

THE QUESTION OF VALIDITY IN VASARI'S ART HISTORICAL CONCEPT

by

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INTRODUCTION

Giorgio Vasari's first and second editions of his 'Lives of the Artists' appeared respectively in 1550 and 1568, just after the great period of Renaissance art in Florence and Rome had ended. As a practising Florentine architect, painter and sculptor who travelled extensively in Italy, Vasari could write with authority on the development of these arts throughout what he saw as the whole Renaissance period in that country, from the late 13th to the mid-16th century. Gathering information from all possible sources, his 'Lives' constitute the first comprehensive historical - critical survey of Italian Renaissance art. Much of their value resides in the first hand information they contain concerning the artists (Michelangelo in particular) who were his contemporaries, and in reflecting the aesthetic attitudes prevalent in a peak period in the history of art.

Vasari's literary predecessors would be found in classical Greece rather than Renaissance Italy. Durius in the late 4th and Xenocrates in the early 3rd century B.C. may be viewed as such.

The former had written on artists' lives, with personal anecdotes but without descriptions of their works. Vasari expanded on the anecdotes of his artists to an unprecedented degree, relating them to descriptions of works and to aesthetic standards. Xenocrates wrote a history of sculpture, applying aesthetic laws to art-works and propounded a concept of artistic progress from the primitive to the perfect, as well as that of a peak artistic period.

These two concepts were adopted by Vasari, along with the acceptance of classical standards of perfection.

But unlike the ancient Greeks, Vasari gives no separate histories of painting, sculpture and architecture, The three arts are treated as inter-influential parts of an overall stylistic development. Combining the approaches of Durius and Xenocrates, he goes on to stress the importance of individual personalities, occassionally to the point of contradicting statements he makes on the limitations of the art of earlier periods, as in his 'Life of Donatello'. (1)

Earlier Renaissance writers who wrote on the lives of artists, like Villani and the sculptor Ghiberti in the 14th and 15th centuries respectively, wrote about artistic personalities, but without the concept of artistic progress. They also lived too early to be able to historically view different periods in Renaissance art. It was Vasari who initially divided this art into three periods.

His concept of periodicity implies that artists working during a certain period in time show stylistic affinities and that each period's style represents a different level of achievement. In this way his three Renaissance periods show different stages in a stylistic development which culminates in an artistically perfect third period. This concept of qualitative progress in art is an integral part of Vasarian periodicity as is the possibility of an artistic retrogression after a peak period. Historians like de la Croix and Tansey refer to a Proto Renaissance, a Renaissance and a High Renaissance, (2) testifying to the way in which Vasarian periodicity has influenced western art historical thinking.

However, Vasari's concept of artistic progress can be criticised for being dependant upon a subjective bias. His

(1) Burroughs, B - Vasari's Lives of the Artists. p 86 - 91

(2) de la Croix, H and Tansey, R - Gardner's Art p 376
through the Ages. p 399
p 450

periodicity appears almost rigidly confining. A number of his stated facts and classifications have been proved erroneous (1) and his anecdotal information is often misleading (2). He was also intolerant of primitive, archaic or other non-classically inspired art. Yet he still infects readers with his tremendous enthusiasm for compelling works of art and can be appreciated as a lively story-teller and a discerning critic.

In attempting to investigate the validity of his theoretical concepts other factors arise; such as the relevance of anecdotal information, the degree of environmental influence on stylistic development as well as that of purely aesthetic influences, the validity of aesthetic standards and rules, the differentiation of stylistic periods and the relativity of taste.

When these issues are considered certain conclusions are reached, for instance that one can only appreciate the art of the past in terms of present experiences; that Vasari was limited in his art experience by time, relative to our present situation, by his never having travelled outside of Italy and by his 16th century Florentine education; that his value lies in his ability to intuitively respond to art works while holding to aesthetic standards; that these can only apply for the duration of a particular style or school, that stylistic influences are possibly stronger than many of the environmental influences, that artistic progress is relatively possible and that periodicity is a reality.

- (1) Vasari attributed Traini's 'Triumph of Death' to Orcagna, in Burroughs, pages 29 - 30.
- (2) Vasari condemned Castagno as being the murderer of Domenico Veneziano in Burroughs, pages 116 - 117. But Veneziano is recorded as having died in 1461, four years later than Castagno, in de la Croix, pages 420 - 422.

When Giorgio Vasari wrote his 'Lives of the Artists' in the mid-16th century, it was at the end of what has been considered a peak period in the history of art. Understandably, he could not conceive that there had been or would be art anywhere which would equal that of his own time. He writes that this art "... has the credit of making such perfection that we must fear that art will sink rather than hope that it may still rise to a greater achievement". (1) Knowing that Greek and Roman art had declined after their mature period, he believed this to be the inevitable fate of the art of the future. Like a mountain peak a period of perfection cannot go on forever.

To Vasari, the artist who most exemplified this artistic perfection was Michelangelo, of whom he wrote that God "... resolved to send to earth a spirit of extreme expression in all the arts, one able to give form to painting, perfection to sculpture and grandeur to architecture". (2) Therefore Michelangelo's work became for him a standard of perfection against which he was to measure all other art.

But observing that what he considered true artistic perfection occurred only in his own mature, Cinquecento period, Vasari realised that earlier artists must also be judged according to the artistic standards of their times. As a Florentine, he had access to two and half centuries of Tuscan Renaissance art, enabling him to trace a stylistic development from Cimabue to Michelangelo. This development he likened to the growth of a man. Dividing his artists into three periods, coinciding with the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he called the

(1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit.

p 42

(2) Ibid

p 258

first period the childhood, the second the adolescence and the third, the maturity of Renaissance art. Artists of the first two periods were also evaluated according to their contributions to the development of the style of the third. And by comparing the art of painters like Giotto and Masaccio with that of Michelangelo on the one hand and earlier Byzantine or medieval art on the other, Vasari came to the conclusion that it was "... the peculiar nature of art always to be crude, stiff and unreal in the beginning and to develop by gradual stages to perfection". (1)

This belief was held by the ancient Greek writer Xenocrates. In his history of sculpture he omitted all sculptors before Polycleitos who he believed had advanced further than his predecessors by making his figures rest their weight on one leg. But he still blamed Polycleitos for making the proportions of his figures appear too heavy. This was in comparison with those of the improved figures of Pythagorus and Lyssipus who came later. The latter achieved a perfection in which according to Xenocrates "... even the smallest detail is accurate and delicate". (2)

So Lyssipus was to Xenocrates what Michelangelo was to Vasari. Like Xenocrates, Vasari did not concern himself with contemporary or past art in other lands, or with earlier archaic developments. Realising the need to generalise and simplify for purposes of classification and didactic clarity, he made the end of the 13th century the beginning of his first period of Renaissance art. Although obviously aware of earlier Renaissances, he wrote as if the dark ages had continued until almost thirteen hundred A.D.

Commencing his 'Lives' with a brief account of the decline of

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 42 |
| (2) Venturi, L. - History of Art Criticism | p 39 |
| | p 40 |

classical art, Vasari was according to Panofsky the first to combine what he called the "outrages of the barbarians" with the "perfidious zeal of the new Christian religion" (1) as the joint causes of one catastrophe, that of the destruction of ancient Greek and Roman culture. The beginnings of Renaissance art, Vasari detected in the sculpture of the Pisanos, the architecture of Arnolfo di Cambio and the painting of Cimabue and Giotto.

Having described how Cimabue released painting from the "uncouth manner" (2) of his Byzantine instructors, he writes that it was Cimabue's pupil Giotto, who "... alone in a rude and inept age, when all good methods of art had long been lost ... set art upon the path that may be called the true one". (3)

When artists set themselves to work after the dark ages, Vasari writes that it was "... not according to rules of art (which they no longer possessed) but each according to his own talent". (4) From the start he revealed a distaste for Byzantine and medieval art. Approving the antique sources of Nicola Pisano's sculpture, he deplored the fact that in Giovanni Pisano's second 'Pisan Pulpit' reliefs (5) "... such care, industry and money were used without any approach to the good style". (6) The "good style", "the rules of art" and Giotto's "true path", refer to the classical style which Vasari seems to have believed was divinely bestowed upon the Ancients.

