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‘An ass with precious things in his panniers’: John Ruskin’s reception of *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* by Giorgio Vasari

Jenny Graham

Introduction

John Ruskin (1819–1900), like many Victorian readers, had a complex relationship with the *Lives of the Artists* by Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), a work that nonetheless profoundly influenced nineteenth-century perceptions of the Italian Renaissance. ‘It is the modern fashion to despise Vasari’, wrote Ruskin in a lecture for the University of Oxford in 1873: ‘he is indeed despicable, whether as historian or critic ... nevertheless, he records the traditions and opinions of his day, and these you must accurately know, before you can wisely correct.’¹ At first glance, Ruskin’s remarks appear to conform to a wider ambivalence towards Vasari’s *Lives* that was expressed often in the art writing of the nineteenth century, when newer empirical enquiries into the style, attribution and technical character of the old masters began to replace older, anecdotal ‘stories’ of art. Ruskin was right to observe that it ‘is the modern fashion to despise Vasari’. The comment shows a familiarity on Ruskin’s part with the broader reassessment taking place, as the century progressed, of the usefulness, value and accuracy of the records of Italian art and artists from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries contained in Vasari’s famous biographies. Certainly, Ruskin was broadly conversant throughout his lifetime with the rediscovery of the Italian Trecento and Quattrocento in Britain and on the continent. By 1873, when Ruskin made his remark, he had become preoccupied with the art of Sandro Botticelli and the ‘Florentine Schools of Engraving’, subjects that closely informed his Oxford lectures of 1872 and 1873.² Even within the remit of these researches, Ruskin showed himself to be well aware of modern challenges to Vasari’s authority, as advances in connoisseurship and archival research discredited

I would like to thank Susanna Avery-Quash for the invitation to present this material at the National Gallery on two occasions in connection with Ruskin’s bicentenary in 2019, and Paul Tucker for kindly sharing information with me from his exhaustive edition of Ruskin’s Resumé of 1845.

¹ John Ruskin, ‘Lecture I: Nicholas the Pisan’, given at the University of Oxford, 20 October 1873. See the *Library Edition* of Ruskin’s works: Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds, *The Works of John Ruskin*, London: George Allen/New York: Longman, Green, and Co, 1903–12, 39 vols; quoted hereafter as *Works of John Ruskin*, followed by volume and page number; here, *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, 14–15.

² For an excellent and very detailed discussion of Ruskin and Botticelli, see Jeremy Norman Melius, ‘Art History and the Invention of Botticelli’, unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2010, esp. 46–59, 76–103.

Vasari's findings.³ Chief among such authors – and first in Ruskin's firing line – were Joseph Archer Crowe (1825–1896) and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle (1819–1897), who joined forces in the late 1850s, united by a desire to put into print the results of long hours spent in front of works of art in the galleries of Italy, France and Germany. Their collaborative handbooks on Italian art, first published between 1864 and 1871,⁴ and followed up by individual studies on Titian and Raphael,⁵ systematically gathered together old and new information on individual paintings, ordered by artist and school, in a format that would evolve eventually into the *catalogue raisonné* of modern art history.⁶ A feature of their work was the inclusion of multiple cross-references to both archival sources and modern continental literature, bringing that information to a broader, English-speaking audience.

Nevertheless, and despite admitting the value of their 'data, of unequalled value', Ruskin was highly critical of what he saw as Crowe and Cavalcaselle's nit-picking. In another Oxford lecture in 1872 on 'The relation of engraving to other arts in Florence', Ruskin told his students that it was 'an absurdity on the face of it' for Crowe and Cavalcaselle to call their work, as they had done: 'a *History of Painting in Italy*, but which is in fact only a dictionary of details relating to that history.'⁷ As Donata Levi has usefully proposed, Ruskin's dislike of Crowe and Cavalcaselle's stringent sifting of facts at the expense of what we might call the bigger picture of the Renaissance, was directly related to Ruskin's interest in Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*.⁸ In Levi's assessment, the 'modern Vasari' (as Crowe and Cavalcaselle's survey of Italian art was dubbed by its publisher, John Murray), even with its scrupulous presentation of documentary evidence, failed in Ruskin's mind to deliver the more enlarged outlook that he was seeking on what he would have called the 'Gothic' arts of Italy. As Levi puts it, 'For Ruskin, Vasari represents the apparent untruthfulness, but in reality, the deeper truth of the tradition'.⁹ It is in this context that we should take seriously the second part of Ruskin's remark, that Vasari 'records the traditions and opinions of his day, and these you must accurately know, before you can wisely correct'.

Accordingly, this article sets out to delve deeper into Ruskin's response to Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, a text that remained important to Ruskin throughout his life and which, for him, constituted an important touchstone for engaging with the

³ For a brief history of the 'new art criticism', see Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, 45.

⁴ Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *A New History of Painting in Italy*, London: John Murray, 1864–66, 3 vols; and J.A. Crowe and G.B. Cavalcaselle, *A History of Painting in North Italy*, London: John Murray, 1871, 2 vols.

⁵ Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *Titian: His Life and Times*, London: John Murray, 1877, 2 vols; and Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *Raphael: His Life and Works*, London: John Murray, 1882, 2 vols.

⁶ Melius, 'Art History and the Invention of Botticelli', 56–57; and Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence: The Monograph and its Project*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006, 181, 191–92.

⁷ *Works of John Ruskin*, XXII, 337.

⁸ Donata Levi, 'Crowe and Cavalcaselle on Botticelli: new results', in Ana Debenedetti and Caroline Elam, eds, *Botticelli Past and Present*, London: UCL Press, 2019, 166–82.

⁹ Levi, 'Crowe and Cavalcaselle on Botticelli', 167.

arts of Italy. Indeed, a review of Ruskin's writings, using E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn's *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*,¹⁰ shows that despite a few fashionably tart remarks on the subject, Ruskin was – for his time – a surprisingly faithful reader of Vasari. As we will see, Ruskin read the *Lives* in Italian, and in English following the publication in 1850 to 1852 of the first complete translation by Mrs Jonathan Foster.¹¹ Ruskin could be at once scathing yet deeply engaged in a close reading of Vasari's text as a foil to his own developing views on the art and architecture of Italy. Above all, it was as a teacher that Ruskin found the richest outlet for materials in Vasari's volumes. He read long passages aloud in his lectures and turned continually to the *Lives* as a historical source. The *Vite* of Vasari informed Ruskin's rehabilitation of Italian artists and architects before Raphael (1483–1520), especially of Nicola Pisano (active 1258–1278), Cimabue (documented 1272–1302), Giotto (c.1267 or 1276–1337), Fra Angelico (active 1417–1455), Pietro Perugino (c.1450–1523) and Botticelli (c.1445–1510).¹² It influenced his emerging philosophy of art education, and Vasari's tales were even something Ruskin cited in his defence of the artists J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) and the Pre-Raphaelites. The article will examine references to Vasari during three epochs of Ruskin's career – his tour to Italy of 1845, *Modern Painters* II and III, and his Oxford lectures of the 1870s.

For Ruskin, Italy remained a deeply important source of inspiration for much of his life. As a place of pilgrimage and respite, of serious study and artistic renewal, it became the crucible for many of Ruskin's finest intellectual achievements such as *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53). More broadly, it influenced his lifelong thinking on the matters and morals of art, on drawing, architecture, craftsmanship, the theology of the creative impulse, materials and making, in myriad ways.

Ruskin made sixteen journeys to Italy during his lifetime, between 1833 and 1888, the earliest of which were taken with his parents in 1833, 1835 and 1840–41.¹³ His more detailed, career-defining engagement with Italy's 'Gothic' past, with the churches of Carrara, Lucca, the Campo Santo at Pisa, the art of the early Italians at Florence and of Jacopo Tintoretto (c.1518–1594) at Venice, came during his first solo tour to Italy in the summer of 1845.¹⁴ It was for this trip that Ruskin turned in earnest to Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, taking with him a sixteenth-century edition of

¹⁰ *Works of John Ruskin*, I–XXXIX. Vasari is identified 163 times by the editors.

¹¹ [Mrs Jonathan Foster], *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, translated from the Italian of Giorgio Vasari*, London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850–52, 5 vols. Little is known about Mrs Foster herself, such as her dates of birth and death. See Patricia Rubin, "'Not ... what I would fain offer, but ... what I am able to present': Mrs. Jonathan Foster's translation of Vasari's *Lives*", in Katja Burzer, Charles Davis, Sabine Feser, and Alessandro Nova, eds, *Le Vite del Vasari: Genesi, Topoi, Ricezione*, Florence: Marsilio Editore, 2010, 317–31.

¹² These dates follow those given by the National Gallery, London. See www.nationalgallery.org.uk accessed 7 April 2020.

¹³ Nicholas Shrimpton, 'Italy' in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 49–65; 54.

¹⁴ Shrimpton, 'Italy', 54–55.

the text published at Bologna in 1647, edited by Carlo Manolesi.¹⁵ To be sure, it was the Alps, with their dramatic landscape and clean air, rather than the cities of Italy, that truly delighted the young Ruskin, aged just twenty-six and under the spell of Turner. 'Here I am at last in my *own* country ... out of Italian smells & vilenesses', he wrote to his mother from the mountain village of Macugnaga, Piedmont in July 1845.¹⁶ Yet Ruskin was very much of his time when he undertook to educate himself in Italian art in the middle years of the 1840s.

1843–1845. Ruskin's sources: the literature of early Italian art

As it is well known, the rediscovery of the so-called Italian 'primitives' was by then well under way in Britain, with a generation of art writers tackling the subject of Italian art before 1500, during the 1840s.¹⁷ Foremost among these critics were Anna Jameson (1794–1860) and Alexander William Crawford Lindsay (1812–1880), known as Lord Lindsay, with a host of travel books also appearing such as John Murray's *Hand-book for Travellers in Northern Italy* (1842 and 1843), Frances Trollope's *A Visit to Italy* (1842), Mary Shelley's *Rambles* (1844) and Charles Dickens's *Pictures from Italy* (1846).¹⁸ Lord Lindsay's *Sketches of the History of Christian Art* was published in 1847, with Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art* appearing the following year.¹⁹ Both were indebted to A.F. Rio's *De la poésie de l'art chrétienne* (1836), a text which had great influence in Britain in its extensive discussion of early Italian painting.²⁰

¹⁵ James S. Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, Oxford: The Oxford Bibliographical Society, 2012, 350; Harold I. Shapiro, ed, *Ruskin in Italy. Letters to his Parents 1845*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, 60; John Ruskin, *Resumé of Italian Art and Architecture*, ed, Paul Tucker, Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2003, LXV.

