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Book Review by Michael McDonald

## PROFIT AND HONOR

*The Collector of Lives: Giorgio Vasari and the Invention of Art*, by Ingrid Rowland and Noah Charney.  
W.W. Norton & Company, 432 pages, \$29.95



COMPETITORS IN FLORENCE AND OTHER Italian cities, where the revival of painting, sculpture, and architecture flourished in the Renaissance, dismissed him as “the little man from Arezzo.” But what Giorgio Vasari lacked in size, he made up for in energy, talent, and ambition.

He was a prolific painter, a notable architect (he designed the Uffizi palace), a trusted diplomat, an intimate member of the Medici family’s entourage, the founder of the first Eu-

ropean art academy, a collector of fine drawings, and a “special effects” consultant who could quickly design tastefully elaborate decorations for important social functions such as weddings, coronations, and triumphal processions. Vasari was also a vivid writer, poet, and storyteller. The lively letters he left behind (later collected and published in Italian in two stout volumes) provide a marvelous sense of what daily life was like for a peripatetic court artist in 16th-century Italy.

HE WAS THE JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES who, in this rare instance, succeeded in mastering them all. And of all Vasari’s many achievements, the most important was his monumental *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, first published in 1550, and then in a revised and expanded form in 1568.

To those with only a passing acquaintance with the volume, it may appear little more than an immense and encyclopedic collection



of anecdotes about the artists of his time—most notably, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo. Undergirding the entertaining stories, however, is a theory, a particular vision of artistic progress and a way of evaluating and establishing a hierarchy of artistic greatness. Small wonder, then, that there is nearly unanimous agreement among scholars that with this single text, dubbed “the Bible of the Italian Renaissance,” Giorgio Vasari singlehandedly created the discipline of art history as we know it today.

Vasari’s theory, in a nutshell, is that from the fall of Rome until the 13th century, art in Italy had lost its way and was wandering in the savage woods of the Dark Ages. (The comparison with Dante’s poetic pilgrimage at the start of the *Divine Comedy* is virtually unavoidable.) “Primitive”—that is, schematic, flat, and non-realistic—art predominated owing to Byzantine and Gothic influences (the latter being a term that Vasari effectively invented). Vasari then posits that due to the genius of mostly Tuscan artists, who intensely studied nature and the statues of classical antiquity, art began to progress again.

**H**E BREAKS DOWN THIS DEVELOPMENT into three distinct periods: in the first age, beginning with Cimabue and Giotto, art was reborn in Florence through the rediscovery of rudimentary technical and emotional realism; in the second, beginning with Masaccio, Brunelleschi, and others, art progressed toward increasing naturalism and fluency; in the third age, beginning with Leonardo and ending with Michelangelo, art reached its “perfection.” It is a hierarchical and historiographic model of progress in the arts that has endured down to the present, one that is fully reflected in how art is curated and displayed in museums today.

The progress Vasari outlines is most definitely *not* dictated by the conforming pressures of impersonal economic, social, or his-

torical forces—he was no proto-Hegelian or Marxist. Vasari insisted that progress depends on individuals who seek *utile e onore*, “profit and honor,” a term that Ingrid Rowland and Noah Charney, in their new biography of Vasari, *The Collector of Lives*, define as

a classic Tuscan pairing that describes the two goals a right-thinking, hard-headed citizen hoped to achieve in life. *Utile* meant “utility” as well as “profit” or “advantage”—gain that was socially and morally useful, as well as simply profitable. *Onore* meant acquiring an external reputation for honest practice by obeying a strict internal code of honor. In Renaissance Italy, this code combined ancient Roman virtues with the moral teaching of the Bible, drawing from Hebrew wisdom literature and from the Gospels.

What’s more, Vasari strongly believed in the benefits of competition—benefits that extended beyond the individual artist to the society at large. As he says in his joint chapter on Andrea del Castagno and Domenico Veneziano: “emulation and rivalry, when men seek by honest endeavor to vanquish and surpass those greater than themselves in order to acquire glory and honor, are things worthy to be praised and to be held in esteem as necessary and useful to the world.”

**G**IVEN HIS ACHIEVEMENTS AND HIS importance, it’s surprising Vasari’s life hasn’t attracted more interest. Rowland and Charney, both art historians, have produced the first biography of Vasari in over a century meant to appeal to a general readership—but with mixed results, alas.

The authors have a tendency to lose track of the story they’re supposed to be telling, most frequently by inserting chapter-long digressions about the lives of other artists of the

period or by offering up mountains of trivia about all things Italian. Vasari travels to Ancona and suddenly the reader is learning how umbrellas were an Etruscan invention. He travels to Pistoia and the reader is told that the stiletto dagger is said to have been invented there. The padding is continuous and is aggravated by poor editing which results in virtually the same sentences and ideas recurring from chapter to chapter and sometimes within the very same paragraph.

Unfortunately, by the book’s end Rowland and Charney have not fulfilled their promise to grapple seriously with the large questions they announced at the start. Instead they hurriedly juxtapose Vasari’s views on the genius of the Renaissance painters (beauty through the study of nature, truth through realism, and technical ability through respect for and knowledge of tradition) with the court jesters of modern art such as Marcel Duchamp, only to throw up their hands and equivocate: to be sure, Vasari “praised skill and beauty above all” but “he also praised the avant-garde of his time.” So who knows?

When the authors *do* discuss Vasari’s life, they tell a good story. They ground his life solidly within his period and are excellent at explaining technical artistic terms. By using Vasari’s own writings and utterances, they succeed in conveying a good deal of his character and personality. Their translations from the Italian are superb, and the best parts of the book are when Vasari is allowed to speak for himself through his letters.

If you were to boil down *The Collector of Lives* to its essence, you would find 100 pages comprising a very fine biography of Giorgio Vasari. This is far from the “perfect” portrait that, following Vasari’s strictures, the reader would prefer.

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