

Vasari and portraiture: function, aesthetics and propaganda

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The opening sentence of John Pope-Hennessy's *The Portrait in the Renaissance* declared unequivocally: 'Portrait painting is empirical.'¹ Portraitists, he claimed, endeavour to represent the inner character and the outer appearance of a person, and the viewer could rely on the artist to have successfully transcribed the traits of the men and women of the past. Empiricism is starkly at odds with our customary understanding of art, but portraiture is an unusual genre in having a long history in which assessments of its quality rested on perceptions of accuracy. This practice goes back at least as far as Giorgio Vasari's influential *Lives of the Painters Sculptors and Architects* (1550, second edition 1568).

The *Lives* is a book of text-portraits, and was influenced by a long tradition of textual representations of *illustri uomini*, from Suetonius and Pliny to Petrarch and Boccaccio, with a cognate tradition in visual imagery.² The importance of portraiture in the *Lives* is clear: Vasari originally intended to have portraits accompany the biographies in the first edition (as they do in the 1568 edition), and states that the text will list portraits at every opportunity.³ Vasari does not address any genre directly, nor did he present a systematic and unified theory of art. Nevertheless, spread throughout the text, and implicit in the ekphrasis, the *Lives* makes a series of assertions about the empirical nature of portraiture.⁴ The claims of empiricism, though unambiguously present in the text, are not always supported by Vasari's

¹ John Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, 3.

² Sarah Blake McHam, 'Pliny's Influence on Vasari's First Edition of the *Lives*', *Artibus et Historiae*, 32: 64, 2011, 9-24; Christiane L. Joost-Gaugier, 'Poggio and Visual Tradition: "Uomini Famosi" in Classical Literary Description', *Artibus et Historiae* 6: 12, 1985, 57-74.

³ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de piu eccellenti Architetti, Pittori, Scultori*, Florence: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1550, 'Proemio delle Vite', 125. "ritratti loro, citati e assegnati da me, dovunque è si trovano." (Here after Vasari-1550).

Charles Hope, 'Historical Portraits in the "lives" and in the Frescoes of Giorgio Vasari', in Gian Carlo Garfagnini ed., *Giorgio Vasari tra Decorazione Ambientale e Storiografia Artistica*, Florence: Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1985, 321-38; Patricia Lee Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 205 n63; Alessandro Nova, 'Vasari i el retrat', in Eva March and Carme Narváez eds, *Vidas de artistas y otras narrativas biográficas*, Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona and Publicacions i Edicions, 2012, 37.

⁴ Nova, 'Vasari i el retrat', 23.

thoughts elsewhere in the same book, by his own painting practice or by the body of artworks he surveys.

This article explores the conceptual context and origin of the 'empirical claim' in the *Lives*, examining ways in which this argument is articulated in the text along with the contradictions that emerge. Finally, it will consider the role these claims served both within the text, in the wider discourse of art in sixteenth-century Italy, and in Medicean Florence in particular.

The literature on Vasari's *Lives* and on portraiture is enormous, and many publications quote Vasari as evidence for attributions, dates, subjects and ideas from the period. However, there is surprisingly little systematic analysis of the role that the ideas about portraiture serve within the text or within the wider purpose of the *Lives*. Some work has been published on the woodcut portraits that accompany the 1568 edition, and Alessandro Nova surveyed Vasari's claims, but didn't attempt an assessment of their function and origin. To properly interpret the commentary on portraiture we should understand its role within the text and within Medicean Florence. What becomes apparent from the analysis below is that Vasari is, in some sense, often not talking about the portrait at all, but is actually promoting the sitter. The idea of empirically 'true' portraits supports the stated aims of portraiture (memorial and moral instruction) and also endorses the unstated and somewhat self-aggrandising nature of the genre: it suggests that the sitters are indeed outstanding members of society who embody praiseworthy values.

Vasari draws on a medley of literary and intellectual traditions that had currency in the cultural and scholarly environment of the sixteenth century. The confluence of ideas about virtue in physiognomy, neoplatonism and ultimately legitimate government underpin Vasari's emphasis on the naturalism of the portraits. These ideas are secondary to the overall purpose of the *Lives*, and they are cited, sometimes contradictorily, to support that purpose. Vasari's application of these ideas to portraits was part of the wider use of literary and visual culture in Cosimo I de' Medici's Florence. Vasari isn't merely giving his honest, though partial, view of the artworks, the purpose of the text is to celebrate Florence and its ruling elite, and the commentary on the portraits serves that purpose. Simultaneously, Vasari is promoting a style of art appreciation that muddies the division between praising the art and praising the patron. This had far reaching consequences for portraiture and its interpretation until at least as recently as Pope-Hennessy's work in the mid-twentieth century. This analysis also suggests that the field of art criticism that was emerging in the renaissance was, in some situations, an extension of the purposes of the artworks and a salutary reminder that we should assess its claims just as closely as we assess the artworks.

To better understand these issues, this article will examine the functions of the *Lives*, the aesthetic schema that is presented in the text, and the conjunction of ideas about virtue and nobility in contemporary Florence, all of which influenced its discussion of portraiture.

I. Functions

In the 'Preface to the Whole Work' Vasari, lamenting the loss of historic artworks, states that the aim of the *Lives* is to: 'protect artists from [a] second death' of being forgotten, and to save them from 'dust and oblivion.'⁵ Similarly, the *Lives* begins with an inscription that says so long as the book survives, the artists it records cannot be said to have died, nor their works be lost.⁶ This is presented as a continuation of an ancient tradition, exemplified in the works of Pliny and others.⁷ The function of the *Lives* as an historic record is closely tied to its function as a guide to moral instruction: the good example of the virtuous carefully recorded in the book exists for the reader to emulate. Vasari writes that the *Lives*: 'fulfils its real purpose by making men prudent and showing them how to live.'⁸ In a much-quoted passage he outlines a similar role for portraits:

to what other end, [...] did the ancients hang images of great men in public places, with honourable inscriptions, than to kindle the souls of those that come after, to virtue and glory?⁹

The stated aims for the book parallel the stated aims for portraiture: both the text and portraiture preserve the memory of great men and provide instruction to posterity. The book could be disseminated much more widely than the individual paintings, and, like the descriptions in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, it could survive even a civilisational collapse. Given how widely the *Lives* was distributed it is likely that many sixteenth-century readers would have known much of the artworks only through Vasari's book. The text extends the function of portraits to viewers beyond the physical limitations of the artworks themselves.

