Vasari and Vincenzo Borghini

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Vasari’s association with Don Vincenzo (or Vincenzio) Borghini, the Benedictine monk and scholar who was also one of Duke Cosimo de’ Medici’s most trusted advisors and civil servants, stretched from at least the end of the 1540s until the artist’s death in 1574. It was important not only for Vasari’s career as an artist and writer but for the history of European art as a whole: it is the most richly documented and probably the most richly productive instance of collaboration between an artist and an intellectual—a “literary” or “humanist” advisor—in the entire early modern period. Inasmuch as such collaboration had been recommended a century before by Leon Battista Alberti, and the ambition to enlarge the discursive scope of the visual arts by integrating literary and philosophical content was central to an emerging conception of art’s social function (a conception implicit in the idea of ut pictura poesis), the collaboration of Vasari and Borghini must be seen as one of the climactic episodes in the developmental trajectory of Renaissance art. Although their partnership consisted primarily of Borghini providing Vasari with thematic material for pictures and large decorative enterprises, it also took the form of joint work on the Lives, as well as a leading role in the formation and early development of the Accademia del Disegno, the first formally incorporated and state-sponsored academy of art.

Borghini’s Life and Scholarly Interests

Borghini (1515–80) made his profession of faith at the Badia (Benedictine Abbey) of Florence at the age of 16, shortly after the end of the traumatic siege that had returned the city to Medici control. There, in addition to pursuing his religious calling, he received an excellent classical education. The Badia was a center of Greek scholarship, in particular, and Borghini’s training eventually led to collaboration with Pier Vettori, perhaps the greatest Italian philologist of the century, on some editions of Greek texts. The young monk also developed a close relationship with the Giunti, publishers and booksellers, who rented their shops from the Badia and helped to supply it with books. This connection provided him with the means of following developments in scholarship, publishing, and printmaking all over Europe.

Duke Cosimo turned to some of the leading members of the Badia community for practical help with the changes he sought to bring about in Florence. As part of a
comprehensive reform of charitable institutions begun in the early 1540s, he appointed the Abbot of the Badia, Isadoro da Montaguto, to the priorship of Santa Maria Nuova, the city’s largest hospital. In 1552, Borghini, who had been Montaguto’s protégé, was made Prior of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, the city’s orphanage, a position he would retain until the end of his life. Borghini played a role in the ecclesiastical government of the city and served Cosimo as a principal advisor on issues related to monasteries and convents throughout Tuscany but, just as importantly, he was the leading member of a small circle who advised the duke on matters related to literature and the visual arts. Cosimo understood his principal challenge as ruler to be the transformation of Florence from a city-state with a centuries-old tradition of republican government into a “modern” nation-state, and he recognized that, in addition to institutional reform, such a process would have to involve a comprehensive shift of attitudes, the creation and active promotion of a new state ideology. Like most successful rulers, he understood the importance of representation to power, and the ways in which the patronage of literature and the visual arts might help him sustain and enhance his power, but it could be argued that—with the help of advisors such as Borghini—he exploited the potential of such patronage more searchingly and comprehensively than any previous ruler of early modern times. Borghini’s work for Cosimo documents an intensification of the single-mindedness and sophistication with which all forms of representation were instrumentalized for political purposes; it must thus be recognized as an important episode in the history of the relationship between politics and culture. His collaboration with Vasari was an important part of that work, but only part.1

As a scholar, Borghini devoted his attention to Florentine history, language, and literature. His work on the early history of the city seems to have been prompted and sustained in large part by a conflict between Duke Cosimo and the d’Este dukes of Ferrara over the issue of precedence at the imperial and papal courts.2 The d’Este claimed that their feudal titles were of greater antiquity than those of the Medici; in response, the Florentines argued, *inter alia*, for the greater antiquity of their city. Borghini and the other scholars involved were compelled to find as much objective support as possible for the claim that Florence had been founded by ancient Romans: they drew upon textual and epigraphic, as well as monumental archaeological evidence. Borghini studied the remains of ancient buildings in the city, and developed a complicated rationalization for the legend that the Baptistry had been a temple of Mars.3

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2 The controversy erupted in 1541 and was only officially settled in 1569, when Cosimo was awarded the title Grand Duke of Tuscany. The best account is still Santi, 1897.

