

# Vasari and the

# National Gallery of Art



**G**iorgio Vasari (1511–1574) was a prolific painter, draftsman, and architect during his day; but what brought him popular and lasting fame is the book he wrote chronicling the lives and works of Italian artists, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (*Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*), published in 1550 and 1568 (fig. 1). Moreover, Vasari was the first great collector of drawings. His talents were boundless.

Vasari seems never to have lacked for confidence or drive. In his youth he wrote, “Why should it not be in my power to achieve, with diligent study and labor, some of that grandeur and rank so many others have obtained? They were just flesh and bones, as am I.” Vasari later vowed “never to shrink from any fatigue, discomfort, vigil, and toil, in order to achieve that end.” The proof of that resolve is found in churches, palaces, and museums throughout Italy, and in galleries, classrooms, and libraries all over the world. Adroitly managing cadres of assistants on many large and far-flung projects, Vasari achieved the stature established by his biographical subjects in the *Lives*.

**Fig. 1. Giorgio Vasari, Portrait of Vasari from *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, 1568, National Gallery of Art Library, Gift of E. J. Rousuck**

## Vasari's Life and Work

Born in 1511 into a family of craftsmen in Arezzo, Italy, Vasari showed talent for drawing at an early age. He entered the studio of Guillaume de Marcillat, making stained glass windows for the Arezzo Cathedral. In 1524, the cardinal of Cortona took young Giorgio to Florence and had him tutored alongside Alessandro and Ippolito de' Medici, possibly to spur the aristocrats with Vasari's industrious example. In that center of art, Vasari also received training in the studio of Andrea del Sarto. By 1529 he was executing small commissions in Arezzo and Pisa.

Vasari traveled to Bologna in 1531 and worked on the decorations for the coronation of the Emperor Charles V, then to Rome at the invitation of Ippolito de' Medici, now a cardinal. Vasari returned to Florence in 1532, where he painted an *Entombment*, also for Ippolito. The painting impressed Duke Alessandro de' Medici, who commissioned many works from the artist, including a portrait of Lorenzo il Magnifico, his illustrious predecessor. Because Alessandro was interested in fortifications, Vasari took up the study of architecture, designing modifications for the cathedral at Arezzo and decorating Florence for the entry of Charles V. His experience on such large projects would prove invaluable, as he learned how to manage assistants to satisfy commissions.

When Alessandro de' Medici was murdered in 1537, Vasari decided the



**Fig. 2. Giorgio Vasari, *St. Luke*, 1570–1571, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Damon Mezzacappa in Loving Memory of Elizabeth Mezzacappa**

**Fig. 3. Giorgio Vasari, *St. Mark*, 1570–1571, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Damon Mezzacappa in Loving Memory of Elizabeth Mezzacappa**



life of a court artist was too precarious. He spent the next seventeen years traveling throughout Italy, painting frescoes, altarpieces, devotional scenes, and portraits, studying works of art, and collecting lore about the artists. In 1550, he published his pioneering study, the *Lives* (as it is abridged in English), which was essentially the first history of art, in the form of artists' biographies. Vasari returned to the Florentine court in 1554 to serve Duke Cosimo de' Medici. He began a burst of architectural productivity in 1559, first designing the structure that is now the Uffizi Gallery, then remodeling Pisa's town center. He undertook his most challenging architectural project in 1562—a complex double-shell dome, one of the largest in sixteenth-century Italy, for the Madonna dell'Umiltà Basilica at Pistoia.

In 1561 Vasari began collecting information for a second edition of the *Lives*, a project he completed in 1568. It is this revised and greatly expanded edition that is reprinted and translated today as the ultimate retrospective on the Renaissance, written by an artist who knew many of the era's masters. As a result, the book has shaped the thinking on art ever since.

In 1571, Vasari undertook painting frescoes in Brunelleschi's Cathedral dome in Florence, work which was dear to him and which he realized might be his last. At the time of his death in 1574, the dome ceiling was unfinished. His catalogue raisonné lists 124 completed painting projects, many of them huge or multipart productions. Indeed, Vasari vies for the world record for putting the most acreage beautifully under paint. He also created or collaborated on more than 50 architectural projects, numerous stage designs, as well as the décor and pageantry for many state occasions. It is with considerable justice then that Vasari ranks himself among the *più eccellenti*.

