



Alice Thomine-Berrada et Barry Bergdol (dir.)

Repenser les limites : l'architecture à travers l'espace, le temps et les disciplines

31 août - 4 septembre 2005

Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art

Deconstructing the Doctrine of *Disegno*

Lionel Devlieger

DOI: 10.4000/books.inha.1820
Publisher: Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art
Place of publication: Paris
Year of publication: 2005
Published on OpenEdition Books: 5 December 2017
Serie: Actes de colloques
Electronic ISBN: 9782917902646



<http://books.openedition.org>

Printed version

Date of publication: 4 September 2005

Electronic reference

DEVLIEGER, Lionel. *Deconstructing the Doctrine of Disegno* In: *Repenser les limites : l'architecture à travers l'espace, le temps et les disciplines: 31 août - 4 septembre 2005* [online]. Paris: Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, 2005 (generated 18 décembre 2020). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/inha/1820>>. ISBN: 9782917902646. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.inha.1820>.

This text was automatically generated on 18 December 2020.

Deconstructing the Doctrine of *Disegno*

Lionel Devlieger

- 1 Michelangelo's tomb in the church of Santa Croce (fig. 1) might be no masterpiece of funerary art, yet it is a powerful pamphlet.



Fig.1: Giorgio VASARI, Vincenzo BORGHINI & al.: Michelangelo's tomb in the church of Santa Croce (1564 – 1578), © Lionel Devlieger.

- 2 The triumphal arch-like stone structure featuring allegories of the three figurative arts sitting on a common base was designed by Giorgio Vasari and Vincenzo Borghini in the course of the 1560s, a period that was crucial in the formulation of the notion that the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture constitute an indivisible triad and find their origin in the art of drawing (*disegno*).¹ In the second edition of his *Vite*, published in 1568, Vasari used genealogical terms to qualify the link between the four arts. “*disegno* [is] the father of our three sister arts: architecture, sculpture, and painting.”² Michelangelo perfectly embodied the idea. As the *Vite* put it, he was the greatest

draftsman of his time and became also the greatest sculptor, the greatest painter, the greatest architect. The idea of the triad of the arts was therefore indiscernible from the Florentine master.³ He is said to have chosen himself three intertwined rings or garlands as his coat of arms.⁴ The Accademia del Disegno, founded in 1563 on Vasari's impulse, appropriated the three intertwined garlands as its own *impresa*.⁵ Within the doctrine of *disegno*, architecture, painting, and sculpture are on a par in a way similar to the mythological Charities or three graces. Ranking them is missing the point of their very nature. That is why the three allegories on Michelangelo's tomb are seated at exactly the same level around the sarcophagus.⁶

The doctrine of *disegno* has a long and complex pedigree that goes back to Petrarch, Ghiberti, and Filarete, to name just a few. And so has the accompanying conception of the architect as an artist of *disegno*. One has typified the tradition of the artist-architect as a typically Tuscan phenomenon, reaching back, for instance, to Giotto. Emphasizing that pedigree or that tradition taints these notions with a touch of unavoidability. As I will argue here instead, if one examines the direct antecedents to the doctrine as formulated in the second, Giuntina edition of the *Vite*, one realizes that it is instead an unbalanced construction.

The first antecedent to these texts is, of course, the far less voluminous first edition of the *Vite*, of 1550. The theoretical passages of the latter in turn, in particular some of its prefaces, bear the heaviest mark of yet another ancestor, Benedetto Varchi's *Due lezioni*, published a few months before the *Vite*, in 1550, but read aloud in public in 1547 already.⁷ Recent research of authors such as Charles Hope and Thomas Frangenberg convincingly suggests that the most significant theoretical passages from both editions of the *Vite* are not from Vasari's own hand, but written by some of his learned friends. New actors thus come into play, the most prominent of which are Cosimo Bartoli (who would have contributed significantly to the Torrentina edition) and Vincenzo Borghini (the most probable second author of the Giuntina edition).⁸

In what follows I will focus in particular on the distinct contributions of Varchi, Bartoli, and Borghini to the idea of a triad of the arts, thus leaving the artists themselves aside. Varchi, Bartoli, and Borghini shared more or less the same status as intellectuals at the court of Cosimo de' Medici, duke of Florence (reigned 1537–1574). Yet they had distinct opinion on the following questions regarding the link between architecture and *disegno*: the question of the status of architecture in regard to painting and sculpture and the question whether architecture is an imitative art?