A reverence for antique art was a characteristic of the whole Renaissance period in Italy. Both the 14th century Villani and Alberti a century later, had referred to ancient

- (1) Panofsky, E. - Renaissance and Renaissances p 31
in Western Art.
- (2) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. p 3
- (3) Ibid p 16
- (4) Ibid p 7
- (5) de la Croix, H. - op cit. p 381
- (6) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. p 14

art in gauging the perfection which they found respectively in the art of Giotto and Masaccio. So armed with these traditional and divinely sanctioned aesthetic standards, Vasari confidently attempted to distinguish "... the better from the good and the best from the better, "in the work of the artists of his three chronologically defined periods. (1)

The classical and the Michelangelesque bias in Vasari's writings is matched by a powerful Florentine bias. He wrote that Michelangelo had been sent to Florence because God had observed "... that in Tuscany men were more zealous in study and diligent in labour than in the rest of Italy". (2) When he writes that Giotto "... deserved to be called the disciple of nature rather than that of other masters," (3) he ignores the possibility of any contemporary Roman influences on Giotto's development in the same way that he ignores the significance of parallel Sieneese developments in painting. Similarly, he disregards the Roman experience of Arnolfo di Cambio, the Florentine who showed "... those who came after him the true path to perfection", (4) in architecture.

But early Pisan influences he could not ignore. He describes how the people were fired by the beauty of 'Pisa Cathedral', 1053 - 1272 (5) "... to undertake noble enterprises". (6) This Romanesque building is however, devoid of any Gothic clutter. It's tall dome, clear dispositioning of parts and graceful round arcading create an effect similar to that of Brunelleschi's Quattrocento Florentine architecture which Vasari praised so highly. (7) He also

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| (1) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 41 |
| (2) | Ibid | p 258 |
| (3) | Ibid | p 17 |
| (4) | Ibid | p 9 |
| (5) | de la Croix, H. - op cit. | p 315 |
| (6) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 8 |
| (7) | Ibid | p 69 - 85 |

He also mentions the great treasury of antiquities to be seen in Pisa. (1) This town served as the seaport for the Florentine Republic of which it was a part, making it preferable for him to acknowledge initial Pisan sources and influences on Florentine architecture and sculpture, rather than those coming from Rome and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, he writes that when Giotto improved the art of design "... figures in marble and stone improved also". (2) He is convinced that Andrea Pisano's 'Florence Baptistry Door', 1430 - 1435 (3) and 'Campanile' reliefs 1334 - 1337 (4) were designed by Giotto, but acknowledges no reciprocal sculptural influences on the painter. As with painting and architecture, the development of early Renaissance sculpture became a Florentine affair.

Florentine pride was among other things based on his appreciation of the history of the great artistic achievements of his native city. In the 15th century, L.B. Alberti had written of his talented Florentine contemporaries that "... there was talent for every noble thing not to be marked below any who was ancient or famous in these arts". (5) To Alberti, it must have seemed that these artists had produced works which were perfect. But here Vasari would disagree; although he believed that second period artists like Donatello, Brunelleschi, Masaccio and Ghiberti had produced work which was equal in merit to that of the classical period. True perfection he believed, was possible only after the discovery of the Hellenistic works at the end of the 15th century. He claims that the sight of "... the Laocoön, the Hercules, the mighty Belvedere, the Venus" (6) had ultimately made possible the achievements of the third period artists. Vasari believed that these Hellenistic works represented the best of classical

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 8 |
| (2) Ibid | p 42 |
| (3) de la Croix, H - op.cit. | p 382 |
| (4) Burroughs - op.cit. | p 12 |
| (5) Holt - A Documentary History of Art. Vol 1. | p 206 |
| (6) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 186 |

art and that Michelangelo had profitted from his experience of them to the extent that he was able to give perfection a new and ultimate dimension.

From the time of the maturity of Michelangelo's style, Vasari finds it necessary for all who would perfect their art to go to Rome to study the antiques and the works of the great third period masters. Correggio and the Venetians were considered the poorer for not having done this. High Renaissance Rome had absorbed the best Florentine talent. Here the monumentality of the ruins and the splendour of the papal court must have also had their effect on the Florentine style. It was in Rome that the fruits of two centuries of Florentine artistic achievement were synthesized and attained an unsurpassed grandeur.

But it was in the Mannerist work of mid-16th century Florence, that Vasari saw a continuation and development of High Renaissance Roman perfection under the predominating influence of Michelangelo. By the time his first 'Lives' were published, Rome and Florence shared the honours as Meccas of artistic perfection. However, it was Vasari's bias towards his own art and that of his Mannerist contemporaries which had the most limiting effect on his appreciation of artistic developments in other centres like Venice. Nevertheless those artists he regarded as truly great (apart from some Mannerist contemporaries) are still considered the truly greats of Renaissance art and for very much the same reasons.

This is true of all three periods. Going back to the first, Trecento period, Vasari discerned that Giotto's painting had progressed far more than contemporary sculpture or architecture. Regarding the latter, he writes that through Arnolfo's labours, "... architecture made as much progress as did painting under Cimabue". (1) One remembers

(1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit.

that in spite of Cimabue's de-Byzantining of painting, Vasari still considered Giotto "... alone in a rude and inept age". (1) Yet he reproves Giotto "... for having drawn eyes not round but almond shaped" because of "... an aesthetic prejudice in favour of the sphere, according to classical tradition". (2)

It would appear that Vasari used different levels of criticism in evaluating his artists. Giotto is appreciated in relation to the artistic standards of his contemporaries as well as those of the Ancients. And when judging him according to third period standards, Vasari does so with Giotto's historical position in mind writing, "If in Giotto the figures did not have the limpidity and beauty of life ... remember that Giotto had never seen a better painter than himself". (3) And in saying that Giotto showed "... the path to that perfection which art displays in our (Vasari's) own age," (4) he recognised the painter as a great innovator and key figure in the development towards the art of the third period. Thus Giotto is evaluated both critically and historically.

It was largely Vasari's belief in artistic progress which enabled him to appreciate Giotto at so many different levels. But because of this he could not find the perfection in Giotto that earlier writers like Villani and Ghiberti did. Villani had praised Giotto's pupils, but having found Giotto's work perfect there could be no question of the pupils progressing further than the master. However, Vasari detected an improvement in "... manner, expression, outline and colour" in the work of the Trecento followers of Giotto, while admitting that this was "... without originating any new direction". (1) These

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 16 |
| (2) Venturi, L. - op.cit. | p 102 |
| (3) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 43 |
| (4) Ibid | p 5 |

improvements seem to reside in single quantities.

Orcagna's 'Or San Michele Tabernacle' 1359 (2), Vasari considered "... the foremost work of that (Trecento) period", (3) but this was despite its Teutonic manner. As he particularly appreciated it's graceful proportioning, we must assume that it was in this quality that he felt that Orcagna had developed further than Giotto. He probably recognised in Orcagna's solemn, sculptural style a Florentine link (during a Gothic interlude) between the art of Giotto and that of Masaccio, a stage in the development from the one to the other and finally to the style of Michelangelo.

Vasari had written that art develops "... by gradual stages to perfection". (4) Yet he infers rather that the development of Florentine Renaissance art progressed in great leaps forward at the beginning of each new period. In painting, this occurred with Giotto in the first period, Masaccio in the second and Leonardo in the third. Any gradual stages in this development presumably took place in the periods between the great leaps. In these periods Vasari detected minor developments, refinements and influences (as in the case of Giotto's followers) which would work together to facilitate the next great leap forward. When describing the initial leap from first into second period art in the early 15th century, he writes that "The superb Masaccio completely freed himself of Giotto's style and adopted a new manner, he brought into existence the new style". (5)

This hyperbolic statement seems to imply a discontinuation of any stylistic link between Giotto and Masaccio. Yet when describing how the latter's figures stand firmly on

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 43 |
| (2) Bertram, A. - Florentine Sculpture | p 24 |
| (3) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 31 |
| (4) Ibid | p 42 |
| (5) Bull, G - Lives of the Artists, Vasari | p 92 |

the ground and are given "... life and force and a certain roundness of relief ..." and how his draperies were painted "... with few and simple folds", (1) this could equally refer to similar qualities in the work of Giotto a century earlier. And when describing how a generation after Masaccio, Castagno painted figures which "... moved with great power.... and were grave and earnest in expression", (2) this could describe the figures of both Giotto and Masaccio as well as those of Michelangelo, implying a strong stylistic link through the work of the three periods. One of the things that impressed him most about Masaccio's work was the new mathematically calculated spacial effects so well demonstrated by this artist. He described the surface of the painted barrel vault in Masaccio's 'Santa Maria Novella Trinity' 1425 (3) as having "... all the appearance of being indented". (4) Seeing Masaccio's work as probably the first forceful demonstration of the second period painting style, he stressed this point so emphatically (5) that he seemed temporarily to forget that it was in the context of an overall stylistic development.