### Vasari's Panels: *Saint Luke and Saint Mark*

The *Saint Luke* and *Saint Mark* panels were part of a commission from Pope Pius V in 1569 to decorate the newly built *Torre Pio* (Pius Tower) in the Vatican (figs. 2 and 3). The project, for which Vasari was knighted by the pope, was finished in two years. In the upper chapel, dedicated to the Archangel Michael, Vasari's *Coronation of the Virgin* occupied the main altar while elaborately framed mirrors flanked either side of the chapel doorways. Large panel paintings of the four evangelists—*Saint Matthew*, *Saint Mark*, *Saint Luke*, and *Saint John*—were set within these mirrors. After 1750, the chapel complex was dismantled and the paintings were dispersed. *Saint Matthew*, *Saint John*, and the *Coronation* altarpiece eventually went to churches in Livorno, Italy, while *Saint Mark* and *Saint Luke* were held in private collections in England, Europe, and the Americas, before their donation to the Gallery in 2012 by Damon Mezzacappa.

Saint Luke, patron saint of painters, with his attribute of a winged ox, is seen in the act of painting or drawing (a faint sketch of a Madonna and Child is barely visible over his right shoulder). Saint Mark, with his winged lion, writes his Gospel. Both evangelists twist and turn, larger than life, ready to burst from their confined space, evoking Michelangelo's Sibyls and Prophets in the Sistine Chapel.

### Vasari's *Lives*

The National Gallery of Art Library is fortunate to have essentially all published editions of Vasari's *Lives*, translated and edited over the course of many centuries. The groundbreaking first edition of 1550, published in two small volumes by Lorenzo Torrentino in Florence, was the first

major biographical and critical survey of artists. While several short biographies had appeared earlier, this was the first attempt to cover a wide range of artists. Mainly limited to artists from Tuscany, it did include some from farther afield, and even some non-Italians. For this, Vasari can be termed the first art historian.

The 1550 edition, a very rare book, received acclaim that encouraged Vasari to issue a much larger edition in 1568, of which the Gallery has four sets, each with different binding styles, from limp vellum to elaborate decoration (fig. 4). Published in Florence by Giunti, the second edition was more than twice the length of the first edition and included a number of portrait woodcuts of the featured artists. A border surrounding each portrait contains the tools of the artist's specialty: palette and brushes for a painter, chisel and sculptor, and t-square for an architect.

Of special note is the biography of Michelangelo, the only living artist included in the 1550 edition. This distinct honor confirms Vasari's high regard for Michelangelo and his opinion that the master represented the very best in Tuscan art. In the 1568 edition, Vasari revised the Michelangelo biography and issued a slimmer volume containing only the Michelangelo biography for those who could not afford the larger work. This slim book can be considered the first off-print in history.

### Vasari's Collection: A Page from *Libro de' disegni*

Vasari was also ahead of his time in collecting drawings by his predecessors and contemporaries in significant numbers. His extensive holdings were incorporated into a series of giant bound volumes known as the *Libro de' disegni* (Book of drawings). Likely meant as illustrated companions to the biographies in the *Lives*, the drawings in

## Caveat Emptor



Domenico Veneziano, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, c. 1445/1450, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection



Domenico Veneziano, *Saint John in the Desert*, c. 1445/1450, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection

For many Renaissance art investigations the prized clue is an item in the *Lives*. Specific mention by Vasari makes a work of art “important” to both scholar and dealer (for whom it may add a zero to the estimate). A passage in Vasari’s *Lives* can be priceless, like a skeleton to the paleontologist. Vasari provides a point of fixity from which to depart. From his eyewitness testimony, particular works of known authorship were located in specific collections. More can be extrapolated using archives, catalogues, databases, and other research tools, especially when the *Lives* is complemented by the writings of those who followed Vasari.

The scholar, however, must use caution. Vasari did not have access to the same scholarly apparatus, and instead had to rely on earlier sources, trustworthy or not, supplemented by memory and hearsay. In some instances, Vasari shaded matters to support a broader concept or even invented a sensational story. He tell us, for example, that Correggio “did not go to Rome,” leading the reader to infer that Correggio’s art was the poorer for it. But there is considerable evidence that Correggio did travel to Rome, where perhaps he found insights different from Vasari’s. The *Lives* also contains a shocking Cain-and-Abel story in the biography of Andrea del Castagno. According to Vasari, Andrea, jealous of the talent of his artistic rival Domenico Veneziano, lies in ambush in a dark Florentine street and disposes of Veneziano with a lead pipe. Vasari wrote:

Andrea set himself to wait for him in hiding behind a street corner; and when Domenico, on his way home, came up to him, he crushed his lute and his stomach at one and the same time with certain pieces of lead, and then, thinking that he had not yet finished him off, beat him grievously on the head with the same weapons; and finally, leaving him on the ground, he returned to his room in S. Maria Nuova, where he put the door ajar and sat down to his drawing in the manner that he had been left by Domenico.