Benedetto Varchi (1503–1565)

The relative status of architecture

- 3 Varchi's 1547 lectures on the arts at the Accademia Fiorentina were meant to boost the prestige of Florentine sculptors and painters. Yet, despite his willingness to stress the intellectual merits of the figurative arts, he ranked them far below architecture. In Varchi's Aristotelian hierarchy of the arts, architecture is the one but noblest of all the human *arti*, only preceded by medicine. Painting and sculpture lag behind at an undefined position.⁹

The reasons Varchi invokes for architecture's superiority are numerous, but central stands usefulness. Varchi draws a parallel between architecture and medicine that had

already been outlined by Galen: Both arts, thus the reasoning goes, are engaged in the effort of preserving human health and guaranteeing physical well-being.¹⁰

Is architecture imitative?

- 4 The definition of architecture as akin to medicine is clearly not casting it as a mimetic art. In 1547 Varchi stressed the fact that architecture is the only art that “beats” nature by creating forms that are not deriving from her.¹¹

Varchi attached much importance to Aristotle’s dictum that some arts are imitative, while others are perfective: they bring the work of nature to an even higher state of perfection or usefulness.¹² An implicit parallel is drawn between architecture and alchemy (in the sense of proto-chemistry), the discipline that develops useful artificial substances, such as glass, bronze, and gunpowder.¹³

Cosimo Bartoli (1503–1572)

The relative status of architecture

- 5 In the so-called *Preface to the entire work* of the Vasarian *Vite*, the author—now assumed to be Cosimo Bartoli—makes clear that he will write for the benefit of the practitioners of all three the arts of architecture, sculpture, and painting, describing the lives of the major architects, sculptors, and painters since Cimabue.¹⁴ This linking up of the three professions does not amount to equaling them, though. The preface makes clear that architecture does not stand at the level of painting and sculpture. The latter are said to be “sisters, born from one father that is *disegno*, in one and the same birth and at exactly the same time.”¹⁵ Architecture is explicitly set apart as a more noble discipline. Introducing the technical prefaces on the three separate arts of design, the author of the *Preface* wrote: “I will thus start with architecture, as the most universal and most necessary and useful to humans, and which the other two arts only serve and adorn.”¹⁶

Is architecture imitative?

- 6 Unlike Varchi, who barely ever mentioned the topic, Bartoli had a serious interest and a solid expertise in the topic of the architectural orders. This expertise makes him actually the only plausible candidate-author of the long technical preface on architecture contained in the first edition of the *Vite*.¹⁷ As both this preface on architecture and the dialogue in the *Ragionamenti academici* make clear, Bartoli recognized that qualitative architecture results from a savvy balance of well-informed imitation of the antique prototypes on the one hand, and a relying on invention on the other.

Vincenzo Borghini (1515–1580)

- 7 Vincenzo Borghini contributed to the first edition of Vasari’s *Vite*, yet he only developed a true interest for art-theoretical questions after his appointment as head of the artist’s academy (Accademia del Disegno) in 1563. He thus read Varchi’s volume (*Due Lezioni*) fourteen years after its publication, but he did so thoroughly.¹⁸ It was part

of his preparation to re-impose discipline on the members of the academy whose painters and sculptors had been entangled, around 1564, in a struggle for preeminence. Borghini's often cunning observations on the *Due lezioni* are conserved in a manuscript referred to as his *Selva di notizie*, or "forest of notes."¹⁹

The relative status of architecture

- 8 As I mentioned, Borghini is probably to be credited with the most important changes to the second edition of Vasari's *Vite*. One important contrast between the Torrentina and the Giuntina editions is the role and the status to which architecture is confined in the second edition of the *Vite*. It is significant that the title changed. In 1568 it is no longer *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* . . . but has become *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*. The concept of an absolute parity of the three *arti del disegno* is now forcefully affirmed. It is in the new version of the technical introduction on painting that the ambitious philosophical definition of *disegno* appears, which starts with the words:

Father of our three arts (architecture, sculpture and painting), disegno proceeds from the intellect, drawing from many things a universal judgment similar to a form or idea of all the things of nature, which is most singular in its measures.²⁰