Art historians have noted the memorial and moral function in the genre. However, they also note that portraits were used by patrons for the careful

⁵ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori ed Architettori scritte*, edited by Gaetano Milanesi, 7 vols, Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1878, 'Proemio di tutta l'opera', I: 91-92, 'dalle... penne delli scrittori ... per difenderli il più che io posso da questa seconda morte, e mantenergli più lungamente che sia possibile nelle memorie de' vivi.' (Hereafter Vasari-Milanesi.) Vasari-1550, 'Conclusione della opera agli artefici et a lettori', II: 993. 'polvere, e alla obliuione.'

⁶ Sharon Gregory, "'The Outer Man Tends to Be a Guide to the Inner": The Woodcut Portraits in Vasari's *Lives* as Parallel Texts', Rodney Palmer and Thomas Frangenberg eds, *The Rise of the Image: Essays on the History of the Illustrated Art Book*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, 51-52.

⁷ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Agli Artefici del Disegno', I: 11.

⁸ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Proemio alla parte seconda', II: 94, 'che è proprio l'anima dell'istoria, e quello che in vero insegna vivere, e fa gli uomini prudenti.'

Carl Goldstein, 'Rhetoric and Art History in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque', *The Art Bulletin* 73: 4, 1991, 645.

⁹ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Jacopo, Giovanni e Gentile Bellini', III: 169, 'Ed a che altro fine, [...] ponevano gli antichi le imagini degli nomini grandi ne'luoghi pubblici con onorate iscrizioni, che per accendere gli animi di coloro che venivano, alla virtù ed alla gloria?' See also 'Jacopo, Giovanni e Gentile Bellini', III: 155-56.

Lorne Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990, 193-194.

presentation of self, and Anne Dunlop argued they involve elements of performance related to social conventions.¹⁰ In these historical interpretations, there is an assumption that the image is purposeful, selective, and may not be the whole truth; that they present an idealised version of the sitter.¹¹ The unstated purpose of most portraiture was to encourage contemporary viewers to believe that the sitter lived up to the high standards of public life and other contemporary ideals. The role of portraits in self-promotion did not go unnoticed in sixteenth-century Italy, and they were condemned by some as vain, especially when commissioned by those of lesser rank.¹² Neither portraits nor the *Lives* were merely empirical documents, they both also involved the promotion of particular ideals and individuals.

As we will see, Vasari does note the tendency to idealise, but the emphasis on naturalism works to assuage doubts about their reliability. To perform the function of memorial, portraits needed to accurately represent the people of the past, and to perform the function of instruction they should do so only for the praiseworthy. Any suggestion of inaccuracy or immorality would be antithetical to these functions and the viewer, doubting the reliability and utility of the image, may not esteem the subject or learn anything from it. Thus it is no surprise that the book discussed only 'the good, the better and the best', and portraits were often, by the mid-sixteenth century, understood to be frank, unmediated replications of the sitters.¹³ Vasari is a critical writer, and frequently notes moral and artistic lapses among artists so that they too can serve a didactic purpose, but portraits, as their sitters intended, are not cautionary tales, they are to kindle 'glory and virtue'.

Early instances of this view of portraiture from Vasari can be found two years before the first edition of the *Lives* was published. On 12 February 1548 Vasari raised an example, involving a painting of Pope Paul III, which, left on a terrace, caused people to make gestures of greeting and respect since they believed it was actually the pope.¹⁴ The story is clearly a literary trope, but regardless of whether or not the event actually happened Vasari used it to make his point.¹⁵ Thus he implies

¹⁰ Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, 193-225; Anne Dunlop, 'Looking the Part: Portraits and Performance', in Anne Dunlop ed. *Early Modern Faces: European Portraits 1480-1780*, New Orleans, La.: Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, 2014, 10-15.

¹¹ Joanna Woods-Marsden, "'Ritratto al Naturale': Questions of Realism and Idealism in Early Renaissance Portraits', *Art Journal* 46: 3, 1987, 209-16.

¹² Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, edited and translated by Paolo Prodi and William McCuaig, Los Angeles, Calif.: Getty Research Institute, 2012, 200-203. Originally published in 1582. See also Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo.

¹³ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Proemio alla parte seconda', II: 94.

Joanna Woodall, 'Introduction: Facing the Subject', in Joanna Woodall ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, 3.

¹⁴ Giorgio Vasari, *I ragionamenti e le Lettere edite e inedite da Giorgio Vasari*, Florence: Sansoni, 1882, 294. The year is written in the old calendar as 1547.

¹⁵ T.S.R. Boase, *Giorgio Vasari: The Man and the Book*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 119. Boase lists similar anecdotes across the first and second ages of the *Lives*. It is inspired by a story in Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, translated by Harris Rackham, 10 vols., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd, 1938, IX: 309 (XXXV, xxxvi, 62-65).

that a memetic lifelike quality is both a praiseworthy criterion for art in general and images of people in particular.

The emphasis on mimesis is present throughout the *Lives*, and begins with the very first *vite*. Vasari notes that Cimabue portrayed St Francis ‘di naturale’, and that Giotto was the first to have made an image of a person from life.¹⁶ In the *vita* of Cimabue and elsewhere, ‘di naturale’ implies a lifelike naturalistic quality in opposition to the more symbolic and schematic ‘maniera greca’, but it does not necessarily imply a likeness. However, the description of Giotto’s image and many other examples indicate that the images resemble the subjects. Later, in the Third Age, Vasari discusses Parmigianino’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and he praises it as evidence that the artist has effectively captured what the eye sees, including the optical distortions.¹⁷ In the second edition’s dedication to Cosimo I, Vasari laments the shortcomings of the woodcut portraits that accompanied the *vite*, but asserts that the images are still ‘right’ and underlines his efforts to ensure that the subjects’ features are true.¹⁸ Throughout the *Lives*, naturalism is consistently aligned with notions of truth, and the style is assumed to have epistemological value.

In the sixteenth century, the likeness was important because of the widespread conceit that the personality of a person, including their abilities and moral values, could be determined from their face.¹⁹ These ideas can be observed in paintings themselves: Leonardo da Vinci’s *Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci* is inscribed on the reverse with the phrase, ‘beauty adorns virtue’, suggesting a link between the beauty of the depicted person and their moral character.²⁰ Similar inscriptions can be found in other paintings, and the widespread conflation of beauty and virtue in the representation of women has been well established in scholarship.²¹ Less studied, but just as clear, is the use of physiognomic tropes in male portraiture.²²

¹⁶ Vasari-Milanesi, ‘Giovanni Cimabue’, I: 249’ and ‘Giotto’, I: 372. The fresco in the Bargello features Dante, but is not by Giotto.