¹⁶ 'Here I am at last in my *own* country, in great luxury and rejoicing – out of the way of everybody – out of Italian smells and vilenesses, everything pure and bright.' Letter from John Ruskin to his mother from 'Macugnaga, Val Anzasca', 24 July 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 160; see also Shrimpton, 'Italy', 55; and Emma Sdegno, 'The Alps' in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 32–48; 32–35.

¹⁷ The classic literature is: Robyn Cooper, 'British attitudes towards the Italian primitives, 1815–1865', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 1976; for the less well-known art critic George Darley (1795–1846) see also Cooper, 'The growth of interest in early Italian painting in Britain: George Darley and the Athenaeum, 1834–1846', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 43, 1980, 201–20; Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*; Matthew Plampin, 'From Rio to Romola: Morality and didacticism in the English appreciation of early Italian art, 1836–1863', unpublished PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2001. For a more recent contribution see Caroline Palmer, "'A fountain of the richest poetry": Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Eastlake and the rediscovery of early Christian art', *Visual Resources*, 33:1–2; 2017, 48–73.

¹⁸ Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 50–51.

¹⁹ Palmer, "'A fountain of the richest poetry"', 55, 70.

²⁰ Alexis François Rio, *De la poésie chrétienne (or, The Poetry of Christian Art)*, translated from the French, London: T. Bosworth, 1854. Originally published in French in 1836. For Rio's influence in Britain see Ronald Lightbown, 'The inspiration of Christian art', in Sarah Macready and F.H. Thompson, eds, *Influences in Victorian Art and Architecture*, London: Society of Antiquaries, 1985, 3–40; Plampin, 'From Rio to Romola: Morality and didacticism';

It was under the influence of this wider cultural context that Ruskin's engagement with Vasari's *Lives* began. The detailed records contained in Ruskin's letters home during his tour of 1845,²¹ and in the notebooks from the same trip,²² show that his first sustained use of Vasari's text was as a guidebook to Italian art to help him locate pictures, buildings and monuments and learn more about their makers during his travels. At this stage of his development, the young Ruskin was thus more of a follower than a leader in the study of early Italian art. A quick learner, however, Ruskin grew in confidence during the months of May to September 1845, shifting his voice from that of a young, generalist art critic, as we find him in the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843, to a more authoritative register. Crucial in this development was Ruskin's mastery of the fashionable early Italian schools, which was the main purpose of his travels in preparation for *Modern Painters II*, already in train when Ruskin left for Italy.

Particularly well-received were the popular histories of Italian art by Anna Jameson. Prior to Ruskin's tour of 1845, Jameson had recently penned for the *Penny Magazine* a series of 'Essays on the Lives of Remarkable Painters' of the Italian school which appeared from 1843 to 1845.²³ They appeared in book form as *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters* in the same year as Ruskin's trip.²⁴ Largely indebted to Vasari's *Lives*, Jameson brought together the best-known of his artistic biographies, including those of Cimabue, Giotto, and Fra Angelico, and, in a move that was decidedly ahead of her time, Jameson continued onwards to the Venetian art of Titian and Tintoretto. Taking into account the book's appearance in 1845, and the *Penny Magazine's* broad circulation of some 50,000 copies a week in this period,²⁵ it is likely that Ruskin's initial familiarity with the stories of Vasari came in part from reading these essays as well as the original text. As it would have been the case for many Victorian readers, the appearance of Vasari's anecdotes in the English language in the *Penny Magazine* would have been helpful for Ruskin, although he leaves no record in his writings to confirm that he read them there.

However, there is an example in 1843, in a piece of newspaper criticism for the *Weekly Chronicle*, where Ruskin uses the same anecdote from Vasari's Life of Cimabue that Mrs Jameson had published in the *Penny Magazine* a few months

and Matthew Plampin, 'A stern and just respect for truth': John Ruskin, Giotto and the Arundel Society', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 6:1, 2005, 59–78; 61–64.

²¹ Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*. Eleven references to Vasari are indexed at 262.

²² John Ruskin, *Resumé of Italian Art*, ed. Tucker, e.g. 13, 23, 30, 34. Twenty references to Vasari are indexed at 342.

²³ [Anna Jameson], 'Essays on the Lives of Remarkable Painters. – No. II. Giovanni Cimabue'. *Penny Magazine*, 12:694, 28 January 1843, 25–27; and 12:698, 18 February 1843, 59–60. See also Susanna Avery-Quash, 'Illuminating the old masters and enlightening the British public: Anna Jameson and the contribution of British women to empirical art history in the 1840s', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 28, 2019, without pagination, published online: <http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.832>.

²⁴ Anna Jameson, *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters. And of the Progress of Painting in Italy from Cimabue to Bassano*, London: Charles Knight & Co, 1845, 2 vols.

²⁵ Palmer, "'A fountain of the richest poetry'", 54.

earlier.²⁶ The anecdote was one of Vasari's most celebrated stories, in which a Madonna painting by Cimabue is paraded through the streets of Florence amidst great rejoicing, attended by crowds of townsfolk eager to see the new naturalism brought to art by the first of Vasari's founding fathers. Vasari says that the painting was borne aloft from Cimabue's house to the Church of Santa Maria Novella, where the painting – which is now attributed to Duccio (active 1278–1319) – remained extant until 1937 when it was moved to the Uffizi Gallery (fig. 1).²⁷ As we will see, Ruskin continued to cherish both the story and the painting (which he saw many times in Florence) throughout his writings on Italian art.



Figure 1 Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Madonna in Majesty (Rucellai Madonna)*, c.1285. Tempera on wood, 429 x 290 cm. Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi. Photo Scala, Florence.

Vasari's anecdote is broadly interpreted as a lesson in the importance of patronage and of a society that values art.²⁸ Ruskin introduces it here by way of a rebuke to Turner's critics, in a further adjunct to his defence of the artist in *Modern Painters* I. In this renewed attack on the criticism by the English press of Turner, 'scorn it as he may, and does', Ruskin seeks to halt the 'oppression of a perpetual

²⁶ *Works of John Ruskin*, III, 644–45; and [Anna Jameson] 'Essays on the Lives of Remarkable Painters', 18 February 1843, 59.

²⁷ Richard Kenneth Emmerson and Sandra Clayton Emmerson, eds, *Key Figures in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2006, 180. The re-attribution to Duccio was made by the Austrian art historian Franz Wickhoff (1853–1909) in 1879. See Hayden Maginnis, *Duccio's Rucellai Madonna*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, 64–78.

²⁸ Hilary Fraser, 'Vasari's *Lives* and the Victorians', in David J. Cast, ed, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Giorgio Vasari*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, 277–94; 282–83.

hissing' directed at the artist, whom as it is well known Ruskin saw as the best painter the English school had to offer.²⁹ Despite Ruskin's unexpected gear shift from the art of the present to that of the past, the introduction of Vasari's tale does illuminate Ruskin's wider point about the abundant support of the public that artists found in 'runder times'. Characteristically, as it will be seen in many of Ruskin's writings, he cites the legend without direct reference to Vasari by name:

yet we cannot hope that he [Turner] will ever cast his spirit upon the canvass [sic] with the same freedom and fire as if he felt that the voice of its inspiration was waited for among men, and dwelt upon with devotion. Once, in ruder times, the work of a great painter* was waited for through days at his door, and attended to its place of deposition by the enthusiasm of a hundred cities; and painting rose from that time, a rainbow upon the Seven Hills, and on the cypress heights of Fiésolo, guiding them and lighting them for ever, even in the stillness of their decay. How can we ever hope that England will ever win for herself such a crown ... while the works of her highest intellects are set for the pointing of the finger and the sarcasm of the tongue, and the sole reward for the deep, earnest, holy labour of a devoted life, is the weight of stone upon the trampled grave.

*Cimabue. The quarter of the town is yet named, from the rejoicing of that day, Borgo Allegri.³⁰

The corresponding passage from the *Penny Magazine* reads thusly:

... on this festive occasion the Madonna was uncovered, and the people in joyous crowds hurried thither to look upon it, rending the air with exclamations of delight and astonishment, whence this corner of the city [of Florence] obtained and has kept ever since the name of the 'Borgo Allegri.' The Madonna, when finished, was carried in great pomp from the atelier of the painter to the church for which it was destined, accompanied by the magistrates of the city, by music, and by crowds of people in solemn and festive procession. This well-known anecdote has lent a venerable charm to the picture, which is yet to be seen in the Church of Santa Maria Novella.³¹

Mrs Jameson was certainly on Ruskin's radar by the time that he arranged to meet her by appointment at the Accademia in Venice on 28 September 1845. This was the occasion that prompted Ruskin's now-famous remark, made in a letter written to his parents that same day, that Mrs Jameson was 'as like' their servant Ann 'as can be ... & knows as much of art as the cat.'³² The divertingly cutting

²⁹ *Works of John Ruskin*, III, 644.

³⁰ *Works of John Ruskin*, III, 644–45.

³¹ [Anna Jameson] 'Essays on the Lives of Remarkable Painters', 18 February 1843, 59.

³² Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 28 September 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 215; see also Palmer, "'A fountain of the richest poetry'", 54.

nature of this comment has detracted, however, from the fact of their meeting, and from the still more obvious influence which Jameson's schema of the history of art would have had on Ruskin's turn to the Italian 'primitives' and Tintoretto, the Italian artist with whom he would become most enamoured in the succeeding years.³³

Twenty-five years Ruskin's senior, and fluent in Italian, Jameson was by no means unsophisticated in her knowledge and interpretation of Italian painting, in comparison with Ruskin's own more rudimentary grasp of the language and the Italian schools of art at that time. As Robert Hewison has noted, for Ruskin, 'speaking Italian' was a private code he used to describe giving money to locals in exchange for access to their various locked churches and palazzos.³⁴ According to Caroline Palmer, in a recent assessment of Mrs Jameson's art-historical legacy, 'In her own time, she was considered absolutely central to the rediscovery of the Primitives.'³⁵ Following the appearance of Jameson's *Early Italian Painters* in 1845, it was re-issued twelve times in the course of the nineteenth century, and her accounts of early Italian art were cited by (among others) the Pre-Raphaelites, Robert Browning (1812–1889) and George Eliot (1819–1880).³⁶ In his memoirs, the artist and original member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Holman Hunt (1827–1910) recalled how, together with the popular *Library of the Fine Arts; Or Repertory of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture & Engraving*,³⁷ the *Penny Magazine* provided 'not a little' of what he learned about Italian art and 'the varieties of style of the great masters, and their relations to the different schools'.³⁸

As a well-known personality in Anglo-Italian circles, who had even met Ruskin's early hero A.F. Rio (1797–1874) in Paris in 1841,³⁹ Mrs Jameson evidently held some fascination for Ruskin at this important juncture in his nascent career. In his unfinished autobiography *Praeterita*, Ruskin recalls walking out in Venice in 1845 together with Jameson, and the artists James Duffield Harding (1798–1863) and William Boxall (1800–1879), the latter of whom went on to succeed Charles Eastlake (1793–1865) as director of the National Gallery in 1866. In this company of four like-minded individuals, Ruskin relates how Jameson and himself would spar jocosely on the matters of art, despite their very different outlooks, which Ruskin describes rather charmingly as their 'pertinaciously separate corners of an equilateral

³³ See, for example, the editors' Introduction, *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, xlv.

³⁴ Robert Hewison, 'The fiery cross of truth: John Ruskin's *Giotto and His Works in Padua*', in John Ruskin, *Giotto and His Works in Padua*, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018, 11. See also the letter from John Ruskin to his father, 30 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 133.

³⁵ Palmer, "'A fountain of the richest poetry'", 54.

³⁶ Palmer, "'A fountain of the richest poetry'", 54.

³⁷ *Library of the Fine Arts; Or Repertory of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture & Engraving*, London: M. Arnold, 1831–32, 4 vols.

³⁸ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1905, 2 vols, I, 24.

³⁹ Avery-Quash, 'Illuminating the old masters', note 30.

triangle.'⁴⁰ Despite his reservations, privately expressed, Ruskin went on to reference Jameson's books in his later publications, possibly in deference to these early experiences and Jameson's straightforward and useful presentation of valuable information in which he was interested.⁴¹

Ruskin's strategic move into the art criticism of the early Renaissance following his Italian tour of 1845 was a success. Without doubt, he had done his homework beforehand. In 1843, Ruskin studied the early Italian pictures then attributed to Cimabue, Duccio and Giotto at Christ Church College, Oxford, given to the University a generation earlier by William Fox-Strangways (1795–1865); that same year Ruskin read Rio's *De la poésie Chrétienne*.⁴² James Dearden's *The Library of John Ruskin* records that Ruskin owned a volume of engravings after Fra Angelico by Giovanni Battista Nocchi published, also, in 1843.⁴³ These were no doubt the reproductions of works by Fra Angelico that Ruskin was copying from in 1844 – 'I am working at home from Fra Angelico, and at the British Museum from the Elgins' [the Parthenon sculptures sold to the museum by Lord Elgin in 1816], as he wrote to Henry Liddell (1811–1898) in October.⁴⁴ These copies after Fra Angelico were mentioned, but not identified, by Richard J. Dellamora in 1974.⁴⁵ In a letter written to his father from Florence in June 1845, Ruskin even records meeting with Nocchi, 'the man who did the Vita di Cristo in my study, the large book from Fra Angelico.'⁴⁶ Ruskin was reading Rio's *De la poésie Chrétienne* again in 1844;⁴⁷ other sources from his own library at this time, as well as the edition of Vasari already mentioned, included a copy of Benevenuto Cellini's *Autobiography*, which Ruskin cited in *Modern Painters* I and II;⁴⁸ Chateaubriand's *Souvenirs d'Italie, d'Angleterre et d'Amérique*, probably the copy bought by Ruskin's father in 1834;⁴⁹ Jacques Augustin Galiffe's *Italy and Its Inhabitants*, published by John Murray in 1820, which

⁴⁰ *Works of John Ruskin*, XXXV, 374: 'Mrs Jameson was absolutely without knowledge or instinct of painting (and had no sharpness of insight even for anything else); but she was candid and industrious, with a pleasant disposition to make the best of all she saw, and to say, compliantly, that a picture was good, if anybody had ever said so before.'

⁴¹ For example, *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIV, 333.

⁴² Shrimpton, 'Italy', 53.

⁴³ *La vita di Gesù Cristo: Dipinto de Fra Giovanni de Fiesole, detto il Beato, lucidata dagli originali che si conservano dell'Le R. Galleria fiorentina delle Belle Arti, disegnata ed incisa da G.B. Nocchi*, Florence: Presso Giovanni Battista Nocchi Incisore, 1843; Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 12.

⁴⁴ Letter from John Ruskin to Henry Liddell, 12 October 1844; *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, xxiii.

⁴⁵ Richard J. Dellamora, 'The revaluation of 'Christian art': Ruskin's appreciation of Fra Angelico 1845–60', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 43:2, Winter 1974, 143–50; 143.

⁴⁶ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 19 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 120.

⁴⁷ *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, xxiii; Plampin, 'A stern and just respect for truth', 63.

⁴⁸ Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 66 (precise edition of Cellini's *Autobiography* not specified); *Works of John Ruskin*, III, 144, IV, 279, IV, 318.

⁴⁹ Vicomte François-René de Chateaubriand, *Souvenirs d'Italie, d'Angleterre et d'Amérique*, London: Henri Colburn, 1815; Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 69.

Ruskin read in 1841;⁵⁰ and Luigi Lanzi's *Storia pittorica dell'Italia* in six volumes, which Ruskin mentioned twice in the notebooks of his Italian tour of 1845.⁵¹ Other books that Ruskin owned in connection with his study of early Italian painting, probably bought during the same period of the 1840s, and certainly acquired by the time of the essay he published for the Arundel Society in 1854 on Giotto's works in the Arena Chapel, included Filippo Baldinucci's *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue*,⁵² cited there;⁵³ Maria Callcott's *Description of the Annunziata dell'Arena; or, Giotto's Chapel, in Padua*;⁵⁴ Charles Lyell's English translation of Dante published by John Murray, probably the copy bought by Ruskin's father in 1849,⁵⁵ and Joseph Baretti's *A Dictionary of the English and Italian Languages* in two volumes, also purchased by Ruskin's father, in 1845.⁵⁶

Thus marked Ruskin's beginnings as an art critic in the increasingly professionalized sense of the term, a status he attained in the later years of the 1840s, following the more carefully delineated art-historical dimension to *Modern Painters* II in 1846, especially regarding the addition of references to the Italian schools. Elizabeth Prettejohn has defined the change from a generalist to a specialist art criticism, and its inception as a 'profession' in the mid-nineteenth century, as dependent on three things: the writer's ability to offer regular reviews to the same periodical; qualification to speak not merely about 'art' but about 'art theory' and

⁵⁰ Jacques Augustin Galiffe, *Italy and its Inhabitants: An Account of a Tour in that Country in 1816 and 1817*, London: John Murray, 1820; Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 126.

⁵¹ Luigi Lanzi, *Storia pittorica dell'Italia*, Bassano: Giuseppe Remondi, 1809, third edition, 6 vols; Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 195; John Ruskin, *Resumé of Italian Art*, ed, Tucker, 42, 81.

⁵² Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua, per le quali si dimostra come, e per chi le bell' arti di pittura, scultura, e architettura lasciata la rozzezza delle maniere greca e gottica, si siano in questi secoli ridotte all'antica loro perfezione, etc.*, Florence: Batelli, 1845–47, 5 vols; Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 21.

⁵³ John Ruskin, *Giotto and his Works in Padua, Being An Explanatory Notice of the Series of Woodcuts Executed for the Arundel Society, After the Frescoes in the Arena Chapel*, London: Arundel Society, 1854; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIV, 13–45.

⁵⁴ Maria Callcott, *Description of the Annunziata dell'Arena; or, Giotto's Chapel, in Padua*, London: Printed for the Author by Thomas Brettell, 1835; Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 60.

⁵⁵ Dante Alighieri, *The Canzoniere of Dante Alighieri, Including the Poems of the Vita Nuova and Convito; Italian and English. Translated by Charles Lyell, Esq.*, London: John Murray, 1835; Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 87.

⁵⁶ Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 23 (precise edition of Baretti's *Dictionary* not specified – recorded in Ruskin's library in two volumes but with title page missing). Baretti's dictionary, first published in 1760, went through multiple editions in the nineteenth century and was standard reading among connoisseurs. See the copy in the Library of the Royal Academy in London: Joseph Baretti, *A Dictionary of the English and Italian Languages. By Joseph Baretti. Improved and augmented with above Ten Thousand Words, omitted in the Last Edition of Altieri. To which is prefixed, An Italian and English Grammar*, London: Printed for J. Nourse; W. Strahan; J. F. and C. Rivington; T. Payne and Son; W. Owen; G. Keith; T. Longman; B. Law; J. Robson; J. Johnson; F. Newberry; G. Robinson; T. Cadell; P. Elmsley; R. Baldwin; T. Evans; W. Goldsmith; and W. Fox, 1778, 2 vols, Royal Academy record number 03/2942.

aesthetics; and the provision of expert opinion on the 'old masters'.⁵⁷ Although Prettejohn rightly identifies the 1860s as the period during which professional art criticism took root – to which we should also add the rise during the same decade of the 'scientific' connoisseurship of the old masters, exemplified by the books of Crowe and Cavalcaselle – Ruskin can be seen to anticipate this trend as early as the late 1840s, following his turn to the writings of Giorgio Vasari and other historical sources.⁵⁸ As Nicholas Shrimpton has observed, Ruskin's reinvention 'as a knowledgeable medievalist' of Italian art following his tour of 1845 and another made to Italy in 1846, resulted in the invitation by the publisher John Murray to contribute material to a new edition of Murray's *Hand-book for Travellers in Northern Italy* and to review Lord Lindsay's *Sketches of the History of Christian Art* for the *Quarterly Review*, both of which Ruskin carried out in 1847.⁵⁹ To these formalized activities may be added Ruskin's review of Charles Eastlake's *Materials for a History of Oil Painting* in 1848, which also appeared in the *Quarterly Review*,⁶⁰ and his membership of the Arundel Society from its foundation in 1849.⁶¹

1845. Ruskin's first solo tour of Italy: Vasari's *Lives* as travel guide

Ruskin was abroad for almost eight months in 1845, leaving London on 2 April and returning on 6 November, most of which time he spent in Italy, where he arrived at Genoa on 26 April.⁶² Writing to his father from Pisa on 12 May, Ruskin gives a strong sense of a young man liberated from the weight of preparing *Modern Painters* II, embarking on a pleasurable trip with Vasari in hand, whose jovial voice could act both as tour guide and storyteller. 'I have read myself thirsty,' says Ruskin

& my mind is marvellously altered since I was here – everything comes on me like music – and I am mighty well, & don't care a farthing about sun or heat or anything else. Coutet [Joseph Marie Couttet, Ruskin's continental chaperone] warned me especially against eating figs. I was looking at Vasari yesterday, & saw that Fra Bartolomeo died of doing so.⁶³

Many such references to Vasari's *Lives* appear in Ruskin's letters home during his trip, most of them regarding the older painters Vasari so closely described. Ten

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Aesthetic value and the professionalization of Victorian art criticism 1837–78', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 2:1, Spring 1997, 71–94; esp. 77–78.

