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The Collector of Lives: Giorgio Vasari and the Invention of Art (Review)

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The Collector of Lives: Giorgio Vasari and the Invention of Art. Ingrid Rowland and Noah Charney.

New York: W. W. Norton, 2017. xii + 420 pp. \$29.95.

Time was when Vasari and his account of the most excellent Italian architects, sculptors, and painters could easily be dismissed as a source for a serious history of the Renaissance. And if the text itself was a pleasure to read, the very inventiveness of Vasari's narrative might be seen, as the critic Robert Langton Douglas put it, as merely a distraction from looking more carefully at the forms of the art. We are more sympathetic now, recognizing that whatever we make of Vasari's text, it can stand as an immensely rich record of the culture that Florence had established for itself by this time. And a record, seen so, that can reward the scholars who have plumbed its depths and used it as a starting point for their own descriptions of the history of Renaissance art. All this new scholarly material is well known to the authors of the present volume, who have produced an accurate introduction to a text that they describe—perhaps over-optimistically—as one still read by every student of European art history and one, if properly contextualized—this judgment we can agree with—that can still refine the ideas we have about the art of the Renaissance.

The narrative is framed front and back by an account of the recent explorations of Maurizio Seracini in the great hall of the Palazzo Vecchio, in Florence, where, under pictures by Vasari, traces of Leonardo's fresco of the battle of Anghiari perhaps still remain. Between these bookends are thirty chapters of varying lengths, tracking the record of Vasari's life as an artist and courtier and referring to the cultural possibilities, understood by artists and patrons alike, that defined the ever-developing notions of the artist and of art. There is much here: the practice of *disegno* and the record of the collecting of drawings; how an artist like Vasari was educated; records of often-vicious political and cultural conflicts, which, as in the Sack of Rome in 1527, none could escape; the cultural role of the Medici; the records of Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo; and the literary and philosophical sources available to Vasari. And then, in the final pages, as a summary of the cultural politics of the age, an account of the funeral of Michelangelo, engineered by Vasari and his colleagues, followed by what the authors call the legacy of his text, which they see, perhaps too enthusiastically, as the very invention of the idea of art as it is understood today.

Many of these topics will be familiar to readers of this journal, if not in many of their details. While the writing may come off as too breezy at times—Mrs. Vasari; Cellini as a Renaissance Ernest Hemingway; Leonardo, if performing *strambotti* at court, being something between a pop singer and a rapper—the authors' research practices are sound. Readers, if so minded, can find more information about topics that interest them in the footnotes, the thoroughness of which clearly indicates the extent to which the authors read and incorporated existing scholarship. But who might be such readers? It is interesting for us in the academy to note a recent rush of historical

writings—I have certainly been their beneficiary—that attempt to present serious and important subjects to a general audience, free from the often-deadening scholarly apparatus that marks more-professional accounts. I am thinking here of someone like Sarah Bakewell, one of the authors commending this book on the dust jacket, and her accounts of Montaigne and the French intellectuals in Paris after the Second World War. It is in such a generous context that this book is best read, and, whatever reservations one might have about the language of the narratives or the topics left out, any text that directs more attention to Vasari—or Giorgetto Vassellario, as Benvenuto Cellini once chose to call him—and his achievements is to be appreciated and praised.

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The Holy Name: Art of the Gesù. Bernini and His Age. Linda Wolk-Simon and Christopher M. S. Johns, eds.

Exh. Cat. Early Modern Catholicism and the Visual Arts 17. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2018. xvi + 640 pp. \$50.

The complex relationship between the Jesuits and the visual arts has occupied scholars of the early modern period over many years, and still has the capacity to raise difficult issues. The current volume is the catalogue of an exhibition at Fairfield University Art Museum featuring Bernini's youthful bust of Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino (cat. no. 20 and essay by Xavier F. Salomon). This is the only surviving part of the cardinal's tomb, erected at the expense of Cardinal Odoardo Farnese, in the apse of the Jesuits' mother church in Rome, the Gesù. The rest of the exhibition consisted of drawings, prints, oil *bozzetti*, medals, and statuettes, mostly from North American collections. The Jesuits' earlier encounters with the arts are explored, but the primary emphasis is on the decoration of the Gesù in the long seventeenth century, and the ubiquitous shadow of Bernini: while the Bellarmino tomb was the only work that he himself made for the church, his presence was felt later in the century through his close connection to the general of the order, Gian Paolo Oliva, and through his support of the painter Giovanni Battista Gaulli (il Baciccio), who was responsible for the glorious decorations of the nave, dome, and apse. Although the prime focus of the book is on the Gesù, there are inevitably discussions of the Jesuits' other Roman foundations—Sant' Ignazio and the Collegio Romano, as well as their novitiate, crowned by Bernini's spectacular Sant' Andrea al Quirinale. Particular attention is given to the ways in which the order sought to establish an iconography for their newly created saints during the Seicento. These were Ignatius, their founder; Francis Xavier; Francis Borgia; and the boy saints Aloysius Gonzaga and Stanislaus Kostka.

The catalogue is dwarfed by the numerous essays charting the mixed fortunes of the Jesuits up to their suppression, in 1773. While their first patron, Cardinal Alessandro