

## The Absolute Leonardo

Review of:

*The Lives of Leonardo*, ed. Thomas Frangenberg and Rodney Palmer, Warburg Institute Colloquia, ed. Charles Burnett and Jill Kraye, London: The Warburg Institute and Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2013. 266 pp. + b&w illustrations. £50.00. ISBN 978-1-908590-044-2.

Claire Farago

There are many possible ways to frame a volume dedicated to studying Leonardo's biography. The approach taken here, the result of a symposium held in September 2006 organized by volume co-editor Rodney Palmer, is to begin with the genre of biography itself. Specifically, Vasari's *Life of Leonardo* serves as ground zero in the historical narrative comprised of twelve chapters and a substantive introduction arranged in roughly chronological order of the evidence discussed. The Introduction by co-editor Thomas Frangenberg draws attention to the role that fiction plays in Vasari's account. Frangenberg's main interest is to establish the 'truth value' of Vasari's history by surveying the writer's use of sources. Frangenberg focuses on Paolo Giovio's short life of Leonardo, written in Latin before 1524 and widely acknowledged to be one of Vasari's sources even though it was not printed until the eighteenth century (1781). The central theme of the book, as argued in Frangenberg's opening gambit, is that the legacy of Vasari's *Lives* is complex and ambivalent because, on the one hand, it is composed of fictional anecdotes; but on the other hand, it is based on a highly reliable source almost contemporary with Leonardo's lifetime.

The convergence of the mythic and the individual, biography as fiction and biography as history, has been a topic of research and discussion since the beginning of the twentieth century. It was most famously the subject of Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's collaborative project, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, (1934; revised English translation, 1979).<sup>1</sup> In 1997, Catherine Soussloff published an important critical study of artistic biography, entitled *The Absolute Artist*, in which she traces the origins of this problematic to Freud's colleague Otto Rank, whose 1905 manuscript entitled *Der Künstler* initially brought him to Freud's

My thanks to Patricia Reilly and Richard Woodfield for their helpful advice. I alone remain responsible for the views expressed here.

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Kris, and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, preface E. H. Gombrich, trans. Alastair Laing and Lottie M. Newman, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. The study was originally published in Vienna in 1934 (as *Die Legende vom Künstler*). Additions to the original text were made by Otto Kurz.

attention.<sup>2</sup> Biography, in Rank's view and in the view of his successors beginning with Freud (who edited Rank's manuscript for publication in 1907), stands as the 'narrow boundary line' in history writing between historical veracity and the mythical dimension of the hero-artist.<sup>3</sup>

The unreliability of historical evidence in biographies continues to be a subject of lively discussion and theoretical reflection. The *Lives of Leonardo* enters these debates in an era when it is impossible to accept views of the artist as a natural category based on the Hegelian assumption that the artist has a relationship to the absolute unlike that of other human beings. To study the representation of the artist figure in biography entails knocking the artist off of its absolute, unexamined, and uninterpreted pedestal. Soussloff concludes her historiographical study of the concept of the artist in the discipline of art history on a pessimistic note: the failure of art history to produce a concept of the artist useful for historical discourse can be located in the negative reception of the psychoanalytic approach to the historical artist.<sup>4</sup> One of the strengths of *The Lives of Leonardo* is that it includes study of the factually verifiable, the philologically trackable, the mythical, and the psychological biography within the covers of the same book.

The main interpretive challenge is where and how to define the terrain in which fact and fiction co-exist. The combination of vivid anecdote and factual record of works and deeds in the *Life of Leonardo* made sense in its original context in Vasari's *Lives*, which conformed to established models such as Pliny's *Historia naturalia* and humanist biographies of illustrious men (and occasionally women), and drew on other precedents ranging from the holy lives of saints to the naughty vernacular tales of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and its spin-offs popular in Leonardo's own lifetime such as the *novelle* of Matteo Bandello (c. 1480-1562). What was truly unprecedented about Vasari's *Lives* was the dedication of a large and complex literary work to the lives of artisans. Vasari himself was such an artisan so his role as 'author' of the *Lives* functions in several registers. It is widely accepted that Paolo Giovio shared his knowledge of Leonardo with Vasari, having suggested the project of the *Lives* to him in the first place (although Vasari's description of these circumstances has been shown to be inaccurate).<sup>5</sup> Frangenberg emphasizes that

<sup>2</sup> For other points of origin, see the discussion of Séailles and Wackenroder below. Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept*, Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 119-122. Rank wrote *Der Künstler* after reading Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900); citing Soussloff, 120.

<sup>3</sup> Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 122, citing Rank's legacy in Kris and Kurz who acknowledge biography to occupy this in-between position. My remarks on Hegelian notions of the artist are drawn from her study.

<sup>4</sup> Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 130.

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, 6 vols., Florence: Sansoni, and S.P.E.S. after 1976, 1966-87, 6: 389-390, is the famous passage in the 1568 edition. Marco Ruffini, *Art*

Giovio's and Vasari's texts on Leonardo were independent of one another. In the context of examining the factual basis of Vasari's source in Giovio, Frangenberg discusses a letter first published by Karl Frey, written on December 10, 1547, in which Giovio tells Vasari that he is amazed at how much the artist had 'achieved with the pen'.<sup>6</sup> Frangenberg implies that Vasari did not need Giovio's humanist-educated help after all. Indeed, the extent of Giovio's editorial advice remains unsettled and his comments were not integrated into Vasari's finished text.

What did Giovio read that so revised his opinion of Vasari's literary skills? The complexity of the authorship of both the 1550 and the greatly expanded 1568 edition of the *Lives* has been recognized at least since the Florentine historian Giovanni Bottari (1689-1775) presented evidence that Vasari was helped by friends and men of letters, as Marco Ruffini (2011) has reviewed the history of scholarship on the subject of Vasari's authorship.<sup>7</sup> Although the question of Vasari's authorship was raised again in the early twentieth century by Ugo Scoti Bertinelli, Wolfgang Kallab, and Julius von Schlosser, the teacher of Kris and Kurz, the implications of the collaborative nature of the *Lives* have only recently begun to be explored.

