feelings and affects that he was going to represent in his playing.⁸ Denis Diderot, after promoting similar ideas in his early writings, developed a more critical attitude towards this Horatian principle of personal identification when discussing the work of actors in his *Paradoxe sur le comédien* in 1774. Rather than identifying with the figures in a theatrical play, a good actor should methodically study how to represent emotions effectively.⁹ These examples show not only that automimesis was discussed in various contexts, but also that it maintained its ambivalent reputation throughout the entire early modern era. It is only with the increasing freedom of artistic forms of expression during the last century that the notion of similarity between artist and artwork has become fully accepted.¹⁰ Today, automimesis is an annoying commonplace, to the extent that some contemporary artists have begun to dissociate personality and work.¹¹ In order to promote the auton-

7 Many useful examples for 17th century France, including the discussion of theoretical works by Nicolas Boilieu, Roger de Piles, and André Félibien, are discussed by Tocanne 1978, esp. pp. 291–310. For examples from the literary theory of 18th century Italy, including Lodovico di Breme e Giacomo Leopardi, see Schlüter 1995.

8 Bach 1787, p. 91: “Indem ein Musikus nicht anders rühren kann, er sey dann selbst gerührt; so muß er nothwendig sich selbst in alle Affecten setzen können, welche er bey seinen Zuhörern erregen will; er giebt ihnen seine Empfindungen zu verstehen und bewegt sie solchergestalt am besten zur Mit-Empfindung. Bey matten und traurigen Stellen wird er matt und traurig. Man sieht und hört es ihm an. Dieses geschieht ebenfalls bey heftigen, lustigen, und anderen Arten von Gedanken, wo er sich alsdenn in diese Affecten setzet. Kaum, daß er einen stillt, so erregt er einen andern, folglich wechselt er beständig mit Leidenschaften ab.”

9 Diderot’s highly discussed ideas on the subject were written in 1774 and first published in 1830.

10 For the increasing autonomy of the arts in the 20th century see Ruppert 1998. Abstract art and the rise of non-figurative painting were no reason to refrain from automimetic art theories. When asked about the essence of his works, Jackson Pollock answered: “Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is.” (As cited in Rodman 1961, p. 85).

11 See for instance Sherman 1996, p. 233: “Ich denke, es geht nie um mich. [...] Was ich mit mir anstelle, um zu Bildern zu gelangen, hat mit mir selber nur sehr wenig zu tun. Die Leute nehmen immer an, es müßte so sein, daß ich mich als Person in die Arbeit einfließen lasse. [...] Die fertigen Bilder, die Resultate, sollen mehr sein als bloße Reflexe meiner Persönlichkeit. Um zu vermeiden, dass die Arbeiten mit mir persönlich in Verbindung gebracht werden, habe ich versucht, mit anderen zu arbeiten. Aber das lief nicht so, wie ich es mir vorstellte. Ich habe dann immer das Problem, daß ich demjenigen sagen muß, was er tun soll.”

omy of the arts and express their individuality, many artists have found it a good strategy to remain anonymous and produce absolute art without an author.¹² As Karl Marx would have put it: History repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.¹³

12 The Berlin-based artists collective Artists anonymous, but also the street artist Banksy, or the pop duo Daft Punk can serve as examples for this strategy. For interesting observations in this regard cfr. Pontzen 1999, Weinhart 2004, and Fastert/Geretsegger/Joachimides 2011.

13 Marx 1852 (1960), p. 115.