- 9 But further in the passage a short account is added on the different types of *disegni* that artists materially produce in their practice: sketches, line drawings, shaded drawings, etc. Here architecture is suddenly reduced to the art of producing outlines (*profili, dintorni, lineamenti*), a type of drawing that is considered relatively plain, especially in comparison with the more complex types of preparatory drawings used by painters and sculptors, and which additionally render *rilievo*.²¹

In Borghini's writings the idea of architecture as superintendence seems to have in itself less nobility than it had for Varchi or Bartoli. In 1547 Varchi had defined architecture as the master art par excellence, and had followed Aristotle by using the term "architectonic arts" to designate all the arts from which minor disciplines originate, such as the art of the saddle maker proceeds from the art of horse riding.²² Varchi and Bartoli clearly considered painting and sculpture to be subordinated to architecture.²³ Not so for Borghini who, as the *Selva di notizie* makes clear, maintains an ambivalent conception of that discipline.

Is architecture imitative?

- 10 Borghini sees architecture in evolutionary terms: for a long time men have only built sturdily functional, solid buildings. Only after centuries did some architects want to infuse constructions with grace and beauty and did they start inventing superfluous ornaments.²⁴ Many trecento houses in Florence or other Italian towns illustrate, according to the author of the *Selva*, this stage of robust primitivism. Borghini evidently sees a sharp divide between the indecorous dimension of necessity in architecture, which he considers of a lowly kind, belonging to the realm of the base mechanical arts, and the dimension of the pleasurable, the ornamental, which is the only thing that raises architecture to the level of its sister arts. The nature of architectural ornaments is thus necessarily imitative; his theory, grounded in Aristotelian poetics, identifies the beholding of artificial imitations of nature as the sole possible cause of aesthetic pleasure.

Imitating, or, to use our own tongue, counterfeiting (*contrafare*) is nothing else but wanting to make something like what in reality it is not, and this is the proper end of both this and that art [that is, of both painting and sculpture].²⁵

- 11 Ornaments, the noble, pleasurable parts of architecture, are thus necessarily akin to painting and sculpture. Inversely, it is only when architecture passes beyond the point of necessity to reach superfluity and ornament that it becomes as worthy as its sister arts.

Conclusion

- 12 Over a span of about twenty years Varchi, Bartoli, and Borghini made decisive contributions to the “doctrine of disegno.” It was a process in different stages, which led to the idea of a fundamental sisterhood of painting, sculpture, and architecture as three disciplines drawing nobility from their common dependence upon *disegno*. Varchi, active in the 1540s, played the role of an initiator. Bartoli and the younger Borghini perfected the doctrine. Yet if one focuses upon the status of architecture in the triad, as we have done above, a serious gap emerges between the positions of Varchi and Borghini, with Bartoli holding an intermediary position. According to Varchi architecture remains clearly superior to painting and sculpture, because, among other reasons, it does not share the imitative drive of the two figurative arts. For Borghini, on the contrary, architecture does not distinguish itself from painting and sculpture. More than that, it is precisely the imitative dimension of (ornamental) architecture that elevates the profession above the level of the base construction trade. The understanding of this blatant divergence makes two questions emerge. First: How was it possible, given earlier disagreement, that the idea of a fundamental equality of the three arts imposed itself with such weight as to influence academic training programs in the arts for centuries after? And second, can this shift in positions in the span of some twenty years be explained?

Regarding the first question, I believe the impact of the Michelangelo propaganda that reached its climax during the artist’s funeral in 1564 cannot be underestimated. The organization of this well-documented event was in hands of the members of the Accademia del Disegno and Vincenzo Borghini as its director. The doctrinal significance of the figure of Michelangelo was advertised through all kinds of means, of which the monument in Santa Croce was only one.

Regarding the second question, I will limit myself to outline a hypothesis. In the context of the increasingly authoritarian Florentine state of Duke Cosimo de’ Medici, architecture theory tends to adapt to a new reality: the architectural practice fell apart in two distinct disciplines. One was becoming the domain of technocratic officials: engineers active in the domain of waterworks and fortifications, heavily relying in their practice upon recent advances in applied mathematics, the development of new land surveying and new military technology. The other is the province of painters and sculptors brought to develop architectural ornament of an either ephemeral or more permanent kind. This second, distinct practice holds a conception of architecture as a kind of urban scenography.