⁵⁸ E.g. Crowe and Cavalcaselle, *A New History of Painting in Italy*.

⁵⁹ Shrimpton, 'Italy', 56; see also John Ruskin, 'Review of Lord Lindsay's *Sketches of the History of Christian Art*', *Quarterly Review*, June 1847; *Works of John Ruskin*, XII, 169–248.

⁶⁰ John Ruskin, 'Review of Charles Eastlake's *Materials for a History of Oil Painting*', *Quarterly Review*, March 1848; *Works of John Ruskin*, XII, 251–302.

⁶¹ For Ruskin and the Arundel Society, see Plampin, 'A stern and just respect for truth', 63.

⁶² Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, xiii–xviii.

⁶³ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 12 May 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 59–60; 60. For mention of Ruskin's fatigue in preparing the second volume of *Modern Painters* see Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, xiv.

days later, on 22 May, Ruskin wrote to his father in rapture about frescoes attributed to Simone Memmi (active 1315–1344) in the Campo Santo at Pisa (since destroyed during the 1939–45 war), exclaiming of four twirling female figures: '*such dancing ... they grow into life as you look, until you can see the very waving of their hair,*' and quoting Vasari's lines on the same painted scenes. '*Vasari's words respecting it are – I have left him in the campo santo with my drawings,*' Ruskin writes, rather evocatively, '*so I can't tell you exactly, but he says – San Raniero (un bel giovane), playing on the psalterio, fa ballar a alcune fanciulle bellissime per la costuma del tempo, et ogni altre cose – or some such thing.*'⁶⁴

On 2 June, still following Vasari, Ruskin went to the Brancacci Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence in search of the art of Masaccio (1401–1428). Impressed by the painter's powers of naturalistic depiction in his frescoes of the life of Saint Peter, especially in the *Tribute Money*, the scene depicting Saint Peter paying his taxes, surrounded by a large group of figures, Ruskin writes following an early start 'this morning the first thing': '*And I was not disappointed.*' Then, Ruskin's words recall entirely Vasari's biography of the artist when he tells his father that '*there ought to be some sympathy between us [Ruskin and Masaccio], for you know he was called Masaccio from his careless habits of dress & absence of mind ... I am going to get a sketch of Masaccio's head, which is there, painted by himself.*'⁶⁵ Turning to Vasari's original passage, its appeal to the rather intense author of *Modern Painters* can be easily understood: '*He was a very absent-minded and careless person, as one who, having fixed his whole mind and will on the matters of art, cared little about himself.*'⁶⁶ Ruskin notes also Masaccio's youth at the time of his works in the Brancacci Chapel – '*younger than myself*' – that so inspired Raphael and Michelangelo; and the artist's early death, all of which he could read about in Vasari's account.⁶⁷

The following day, Ruskin was in the Church of Santa Maria Novella, where he found himself confronted with the very altarpiece he had read about in Vasari, the '*Cimabue Madonna*', in the chapel to which it had been borne aloft in the legend (fig. 1). Ruskin writes: '*... yesterday to Santa Maria Novella, and was very much*

⁶⁴ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 22 May 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 72–73; 73. For Vasari's description, see Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Gaston du C. de Vere, London: Everyman's Library, 1996, 2 vols: I, 167: '*... S. Ranieri of Pisa. In the first scene he is shown as a youth, playing the psalter and making some girls dance, who are most beautiful by reason of the air of the heads and of the loveliness of the costumes and head-dresses of those times.*'

⁶⁵ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 2 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 94.

⁶⁶ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 318–22; 318: '*He was a very absent-minded and careless person, as one who, having fixed his whole mind and will on the matters of art, cared little about himself, and still less about others. And since he would never give any manner of thought to the cares and concerns of the world, or even to clothing himself, and was not wont to recover his money from his debtors, save only when he was in the greatest straits, his name was therefore changed from Tommaso to Masaccio, not, indeed, because he was vicious, for he was goodness itself, but by reason of his so great carelessness; and with all this, nevertheless, he was so amiable in doing the service and pleasure of others, that nothing more could be desired.*'

⁶⁷ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 323.



Figure 2 Fra Angelico, *Annunciation and Adoration of the Magi*, Painted Reliquary, c.1424. Tempera on panel, 84 x 50 cm. Florence: Museo di San Marco. Photo Scala, Florence.

taken aback. *There is the Madonna of Cimabue, which all Florence followed with trumpets to the church.*⁶⁸ There too, Ruskin also admired the painted reliquary by Fra Angelico (fig. 2), then in the Sacristy of Santa Maria Novella (and now in the Museum of San Marco), his comment on the figures in the Annunciation particularly recalling Vasari's words about the painter. Of the '*perfectly preserved works of Fra Angelico*', Ruskin writes, '*the centre one ... is as near heaven as human hand or mind will ever, or can ever go.*'⁶⁹ Vasari had written of the same artist that his figures '*are so beautiful, that they appear truly to belong to Paradise;*' and also, that they appear to be painted as if '*by the hand of a saint or an angel like themselves.*'⁷⁰ Ruskin's more qualified response to what he saw as the naïve

⁶⁸ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 4 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 96–97; 96. As clarified in the main body of this article, the painting is now attributed to Duccio (see fig. 1).

⁶⁹ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 4 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 96–97; 96. Ruskin made a drawing of Fra Angelico's Madonna in the Annunciation scene of the reliquary; *Works of John Ruskin*, VII, frontispiece.

⁷⁰ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 405: 'In S. Domenico da Fiesole, likewise, he painted the panel of the high-altar, which has been retouched by other masters ... But the predella ... [has] remained in better preservation; and the innumerable little figures that are to be seen

element of Fra Angelico's work, the painting of faces – 'the result ... that two out of three heads are failures, and every here & there comes one which is quite painful or absurd' – was also a direct reference to Vasari's account of the artist, where the latter relates that Fra Angelico never went over his works twice, considering their first appearance to reflect the 'will of God'.⁷¹ Such a practice was never going to satisfy Ruskin, the diligent and studious draughtsman, however holy its intent. Ruskin's response to Fra Angelico also distances him from that of Rio, which was much more redolent of Catholic piety than Ruskin would have found acceptable. It demonstrates also the beginnings of Ruskin finding his own voice on the matter of Italian painting which would resonate with its greatest confidence in his Oxford lectures of the 1870s.

In the softer tones of a letter to – somewhat unusually – his mother, rather than his father, of 9 June 1845, Ruskin could be found enjoying Vasari's text for its own lyrical beauty when he recited lines from the Life of Taddeo Gaddi (c.1300–1366) in recollection of his visit earlier in the day to the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella. Vasari's passage is about the brotherly love between artists, a favourite theme of the *Lives*, and Ruskin was clearly enthralled to be standing on the hallowed ground where his newest artist-heroes, the early artists Simone Memmi and Taddeo Gaddi, pupils of Giotto, had 'worked hand in hand'. Here, Ruskin quoted directly from his source, telling his mother that 'Vasari exclaims in a pretty burst of feeling – "Oh noble souls, that without ambition or envy did love each other so brotherly, and were glad each in his friend's honour, as in his own."' ⁷² A month into his stay, Ruskin had found his niche in the fashionable appreciation of early Italian painting, writing in the same letter with great scorn about the modern paintings in the Pitti Palace in comparison with the frescoes of Paolo Uccello (c.1397–1475), Ghirlandaio (1449–1494), and once again, Memmi and Gaddi: 'then think what the few rubbishy heads & shoulders in the oil galleries look after [them].'⁷³ His letter concludes, rather drily, with a nod to Michelangelo's often-cited remark told in Vasari's Life of Sebastiano del Piombo: 'Well might M Angelo say oil

there, in a Celestial Glory, are so beautiful, that they appear truly to belong to Paradise'. See also 406: 'But superior to all the other works that Fra Giovanni made ... was a panel that is beside the door of the same church ... wherein Jesus Christ is crowning Our Lady in the midst of a choir of angels and among an infinite multitude of saints, both male and female, so many in number ... the whole colouring of that work appears to be by the hand of a saint or an angel like themselves'.

⁷¹ Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 96; Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 410: 'It was his custom never to retouch or improve any of his pictures, but to leave them ever in the state to which he had first brought them; believing, so he used to say, that this was the will of God.'

⁷² Letter from John Ruskin to his mother, 9 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 107–9; 108. See also Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 176: '[Taddeo Gaddi] also painted the Chapter-house in S. Maria Novella ... [with] Simone Memmi [who painted] half of this work ... for the reason that [Taddeo] had a surpassing love for Simone, because he had been his fellow disciple under Giotto and ever his loving friend and companion. Oh! minds truly noble! seeing that without emulation, ambition, or envy, ye loved one another like brothers, each rejoicing as much in the honour and profit of his friend as in his own!'

