

Vasari's progressive (but non-historicist) Renaissance*

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Today's scholarly understanding of Giorgio Vasari is richer than it has ever been yet still conflicted. While on the one hand the sophistication of his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (*Le vite de più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori*) published in 1550 and revised again in 1568, has been amply documented, including the possibility of multiple authorship, it is not clear to what degree he is a 'modern' writer. A number of works have increasingly appeared that stress the precociousness of Renaissance notions of historical difference and relativity.¹ On the other hand, a largely medieval textual approach has been detected in his work, for example in the demonstration that the structure of the *Lives* is basically the form of a medieval chronicle, and most startlingly Gerd Blum's detection of numerology in the page numbers.²

In line with the latter approach, this paper utilizes a fundamental distinction between 'scholarship' and 'consciousness' introduced by Zachary

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¹ Patricia Rubin, *Vasari: Art and History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 190-197; Philip Sohm, 'Ordering History with Style: Giorgio Vasari on the Art of History', in *Antiquity and Its Interpreters*, ed. A. Payne, a. Kuttner and R. Smick, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 40-55; Carlo Ginzburg, 'Battling over Vasari: A Tale of Three Countries', in *The Art Historian: National Traditions and Institutional Practices*, ed. M. Zimmermann, Williamstown, Clark, 2002; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Antiquarianism, the History of Objects, and the History of Art before Winckelmann', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, 2001, 523-541; Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstkammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art and Technology*, trans. Allison Brown Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

² See Ian Verstegen, 'Birth Dates, Death Dates, and the Beginnings of Modern Art History', *Storiografia: Rivista annuale di storia* 10, 2006, 1-19; Gerd Blum, 'Provvidenza e Progresso: La teologia della storia nelle *Vite* Vasariane, con considerazioni sul rapporto fra periodizzazione e paginatura nella *Editio Torrentiniana* del 1550', in Charles Davis, Sabine Feser, Katja Lemelsen, and Alessandro Nova (eds.), *Die Vite Vasaris. Entstehung – Topoi – Rezeption*, Akten des internationalen Kongresses, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, 14. 2. – 18. 2. 2007), Venezia: Marsilio 2010; c.f. the shorter 'Kunstgeschichte als 'große Erzählung' und Bildsystem. Zur Geschichtstheologie von Vasaris *Vite* (1550)', in David Ganz and Felix Thürlemann (eds.), *Das Bild im Plural. Mehrteilige Bildformen zwischen Mittelalter und Gegenwart*, München: Fink 2010.

Schiffman in his work on the French Renaissance as a heuristic tool to shed new light on Vasari.³ This paradigm has the ability to give credit to Vasari's modern scholarship but affirm the pre-modernity of his historical consciousness. In particular, I stress Vasari's view of art as progressive but non-historicist by clarifying that his historical consciousness is 'spatial' in the sense that it is unified and additive, noting that he can only countenance progress in an 'ordinal' way, as elements succeeding and improving on past accomplishment without knowledge of any larger, teleological system. In sum, Vasari (and pre-modern historiography) must be separated from the typical characteristics of modern historicist discourse.

In this emphasis on a recycling of basic, universal ideas, my conclusion reinforces the understanding of the 'anachronic' Renaissance, wherein substitution of forms usually predominates over their unique historicity.⁴ According to Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, when it came to religious experience, most spectators were content with a 'substitute' of a cult image, a rubber-geometry copy that need not preserve any exact resemblance (in the modern sense) with the original. As opposed to (or often in addition to) the 'performative' aspect of the work, tied to an author at a particular time and place, the substitutional mode collapses historical distance. This very attitude to art is essentially the same as that of Vasari toward its history.

The plan for the article is as follows: after discussing various prior attempts to characterize Renaissance conceptions of history and finding them inadequate, I utilize Jörn Rüsen's theory of the modus of *exemplary* history – a mode of history as a series of exempla to follow for present action – to characterize the world view of writers like Vasari.⁵ Rüsen's overview allows us to see a generally repetitive, typological (or 'figural') orientation to the

³ Zachary Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity: Relativism in the French Renaissance*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. Schiffman had reacted to work on the French school of legal studies in which claims for historicism, as for Vasari, had entered.

⁴ See Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, 'Towards a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism', *Art Bulletin* 87, 2005, 403-432; *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York: Zone Books, 2010; c.f., Christopher Wood, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

⁵ Jörn Rüsen, 'Narrative Competence: The Ontogeny of Historical and Moral Consciousness', in *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005; *Historische Orientierung. Über die Arbeit des Geschichtsbewußtseins, sich in der Zeit zurechtzufinden*, Cologne: 1994, 3-24; 'What is Historical Consciousness? A Theoretical Approach to Empirical Evidence', trans. Wolfgang Gebhard, Paper presented at Canadian Historical Consciousness in an International Context: Theoretical Frameworks, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC. On Rüsen, see Allan Megill, 'Jörn Rüsen's Theory of Historiography between Modernism and Rhetoric of Inquiry', *History and Theory* 33, 1994, 39-60.

past based on exemplification as captured in Cicero's phrase, *Historia magistra vitae*, history the teacher of life.⁶ The unified sense of 'spatialized' (*verräumlicht*) time found in Rüsen's account of the exemplary mode enlightens Vasari's project. Next, I introduce an 'ordinal' account of Renaissance cultural achievement, according to which artistic contributions were seen by contemporaries as 'better than' earlier efforts without implying a large-scale or teleological historical development. I will argue that what Vasari was helping to inaugurate was, to coin a term, 'naïve relativism', relativized elements added to an essentially traditional worldview. This is a feature that is common to all historical efforts up to Winckelmann, the most notoriously naïve of all relativists who persisted in emulating the Greek ideal of ancient sculpture in spite of articulating the historicist platform (making achievement relative to a fixed process of development). In the end, I will argue that Vasari is a progressive but non-historicist thinker.