Borghini’s definition of architecture reinforced the distinction between an understanding of architecture as civil and military engineering on the one hand and ornamental design on the other, by mainly ignoring the first dimension, either in his texts or in the education he provided at the Accademia del Disegno. He might have

done so because he thought, as did his patron Cosimo de' Medici, that civil and military engineering was a body of knowledge too valuable to be left in the hands of artists, professionals with a mercenary and volatile reputation, that contrasted with the trustworthiness the duke demanded from his closest collaborators²⁶.

ENDNOTES

1. The tomb was designed by Giorgio Vasari and Vincenzo Borghini during 1564, the year of Michelangelo's death, on commission of Lionardo Buonarroti. Masonry works took place in 1572; the whole composition was finished by 1578. See John Wyndham POPE-HENNESSY, *Italian Renaissance sculpture*, New York, Vintage Books, 1985, pp. 366–369.
2. The phrase appears at the very opening of chapter XV of the 1568 *Vite*, an opening chapter entirely dedicated to *disegno*, or the art of drawing. “Perché il disegno, padre delle tre arti nostre architettura, scultura e pittura.” Giorgio VASARI, Rosanna BETTARINI, and Paola BAROCCHI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, 6 vols., Firenze, Sansoni, 1966–87, vol. I, p. 111.
3. See David SUMMERS, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 259, for a series of testimonies of contemporaries, among whom Pope Paul III, praising Michelangelo as an equally unsurpassable draftsman, painter, sculptor and architect.
4. Vasari referred to Michelangelo's *impresa* in his description of the decorations of the *apparato* for the master's funeral in 1564. VASARI, BETTARINI, and BAROCCHI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, vol. 6, p. 139.
5. The three intertwined garlands, representing the three arts of design, were adopted as the official *impresa*, or seal, of the Florentine artist's academy in 1597. See Karen-edis BARZMAN, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State: The Discipline of Disegno*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 42.
6. Despite this position on a same level, Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt argued that the monument embodies nonetheless a form of statutory preeminence of architecture, the allegory of which is centrally placed on the tomb. See Kathleen WEIL GARRIS BRANDT, “Michelangelo's monument: an introduction to an architecture of iconography” in *Architectural Studies in Memory of Richard Krautheimer*, Mainz : P. von Zabern, 1996, pp. 27–31. Brandt's point does not, as we shall see, weaken our argument developed further, since it reveals the inherent contradictions proper to the “doctrine of *disegno*.”
7. The lectures were held before the public of the Accademia Fiorentina on the Sundays, March 6 and 13, 1547. They were published in the first months of 1550 (1549 according to the Florentine calendar) as Benedetto VARCHI, *Due lezioni di Messer Benedetto Varchi, nella prima delle quali si dichiara un sonetto di M. Michelangiolo Buonarroti. Nella seconda si disputa quale sia più nobile arte, la scultura o la pittura, con una lettera d'esso Michelangiolo e più altri eccellentissimi pittori e scultori sopra la questione sopradetto*, Florence, Lorenzo Torrentino, 1549. I will cite them hereafter from the standard edition of Varchi's collected works: Benedetto Varchi, *Opere*, 2 vols., Trieste, Lloyd Austriaco, 1858–1859.
8. Thomas FRANGENBERG, “Bartoli, Giambullari and the prefaces to Vasari's lives (1550)” in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* LXV (2002), pp. 244–258. See also Charles HOPE, “Can you

trust Vasari? Book review of Patricia Lee Rubin: Giorgio Vasari. Art and History” in *New York Review of Books* (Oct. 5, 1999), pp. 10–13.

9. See the *Lezione della maggioranza delle arti* in VARCHI, *Opere*, vol. 2, p. 633.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. “and generally, art in some cases completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, in others imitates nature.” ARISTOTLE, *Physics* (199a 15–17) cited from Jonathan BARNES, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 6th. ed., 2 vols., Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995, vol. 1, p. 340.

13. In the early years of his employment at the court of Cosimo I de’ Medici, Varchi has written a small treatise on alchemy, in which he similar discourse is held about alchemy is held as the one he would uphold later about architecture. Alchemy is defined here as an art which, like agriculture or medicine, brings about results that could have been generated by Nature alone. Yet in the mean time, some of alchemy’s most glorious products (such as glass or gunpowder) may be said to be so amazing that they “beat” nature, like architecture does when developing forms for which Nature provided no prototypes. Alchemy and architecture thus both come to be labeled “master arts.” See Benedetto VARCHI, *Questione sul Alchimia di Benedetto Varchi*, Florence, Stamperia Magheri, 1827.