3 Borghini’s treatise “Dell’origine della città di Firenze” was published posthumously, in 1584–85, edited by a committee of his scholarly executors. A modern edition is Manni, 1808–09. Borghini became involved in a controversy with another Florentine scholar, Girolamo Mei, who believed that the ancient city had occupied a different site, and that modern Florence had been founded in medieval times. Although Mei was soon proved wrong about the location of the city, his doubts about Borghini’s
Borghini’s work on the history of the Florentine patriciate was also motivated by the social transformation occurring under Cosimo. The consolidation of ducal authority involved the systematic dismantling of the power traditionally enjoyed by the old families that had taken a leading role in the government of the Republic; at the same time, their support was essential to the viability of the regime. The old families were anxious to preserve whatever prerogatives and tokens of status they could; Cosimo’s position in the precedence controversy, moreover, required his being able to show that Florence had a large and energetic “nobility,” that while his own family might not have the ancient pedigree of the d’Este, the city over which he ruled was conspicuous for its virtù. Borghini’s collection of information about the leading families thus reaffirmed their importance while supporting Cosimo’s agenda; it had a domestic significance, but also a significance in the international context of the precedence controversy. And in the same way that his research into the origins of the city led him to examine the vestiges of ancient ruins, his interest in family history led him to the study of heraldry, including the archaeological evidence of coats of arms positioned all over the city.4

Borghini’s depth and originality as a scholar are most evident in his study of vernacular language and literature. Concern with clarifying and codifying rules for all aspects of the language we now call Italian was widespread in sixteenth-century Italy; the Florentines thought of that language as their own—la lingua fiorentina—and regarded its great literary tradition, represented by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, as a fundamental feature of their cultural identity. A private literary academy that had been established for the study and cultivation of the vernacular was made over at Cosimo’s order into an official organ of state, the Accademia Fiorentina, and charged with the task of publishing authoritative editions of classic texts, as well as contemporary scholarly works that would demonstrate the literary potential of the vernacular and the primacy of Florence in determining standards of correct and elegant usage. Borghini was not a member of the Accademia Fiorentina: though his work was closely related, his approach was in some respects distinctive. More than the great canonical texts that were the primary object of study for the academicians, he examined all kinds of literary artifacts: chronicles, diaries, letters, record books, translations, and popular writings of various kinds. His real object was the language itself: for him, the great classics of the fourteenth century, such as the Divine Comedy or the Decameron, were ultimately documents of the spoken language at a privileged—what we would call “classic”—moment in its development. He had an extraordinarily acute sense of the way the language had changed over time, and came to believe that from the period of its pristine perfection in the Trecento, it had gradually been corrupted by the introduction of words and grammatical forms from other parts of Italy. While lingua was in decline, however, verbal and literary artifice—arte—had improved, preserving and refining the best linguistic forms, so that the rules of good speech and writing, while no longer to be gathered

belief that the Baptistry had been an ancient temple were fully justified: see Rubinstein, 1967; Wazbinski, 1980; Williams, 1988, esp. 82–89, 96–105; Moyer, 2003; and Carrara, 2007.

from everyday usage, were still recuperable. This conception of the relationship of language to literature sheds light on the idea of the historical progress of art developed in Vasari’s Lives.

The single most important product of Borghini’s philological work was an edition of the Decameron, together with a volume of commentary, published in 1573–74, the first version of the scandalous classic to conform to Tridentine directives. This project was another example of Borghini’s service to Cosimo. The Duke (by now Grand Duke of Tuscany) had secured papal permission for the “authorized” version of the text to be published in Florence, by Florentine scholars, and appointed a three-man committee, headed by Borghini, to oversee the editing. Although the book was not published under Borghini’s name, but rather as the joint effort of the committee, the documentary evidence suggests that it was primarily his work. He was also involved in the publication of other old Tuscan texts, such as the Novellino, and of the chronicle called the Istorie Pistoiese, which he commended to readers for its purity of style as well as for the historical information it contained. Due to his habit of not taking credit in print, his role in other similar projects is often difficult to determine.

Borghini as an Iconographer

Borghini’s earliest creative involvement with the visual arts seems to have been the design of two imprese for the Giunti in 1548: the first to symbolize the publisher’s renewed commitment to higher standards of accuracy, the second for use in editions of texts based on the study of manuscripts in the ducal collection. He would go on to design many imprese, as well as rovesci (emblematic images modeled on the reverses of ancient coins), some of which were actually used as the reverses of medals struck to commemorate Cosimo’s outstanding achievements. The design of imprese had become something of a fashionable pastime among intellectuals; it was sufficiently widespread to generate a body of theoretical writing, which Borghini read avidly and with great critical discretion, commenting in his notes upon those inventions he found either successful or not. In addition to imprese for public purposes, he designed them for the covers of his own notebooks, and one for his seal as Prior of the Ospedale degli Innocenti.