Vasari’s conclusion that Veneziano was murdered appears again in his description of the artist’s panels of Saint Francis and Saint John (below). This makes a fine cautionary tale, but archival evidence shows that, in fact, Castagno predeceased Veneziano by four years!

“The work begun by the latter [Domenico] in S. Maria Nuova remained unfinished, nor did he ever complete it, as he had done the panel of the high altar in S. Lucia de’ Bardi, wherein he executed with much diligence a Madonna with the Child in her arms, S. John the Baptist, S. Nicholas, S. Francis, and S. Lucia; which panel he had brought to perfect completion a little before he was murdered.”

his *Libro* suggest that Vasari intended to collect drawings by every artist he chronicled. The pages, nearly two feet tall with decoration by the master or his students, featured drawings annotated with the name of the artist who Vasari believed to be the author. Vasari considered *disegno*—drawing as visual concept, the basis of design—to be the foundation of art, an axiom he mentions repeatedly throughout the *Lives*. The indication of the authorship on the page suggests Vasari’s understanding of individual style correlated to his assessment of the fundamental role of drawing. For Vasari, to know an artist’s drawings was to understand his artistic manner.

None of Vasari’s collected volumes survive intact, and many of the individual pages were dispersed and cut down after they left Vasari’s hands. The Gallery possesses one of the few complete sheets to survive from the *Libro*. Formerly in the collection of the Dukes of Devonshire at Chatsworth and then Ian Woodner in New York, the Gallery’s double-sided page elegantly presents ten rare fifteenth-century drawings by Sandro Botticelli, Filippino Lippi, and Raffaellino del Garbo within a complex, decorative, architectural framework drawn by Vasari himself, elevating the drawings to the status of altarpieces (figs. 5 and 6). The drawings were executed in a rich variety of media—met-alpoint, brown ink and wash, gouache, and prepared papers with lilac and yellow tones—and set in Vasari’s brown ink and wash framework to create a vibrant effect that animates the page and invites repeated study and exploration. This work represents one of the finest surviving examples of a full page from Vasari’s *Libro*. In its multivalent identity—a record of artistic practice and theory, and a document from the history of collecting and display—the *Libro* page is unique among the Gallery’s graphic holdings.