14. *Proemio a tutta l’opera*, VASARI, BETTARINI, and BAROCCHI, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, vol. 1, pp. 9–30. This text remained mostly unchanged between the Torrentina and the Giuntina edition of the *Vite*.

15. “Dico adunque che la scultura e la pittura per il vero sono sorelle, nate di un padre, che è il disegno, in un sol parto et ad un tempo.” *Ibid.*, vol. 1 (T/G), p. 26.

16. “Comincerommi dunque da l’architettura come da la più universale e più necessaria et utile agli uomini et al servizio et ornamento della quale sono l’altre due.” *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 28.

17. FRANGENBERG, “Bartoli, Giambullari and the prefaces to Vasari’s lives (1550),” p. 257.

18. On August 5, 1564, Don Vincenzo Borghini wrote a letter to Giorgio Vasari in which he reported from the countryside that he had been studying Varchi’s *lezioni* and had had a hearty laugh at the naive philosophical tone of the artist’s letters on the question of the *paragone*. See Karl FREY, ed., *Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*, Munich, 1923–30, vol. 2, p. 93. For an analysis of that letter, see Paola BAROCCHI and Vincenzo BORGHINI, “Una ‘selva di notizie’ di Vincenzo Borghini” in *Un augurio a Raffaele Mattioli*, Florence, Sansoni, 1970, p. 87 ff.

19. BAROCCHI and BORGHINI, “Una ‘selva di notizie’ di Vincenzo Borghini.” This book section is composed of a short introductory article by Paola BAROCCHI, followed by about 70 pages of selected passages out of Borghini’s manuscript notes on art theoretical questions: the “Selva di Notizie.”

20. VASARI, BETTARINI, and BAROCCHI, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, vol. 1 (G), p. 111.

21. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 112.

22. VARCHI, *Opere*, vol. 2, p. 631.

23. For Varchi see for instance the paragraph on the superiority of architecture in *Opere*, vol. 2, p. 633. As for Bartoli, except from his inclination towards literature related to architecture, his own devotion for this art appears for instance from the long dialogue on architectural critique in the first book of Bartoli’s compilation of lectures, printed in 1567: *Cosimo Bartoli, Ragionamenti Accademici di Cosimo Bartoli, Gentil’huomo et Accademico Fiorentino, sopra alcuni luoghi difficili di Dante*, Venice, Francesco de’ Franceschi Senese, 1567, pp. 1a–21b.

24. BAROCCHI and BORGHINI, “Una ‘selva di notizie’ di Vincenzo Borghini,” p. 101.

25. “Lo imitare, o parlando la nostra lingua, contrafare, non è altro che voler mostrare una cosa sia quello che in fatti non è, e questo è il fine proprio dell’una e dell’atra arte.” *Ibid.*, p. 102.

26. I thank Caroline van Eck and Maarten Delbeke for their comments on this paper.

ABSTRACTS

The decades between 1540 and 1570 have seen the emergence, in Florence, of the idea that painting, sculpture, and architecture share fundamental characteristics because of their common dependency upon draftsmanship, or *disegno*. This conviction would have a considerable impact in the following decades and centuries, because of the influence the first public art school (the Florentine *Accademia del Disegno*, 1563) exercised upon the whole academic movement. This article examines the positions held by three theorists who stood at the cradle of the “doctrine of *disegno*” regarding the position of architecture in the triad of the arts: Benedetto Varchi, Cosimo Bartoli, and Vincenzo Borghini. Regarding the problem of architecture, an important theoretical shift can be assessed. The article offers an explanation for this shift by situating the debate in the context of how, by then, the architectural profession was exercised.

INDEX

Geographical index: Europe, Florence, Italie

Chronological index: XVIe siècle, Epoque moderne

Mots-clés: Accademia del Disegno, Accademia Fiorentina, dessin, peinture, sculpture

AUTHORS

LIONEL DEVLIEGER

Lionel Devlieger (dr. ir.-arch.) is active as an independent artist and designer. He is currently teaching assistant at the architecture department of Ghent University. His researches in architectural history and theory focus on the figure of Benedetto Varchi and the context of the Florentine sixteenth-century court. Universiteit Gent, Belgique