Claims for Vasari

Whether or not we want to see Vasari as 'modernist' or 'medieval' depends on our definition of those terms, and we shall proceed with a discussion of them according to which modern historicism implies a unified and developing historical entity. For now, however, it is useful to survey the claims made on Vasari's behalf. For the most part, I will argue that these claims relate to his scholarship and not his consciousness. There are broadly two ways of affirming that Vasari partook in a modern idea of historical consciousness – through (1) discussing his conception of style and (2) his affirmation that historical judgments of a work (e.g. Giotto) can be formed relative to its time of creation. Each contributes to a 'cognitive distance' between the historian and the past.

The first and most important element of Vasari's conception of history is the very idea of the development of art, based on three ages (*età*) and the overcoming of various challenges of artistic representation. Vasari, at the famous meeting at the Palazzo Farnese wherein he conceptualized his project, recounted that he would describe history 'according to the order of

⁶ On this notion, see Reinhart Koselleck '*Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process*', in: *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985. Koselleck's point that multiplied *historie*, eyewitness accounts, gave way to historicist events gathered under unitary *Geschichte*, adds to Rüsen's characterization of the modus of exemplary history. On exemplary history, see also George Nadel, 'Philosophy of History before Historicism', *History and Theory* 3, 1964, 291-315; reprinted in *The Critical Approach to Science and Philosophy*, ed. Mario Bunge, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964, 445-70.

the times' (*secondo l'ordine de' tempi*), suggesting some kind of stylistic development.⁷ Philip Sohm has been the most prominent to defend this as a radically historicizing gesture in Vasari, by which he meant that Vasari had outlined an order of style in history, of artfully discerned stylistic similarities and differences in time, over old-fashioned chronicle.⁸ When we say that Vasari articulated a theory of stylistic development, it makes us think of (post-Romantic) theories of style along the lines of Riegl and Wölfflin. In a similar vein, Alina Payne has found a precedent of stylistic development in the succession of architectural orders in Vitruvius, which conflate the temporal order of history and the stylistic order of architecture.⁹

In the following, I will actually reinforce the idea of stylistic development in Vasari's thought in a strict sense. But I will do so in a way that seeks to see development on a largely exemplary model relying on figurative – Greco-Roman or biblical – tropes or else through mere summative accretion. I will be calling this the 'ordinal' approach to history, chosen to remove Hegelian connotations of style as something that contains within itself an inevitable trajectory. Although there is no doubt that historicist writers from Hegel on recognized something modern in Vasari's writing (and romantic writers reacted against his 'teleology'), progress, generally speaking, proceeded for him only on a very 'slow fuse.'

In regard to the idea that historical judgments of a work can be formed relative to its time of creation, it was Erwin Panofsky who noted the role it played in Vasari and its classical prototype. Panofsky stressed the influence of L. Annaeus Florus's *Epitome rerum Romanarum* for the ages of man.¹⁰ In particular, Panofsky thought the notion of *secundum quid* was significant for Vasari's nascent historical relativism in judging Giotto and earlier artists according to their time.¹¹ Thus, writers like Vasari began to recognize anachronisms and did not make judgments *simpliciter* but 'in accordance with' prior realities. Such ideas complement greatly those about

⁷ Giorgio Vasari, Preface to Part III, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 4 vols., ed. William Gaunt (New York, 1963), 154; *Le vite de' eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti scritte da Giorgio Vasari, pittore Aretino*, (1550 and 1568), ed. P. Barocchi (ed.), Florence: Sansoni, 1966, vol. IV, 10. All citations of Vasari will follow this form: Life or Preface, English page number and Italian page number, and original Italian.

⁸ Philip Sohm, 'Ordering History with Style;' c.f. 'Life Cycles of Art', in *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy, 1500-1800*, 131-148.

⁹ Alina Payne, 'Vasari, Architecture and the Origins of Historicizing Art.' *RES. Journal of Aesthetics and Anthropology* 40, Autumn 2001, 51-76.

¹⁰ Panofsky, 'First Page of Vasari's *Libro*', 216-218.

¹¹ Panofsky, 'First Page of Vasari's *Libro*', 212-213.

teleology just mentioned and their potential for conflation with standard historicist doctrines is obvious. However, as we shall see, the notion of *secundum quid* can operate quite well with a standard providential model. In the following I will seek to discuss Vasari's developmental commitments in a precise way that will tease these different aspects apart. Because I regard Vasari's theory to be a typical species of pre-modern 'exemplary' history, I will define that now.

Exemplary History

As is well known, with Petrarch Italian humanists begin to see their era as something other from the preceding one which came to be called the *medium aevum* or 'middle' ages.¹² Instead of sensing their continuity with the ancients, as medieval thinkers had done, they acknowledged a process of replacement of antique ideals and practices with 'medieval' ones, and conversely sought to go about reviving these ancient values. They found that they had more in common with the ancients than their predecessors of just one hundred years prior. Nevertheless, such evolution and resulting 'cognitive distance' cannot be confused with historicism. It is necessary to affirm the Renaissance understanding of the past as exemplary history.