Early in 1562, Vasari was entrusted by Cosimo with the refurbishment of the largest room in the Palazzo Vecchio, which during the republican period had been called the

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5 On Borghini the philologist, see Barbi, 1889; Croce, 1945; Scrivano, 1965; Mazzacurati, 1967; Woodhouse, 1971; Pozzi, 1975; Pozzi, 2005. On Borghini’s relation to the Academy, see Scorza, 1995. On his theory of linguistic development, see esp. Woodhouse, 1967; and Woodhouse, 1971.
7 For the most recent overview of his editorial activity, see Belloni and Drusi, 2002, 167–347.
8 Scorza, 1989; Belloni and Drusi, 2002, 72–89 (Scorza).
Sala del Maggior Consiglio or Sala dei Cinquecento, and which the duke now intended to use as a throne room and audience hall (Fig. 2.1). In addition to the fresco decoration of the walls, the plan called for an immense wooden ceiling with 42 painted panels set in an elaborately carved frame. A fully developed iconographical program for the ceiling, worked out with Borghini’s help, was presented to the Duke early in 1563. The program would undergo revision several times before the project was completed in October 1565: some of the changes were ordered by Cosimo himself, who followed the progress of the work carefully. In its final form, the decoration consisted of four thematic elements: scenes representing 1) the war between the Florentine Republic and Pisa at the end of the fifteenth century, 2) the more recent war against Siena, led by Cosimo, 3) the foundation and early history of Florence, and 4) the administrative divisions (quartieri) of the city, the Tuscan territories subject to Florence and, in the very center, an apotheosis of the duke himself. The scenes from the Pisa War emphasized the continuity of the ducal regime with the old Republic, while the scenes of Cosimo’s campaign against Siena demonstrated his worthiness as successor to the tradition of the Republic. The quartieri and subject territories, together with the central scene, represented the new territorial state and administrative structure Cosimo had devoted himself to creating.

The pictures illustrating the origin and early history of Florence were the most difficult part of the program to resolve, and the one in which Borghini’s historical expertise was most crucial. They touched upon issues central to the precedence controversy, and were chosen in such a way as to support the argument that Cosimo and his advisors had developed in favor of Florence. The scene representing the foundation of the city, for instance, drew upon Borghini’s own research into the city’s Roman origins: it even featured a reconstruction of the Baptistery as a temple of Mars. In their finished form, with explanatory tituli, these pictures helped to make the decoration as a whole a carefully researched, comprehensive, and articulate political statement, a visual expression of the ideology of the new Tuscan state.

While work on the ceiling was in progress, Cosimo negotiated the marriage of his son and heir, Francesco, to the Imperial Princess Johanna (known in Florence as Giovanna d’Austria). The match had been sought by Cosimo in part to elevate the status of the Medici principate and was closely linked to the precedence controversy, since, at the same time, Prince Alfonso d’Este had obtained the hand of Giovanna’s older sister. Cosimo wanted to make sure that the lavishness of the Florentine ceremonies connected with the wedding outdid those in Ferrara, and charged Borghini with planning the formal entry of the bride into the city. Starting from his knowledge of ancient triumphal processions, Borghini set to work reading descriptions of comparable ceremonies that had taken place all over Europe during the preceding decades, carefully choosing and adapting elements that he thought were appropriate. He soon devised, down to the last iconographical detail, an extraordinarily elaborate spectacle. Giovanna was to enter the city, greeted by dignitaries, and escorted past or through a series of 12 temporary structures, some of them multi-story-high triumphal arches, made to look as if built of stone and decorated with sculpture of fictive marble and gilt bronze, as well as with paintings, all executed by teams of artists working under the supervision of Vasari.
Figure 2.1  Giorgio Vasari and collaborators, general view of the Salone dei Cinquecento, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY
This page has been left blank intentionally. To view Figure 2.1 as a double-page spread, please refer to the printed version of this book.
Each structure was dedicated to a specific theme, with the iconography designed to amplify that theme in the manner of an oration or celebratory poem. Flanking the huge arch at Giovanna’s point of entrance to the city, for instance, were painted scenes in which illustrious Tuscans in different fields of achievement, such as arms and letters, were shown as if approaching the new bride in order to pay her homage. Sculptures of figures from ancient myth appeared atop each scene—over the men of arms, for instance, was a figure of Mars—and ornamenting the columns dividing them were rovesci thematically related to the scenes as well. Over the arch itself was a figure of Florence, flanked by personifications of fidelity and affection, the whole surmounted by a painted impressa, halcyon birds making their nest in the sea with the sun in the sign of Capricorn and the motto “hoc fidunt,” signifying that, as the halcyon birds of ancient myth could trust to the calmness of the sea, so, under the rule of Cosimo—who regarded Capricorn as the zodiacal sign of his reign—the newly married couple, together with Florence as a whole, could hope to enjoy peace and prosperity.11