The first chapter by Charles Hope puts the entire question of Vasari's authorship into freefall. The following chapters sound differently if we first digest Hope's argument that several anonymous humanist authors ghost-wrote a large portion of the text published solely under Vasari's name. Hope argues on the basis of philological evidence (though the details are not published here) that a majority of the *Lives* (60% of the 1550 edition) were written by others, including the entire Life of Leonardo, the *proemi*, and the technical introductions.<sup>8</sup> In other words, some of the most important sections of the entire *Lives* regarding the intellectual status of the modern artist and his artmaking activities were not actually written by an artist claiming such status.

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*without an Author: Vasari's Lives and Michelangelo's Death*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, 76-79, reviews the evidence and the scholarship.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Frey, ed., *Die literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*, I, Munich, 1923, 209, n. CV; cited and translated by Frangenberg, 'Introduction', *The Lives of Leonardo*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ruffini, *Art without an Author*, 72-103, citing 72-73 on Bottari.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Frangenberg, 'Bartoli, Giambullari, and the Prefaces to Vasari's 'Lives' (1550)', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 65 (2002): 244-58, is the only publication of the textual analysis as far as I am aware. Hope cites his own essay, 'Le 'Vite' vasariene: Un esempio di autore multiplo', in *L'autore multiplo*, ed. Anna Santoni, Pisa: Scuola Normal Superiore, 2004, 59-74, which I have not been able to consult. See further discussion in Ruffini, *Art without an Author*, 74-75 and *passim*. Ruffini accepts the analysis but, like the present reviewer, locates their findings in period understandings of authorship. He concludes that Vasari's humanist collaborators', particularly Borghini's, interest in the vernacular has been overlooked in previous studies of Vasari's *Lives*. Borghini was a consummate editor and his linguistic interests in vernacular sources of modern Italian are well documented; see Brian Richardson, *Print Culture in Renaissance Italy: the Editor and the Vernacular Text, 1470-1600*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, especially Chapter 11, 'A 'True and Living Image': Editing in Florence, 1561-1600'.

If the ideal image of Leonardo was constructed not by Vasari but by anonymous humanists who were in all likelihood courtiers at Cosimo I de' Medici's court, then the fabricated *persona* of Vasari as an artist who could write like an educated humanist is also a matter requiring historical interpretation. The *Lives* promoted a certain understanding of the figurative arts endorsed by the ruler of Florence, to whom the *Lives* are dedicated. Cosimo I placed Florentine artists under his protection and his centralized control, a matter facilitated by the establishment of the *Accademia del disegno* in 1563 under Vasari's (and one of Cosimo's chief advisors Vincenzo Borghini's) leadership. The image of the artist promoted by Vasari's *Lives* ostensifies the claim that the time had come to treat artists' lives as if their biographies mattered – even if the trail of correspondence indicates that Borghini, Vasari's chief collaborator/supervisor on the second edition of the *Lives*, wrote to Vasari in the summer of 1564 that 'the writing of lives is suitable only in the cases of princes and men who have practiced princely things and not of low people'. For his part, Borghini advises, Vasari should concern himself with gathering information about works of art, which is all that matters in the case of artists' lives.<sup>9</sup>

What is to be made of the simultaneous elevation and containment of the modern artist, a 'low person' to be remembered for his works? If we put Hope's arguments based on philological criteria for distinguishing one writer from another into the broader framework of studies about the composition of Vasari's *Lives*, it becomes clear that a complex intersection of individuals with different aims and values produced the *Lives* and made it appear in print as if Vasari were the sole author. There may never be a scholarly consensus on the significance and mechanisms of this fabrication, but at this point there is no possibility of taking at face value the Life of Leonardo, cast in the *Lives* as the first modern hero/artist. After Vasari, the Life of Leonardo went on a rollercoaster ride detached from the superstructure of the first progressive history of art (progressive in the sense of a developmental history of art). Biographies of Leonardo spanning some 400 years, which are the subject of the rest of the volume, became entangled in many different contexts involving many different agents. The prime text on which the literary representation of Leonardo's life and work is based, especially Vasari's most beloved anecdotes, exerted pressures of its own in diverse fields of cultural production.

Four chapters are devoted to one of the most fascinating moments in the post-Vasarian world: the late-Romantic era construction of Leonardo's Life as a soap opera *avant la lettre*. By this point in the historical game of drawing upon Vasari's canonical authority, embroidered anecdotes that might have once been rightly perceived as praise to properly embellish a moralizing life story, sank with leaden literalness into the soft sediment of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular culture. Take for example, Rodney Palmer writes, the many treatments, both visual

<sup>9</sup>Frey, *Die literarische Nachlass*, 2, 102; cited by Patricia Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 192.

and verbal, of Leonardo's fabled death in the arms of the king of France. Or his vegetarianism. Or his homosexuality. Or his fascination with grotesque creatures like lizards, which Palmer at one point (p. 169) describes as 'cruelty to animals'. At the other end of the synchronic spectrum of historical reception, Michela Passini offers a nuanced study of Gabriel Séailles' careful historical work on Leonardo at a time when the artist had become a popular cultural icon. Julia Friedman contributes a close reading of Russian *fin-de-siècle* Leonardo literature, most famously Merezhkovsky's novel used by Freud. Bradley Collins continues the conversation with a re-reading of Freud's literary debts to Merezhkovsky and others, balanced against (Collins's view of) Freud's enduring impact on explanations of the artist's creative genius.