Many critics and historians have noted special facets about Vasari's thought, without actually pinpointing what separates it from other authors or, indeed, epochs. Of art historians, Hans Belting has written suggestively of Vasari's idea of the history of art as a *process*,¹³ and even more challengingly David Cast writes of Vasari's 'speculation about the philosophy of art.'¹⁴ When we turn to philosophers of history like Arthur Danto and David Carrier, we might expect more precise formulations; but in spite of their sometimes impressive philosophical reflections, they have not carefully discussed Vasari.¹⁵ In short, we have no further specification beyond which Vasari (or Machiavelli, etc.) essentially made sense of historical time.¹⁶

¹² The classic article is Theodor Mommsen, 'Petrarch's Conception of the "Dark Ages"', in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959. Mommsen's influence on Panofsky is well known.

¹³ Hans Belting, 'Vasari and His Legacy: The History of Art as a Process?' *The End of the History of Art?* trans. Christopher S. Wood, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

¹⁴ David Cast, 'Reading Vasari Again: History, Philosophy', *Word & Image* 9, 1993, 29-38; c.f. *The Delight of Art: Giorgio Vasari and the Traditions of Humanist Discourse*, University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2009.

¹⁵ Arthur Danto, 'Art, Evolution, and the Consciousness of History', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44, 1986, 223-234; 'Narratives of the End of Art', *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical*

Schiffman followed Friedrich Meinecke to note the difference between an apparent and a real historicism. In his view, antiquarian and pre-modern scholarly methods were based on individuality, a sense of the uniqueness of historical entities, whereas historicist understanding was based on this same individuality *and* development. Pre-modern historical understanding precluded development, which could only be conceived as unfolding (*Entfaltung*) rather than pure development (*Entwicklung*).¹⁷ Meinecke believed that development involved objects *in* their historical context. Maurice Mandelbaum refined this account to isolate the peculiarly modern element here, which affirms that knowledge is only possible relative to the stage of development of a thing: 'Historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of anything and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained by considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role it played within a process of development.' This means understanding objects according to a unitary process of development that is stronger than merely knowing its history.¹⁸

It is here that Rüsen's discussion of the exemplary mode of history is important. Only one of a typology of forms of historical consciousness, it is usefully opposed here to the 'genetic' mode, the basis of modern historical scholarship, and hence a mode that is strictly historicist. In modern (genetic) narrative, 'change becomes the decisive, the actually meaningful and significant', and 'the ability of a life form to change becomes a necessary precondition to its duration.' Significantly, 'In this form of consciousness history is essentially temporalized'.¹⁹ Being is time.

In the exemplary mode, on the contrary, being is spatial and synchronic. The approach to the world is catholic in the literal sense. All life can be applied to general rules of conduct, even if rules can be improved upon. Here, we may quote Rüsen's lengthy summation:

Present, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992, and David Carrier, 'Beginnings in Narrative Art Histories', in *Artwriting*, College Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1991.

¹⁶ Note that Hayden White's theory of master tropes is not successive but outlines emplotments available to any form of historical narration; *Metahistory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1973.

¹⁷ Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity*; Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1936.

¹⁸ Maurice Mandelbaum, 'Historicism', in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, New York: Macmillan, 1967, 24. For a recent review, see Georg Iggers, 'Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, 1995, 129-152.

¹⁹ Rüsen, *Historische Orientierung*, 10; 'What is Historical Consciousness', 9.

In the *modus of exemplary sense* historical consciousness represents the past as a multitude of instances or examples that serve to show the validity and utility of general rules of conduct. The internal relationship between past, present and future lies in the continued validity of such general rules. The past provides the paradigms which one can adhere to if one is to overcome the present and shape the future. This historical consciousness enables communication through the ability to make decisions, which refers cases to precedents and deduces rules from precedents. Divergent standpoints and interests are overcome and disseminated by a search for comprehensive rules and principles, and life is oriented according to these rules and principles. In this instance historical identity assumes the form of competence with rules. In this modus of signification historical consciousness assumes a large field of experience. It transcends the narrow confines, in which history is active as tradition, into the broad terrain of temporal processes to which various or even no obligatory traditions can be adduced. At the same time meaning is expanded to an expanse of historical experience that can be brought together into abstract regulatory principles for the conduct of life. The breadth of the experience is dependent on the level of abstraction, which in turn determines the multiplicity of applications deduced from the rules of conduct that have been drawn from historical experience. Through this form of thinking becomes 'wise forever' (Thucydides). The great political history writing of the west from the Greeks to the first half of the eighteenth century as well as the classical historiography of other cultures is indebted to this form of historical consciousness: the rules of political wisdom for the present and the future were taught by the examples set by this historical consciousness.²⁰

In short, human action occurs within a common medium and useful principles are universally applicable. This scheme is merely a heuristic, but once commonalities between histories that memorialize the present on timeless principles are brought together, their common purpose as *exemplary* becomes clear.

²⁰ Rüsen, *Historische Orientierung*, 9; 'What is Historical Consciousness', 8; c.f. for the separation of Enlightenment (and pre-Enlightenment) from historicism, Ulrich Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung: Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1991). Note, however, that according to Mandelbaum's definition given above, the Enlightenment *was* historicist. In other words, the debate involving Muhlack is partly of the nature concerning methods of research (*Geschichtswissenschaft*). Mandelbaum's definition isolates the consciousness, which is distinctive.