⁷³ Letter from John Ruskin to his mother, 9 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 107–9; 109.

painting was only fit for children.'⁷⁴ Ruskin's choice of this quotation may also reflect a preference, in his own artistic output, for drawing and watercolour, something which was apparent also in his admiration of Turner's watercolours.⁷⁵

By late June, Ruskin had clearly absorbed the detail of Vasari's text, referring to it with ease in his correspondence, and, interestingly, in ways that suggest he had some expectation that his parents and friends might enjoy or even recognize the references. Writing in increasing frustration with the crowds that thronged the streets of Florence around the Baptistery and Giotto's Campanile, he complained to his father about the nuisance of English tourists in particular, who diluted the purity of the experience of his beloved sights. 'Perhaps', he wrote home on 17 June

nearly as bad as any, it is an English cheesemonger & his wife, who come in, and remark, as happened to me the other day when I was looking at the gates of Ghiberti, those which M. Angelo said were fit for the gates of heaven. Two English ladies came & stopped before them. Dear me – said one – how dirty they are. Oh, quite shockin' – said the other, and away they went.⁷⁶

In a similarly satirical vein, Ruskin evoked a far more obscure Vasarian reference in a letter of 27 June, where he complained bitterly to his father about the shocking effects of the picture restorers to be seen in the galleries of Florence. 'I am quite mad with the people here. I don't know where to turn for anger & pity – the monkey that touched up Buffalmacco's pictures and painted everything green, was a gentleman and a scholar compared to them.'⁷⁷ The reference is to the story from Sacchetti (c.1335–1400) told by Vasari which recounts how Bishop Guido of Arezzo [Guido Tarlati (died 1327)] had a pet chimp who leapt onto Buffalmacco's scaffolding during his absence on the holy day of rest. Mixing together Buffalmacco's colours, the monkey daubed all over the work, 'and persevering in

⁷⁴ Letter from John Ruskin to his mother, 9 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 107–9; 109. Possibly Ruskin modified Vasari's original – which said that Michelangelo's slight was at the expense of 'women' and 'idlers' – out of a tactful respect for his much-loved mother. See Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, II, 151: 'Michelagnolo [sic] stood thus for some months without setting his hand to the work. But at last, after being pressed, he said that he would only do it in fresco, and that painting in oils was an art for women and for leisurely and idle people'.

⁷⁵ Scott Wilcox and Christopher Newall, *Victorian Landscape Watercolors*, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut and Hudson Hills Press, 1992, 31.

⁷⁶ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 17 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 118–20; 118–19. For Michelangelo's remark, see Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 304: 'And right truly does Lorenzo [Ghiberti] deserve to be praised, seeing that one day Michelagnolo [sic] Buonarroti, having stopped to look at this work, and being asked what he thought of it, and whether these doors were beautiful, answered: 'They are so beautiful that they would do well for the gates of Paradise': praise truly appropriate, and given by an able judge.'

⁷⁷ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 27 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 130–31; 131.

this performance, he did not cease until he had repainted everything with his own hand'.⁷⁸



Figure 3 Pietro Perugino, *Portrait of Francesco delle Opere*, 1494. Tempera on wood, 52 x 44 cm. Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi. Photo Scala, Florence.

Elsewhere, prompted by Vasari's rather jaundiced view of Pietro Perugino, an early artist who was becoming well known in the nineteenth century as both a 'primitive' and the master of Raphael, Ruskin cannot help but restate Vasari's general attitude towards the painter. In Vasari's tale, Perugino was a miserly figure more in love with money than with God, who slept on a mere *cassa*, meaning 'chest' but also a 'cash box'. Perugino travelled always with every penny he possessed until one day he was robbed, almost 'dying of vexation', more from the loss of what was his than from the attack; and Vasari asserts that his religious paintings became hackneyed and monotonous as a result of his wage-chasing ways.⁷⁹ In a memo to his father of 4 June, Ruskin observes that beside Fra Angelico, 'Perugino is prosaic',⁸⁰ developing his thoughts still further in a letter to the painter George Richmond (1809–1896) on 28 June. Describing Perugino's *Portrait of Francesco delle Opere* in the Uffizi Gallery (fig. 3), then thought to be

⁷⁸ For the Life of Buffalmacco (active 1315–1336) see Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 148.

⁷⁹ See Andrew Ladis, *Victims and Villains in Vasari's Lives*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 73. See also Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 583–97; 594–95.

⁸⁰ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 4 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 96–97; 97.

the artist's self-portrait, Ruskin writes 'I was sorry to see Perugino's portrait; there is something so hard in the countenance, it reminds one of Vasari's rascalities ... in Perugino some of [the soul] invariably remains locked up.'⁸¹ Ruskin would repeat the comparison between Fra Angelico and Perugino the following year in print in *Modern Painters II*, where he writes:

the highest beauty has been attained only once ... by a most holy Dominican monk of Fiesole [Fra Angelico] ... even Perugino, in that there is about his noblest faces a short-coming ... an absence of the full outpouring of the sacred spirit that there is in Angelico; traceable, I doubt not, to some deficiencies and avaricious flaws of his heart, whose consequences in his conduct were such as to give Vasari hope that his lies might stick to him.⁸²

Ruskin's narrow opinion of Perugino was coloured also by probably having a relatively limited exposure to his work. The National Gallery had not yet acquired the three beautiful panels from Certosa (the *Virgin and Child with an Angel*, the *Archangel Michael* and the *Archangel Raphael with Tobias*), which it did in 1856. Ruskin would only have known the Gallery's somewhat more hard-faced *Virgin and Child with Saint John*, now attributed to an associate of the artist.

As well as running along in the back of Ruskin's mind as he acquainted himself with Italian art, Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* provided him with precious information on the whereabouts of pictures; evidently the function of the text as an itinerary of sorts remained important to Ruskin right up to the end of the tour. On 28 June 1845, Ruskin followed Vasari to the Bardi Chapel of Santa Croce in Florence in search of a wooden panel painting of Saint Francis then attributed to Cimabue (fig. 4). In the Life of Cimabue, Vasari had written:

he added much perfection to the art ... to which witness is borne in Florence by the pictures that he wrought, such as ... in S. Croce a panel with a Madonna ... [and] a S. Francis on a small panel on a gold ground, and portrayed him from nature (which was something new in those times) as best he knew, and round him all the stories of his life, in twenty small pictures full of little figures on a gold ground.⁸³

Writing to his father two days later, Ruskin tells how he gained access to the very same panel after paying a custodian to see it. The quotation is also suggestive of Ruskin's developing historical perspective as he attempts to locate the works he has seen in a larger, more orderly record of the past.

⁸¹ Letter from John Ruskin to George Richmond, 28 June 1845; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXXVI, 51.

⁸² *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 212.

⁸³ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 52.

By "speaking Italian" I saw on Saturday what I think the most interesting picture in Florence. It is only shown to the people once a year, always kept behind a gold cloth. It is a *portrait* of St Francis, taken from the life by Cimabue, and not only is it interesting from its subject, but from [its] being perhaps the first portrait existing in genuine Italian art ... it has completely the look of portraiture, & *Vasari* names it as taken from the life.⁸⁴

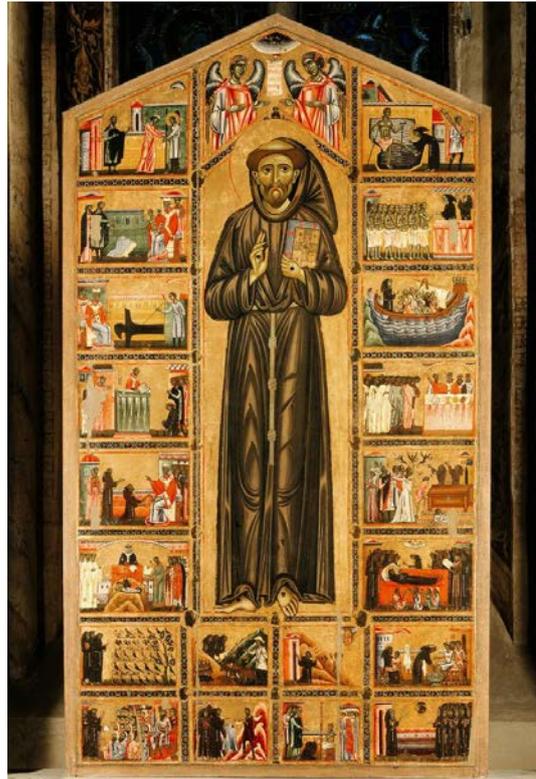


Figure 4 Bonaventura Berlinghieri, attributed, *Saint Francis and Scenes from his Life*, c.1240–45. Florence: Basilica di Santa Croce, Capella Bardi. Photo Scala, Florence.

Ruskin left Florence on 7 July, to escape the heat, and travelled north towards the Alps.⁸⁵ Stopping in Parma on 10 July for three days, he visited the Gallery of the Palazzo della Pilotta, now the Galleria Nazionale. There, with Vasari still very much in hand, Ruskin sought out the works by Correggio (active 1494–1534) described in the *Lives*, evidently intent on gathering data to support his view of the marked contrast between the early and later schools of art. Of Correggio's *Madonna with the Magdalene and Saint Jerome* (fig. 5), Vasari had written in his typically jolly style about the 'boy in the guise of a little angel, holding a book in his hand', whose smile, says Vasari, 'seems so natural that he moves whoever beholds him to smile also, nor can any person, be his

⁸⁴ Ruskin's italics. Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 30 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 133–34.

⁸⁵ Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, xvii.

nature ever so melancholy, see him without being cheered.'⁸⁶ Sure enough, in something of a parody of Vasari, Ruskin writes to his father on 13 July about the same painting, saying that 'the Christ Kicks and crows in a most lively and healthy manner, and the angel who is teaching him to read laughs at him to such an extent that as Vasari says, *ne lo vede persona di natura melancolica, che non si rallegrì*.'⁸⁷ With playtime over, Ruskin was quick to add this more sober assessment:

I never saw such desecrations of sacred subject ... Add to this the most lascivious youn[g M]agdalen conceivable – all the sensuality [of] Etty [William Etty RA, the Victorian painter known for his comely female figures and nudes] – beautified and white fleshed & so[ft] and gold[en] haired til it is quite poison – and yo[u] have the main points of the Chef d'oeuvre.⁸⁸



Figure 5 Antonio Allegri, called Correggio, *Madonna of Saint Jerome*, c.1525–28. Oil on panel, 235 x 141 cm. Parma: Galleria Nazionale. Photo Scala, Florence.

⁸⁶ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 647.

⁸⁷ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 13 July 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 145–46; 146.

⁸⁸ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 13 July 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 145–46; 146. In this, Ruskin's opinion is markedly different than Vasari's. See Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 647: 'There is also a S. Jerome; and the whole work is coloured in a manner so wonderful and so astounding, that painters revere it for the marvel of its colouring, and it is scarcely possible to paint better.' Other advocates for the 'primitives' were similarly critical of Correggio, especially George Darley in the 1830s. For Darley, see Cooper, 'The growth of interest in early Italian painting', 211; for Ruskin and Darley see John Ruskin, *Resumé of Italian Art*, ed, Tucker, XLV–XLVI.