Masaccio's art like Giotto's, appeals to what Berenson calls our "tactile values", (6) stimulating a structural, sculptural sense of reality. But contemporary with this art was that of the late Gothic painters in Florence which had a predominantly sensuous appeal. Their Gothicism was more stylish than expressive. Like Vasari's own painting, it was mannered and came at the end of a long stylistic development. It was also a courtly art and as such, appealed to the 16th century Mannerists who themselves worked largely for courtly patrons. Michelangelo is quoted by Vasari as saying that he found the painting of the courtly Gentile da Fabriano, "... gentile like his name". (7)

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 64 |
| (2) Ibid | p 115 |
| (3) de la Croix, H. - op cit. | p 420 |
| (4) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 65 |
| (5) Bull, G. - op cit. | p 92 |
| (6) Berenson, B. - The Italian Painters of the Renaissance. | p 53 |
| (7) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 119 |

Vasari revealed his delight in courtly subject matter when describing an idyllic section of Traini's 'Triumph of Death' 1350 (1) in the Pisa Campanile. He writes that the artist (who he believed to be Orcagna) had depicted "... everything that the world has to offer of joy and delight". (2) He describes Pisanello's 'Saint George Liberating the Princess' 1435 (3) as entirely "... correct in design and extraordinary in grace". (4) Here he was not concerned about whether the figures stood on the ground or had the quality of relief.

Vasari must have seen many roads converging to make up the third period style. Quattrocento Gothic art could have a refining and enriching influence on the austere style of Masaccio. When turning to second period architecture, Vasari writes that Brunelleschi was "... of such exalted genius that we may say he was sent to us by heaven to revive architecture, which for hundreds of years had been all but lost". (5) Here he seems to completely discount any possible first period development towards Renaissance architecture, thus virtually disregarding his earlier appraisal of the achievements of Arnolfo di Cambio. He believed that it was through Brunelleschi that "... architecture rediscovered the proportions and measurements of the antique". (6) Relating how Brunelleschi and Donatello went around Rome measuring up ancient buildings to the extent that they became known as "treasure hunters", (7) Vasari emphasised the importance of a knowledge of the rules of classical art for further development.

With this knowledge at their disposal, Vasari suggests that it was possible for Quattrocento architects and sculptors to produce works that were the equal of those of the ancients.

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| (1) | de la Croix, H. - op.cit. | p 397 |
| (2) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 29 - 30 |
| (3) | Huyghe, R. - Larousse Encyclopedia of
Renaissance and Baroque Art. | p 46 |
| (4) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 119 |
| (5) | Ibid | p 69 |
| (6) | Bull, G. - op cit | p 90 |
| (7) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 72 |

Regarding Brunelleschi's 'Florence Cathedral Dome' 1420 - 1436 (1), he goes as far as saying that the Ancients never dared "... so to compete with the heavens as this building seems to do." (2) He claims that Donatello's work was considered "... as fine as the best of Greek and Roman art", (3) and describes Ghiberti's bronze reliefs on the second 'Florence Baptistry Doors' 1425 - 1452 (4) as "... the most admirable the world has ever seen - ancient or modern". (5)

Each of these second period artists Vasari found "... supreme in his own field" and all together "... leading the way to that grandeur and exalted perfection" made manifest in the third period. (6) But they still had not attained third period standards of perfection. Even though Vasari believed Masaccio's work to be "... so far in advance of that which had been done until this time that it could be compared with the art of any time", (7) he did not find in it the perfection of the art of the third period.

The discrepancy between what Vasari says and what he implies must always be considered in view of his often euphoric statements. However, in his 'Life of Donatello', Vasari admitted to being undecided as to whether to place this artist in the second or the third period and wrote, "It is certain that if we assign him to the second period, we must hail him as the representative of all the other masters of that period, since he summed up all the qualities in himself which were divided among the rest ". (8) As he believed Donatello's relief sculpture to be unsurpassed even by his own 16th century contemporaries, it is this artist who mostly seemed to disturb Vasari's neatly formulated

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| (1) | de la Croix, H. - op cit. | p 412 |
| (2) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 82 |
| (3) | Ibid | p 86 |
| (4) | de la Croix, . - op cit. | p 408 |
| (5) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 62 |
| (6) | Ibid | p 64 |
| (7) | Ibid | p 65 |
| (8) | Ibid | p 44 |

periodicity. Donatello will therefore serve as an interesting example of how Vasari treats the life of an individual artist.

The works of Donatello which he praised most highly, were those which could have contributed to the development of the style of Michelangelo. For example, when Vasari describes the 'Or San Michele, St. George' figure, 1415 - 1417 (1) he writes of it's expression of "... the beauty of youth, courage and valour in arms and a terrible ardour". (2) Apart from the armour he could have been describing Michelangelo's 'David' 1501 - 1504 (3). And there are similarities between these two works. Both convey the ideal of the classical hero in troubled times. Both represent early achievements in the stylistic development of their creators. And both figures appear apprehensive of the immediate future; a seemingly prophetic expression of the lonely paths their creators would take ahead of and away from the stylistic canons of their age.

When Vasari says of the 'St. George', that "... life seems to move within the stone", (4) it could apply to virtually any statue by Michelangelo. But when praising Michelangelo's 'David' he stresses it's beauty more than it's life-like qualities, writing "Never since has a statue been produced with so fine an attitude, so perfect a grace, such beauty of hand, of foot, of brow". (5) Regarding Donatello's 'St. George', he writes "It is certain that no modern figure is as life-like as this marble by the hand of Donatello". (6) The second period Donatello is allowed to achieve a life-like perfection whereas the perfection of Michelangelo is on an ideal God-like plane.

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| (1) | Hartt, F. - Donatello, Prophet of Modern Vision | p 49 - 54 |
| (2) | Bull, G. - op cit. | p 187 |
| (3) | Stampatore - Michelangelo | p 25 - 27 |
| (4) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 87 |
| (5) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 262 |
| (6) | Ibid | p 87 |

To the modern observer a work like Donatello's 'Mary Magdalene' 1456 (1) might appear to be far more realistic than his 'St. George'. But it's compelling realism was not in the idealistic Michelangelesque line of development. Yet in spite of it's rugged, non-classical qualities, Vasari finds the 'Magdalene' "... most exquisitely carved...." with "... every part a perfection of anatomical study". (2) He must have appreciated particularly the life-like qualities of this work in spite of his classical prejudice.

Vasari's observations are usually acute. He writes that Donatello's figures "... often seem quite different when they are set in place higher or lower or in a new light". (3) The 'St. George' figure is a case in point. When seen at floor level (that of most photographic reproductions) the saint appears to be an unflinching warrior, glaring at an unrepresented foe. But when positioned up in its niche and viewed as it should be, from below, the saint appears to be looking slightly upwards, almost apprehensively, as if listening for the voice of God who appears in the relief above.

Vasari's discernment is also apparent in his appreciation of Donatello's bronze 'David' 1432 - 1440 (4), not for it's antique qualities but for its truth to nature. He writes "It is hard to believe that it is not a cast of a living figure; it is so soft and so flexible". (5) Jansen, writing in the 20th century confirms that the figure "... is not a classical Epehebos but a beautiful apprentice" and says "... we cannot altogether blame Vasari for comparing the figure to a living model". (6) The renowned early 20th century art historian, Heinrich Wölfflin proves far more rigidly period confining than Vasari by ignoring

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| (1) Hartt, F. - op.cit. | p 383 - 392 |
| (2) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 87 |
| (3) Ibid | p 87 |
| (4) Hartt, F. - op cit. | p 209 - 223 |
| (5) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 88 |
| (6) Jansen, H.W. - The Sculpture of
Donatello | p 85 |

the life-like qualities of this work. He could only see that it was "so close to classic taste" (1) but lacking in projection and contrast when compared to a 16th century work like Cellini's 'Perseus'. (2)

Having discerned that Donatello's achievements in realistic art were unsurpassed and rating him higher than any other second period artist, Vasari still realised that Donatello did not create the larger than life third period concept of man. In other words, Donatello did not work in the third period style. But Vasari excused this by pointing out that in Donatello's day "... the antiquities now (then) brought to light had not been discovered". (3) This seems to have been Donatello's barrier to ultimate perfection. However Vasari's enthusiastic responses to moving works of art often caused him to praise them in terms which put them beyond the confines of the period in which he had placed them.

His classical bias again becomes evident in the praise he lavishes on Donatello's antique flavoured works. He writes that the Paduan 'Gattamelata' 1445 - 1450 (4) "... could compare with any antique work", (5) and the dancing children on the 'Prato Pulpit' 1433 - 1438 (6) he describes as "... sculpture that is perfect". (7) When describing the Santa Croce 'Annunciation' (8) he is in no doubt that Donatello was "... striving to recover the beauty of the Ancients that had been lost for many years. (9) This 'Annunciation' was the work which Vasari thought

- (1) Wölfflin, H. - Classic Art p 288 - 289
- (2) Murray, L. - The Late Renaissance and Mannerism. p 63
- (3) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. p 90
- (4) de la Croix, H. - op.cit. p 410
- (5) Bull, G. - op.cit. p 182
- (6) Hartt, F. - op.cit. p 184 - 196
- (7) Bull, G. - op.cit. p 181
- (8) Hartt, F. - op.cit. p 177 - 183
- (9) Bull, G. - op.cit. p 171

had established Donatello's reputation, probably because he associated it chronologically with an early 'Crucifix' 1410 - 1415 (1) by Donatello in the same church.