If historicism leads to regarding historical events as evolving, organic wholes, it is easy to see how cycles understood in ancient history can be interpreted in Hegelian, historicist terms. Panofsky's imputation of judgmental relativism (*secundum quid*) in regard to Giotto and other early artists mentioned above is just such a case. Indeed, while there is space for evolving judgment here, it should not obscure the underlying absolutist core of the theory. Yes, there is nascent historical distance, but it is not so great to upset any major paradigm. Thus this relativity of judgment is only one element within a slowly changing system that still, really until the eighteenth century, maintained an exemplary form.

Because of the tendency to conflate ancient recurrentist with cyclical historicist models of history, I want to show how the ancient mechanisms understood within Renaissance historiography uphold the exemplary model. In philosophical terms, a Christian providential philosophy of history had to be accommodated to an ancient recurrentist philosophy of history. The simplistic understanding of the Renaissance as a war between the church and secular humanism has hindered understanding of its modes of making sense of the experience of time. While in the religious sphere a standard providential view dominated, and humanism revived antique views of recurrence, the two were combined in a complex web of religious and political renewal (*renovatio*) and restoration (*instauratio*).²¹ In other words, recurrence was often wed to religious reform just as it also existed in the medieval writings and, hence, the frequent invocations of a new Golden Age under different Popes.²²

Biblical events themselves were beyond question, but political events could be explained with new tools. The process has been characterized by Frank Manuel as 'surreptitious', and he wrote that 'where the Gentiles were involved, a conception of the repetitive rise, apogee, and fall of empires as the way of the world could find support in Daniel skillfully interpreted and even in Augustine himself. Fuse the famous text from Ecclesiastes about nothing being new under the sun, the medieval *Ubi sunt* theme, and a historical interpretation of Daniel, and you produce a passable Christian version of Ixion's wheel.'²³ The instrument used for recurrence was fortune (*fortuna*). Historical accidents might seem opposed to the seeming lawfulness

²¹ Charles Stinger, *The Renaissance in Rome*, 2nd edition, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, 235-291.

²² On the 'Golden Age' theme in general, see E. H. Gombrich, 'Renaissance and Golden Age', *Norm and Form*, London: Phaidon, 1966, 29-34; Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969.

²³ Frank Manuel, *The Shapes of Philosophical History*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1965, 48.

of recurrence; however, as J. G. A. Pocock pointed out they possess for the Renaissance consciousness on a larger scale an element of repetitiveness and intelligibility.²⁴ The image of the wheel of fortune is appropriate here, because accidents were hardly understood in a contemporary statistical sense but rather in terms of a few regular possible alternatives. Although *fortuna* introduced inassimilable elements that would eventually break down the exemplary universe, for now they were successfully mastered.

The engines that Vasari saw perpetuating history were similar to those described by Machiavelli and others but moulded to his own purposes. He accepted *fortuna* and explicitly wrote how 'Fortune, when she has brought men to the top of the wheel, either for amusement or because she repents, usually turns them to the bottom.'²⁵ But *virtù* was demonstrated in a sense as a complementary working of imitation (of nature and other artists, including antique works of art) and genius. Neither imitation nor genius was enough to demonstrate artistic *virtù*; artists could devote themselves to ardent imitation but have no ultimate talent, or they could have talent in abundance but never apply themselves.²⁶ In the life of Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, Vasari remarks that sometimes the sons of famous artists – the great Domenico Ghirlandaio was Ridolfo's father – do not live up to their fathers because of 'greater ease and wealth.'²⁷ In other words, these factors were reducible once again to principles of practical orientation.

Most opinion has nominated Polybius as the most important writer to influence Renaissance historical ideas; we know he influenced Machiavelli.²⁸ And this means that the doctrine of *anacyclosis* – a schematic of cyclical yet non-organicist fortunes of civilizations – made its way into popular historiography, including Vasari's. It is at this point that Panofsky's

²⁴ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 78-79.

²⁵ Preface to the Lives, i, 9; Italian, 103: 'Ma perché la fortuna, quando ella ha condotto altri al sommo della ruota, o per ischerzo, o per pentimento il piu delle volte lo torna in fondo.'

²⁶ Here, at the height of a thriving Renaissance artistic culture, Vasari's qualifications of innate genius contrasts to the bold assertions of Alberti more than a century earlier, who was still ambivalent about the weight of classical achievement; c.f., Christine Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, chapter 2.

²⁷ Life of Ridolfo, Davide and Benedetto Ghirlandaio, Eng., iv, 1; Ital., v, 437: 'troppi agi e commodi.'

²⁸ G. W. Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought: From Antiquity to the Reformatio*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979, esp. ch. 5; Peter Burke, 'A Survey of the Popularity of Ancient Historians', *History and Theory* 5, 1966: 143-45. Significantly, the popular ideas found in Aristotle's *Politics* also supported Polybian cyclical ideas. On Machiavelli and Polybius, see G. Sasso, *Studi su Machiavelli*, Naples: Morano, 1967, 161-280; Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought*; Charles Trinkaus, 'The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought', *History and Theory* 20, 1981, 218-31.

judgmental relativism can find its place. It is not so much that Vasari was developing a relativized stance as making simultaneously an absolute and a relative judgment. Vasari's friend, Vincenzo Borghini, concluded in his studies of the vulgar that poetics followed different rules of development than did nature, and as a part of nature, language.²⁹ Roughly speaking, language was subject to cyclical change whereas poetry was subject to rules. In Vasari's terms, if *disegno* is an absolute principle, *maniere* or styles are variable. Matteo Burioni notes tellingly that for Giovanni Battista Gelli, for example, Hebrew was an immutable language whereas Florentine was a historical language. It follows that, 'Absolute judgment is appropriate for art, whereas historical judgment is adequate for styles.'³⁰

Synchrony and Typology in Vasari

Vasari's writing satisfies perfectly this requirement for pragmatic philosophy. In addition to scrupulously recording details for his lives, he is establishing a set of improving rules for the perfection of art. In a remarkable passage Vasari addressed the problem directly. 'If ever it happens, which God forbid, that the arts should once more fall to a like ruin and disorder, through the negligence of man, the malignity of the age, or the decree of Heaven, which does not appear to wish that the things of this world should remain stationary, these efforts of mine...may maintain the arts in life.'³¹ These are abstract, not inexorable, principles.