Robert Joseph Williams, ‘Vincenzo Borghini and Vasari “Lives”’ PhD Thesis, Princeton University, 1988, 142.

¹⁷ Vasari-Milanesi, ‘Francesco Mazzuoli’, V: 221-222.

Parmigianino, *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*, c. 1523-24. Oil on poplar, 24.4 cm diameter. Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemaldegalerie.

¹⁸ Vasari-Milanesi, ‘Lettera Dedicatoria di Giorgio Vasari [1568]’, I: 6; Nova, ‘Vasari i el retrat’, 41.

¹⁹ Ian Maclean, ‘The Logic of Physiognomy in the Late Renaissance’, *Early Science and Medicine* 16, 2011, 275–95.

²⁰ André Chastel ed. *Leonardo on Art and the Artist*, London: Dover Publications, 2002, 144-45; Piers Dominic Britton, ‘The signs of faces: Leonardo on physiognomic science and the “four universal states of man”’, *Renaissance Studies*, 16: 2, 2002, 143-162.

²¹ David Alan Brown ed., *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo’s Ginevra de’ Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2001. See Domainco Ghirlandaio, *Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni*, 1489-90. Tempera and oil on panel, 77 x 49 cm. Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza; and Dosso Dossi, *Lucrezia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara*, c. 1515-19. Oil on wood, 74.5 x 57.2 cm, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria.

²² Peter Meller, ‘Physiognomical Theory in Renaissance Heroic Portraits’, in *The Renaissance and Mannerism: Studies in Western Art, Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, II: 53–69.

Statues like Andrea Verrocchio's *Bartolomeo Colleoni* (1480-96) and Giovanni and Bartolomeo Bon's *Head of Francesco Foscari* (1438-43) exemplify the fierce characteristics of a warrior and the careworn senatorial wisdom of the faithful servant of state.²³

There are differences between the behaviours expected of men and women, but both sexes were required to exhibit, to some degree or other, most of the cardinal virtues (such as charity and temperance) as well as other worthy qualities. Portraiture, and physiognomy, was a valuable tool by which people could demonstrate their commitment to established moral codes and their good standing within society. Vasari, meanwhile, commented several times on the relationship of face and character, saying, 'the outer man tends to be a guide to the inner, and to reveal what our minds are.'²⁴ This belief was aligned with neoplatonic thought which argued the physical, however dimly, was a reflection of the spiritual.²⁵ In the second edition, Vasari includes a letter from Giovanni Battista Adriani, which claims that it may be possible to portray someone's physiognomy so faithfully that it would allow one to discern what had happened to them in the past and what may occur in the future.²⁶ Similarly, in the 'Preface to the Whole Work' (1568) Vasari writes: 'for greater perfection in demonstrating not only the passions and emotions of the soul, but also the incidents to come, [... artists] must have, a full understanding of physiognomy.'²⁷

In the woodcut portraits that accompany the *vite* in the second edition, Sharon Gregory has shown that the clothes, facial expression and physiognomy of the subjects are used to illustrate Vasari's view of the subject's character.²⁸ The print of Rosso Fiorentino, for example, is altered from the drawing on which it is based to emphasise 'Rosso's leonine, choleric temperament', while the (now exonerated) murderer Castagno is shown hunched and dark.²⁹ The contrasting representation of

²³ Andrea del Verrocchio, cast by Alessandro Leopardi, *Equestrian Monument to Bartolomeo Colleoni*, 1480-1496. Bronze, 395 cm high, Venice, Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo; Giovanni and Bartolomeo Bon, *Head of Doge Francesco Foscari*, 1438-43. Marble, Venice: Palazzo Ducale.

²⁴ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Bastiano da Sangallo detto Aristotele', VI: 451, 'Ma perchè il di fuori suole essere indizio di quello di dentro e dimostrare quali sieno gli animi nostri.'

Gregory, "'The outer man'", 56.

²⁵ See, for example, Marsilio Ficino, [*De Amore* or] *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*. Edited and translated by Sears Reynolds Jayne, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1944, 136, 139-140, 164, 183-184, 204, 212, 215.

Aphrodite Alexandrakis, 'Plotinus, Marsilio Ficino, and Renaissance Art', in Liana Cheney and John Shannon Hendrix eds, *Neoplatonic Aesthetics: Music, Literature and the Visual Arts*, New York: Peter Lang, 2004, 190.

²⁶ Eliana Carrara, 'Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Battista Adriani e la stesura della seconda edizione delle *Vite*: Ragioni e nuove evidenze della loro collaborazione', *Opera, Nomina, Historiae* 2: 3, 2010, 393-430; Nova, 'Vasari i el retrat', 40.

²⁷ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Proemio di Tutta L'Opera', I: 99, 'a maggior perfezione del dimostrare non solamente le passioni e gli affetti dell'animo, ma ancora gli accidenti avvenire, [...] bisogna loro avere una intera congizione d'essa fisionomia.'

²⁸ Gregory, "'The Outer Man'", 62-64; Maria H. Loh, *Still Lives: Death, Desire and the Portrait of the Old Master*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, 19-30.

²⁹ Gregory, "'The Outer Man'", 64; Britton, 'Lionizing Leonardo', 10-15.

Titian and Michelangelo, especially relative to the source images, is equally suggestive of Vasari's noted Tuscan bias. At least four of the biographies (Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea Sansovino, Giulio Romano and Michelangelo), explicitly address the features of their respective subjects in physiognomic terms.³⁰ Since it was believed that the faces revealed something of the characters and biographies of the artists it is no surprise that an edition of Vasari's portrait prints was produced without the text of the *Lives* at all.³¹ Notably, the *Lives*' used physiognomic terms to describe the portraits of artists, but rarely used them for other sitters.

There are some clear examples of the influence of physiognomy, usually within the limits of recognisability and it did provide a generalised endorsement that portraits could be read to understand the sitter. However, there were also debates concerning the relationship between soul and body, the place of free-will in relation to 'natural' inclinations, the reliability of the practice, and the role of an adequate interpreter. Ultimately, the pseudo-science never provided a standardised or systematic set of useful interpretive models. How far artists balanced the 'clumsy compendia of prescriptions offered by ancient physiognomics,' against the requirements of likeness is hard to generalise about and, where they attempted it at all, it was probably dependent on individual circumstances.³² It is clear that most portraits relied on composition, iconography and other features, including the woodcut portraits in the *Lives*. Indeed Vasari's own portraits of the Medici dukes Alessandro and Cosimo I, while being appropriately heroic, show little evidence of having been adapted to fit physiognomic models. Within the Medici court Agnolo Bronzino's *Portrait of Cosimo I* [fig. 1], unflinchingly depicts his amblyopic eye, a feature that would have been looked upon negatively in standard physiognomy.³³ Over twenty-five versions of this portrait exist, and they were regularly given as diplomatic and personal gifts demonstrating that it was believed to show Cosimo to advantage.³⁴

Vasari was clearly not a committed physiognomist, rather he includes these ideas because they serve a useful purpose within the *Lives*. The endorsement of physiognomy and the woodcuts provided the veneer of authority to the widely held belief that you could know a person from their face, even if the specifics of how to do so, and a thorough commitment to these ideas were lacking. It served to convince the reader that the overall purpose of the *Lives* and of portraits, memorial and instruction, are possible because the faces of people are reliable documents of their character.

