

## Vasari's words

Review of:

Douglas Biow, *Vasari's Words: The Lives of the Artists as a History of Ideas in the Italian Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2018, pp. 256, 41 b/w illus. ISBN9781108472050 (hbk).

David Cast

This is a slim, careful volume that in its implication, ranges far and wide across the culture of the arts in the Renaissance. The immediate subject is a group of terms that appear in the account of the lives of the artists – though that exact word he never used – written by Giorgio Vasari and published first in 1550. This is a text that Biow is prepared to see as more than a set of stories or of biased judgments, more indeed than a simple source of information, but rather as a record of values and culturally shared forms enlisted, as he sees its purpose, in the solving of artistic problems defined within the material processes of the making of art. Such wider possibilities have long been recognised by scholars of the Renaissance, while it is acknowledged, by even his friendliest readers, that Vasari was not in any rigorous sense an original thinker. But that limitation, if such it is, does not matter; nor is it a problem that to Biow, invoking the title of a work by Mikhail Bakhtin, the text itself is at once dialogic and plurilingual. For, all else apart, what here is so important is what Biow sees as Vasari's commitment to certain key ideas, mulled over again and again, as he describes this, with relentless persistence.

It is five such ideas, Vasari's words as they are described in the title, that are the focus of this study. And whatever other reservations about what Vasari wrote that Biow recognises, he sees this text as a vital document in the history of ideas, waiting to be dissected, to borrow the phrases once used by of Raymond Williams – and Biow repeats them – to understand the vocabulary of a culture and society. This here Biow produces by a close and contextualised reading of Vasari's text, if then he adds, perhaps unnecessarily, that he hopes this enquiry can be effective for readers not fluent in sixteenth-century prose yet curious about Vasari, about the artists he spoke of and about the Renaissance as a whole. Little of the original Italian text, we might note, is cited in the body of this book. Yet, in its place, what we have is an account of these several words and phrases taken from the text, highlighted to underscore their frequency and to emphasise what Biow calls their pervasive yet subtle linguistic power and the cluster of associations they bring with them. Perhaps some of the terms encountered here will seem to be, as Biow acknowledges, untranslatable; *disegno*, for example, or drawing, or *grazia*, or grace, a polysemous word as he puts it, used as it is in the text of Baldassare Castiglione, to mean everything from a theological gift to the qualities of someone born with charm and

with the ability, without training, to do something brilliantly. Or then the familiarly elusive term *sprezzatura*, to cite Castiglione again, where as Biow puts it, nonchalance or insouciance or being cool, simply will not do. But such familiar difficulties can easily be dealt with and, for all the linguistic detail here, there should be no problem, as indeed Biow hopes, for anyone, general readers included, to understand what Vasari was saying when he used such terms and phrases within his text. I should add that Biow does not need, for his purpose, to decide one way or another how much or how little of the final text was written by Vasari himself or by his more scholarly friends.

This then is his purpose and this is the way in which Biow approaches his task, choosing to consider a few terms interestingly different in their implications. He begins with the word profession, *professione*, about which as an idea and practice, as he notes, there was an ever-growing interest in the XVIth century; here he is able to refer to a general text on the subject by Tomazo Garzoni, published in 1585-7. What then follows – and this is the method of this study – is a documentation, in what we might call an encyclopaedic way, of examples of the term found in the text, as when in one footnote Biow lists as many as forty-six artists spoken of as being experts within the profession of the visual arts. From such a tally of instances, exhaustive as it is, Biow is able to document the range of meanings this term could carry and then, as importantly, the particular significance of this idea when applied to individual artists. Of Leonardo, for example, Vasari said that he wanted his full profession to be painting, whereby, he practised all those others in which *disegno* might play its part, sculpture, drawings of ground plans in architecture, designs of flour mills and the like. Of Raphael, supreme professional that he was, Vasari noted that he was concerned to have masters in his workshop, experts capable in their own specialities, one in stucco, another in grotesques, another in foliage, another in festoons, another in historical narratives and others in other things. Such professionals, Biow comments, might then inevitably be judged by other professionals, the very idea of such practices, now so recognised, inviting certain boundaries and what, citing modern studies of professionalism, he speaks of as an ethics of duty, a field of expertise with its own defined jurisdictional claims. Hence the supreme importance of this idea of the profession throughout this text, where, as we might expect, it is Michelangelo who comes to stand as the epitome of both artistic and professional success, with his universal ability, as Vasari put it, in every art and every profession. Three crowns or three circlets, it is noted, were intertwined in the allegories of his funerary monument, to suggest that in all these three professions, painting, sculpture and architecture, the crown of human perfection was justly due to him.