The link between history more generally and art history more particularly lies in the artist as moral agent. Vasari had to elevate his lives beyond a mere chronicle to distinguish it humanistically, but it was also in keeping with the nature of Renaissance discourse. A 'vita' in the Plutarchian sense was a moral biography, complete with pragmatic consequences for action drawn from it.³² Artists, no less than princes and nobles, were

²⁹ Vincenzo Borghini's unpublished notes c. 1564, Florence, Kunsthistorisches Institut, MS K783, no. 2, and Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, MX. II.X.116, both cited by Robert Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

³⁰ Matteo Burioni, 'Vasari's *Rinascita*: History, Anthropology or Art Criticism?' In: *Renaissance? Perceptions of Continuity and Discontinuity in Europe, ca. 1300-1550*, Schnitker H., Pépote P., Lee A.C., eds., Leiden, 2008, 126.

³¹ Preface to the Lives, vol. I, 18; Italian, vol. I, 109: '*...se mai (il che non acconsenta Dio) accadesse per alcun tempo per la trascuraggine degli uomini o per la malignità de' secoli, oppure per ordine de' cieli, i quali non pare che vogliano le cose di quaggiù mantenersi molto in uno essere, ella incorresse di nuovo nel medesimo disordine di rovina, possano queste fatiche mie, qualunque elle si siano (se elle però saranno degne di più benigna fortuna), per le cose discorse innanzi e per quelle che hanno da dirsi, mantenerla in vita...*'

³² See Patricia Rubin, *Vasari: Art and History*, 155-7.

charged with leading moral lives, and they indicated the direction of this morality in the choices they made in their lives as artists, works being substituted for actions. The moral tone is evident in Vasari's lives, where individual artists are sometimes mere emblems for a virtue or vice which they serve to illustrate, although it was deemphasized in the second edition.

In addition to Vasari's adoption of classic aims in the nature of *Historia magistra vitae*, many elements shared by thinkers in the Renaissance contained other synchronous, 'spatialized' elements.³³ It operated foremost against a rich backdrop of church typology and exegesis. Just as the Old Testament foretold the New Testament, all manner of church history and lore, both official and apocryphal, afforded them meaningful parallels and connections with contemporary events. In the late antique period, the Roman Empire had already been Christianized and so it was not so difficult for the introduction of ancient texts into the canon, along with all of their recurrentist or cyclical historiographical assumptions. In this, Vasari's schema is largely consistent with general Renaissance thought. He shares the Renaissance humanist's complex typology uniting the secular and the spiritual. Paul Barolsky has pointed out consistently the ways in which Vasari's wordplay would construct links between artists, patrons and sites. An artist named Andrea, for example, might be said to hold San Andrea especially dear, and to have painted an altarpiece or chapel devoted to that saint, or with another artist of the same name.³⁴ Similarly, it should be pointed out that Vasari's stages are roughly based on centuries and the same way that Savanorola saw the approach of 1500 with millenarian zeal, so too Vasari saw qualitative breaches between the second and third ages.³⁵

This ecclesiastical framework has been startlingly confirmed in the research of Gerd Blum.³⁶ He shows that Vasari (and probable co-authors) conceived of the original 1550 edition as reflecting a basic providential form. The first age (of Cimabue, Giotto and *Trecento* artists) is the natural, Adamic state of the world, *ante legem*. The second age is that *sub legem* of Moses and reflected in the works of Masaccio, Brunelleschi and Donatello. Finally, the

³³ On this, see Leonard Barkan, *Transuming Passion: Ganymede and the Erotics of Humanism*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991, 10-19. Barkan utilizes Freud's dream theory to understand this Renaissance synchrony. Without raising the complex issue of memory and its relation to history, it is worthwhile that Freud's theory (or one like it) could explain the ontogenetic 'naturalness' for adopting this mode of history.

³⁴ Especially for its genealogical focus see Paul Barolsky, *Giotto's Father and the Family in Vasari's Lives*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1992.

³⁵ See, for example, Barolsky's treatment of the year 1300 in *Giotto's Father*, 9-10.

³⁶ Blum, 'Provvidenza e Progresso;' 'Kunstgeschichte als 'große Erzählung' und Bildsystem.'

trio of Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo are savior figures, who introduce like Christ the age of grace (*sub gratia*). Vasari ends with a discussion of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, a proper eschatological finish.

If it is true that Vasari's progress is pre-historicist, we can expect that decline will be rendered in interesting ways in his scheme. The way that Michelangelo's death (1564) seemed to spell the decline of art in the second edition (1568) was stressed by Panofsky, and many others. 'Vasari', writes Panofsky, 'had a tragic premonition of impending decline' for 'what, after the achievement of this *divino*, can be expected of the other, lesser artists?'³⁷ Decline comes up constantly in the Renaissance, and art writing in particular, often as the outcome of a cycle. But such downturns are a far cry from the decline hypothesized first by Anton Rafael Mengs and Johann Winckelmann.³⁸ In the case of Mengs and Winckelmann, true to historicism, decline was inexorable because of an absolutely unified organic process. Art, society, *everything* declined.