Others have written in recent years about the structure of anecdote and the fabrication of Leonardo's *persona* in Vasari's *Lives* who deserve mention here. Among the most important contributions is by Patricia Rubin, who also discusses the relationship between Giovio and Vasari's account of Leonardo.<sup>10</sup> Frangenberg's and Hope's primary concern is to establish the 'truth value' of Vasari's text. Rubin by contrast takes up the genre of Renaissance biography as her subject of investigation, focusing on all the literary conventions that comprise the rhetoric of Renaissance biography aimed to exalt worthy men as examples of virtue. At stake is how one can distinguish fact from fiction without taking into account historical definitions of those very categories. Rubin understands that the facts of the *Lives* as well as the imaginative anecdotes that embellish them were selected to demonstrate the ways and means of exercising virtue.

The *Lives* are thus fabrications, Rubin insists, not simply fictive. Moreover, what is presented as true must also be lifelike to be convincing, that is, to move the reader. Rubin demonstrates that Vasari followed specific rhetorical models to achieve these ends by passing from topics of praise to the narrative of deeds. The structure of Vasari's biography consists of a eulogistic opening, an account of that artist's ancestry, birth, youth, and choice of profession, followed by works and deeds selected to illustrate the virtues of the artist's character. Persuasion, understood in these terms, has a recoverable cultural history. It would flatten the carefully planned artifice of Vasari's *Lives* considerably to disregard period constructions of truth and falsehood, and the criteria upon which judgments were made, especially given then-current debates over the relative merits of poetry and history, judged in terms of their truth value. The unstructured facts which comprise chronicles were widely considered to be of lesser value than moral histories like Vasari's in which the author has judged the 'facts', weighed their importance, and constructed a narrative conveying a moral lesson to its intended readers.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Rubin, 'What Men Saw: Vasari's Life of Leonardo da Vinci and the Image of the Renaissance Artist', *Art History* 13 (1990): 36-46.

<sup>11</sup> These debates are integral to the reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and questions raised there about truth and verisimilitude, definitions of poetry, imitation, artifice, and decorum. See

Written at a time when a fittingly embellished interpretation of the events counted as a higher form of truth than the unadorned record of drab facts, can the *Lives* be studied today without taking into account these factors regarding the functional value of artifice to persuade the reader? Rubin emphasizes that, given the key position of the Leonardo *Life* at the opening of the third age, it is expected that the Vasari text should be based on narrative models in classical texts that educated readers would have easily recognized.

However, Charles Hope asserts that his analysis of syntax, language, and other formal qualities of the words as such, indicates that Vasari was not the primary author of his biographies, the *Life of Leonardo* being no exception. Hope's main point about the *Life of Leonardo*, one of the best written and most literary which depends on the brilliant use of anecdotes, is that its author (who is not Vasari) knew almost nothing about the career, output, or working practices of the artist (p. 23). Hope takes the implications of his textual analysis one step further to claim that placing the Leonardo biography as the first in Part Three was due to an historical accident rather than a considered decision. The 1550 edition is divided into two volumes, with the second containing Part Three ending on the final page of a gathering. Presumably, Hope argues, the printers decided to conclude the volume there. That is to say, the preface to Part Three was written to accommodate the actual arrangement of the individual biographies as determined by the printers. To counter this, one can refer to Rubin who, like Hope, considers Giovio to be one of Vasari's sources. Rubin also considers how the structure of Vasari's *Lives* divided into three periods is indebted to Giovio: both writers use the tri-partite structure and they both use Perugino as a foil against the modern era initiated by his former fellow-apprentice Leonardo. Vasari potentially had access to Giovio's fragmentary discussion of imitation and creative procedure where this account of Perugino and Leonardo occurs.<sup>12</sup>

Rubin concludes that the similarities of structure *and* content make it highly likely that Vasari was indebted to Giovio's text in positioning Leonardo as the first artist to practice the *maniera moderna*. Characteristics such as the ones Rubin discusses raise the troubling question of whether Hope's methods of analysis are adequate to the task he has set himself, namely to establish the authorship of 'Vasari's' *Lives*. What did collaboration actually entail and what is the significance of the collaboration on the *Lives* to our historical understanding of its authorship? If we accept Hope's analysis that the *Lives* were composed by a team of *letterati* whom the novice-writer Vasari more or less willingly served, we find ourselves addressing, not questions of attribution *per se*, but Michel Foucault's question, originally posed in 1969, 'what is an author?' Foucault asked us to consider the systems of valorisation and the conditions that fostered the formulation of the fundamental

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Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italia Renaissance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, 2 vols, especially volume 2, 'Conclusion on Poetic Theory'.

<sup>12</sup> Rubin, 'What Men Saw', 42.

critical category of 'man and his work', a formulation that was significantly developed for the first time in 'Vasari's' *Lives*, particularly in the second edition. The function of an author, Foucault argued, is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society. Treating the 'author as a function of discourse', can include assigning specific books to real authors, but only at the moment that a system of ownership, punishment, and strict copyright rules were established at the end of the eighteenth/early nineteenth century.

Since the publication of Foucault's immeasurably influential essay nearly half a century ago, a great deal of attention has been devoted to questions of authorship during the Early Modern era, when the conditions named by Foucault were in their formative stages. Among art historians and other scholars working with visual culture, especially print culture, the complex and diverse nature of authorship has recently become a leading question, as studies by Evelyn Lincoln, Rebecca Zorach, Alexander Marr, and others attest.<sup>13</sup> The transmission of ideas was neither linear nor teleological, writes Lyle Massey in her introduction to an edited volume on treatises on perspective (2003), and the challenge for historians is to construct a narrative of epistemological transformation without resorting to 'positivistic plot structures or over determined historical chronologies'.<sup>14</sup> In the case of scientific texts like perspective treatises, practical manuals, and educational texts, originality and authorial ownership of ideas were not so important, inviting an accepted form of what we would today call plagiarism. Writers sometimes drew heavily on the same source to which they voiced opposition. This was certainly the case for Leonardo's so-called treatise on painting, a compilation made from his autograph notes that was first printed in 1651.<sup>15</sup>

