GIORGIOVASARI
1511-74

Born in Arezzo, a town in Central Italy, Vasari was apprenticed to Michelangelo in Florence and became an ardent follower and admirer of his master's style. His first version of a collection of artists' lives appeared in 1549-50; the second and enlarged edition was printed in 1568. Vasari was an excellent artist and architect in his own right, enjoying the patronage of the Medici Grand Dukes of Tuscany. He was named architect of the Palazzo Vecchio, where he painted a number of important frescoes; he started the construction of the building now known as the Uffizi Museum; and he founded the Academy of Design in 1563. Most of his work, including Michelangelo's tomb in the Cathedral of Santa Croce in Florence, reflects the Florentine Mannerist style of his times.

Vasari's collection of artists' biographies constitutes his most lasting contribution to Renaissance culture. It ranges from Cimabue to his own day, includes most of the artists we continue to remember, and contains a wide range of fascinating stories, anecdotes, and artistic judgments. To Vasari we owe the general view of Renaissance painting still held today—the view of a progressive development from the early infancy of art (the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, represented by Cimabue and Giotto) to a period of youthful vigor (the fifteenth century of Donatello, Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, and Masaccio), followed by the mature period of perfection, dominated by Leonardo, Raphael, and, most of all, Vasari's teacher, Michelangelo. The grand design of the work—the progress of the arts leading inexorably from the revolutionary new discoveries of Giotto through the rise of perspective to the perfection of Michelangelo—constituted a perspective upon Italian Renaissance art that has not lost its appeal after four centuries. Perhaps more than any other writer, Vasari, who lived in the twilight age of that period, was supremely aware that a renaissance had occurred in Italy. In fact, his work popularized the concept of artistic rebirth, and when the term "Renaissance" was eventu-
Preface to Part One

I realize it is a commonly accepted opinion among most writers that sculpture, as well as painting, was first discovered from Nature by the peoples of Egypt; and that others attribute to the Chaldeans the first rough carvings in marble and the first reliefs in statuary; and still others assign to the Greeks the invention of the brush and the use of colors. But I believe that design, which is the basis of both arts, or rather the very soul which conceives and nourishes within itself all the aspects of the intellect, existed in absolute perfection at the origin of all other things when Almighty God, having created the great body of the world and having decorated the heavens with its brightest lights, descended with His intellect further down into the clarity of the atmosphere and the solidity of the earth, and by shaping man, discovered in this pleasing invention of things the first form of sculpture and painting. For who will deny that from man, as from a true model, statues and sculptures were carved out along with the difficulties of various poses and their surroundings or that from the first paintings, whatever they might have been, came the ideas of grace, unity, and the discordant harmonies which are produced by lights and shadows? Thus, the first model from which issued the first image of man was a mass of earth; and not without reason, for the Divine Architect of time and Nature, being all perfect, wished to demonstrate in the imperfection of His materials the means to subtract or add to them, just as good sculptors and painters are accustomed to do when by adding or subtracting from their models, they bring their imperfect drafts to the state of refinement and perfection they seek.

I am convinced that anyone who will discreetly ponder this question will agree with me, as I have said above, that the origin of these arts was Nature itself, that the inspiration or model was the beautiful fabric of the world, and that the master who taught us was that divine intelligence infused in us by a special act of grace which has made us superior not only to other animals but even similar, if I may be permitted to say so, to God Himself. And if in our own times (as I hope to demonstrate further on with numerous examples), simple children, cruelly brought up in the wilderness, have begun to draw by themselves, using as their models only those beautiful pictures and sculptures from Nature, is it not much more probable and believable that the first men—being much less far away from the moment of their divine creation, more perfect, and of greater intellect, taking Nature as their guide, with the purest of intellects as their master, and the world as their beautiful model—originated these most noble arts, and improving them little by little finally brought them from such humble beginnings to perfection?