What is important about Blum's work is the way in which it points out the importance for Vasari of directional history without historicism. Michelangelo (at least in the 1550 edition) is the culminating moment of the history, but more as a convenient marker of the End of Time rather than in Panofsky's reckoning an unstable avatar of achievement whose selection will be brought to crisis in a few years after the master's death when new artists will vie for final inclusion. In this sense, for writers in the Renaissance Michelangelo simply became the focus of the process, an exemplum that could be followed with diligence and perhaps under the right conditions equalled. The anxiety does not surround whether or not another Michelangelo can arise, but whether or not the conditions can arise to support him.³⁹

³⁷ Panofsky, 'First Page of Vasari's *Libro*', 220.

³⁸ For Winckelmann and historicism, see Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, vol. II, 313-324, for a classic formulation of Winckelmann's role, and especially Alex Potts, 'Political Attitudes and the Rise of Historicism in Art Theory', *Art History* 1, 1978: 191-213, and 'Winckelmann's Construction of History', *Art History* 5, 1982, 377-407. David Carrier, *Principles of Art History Writing*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 1991 clearly opposes Vasari's dominantly *ekphrastic* method from later interpretation. I agree with his opposition but not with his account of their incommensurability; following Rösen's 'ontogenetic' approach, genetic history encompasses exemplary history.

³⁹ Compare Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 404: 'what Vasari foresaw in the future. . . was neither improvement in quality nor a new definition in quality. Rather, he looked forward to an unlimited application of the infallible rules taught through example by Michelangelo and by precept in the new Accademia del Disegno' and Alpers, 'Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes', 209: 'In the [last] edition, Michelangelo still marks an end, but Vasari does not expect a necessary decline after the peak of Michelangelo's perfection, nor some kind of lesser, more widespread perfection.'

Ordinal Progress in Art

I have said that only a very 'rough' kind of historical sense was available in the Renaissance, the legitimate improvements to art in contemporaries' eyes as well as the refinements to historical techniques of research, documentation and source material still practiced by scholars today.⁴⁰ Here, I introduce the concept of 'ordinal' progress to differentiate this kind of 'progress' from historicist progress.

Ordinal progress accommodates competition, a feature of many different societies and historical outlooks, but is more complex than pure imitation, which could be called the original form of the substitutional mentality. Ordinal progress recognizes that one element is better than another without knowledge of what the ultimate end point is (teleology). Like beads on a string, one element merely is before or after another with no chronological relationship. The improvement of one style over another, like Raphael's over that of his teacher, Perugino, should properly be conceived as ordinal progress. This category of thought was investigated by E. H. Gombrich in 'The Renaissance Notion of Artistic Progress' and he discussed cases in which artists specifically try to outdo an older style; they now have a 'mission' in addition to a 'commission.'⁴¹ Such competition was already a feature of *Trecento* society, as Hayden Maginnis' scholarship has shown.⁴²

As often happens in the writing of history, actors do not understand the epistemological consequences of ideas when they are adopted, leading to naïve relativism. Winckelmann sought to historicize art according to process of rise and fall of civilizations but never gave up the hope of restoring art. Similar things happened with the rise of what I am calling ordinal progress in art history. As works of art came to look different with succeeding generations, they still had to fulfil their religious functions. Thus, Alexander Nagel has pointed out the interesting case of the repainting of Guido da Siena's *Maestà* in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. While it was painted to update its appearance in the light of Duccio's revolution in painting, this was

⁴⁰ Discussing Raphael's famous letter to Leo X, Nagel and Wood ('Anachronic Renaissance') call the historical sense contained in the document 'rough', to the degree that Raphael (and Castiglione) are not making archeological claims but determining a unified body of ideal monuments to emulate.

⁴¹ E. H. Gombrich in 'The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences', *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London, 1966, 1-10. Significantly, Gombrich stressed the consequence of such thinking for nascent 'historicism' (in Karl Popper's terms).

⁴² H. Maginnis, *The World of the Siennese Artist*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997, 184-6.

subservient to the overriding desire to make the image efficacious again.⁴³ Stylistic change entered through the back door.

Late eighteenth and nineteenth century historicism conceived these cycles as part of the unitary life-course of a historical entity whereas the organic analogies referring to growth and decline and undoubtedly present in the thought of earlier writers were, as we have seen, more additive and mechanistic in scope. In Frank Manuel's still-useful clarification, Renaissance thinking was not directed toward infinite progress, rather, it was *against regression*:

the cyclical historical theorist says that all things move in a circle and therefore our turn too has come, after the fallow period of the Middle Ages, to be as great as the ancients. We are, to be sure, not likely to maintain our superiority any longer than they did, but we can surely equal them. Thus a circular theory became optimistic by implication.⁴⁴

Vasari becomes a useful eyewitness to the way in which these goals were actually put into action in the Renaissance. What we find is that he views other artists and is himself content to continue to provide the same artistic services to his clients, if perhaps offering them more work and doing it more quickly. This is clear in two sections of the *Lives*, the first recalling Michelangelo's achievement in the Sistine Ceiling and the other his own work in the Palazzo Vecchio many years later.