Indeed, it was during his short stay in Parma that Ruskin drafted what he called 'my scale of painters,' a list that he forwarded to his father in anticipation of a return to serious writing for *Modern Painters II*, which he went on to publish in April of the following year.⁸⁹ Prominent in the list of names were all the early painters he had studied at Pisa and Florence – Fra Angelico, Perugino, Simon Memmi, Taddeo Gaddi and even Buffalmacco, while special praise was reserved for Giotto, Masaccio and Ghirlandaio, the 'School of the *Great Men*', who excelled in the 'General Perception of Nature human & divine'.⁹⁰ Correggio was consigned to Ruskin's 'School of Errors and vices'.

1846–1854. References to Vasari in Ruskin's mid-century published works

The travelogue Ruskin created during his tour of 1845, a dialectic between pictures seen *in situ* and the detail of Vasari's *Lives*, was not to be repeated again during his career. What followed in the middle years of the nineteenth century, however, was a sustained reference in Ruskin's published work to Italian art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that continued to show the influence of Vasari.

Without a doubt, Ruskin was determined following his travels to speak on his own authority about the schools of art that Rio and Jameson had made popular previously. *Modern Painters II* contains multiple references to 'the earlier and mightier painters of Italy', with Ruskin introducing them in relation to their quaint but sincere treatment of landscape; to their work ethic; or most commonly to their 'unpretending' depiction of the things they saw around them. 'And so we find the same simple and sweet treatment, the open sky, the tender, unpretending horizontal white clouds, the far winding and abundant landscape, in Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi, Laurati, Angelico, Benozzo, Ghirlandajo, Francia, Perugino, and the young Raffaele', he writes airily, using Vasari's form of 'Laurati' for the artist Pietro Lorenzetti (active 1306–1348). Ruskin had seen frescoes then attributed to Lorenzetti in the Campo Santo at Pisa in 1845.⁹¹ Other more direct references to Vasari occur in the text of *Modern Painters II*, such as Ruskin's admiring description of Ghirlandaio's representation of real architecture, 'especially the chiaroscuro of the square window of Ghirlandajo's, which so much delighted Vasari, in S^{ta}. Maria Novella', as he remembers.⁹² The reference is to Ghirlandaio's fresco cycle of the stories of the Virgin in the Tornabuoni Chapel there, where Vasari had

⁸⁹ Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, xviii. See also the letter from John Ruskin to his father, 10 July 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 143–45; 144.

⁹⁰ Letter from John Ruskin to his father, 10 July 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 143–45; 144–45.

⁹¹ *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 84. For an attribution history of these works in the Campo Santo, see Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1923–1938, 19 vols; V, 212.

⁹² *Works of John Ruskin*, III, 202.

indeed praised the window in the *Nativity of Our Lady*, 'that gives light to the room, which deceives all who see it.'⁹³ Another instance is Ruskin's observation that the 'habit of the old and great painters' was to introduce into their works 'actual, professed, serviceable, hard-working portraiture of the men of their time', naming three examples taken straight from the pages of Vasari: 'Fra Bartolomeo of Savonarola, and Simon Memmi of Petrarch, and Giotto of Dante'.⁹⁴ The latter, Dante's portrait in the Chapel of the Podestà at the Bargello at Florence, which Vasari mentions in his Life of Giotto, Ruskin had seen and described in his notebook of 1845.⁹⁵ Other references to Vasari in *Modern Painters* II include Ruskin's mention of the angel in Andrea del Verrocchio's *The Baptism of Christ*, which, following Vasari, he attributes to Leonardo,⁹⁶ or, his assertion in *Modern Painters* III, that Dante (1265–1321), 'the greatest poet of that, or perhaps of any other age', was 'the attached friend of its greatest painter', by which Ruskin means Giotto, although he doesn't mention him by name.⁹⁷ The reference is to Vasari's view, uncorroborated but highly influential in the romantic age of the nineteenth century, of the close companionship of Dante and Giotto. Ruskin's lines follow Vasari's closely, who had written that 'Dante Alighieri, a contemporary and his very great friend ... [was] no less famous as a poet than was in the same times Giotto as painter'.⁹⁸ Also in *Modern Painters* III, in a discussion about painting on a large scale, Ruskin introduces another reference to Vasari, this time regarding Ghirlandaio's wish 'that he might paint all the walls of Florence'.⁹⁹ Vasari's point is about Ghirlandaio's utmost devotion to art, rather than 'household cares', who is made to say, 'now that I have begun to understand the methods of this art, it grieves me that they will not commission me to paint the whole circuit of the walls of the city of Florence with stories'.¹⁰⁰ Ruskin, however, begs to differ, owning that in the best works of Fra Angelico or Turner, once again linking together the two artists rather conspicuously, the size is not greater than around '18 inches by 12'.¹⁰¹

The volumes of *Modern Painters* contain many reminders, however, that Ruskin's were works of criticism rather than of history. Doubtless eager to distinguish his voice from Rio or Jameson's, Ruskin was keen to present a more moderate view of the merits of early Italian painting than a devoted follower of the revivalist movement might have done. In *Modern Painters* II, he asserts, for instance, that the early painters are unable to deal with

⁹³ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 522.

⁹⁴ *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 188.

⁹⁵ John Ruskin, *Resumé of Italian Art*, ed. Tucker, 85; *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 188; and Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 97.

⁹⁶ *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 267.

⁹⁷ *Works of John Ruskin*, V, 37. For the identification of Giotto see Cook and Wedderburn's note 2, on the same page.

⁹⁸ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 97.

⁹⁹ *Works of John Ruskin*, V, 62, and editorial note 1.

¹⁰⁰ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 525.

¹⁰¹ *Works of John Ruskin*, V, 62.

landscape in the modern sense of the term, stating that their treatment of 'near water or rock' or the 'hexagonal and basaltic ... protuberances of their river shores are, I think, too painful to be endured even by the most acceptant mind'.¹⁰² Ruskin's description recalls the stony block on which Saint John the Baptist stands in Fra Angelico's fresco of *The Baptism of Christ* in the Convent of San Marco (fig. 6), which he would have seen during his several visits to San Marco during his tour in 1845.¹⁰³ The work to which Ruskin makes direct



Figure 6. Fra Angelico, *Baptism of Christ*, c.1441. Fresco, 179 x 148 cm. Florence: Museo di San Marco, Cell 24. Photo Scala, Florence.

Figure 7. Fra Angelico, *Baptism of Christ*, detail, *Scenes from the Life of Christ*, from the Silver Treasury of Santissima Annunziata, c.1450–53. Tempera on panel. Florence: Museo di San Marco. Photo Scala, Florence.

reference, however, is another image of the baptism of Christ by Fra Angelico, one which is part of the cycle of the life of Christ depicted on the painted panels of the Silver Treasury of Santissima Annunziata (fig. 7). Ruskin's comment on the composition, 'which, as far as I can judge, is a total failure in action, expression, and all else;' seems also to suggest that his immediate point of reference was the engraving after the same scene by Giovanni Battista Nocchi in the 'Vita di Cristo' volume that he owned.¹⁰⁴ Instead, Ruskin's praise is reserved for Tintoretto's treatment of the same subject in the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice (fig. 8). Significantly, this is one of the first instances of Ruskin's turn in print to the Venetian rather than the Tuscan – for which, read

¹⁰² *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 267–68.

¹⁰³ See, for example, the letter from John Ruskin to his father, 31 May 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 89–92; 92; the letter from John Ruskin to his father, 27 June 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 130–31; 131; and the letter from John Ruskin to his father, 24 August 1845, published in Shapiro, *Ruskin in Italy*, 186–88; 187.

¹⁰⁴ Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 12.

Vasarian – school of painting. In *Modern Painters II*, Ruskin had already qualified the Rio-esque veneration of early 'Christian' art, complaining about the 'morbid tendency in Romanism towards the contemplation of bodily pain', even in the work of Fra Angelico, 'who, in his Passion subjects, always insists weakly on the bodily torture and is unsparing of blood'.¹⁰⁵ For Ruskin, the early painters were not to be followed as models in the practice of modern art. He is similarly critical of Giotto and Fra Angelico, also in *Modern Painters II*, when he writes, 'the sacred painters must not be followed in their frankness of unshadowed colour'. Even 'the walls of [Giotto's] the Arena chapel in their rainbow play of brilliant harmonies' should not stand as an example beside the 'golden light and deep-pitched hue of the school of Titian, whose virtue is the grandeur of earthly solemnity, not the glory of heavenly rejoicing.'¹⁰⁶



Figure 9 Jacopo Tintoretto, *Baptism of Christ*, 1579–81. Oil on canvas, 538 x 465 cm. Venice: Scuola Grande di San Rocco. Photo Scala, Florence.

Ruskin goes on to introduce a further example gleaned from his travels to Italy, when he introduces into the running text of *Modern Painters II* a specific work by Fra Angelico which he saw in Florence's Accademia in 1845. In Ruskin's mind the bright, un-mellowed colours of the painting seemed to have been exposed by the ill attentions of a picture restorer. We have already

¹⁰⁵ *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 202.

¹⁰⁶ *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 325–26.

seen that Ruskin had real concerns about the conservation of many of the works he encountered in Italy. This passage in *Modern Painters II* refers to 'a Crucifixion of Fra Angelico in the Florence Academy, which has just been glazed, and pumiced, and painted, and varnished by the picture cleaners until it glares from one end of the gallery to the other'.¹⁰⁷ Although Ruskin's inexact use of the term 'crucifixion' to describe what is in fact a 'deposition', that is to say, a subject that depicts the *taking down* of Christ from the cross, there is no doubt that the picture he describes is Fra Angelico's acknowledged masterpiece, *The Descent from the Cross* (the *Pala di Santa Trinità*), now in the Museum of San Marco in Florence (Fig. 9). In the notebooks kept during the tour of 1845, Ruskin gives the following, fuller account, which, with its reference to the proliferation of plant life in the foreground, confirms the identification of the painting as the *Pala di Santa Trinità*.



Figure 10 Fra Angelico, *Descent from the Cross*, 1437–40. Tempera on panel, 176 x 185 cm. Florence: Museo di San Marco. Photo Scala, Florence.