Modern scholars like Hartt and Jansen, have by tracing the artists' stylistic development (among other factors), dated the 'Annunciation' between 1430 and 1435, during a classical phase in Donatello's work. This, Frederick Hartt attributes to the sculptor's sojourn in Rome between 1432 and 1433 (2). But Vasari probably associated the classical elements of the 'Annunciation' with the traditional early trip that Donatello is supposed to have made to Rome with Brunelleschi in 1402. Vasari does not trace any stylistic development in the work of Donatello, but takes his readers from work to work like an enthusiastic tourist guide.

His description of this work is as usual very concise. He describes how Donatello "... created a masterly flow of folds and curves in the drapery ..." and how "... frightened by the unexpected appearance of the angel, she (the Virgin) makes a modest reverence with a charming, timid movement, turning with exquisite grace towards him as he makes his salutation". (3) Vasari does not find it necessary to explain why Donatello's "skill and ingenuity are especially apparent". (4) They must have been to evoke this charmingly intuitive description.

Unlike modern pictorial analysts, Vasari does not compare examples of an artist's work with others or analyse compositional structure and surface tensions. Jansen for instance, compares the central void of this 'Annunciation' with that in Donatello's bronze 'Feast of Herod' relief, 1423 - 1427 (5) which he says has the "centrifugal force

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| (1) Ibid | p 29 - 36 |
| (2) Ibid | p 165 |
| (3) Bull, G. - op.cit. | p 174 |
| (4) Ibid | p 174 |
| (5) de la Croix, H. - op.cit. | p 407 |

of an explosion whereas in the 'Annunciation' he finds that it has the opposite effect, drawing the two figures together like "... complementary arcs irresistably attracted to each other". (1) 20th century readers respond to such a description. But in Vasari's time not many people outside of Florence would have seen this work and any analytical description would not have enticed them to see it.

Having used the above as an example of how Vasari described a work of art we can see that as an historian he recognised the classical qualities of the 'Annunciation' and as a critic and an artist, appreciated it's skilful execution. It is as a writer that he infects his readers with his delight in the work.

Art history and criticism had not yet developed to where other opinions where required, dates disputed and references sought out and compared. Hartt and Jansen in their books on Donatello differ in their interpretations of the symbolism of the Santa Croce, 'Annunciation'. Hartt quotes Jansen regarding it's date and symbolism (2) but leaves the reader with nothing definite regarding either symbolism or dating. With Vasari, there are no questions, right or wrong; certainty, clarity and concision are the hallmarks of his style.

His aim in writing the 'Lives' was didactic. He wished his artists to stand as examples to the artists of his own time. Where he could, he portrayed them as generous and hardworking. Complete accuracy was neither essential nor possible when glorifying his artists to keep their memory alive and having to rely upon what was often studio gossip for information. Vasari brings his artists alive as personalities with individual idiosyncracies. He describes how when Donatello was accused of making his

(1) Jansen, H.W. - op.cit.

p 107

(2) Hartt, F. - op.cit.

p 177 - 183

'St. Louis' statue, 1422 - 1425 (1) "... so stupid and clumsy", the sculptor replied that it was on purpose as St. Louis must have been stupid to forsake his kingdom to become a monk. (2) One is delighted that the creator of such intensely religious works could be so irreverently human. Vasari's anecdotes are usually related to his own opinions; he really did find the 'St. Louis' figure "the least meritorious" of Donatello's works. (3)

Vasari would certainly not have been able to see all Donatello's work as contributing to the development of the third period style. The sculptor's expressive bronze reliefs depicting dramatic events in the 'Life of Saint Anthony' 1446 - 1447 (4) in San Antonio, Padua, seem antithetical to classic art. Yet Vasari describes the "... amazing skill in composition and handling of perspective" (5) in these works, appreciating their pictorial qualities. In the 'Miracle of the Wrathful Son' relief, 1446 - 1447 (6) the long architectural perspective lines thrusting into space are reminiscent of his own 'Uffizzi Courtyard' 1560 (7) in Florence.

Donatello's reliefs often present a preview of the compositional devices of Cinquecento Mannerism. In his earlier bronze 'Feast of Herod' 1425 (8) one's eye is drawn across a central void between contrastingly calm and emotionally charged areas with figures crowded

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| (1) | Hartt, F. - op.cit. | p 61 - 66 |
| (2) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 90 |
| (3) | Ibid | p 90 |
| (4) | Hartt, F. - op.cit. | p 353 - 376 |
| (5) | Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 89 |
| (6) | White, J. - The Birth and Rebirth
of Pictorial Space | p 36 |
| (7) | Crosby, S. Mck. - Gardner's Art
through the Ages. | p 373 |
| (8) | Ibid | p 296 |

into corners, very much the same as in Raphael's 'Expulsion of Heliodorus' 1511 - 1512 (1). As a mannerist, Vasari would have fully appreciated the spacial complexities of Donatello's works and their potential as influences on third period compositions.

However, when viewing the 'San Lorenzo Pulpit' reliefs, 1460 - 1470 (2), one realises why the style-conscious Vasari wrote that Donatello "... tried his hand at everything without worrying whether it was worth-while or not". (3) Charles Seymour Jnr. writes in his book 'Sculpture in Italy', that in these works "... we seem at times to be looking at 20th century expressionist art". (4) Despite the expressively distorted and often grotesque figures in works such as these, Vasari still found a way of accepting them as the work of a great Florentine artist. He also had to accept stylistic changes in the work of Michelangelo.

In concluding his 'Life of Donatello', Vasari quoted from a book of drawings in which those of Michelangelo and Donatello appear on opposite pages. Under these is written, "Either the spirit of Donatello moves Buonarroto or that of Buonarroto first moved Donatello". (5) This is surely the highest praise Vasari could lavish on a second period artist. In his book 'High Renaissance', Michael Levey sees Michelangelo as the Everest of a Himalayan range of third period masters (6). We may imagine Donatello then as representing a separate peak apart from, but as high as some of the peaks of the Himalayan range.

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| (1) Crosby, S. Mck. - op.cit. | p 363 |
| (2) Hartt, F. - op.cit. | p 431 - 478 |
| (3) Bull, G. - op.cit. | p 189 |
| (4) Seymour, C. - Sculpture in Italy. | p 146 |
| (5) Bull, G. - op.cit. | p 190 |
| (6) Levey, M. - High Renaissance. | p 16 |

Heinrich Wölfflin wrote that when moving from Quattrocento to Cinquecento art "We feel a distinct sense of moving into another class of society and a bourgeois art is transformed into an aristocratic one" (1). Sir Joshua Reynolds referred to the High Renaissance as the "highest province" of art. (2) And Kenneth Clark described it as "... no longer a world of free and active men...." but one of "giants and heroes". (3)

These statements could almost sum up Vasari's view of the change from his second to his third periods. They also confirm the stylistic reality of his periodicity.

However, judging by his descriptions of third period artists' works, it seems as if it was their life-like realism which Vasari most appreciated. He writes of how "... the muscles and the veins of the hands..." in Michelangelo's 'Moses' (4) are executed "... to the utmost perfection". (5) In Raphael's 'Pope Leo and the Two Cardinals', 1517 - 1519 (6) it is the living quality of the two figures which he mentions and the way the "... textures of skin, of glossy damask, of fur and of silk" are "... copied to the life". (7)

But to Vasari, absolute realism was in the selection of "... only the most graceful and beautiful things of nature", and in the recombining of these "... to create an ideal grace". (8) The artist initially derived his inspiration from observations and experiences. In combining these in his imagination to form a new whole,

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| (1) Wölfflin, H. - Classic Art. | p 213 |
| (2) Levey, M. - op.cit. | p 1 |
| (3) Clark, K. - Civilization. | p 117 |
| (4) Stampatore - op.cit. | p 57 - 60 |
| (5) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 256 |
| (6) Orlandi, E. - The Life and Times of Raphael | p 38 - 39 |
| (7) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 228 |
| (8) Panofsky, E. - Idea, A Concept in Art Theory. | p 64 |

we may presume that his classical education came into play so that he did so according to aesthetic laws. According to Panofsky, Vasari felt that this revealed the actual purposes of nature (1) so that through perfect art, the possible perfection of nature was revealed. In Vasari's view it was the third period masters who realised in their work the full aesthetic potential of natural objects. The finely executed textures and anatomical details which he appreciated in the work of Raphael and Michelangelo were rendered to an ideal perfection.