But since Fortune, when she has carried men to the top of her wheel, either for amusement or out of regret for what she has done, usually returns them to the bottom; it came to pass after these developments that almost all of the barbarian nations in various parts of the world rose up against the Romans, and, as a result, in a brief time not only did they bring down so great an empire but they ruined everything, especially in Rome itself. With Rome's fall the most excellent craftsmen, sculptors, painters, and architects were likewise destroyed, leaving their crafts and their very persons buried and submerged under the miserable ruins and the disasters that befell that most illustrious city. Painting and sculpture were the first to go to ruin, since they are arts that serve to delight us more than anything else; and the other one, that is architecture, since it was necessary and useful to the welfare of the body, continued, but now without its former perfection and goodness. Had it not been for the fact that painting and sculpture represented before the eyes of the newly born those men who had in that way been immortalized, the very memory of one or the other of these arts would soon have been erased. Some men were commemorated by images and by inscriptions placed upon private or public buildings, such as amphitheaters, theaters, baths, aqueducts, temples, obelisks, coliseums, pyramids, arches, reservoirs, and treasuries, and finally upon tombs themselves, but the majority of these were destroyed by savage barbarians, who had nothing human about them save their appearance and their name.

But what was the most infinitely harmful and damaging to the above-mentioned professions, even more so than the things noted earlier, was the fervent zeal of the new Christian religion, which, after a lengthy and bloody struggle, had finally beaten down and annihilated the ancient religion of the pagans by means of a multiplicity of miracles and the sincerity of its actions. Then with great fervor and diligence it strove to remove and completely to destroy on every side the slightest little thing from which sin might arise; and not only did it destroy or pull to the ground all the marvelous statues, sculptures, paintings, mosaics, and
ornaments of the false pagan gods, but it also did away with the memorials and the testimonials to an infinite number of illustrious persons, in honor of whom statues and other memorials had been constructed in public places by the genius of antiquity. Besides this, in order to build churches for Christian worship, not only did the Christians destroy the most honored temples of the pagan idols, but, in order to ennoble and adorn St. Peter's with more ornaments than it originally possessed, they plundered the columns of stone on the Tomb of Hadrian, now called the Castel Sant'Angelo, as well as many other monuments which we today see in ruins. And although the Christian religion did not do such things out of any hatred for genius but only to condemn and cast down the gods of the pagans, the complete destruction of these honorable professions, which entirely lost their ways of doing things, was nevertheless the result of this ardent zeal.

Up to now, I have discussed the beginnings of sculpture and painting, perhaps at greater length than was necessary at this point; I have done so not because I was carried away by my love for the arts but rather because I was moved by the desire to be of some good use to our own artists. By showing them how the arts had reached the summit of perfection after such humble beginnings, and how they had fallen into complete ruin from such a noble height (and consequently how the nature of these arts resembles that of the others, which like our human bodies are born, grow up, become old, and die), they will now more easily be able to recognize the progress of art's rebirth and the state of perfection to which it has again ascended in our own times.

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In the first book of his Lives, Vasari offers biographical sketches, descriptions of various works, and aesthetic judgments on some thirty-four painters, sculptors, and architects who lived and worked in Italy between the mid-thirteenth century and the first decades of the fifteenth century. These include Cimabue, Giotto, Simone Martini, Orcagna, Niccolò and Giovanni Pisano, and Duccio. Towering over them all in importance, however, is the figure of Giotto (1266–1337), whom Vasari believed was almost personally responsible for the rebirth of painting. About Giotto, Vasari says: "That same debt which painters owe to Nature, which continuously serves as a model to those who, selecting its best and most beautiful parts in order to reproduce and imitate them, strive always to do their best, is also owed, in my opinion, to Giotto, the Florentine painter; for when the methods and outlines of good painting had been buried for so many years by the destruction of wars, he alone, although born among inept artists, through God's grace, revived what
second period there is a clear improvement in invention and execution, with a better design and style and more careful completion; and so artists cleaned off the rust from the old style, along with the stiffness and lack of proportion typical of the crudeness of that time which had brought it on. But who would dare to say that in this second period there existed a single artist perfect in everything, and who had brought things up to the standards of today in invention, design, and coloring? And who has observed in their works the soft shading away of figures with the darkness of coloring, the light being left to shine only on the parts in relief, and likewise who has observed in their works the perforations and certain exceptional finishes on the marble statues which are produced today? This kind of praise clearly belongs to the third period, and I may safely declare that its art has achieved everything which could possibly be permitted to an imitator of Nature, and that it has risen so high that there is no more reason to fear its decline than to expect further improvements. Considering these matters carefully in my own mind, I consider this to be a property and a peculiarity of these arts that from humble beginnings they finally reach perfection. . . .