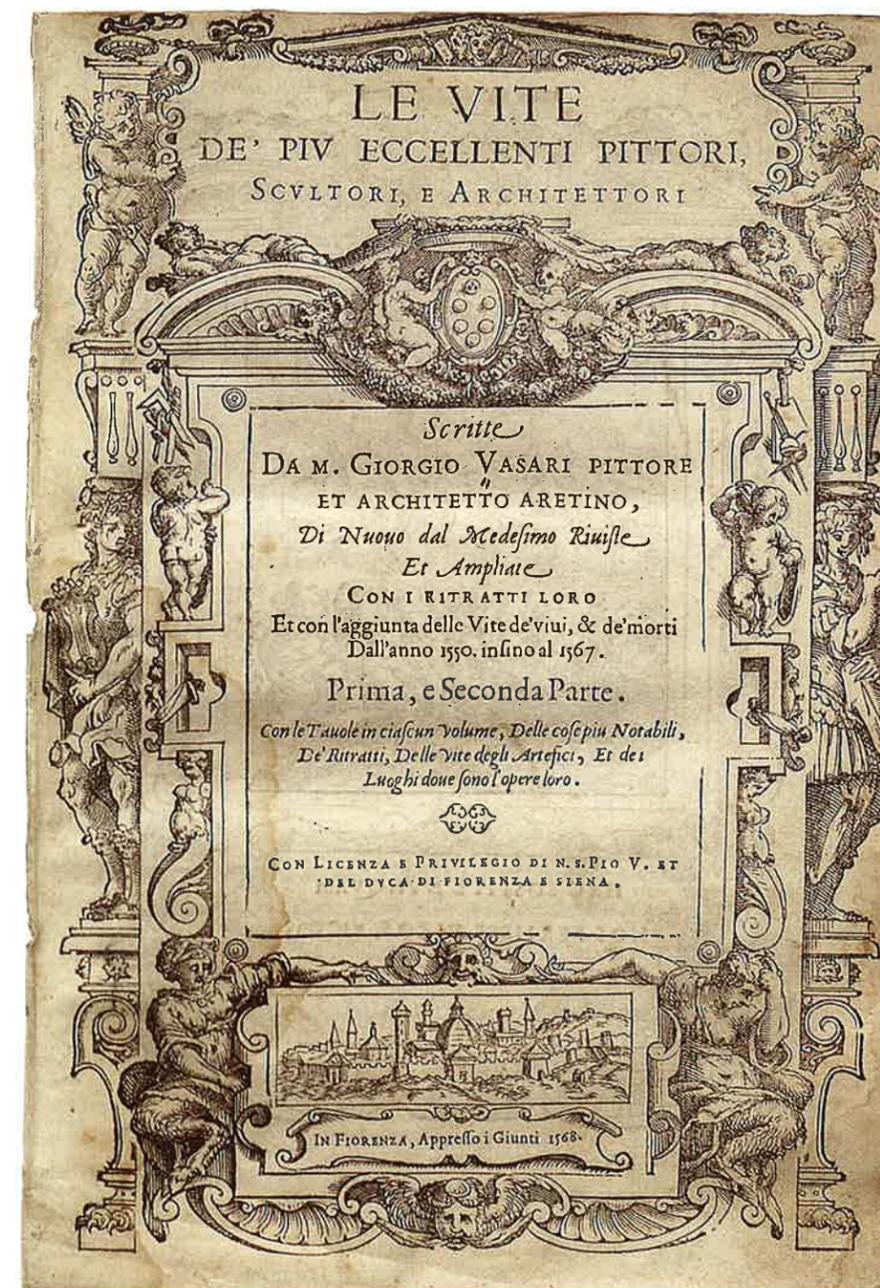


Fig. 4. Giorgio Vasari, Title page from *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, 1568, National Gallery of Art Library, Gift of E. J. Rousuck



Figs. 5 and 6. Giorgio Vasari, *Page from "Libro de' disegni"* (recto and verso), with ten drawings, dating from about 1480 to 1504, in various media by Filippino Lippi, Sandro Botticelli,

and Raffaellino del Garbo; assembled, mounted, and decorated by Vasari after 1524, National Gallery of Art, Woodner Collection, Patrons' Permanent Fund

“He made a portrait of Ginevra d’ Amerigo Benci, a very beautiful work.”



Leonardo da Vinci, *Ginevra de' Benci* [obverse], c. 1474/1478, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

Drawing on earlier sources, Vasari’s brief mention of a portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci by Leonardo da Vinci has long been connected with this portrait of a young woman. No other likeness of Ginevra survives for comparison, but the juniper (*ginepro* in Italian) behind the sitter is a play on her name, and the circumstances of her life (her marriage and a platonic courtship with the Venetian ambassador in the 1470s) agree well with Leonardo’s style at the time. Indeed, the lady’s spiraling curls are a kind of signature of the artist.

“And for the Chapel of Gino Capponi, in the Church of S. Spirito at Florence, he painted a panel wherein is the Visitation of Our Lady, with S. Nicholas, and a S. Anthony who is reading with a pair of spectacles on his nose, a very spirited figure. Here he counterfeited a book bound in parchment, somewhat old, which seems to be real, and also some balls that he gave to the S. Nicholas, shining and casting gleams of light and reflections from one to another; from which even by that time men could perceive the strangeness of his brain, and his constant seeking after difficulties.”

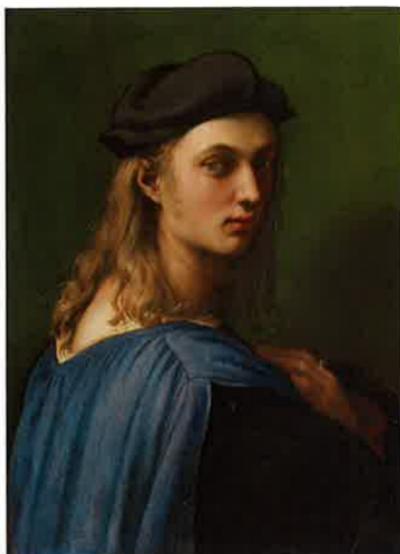
Vasari’s entry on the life of Piero di Cosimo is full of details about the artist’s odd behavior, which in part led to Piero’s reputation as an eccentric wild man. In his description of the *Visitation*, Vasari emphasizes picturesque narrative details seen at eye level that enliven the scene, such as the parchment book, eyeglasses, and reflective golden balls. Vasari was so taken with Piero that he owned one of the artist’s greatest mythological paintings.