The large picture of the crucifixion at the Academy is another inferior work, many of the faces being monkish & poor in type, and the colour now most painful. It has been "pulita"[wiped], & whether indeed Angelico so painted it, or whether all his deep colours have been polished pale & bright, I know not, but the complexions are of a chalky and false carnation and the dresses blind one with crude colour. There is no pleasant colour nor holy colour about it, all false & staring. It is

¹⁰⁷ *Works of John Ruskin*, IV, 326.

remarkable for the constant use of oxalis aceto-sella [wood sorrel] in the elaborate foreground.¹⁰⁸

Returning to Vasari's *Lives*, the text continued to be Ruskin's main point of reference for the Italian schools in his published work during the late 1840s and onwards into the 1850s. In his review of Lord Lindsay's *Sketches of the History of Christian Art* for the *Quarterly Review* in June 1847, Ruskin can be found quibbling with Lindsay over Vasari's story about the fly that Giotto painted onto one of Cimabue's paintings, tricking his master into believing it was real.¹⁰⁹ Pure humbug, says Ruskin, in a rare instance early on in his oeuvre of a dismissal of one of Vasari's legends: 'the story has all the look of one of the common inventions of the ignorant for the ignorant', he writes.¹¹⁰ In his review of Charles Eastlake's *Materials for a History of Oil Painting* for the *Quarterly Review* in March 1848, Ruskin referenced Vasari's (false) tale of the murder of Domenico Veneziano (active 1438–1461) by Andrea del Castagno (c.1421–1457), who, driven by a jealous desire to keep the so-called secret of oil painting to himself after its introduction into Italy from the Low Countries, clubbed his rival to death in a back alley.¹¹¹ While Eastlake's book, as the most serious enquiry of its day into the actual practice of the painters of the past, focused on re-examining the circumstances of the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck's 'invention of oil painting', a tale also originating in Vasari, Ruskin's review showed less of a critical distance from the romantic past. 'It was this *process*', wrote Ruskin, admiringly, of the story: 'separate, mysterious, and admirable, whose communication the Venetian, Domenico, thought the most acceptable kindness which could repay his [Castagno's] hospitality, and whose solitary possession Castagno thought cheaply purchased by the guilt of [his being] the betrayer and murderer'.¹¹² Ruskin's view of Vasari could not have been more different from Eastlake's, whose researches explicitly set out to replace Vasari's literary legends with a more scientific mode of investigation.

In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* of 1849, in a critique of the modern-day *cast* ironwork to be found in Victorian railway stations – 'not architecture at all' – Ruskin introduces another Vasarian reference (although not by name) in order to criticize modern British workmanship and production. Appealing, typically, for the use of traditional materials for building (he mentions wood and stone), Ruskin adds that 'even in periods of more advanced science, the materials and principles of earlier ages' ought to be revived. If iron were to be introduced, and these comments reflect Ruskin's antipathy towards the post-Industrial boom in iron-working and manufactures in the Victorian era, then it should be done only by the use of iron

¹⁰⁸ John Ruskin, *Resumé of Italian Art*, ed, Tucker, 98.

¹⁰⁹ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 117.

¹¹⁰ John Ruskin, 'Review of Lord Lindsay's *Sketches of the History of Christian Art*', *Quarterly Review*, June 1847; *Works of John Ruskin*, XII, 169–248; 213.

¹¹¹ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 451–53. It is now known that Castagno died four years before Domenico, whom he is supposed to have murdered. See Ladis, *Victims and Villains in Vasari's Lives*, 51.

¹¹² John Ruskin, 'Review of Charles Eastlake's *Materials for a History of Oil Painting*', *Quarterly Review*, March 1848; *Works of John Ruskin*, XII, 251–302; 278.

supports. Again, his model is the Italian 'Gothic'. We cannot, he writes, 'well deny to the Gothic architect the power of supporting statues, pinnacles, or traceries by iron bars; and if we grant this, I do not see how we can help allowing Brunelleschi his iron chain around the dome of Florence, or the builders of Salisbury [another medieval example but this time in England] their elaborate iron binding of the central tower.'¹¹³ Ruskin's phrase recalls Vasari's description of Brunelleschi's way 'of making buildings secure by binding the stones together, by iron bars'.¹¹⁴

Ruskin's source was doubtless Vasari again in 1853 when, in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice*, he wrote about the risks of over-attention to matters of science and perspective for their own sake. 'Leonardo fretted his life away in engineering so that there is hardly a picture left to bear his name', he wrote, echoing Vasari's summary of the artist, whilst the passage that followed bears all the hallmarks of Vasari's Life of Paolo Uccello, an artist so enamoured with the geometry of perspective that he refused to sleep with his wife. When 'perspective was first invented', writes Ruskin, 'the world thought it a mighty discovery, and the greatest men it had in it were as proud of knowing that retiring lines converge, as if all the wisdom of Solomon had been compressed into a vanishing point.'¹¹⁵ And, in a lecture on 'Pre-Raphaelitism' given at Edinburgh, also in 1853, in a defence of the youthfulness of Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais (1829–1896) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), something which had been the cause of attacks by the press, Ruskin observes rather smartly that no 'one member of the body [are] so young as Giotto, when he was chosen from among the painters of Italy to decorate the Vatican'. 'Italy, in her great period,' Ruskin intoned, 'knew her great men, and did not "despise their youth"'. It is reserved for England to insult the strength of her noblest children'.¹¹⁶ Well might Ruskin have referenced Giotto at this time, when he was engaged concurrently in preparing an introductory essay to the works of the artist in the Arena Chapel at Padua, to accompany black and white printed woodcuts by the Dalziel brothers issued by the Arundel Society.¹¹⁷ Despite a claim to eschew all legends in favour of a closer examination of the works themselves, Ruskin's biographical piece, published in 1854, remained nonetheless imbued with the facts and the feel of Vasari's account.¹¹⁸ Ruskin's Arundel Society project included oversight of the illustrations just mentioned, and the provision of a descriptive catalogue of the iconographical subjects of the frescoes. In his detailed examination of Ruskin's *Giotto and His Works In Padua*, Matthew Plampin draws attention to the mid-Victorian inflection which Ruskin brought to the Life of Giotto, when he re-cast him as a modest, 'artist-labourer', who was 'proud to be a good workman'. Plampin identifies this as a deliberate strategy on Ruskin's part, which he employed in order to break away from Vasari's anecdotal structure, and to move

¹¹³ *Works of John Ruskin*, VIII, 67 and editorial note 2 on the same page.

¹¹⁴ For the Life of Brunelleschi (1377–1466) see Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 331.

¹¹⁵ *Works of John Ruskin*, XI, 70–71; and editorial notes, 71. For the Leonardo reference see Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 627; for Uccello, see Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 289.

¹¹⁶ *Works of John Ruskin*, XII, 164.

¹¹⁷ Plampin, 'A stern and just respect for truth', 65.

¹¹⁸ *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIV, 13–45.

closer instead towards a moral-art-critical assessment more in line with his other published writings.¹¹⁹ That being said, Ruskin was nevertheless hampered by not having seen Giotto's works in the Arena Chapel at the time he wrote his essay. Necessarily, he had to fall back on printed sources such as Vasari (and in this instance, Lord Lindsay's *Sketches of the History of Christian Art*).¹²⁰

1870–1875. References to Vasari in Ruskin's Oxford lectures

What was perhaps Ruskin's most significant engagement with Vasari's text came later in his life, during the 1870s, following his appointment as the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at the University of Oxford in 1869 and his founding of the Oxford School of Drawing and Fine Art in 1871. The series of lectures that Ruskin gave between 1872 and 1874 demonstrates a return to the detail of Vasari's text. This followed the general fashion for studying the Italian Renaissance during the same years, particularly in Oxford where Walter Pater (1839–1894) was working on his collection of essays, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, published in 1873.¹²¹ Foremost among Pater's writings was his response to the art of Sandro Botticelli, which, whatever Ruskin's claims to the contrary, was highly influential on the latter's own turn to the same painter.¹²² In a letter to the American critic Charles Eliot Norton (1827–1908) of August 1872, Ruskin wrote:

I am myself going to give, this autumn, at Oxford, a summary of the points in the lives of the Florentines and their school as related by Vasari, i.e. assuming Vasari to be correct, what thoughtful conjecture may be made as to each life. Then I shall correct Vasari afterwards as I can, to make him understood, first sifting the points in each life from the rubbish. I shall do Verrochio, Mantegna, Sandro Botticelli, Pollajuolo, Lorenzo di Credi, Perugino, and the Lippis, with what else comes in naturally – and I think it will be interesting.¹²³

Sure enough, Ruskin's Oxford lectures in December 1872 turned to the painters of the Florentine school, with a particular focus on Botticelli. The influence of Vasari is evident in both the continued reliance on the

¹¹⁹ Plampin, 'A stern and just respect for truth', 67–68.

¹²⁰ *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIV, 17, for a cited reference to Lord Lindsay's *Sketches*, and XXIV, 19, for a cited reference to Vasari.

¹²¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1986.

¹²² See for example, Walter Pater, 'A fragment on Sandro Botticelli.', *Fortnightly Review*, 8, August 1870, 155–60. For Ruskin on Pater, and his own originality on the matter of Botticelli, see Adrian S. Hoch, 'The art of Alessandro Botticelli through the eyes of Victorian aesthetes', in John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen, eds, *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 55–85; 79. See also Melius, 'Art history and the invention of Botticelli', 70–81.

¹²³ Ruskin, Letter to Charles Eliot Norton, 10 August 1872; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXXVII, 52–53.

biographical details he provided, and in Ruskin's close attention to the text itself. By way of an introduction, Ruskin defended the less palatable antics of a painter such as Fra Filippo Lippi (c.1406–1469), a master of Botticelli of sorts, when he declared that the beauty of Lippi's art had not suffered as a result of his colourful personal affairs. According to Vasari, Lippi had seduced and made pregnant the young nun who acted as his model for a painting of the Virgin at Prato, a tale which enjoyed great popularity in the nineteenth century.¹²⁴ Consequently, Ruskin felt obliged to admit rather wryly to his students that however ground-breaking his art might have been, Lippi's 'running away with a novice was not likely to be understood as a step in Church reformation'.¹²⁵ It is worth pointing out that Ruskin was more forgiving, at a distance of some four hundred years, of Lippi's sexual exploits than he had been of the private life of Turner. Ruskin's alleged involvement in the destruction of erotic sketches by Turner, which, whether it was true or not, has itself become something of a modern legend in the history of art.¹²⁶

In the same lecture, Ruskin declared himself dependent on Vasari, before proceeding to read out loud from the text.