³⁰ Britton, 'Lionizing Leonardo', 10-15.

³¹ Loh, *Still Lives*, x.

³² Britton, 'Lionizing Leonardo', 10.

³³ Agnolo Bronzino, *Cosimo I de' Medici*, c. 1545. Oil on poplar, 11.75 x 9.85 cm. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales.

³⁴ Robert B. Simon, 'Bronzino's portrait of Cosimo I in armour' *The Burlington Magazine* 125, no. 966 (1983): 527.

Agnolo Bronzino, *Cosimo I de' Medici*, c. 1543-45. Oil on panel, 74 x 58 cm. Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi. See also Bronzino's portrait of Cosimo as Orpheus, in Philadelphia, and Vasari's *Apotheosis of Cosimo I* (Salone dei Cinquecento, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence).



Figure 1. Agnolo Bronzino, *Cosimo I de' Medici, 2nd Duke of Florence and 1st Grand Duke of Tuscany*, c. 1543-45. Oil on poplar, 86x66.8 cm. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales.

An accurate likeness was considered the first priority of a good portraitist, and many sixteenth-century authors comment that artists should transcribe the face with as little embellishment, invention or intercession as possible. When discussing portraits, Vasari makes little reference to medium or distinction between so-called 'independent portraits' and those in altarpieces, or larger decorative programs. Each image of a person is noted and assessed largely regardless of context and medium. Ultimately, this means that the important information conveyed by a portrait was not found in the image but rather in the original, the sitter. The medium or mode of preserving the likeness was not particularly relevant, since any accurate representation of the physical features of the subject, in any media, would effectively memorialise the individual, preserving them for the moral benefit of future generations. In this view, the portrait is a communication technology rather than a creative work.

II. Aesthetics

While accuracy was considered an essential element for portraiture, it was only one of the criteria that Vasari uses to judge portraits. A few portraits are given longer descriptions and adjectives that fit them within a broad framework of neoplatonist aesthetics.³⁵ The portraits interpreted within this model raise significant contradictions with the above emphasis on likeness, and have implications for the role and interpretation of portraiture in Vasari's historical context.

³⁵ Boase, *Giorgio Vasari*, 124; Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 239, 377-78, 393-94, 411.

Vasari, like much of the literate elite of late medieval and renaissance Europe, was influenced by Platonic and neoplatonic thought.³⁶ This influence is clear in the section on painting in the 'Introduction', where, in a frequently cited passage, Vasari explains the role that the platonic ideal has in *disegno*.³⁷ The tradition of neoplatonism in the arts is exemplified by the well-known story of Zeuxis and the Maidens of Croton,³⁸ which Vasari had portrayed in a fresco at his home in Arezzo.³⁹ The tale was included in the account of ancient arts in the 'Letter from G.B. Adriani' in Vasari's second edition,⁴⁰ and a quote from Cicero's telling of the story is ventriloquised by Andrea Mantegna in the *Lives*:

ancient statues were more perfect and had more beautiful parts than is shown in nature; since those excellent masters [...] had extracted from many living people all the perfection of nature, which rarely in a single body embrace and combines together all beauty, hence it is necessary to take some from one part and some from another.⁴¹

Vasari was not a theorist, and we cannot know how committed or purposeful his use of these neoplatonic tropes was, but their influence on the text is clear. Thus, although it may not have been an intentional emulation, the *Lives* follows an ascending path akin to the rungs on Diotima's ladder from Plato's *Symposium*.⁴² In the *Symposium* and in Marsilio Ficino's widely-read commentary on it, commonly called *de Amore* (1484), beauty is related to the other transcendental attributes, the good and the true. Studying the transcendental attributes was an upward path to approach the divine. The three ages of the *Lives* begin with the imitation of nature; continues with the early development of good style, and; in the

³⁶ James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1991, 1: 3-26

³⁷ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Introduzione, Delle Pitture, Capitolo 1', I: 168-69.

Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy: 1450-1600*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, 100; Boase, *Giorgio Vasari*, 124; Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 241-42.

³⁸ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, IX: 308-09, (XXXV.xxxvi. 62-65); Cicero, *De inventione*, translated by H.M. Hubbell, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd, 1949, 167-69, (II. 1-3).

³⁹ Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 240; McHam, 'Pliny's Influence on Vasari's First Edition', 9-24; Sharon Gregory, 'Vasari on Imitation', in David Cast ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Giorgio Vasari*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, 226. A variation on the theme, Apelles painting Diana, is also depicted at Vasari's home in Florence.

⁴⁰ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Lettera di G.B. Adriani', I: 27.

⁴¹ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Andrea Mantegna', III: 390, 'statue antiche fussino più perfette e avessino più belle parti, che non mostra il naturale; attesoche quegli eccellenti maestri, secondo che e' giudicava e gli pareva vedere in quelle statue, avevano da molte persone vive cavato tutta la perfezione della natura, la quale di rado in un corpo solo accozza ed accompagna insieme tutta la bellezza; onde è necessario pigliarne da uno una parte e da un altro un'altra.' Compare to Cicero, *De inventione*, 168-69, (II. 3) and Ficino, *De Amore*, 213. See also Vasari-Milanesi, 'Proemio alla parte terza', IV: 8

Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 240; McHam, 'Pliny's Influence on Vasari's First Edition', 19.