After months of feverish work, the entry took place on 16 December 1565. The procession made its way slowly along the prescribed route to the Palazzo Vecchio and finally concluded when the principal participants entered the Sala dei Cinquecento, the ceiling of which had been completed only weeks before. Impressive though the ephemeral decoration must have been, the complexity of the symbolic imagery made it difficult even for some learned viewers to understand. Although the Medici would sponsor many similar kinds of public events in the subsequent decades, the iconography was never quite as arcane or elaborate again: Borghini’s scheme for the entry of 1565 must thus be regarded as the most complex iconographical program of the Renaissance, a kind of high-water mark in the ambition to push the discursive potential of visual imagery—its capacity to sustain complex conceptual content—to its limit.

The Sala dei Cinquecento and the entry of Giovanna d’Austria are the most conspicuous examples of the way in which Borghini helped to shape the public image of the Medici regime, but he was involved in other such projects. Altogether smaller in scale, yet also calculated to impress, and noteworthy for its complexity and sophistication of conception, is the Studiolo of Prince Francesco, a Kunstkammer just off the Sala dei Cinquecento (Fig. 2.2). Charged by the prince with the task of decorating the room, Vasari turned to Borghini for the iconographical program, as well as to other artists for help with its execution. The room was to be adorned with frescoes, bronze figures, and 34 painted panels, arranged on two levels, to cover the walls and doors of the cabinets in which the prince’s curiosities were kept. Borghini had to find subjects suitable for the kinds of objects Francesco owned, but also to give the decoration as a whole some kind of conceptual unity. The process by which he did so, while also striving to satisfy the demand for thematic variety and interest, is revealingly documented in his letters to Vasari.12

11 The most detailed account of the entry in English is Starn and Partridge, 1993; the original descriptions are Mellini, 1566, and Cini, 1878–85. For a learned and perceptive analysis of Borghini’s creative process, see Scorza, 1981.
12 For the essential information about the Studiolo, see Allegri and Cecchi, 1980, 323–350; the development of the program is discussed in detail by Schaefer, 1976, esp. 17–59.
Figure 2.2  Giorgio Vasari and collaborators, Studiolo of Francesco I, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY
The program that he worked out is organized around the idea of the relationship of art to nature, and a fresco representing art and nature occupies the center of the vault, serving as a kind of key to the decoration as a whole. The subjects illustrated on the four sides of the room are arranged according to the four elements. On the wall devoted to fire, for instance, are, on the upper level, crafts involving fire, from goldsmithy and bronze casting, to glassmaking and the manufacture of gunpowder; below them are, for the most part, mythological or historical scenes involving the materials, processes, or products of those crafts. In some cases, the links are quite tenuous: underneath goldsmithy, for instance is a scene that seems to illustrate nothing more specific than the sacking of a city and the heaping up of booty, amidst which golden vessels are conspicuous. By nimbly and resourcefully drawing upon his wide-ranging erudition, Borghini was thus able to give the haphazard array of objects that Francesco had acquired the appearance of collective necessity, and make it into a symbol of the order of nature as a whole.

Borghini also conceived the iconographical program for the vast fresco in the dome of the Cathedral of Florence, representing the Last Judgment (Fig. 2.3). Commissioned by Cosimo in 1571, the painting was begun by Vasari the next year but left unfinished.