When describing the works of these masters, Vasari usually implied that they displayed super-human abilities. Leonardo's 'Mona Lisa' 1503 - 1505 (2) is "... a miracle of art ... rather divine than human". (3) Michelangelo's 'David' 1501 - 1504 (4) is also "divine" and "... surpasses all others, both ancient and modern". (5) Describing Raphael's 'Pope Leo and the Two Cardinals', he writes "... I do not believe any master has ever done or can do any better". (6) But even with a period of perfected art Vasari retains a critical eye and continues to distinguish the best from the better. He writes that no matter how hard he tried, Raphael could never master the nude as did Michelangelo or draw like Leonardo. (7) Vasari's artists were seldom perfect in every respect, but being in the third period they were working in a perfected style.

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| (1) Panofsky, E. - Idea, A Concept in Art Theory. | p 64 |
| (2) Wölfflin, H. - Classic Art. | p 31 |
| (3) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 228 |
| (4) Stampatore - op.cit. | p 25 - 27 |
| (5) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 262 |
| (6) Ibid. | p 228 |
| (7) Ibid. | p 231 |

With Michelangelo as Everest, the other Himalayan peaks would be of varying heights; the two nearest to Everest being those of Leonardo and Raphael. Others may have had the potential to approach the height of Everest but were situated too far from its Michelangelesque structure to emulate its growth pattern. Such would be the Venetian cluster of peaks.

Vasari believed that the limitations of the Venetian artists were in what he believed to be the essential qualities of drawing and design, prevented their achieving complete artistic perfection. He quotes Michelangelo as saying "It was a pity that the Venetians did not study drawing more without which "... one cannot give complete grace to a work of art". (1)

Describing the "bold strokes and dashes" of Titian's late manner, Vasari notes that "... if seen too near, the effect is confusing, but at a distance it is perfect". (2) Finding his intuitive appreciation of art in conflict with his theoretical concepts, he quotes a respected contemporary, Sebastiano del Piombo as writing that Titian "... deserved to be called the most perfect imitator of nature in our time as far as colouring went". (3)

So Titian is allowed a third period perfection within a certain field. But Vasari admits that had Titian gone to Rome, "... he would have equalled Michelangelo and the Urbinese (Raphael) in design - the great foundation of all art". (4) As much as he loved Titian's work, Vasari could not escape his own Florentine-Roman education in the virtues of the sculptural-linear style.

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 253 |
| (2) Ibid | p 254 |
| (3) Ibid | p 248 |
| (4) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 248 |

He must have discerned in the sensuous, richly coloured Venetian manner of painting, a movement in a direction away from the central Italian style and writes that Titian's widely imitated manner was "... responsible for many wretched pictures". (1) He believes that Tintoretto, would have been one of the greatest painters Venice had known, if only he had "... not dashed off his work as he did". (2) Vasari must have viewed these early seeds of impressionism as signs of the inevitable decline in art, which would follow the peak period of the Renaissance.

Correggio in Parma suffers from the same limitations as the Venetians. Vasari seems to have been visually ravished by his work, writing "... no artist has used colour more effectually than he, nor has any painted in a more charming manner, or given more form to his figures". (3) Not much more could be asked of an artist than this, yet Vasari faults Correggio's drawing, and reasons that it was because this artist had not seen "... the masterpieces of the antique and the best works of the modern masters". (4) Thus another non-Florentine artist who through not having completed his artistic education in the central Italian manner, cannot attain full artistic stature.

Vasari had praised Leonardo for a grace that was divine, and for creating "... a totally dark shade in which there is no light left" (5) Raphael and Michelangelo incorporated a Leonardesque grace into their work, but both artists ignored his dark shades and merging effects. The sculpturally orientated Vasari could only see Leonardo's softening darks as a means "... to give greater relief to

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 254 |
| (2) Rudd, E. - Vasari's Life and Lives | p 111 |
| (3) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 201 |
| (4) Ibid | p 201 |
| (5) Ibid | p 190 |



the forms in his work". (1) But the north Italians interpreted his sfumato differently. Correggio and the Venetians used it to break down linear barriers and sculptural form, fusing figure and background in a new painterly manner.

Vasari could not conceive of this art as a development parallel to that of the central Italians with its own Titianesque Everest. Nor could he have been expected to have foreseen a Venetian-Correggiesque development into the Baroque style with its climactic period in the next century. Believing as he did in the perfection of the art of his own time, any style which seemed to be moving away from what Wölfflin would call "... the linear to the painterly", (2) or the clear to the unclear, Vasari could view analogistically as the decline into old age following maturity.

Regarding the central Italian development, it is difficult to discern at just what stage Vasari considered the summit of perfection to have occurred, taking into account the difference between Michelangelo's early and late works and between what we in the 20th century have called High Renaissance and Mannerist art.

Vasari appreciated the early works of Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo as the first perfected examples of the third period style, which formed a synthesis of the artistic achievements of two centuries. They represent what Shearman calls "a moment of equilibrium" (3) in Renaissance artistic development. Vasari lavished the highest possible praise on these works. He writes for instance, that in Raphael's 'School of Athens' 1509 - 1511 (4) "... the composition is so perfect in every part that the master proved his supremacy over all painters". (5)

- (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. p 191
- (2) Wölfflin, H. - Principles of Art History. p 14 - 15
- (3) Shearman, J. - Mannerism p 42
- (4) Hale, J.R. - Renaissance p 28 - 29
- (5) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. p 225

Yet after this, Vasari writes that "Raphael, famous as he was and familiar with the antique, had not yet formed his grand style". (1) It was only after Bramante had lent Raphael the key to the Sistine Chapel, that he might see Michelangelo's unfinished 'Creation Story' 1508 - 1512 (2) that this could occur. The result according to Vasari, was that Raphael's manner was "... inexpressibly enlarged and received henceforth an obvious increase in majesty". (3)

We must assume this to be evident in a work like Raphael's 'Expulsion of Heliodorus' 1511 - 1512 (4). Vasari relates that "... the very cartoons for this work were treated as masterpieces". (5) But here proportional and spacial ambiguities create surface tensions which represent a break from the calm grandeur of Raphael's slightly earlier 'School of Athens'.

It would seem then that Vasari's conception of grandeur and majesty in art must include what we might term Mannerist ingredients. These include virtuoso displays of exaggerated anatomy and perspective employed to achieve strange and compelling effects. They appear in paintings like Rosso's 'Moses Defending the Daughters of Jethro' 1528 (6) and Pontormo's 'Joseph in Egypt' 1515 - 1518 (7). Vasari believed that if the latter were larger "... it would not be possible to behold a work executed with more grace or more completely excellent in all its parts". (8)

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 225 |
| (2) Stampatore - op.cit. | p 43 - 55 |
| (3) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 225 |
| (4) Crosby, S. Mck. - op.cit. | p 363 |
| (5) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 227 |
| (6) Murray, L. - The Late Renaissance and
Mannerism. | p 56 |
| (7) Ibid | p 45 |
| (8) Bohn, H.G. - Vasari's Lives of the
Painters, Sculptors and
Architects : Vol. IV. | p 354 |

These works appear to represent a stylistic reaction in central Italian art, particularly around 1520. But Vasari saw no such reaction and regarded this Mannerist art as a continuing development of the High Renaissance style. High Renaissance artists had set the standards and the vocabulary of the new style and those who followed had the task of refining, enriching, and developing their personal idioms. Vasari writes how Parmigianino had the property of "... imparting to his figures a certain beauty and sweetness with a singular grace of attitude which was entirely peculiar to himself". (1) If the earlier art of Raphael is classical then that of an artist like Parmigianino must represent a "super-sophistication". (2) of the classical style.

Once Leonardo and Raphael had reached the first tip of the summit of painting perfection, the peak still seemed to rise slightly, though it gradually levelled off before descending. This is not to say that the mid-century Mannerists were regarded as greater than Leonardo and Raphael, but that art had continued to develop (as Vasari saw it). The Mannerists had the advantage of Leonardo and Raphael having made things easier for them and of profiting from the continuing stylistic development of Michelangelo.

To Vasari, art came from art and good art came initially from a combination of antique sources and Florentine genius. During the first period this was in conjunction with the study of nature; in the second, nature was subjected to the rules of the Ancients as well as being scientifically analysed. The resultant realistic art was idealized in the third period. This was through the influence of the late antique discoveries, the genius of the early Cinquencento masters and the study of these masters in Rome and Florence by their followers. In Vasari's eyes the greatest of these masters was as we have said, Michelangelo.