What is interesting about Vasari's account of the *Sistine Ceiling* is the relation of scale, labour and accomplishment. The ceiling was great in its formal perfection, but awed the viewer with its location (on a ceiling, not just a wall fresco), its sheer size (680 square meters), and its mythical single-handed execution primarily by the master himself. Both Vasari, Condivi, and then Vasari again were willing to perpetuate this myth, which they all knew to be untrue. The physical accomplishment of the ceiling was like that of Michelangelo's monumental works in marble, displaying great difficulty. Christine Smith has already shown how strongly Brunelleschi's mechanical invention of the dome of Florence Cathedral was tied to a sense of modern accomplishment and artists of the later Renaissance were not averse to gauging their successes on sheer size.⁴⁵

⁴³ Alexander Nagel, 'Fashion and the Now-Time of Renaissance Art', *Res: Journal of Aesthetics and Anthropology* 46, 2004: 33-52.

⁴⁴ Manuel, *The Shapes of Philosophical History*, 65.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism*, chapter 2.

Another example is provided by Vasari's own account of his executive supervision of the painting of the Sala dei Cinquecento in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. By now Vasari had gained increasing dominance in Duke Cosimo I de' Medici's court and was overseeing the frescoing of the Palazzo Vecchio. Much of it continued after the bulk of the writing of the *Lives* was completed and, in any case, Vasari wished to provide a manual for its understanding. These *Ragionamenti* are the last significant documents from Vasari's life and continue to tell us about his ideas on art and progress.⁴⁶ The book takes the form of a three-day dialogue between Vasari and Prince Francesco de' Medici. The latest fresco, the *Sala dei Cinquecento*, was only awarded in 1563 and consisted of a ceiling (1563-5) and wall (1567-72) project.⁴⁷ The *Sala dei Cinquecento* is an enormous room, 23 by 53 meters. It receives brief mention in the Life of Taddeo Zuccaro when Vasari mentions the young artist's visit to Florence: '[Taddeo] saw Vasari's preparations for the great hall, namely forty-four large pictures of four, six, seven and ten *braccia* each, all executed in less than a year.'⁴⁸ In the *Ragionamenti* the Prince comments on this 'enormous undertaking', concluding how 'besides achieving such beauty in the figures, you planned the whole work according to such an excellent arrangement and with so much invention that you prove you worked just as hard in finding and understanding the stories from ancient and modern writers as you did in painting them.'⁴⁹ Here there is no better portrayal of artist-organizer and Vasari has no shame in including portraits of his *frescanti*, Naldini, Stradano, and Zucchi whom he proudly points out to the Prince.

The attitude here is not altogether different from the late Medieval mentality revealed in a typical contract, as when in Siena the painter Matteo di Giovanni was contracted to paint a panel and, 'the said panel is to be as rich and as big, and as large in each dimension, as the panel that Jacopo di Mariano Borghesi has made...With this addition, that the lunette above the said altarpiece must be at least one-quarter higher than the one the said

⁴⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *I Ragionamenti*, Eng. trans. in Jerry Lee Draper, *Vasari's Decoration in the Palazzo Vecchio: the Ragionamenti Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, Ph. D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1973. According to Draper, the work was probably begun in 1558 but the last *giornata* had to have been written after 1563, after the commission of the *Sala dei Cinquecento*, and hence after the bulk of the writing of the *Lives*.

⁴⁷ On the commission see Marcia Hall, *After Raphael*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 153-156.

⁴⁸ Life of Taddeo Zuccaro, vol. 4, 91; Ital., vol. V, 567: 'Avendo dunque veduto l'apparecchio del Vasari per la detta sala, cioè quarantaquattro quadri grandi, di braccia quattro, sei, sette e dieci l'uno, nei quali lavorava figure per la maggior parte di sei et otto braccia...e tutto essere stato condotto in meno d'un anno.'

⁴⁹ Vasari, *I Ragionamenti*, 401, 405.

Jacopo had made.⁵⁰ The same attitude is reflected in Vasari's proud claim of the modern manner: 'But the important fact is that art has been brought to such perfection today, design, invention and colouring coming easily to those who possess them, that where the first masters took six years to paint one picture our masters today would only take one year to paint six.'⁵¹

Ordinal Progress in the *Lives*

While one should not minimize the stylistic perfection that Vasari and others like him achieved, it is also clear that art improved on quite standard – even physical, as seen here – criteria rather than inexorable development, the hallmark of historicism. And so when we finally turn to the writing and organization of the *Lives*, we can see that it indeed possesses an interesting spatial character, which has not been appreciated sufficiently. It presumes a common set of principles of judgment, which unite all that is recounted into a single, synchronous universe of artistic achievement.

One of the historicist takes on Vasari emphasizes heavily the doctrine of *disegno* as a teleological principle, to which each successive generation contributes. Since Svetlana Alpers' work, it has been known that Vasari's individual lives are filled with quite traditional *ekphrasis* while the 'progressive' aspect is found in the *proemi*.⁵² As we saw, *disegno* is linked to absolute judgment while *maniera* is subject to variable or historical judgment. Thus, to return again to Vasari's stated wish to write history 'according to the order of the ages (*secondo l'ordine de' tempi*)', we must resist the tendency to interpret this in a historicist way when a simpler, more literal interpretation is available.

Rubin, noting Vasari's early notes, argues them to be 'a preliminary preparatory sequence of the chronological type that Vasari decided against

⁵⁰ Bruce Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work: From Pisano to Titian*, Fairfax: John Murray, 1983, 52.

⁵¹ Vasari, Preface to Part III, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, vol. 4, 154; *Le vite de' eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti*, vol. IV, 10: 'Ma quello che importa il tutto di questa arte è che l'hanno ridotta oggi talmente perfetta e facile per chi possiede il disegno, l'invenzione et il colorito, che dove prima da que' nostri maestri si faceva una tavola in sei anni, oggi in un anno q[ue]sti maestri ne fanno sei.'