Figure 2.3 Giorgio Vasari, Federico Zuccaro, and collaborators, complete view of the fresco in the cupola of the Duomo (Santa Maria del Fiore), Florence. Photo credit: Nicolo Orsi Battaglini / Art Resource, NY
at his death in 1574 and completed by Federico Zuccaro in 1579. Borghini’s original program indicates his awareness of the importance of the site and the commission, and thus of the necessity of creating something especially impressive. Adapting his imagination to the awkward, eight-sided configuration of the vault, Borghini came up with an arrangement that obviously owes some of its compositional principles to the mosaics in the vault of the Baptistry of Florence, so that the frescoes celebrate the continuity of Florentine art while also demonstrating the process by which, in Florence, the arts had been revived and brought to perfection, the process that Vasari himself had chronicled in his great book.\footnote{Acidini, 1998, 2: 65–97; Acidini et al., 1995. The text of Borghini’s program was published in Guasti, 1857, 432–444.}

Each of the eight sides is divided into five horizontal registers. The uppermost forms the heavenly Jerusalem, which is shown as if held aloft by angels just beneath its lower edge. The eight faces of the vault are each given over to one of the orders of angels: the cherubim and seraphim are grouped immediately over Christ on one face, so that the remaining seven orders are divided among the remaining seven faces. In the next register are Christ, on the principal, easternmost face, and the assemblies of the blessed, arranged according to category, over the remaining seven. In the fourth register are allegorical figures, three on each face: a virtue, a beatitude, and a gift of the Holy Spirit, corresponding to the classes of the blessed above them. In the lowermost region is a view of hell and the punishments of the damned, each face dominated by a mortal sin, and with punishments based on those described in Dante’s \textit{Inferno}. There are other allegorical features as well: immediately under Christ’s feet, for instance, is a celestial globe, with a putto driving a spike into it to signify the movements of the heavens coming to a stop and thus the end of time. Michelangelo’s \textit{Last Judgment} in the Sistine Chapel had been widely criticized for what was felt to be an inappropriate use of allegorical imagery: Borghini’s carefully contrived program for the dome of Florence Cathedral seems to have been intended to show how such allegorical elements might be introduced properly, and thus to offer an implicit critique of—and improvement upon—the work of Michelangelo that Vasari regarded as the single greatest masterpiece of modern art.

The projects thus far discussed represent only the most important of those in which Borghini was involved. Among the others was the funeral of Cosimo I in 1574.\footnote{Borsook, 1965–66; Scorza, 2002, 97–103.} He also invented a complex iconographical program for the painted decoration of a large room in the Casino Mediceo, a building sometimes used by Prince Francesco for forays into scientific research—and thus related to the Studiolo—although the project was not carried out until much later.\footnote{Kliemann, 1978.} Borghini provided Vasari with advice on projects not associated with the Medici, such as the decorations in the Sala Regia and Torre dei Venti in the Vatican Palace;\footnote{Frey and Frey, 1930, 2: 744–747, 800–805.} he also furnished Vasari with inventions for individual easel pictures.\footnote{The Forge of Vulcan, now in the Uffizi, for example: Belloni and Drusi, 2002, 103–107 (Scorza).} Extensive as it is, the surviving documentation probably does not fully account for the range of Borghini’s activity as an artistic advisor. In 1565–66, for instance, Duke Cosimo commissioned Vasari to undertake the redecoration of the churches of
Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce, a vast project that involved the removal of the old rood screens and almost all of the old altars, together with their decoration, and the installation of new ones. We know that Borghini offered Vasari iconographical advice about some of the new altarpieces, and given his role as both an advisor on monastic as well as artistic matters, it seems very unlikely that he did not have an important role in planning the entire enterprise, yet there is no solid evidence that he did.  

The Accademia del Disegno

The Accademia del Disegno seems to have had its origin in an effort, led by the sculptor Giovanni Angelo Montorsoli, to revive the old Compagnia di San Luca, a medieval confraternity of painters. According to the account in the Lives, Vasari intervened, asking the duke to show his support for the arts of design by sponsoring the creation of a new organization, an academy similar to the Accademia Fiorentina, which would be composed of a select group of the city’s leading artists. Statutes were drafted under the supervision of Lelio Torelli, Cosimo’s chief legal advisor and architect of many of his administrative reforms, and Borghini seems to have had input into the process. The new organization was formally chartered and held its first meeting in January 1563: the members acknowledged Cosimo as their “leader, guide, and protector,” immediately electing Borghini as the duke’s official representative (luogotenente).