(1) Bohn, H.G. - op. cit.

p 256

(2) Shearman, J. - op. cit.

p 70

Once Vasari could write that this artist had "... triumphed over later works, over the artists of the ancient world, over nature itself; that has produced nothing, however challenging or extraordinary that his inspired genius" has not been able to surpass with ease", (1) then the study of Michelangelo would be of greater value than any study of mere nature.

The limiting effect of such hero worship is revealed in Vasari's earlier evaluation of the effect of Michelangelo's work on Raphael (2). Michelangelo had become an over-whelming influence on the mid-Italian art of the first half of the 16th century.

Works based on his 'St. Peter's Pieta' 1498 - 1500 (3) through to his 'Medici Tomb' figures 1524 - 1534 (4) were produced by Pontormo, Parmigianino and the other Mannerists during this period. Vasari's Venetian contemporary, Arentino wrote of painters who "... in forcing themselves to make majestic figures - not only do not enter into his (Michelangelo's) manner but also forget their own". (5) Raphael's 'Deposition' (6) of 1507 could serve as an example.

It was probably under the powerful influence of this writer that Vasari revised some of his opinions. In the second edition of his 'Lives' which included many living artists other than Michelangelo (who had recently died), Vasari admitted that by following Michelangelo too closely, Raphael had in his later works, "... lost part of the good name which he had acquired". (7)

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| (1) Bull, G. - op.cit. | p 253 - 254 |
| (2) Burroughs, B. - op.cit. | p 225 |
| (3) Stampatore - op. cit. | p 21 - 23 |
| (4) Ibid | p 70 - 79 |
| (5) Venturi, L. - op.cit. | p 104 |
| (6) Orlandi, E. - The Life and Times of Raphael | p 26 - 27 |
| (7) Venturi, L. - op.cit. | p 104 |

But still Vasari believed in art developing through artists initially acquiring the manner of a renowned master. Having written that Bronzino and Titian had acquired the manners of their respective masters, Pontormo and Giorgione to the degree that their works could be taken one for the other (1) (2) (pupil for master), he described how Michelangelo "... copied drawings of the old masters so perfectly that his copies could not be distinguished from the originals". (3) Going back further, he writes of how Masaccio's murals in the Brancacci Chapel became "... a school of art for the most celebrated sculptors and painters" (4) among whom he lists Michelangelo and Raphael. And it was after being exposed to the late Hellenistic discoveries that these artists were able to transform Masaccio's second period excellence into third period perfection.

Vasari regarded powerful influences as the driving forces of a stylistic development. This could refer to a period or an individual. Raphael he writes, had imitated his master Perugino's manner "... so exactly that one cannot tell their works apart". (5) But on coming to Florence Raphael had (according to Vasari) founded his style in the Brancacci Chapel. This style was later perfected after receiving the influences of Leonardo, the antiques in Rome and Michelangelo. (6) So Vasari recognised that Raphael's style was based upon what we might call an eclectic synthesis of different styles. This eclecticism became increasingly evident in the work of the 16th century Mannerists.

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| (1) Bohn, H.G. - op. cit. | p 467 |
| (2) Burroughs, B. - op. cit. | p 247 |
| (3) Ibid | p 251 |
| (4) Ibid | p 67 |
| (5) Burroughs, B. - op. cit. | p 220 |
| (6) Ibid | p 220 - 225 |

In the 20th century, Heinrich Wölfflin still endorses Vasari's belief that "... the effect of picture on picture as a factor in style is much more important than what comes directly from nature". (1) But this writer does not share Vasari's antique bias. He writes that the fluidity of line in third period art "... did not come from the Apollo Belvedere" and was "... as it had to be with or without antique sculpture". (2) But Vasari was a friend of Michelangelo and as such would have been in a better position to evaluate the extent of antique influences on the style of this master and his contemporaries than was Wölfflin.

Rolf Schott in his book 'Michelangelo', wrote that the inspiration that the master derived from antiquity "... far out-weighed the influences of say, Giotto, Masaccio and Donatello". (3) Judging by his early 'Madonna of the Stairs' 1491 - 1492 (4) and 'Battle of the Centours' reliefs, 1491 - 1492 (5) Michelangelo's vision was already antique orientated before he left Florence. On his arrival in Rome in 1496 he first saw the recently excavated Hellenistic statues. This experience seems to have given him the inspiration to more forcefully pursue a classical direction in his developing style.

Michelangelo's first Roman work was his large 'Youthful Bacchus' 1497 (6) and this was followed later by his classically serene 'St. Peter's Pieta' 1498 - 1500 (7). Then after leaving Rome and returning again he saw the 'Laocoön' (excavated in 1506) (8) which seemed to inspire a development towards virtuoso displays of anatomy and

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| (1) | Wölfflin, H. - Principles of Art History. | p 230 |
| (2) | Wölfflin, H. - Classic Art. | p 247 |
| (3) | Schott, R. - Michelangelo. | p 25 |
| (4) | Stampatore - op. cit. | p 9 |
| (5) | Ibid | p 10 - 11 |
| (6) | Stampatore - op. cit. | p 19 |
| (7) | Ibid | p 21 - 23 |
| (8) | de la Croix, H. - op. cit. | p 162 |

increasingly dramatic content in his art. This becomes progressively evident in his 'Sistine Chapel, Creation Story' 1508 - 1512 (1) and in his first sculptures thereafter; the 'Moses and the two Captives' for the 'Tomb of Julius II' 1513 - 1516 (2).

The influence of the antique appears to have been far more than a "secondary factor" (Wölfflin) (3) in the education of Michelangelo. In the same way that Vasari believed that God had sent Michelangelo to Florence to perfect painting, sculpture and architecture, he could have considered the later antique discoveries at the beginning of the third period as a divinely inspired directional incentive for the future of art. With Vasari there are no considerations other than aesthetic influences on the development of style in art. So in his writing one reads nothing of the influence of plagues, wars, revolutions or sociological changes on art. The sociological history of art seems to be a more modern invention. Arnold Hauser for instance, expresses a popular 20th century viewpoint when describing Mannerist art as being on the one hand "... a reaction against the academism of the Renaissance", (4) and on the other as, "... the expression of a crisis". (5)

One cannot ignore the crisis situation which prevailed in the 1520's. There were Franco-Spanish wars in Lombardy, a plague in Florence and the 1527 sack of Rome scattered the artists working there. This was followed by social disturbances in Florence which culminated in the 1529 siege of that city, it's occupation

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| (1) Stampatore - op. cit. | p 41 - 55 |
| (2) Ibid | p 57 - 62 |
| (3) Wölfflin, H. - Classic Art. | p 247 |
| (4) Hauser, A. - A Social History of Art. | p 122 |
| (5) Ibid | p 96 |

by a foreign army and eventual rule by a capricious tyrant from 1530. Yet Vasari, who lived through this period of crisis, does not note any significant change of style as a consequence of events.

Hauser regards Vasari's criticism of the influence of Dürer on Pontormo as a recognition of that artist's new direction constituting a break with the past. (1) He also writes that Pontormo's turning to Dürer is not "... merely a question of taste and form, as Vasari thinks, but the artistic expression of the intellectual affinity which links up Pontormo's generation with the German Reformation". (2)

It is difficult to see in Vasari's criticism of what he considered the adverse effects of a foreign influence as in any way an acknowledgement of a general stylistic break with the past. On the other hand, Hauser's belief that Pontormo's new direction was a result of his intellectual affinity with the German Reformation could be true. It was just after the 1527 sack of Rome that Pontormo completed his strangely disturbing 'Descent from the Cross' 1525 - 1528 (3). The distorted figures in this painting appear to reflect either the spiritual unrest of the artist or a general state of anxiety. But this artist's 'Joseph in Egypt' (4) appeared in 1518 - 1519, before the decade of troubles began. It reflects a similarly disturbing mood of anxiety, particularly through its spacial ambiguities. The more strident quality of the later work would indicate the direction of Pontormo's stylistic development, whether the influences be sociological, psychological or purely aesthetic. But what is certain is that the more dramatic 'Descent from the Cross' reveals an overwhelming Michelangelesque influence as well as the melodramatic quality of the 'Laocoön' (1st century B.C.) (5).

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| (1) Hauser, A. - op. cit. | p 122 |
| (2) Ibid | p 122 |
| (3) Murray, L. - The Late Renaissance and
Mannerism. | p 49 |
| (4) Ibid | p 45 |
| (5) de la Croix, H. - op. cit. | p 162 |

It was during the turbulent 1520's that Rosso painted his violent and strident 'Moses Defending the Daughters of Jethro' 1528 (1). But Parmigianino's 'Madonna and Child with St. Jerome' 1527 (2) which is virtually free of the more disturbing Mannerist qualities, was painted at the same time. This work does however reflect the influences of Michelangelo and Raphael. Also at this time Michelangelo was working on his 'Medici Tomb' figures 1524 - 1534 (3) which reflect a mood of lethargic introspection.