Adrian Johns, studying publications in natural philosophy, asks how the question of veracity became recognized and subject to standardization.<sup>16</sup> Although the subject matter of the *Lives* may have been classified a productive science, the humanist literary form of the text itself positions it in a different arena of cultural production. One example of authorial collaboration that is particularly relevant to the publication of Vasari's *Lives* because it involved an artist collaborating with

<sup>13</sup> Evelyn Lincoln, *Brilliant Discourse: Pictures and Readers in Early Modern Rome*, London-New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014; Rebecca Zorach et al., *The Virtual Tourist in Renaissance Rome: Printing and Collecting the Speculum romanae magnificentia*, Chicago: Joseph Regenstein Library, 2008; Alexander Marr, *Between Raphael and Galileo: Mutio Oddi and the Mathematical Culture of Late Renaissance Italy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Lyle Massey, 'Introduction', *The Treatise on Perspective: Published and Unpublished*, ed. Lyle Massey, Studies in the History of Art 19, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Symposium Papers XXXVI, Washington: National Gallery of Art, distributed by Yale University Press, 2003, 11.

<sup>15</sup> See Francesca Fiorani, 'Abraham Bosse e le prime critiche al *Trattato della Pittura* di Leonardo', *Achademia Leonardi Vinci: Journal of Leonardo Studies and Bibliography of Vinciana* 5 (1992): 78-95.

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998.

humanists (Raphael, Baldassare Castiglione, and Angelo Colocci), was an unfinished project to publish an illustrated vernacular edition of Vitruvius. As analyzed by Ingrid Rowland in a masterful essay focused on a letter that all three helped to compose though it was submitted to Pope Leo X in Raphael's name alone, makes two excellent points relevant to the case at hand here. First, that the intertwining of art and learning that we still associate with the sixteenth-century 'Renaissance' stemmed in great measure from the fact that its art, speaking, and writing subscribed to the same aesthetic and the same analytical vocabulary rooted in Greco-Roman antiquity. The visual and the verbal functioned reciprocally, Rowland writes, as Frances Yates' work on 'classical memory' has revealed.<sup>17</sup>

Second, that their publishing enterprise, which required a team of specialists, moved into the area of entrepreneurship: had the project been successfully completed, it would have resulted in a printed book similar to Cesare Cesariano's illustrated *volgare* Vitruvius, issued in 1521. In a letter to Pope Leo X for which drafts survive to enable a careful reconstruction of who contributed what, the humanists acting as a scribe for the artist worked together with Raphael in the spirit of entrepreneurship.<sup>18</sup> The way in which Raphael drew upon ancient textual sources for his painting, *Fire in the Borgo*, executed during these years, was also informed by his companionship with Castiglione and Colocci.<sup>19</sup> Raphael contributed his knowledge of modern drawing methods to measure buildings to the collaboration. Furthermore, Raphael, like Vasari, ran a workshop on a scale that meant he no longer operated within the traditional purviews of a professional artist of his time - circumstances that made his social status ambiguous.<sup>20</sup> Rowland emphasizes that the contacts Raphael formed, for example with the wealthy banker Agostino Chigi, were the effect of 'mass marketing and economic speculation' evident not only in the culture of papal Rome but in Europe as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

To address what was the effect of branding the set of biographies with their important paratexts as the product of a single author, and a painter at the court of Cosimo I de' Medici at that, entails developing a robust, multi-evidentiary framework similar to the one Rowland constructed to fathom the collaborative fabrication of Raphael's literary persona. Putting a painter into the position of authoring the lives of illustrious artists was not only a bid to raise the craftsman to

<sup>17</sup> Ingrid D. Rowland, 'Raphael, Angelo Colocci, and the Genesis of the Architectural Orders,' *The Art Bulletin* 76/1 (March 1994): 81-104, citing p. 82, citing Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966.

<sup>18</sup> Rowland, 'Raphael, Angelo Colocci', 92-93.

<sup>19</sup> Rowland, 'Raphael, Angelo Colocci', 95. On the painting's appeal to an elite audience who understood that he translated a literary practice of parodying style to the art of painting, in this case to construct himself as 'the pictorial Petrarch of Rome', see Patricia L. Reilly, 'Raphael's 'Fire in the Borgo' and the Italian Pictorial Vernacular', *The Art Bulletin* 92/4 (2010): 308-325 (citing p. 320 here).

<sup>20</sup> Rowland, 'Raphael, Angelo Colocci', 82.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



the level of a humanist, it was also a symptom of the fact that some artists were already operating successfully as men of letters. Vasari's workshop was, like Raphael's, no longer the independent atelier of a craftsman answering to a guild: between the first and second edition of the *Lives*, his workshop became affiliated with an academy where students would be trained in geometry, optics, and anatomy, in addition to all the traditional skills of figurative rendering and the collaborative production of images in a variety of media, so that the enormous commissions offered by heads of state, powerful ecclesiastics, and other patrons with sufficient means could be appropriately and rapidly executed to impress all who needed impressing. That is pretty much the story of Vasari's actual life – he, like Raphael, was willingly and creatively an entrepreneur. The story of Leonardo's life could have been similar if only he had towed the line instead of pursuing his own, sometimes questionable research interests – at least that is how the *Lives* portrayed him.