The original aim of the Academy, as Vasari described it, was to instruct young artists and to encourage established ones to perfect their skills “through honorable and praiseworthy competition.” Drawing classes and contests, as well as instruction in subjects such as geometry and anatomy, were part of its program, but Borghini seems to have spent much of his time reminding the artists of their responsibility to serve the duke and to behave in an orderly and cooperative manner. He took a hard line toward those who expressed dissatisfaction, and was dismissive of artists’ attempts at theorizing, telling them, at one point, that theirs was an academy “for doing and not for talking.” The new organization was beset by all sorts of internal tensions, and the statutes had to be rewritten several times in the years following its foundation.

The first major artistic project in which the Academy was involved was the funeral of Michelangelo in 1564. When the master died, Borghini and Vasari immediately set about arranging for a large public event, peremptorily dismissing the apparent wishes of Michelangelo’s own family for a modest private ceremony. They obtained ducal permission to stage the spectacle in the Medici family church of San Lorenzo, and although the magnificent ephemeral decorations were ostensibly a joint offering by the Florentine artistic community, a number of the participants resented the manner in which Borghini and Vasari assumed control of the project: some of the sculptors, led

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18 Belloni and Drusi, 2002, 129–139 (Scorza). Sanleolini, 1578, 75–76v, contains an ode in praise of the redecoration of the churches, presented as if being recited by Borghini.
20 Lorenzoni, 1912, 14: “Academia di FARE e non di RAGIONARE” (Borghini’s emphasis).
by Benvenuto Cellini, withdrew from participation in protest. As the most elaborate public tribute ever accorded an artist, the ceremony certainly did help to increase the recognition of Michelangelo’s historical importance, as well as to make a case for the dignity and importance of the visual arts in general, but it also served the immediate purpose of promoting the new Academy and Cosimo’s role as its patron.

Despite its shaky start, the Academy soon attracted the attention of contemporaries all over Europe. In 1565, four Venetian artists, including Titian and Tintoretto, asked to be included in the membership; in 1567, King Philip II of Spain transmitted a request for advice about the completion of the Escorial. The Academy eventually came to absorb the authority and functions of the old guild and confraternity, completing a process of institutional transformation that, insofar as it documents the pressure to organize artistic labor in more rationalized and hierarchical form, might be said to mark a fundamental aspect of the shift from medieval to early modern art. Similar “official” academies began to appear all over Europe, the largest and most important being the Accademia di San Luca in Rome (founded in 1577), the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris (founded in 1648), and the Royal Academy of Art in London (founded in 1769). Because the artistic modernism of the nineteenth century rebelled so violently against the academies and values for which they stood, it is difficult for us to see that they were in fact early manifestations of modernity. Vasari and Borghini may have shown themselves to be pushy and domineering, but they deserve credit for having given birth to an idea whose time had come.

Borghini and Vasari’s Lives

Borghini was one of several literary men involved in the production of the first edition of Vasari’s Lives. The surviving documentation indicates that he participated in the last stages of revision and proofreading, and that Vasari entrusted him with seeing the book through publication in the early weeks of 1550. Recent efforts have been made to sustain the conjecture that he was involved much earlier than the record suggests, and had a more formative role in the creation of the book.

Whatever the degree of his involvement in the first edition, Borghini was Vasari’s principal collaborator in the preparation of the second, much enlarged edition, finally published in 1568, and in this venture his influence was profound and multifaceted. An addendum to the Lives had been promised in a postscript to the first edition, “an addition to the things contained in this volume, with the lives of those who are still living and are so advanced in years that one does not expect many new works from them.”

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21 For a recent account of the political machinations behind Michelangelo’s funeral, see Ruffini, 2011, 11–38.


23 On the differences between the first and second editions, see Scoti-Bertinelli, 1905; Kallab, 1908; Wazbinski, 1976; Williams, 1988; Rubin, 1995, esp. 187–230.

24 Unpaginated conclusion: “… una aggiunta di molte cose appartenente a questo volume, con le vite di que’ che vivono, et son tanti avanti con gli anni, che mal si puote oramai aspettar da loro molte più opere che le fatte.”
The wording suggests a simple supplement to the third part, the lives of contemporary artists, but the next evidence of work on the project indicates that it had been redefined much more ambitiously: a set of notes that Borghini made about fourteenth- and fifteenth-century pictures while on trips to San Gimignano and Volterra in 1557 and 1558 shows that a rewriting of the first two parts—and thus of the entire book—was now foreseen. Exactly when the decision thus to radically expand the project was made and who was responsible for it are uncertain, but evidence from the later phases of work on it, in which the importance of Borghini’s role in shaping it emerges very clearly, strongly suggests his influence. Given the interest that the first edition had attracted all over Europe, the decision to revise it completely may have been prompted in part by an entrepreneurial desire—understandable in someone with close ties to the publishing industry—to capitalize on a product with proven market potential.