Now that we have, in a manner of speaking, taken these three arts away from their nursemaid and they have survived their infancy, there follows the second period, during which everything is seen to improve enormously. Inventions are more elaborately filled with figures and are richer in ornamentation; and design is more often firmly grounded and more natural and lifelike, and besides the finishing touches even in works executed with less expertise but more thoughtful diligence, the style is lighter, and the colors are more charming and very little remains to bring all things to complete perfection, so that they imitate exactly the truth of Nature. For in the first place, by the study and diligence of the great master Filippo Brunelleschi, architecture rediscovered the measurements and proportions of the ancients, as much in round columns as in square pilasters and the rough and smooth exterior corners; then it distinguished between the different architectural orders, and made obvious the difference between them; it required everything to be done according to rules, to follow them with greater orderliness, and to be partitioned by measurements; the power and the method of design grew, and bestowing upon these works a pleasing grace, the excellence of this art was made manifest. Architecture rediscovered the beauty and the variety of capitals and cornices in such a way that the plans of churches and other edifices were well conceived and the buildings themselves more ornate, magnificent, and most beautifully proportioned. This is evident in the stupendous structure of the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore.
that these arts were not only improved but were brought to the flower of their youth, giving promise of bearing that fruit which would come later and which in a short while would have attained its perfection.

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[Part Two of Vasari's Lives offers biographical sketches of over sixty artists, including Paolo Uccello, Masaccio, Ghiberti, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Piero della Francesca, Botticelli, Mantegna, and Fra Angelico.]

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Preface to Part Three

Those most excellent masters we have described to this point in Part Two of these Lives truly made enormous improvements in the arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture, adding to the accomplishments of the first period rule, order, proportion, design, and style; and if they were not perfect in everything, they were at least so close to the truth that the artists in the third group, whom we shall discuss from here on, were able, with the help of their illumination, to rise up and to reach the highest perfection, the proof of which we have in the finest and most celebrated modern works. But to clarify the quality of the improvements that these artists made, it will not be out of place to explain in a few words the five qualities I named above and to treat succinctly the origins of that true goodness which, after surpassing the ancient world, has made the modern age so glorious.

Rule then, in architecture is the means of measuring the antique monuments, following the plans of ancient edifices in modern works. Order is the distinction between one kind of style and another, so that each body has the members appropriate to it and there is no confusion between Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Tuscan Orders. Proportion in architecture as well as sculpture is universally considered to be the making of bodies with erect, upright figures with properly arranged members; and the same is true in painting. Design is the imitation of the most beautiful things in Nature in all figures, whether sculpted or painted; and this quality depends upon a steady hand and skill which reproduces everything the eye sees with great accuracy and precision on the same plane or design or on a sheet of paper, a panel, or another flat surface; and the same is true for relief in sculpture. Then style comes to be the most beautiful when the artist makes it a habit to copy beautiful

things and combines the most beautiful hands, heads, bodies, or legs together, and makes of all these beautiful qualities the most perfect figure possible, using it for all the figures in each of his works; and because of this it is said to be excellent.