The dynamic transformations of the 'author-function' are one of the most important implications of studies assembled in the *Lives of Leonardo*. The network of people involved in the production of Vasari's *Lives*, which includes many more individuals associated with the court of Cosimo I de' Medici, the Florentine Academy, and the *Accademia del disegno* than is possible to mention in this review, is now fairly well-established after generations of scholarly work. It is now possible to study how the differing aims of Borghini, Vasari, Bartoli, Giambullari, Lenzoni, Cosimo himself, and many others intersected to produce the *Lives*. The same advanced state of research regarding the field of cultural production has not been reached for any other place or time. When Vasari's text, or Leonardo's for that matter, turn up in later editions and other works, there are many questions to ask about the nature of these appropriations and imitations as part of a discursive matrix. The matrix might be described as a network of agencies that connects everything from actual texts to the entrepreneurial investments in them.<sup>22</sup> The term 'intertextuality' was initially introduced (by Julia Kristeva in 1966) to describe how one text's meaning is shaped by another text. The notion of intertextuality recognizes that meaning is mediated through 'codes' imparted to both the reader and the writer through other texts.<sup>23</sup>

Juliana Barone contributes an important study of Trichet du Fresne's biography, undoubtedly the most important reinterpretation of Vasari's *Life*, which could be understood productively within a framework of intertextuality. Trichet repositioned Leonardo as a French court artist of the highest calibre. To understand

<sup>22</sup> Here I allude to Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory which gives agency to material things (he calls them 'actants') alongside human agents. It maps relations which are simultaneously material and semiotic. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, 69.

Trichet's undertaking, Barone argues, we must first reassess the complex history of the project leading to its publication in France. Trichet, whose biography appears in his *editio princeps* of Leonardo's *Trattato della Pittura* (1651), had at his disposal the important history of the dispersal of Leonardo's manuscripts after the death of his student/heir Francesco Melzi, written by the Milanese Barnabite Father Giovanni Ambrogio Mazenta, who reported on events within his own living memory. By 1635, Mazenta had written the account requested by Cassiano dal Pozzo, then in Rome preparing what became Trichet's edition published in Paris. Cassiano's correspondence from 1634-40 leaves no doubt that he was concerned with obtaining transcriptions of autograph writings by Leonardo then in Milan. By 1634, Cassiano also had a copy of the abridged version of Melzi's text, and he commissioned a new set of figurative illustrations from the young artist Nicolas Poussin then in Rome. The next stages of the project are obscure, but it eventually evolved into two editions, one the French translation by Roland Fréart de Chambray and the other Trichet's Italian edition. Barone focuses on the rights to publication dated 30 April 1650. The unresolved question for Barone is why there was a delay in the publication of both editions of the *Trattato* until 1651, whereas the other two books granted publication rights in the same document were published by Chambray in 1650. Barone hypothesizes that Trichet's involvement was recent, and caused a publication delay because he wanted to take into account another manuscript of the abridged text (as he mentions) in addition to the one he had received from Cassiano. She includes an analysis of DuFresne's sources in Vasari, Lomazzo, and Mazenta's *Memorie* to offer a lucid interpretation of Trichet's construction of a French Leonardo. Trichet was the first to offer an account of Leonardo's theoretical writings together with his artistic projects. In subsequent French biographies, Trichet's admiration for Leonardo's focus on expression and decorum effectively broke away from Vasari's framework.

In the case of the Low Countries, Paul Taylor's account of Leonardo is only the second overview published, following Thijs Weststeijn's 2009 study of the *Trattato*.<sup>24</sup> Taylor covers much of the same territory, although his primary focus is on the biographic literature. In the Low Countries, he writes, biography cannot be separated from the reception of Leonardo's own writings, a situation similar to what would develop in France in the mid-seventeenth century. The Dutch text published by Karl van Mander under the title *Schilderboek* (Haarlem, 1604), is surprisingly early, nearly fifty years before the publication of the *Trattato* itself. This was only possible if van Mander had access to a pre-publication copy of Leonardo's book on painting.<sup>25</sup> Taylor's writing postures deferentially regarding the reception of

<sup>24</sup> Thijs Weststeijn, "'This Art Embraces All Visible Things in its Domain': Samuel van Hoogstraten and the *Trattato della Pittura*", in *Re-Reading Leonardo: The Treatise on Painting across Europe 1550-1900*, ed. and intro. Claire Farago, Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2009, 415-440.

<sup>25</sup> Van Mander was in Rome between 1573-77, after staying in Florence, where the earliest abridged copies survive today. See Michèle-Caroline Heck, 'The Reception of Leonardo da

Leonardo through van Mander's and later texts. Rembrandt may have owned a copy of van Mander. Samuel van Hoogstraten (1678), who trained in Rembrandt's shop, recounted some of Vasari's most highly embroidered anecdotes, such as the story of Leonardo's death, now untethered from the larger *Lives*. Many of Leonardo's own ideas were recycled through Chambray's French edition of the *Trattato* (1651), but Leonardo's paintings and autograph graphic work were completely unavailable. Taylor ends his discussion with a striking example of the ensuing intertextual drift in which the verbal stands in for the missing visual record: van Hoogstraten commented on the Mona Lisa following van Mander, who translated Vasari, who had never seen the painting or 'forgot what it looked like' (p.48).

Thus the Life of Leonardo cannot be disassociated from the artist's artistic and literary legacy, even when they remained unavailable directly. This is intertextuality at work: Leonardo's continuing eminence lay in the hands of editors and copyists with aims and cultural circumstances very different from the *Life of Leonardo* as originally published under Vasari's name. Giovanna Perini Folesani offers a truly groundbreaking study of Leonardo's eighteenth-century Italian biographers. She is a philologist by training and her contribution is an outgrowth of her doctoral dissertation on Venanzio de Pagave (1722-1803)'s letters to Luigi Crespi. Pagave's biography of Leonardo does not survive, but he intended it to form part of a project begun around 1773 on Renaissance artists active in Milan, even though Pagave was prevented by the Oblati from publishing Leonardo's autograph manuscripts then in the Ambrosiana Library. The chapter considers how Trichet du Fresne's biography informed numerous later biographers. To establish a genealogy of texts, some of which are unknown even to Leonardo specialists, Perini Folesani tracks repetitions of erroneous details that enable her to identify precisely the sources each biographer used. The rich detail of this chapter brings much new information to light, but the material deserves to be critically studied further for what the intertextual chain in which fact and fiction mingle seamlessly can tell us about the reception of Leonardo in eighteenth-century northern Italy. The closing section of the chapter is focused on a comparison of Carlo Amoretti and Luigi Lanzi, who is generally credited with moving the study of Leonardo out of the biographical tradition and into a more scientifically verifiable context fully focused on his artistic career. An appendix transcribes excerpts from the letters of de Pagave to Crespi.