Shearman, in his book 'Mannerism' regards the expressionist interpretation of Mannerist art as an "... invention of the Expressionist period". (4) Most of the characteristics of Mannerism had already appeared in Raphael's 'Expulsion of Heliodorus' (5) completed in 1512 in peaceful circumstances in the Vatican. Mannerist elements do not appear to have occurred as a result of a crisis but lent themselves to use in expressing a crisis situation.

Earlier, Leonardo had produced the calm grandeur of the High Renaissance style in his 'Last Supper' 1495 - 1498 (6), painted during the time of the great shock of the first foreign invasions of Italy since Medieval times (the French invasions of 1494 and 1499). During that time, Leonardo never left Milan which was directly involved in these wars. The wars of the League of Cambrai and the Holy League affected Venice at the time when Giorgione and Titian were bringing to maturity the idyllic Venetian third period painting style.

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| (1) Murray, L. - The Late Renaissance and Mannerism. | p 56 |
| (2) Ibid | p 43 |
| (3) Stampatore - op. cit. | p 70 - 79 |
| (4) Shearman, J. - op. cit. | p 135 |
| (5) Crosby, S. Mck. - op. cit. | p 363 |
| (6) Wolfflin, H. - Classic Art. | p 24 |

It would appear to one that some artists are affected by external events while others are not. And even if they are, they may often react in an escapist manner, producing works which do not necessarily reflect the current situation. This may have been the case with some of the Mannerists. But whatever other influences affect the art of a period, the factor which has to be taken into account is the influence of the art of one artist upon that of another and of the style of the master or studio on the student or the apprentice. This would invariably reflect source material and current fashions, the latter often being a condition of patronage. The more this is so, the more a style becomes related to a period.

These factors Vasari does take into account, enabling him to distinguish the style of one period from that of another irrespective of how great the achievements of individual artists. No matter that Donatello's realism is unsurpassed, ultimate perfection is denied him because his work does not have that particular kind of beauty which is the unique quality of the art of the Cinquecento.

However, a work like Leonardo's 'Last Supper' 1495 - 1498 (1) appears to have far more in common with a work like Masaccio's Santa Croce 'Trinity' 1425 (2) from the previous period, than it does with Pontormo's 'Descent from the Cross' 1525 - 1528 (3) of the same period. The two former works have a classically balanced symmetry; both exude the feeling of a calm and harmoniously conceived grandeur; qualities associated with High Renaissance art. In Pontormo's 'Descent', qualities antithetical to these appear.

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| (1) Wölfflin, H. - Classic Art. | p 24 |
| (2) de la Croix, H. - op. cit. | p 420 |
| (3) Murray, L. - The Late Renaissance and Mannerism. | p 49 |

But the two third period works are related through the graceful and eloquent gesturing of the figures and the variety of their attitudes and expressions. They also share a flexibility of movement and an easy flow of line. Subtle anatomical refinements are accompanied by an accomplished handling of drapery and lighting. These are qualities which Vasari found in the art of the third period, whether we consider it High Renaissance or Mannerist. As one begins to appreciate Vasari's stylistic ideals one does not necessarily find his intuitive responses as contradictory as they may initially seem.

He sees the development of third period architecture following a similar course to that of painting. It is also built on a second period foundation. He writes that Bramante "... preserved what Brunelleschi did, adapting it to the uses of modern life". (1) This seems to imply that he made it closer to the antique in appearance. His Roman 'Tempietto' 1502 - 1503 (2) reveals his mastery of the Vitruvian vocabulary. But Vasari goes on to say that Bramante had "... not merely imitated - he also embellished". (3) Imitation and then embellishment is what Vasari expected of his third period painters, sculptors and architects alike.

Embellishment is taken to extremes in the decoration of Giulio Romano's 'Palazzo del Te' 1425 - 1435 in Mantua (4). Vasari finds these decorations "... so rich in a thousand various fantasies that the mind is overbalanced and becomes confused in the midst of them". (5) Here he appreciates the fact that Romano has worked in a "... new and fanciful manner". (6)

- (1) Burroughs, B. - op. cit. p 212
- (2) Murray, P. - The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance. p 175 - 176
- (3) Burroughs, B. - op. cit. p 212
- (4) Murray, P. - The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance. p 103 - 107
- (5) Bohn, H.G. - op. cit. p 42
- (6) Ibid p 42

However, the 'Palazzo del Te' is comprised of the same antique vocabulary as Bramante's classically balanced 'Tempietto', although with the former, Romano has juxtaposed the antique elements in a free and fanciful arrangement. Where Bramante's 'Tempietto' is immediately recognized as representing the High Renaissance style in architecture, Romano's building will be seen as a playful manifestation of Mannerism. These differences, Vasari would see as the individual manners of two artists working in the same style. Although Romano was his contemporary and Bramante belonged to an earlier generation, he could still speak of "... Bramante in our age". (1)

Shearman believes that Vasari's generation regarded the High Renaissance rather as a "... swing towards a good style", (2) than as a period of ultimate perfection. He continues "They could reasonably see Mannerism as a continuation of the refining process begun in the High Renaissance and they had little incentive to realize that the swing had gone beyond the mean". (3) So it appears that Vasari believed the ultimate tip of the third period summit to have been reached towards the middle of the 16th century, when the perfect art produced by Raphael, Bramante and Leonardo had been embellished to a point where it could only decline thereafter.

During this mid-16th century period of the most extreme manifestations of Mannerism, Michelangelo's late works became increasingly less stylish and more emotionally expressive. But artists like Bronzino, Salviati and Vasari himself, continued to borrow and develop the more precious or virtuoso elements of the master's earlier art. Adaptions of his 'Doni Tondo Madonna' 1505 (4) for example,

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| (1) Burroughs, B. - op. cit. | p 212 |
| (2) Shearman, J. - op.cit. | p 42 |
| (3) Ibid | p 42 |
| (4) Stampatore - op. cit. | p 38 |

appear as the principal figure in both Bronzino's erotic 'Venus, Cupid, Time and Folly' 1550 (1) and Salviati's 'Charity' 1554 - 1558 (2).

With regard to the former, Heinrich Wölfflin writes that "... one can hardly believe that this was the generation which had its starting point in the age of Raphael and Fra Bartolommeo". When confronted by the 'Venus and Amor' (3) of uncertain date but which is attributed to Vasari, he discerningly writes that "... these central Italians had to rely on the most complicated poses to make a Venus interesting to the public". (4) The hefty Venus figure here is an adaptation of Raphael's fallen Heliodorus.

Finding central Italian Mannerism an art of declining standards, Wölfflin contrasts it unfavourably with contemporary Venetian art. To Vasari on the other hand, it represented the last phase of third period perfection; thus his failure to fully appreciate later Venetian developments and the final direction taken by Michelangelo. This artist's paintings of the 'Crucifixion of St. Peter' and the 'Conversion of St. Paul' 1542 - 1545 (5) (6) have giant symbolically expressive figures with individual distinctions of age and sex broken down. Vasari found it necessary to explain that these were the masters last pictures, painted in his seventy-fifth year. He relates how Michelangelo told him that they were done "... at cost of great fatigue". (7)

As an active participant in the affected and artificial court-style which Mannerism had become, Vasari cannot be expected to have really been in sympathy with Michelangelo's

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| (1) Murray, L. - The Late Renaissance and Mannerism. | p 57 |
| (2) Ibid | p 62 |
| (3) Wölfflin, H. - Classic Art. | p 203 |
| (4) Ibid | p 202 |
| (5) Stampatore - op. cit. | p 93 |
| (6) Murray, L. - The Late Renaissance and Mannerism. | p 14 |
| (7) Burroughs, B. - op. cit. | p 277 |

'Last Judgement' 1534 - 1541 (1) as "... unsuitable by reason of their ecclesiastical destination". (2) He remained the decorous and courtly Mannerist to the last and as such he invariably placed stylistic considerations above those of spiritual expressiveness, even when dealing with an intensely religious art.

A concentration on style and manner had robbed most of Vasari's generation of the ability to express true feeling in art. When explaining the ingredients required as aids to the production of perfected or third period art, Vasari lists rule, order, proportion, design and manner, but not imagination, expressiveness or feeling.