Neither Giotto nor any of the artists of the first period did this, even though they had discovered the principles of all such artistic problems and had superficially resolved them, as in the case of design, which became truer than it had been before and more similar to Nature; thus the blending of colors and the composition of figures in narratives, and many other things, about which enough has already been said. But although the artists of the second period greatly improved the arts in the areas listed above, they nevertheless were not so thorough that they reached complete perfection, for they still lacked, within the boundaries of the rules, a freedom which—not being part of the rules—was nevertheless prescribed by them and which could coexist with order without causing confusion or spoiling it; and this required a copious invention in everything and a certain beauty down to the smallest detail which demonstrated all of this order with more decoration. In proportion, they lacked good judgment, which, without measuring the figures, bestows upon them a grace which goes beyond measurement. In design they did not reach the potential of its goal, for even when they made a rounded arm or a straight leg, there was no real understanding of the muscles and that charming and graceful facility which is partly seen and partially concealed in the flesh and in living things; and their figures were crude and stunted, which made them difficult to see and harsh in style. Moreover, they lacked a lightness in touch in making all their figures slender and graceful, especially those of women and children, which should have members as natural as those of men but with a plumpness and fleshiness that are not awkward like real bodies but created by design and judgment. They were also deficient in the abundance of beautiful costumes, the variety of imaginative details, the charm of their colors, the diversity of their dwellings, and the distance and variety in their landscapes. 

But their error was later clearly demonstrated by the works of Leonardo da Vinci, who introduced the third style, which we call modern; besides his bold and courageous design and his most subtle imitation of all the details of Nature, just exactly as they really are, his work possessed good rule, the best order, correct proportion, perfect design, and divine grace. Prolific in his work and profoundly knowledgeable in the arts, Leonardo may be said to have made his figures move and breathe. Somewhat later followed Giorgione of Castel Franco, who
shaded his pictures and gave everything in them an amazing sense of movement because of his use of depth of shade, which he well understood. Fra Bartolommeo of San Marco, who was by no means less skillful in giving to his own paintings a strength, relief, sweetness, and grace in color. But the most graceful of all was Raffaello of Urbino, who studied the accomplishments of both the ancient and the modern masters, taking the best from them all; and after doing so, he enriched the art of painting with that complete perfection reflected by the ancient works of Apelles and Zeuxis. . . . But the man who wins the palm among both dead and living artists, who transcends and surpasses them all, is the divine Michelangelo Buonarroti, who holds first place not only in one art but in all three at once. This man surpasses and overcomes not only all those artists who have almost surpassed Nature but even those same most celebrated ancient artists, who beyond all doubt surpassed Nature in so praiseworthy a fashion; and he alone has triumphed over ancient artists, modern artists, and over Nature itself.

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[The third part of the Lives treats another large group of artists, including Leonardo, Raphael, Correggio, Piero di Cosimo, Bramante, Andrea del Sarto, Giulio Romano, Domenico Beccafumi, Pontormo, Titian, and Vasari's own works. Interestingly, Cellini is only mentioned in the life of his archenemy Baccio Bandinelli and in the life of Michelangelo. The entire last section of the collection is dominated both in length and in importance by the towering figure of Michelangelo.]

NOTES

1. Vasari should have referred not to St. Peter's but to St. Paul's Outside the Walls, a major basilica in Rome.

2. Here Vasari presents his influential thesis on artistic "rebirth," the concept which has provided the period name for the epoch we remember as the Renaissance.

3. Florentine sculptor and architect (1377–1446), most famous for the design of the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore (the cathedral of Florence), the Pazzi Chapel at Florence's Santa Croce Church, and a number of important churches in the same city (Santo Spirito, San Lorenzo). His architectural style can be said to reflect both the principles of Italian humanism and a new awareness of the styles from classical antiquity.

4. The painter Masaccio (1401–c. 28) completed the famous Brancacci Chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, which became a model for all subsequent painters, just as Giotto's frescoes were imitated by artists of that earlier generation.

5. A Venetian painter (c. 1476–1510), perhaps most famous for the painting called The Tempest, now in the Accademia Museum of Venice.

6. Florentine painter (1472–1517).

7. Raphael, painter and architect from Urbino (1483–1520), best known for his decoration of the papal apartments at the Vatican (The School of Athens, The Disputation, and others), as well as his numerous portraits, altarpieces, and paintings.
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