By the eighteenth century, biographies of Leonardo were also available to German-speaking readers who were not well versed in Italian or French. A study of German language texts before 1800 is contributed by volume co-editor Frangenberg. His survey of authors also brings new information into the discussion of Leonardo

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Vinci's *Trattato delle Pittura*, or *Traité de la Peinture*, in *Seventeenth-Century Northern Europe*, in *Re-Reading Leonardo*, 377-414; see especially p. 379 on his access to Leonardo's abridged treatise on painting. Her comparative analysis of texts leaves no doubt that Van Mander had direct access to the abridged treatise.

biography, but as Frangenberg notes, few of these texts strove for originality. For this reason, however, they are also prime candidates for the study of intertextual relationships in the production of the 'author-function'. The first German Life, published by Joachim Sandrart (*Teutsche Academie*, 1675-80), was based on van Mander, and took over Trichet's praise of Leonardo's gifts. Whether we name this 'inter-textual' or 'hybrid' or use some other term, authorship became ever more complicated during the first half of the eighteenth century. Combining biography with passages taken from the *Trattato* was a feature of the German reception of Leonardo, as was often the case in the Low Countries according to Taylor, as had been the case with Trichet's 1651 Italian edition of the *Trattato*. Georg Bohm's German translation of the *Trattato* in 1747 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) had a profound effect on the later reception of Leonardo in Germany. Bohm regrouped the chapters under new headings and followed the Life by Sandrart, enriched with additional information from Trichet. The most widely read biography was by Dezallier d'Argenville, which was popularized by Fuseli's dictionary. Wackenroder was the first to address the psychology of artistic creation, a theme developed by Walter Pater and Freud [and Otto Rank]. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Goethe's famous essay on the *Last Supper* (1817), which Frangenberg characterizes as frequently 'plagiarized'.

Is it 'plagiarism' or 'intertextuality'? Given the known diversity of pre-modern notions of authorship, I wonder if the activity of appropriating Goethe's text, and others, might be productively un-categorized until the evidence is weighed against period norms. In fact, the individual case and the broader cultural fabric are co-terminus co-constructions. As has been recently studied at length, writers who used Leonardo's *Trattato* frequently did not give credit to him as author and, indeed, Leonardo's own writings are filled with material that he derived from other sources.<sup>26</sup>

The next chapter, by Matthew Craske, which takes the discussion to eighteenth-century England, focuses on the representation of Leonardo as a 'universal' genius, an epithet which, *contra* Craske, has been in use at least since Alberti's treatise on painting (1434), and was specifically identified with Leonardo, for example, by the Dutch writers Taylor discusses. Craske discusses early publications of Leonardo's drawings in the Royal Collection and he takes issue with two recent studies of the same period in the English fabrication of Leonardo's persona that focused on the reception of the *Trattato*, by Richard Woodfield and Geoff Quilley (in *Re-Reading Leonardo*, 2009).<sup>27</sup> Craske argues that an important source for later views of Leonardo first appeared anonymously in the *Spectator* (n. 554, 5 December 1712), which was a central influence on (if not synonymous with)

<sup>26</sup>See *Re-Reading Leonardo*, especially the chapters by Farago, Bell, Kemp, Robison, Black, Heck, and Weststeijn.

<sup>27</sup>Richard Woodfield, 'The 1721 English Treatise of Painting: a Masonic Moment in the Culture of Newtonianism', 475-494; Geoffrey Quilley, 'The *Trattato della Pittura* and Leonardo's Reputation in Eighteenth-Century British Art and Aesthetics', 495-510, both in *Re-Reading Leonardo*.

the translator's preface to the 1721 edition published by John Senex. Craske attributes the *Spectator* article to John Hughes and locates previously unidentified theological dimensions in Hughes' characterization of Leonardo (p. 147). The chapter should definitely be read in conjunction with the studies by Woodfield and Quilley, both of whom discuss the dynamics of early eighteenth-century English publishing and their diverse readerships ranging from Freemasons who promoted Newtonian culture to the patrician world of virtuoso collectors and men of letters.

The next chapter, by volume co-editor Rodney Palmer, as described above, traces several of Vasari's most colourful anecdotes regarding Leonardo. He concludes that Vasari was more of a 'symbolic' point of reference than a literal history, in both visual and verbal media. Palmer's discussion of the availability of Leonardo's autograph writings in Rome by the early 1600s requires a small course correction. Giovanni Baglione and Gian Pietro Bellori are the main sources for our understanding of Zaccolini's knowledge of Leonardo's manuscripts, but neither author is conclusive – what is certain is that Zaccolini was considered an authority on Leonardo's writings on perspective by his seventeenth-century peers in Rome, as Janis Bell has argued.<sup>28</sup> Zaccolini also might have had access to Leonardo manuscripts before he arrived in Rome c. 1600. After 1585, as Mazenta recounts, Leonardo's manuscripts changed hands numerous times and travelled: thirteen notebooks were acquired by Mazenta himself in 1587 in Pisa; in 1614 fifteen manuscripts were offered to Cosimo II de' Medici in Florence; in 1637, Count Galeazzo Arconati, who appears to have acquired the manuscripts around 1622, donated eleven autograph notebooks to the Ambrosiana Library in Milan.<sup>29</sup> As for the issue of whether Leonardo's autograph manuscripts circulated in Rome in the early 1600s, that is also *terra incognita* but it is highly likely that abridged copies of the *Libro di pittura* were available as early as the mid-1580s when Egnazio Danti, then Bishop of Alatri, communicated with Gian Vincenzo Pinelli in Padua, who was seeking to establish the most accurate version.<sup>30</sup>

Michela Passini contributes the next chapter, which considers Gabriel Séailles's originally 1892 'psychological biography' of Leonardo as straddling the fence between history and fiction. Séailles was concerned with social reform in which the democratization of art played a pivotal role. Preceding the work of Rank and Freud by fifteen years, Séailles' main contribution to Leonardo studies was in

<sup>28</sup> Janis Bell, 'Zaccolini and Leonardo's Manuscript A', in *I leonardeschi a Milano: fortuna e collezionismo*, ed. Maria Teresa Fiorio and Pietro C. Marani, Atti del convegno Internazionale Milano 25-26 settembre 1990, Milan: Electa, 1992, 183-93, citing the primary sources, which postdate Zaccolini's life (d. 1630), Baglione (before 1642) and Bellori (1666).