By rule, he means "... the exact study of the measurements of antique buildings, "order" refers to "... the classification of all art and to the orders of architecture". Proportion is "... the relationship of the members within the form". Design means "... imitation of the most beautiful parts of nature". Manner, he explains "... requires a more minute selection and combination of parts - beautiful legs added to perfect torso in order to invest one figure with every beauty in highest perfection". (3)

Here we must add that "... the imitation of the most beautiful parts of nature" implies as witnessed the works of past and present masters. Having deprived nature of its ability to surprise or even inspire, the Mannerists had as Shearman puts it, made the work of art "... more nearly its subject than ever before". (4) The propagation of this stylish style was continued by the Academia de Disegno, which Vasari induced Duke Cosimo I to found in Florence in 1561.

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| (1) Cartocci, S. - The Sistine | p 50 - 55 |
| (2) Hauser, A. - op. cit. | p 112 |
| (3) Burroughs, B. - op. cit. | p 185 |
| (4) Shearman, J. - op. cit. | p 53 |

However, in an age when art was again to become a propagandistic vehicle in the service of the church and subject matter was to be presented as forcefully as possible in order to involve the spectator as intimately as possible with the event depicted, the late works of Michelangelo and Titian were far more in tune with the spiritual climate of the age than were the increasingly effete works of most of the later Mannerists. Michelangelo's 'Rondanini Pieta' 1552 - 1564 (1) and Titian's 'The Crowning with Thorns' 1573 - 1575 (2) seem purged of all third period refinements. Their expressionistic qualities are alien to those pertaining to what Vasari called the good style. They represent a decline from Vasarian-type perfection.

Wölfflin, judging by his comment on the Vasarian 'Venus and Amor' must have regarded the lingering Mannerist extension of Vasari's perfection period as a temporary artistic decline during the transitional stage between the peak periods of the High Renaissance and the Baroque. It would have been impossible for Vasari to adopt such a view-point, living when he did.

By following the Vasarian concepts of artistic progress and periodicity, Wölfflin who seems to update Vasari's theories, came to the conclusion that all occidental styles in art develop first to a classical period and then on to a baroque period (3). He saw no qualitative difference between these classical and baroque periods, (4) but like Vasari, he did find a qualitative difference between what he called "... the art of the primitives and the art of the classics". (5)

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| (1) | Stampatore - op. cit. | p 103 |
| (2) | Orlandi, E. - The Life and Times of
Titian. | p 72 |
| (3) | Wölfflin, H. - Principles of Art History | p 18 |
| (4) | Ibid | p 14 |
| (5) | Ibid | p 197 |

In this, both writers committed the error of Xenocrates, who according to Venturi, expressed some of his best judgements through believing in the perfection of Lyssipus, but committed a critical error "... through not having distinguished the perfection of Lyssipus from that of Phidias". (1) They could not appreciate that a work by Giotto or Masaccio, or Piero Della Francesca might be perfect according to its own stylistic canons; that in many cases anything added, subtracted, changed or altered would be to the detriment of such a work. In accepting such individual perfectibility, Vasari would be renouncing his belief in the superiority of third period art and invalidating his concept of artistic progress.

This concept gave Giotto and Masaccio an increased historical significance at the expense of a full appreciation of their intrinsic value as individual artists, because it entailed the imposition of aesthetic standards. Although Vasari measured the achievements of his artists against those of their contemporaries, they were ultimately evaluated according to what he considered the universal aesthetic standards which he believed were being demonstrated in the art of the age in which he lived. He had been educated to see the world through Cinquecento eyes.

Therefore, what Vasari could not see was that the mastery of a particular grace and ease in accomplishing what was previously found difficult, need not be considered artistic progress. Gombrich points out that "... what looks like progress from the point of view of the mastery of the medium can also be viewed as a decline into empty virtuosity". (2) This seems to have been the case with later Vasarian Mannerism.

- (1) Venturi, L. - op. cit. p 340
(2) Gombrich, E.H. - Art and Illusion. p 8

Yet, without his biased, qualitative evaluations, Vasari's concept of a stylistic development which implies artistic progress, can be valid if related to a defined line of development dependant upon the aims of the artist, critic or historian. In tracing a development entailing the advances in representational skill and the acquisition of the stylistic features which were to facilitate Cinquecento virtuosity, Vasari does indicate progress toward the realisation of the Cinquecento third period style.

In the development towards say realistic or abstract art one may speak of progress in either direction, although this might involve a simultaneous retrogression in other qualities such as design or truth to nature. From a Baroque or Impressionist view-point, one might see more progress in the late works of Titian with their sketchy, blurring effects than in art of Giorgione or Leonardo. So from his Mannerist view-point, Vasari might see a retrogression in Titian's late works. Having stated his ideal of third period perfection, it was valid for Vasari to regard Masaccio as having progressed further than Giotto and Leonardo further than Masaccio.

As this kind of progress was predominantly dependent upon aesthetic influences (that is apart from individual artists' intrinsic, creative genius), it is probably much more in evidence now than it was in Vasari's time. The type of eclecticism he noted in Raphael's developing style was essential to the development of Picasso's Cubism and the Fauvism of Matisse. In the 20th century our increasing awareness of the differing styles and types of art around the world has increased the choice of aesthetic influences for modern artists. And with our increasingly artificial environment it is highly probable that in the 20th century art comes from art more than ever before.

It was Vasari's belief in eclecticism which eventually lead him to support an increasingly superficial art. But apart from this, he did discern who were the most significantly influential Renaissance artists, appreciating most of them in the way they are generally appreciated today. It is still easy to consider Michelangelo a paragon of loftiness in conception and to praise Titian's colour more than his drawing.

Some of Vasari's best judgements seem to have occurred when his stylistic prejudices were overcome by his intuitive responses to great art. Considering the more expressionistic works of Donatello and the more painterly examples of Titian it appears that Vasari was also capable of appreciating what he might not entirely enjoy and of enjoying what he might not fully appreciate.

Seemingly contradictory statements appeared when the art historian and the appreciative critic in him came into conflict. This resulted at times in an uneasy flexibility within the rules, as was the case when Vasari was undecided as to whether to place Donatello in the second or third period.

Generally, the artists in each of the three periods were appreciated for qualities which promoted or limited their achievements to what Vasari regarded as the style of a certain period. As mentioned earlier, each new stylistic phase was seen to be reached after a great leap forward in the development, as with the painting of Giotto, then Masaccio and finally Leonardo. And as each leap forward conveniently occurred near the turn of a century, it is easy to appreciate Vasari's view-point and see the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries as the childhood, adolescence and maturity of Renaissance art. In this way his concept of periodicity is inextricably connected with that of artistic progress.

Whether or not Vasari might misrepresent the aims of the artists of earlier periods by confusing their concepts of reality and beauty with attempts at representing reality as he saw it, or felt that it should be, each period does reveal a different level of technical facility one way or another. In second period painting and sculpture, realistic spacial effects, anatomical details and proportions were far more scientifically verifiable and visually convincing than in the first. A certain accomplished gracefulness and mastery of means not generally discernable in second period art does seem to have been a prerequisite for third period virtuosity.

As previously mentioned, Vasari could regard stylistic variations as more gradual stages of development within one period like the development of High Renaissance art into Mannerism. By considering the art of Raphael and Leonardo, and that of Pontormo and Bronzino as the earlier and later phases of one uninterrupted Cinquecento style, he is supported by later modern writers of the 1960's and 1970's like Levey and Shearman in their respective books 'High Renaissance' and 'Mannerism'.

In his 'Principles of Art History', Wölfflin illustrates the Vasarian concept of period vision by indicating stylistic features common to Baroque artists with manners as seemingly divergent as those of Rembrandt, Velázquez, Bernini, and Poussin. He does the same with the artists of the High Renaissance and then compares that style with Baroque art to reveal the differences between the 16th and 17th century views of the world. The reality of Vasarian periodicity is revealed in the fact that the vision of these two ages is seen to differ far more radically than that of the individual artists within each period.

Obviously the shapes of trees, shadows and men's limbs did not basically change over a century, but it becomes

clear that pictures and sculptures do condition artists as to the decorative elements they seek out or see in nature. The great avant-garde artists of each period impose their personal vision on the age in which they live and influence those who follow. It has been one of the prime functions of art, to mould and enhance men's vision of nature, which is as Vasari would have it.

Vasarian periodicity without qualitative evaluations provides the framework for marking the stages of an artistic development; it allows for the assimilation of stylistic affinities, for tracing influences, comparing and contrasting the art of different epochs and for associating art with historical events and social attitudes.

In the 20th century, photography and abstract art have polarised realistic and abstract vision. The pace of modern developments in all communications media has increasingly shortened the duration of artistic period styles. This has allowed for many changes of artistic vision within a life-span. However, the term artistic period still refers to stylistic phases in artistic developments, individual or general (no matter how brief), and to the length of time any number of artists continue to work in a particular style.

Thus Vasarian periodicity becomes a reality whenever an artist or group or artists work in a similar manner for a certain time.

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