The second edition expands both the temporal and geographical range of the book. Recent art is treated much more extensively, in the form of full biographies, in the case of deceased artists, and descriptions of the works of living ones. An attempt is made to chronicle artistic developments up to the last minute: the artists of the Accademia del Disegno, many of whom were still quite young, are discussed in a composite account near the end, and there is also an extensive description, written by Giovanni Battista Cini, a literary associate of Borghini’s, of the entry of Giovanna d’Austria, in which the members of the Academy had collaborated. At the same time, another scholar, the historian Giovanni Battista Adriani, was asked to provide an account of ancient art. Considerable effort was made to include more information about art in areas of Italy that Vasari had ignored or mentioned in only very summary fashion in the first edition. Borghini urged his collaborator to travel: “I would like you to have seen Genoa, Venice, Naples, Milan, and altogether as many things in each of these principal cities—paintings as well as sculpture and architecture—as possible, and to adorn your work with them.” Reminding him of what yet needed to be done, he also thought it important to emphasize the overall purpose of the book. He urged Vasari to put in order the things related to the living [artists], most of all the leading ones, so that the work may be finished and perfect in every part, and that it may be a universal HISTORY of all the paintings and sculpture of Italy, etc., for this is the aim of your efforts.

Although the emphasis is on Italy, Vasari had already begun to assemble information about Northern European art, and the second edition of the Lives makes an attempt, however inadequate, to represent it more fully than in the first. One of Borghini’s chores was to compile the topographical index, and his work on it seems to have sharpened his

25 Presumably, his contribution was to have been placed at or near the beginning of the book, but he was late in delivering it, so it was put at the beginning of the third volume.

26 Frey and Frey, 1930, 2: 98 (letter of 11 August 1564): “Voi uorrej uedessi haver di Genoua, Venetia, Napoli, Milano et in soma di queste citta principali piu numero di cose, cosi di pittura come dis scultura et architettura, she sia possible et ornare l’opera vostra … Et di nuouo ui ricordo, che mettiate a ordine le cose de uiiij, massime de principali, accio questa opera sia finita e perfetta da ogni parte, et che sia un HISTORIA vniuersale di tutte le pitture et sculture di Italia etc., che questo è il fine dello scriver vostro” (Borghini’s emphasis).
sense of which locations required more complete coverage. In addition to the effort at “universal history,” however, Borghini also prompted Vasari to reinforce the emphasis on Florence, encouraging him to discuss Duke Cosimo’s collection in greater detail.\(^{27}\)

The second edition reflects higher scholarly standards than the first, and again, the evidence suggests that this change can be traced to Borghini’s influence. The scholar urged his friend to provide as much information about the buildings and pictures he mentions as will serve to identify them unambiguously, as well as to avoid unreliable or overtly legendary material, except in cases where no other information is available or where the legends have independent literary value.\(^{28}\) The biographies of the first edition had been modeled on the rhetorical elogie popularized by Paolo Giovio, each of which had begun with a moralizing introduction—encapsulating the most important “lesson” the subject’s life might be thought to illustrate—and concluding with a poetic epitaph. In the second edition, this formula is abandoned: though a few such introductions and epitaphs are retained, the biographies now generally begin with factual information about the subject’s origins and training, and there is less effort to make each life fit some kind of commonplace rhetorical conceit.

Borghini had a highly developed idea of what the individual biographies should do, and expressed it in one of his letters to Vasari. After noting the need for more specific information about works of art, he added: “The PURPOSE of your work is not to write the lives of the painters—whose sons they were, nor to describe their everyday lives—but only their WORKS as painters, sculptors, or architects.” Apart from the works produced, the lives of artists are of little interest: “Biographies are only for princes and those who have acted like princes and not for people of low rank; here you have as your only object the art and the work of their hands.”\(^{29}\) If, on the one hand, Borghini was working to expand the Lives by enlarging its temporal and geographical scope, here he can be seen trying to restrict it as well, to focus it on art and to exclude the inessential. He is not going so far as to suggest that Vasari do away with the biographical format entirely, but he clearly believed that by structuring the biographies in a consistently selective way, they could more efficiently direct the reader’s attention to the larger historical development—the “universal history” of art—to which all significant artists contribute. His remarks expose an obvious social snobbery—one that he expects Vasari to share—as well as a precise sense of literary decorum, but they also reveal a clear conception of what specifically art-historical knowledge should involve.