<sup>29</sup> Giovanni Ambrogio Mazenta, *Le memorie su Leonardo da Vinci di Don Ambrogio Mazenta*, ed. Luigi Gramatica, Milan: Alfieri & Lacroix, 1919.

<sup>30</sup> The correspondence between Pinelli and the Florentine Lorenzo Giacomini in 1585-86 that names Danti is published by Carlo Pedretti, ed., *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci compiled and edited from the original manuscripts by Jean Paul Richter*, Berkeley: University of California press, 1977, I: 29-31.

making the artist into a symbol of his own conception of creativity. He incorporated recent trends in psychology from his studies with Wilhelm Wundt at the University of Leipzig in 1881-82. In France, Passini concludes, Leonardo played an important part in the construction of the image and 'myth' of the artist, facilitated by the extraordinary number of his paintings and manuscripts in the country and a history of scholarship since the end of the eighteenth century. The availability of material informed a process of literary re-invention in the course of which a new, decadent Leonardo supplanted his traditional associations with masters of the Italian Renaissance. This chapter does an excellent job of conveying the complexity of the discursive matrix in which Leonardo's biography circulated both as a model for contemporary artists and as a subject of historical research.

Julia Friedman, author of the next chapter entitled 'Three Faces of Leonardo', also deals with fin-de-siècle re-inventions of Leonardo's biography, as mentioned above. She reports on three books available to Russian readers, a scholarly biography and two novels, the more famous one by Merezhkovsky, and the other by his associate Volynsku. Friedman's analysis is an exemplary study of 'intertextual' relationships among these particular authors that deserves to be expanded to include their active appropriation of the Vasari *Life of Leonardo* and whatever other sources they used. Sumstov's scholarly publication aimed at both specialist and general readers included an extensive annotated bibliography and a scathing review of the two novels. He was particularly critical of the portrayal of Leonardo's homosexuality. Meanwhile Volynsku accused Merezhkovsky of plagiarism and the two novelists parted ways. Both novels had strongly autobiographical dimensions in line with Russian fin-de-siècle literature, even if they differed sharply in their treatment of Leonardo's character. Merezhkovsky was eventually nominated for a Nobel Prize in 1931 on the basis of his interpretation of Leonardo, while Volynsku had been made an honorary citizen of Milan in 1909.

In the next chapter, after briefly reviewing the genesis of Freud's famous argument that Leonardo's sexuality was shaped by his traumatic experiences as an infant, Bradley Collins writes about the discrediting of Freud's theory, partly due to the subsequent discovery of documents that undercut his argument that Leonardo experienced abandonment (Leonardo's father and grandfather both accepted him into the family). Collins asks what insights remain today from Freud's study, and finds at least three: Caterina probably wet nursed Leonardo; Freud's assertion of Leonardo's homosexuality endures; as does the idea that a connection exists between an artist's experience with his own mother and how he chooses to depict this relationship in subjects such as the Virgin and Child. I would quarrel with the last assertion, which inadvertently echoes naïve essentialist claims that have sometimes been advanced in feminist studies by writers unfamiliar with the complexity of artistic conventions that also need to be taken into account.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Kristeva, 'Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini', *Desire in Language*, 237-270, is widely acknowledged for its creative methodology, but Kristeva's lack of awareness of artistic convention compromises her argument considerably from an historical perspective.

The penultimate chapter is David Ekserdijan's analysis of Renato Castellani's film *Leonardo*, of 1971, originally broadcast as a TV mini-series. The film is not unsurprisingly a hybrid of fictional biography combined with scholarly documentary. The main line of the film's narrative, echoing the romantic remake of Leonardo as a decadent character discussed by Passini, is that Leonardo's visions outstripped what he was actually able to achieve because of his own apprehension of the danger of some of his ideas. Ekserdijan describes the sequence of action, which is also amply illustrated, to conclude that it is far from clear that the film succeeds in revealing Leonardo the man because he is invariably presented as an unfeeling Olympian genius. It would be interesting to extend his argument into a comparison with Vasari's ground zero text where fact and fable also mingle in striking ways, and where Leonardo is also cast as a negative foil (to the main hero of the *Lives*, Michelangelo). How did these biographies use similar strategies to appeal to their audiences? To what ends?

Martin Kemp has the final say, contributing a chapter that would have made the volume as a whole stronger if it had engaged directly with the other chapters in the form of an epilogue. Entitled, 'Do Biographies (and Portraits) Matter?', Kemp's essay is focused on the central problem that threads through the entire volume: the problematic of distinguishing documentable fact from everything else. He argues that, ever since Vasari, biographies have been based on the assumption that the artist's personality and his works are all of a piece – even Leonardo subscribed to the notion that every painter paints himself. [In fact, the previous chapter is a good example of how that assumption continues to operate in contemporary popular culture.] What Kemp calls the 'biographical imperative' is coupled with a 'physiognomic' one. To illustrate, Kemp compares Charles Nicholls' biography of Leonardo with his own. Whereas a writer of historical biography fills in the gaps in the historical record by supplying Leonardo's psychological motivations, Kemp's aim as an art historian is to understand Leonardo's intentions defined in the broadest sense as conscious choices based on the actual surviving historical record without filling in the gaps. Both approaches to biography depend on the same underlying assumptions, he adds: fact and fiction both mirror what is taken to be the nature of the artist at the time they are written. Asking what we can really hope to learn from biography, Kemp supplies a series of common-sense points ranging from satisfaction of fundamental human curiosity, to the supply of data to gain access to the 'person behind the work', to the location of works within a broader historical context, to reflection on what is assumed to be significant at a given time.