⁴² Plato, *Symposium*, edited by M.C. Howatson and Frisbee C.C. Sheffield, translated by M.C. Howatson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 37, 48-50, (201d, 210a-211d). See also Ficino, *De Amore*, 182-87, 197, 199, 208.

third age, art achieves transcendental ideal beauty, and a perfection beyond even the ancient arts.⁴³ The narrative is one of continuous improvement and is marked by distinct vocabulary. The first age is naturalistic, the second age has increased vivacity, and better *maniera* and *invenzione*, but the third age is distinguished by words that suggest that some artworks are beyond mundane experience, and viewing them is almost a spiritual encounter. For Vasari, the third age has achieved a level of perfection that is beyond artistic rules or his ability to describe them. These works have a 'certain delicacy' or grace, that 'astonish' and are so perfect it is impossible to see anything better, or to put into words.⁴⁴ He used terms like miraculous, divine, and stupendous, to signal the awestruck and inspiring nature of the artworks. Raphael's *Borghese Entombment*, for example, is described as: 'stupefying whoever sees it.'⁴⁵ It is this incomprehensible moment, this Stendhal Syndrome, that is the mark of truly ideal beauty in the *Lives*.

Most of the paintings, sculptures and buildings mentioned in the *Lives* are neither described nor praised, and this is true of portraits as well. The shorter first edition of the *Lives* (1550) lists hundreds of portraits and most of them are named with standard adjectival phrases. The most common phrase is 'di naturale', which is used in 42% of cases, no adjectival description at all is given for 23% of portraits listed, variations on 'dal vivo' and 'vivissimo' are used for 17% of the images, while 'bella' and 'grande' are the only other adjectives to be used more than a handful of times and are used in 13% and 1% of occasions respectively.⁴⁶ If words with similar meanings were counted together, then a group of adjectives related to likeness and liveliness such as: 'di naturale', 'dal vivo', 'sommiglia', 'similitudini' and 'verace', are used in 66% of descriptions. Such repetitions are not surprising, but they are revealing about the qualities that were felt to be important and where those qualities are found. They also provide a yardstick against which the more unusual descriptions can be measured. Although portraits in every age are described as natural, only those in the third age are described as 'divine', 'stupendous' or 'miraculous.'

⁴³ Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 247-48, 378; Patricia A. Emison, *Creating the 'Divine' Artist: From Dante to Michelangelo*, Leiden: Brill, 2004, 3-4, 22.

⁴⁴ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Proemio alla parte terza' IV: 9-15; 'Michelangelo' VII: 181-82. 'Non si può dir...'

⁴⁵ Svetlana Alpers, 'Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's *Lives*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 23, 1960, 195.

Raphael, *Borghese Entombment*, 1507. Oil on panel, 174.5 x 178.5 cm, Rome: Galleria Borghese.

⁴⁶ The percentages are based on a sample (133 items) found using keyword searches (for variations on *ritratto*) of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz's *Vasari Scrittore* database. I used the 1550 edition only, to avoid complications of counting items across both editions. Other words used for portraits (e.g. 'imago', 'effigi' or 'teste') were not used. Some choices about ambiguous or non-specific wording and how to count some descriptions was required, thus repetition of this research will likely get slightly different results. However, the sample is broadly indicative of the terms used throughout the *Lives*. Percentages have been rounded to their nearest whole number.

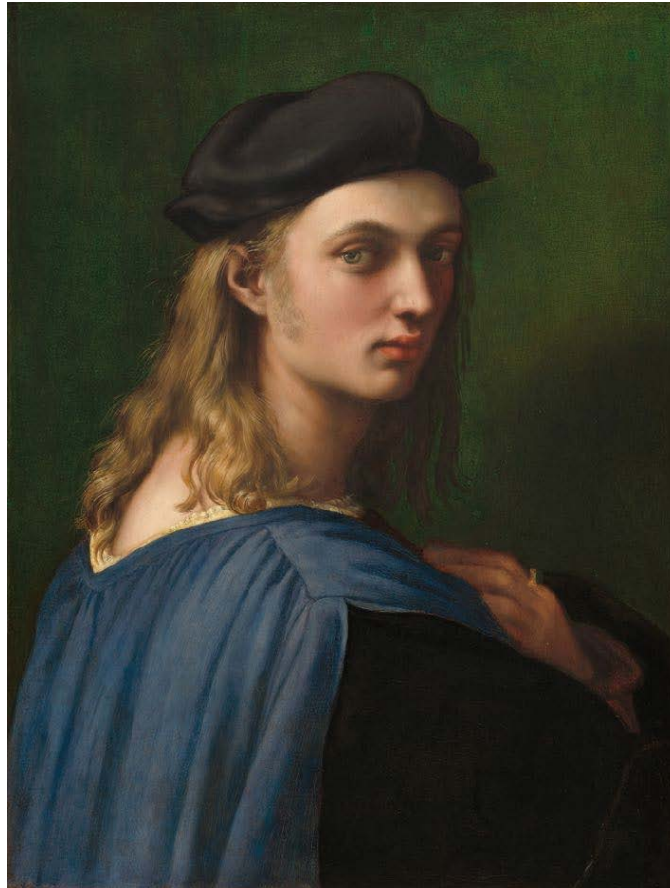


Figure 2 Raphael, *Bindo Altoviti*, c. 1515. Oil on panel, 59.7 x 43.8 cm. Washington DC: National Gallery of Art.

Raphael's portrait of the Florentine and Roman banker *Bindo Altoviti* [fig. 2] is described as 'stupendissimo', while a portrait of Federico II Gonzaga is described as being a 'marvel.'⁴⁷ Palma Vecchio's portraits are described as 'divine and miraculous', but in the interests of brevity they are not commented upon individually.⁴⁸ Sebastiano del Piombo's portrait of Florentine Anton Francesco degli Abizzi, 'did not seem painted, but alive' and was 'certainly miraculous'.⁴⁹ Sebastiano's lost picture of Pietro Aretino was praised for including six or seven blacks, a variety of excellently captured fabrics, and an allusion to Aretino's vassalage to the Medici Pope Clement VII. Another portrait of Clement VII by Sebastiano is also praised as 'stupendous' by Vasari.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Raffaello da Urbino', IV: 351, and 'Raffaello da Urbino', IV: 331, 'il quale apre le braccia per maraviglia.'

⁴⁸ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Iacomo Palma e Lorenzo Lotto', V: 244, 'divina e maravigliosa.'

Sebastiano del Piombo, *Anton Francesco degli Abizzi*, 1525. Oil on canvas, 147.32 x 98.75 cm, Houston, Texas: Museum of Fine Arts. The Kress Foundation lists significantly different dimensions for this painting.

⁴⁹ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Sebastian Viniziano' V: 575, 'che non pareva dipinto, ma vivissimo [...] certo maravigliosa.'

⁵⁰ Sebastiano del Piombo, *Clement VII*, 1526. Oil on canvas, 145 x 100 cm, Naples: Museo nazionale di Capodimonte; and c. 1531. Oil on slate, 105.4 x 87.6 cm, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum.