After profession, in Biow's chapters, comes genius, *ingegno*; after genius, speed, *prestezza*; after speed, time, *tempo*; after time, night, *notte*. These are not, at first sight, terms immediately familiar within the critical language of the visual arts in the Renaissance and yet all of them, in Biow's account, could exemplify what, in other contexts, Vasari spoke of often as the difficulties of art. *Ingegno* can, of course,

be seen as a part of all general criticism, taken as a notion to operate across the many fields of cultural activity. But here Biow examines this idea in what he calls its professional, pedagogical, creative and institutional contexts, less, we might say, from the language of humanism than from the practical details of workshop actions. Here again Biow can range far and wide for his evidence but at the end, whereas earlier he had crowned Michelangelo for his *ingegno*, here it was the Accademia del Disegno that Vasari chose to praise in conclusion as the institutional defence of this idea within the culture, defined in ways that recognized it essentially as a part of material practices.

From here Biow considers the idea of the speed, *prestezza*, by which, very strikingly, it could be said that a work was praiseworthy – and an example is a large canvas Vasari himself produced for Don Francesco de' Medici – for having been done with great speed, this being a token of artistic competence and authority. So too then, from this reference to a term depending on temporality, we can understand what Vasari says, at once with hope and despair, of the idea of time itself, its destructive onslaught, its relentless voracity. To which in the final chapter Biow, considering a more material aspect of the idea of time, speaks of what Vasari said about the visualisation of night, as in a picture he himself painted of Endymion. Again, as we might expect, it was in the practical aspects of this subject Vasari commented on, the effects of the moon in a particular image, or some pictures of night and fire by Girolamo Savoldo that are, as he put it, very beautiful. As Biow notes, it was Leonardo whom Vasari described as first painting in what could be called a dark manner, thereby to be held up for great praise. And if Raphael, in a picture like the Deliverance of St. Peter, was able to capture the sheen on the armour of the guards seen in the darkness, surpassing everyone within the profession of the arts, it was again Michelangelo, stepping beyond in his sculpture of the image of Night, who produced the supreme image of this idea, not one of nocturnal darkness as merely a span of time but, as Biow puts it summarizing Vasari, of immortalized, funereal sleep.

It is thus, amidst these particular terms and such many examples from the text, seen here in their fuller contexts, that the special value of this study resides. At one level, as Biow admits, it is an examination of language and the way also that Vasari, in true humanist fashion, demonstrated in his examples the idea of the institutionalisation of art that was so important in his account of the artistic culture of the moment. This is important and interesting and easy for any reader to recognise. Yet in thinking about what Biow does here in his readings we might also ponder the history of such linguistic examinations of Vasari's text, so notably opened up by Paola Barocchi the great scholar of Vasari, in her edition of the two versions of his life of Michelangelo, published in 1962 and then continued, if not completed, in the volumes, listing all the terms he used and their frequency, begun in 1994 under the patronage of the Accademia della Crusca and the Scuola Normale in Pisa. Now, later, we are fortunate to have access to an electronic data base for the text of Vasari, *L'arte*, produced by the Scuola Normale in Pisa as part of what on

their web site is called a laboratory of the cultural patrimony of Italy. Here any word or phrase in Vasari is immediately accessible in all its instances. This allows us a different and easily usable way to enter into what Vasari wrote, and, as I know – as I am sure does also Biow – offering a more efficient and comprehensive method to find particular terms as they appear in this text. But with a proviso; that, to understand fully the meanings these words and phrases carry with them, we should every instance back to the text to recognise fully the delicate shades of meaning implied in each particular instance. All ways of doing things have their advantages and disadvantages; here in this study what we might think of as both the encyclopaedic and the more general ways of reading Vasari are thoroughly and nicely balanced.

**David Cast** was educated at Oxford University and Columbia where he completed his dissertation under the supervision of Rudolf Wittkower. He has taught at Yale, Cornell and, for the last thirty years, at Bryn Mawr College. His work is centred on the language of criticism in the Renaissance, architectural theory in England in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries and English painting in the XXth century. His most recent publication is: *Observation: Notation: Selected Writings of Andrew Forge, 1955-2002*, New York 2018. Relevant to this review is his paper 'Vasari on the Practical' in Philip Jacks (ed.) *Vasari's Florence: Artists and Literati at the Medicean Court*, Cambridge 1998.

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