⁵² Svetlana Alpers, 'Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's Lives', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23, 1960, 190-215. Alpers' interpretation that fractures the text into differently motivated parts has been reinforced by Charles Hope's positing of multiple authorship of the Lives: 'Le Vite Vasariane: Un esempio di autore multiplo', in *L'autore multiplo*, ed. Anna Santoni, Pisa, 2005, 59-74; c.f., Thomas Frangenberg, 'Bartoli, Giambullari and the Prefaces to Vasari's 'Lives' (1550)', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 60, 2002, 244-58. As I am using Vasari to investigate a representative approach to the arts, attribution of individual passages to different authors, this does not affect my argument here.

when he organized *The Lives* by style rather than by strict order of time – when he chose art history over chronicle.⁵³ Sohm argues that Vasari eschewed chronology in favour of style.⁵⁴ Yet it should be understood that the very choice of artists was subjective. Vasari had to be selective in his history in the very choice of which artists to include and while he did introduce additional artists to his individual lives, upsetting the 'ordine de' tempi', he generally followed this *ordine*.⁵⁵ In short, when Vasari set out to write the *Vite*, he conceived of it in strongly pre-modern terms as an additive exercise.

Much historicizing writing on Vasari from Panofsky to today has stressed the anomalous place of Michelangelo, which especially in the first edition (1550) seemed to cap off a teleology and along with it put into place (seemingly modern) anxiety about future achievement. While it is true that in the first 1550 edition Michelangelo was moved slightly so as to end the set of lives, in the second edition he falls more or less into place according to his death date, 1564.

Sequence of Lives at the end of the 1566 edition

Benvenuto Garofalo, 6 September 1559.

Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, 1560.

Giovanni da Udine, 1564.

Battista Franco, 1561.

Giovan Francesco Rustichi, no date (1554).

Fra Giovann' Agnolo Montosorli, 30 August 1563.

Francesco Salviati, 11 November 1563.

Daniele da Volterra, 4 April 1566.

Taddeo Zuccaro, 1 September 1566.

Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1564.

⁵³ Rubin, *Vasari: Art and History*, 178.

⁵⁴ Sohm, 'Ordering History with Style', 43-45.

⁵⁵ Sohm carefully reviews the meaning of the term, 'ordine de' tempi', but I believe one of his examples is mistaken. He translates Vasari's mention of the phrase in the lives of the *trecento* sculptors Agostino and Agnolo of Siena in the following way: 'Now it would undoubtedly be mistaken not to mention other artists following the historical order (*ordine de' tempi*), who have not done enough work to merit their own lives yet have added something beneficial and beautiful to art', concluding Vasari is referring to a kind of 'period framing.' Traditional translations of this passage, however, seem to be more accurate; for example, Jean Paul Richter: 'And now, it would without doubt be an error, if, following the order of time, I should fail to make mention of some artists, who, although they have not produced works of sufficient importance to entitle them to a separate biography, have yet contributed in some degree to the amelioration of art, and the embellishment of the world.' The point is that Vasari says that in order to treat these other artists, he must step out of the chronological sequence, not give new meaning to this term.

Like the providential structure outlined by Blum, this more modest ordering of lives along medieval principles of chronicling also points to Vasari's comfortable possession of an exemplary mind set.

In the dedication to Cosimo de' Medici written for the first (1550) edition (and republished in the second), Vasari wrote 'I hope that someone after our time will have to write a fourth part to my book, enriching it with other masters and other masterpieces than those described by me; in which company I am striving with every effort not to be among the least.'⁵⁶ This he did in the second edition, adding the lives of those artists that died between 1550 and 1568. Significantly, when Giovanni Baglione came along to write another history, he specifically saw his task as picking up where Vasari left off, hence the title to his set of lives: *Le vite de' pittori scultori et architetti dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII. del 1572 in fino a' tempi di Papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642 le quali seguitano le Vite che fece Giorgio Vasari*.⁵⁷

Conclusion

This article has sought to provide an interpretive framework for discussing apparently 'historicist' elements in Vasari's writings. Vasari's use of historical sources (archives, inscriptions, and eye-witness testimony), his cognitive distance, and sense of stylistic history, all must be parsed into elements which respect the distinction noted by Schiffman between historical scholarship and historical consciousness. Using Rösen's ideas, I have defended the understanding of Renaissance historiography under the mode of exemplary history. Its timeless, spatial orientation to history as a source for present action (*Historia magistra vitae*) is a useful general umbrella for Vasari's more particular concerns. More particularly, it is possible to nuance the existence of various seemingly style-conscious cultural forms as imitation and competition by falling back on the concept of ordinal progress, which can capture improvement over a prior contribution but does not imply historicist, organic development. We can affirm that this was only supplied in the late Enlightenment while at the same time better understanding those legitimately progressive, scholarly elements of Renaissance culture.

⁵⁶ Dedication to Cosimo de' Medici, vol. I, xiii; Italian, vol. I, 28: '...spero che chi verrà dopo noi arà da scrivere la quarta età del mio volume, dotato d'altri Maestri, d'altri magisterii che non sono i descritti da me; nella compagnia de' quali io mi vo preparando con ogni studio di non esser degli ultimi.'

⁵⁷ Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori scultori et architetti dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII. del 1572 in fino a' tempi di Papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642 le quali seguitano le Vite che fece Giorgio Vasari*, Rome: Andrea Fei, 1642; fascimile ed., Valerio Mariani ed., Rome, 1935.

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