The second edition's 'Life of Titian' mentions seventy-nine portraits, most of which are merely named. There are three exclamations to the effect of 'and a great many more,' and one comment that every nobleman of note has been portrayed by Titian. Some of the listed portraits are part of altarpieces and larger decorative programs. Many are praised for being 'natural' and for being 'almost alive'.⁵¹ Only a few pictures of people are praised beyond the others: the 'stupendous' portrait of Laura de'Dianti and its pendant the 'splendid' Duke Alfonso I d'Este of Ferrara.⁵² Two portraits of emperor Charles V are described as truly beautiful and apparently elicited extra rewards from the patron. Only Andrea Gritti's portrait, of the many doges that are listed, is described as 'unusually fine' and 'astonishing'.⁵³ The praise is gendered: while paintings of women are highly praised, generally it is paintings of men that warrant the more profound descriptions as awe-inspiring, stupendous, divine or miraculous.

Vasari treats portraits no differently than other artistic endeavours, using the same adjectives for images that are not portraits - as in Raphael's *Borghese Entombment*.⁵⁴ However, portraits are unlike other types of images in that to be considered good they must privilege accurate representation. This produces a seeming contradiction between Vasari's concern for documentary accuracy and neoplatonic ideal beauty. If the highest praise is given only to ideally beautiful works, which are composites of various flawed examples in the visible world of material reality, portraits appear to be excluded from the higher ranks of artistic achievement. An accurate copy of one thing (in this case a person's facial features) cannot represent a platonic ideal. The implication is that portraits, in most cases, must be cut off from the higher echelons of ideal beauty and the experience that viewing such a work can engender.

In the 'Life of Domenico Puligo', Vasari comes near to acknowledging this issue. He comments that artists should not strive to idealise the sitter, instead, when portraits 'are a good likeness and beautiful then, they may be called rare works.'⁵⁵ One of these rarities is the *Mona Lisa*. It is the first portrait in the *Lives* described at any length and it has clearly surpassed the standards of mere naturalism. It is 'divine' and 'miraculous', which implies that the work has achieved something

⁵¹ In the 'Life of Titian' this description is not exclusive to portraits, it is also applied to nudes, St Nicholas and other images.

⁵² Titian, *Laura de'Dianti*, c. 1523. Oil on canvas, 118 x 93 cm, Kreuzlingen: Kisters Collection. The male portrait is lost, but copies survive.

⁵³ Titian, *Andrea Gritti*, c. 1546-50. Oil on canvas, 133.6x103.2cm, Washington DC: National Gallery of Art.

⁵⁴ With some obvious exceptions: 'magnificent', following Aristotle, is mostly used for large buildings, while adjectives about colour are naturally reserved to painting. Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 255

⁵⁵ Vasari-Milanese, 'Domenico Puglio', IV: 463, 'quando somigliano e sono anco belli, allora si possono dir opere singolari, e gli artefici loro eccellentissimi.'

Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy*, 89. John Garton and Frederick Ilchman, 'Portraiture', in *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice*, Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2009, 199.

ideal and beautiful.⁵⁶ Remarkably, the beauty of the image is linked to the beauty of the individual portrayed, and is achieved not through artistic skill, but in coaxing a smile from the beautiful sitter.

[Leonardo] employed this device: Mona Lisa being very beautiful, while he was painting her portrait, he retained those who played or sang, and continually japed, who made her remain cheerful, in order to take away that melancholy which painters often give to their portraits. And in this work of Leonardo there was a smile so pleasing, that it was a thing more divine than human to behold, and it was held to be something marvellous.⁵⁷

The smile was achieved by musicians and jesters not through paint, and it is transcribed by Leonardo so that 'there was a smile' that is divine. In other words, the painter has accurately captured the beauty of Lisa del Giocondo (née Gherardini of Florence), and there has been no Zeuxis-like compilation. The beauty belongs, or originates, with the sitter and is not original to the painting. A similar, though briefer, remark is made about Sebastiano's lost painting of Giulia Gonzaga. In his description of the image Vasari says: 'coming from the beauty of that woman, that was celestial, he succeeded [in making] a divine painting.'⁵⁸ The meaning here is clear: the divinity of the painting is dependent upon the 'celestial' beauty of the woman. Thus the praiseworthy aesthetic qualities belong to the sitter, not the portrait and the artist is merely a copyist.

Vasari used neoplatonist ideas to celebrate the art of his own generation, especially Michelangelo, as having achieved new heights, beyond the ancients and to the point of being divine. However, portraiture is problematic within this scheme, since neoplatonic idealism is at odds with the genre's need for individuality and accuracy, and the *Lives*' own insistence on the documentary and lifelike quality of the images. In fact, the *Lives* indicates that a special group of portraits (all from the Third Age) are beautiful despite not being representations of platonic ideals - they are beautiful while also being individual earthly exemplars. It thus seems possible for pictures of some people to be ideally beautiful in a way that is usually denied to any one individual. This apparent contradiction stems from contemporary understandings of virtue, which, as well as being associated with physiognomy and neoplatonism, was also related to nobility.

⁵⁶ Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503-06, possibly continuing until 1517. Oil on poplar, 77 x 53 cm, Paris: Musée du Louvre.

⁵⁷ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Leonardo da Vinci', IV: 40, 'Usovvi ancora questa arte: che essendo madonna Lisa bellissima, teneva, mentre che la ritraeva, chi sonasse o cantasse, e di continuo buffoni che la facessero stare allegra, per levar via quel malinconico che suol dar spesso la pittura a' ritratti che si fanno: ed in question di Lionardo vi era un ghigno tanto piacevole, che era cosa più divina che umana a vederlo, ed era tenuta cosa maravigliosa.'

⁵⁸ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Sebastiano Viniziano', V:578, 'il quale vendendo dalle celesti bellezze di quella signora e da così dotta mano, riuscì una pittura divina.'