Piero di Cosimo, *The Visitation with Saint Nicholas and Saint Anthony Abbot*, c. 1490, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection



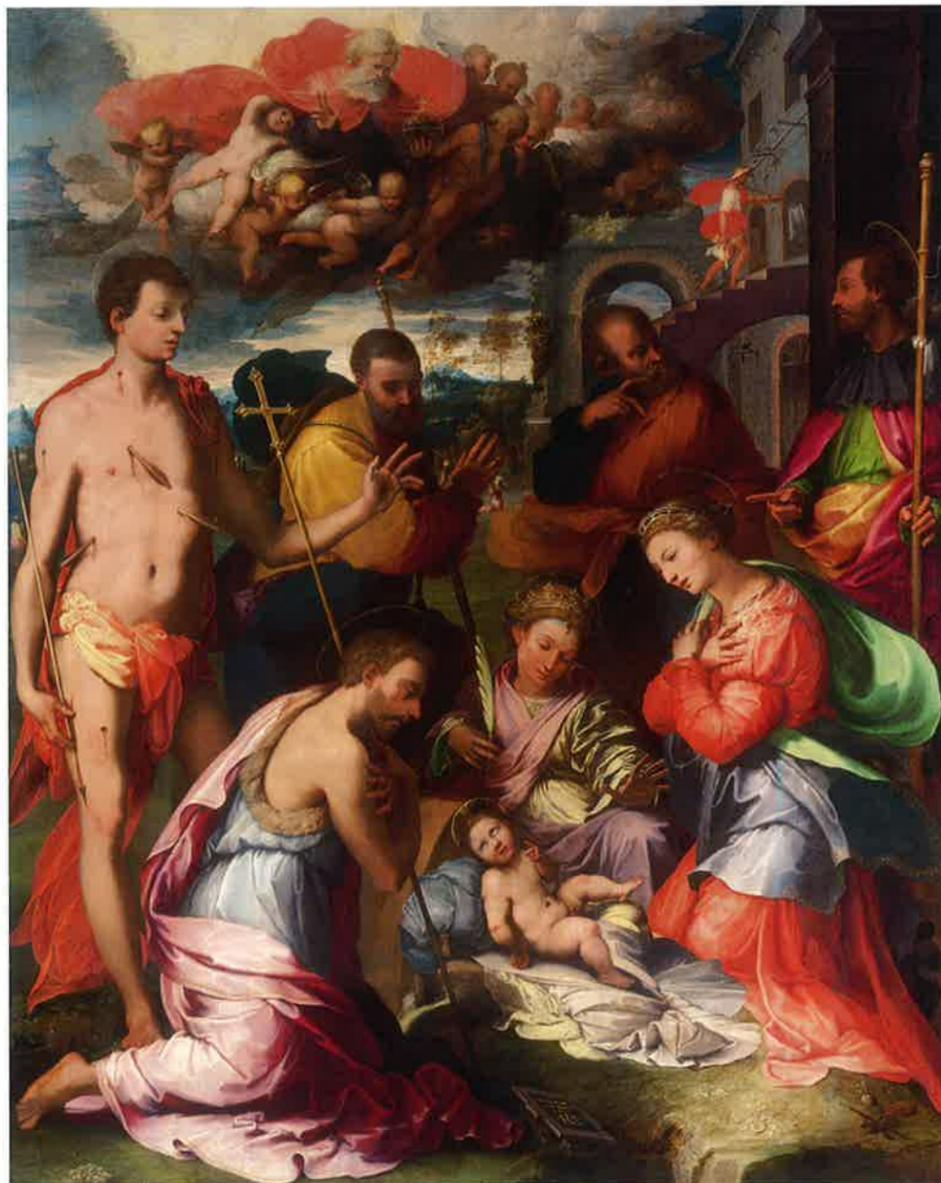
“For Bindo Altoviti he made his portrait when he was a young man, which is held to be extraordinary.”