If, in the first edition, the progress of art comes to climactic fulfillment in Michelangelo, the second, with its effort to accommodate the most recent developments, implies a very different understanding of that progress. The extensive descriptions of the projects executed by the Accademia del Disegno are obviously intended to suggest that the arts of design now flourish so abundantly that a sequence of biographies can no longer

\(^{27}\) Frey and Frey, 1930, 2: 89 (letter of 3 August 1564); see discussion in Williams, 1988, 120–3.


\(^{29}\) Frey and Frey, 1930, 2: 101–102 (letter of 14 August 1564): “IL FINE di questa oustra fatica non è di scrivere la uita de pittori, ne di chi furono figliuoli, ne quello che è feciono dationj ordinarie; ma solo per le OPERE loro di pittori, scultori, architetti ... E lo scriver le uite, è solo di principi et huominj che habbino esercitato cose da principi et non persone basse, ma solo qui havete per fine l’arte et l’opere di lor mano” (Borghini’s emphasis).
account for what is happening. In thus suggesting that the historical development should not be seen as completing itself in one man, but rather in the perfection of principles, rules, and practices that can be efficiently taught, Vasari has offered a significantly more nuanced account, and remedied a glaring weakness of the first edition. There, the progress of art had been likened to the growth of a living thing, leading from infancy to youth to maturity. Concluding his account with Michelangelo, the moment of perfect maturity, he did not reckon with the inevitability of decline and death implicit in his metaphor. To what extent Borghini was responsible for the more deeply meditated account of artistic progress in the second edition can only be surmised, but his ideas about the relation of the spoken vernacular to literary artifice help to clarify the basis of Vasari’s faith in sustainable perfection. While all natural things may be subject to decline, the rules of art are capable of being codified and passed on in perfect form from generation to generation.

Borghini was among the numerous friends, colleagues, and correspondents who provided Vasari with information about works of art that they had seen themselves. He also passed on references he found in literary sources. While the overwhelming amount of new material in the second edition is found in the last part, devoted to the artists of the sixteenth century, there is also a more serious engagement with medieval art, and again, the evidence suggests Borghini’s responsibility. A sheet of notes taken from the *Historia Langobardorum* of Paulus Diaconius, for instance, was used for the account of medieval architecture presented in the *proemio* to the first part of the *Lives*. The chronicle of Giovanni Villani was mined in a thorough, consistent, and strikingly resourceful way to provide a kind of chronological armature for the expanded account of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century art that appears in the second edition.30

As one would expect, Borghini also helped to correct and refine Vasari’s writing. Recent efforts to suggest that he wrote large sections of the text himself, while interesting to contemplate, are not confirmed by the available evidence. He seems to have gone over Vasari’s drafts, which may often have been quite rough—little more, perhaps, than notes—putting them into proper prose. It may come as a surprise, for instance, to see Vasari asking Borghini for help with his own autobiography, saying that Borghini understands certain details (*certi particolari*) about his most recent work even better than he does (*meglio di me*). In this case, however, Vasari may be referring to the circumstances surrounding the commissioning and iconographical details of works such as the Sala dei Cinquecento, which Borghini certainly did understand at least as well as Vasari himself. At any rate, Vasari then adds that he will help Borghini further with the text, and that he expects its completion to take some time.31

One of the most important additions to the second edition is the definition of *disegno* prefixed to the introductory section on the materials and methods of painting. A draft of this passage survives, a single sheet in Vasari’s hand. A comparison of the draft with the finished version offers what is probably a glimpse of Borghini at work: there is little in the way of substantive revision or amplification, but the revised version is much more lucid and elegant. One might conclude that Borghini’s role was simply to smooth out the rough edges of Vasari’s prose. On the other hand, Vasari’s original draft makes

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reference to philosophical ideas that we may doubt he would have known well enough to use without the advice of someone more learned than himself: it may be that he discussed the ideas with Borghini before composing the first draft, and that Borghini was thus responsible for at least some of the content, not just the form. Emphasis on the philosophical significance of disegno helps to anchor and give coherence to the Lives as a whole, to clarify and lend depth to the idea of a “universal history” of art; it is thus consistent with the other interventions securely attributable to Borghini. At the same time, it makes more explicit the relation of the book to the values and institutional agenda of the Accademia del Disegno.32

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