III. Nobility

The topic of nobility was of particular interest in sixteenth-century Italy. At least in part this was because of the Habsburg-Valois wars (roughly 1494-1559), which encouraged a renewed interest in military honours, especially those of the monarchical and feudal-style nobility of Spain and France. These wars may also have contributed to the economic decline, re-feudalisation of the countryside, and regionalisation of the economy, which further contributed to an interest in and reassessment of nobility and other issues concerning the right to rule.⁵⁹ There was, like elsewhere, a long tradition in Florence of treatises about nobility, often borrowing from Aristotle's *Politics*, Cicero and Dante, Petrarch, and even Frederick II.⁶⁰ Generally virtue was presented as the source, and an essential component, of nobility. A 1440 dialogue by Poggio Bracciolini featured Lorenzo il Magnifico de' Medici advocating for wealth, liberality and magnificence as defining features of nobility, but noted at the end 'it is virtue that constitutes the one and only nobility.'⁶¹ In his *Dialogue On True Nobility* (1510), Platina wrote: 'Only virtue confers nobility and gives the title of nobility to descendants. Nobility [...] allied to and companion of virtue conquered by our efforts and not others', is absolutely incompatible with vice.'⁶²

Without a feudal tradition Florentine patricians sought other ways to characterise their status. Vasari's friend and advisor Vincenzo Borghini argued that an ancestry of urban administrative patricians was sufficient. He claimed nobility could be constituted by 'virtù civile', a selfless devotion to the mother city, that was essential to the class of civil administrators who exercised good government during peace and valour during war. To the more traditional criteria of heredity and virtue, humanists across Italy added state service as a qualification for nobility.⁶³ In the work of Borghini, Lorenzo Giacomini, Francesco Vieri, Marcello Adriani and Paolo Mini the argument was remarkably consistent: as Henk van Veen expressed it 'the Florentine aristocracy was the "nobiltà civile" which manifested itself by

⁵⁹ Robert Litchfield, *Emergence of a Bureaucracy: The Florentine Patricians 1530-1790*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, 31; Christopher F. Black, *Early Modern Italy: A Social History*, London: Routledge, 2001, 129.

⁶⁰ Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969, 89-109; Quentin Skinner, 'Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Language of Renaissance Humanism', in Anthony Pagden ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 135-137; James Hankins, 'Humanism and the Origins of Modern Political Thought', in Jill Krayer ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 120-136; Eric Nelson, 'The Problem of the Prince', in James Hankins ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 322-27.

⁶¹ Skinner, 'Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*', 140.

⁶² Black, *Early Modern Italy*, 131.

⁶³ Stanley Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, 29; Henk van Veen, 'Princes and Patriotism: The Self-Presentation of Florentine Patricians in the Late Renaissance', in Martin Gosman, Alasdair MacDonald, and Arjo Vanderjagt eds, *Princes and Princely Culture 1450-1650*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003, II: 68.

maintaining civic harmony, defending virtuous bourgeois life in accordance with traditional values and norms, and serving the mother city.’⁶⁴



Figure 3 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Apparition of the Angel to Zechariah*, 1490. Fresco. Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Tornabuoni chapel.

Although it was wealth that gave these patricians access to the networks of power that governed the communes of renaissance Italy,⁶⁵ this too was tied to virtue using a providentialist argument that wealth was the reward of virtue and thus the political power resulting from that wealth was inevitably and appropriately the responsibility of the virtuous.⁶⁶ In this context the public appearance of respectability was vital, and the portrait was an important tool in promoting the impression that wealth and morality are natural bedfellows. A clear example of this is found in Domenico Ghirlandaio's portraits in the Tornabuoni chapel (1485-90, Santa Maria Novella, Florence). The frescos show contemporary Florentines anachronistically present at biblical events in settings of fantastic open-air roman architecture. The cycle displays well-established signifiers of social status with a reserved modesty appropriate for class solidarity, while still being a public display of piety. Vasari describes the frescos in some detail and on the *Apparition of the Angel to Zechariah* [fig. 3] he comments that religious rituals are 'always attended by the

⁶⁴ Veen, 'Princes and patriotism' 69-70; Litchfield, *Emergence of a Bureaucracy*, 32.

⁶⁵ Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 90, 97-98.

⁶⁶ Hankins, 'Humanism and the Origins of Modern Political Thought', 123. Gregory Murry, *The Medicean Succession: Monarchy and Sacral Politics in Duke Cosimo dei Medici's Florence*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014, 50-103.

most notable people, to make it more honourable [Ghirlandaio] portrayed a good number of Florentine citizens who governed the state'.⁶⁷ Vasari places publicly expressed piety alongside social and political position, they are mutually inclusive, or even, co-dependent. The portraits attest to the status of the sitters and contribute to a dialogue and a careful negotiation about what nobility, virtue and beauty look like, how it is characterised and who possesses it. Vasari's text, was engaged in this discourse, legitimising the images as true, celebrating appropriate displays of public respectability and linking these to government.

The importance of virtue as the conceptual underpinning for nobility and for legitimate political power, is demonstrated in the response to Niccolò Machiavelli's *De Principatibus* (1513, translated and printed as *Il principe* in 1537). This contradiction of the belief that virtue and utility were synonymous with government was thoroughly rejected by the Florentine establishment.⁶⁸ Accusing a renaissance ruler of governing without virtue was tantamount to an accusation of tyranny and a tacit call for insurrection. As Gregory Murry has argued, the legitimisation of Cosimo I's rule was conducted upon lines very similar to a long tradition of semi-sacral monarchies that equated the duke with the divine and allied itself with established moral value systems embodied by the church.⁶⁹ Thus despite Machiavelli's re-assessment of power and virtue, the traditional view, that a divinely appointed hierarchy was by definition virtuous and resulted in stability, prosperity and glory, remained the publicly stated belief of the Medici and their publicists.

The title, 'Duke of Florence', had been created only in 1532 amid considerable opposition to Medici rule. In 1537, following the assassination of the first duke, Cosimo I ascended to a dukedom of questionable foundation and proceeded to exile and execute opposition, and abolish the remnants of the traditional constitutional republicanism. He used humanist rhetoric to re-contextualise the cultural spaces and markers of Florence to legitimise his reign.⁷⁰ The court, arts and literature were used to patronise and solidify a nobility which

⁶⁷ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Domenico Ghirlandaio', III:265-66. "nella quale storia, mostrando che a' sacrificj de' tempi concorrono sempre le persone più notabili, per farla più onorata ritrasse un buon numero di cittadini fiorentini che governavano allora quello Stato; [...] i quali sono vivissimi e pronti."

⁶⁸ Nicholas Scott Baker, *Fruit of Liberty: Political Culture in the Florentine Renaissance, 1480-1550*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 202; Murry, *The Medicean Succession*, 104-32, especially 105-09, 113.

⁶⁹ Murry, *Medicean Succession*, 104-32, especially 109-111.