An eighteenth-century editor of Vasari's *Lives* mistakenly interpreted the phrase “il ritratto suo,” or “his portrait,” to mean that Raphael had made a portrait of himself for the wealthy Florentine banker Bindo Altoviti. The proposed identification as a self-portrait of the world's most-beloved artist brought the picture enormous fame. Lured out of Nazi Germany, the painting was acquired, as Raphael's portrait of Altoviti, by Samuel Kress, who donated it in 1943 to the newly opened Gallery, where Bindo's image has beguiled visitors ever since.



**Raphael, *Bindo Altoviti*, c. 1515, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection**

**Perino del Vaga, *The Nativity*, 1534, oil on panel transferred to canvas, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection**



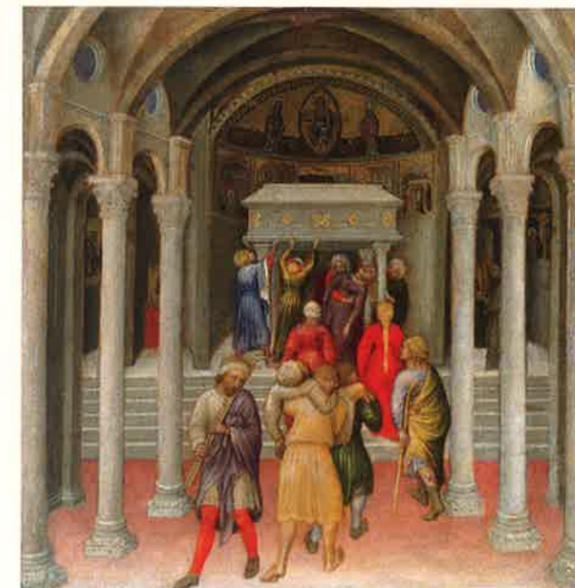
“He painted a most beautiful altarpiece, very finely designed, for S. Francesco, and another for a church called S. Maria “de Consolazione,” at the commission of a gentleman of the house of Baciadonne: in which picture he painted the Nativity of Christ, a work that is much extolled, but it was placed in a position so dark, that, by reason of the light not being good enough, one is not able to recognize its perfection, and all the more because Perino strove to paint it in a dark manner, so that it has need of a strong light.”

One of the largest altarpieces in the Gallery's collection and Perino del Vaga's most important religious painting to survive, *The Nativity* actually represents an Adoration of the Child, without the requisite ox, ass, or manger. Instead, worshipping saints, who would not have been in attendance at the birth, surround the child. Vasari laments the dark conditions in the Genoese church, which made the altarpiece almost impossible to see and probably account for its lack of notice by early writers. He provides the only certain information known about the commission and the original setting,

## Predella Panels

“In San Niccolò, near the Porta a San Miniato, for the family of the Quaratesi, he painted the panel of the high altar, which appears to me without a doubt the best of all the works that I have seen by his hand, for, not to mention the Madonna surrounded by many saints, all well wrought, the predella of the said panel, full of scenes with little figures from the life of St. Nicholas, could not be more beautiful or executed better than it is.”

Many of the paintings discussed by Vasari were multipanel altarpieces that were placed on church altars, to be seen in flickering candlelight. The large central scene often depicted a Madonna and Child in the company of saints and angels, its content usually decreed by convention or contract. Below the main panel were small scenes called predella panels, illustrating the lives of Jesus, Mary, or the saints that were included above. These saints were chosen because of their connection to the patron's family or to a church dedicated to them. Generally, artists had more freedom in creating the predella scenes; artistic innovations were often found in these small narrative stories, evident in Gentile da Fabriano's panel, *The Crippled and Sick Cured at the Tomb of Saint Nicholas*, and in panels by Domenico Veneziano. Vasari seemed to take great delight in describing predellas, which, set at eye level, he was sure to have seen. Over the centuries many of the large altarpieces were displaced because of changing styles and circumstances. The panels were dismembered and parts sold off, many eventually ending up in museums or private collections. The original locations of many such fragments remain unknown; fortunately, the Gallery's predellas mentioned by Vasari can be connected with the commissions that gave rise to them.



