

Sharon Gregory. *Vasari and the Renaissance Print*.

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Over the last eighteen years we have experienced a veritable renaissance of Vasari studies that have become increasingly sophisticated, culminating in the many initiatives, conferences, exhibitions, and publications related to the 500th anniversary of his birth (Vasari was baptized on 30 July 1511). These celebrations have taken place all over the world, from Arezzo to Florence and Paris, from Cambridge, Massachusetts to Brazil and Japan. Such an overwhelming and somehow unexpected success should not be misunderstood as a mere homage to

the first professional art historian on the anniversary of his birth, but as a new awareness of the theoretical relevance of his writings and all that implies. Indeed, this renewed attention goes well beyond the traditional investigation of his critical vocabulary (*disegno, giudizio, grazia*, etc.), and it embraces almost neglected themes, such as Vasari's vision of history (not only of art history), his language, as well as his methodological innovations (in-depth analysis of specific works, connoisseurship, archival research, and oral history). To this group of issues belong also his scattered references to a history of the pictorial genres (portrait, landscape, still life) and his extremely articulated discussion of artistic techniques, above all in the second edition of his *Lives*.

Sharon Gregory's beautiful book, which justly treats prints as works of art worthy of being illustrated with good quality plates, is part of this renaissance and investigates with great expertise the crucial topic of Vasari's relationship with the printed image: indeed, the purpose of her monograph is to recognize and discuss in depth the important role played by graphic works in the elaboration of the first history of art ever written. Vasari was well aware of their power and potential, even for his own professional career. In her lucid introduction, the author herself offers a good overview of the structure of her text. Chapter 1 deals with Vasari's first history of printmaking: as is well known, the artist added in the second edition (1568) of the *Lives* a long biography of Marcantonio Raimondi that was expanded into the first survey of the history of making prints; this collective Life was by no means the only evidence of Vasari's interest in this medium, which acquired a higher status in the second edition. The main thesis of this chapter is that Vasari was very much concerned with the issue of quality in printmaking and that engravers played an important role in his narrative, at least as important as the role played by the designers of printed images. Chapter 2 is devoted to the illustrated book, "with reference to [Vasari's] own designs for book illustrations" (63) as well as to the woodcuts in the *Lives*, which have "contributed to his programme to enhance the status of the artist" (63). Chapter 3 examines Vasari's innovative use of printed images as sources for his historical writing. The artist travelled extensively all over Italy and made extensive notes. Furthermore, he relied upon correspondents who could provide precious information about peripheral areas where he did not or could not travel. But this was not enough. Such a prolonged project as the writing of the *Lives* must have required images as memory aids, and this is where prints, together with his own drawings after the masters, became a crucial support. However, Gregory can smoothly demonstrate that Vasari, perhaps surprisingly, "did not rely on them very much, and that in the main he used them as a supplement to his own memory" (133). Chapter 4 analyzes prints as tools to educate and train young artists. Although few drawings after prints actually survive, Gregory is convinced that the "imitation by draughtsmen of the graphic technique of prints increased during the early Cinquecento, with artists responding first to German engravings and woodcuts, and then to new engraving style created by Marcantonio and Raphael" (3). If it is easy to demonstrate that Italian artists, famously including Michelangelo, made extensive use of Northern engravings for

their training and compositions, the stylistic argument of this chapter is the most questionable point in the book. This review is too short to allow for the full development of a counterargument, but the present writer is not convinced that “northern prints were initially used by artists in Florence who sought to expand their graphic vocabulary in ways that enlivened their drawing style but, more importantly, allowed for the convincing representation of three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface” (161–62). Chapter 5 deals with Vasari’s theory of imitation, suggesting that his assimilation of printed sources is closely linked with the theoretical premises sketched in his *Lives*. Finally, the author concludes her book with a chapter devoted to Vasari’s designs for prints which were made, like Raphael’s, as a mean to advertise his works in pursuit of fame.

This clearly written, well-researched, and intelligently structured book will remain a fundamental point of reference for all those interested in the history of printmaking as well as in Vasari’s fundamental contribution to art history.

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