⁷⁰ André Chastel, 'La légende médicéenne', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 6: 3, 1959, 161-80; André Chastel, *Art et Humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1961, 19-25; Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, 132-38; Konrad Eisenbichler, 'Introduction', in *The Cultural Politics of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, xxi; Veen, 'Princes and patriotism', 66; Murry, *The Medicean Succession*, 105-06; Stephen J. Campbell, 'Counter Reformation polemic and Mannerist counter-aesthetics', *Res*, 46, 2004, 98-119.

was dependent upon, and would therefore support, a dynastic dukedom.⁷¹ Ideas like *virtú civile*, and related images and texts, became key components authorizing the Medici rule in Florence. Cisalpine governments are well known for their use of the visual arts and the writings of humanists to promote their legitimacy and prestige.⁷² Vasari was involved in co-ordinating the patronage and pageantry of the Medici court, it was under his guidance that the Palazzo Vecchio was turned into a ducal residence and decorated to reframe 'Florentine history into a celebration of Medici rule.'⁷³

In the *Lives*, Vasari was participating in this project. Scholars have noted that, especially in the second edition, the Medici are presented in Vasari's work as having been benevolent guides to painting, sculpture and architecture all along. Some of their more notable, and possibly fictional, interventions include inviting Masaccio to return to Florence, suggesting Luca della Robbia produced coloured clays, and supporting the young talent of the city in a sculpture garden that is recast as the origins of the Accademia del Disegno. These are embellishments, attempts to inscribe the Medici further into the history of Florentine art.⁷⁴ To read Vasari with this in mind is thus to see his endeavours not only as the promotion of the arts and his fellow artists, which are among his stated aims, but also to support his patron and the patricians. The Florentine bias of the *Lives* isn't merely an accidental side effect of Vasari's affection for his home country, it is the purpose of the *Lives*.

Vasari does not define nobility or virtue, but he was embedded in a tradition of understanding virtue and nobility as linked, and was a courtier in a dukedom with a vested interest in promoting the idea. When Vasari discusses portraits that attain an elusive ideal beauty, he is implicitly identifying paintings that, by the logic of physiognomy, accurately document the sitter's virtues. Since virtue was presented as a defining characteristic of nobility, one should expect nobles to be beautiful. In this schema, beauty becomes a signifier of nobility: to be noble is to be virtuous, and to be virtuous is to be beautiful, and therefore beautiful portraits are portraits of nobility.

IV. Conclusions

When Vasari praises portraits for being in the highest orders of beauty he is also commenting on the nobility of the sitter. The qualities that Vasari admired are not part of a creative process, he was not interested in portraits as a surveyor of social convention or as a critic interested in the artists' intentions or interpretations, in

⁷¹ Veen, 'Princes and Patriotism', 63. Baker, *Fruit of Liberty*, 190-3, 196, 200-01, 226-27.

⁷² Henk van Veen, 'Art and propaganda in late Renaissance and Baroque Florence: The Defeat of Radagastus, King of the Goths', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 47, 1984, 106-18; Burke, *The Italian Renaissance*, 132, 136-39; Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 1: 9.

⁷³ Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 197-200.

⁷⁴ Vasari-Milanesi, 'Masaccio' II: 294, and 'Luca della Robbia', II: 174.

Chastel, 'La légende médicéenne', 171-177; J.R. Hale, *Florence and the Medici: The Pattern of Control*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1977, 59; Caroline Elam, 'Lorenzo de' Medici's Sculpture Garden', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 36, 1992, 42; Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 201-202.

media, form or the methods or nature of representation. He writes about portraits as a way to promote, extend and endorse their message, and his discussion of any particular portrait is an extension of the portrait's function in promoting the ideals of courtly virtue and legitimising the power of elites. In the *Lives*, aesthetic appreciation is put at the service of the wider purpose, which is to idealise and endorse Cosimo I's Florence. The text, and its aesthetic judgements, suggests that the world (and Florence in particular) was justly organised around a monarchical divinely-appointed and semi-sacral duke and that great art derived from the patronage of virtuous nobles.⁷⁵

An examination of the examples that Vasari praises above others corroborates this pattern. Among the hundreds of portraits listed by Vasari, only a few stand out for the adjectives used to describe them. Some stand out because they have more than one unconventional adjective, but relatively few are described at any length at all. Amongst these, most of them were members of the Medici family or their associates. A survey of the first edition using the terms outlined above indicates that portraits described as 'divine' or 'miraculous', were Florentine, members of the curia, known associates of the Medici or members of the Medici family. For example, Giulia Gonzaga's portrait was praised using the highest terms and she was a paramour of Ippolito de' Medici (son of Giuliano di Lorenzo de' Medici), and it was for him that the portrait was produced.

There is some acknowledgement of non-Tuscan artists and sitters, such as Titian's 'truly beautiful' portrait of emperor Charles V, but the praise is disproportionately awarded to Florentines, and exclusively to portraits of royalty or nobility. Thus Vasari praised the *Mona Lisa* (by a Florentine artist and depicting a woman from a prominent Florentine family) in the highest terms even though he is unlikely to have ever seen it.⁷⁶ Similarly, Vasari praised the Medici tombs in San Lorenzo even though they do not resemble their subjects (as was noted at the time).⁷⁷ Vasari would have known that these statues did not look like their subjects, but the unstated aim of celebrating the Medici took precedence over the stated requirement of accurate documentation. Indeed, the general emphasis on accurate documentation in the *Lives* allows Vasari to praise the images of the Medici as an apparently reliable representation of the dukes, and may have helped forestall or blunt criticism of bias.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Emison, *Creating the 'Divine' Artist*, 22.

⁷⁶ Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, 109; Boase, *Giorgio Vasari*, 148; Nova, 'Vasari i el retrat', 36.

⁷⁷ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art: Past and Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940, 35; Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, 2. Pevsner and Campbell quote a letter from Niccolò Martelli to Rugasso, servitor of S. Oratio da Farnese, dated Florence, 28 July 1544.

⁷⁸ Unsuccessfully as it turns out, see Ludovico Dolce, Cesare Malvasia and the Carracci. Michel Hochmann, 'Les annotations marginales de Federico Zuccaro à un exemplaire des *Vies de Vasari*: La réaction anti-vasarienne à la fin du XVIe siècle', *Revue de l'Art*, 80, 1988, 65–67; Marco Ruffini, 'Sixteenth-Century Paduan Annotations to the First Edition of Vasari's *Vite* (1550)', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 62: 3, 2009, 748–808.

The claim that ‘portrait painting is empirical’ serves to endorse and extend the function of the portraits by suggesting that their representation is accurate and that they provide us with visual access to the sitter. In the *Lives*, just and virtuous government finds expression in beautiful portraits, which are accurately transcribed by faithful artists who employ ingenious techniques to capture it. This is so because visible virtue was a necessary component of legitimate authority in Renaissance Italy.

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