As readers of this review might already have noticed, there is little engagement in this volume with the poetics of the biographies of Leonardo. Paul Barolsky, who has written with great erudition based on many years of studying what might be called intra-textual element of Vasari's *Lives*, addresses concerns voiced and unvoiced in this set of essays about the historically shrewd imagination

that informs the fables.<sup>32</sup> Long misconstrued by historians as fact or misidentified as errors, Barolsky writes, these fables embody a philosophy of art presented in novella form. The stories embody subtle relations between art, poetry, theology, art theory, etiquette, economics – the list goes on – that enable us to understand at our historical remove how the *Lives* inflected issues of the day. By way of example, Barolsky singles out the portrayal of Leonardo's pursuit of natural philosophy at the expense of religion as an important theme, especially of the 1568 revised edition. Leonardo's inventions of 'strange conceits and new chimeras' (to borrow a phrase from Castiglione) addressed politically sensitive issues under the veil of fictive allegory. For Vasari's *Lives* was published during an era when the Church of Rome was redirecting artists to use their inventive skills in ways that conformed more closely with other aspects of Leonardo's artistic practice, above all with his uncanny command of optical naturalism.

When the same anecdotes were unmoored from the larger literary conception of the *Lives* as a 'deep historical fiction', they lost coded resonances meaningful to the publication's immediate audiences, inflections that nonetheless continued to exert pressure on the legacy of the artist's biography, as the individual chapters in *The Lives of Leonardo* attest. What did Walter Pater or Sigmund Freud know or understand about the pressures that ongoing Church reform exerted upon art and writings about art in mid sixteenth-century Florence or Rome? At our historical remove, what chance do we have to sort out fundamental characterizations of the artist that no doubt have some basis in historical fact but were utilized to build a picture of Leonardo as someone who frittered away his powers of invention on unworthy projects and was incapable of bringing anything to completion? In 1989, a critique of the category the 'artist and/as his work' was one of the main objectives of Donald Preziosi's *Rethinking Art History*, a book that appeared when art historians were becoming newly aware that Cartesian assumptions about identity as unified, and works of art as the direct reflection of the artist's identity, merit critical attention. Kemp's essay in this volume broaches the same question. Preziosi advises that, rather than collapsing the artist into his work, as if the final horizon of interpretation could be reached by explaining the artist's psyche, it would be more to the point 'to rearticulate the blueprints that have engendered and sustained the metaphorical landscapes within which we practice our craft'.<sup>33</sup> Attention to the genre of biography as such is an invaluable tool to understand the ideological presuppositions that b(l)ind us to disciplinary practices from which some of us might otherwise wish to be liberated. The biography of Leonardo studied diachronically offers an excellent 'core sample' of the much broader phenomenon of artistic biography.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Barolsky, 'Vasari and the Historical Imagination' *Word & Image* 15/3 (1999): 286-291.

<sup>33</sup> Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, London-New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 37.



In closing, I reluctantly note that this anthology is a little rough around the edges. The editorial introduction does not include a history of the scholarship or summaries of the chapter arguments, which is one reason I have included brief summaries here. The chapters, aside from the contribution by co-editor Rodney Palmer, do not refer to one another even when there are overlaps and resonances worth mentioning, a few of which I have indicated in this review. The bibliographical citations are inconsistent – to give one egregious example (my apologies if this sounds self-serving, but it struck me as significant), references to *Re-Reading Leonardo: The Treatise on Painting across Europe 1550-1900* (2009) vary from chapter to chapter: Taylor is awaiting the publication of Weststejn’s contribution to the volume, which, along with Heck’s chapter mentioned above, would indeed have been deeply relevant to his own essay; Barone did not have a chance to incorporate Soussloff’s study, though it also would have strengthened and expanded her arguments about Trichet’s construction of a ‘French Leonardo’;<sup>34</sup> while on the other hand, Perini Folesani cites various chapters in the same volume at some length, even though she has not always absorbed their arguments; and Craske’s chapter is built on a close reading of parts of two chapters. Nor are the views of art historians whose important work on Leonardo’s biography and Vasari’s *Lives* I have inserted into this review discussed. I am struck by the number of important contributions by art historians who are women that are missing – this is not a subject that receives much attention in print, but I can assure my readers that it is noticed by the women themselves whose work is thus marginalized or rendered invisible.

**Claire Farago** is Professor of Renaissance Art, Theory, and Criticism at the University of Colorado-Boulder. She has published widely on Renaissance art theory, Leonardo da Vinci, and the historical reception of his writings, as well as on contemporary critical issues. In 2012, she published *Art Is Not What You Think It Is*, co-authored with Donald Preziosi. Her most recent contributions to Leonardo studies are two edited volumes, *Re-Reading Leonardo: The Treatise on Painting across Europe, 1550-1900* (2009) and *Leonardo da Vinci and the Ethics of Style* (2008). She is currently at work on a critical edition of the first edition of Leonardo’s *Trattato della Pittura* (Paris, 1651), a collaborative project involving an international team of Leonardo manuscript specialists forthcoming from E. J. Brill Press.

farago@Colorado.EDU



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<sup>34</sup> Catherine M. Soussloff, ‘The Vita of Leonardo da Vinci in the Du Fresne Edition of 1651’, in *Re-Reading Leonardo*, 175-196.