**Gentile da Fabriano, *The Crippled and Sick Cured at the Tomb of Saint Nicholas*, 1425, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection**



**Bernardino Luini, *The Misfortunes of Cephalus*, c. 1520/1522, fresco, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection**

“Bernardino del Lupino, of whom some mention was made not very far back, painted in Milan, near S. Sepolcro, the house of Signor Gian Francesco Rabbia that is, the facade, loggie, halls, and apartments—depicting there many of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid and other fables, with good and beautiful figures, executed with much delicacy.”

A Milanese follower of Leonardo da Vinci, Bernardino Luini excelled in painting devotional works that combined Leonardo’s innovations with the Lombard tradition of everyday realism. Like other artists of the period, Luini also ventured into the secular realm, painting a series of murals that decorated the city dwelling and country estate of Gerolamo Rabia. In these frescoes Luini brought to life, on a large scale, scenes from the ancient Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The Gallery’s series of nine detached frescoes is believed to have come from Rabia’s house or villa.

“In the year 1514 Duke Alfonso of Ferrara had caused a little chamber to be decorated . . . and he desired that there should also be there pictures by the hand of Gian Bellini. . . . Bellini painted on another wall a vat of red wine with some Bacchanals around it, and Satyrs, musicians, and other men and women, all drunk with wine, and near them a nude and very beautiful Silenus, riding on his ass, with figures about him that have their hands full of fruits and grapes; which work was in truth executed and colored with great diligence, insomuch that it is one of the most beautiful pictures that Gian Bellini ever painted, although in the manner of the draperies there is a certain sharpness after the German manner, because he imitated a picture by the Fleming Albrecht Dürer, which had been brought in those days to Venice. . . . On that vat Gian Bellini wrote these words: JOANNES BELLINUS VENETUS, P. 1514. That work he was not able to finish completely, because he was old, and Tiziano, as the most excellent of all the others, was sent for to the end that he might finish it.”



**Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514/1529, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection**

Returning from a trip to Venice in 1566, Vasari inspected the glorious mythological cycle decorating Duke Alfonso d’Este’s private study in Ferrara. In the second edition of 1568, *The Feast of the Gods*, part of Alfonso’s decoration, appears in the biography of Titian, not that of Giovanni Bellini, who was originally commissioned to paint the picture. To account for Titian’s share in the *Feast* (the mountainous landscape on the left), Vasari mistakenly assumed that the aged Bellini had left the painting unfinished, even though it is signed and dated by the artist. X-radiographs have subsequently revealed that Titian partly over-painted Bellini’s original background.

“In the year 1514 Duke Alfonso of Ferrara had caused a little chamber to be decorated, and had commissioned Dosso, the painter of Ferrara, to execute in certain compartments stories of Aeneas, Mars, and Venus.”

**Dosso Dossi, *Aeneas and Achates on the Libyan Coast*, c. 1520, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection**



For the decoration of his *camerino*, or private study, Duke Alfonso d'Este of Ferrara turned to the greatest artists of the day—Bellini, Raphael, Fra Bartolomeo, and possibly even Michelangelo. Most of these artists failed to contribute, however, and Alfonso commissioned his greatly admired court painter, Dosso

Dossi, to create one of the principal pictures in the cycle and a frieze of canvases depicting events from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Although shorter than the other surviving canvases from the Aeneas frieze, the Gallery's lushly romantic canvas may have been admired by Vasari as part of the pictorial cycle.



“Tiziano portrayed Bembo another time, that is, after he became a Cardinal.”

The sitter's distinctive features, particularly his long aquiline nose, unmistakably identify him as Titian's friend and distinguished humanist Pietro Bembo (1470–1547). In addition to the Gallery's portrait, painted after Bembo became a cardinal in 1539, Vasari mentions another earlier likeness of Bembo that Titian completed before his subject grew a beard. As it increased in length, the beard gave Bembo the look of an ancient sage.

**Titian, *Cardinal Pietro Bembo*, c. 1540, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection**



**Follower of Titian, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, c. 1560, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection**

“There are also to be seen portraits from life by Tiziano . . . and in like manner Signora Irene, a very lovely maiden, skilled in letters and music and a student of design, who, dying about seven years ago, was celebrated by the pens of almost all the writers of Italy.”

This painting is no longer considered to be by Titian's hand alone. Vasari is correct, however, in his description of Irene as an accomplished young woman who died young. Most likely posthumous, the portrait is full of symbols, such as the unicorn denoting chastity and the laurel wreath celebrating intellectual or artistic achievements. After her death a volume of nearly four hundred poems was published in her honor.