I had hoped to be able to lay before you some better biography of [Botticelli] than the traditions of Vasari ... but as yet I have only added internal evidence to the popular story, the more important points of which I must review briefly. I will read you – instead of merely giving you reference to – the passages in sequence on which I have to comment.¹²⁷

Not surprisingly, for a teacher dedicated to espousing the virtues of a close practice in drawing, Ruskin was most interested, not in the paintings of Botticelli that had fascinated Pater and the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, but in the drawings that Botticelli made and had printed for an edition of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. These were mentioned by Vasari and were extant in Scotland at the time of Ruskin's lectures in the collection of the twelfth Duke of Hamilton (1845–1895). It is fairly certain that Ruskin knew the original drawings, because he was later a noted campaigner for keeping them in the country when they were sold controversially to the Museum of Prints and Drawings in Berlin in 1882.¹²⁸ Vasari's account of the same

¹²⁴ Jenny Graham, 'Amorous passions: Vasari's legend of Fra Filippo Lippi and the nineteenth century', *Studi di Memofonte, Rivista On-Line della Fondazione Memofonte, In Memoria di Francis Haskell*, 12 (July 2014), 187-210.

¹²⁵ Ruskin, 'Lecture on design in the Florentine schools of engraving: Sandro Botticelli', given at the University of Oxford, 7 December 1872, published in *Ariadne Florentina*, 1876; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXII, 424.

¹²⁶ For a larger discussion of this episode, see Ian Warrell, *Turner's Secret Sketches*, London: Tate Publishing, 2012, 48.

¹²⁷ *Works of John Ruskin*, XXII, 425.

¹²⁸ *Works of John Ruskin*, XXII, 433, XXVII, 375, XXX, 44; Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 538. For the Berlin drawings, see Stephanie Buck, Frauke Steenbock, Beatrice Alai and Georg

drawings included a significant biographical detail, since this was where he had written first about Botticelli's dissolute ways with money. According to Vasari, the artist embarked on what the chronicler of the *Lives* considered to be an ill-conceived personal project to illustrate 'the Inferno' of Dante, 'on which he [Botticelli] wasted much of his time, bringing infinite disorder into his life by neglecting his work.'¹²⁹ Ruskin was quick to engage in a defence of what he saw as Botticelli's greatest production. He rather entertainingly brings the debate between himself and Vasari fully to life for the benefit of his audience. Ruskin's words are worth quoting in full; they also confirm Ruskin's switch from reading Vasari in the original to Mrs Foster's English translation, all five volumes of which he had bought for his own use two years earlier in 1870.¹³⁰

Well, but one would have liked to hear *how* he squandered his money ... It is just possible *Master Vasari*, that Botticelli may have laid out his money at higher interest than you know of; meantime, he is advancing in life and thought, and becoming less and less comprehensible to his biographer ... Unpaid work, this engraving of Dante, you perceive ... and not appearing to Vasari to be work at all. It is but a short sentence, gentlemen ... a very foolish person's contemptuous report of a thing to him totally incomprehensible ... "A worthless, ill-conducted fellow on the whole", thinks Vasari, "with a crazy fancy for scratching on copper."¹³¹

Ruskin's Oxford lectures are thus interesting because they mark a return to the early Italian school that had delighted him as a young man. In October 1873, in a lecture on the work of the sculptor and architect Nicola Pisano (active 1258–1278), we recognize the sharply worded apologia in support of the value of Vasari's *Lives* with which we began this article. 'It is the modern fashion to despise Vasari', writes Ruskin, 'nevertheless, he records the traditions and opinions of his day; and these you must accurately know, before you can wisely correct.'¹³² Proceeding to quote again from the text – 'I will take leave, therefore, to begin to-day with a sentence from Vasari' – Ruskin takes issue at once with what he sees as Vasari's rather patronizing disrespect for the earlier, Byzantine style that he thought had informed work attributed to Pisano on the Duomo of Pisa's Cathedral. Once again, Ruskin speaks as if directly to Vasari for the edification of his students. "*Niccola Pisano*", he reads, "*finding himself under certain Greek sculptors who were carving*

Josef Dietz, eds, *Botticelli and Treasures from the Hamilton Collection*, London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2016.

¹²⁹ Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library, I, 538.

¹³⁰ Dearden, *The Library of John Ruskin*, 350. Ruskin uses the same word – 'squandered' – as it appears in the Bohn edition. See [Mrs Jonathan Foster], *Vasari's Lives*, 1851, II, 235. Rather confusingly, Ruskin refers to the 'old edition of Vasari'; nevertheless his quotation lines up with Mrs Foster's translation.

¹³¹ Ruskin's italics; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXII, 432–35.

¹³² *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, 14–15.

the figures and other ornaments of the cathedral of Pisa ... that old Greek manner, blundering, disproportioned ... Behold,' one can almost hear Ruskin exclaim, 'the Christians despising the Dunce Greeks!'¹³³ Ruskin had already made a detailed, coloured sketch of a section of the apse of the Duomo (figs 10 and 11) during a visit to Pisa in April that year, and placed it in the 'Rudimentary Series' of illustrative teaching materials for the use of his students. Ruskin is careful to draw attention to his disagreement with Vasari on the matter of the Gothic, which Vasari saw only as a crude stepping stone on the road to the High Renaissance and the art of Michelangelo (1475–1564). Hence Ruskin's statement that: "My own judgement respecting [the building, is] ... that no architecture on this grand scale, so delicately skilful in execution, or so daintily disposed in proportion, exists elsewhere in the world.'¹³⁴



Figure 10. Photograph showing a detail of the Apse of the Duomo of the Cathedral of Pisa, consecrated 1118 in the Pisan Romanesque style. Photographic credit © Alamy Pictures.

Figure 11. John Ruskin, *Apsé of the Duomo, Pisa*, 1872. Watercolour and bodycolour over graphite on paper, some lines ruled, 31 x 22 cm. University of Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, accession number INV.WA.RS.REF.076.

Ruskin's greatest defence of Vasari as a *magnum opus*, not to be carved up, fiddled about with or tidied away from modern eyes, came in November 1874 in a lecture at Oxford on Brunelleschi (1377–1466). It is hard to imagine a more passionate defence of any text by Ruskin, fully admitting as he is of Vasari's faults for a contemporary reader. These shortcomings, however, he seems to say, hardly

¹³³ My exclamation mark; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, 14–15.

¹³⁴ *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, 16.

matter in the grand scheme of things. Evidently, Ruskin found it harder to persuade his students to see Vasari his way.

Whenever I am reading a bit [of my lecture] with which I have taken pains, I find you all very kindly attentive; but so soon as I begin to read Vasari, I have a sense – I don't know how, but an instinctive one – that you are getting restless, and would rather I should skip that. You can read Vasari for yourselves at home, you think. But, pardon me, you can't do anything of the sort ... Vasari, read straight on from a sense of duty, is wholly useless. He is a catalogue of pictures, sure to be wrong somewhere, either in the description of the picture, or the author of it, or the date of it, or the place of it, often wrong in all four at once. He is mere prey to the teeth of a German commentator; confusion of face to an innocent reader. Extremely dull, besides, in his remarks and morals. But he is only a prey to the teeth of people who have no stomachs. He is excellent food for those who have. You require a good deal of mental gastric juice, but I assure you it is good meat.¹³⁵

Ruskin's reference to the 'German' school of art criticism, provides an important clue to his renewed engagement with Vasari's *Lives* at this moment. As we saw at the beginning of this article, by the 1870s, the new 'scientific art criticism' was chipping away at Vasari's text as improvements in continental travel and the opening up of state archives in Italy fostered new art-historical endeavours. Ruskin's real target here was Crowe and Cavalcaselle, whose books contained many references to the German editors of Vasari, Ludwig Schorn (1793–1842) and Ernst Förster (1800–1885). Ruskin was irked in particular by Schorn and Förster's rejection of Vasari's story in the Life of Cimabue about the 'Borgo Allegri', so named, we will remember, for the festive reception which Cimabue's Madonna received in that portion of the city. Schorn and Förster's denial was accepted and repeated in Crowe and Cavalcaselle's *New History of Painting*.¹³⁶ Hence, in his short guide-book, *Mornings in Florence* (1875), which Ruskin wrote during this first tenure as the Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford (1869–1877), Ruskin refers meaningfully to 'recent critical writers', in a discussion of the same anecdote. This was Crowe and Cavalcaselle, who, to Ruskin's mind, being 'unable to comprehend how any street populace could take pleasure in painting, have ended by denying his triumph altogether, and insisted that he gave no joy to Florence; and that the "Joyful quarter" was accidentally so named'.¹³⁷ *Mornings in Florence* contains several other such jibes at the expense of Crowe and Cavalcaselle, who were enjoying enormous critical success at this time.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Ruskin, 'Lecture on Brunelleschi' given at the University of Oxford, 20 November 1874, published as *The Schools of Art in Florence*, 1906; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, 218–19.

¹³⁶ Crowe and Cavalcaselle, *A New History of Painting in Italy*, I, 203.

¹³⁷ *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, 330.

¹³⁸ E.g. *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, 337–39.

Conclusion

Throughout Ruskin's work he remained closely engaged with Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. Several reasons can be offered for this. Like Ruskin's own written output, it was extensive. Also like Ruskin's oeuvre, Vasari's *Lives* was a work of art criticism, as well as a historical source, with a strong authorial voice at the helm. Most importantly for Ruskin, it contained a large coverage of the medieval schools of Italy, in the broadest sense of the term. Reading Vasari through Ruskin's eyes, then, it is possible to discern a valuable corrective to the modern conception of Vasari's *Lives* as a text that is essentially about and built upon the values of the High Renaissance. Certainly for Ruskin, the *Lives* should be considered the original 'Pre-Raphaelite' source; its influence, through the specific channel of Ruskin's published writings, on the painters who identified themselves with that movement in the nineteenth century, has yet to be traced. Going against the grain, also, is Ruskin's commitment to the text as a whole at a time when multiple re-editions of Vasari were being issued, complete with footnotes nearly as long, which detailed the errors and corrections of three generations of archival scholars during the nineteenth century.¹³⁹ Long-winded, Vasari might be, says Ruskin, in an essay on the 'Art Schools of Mediaeval Christendom' for the *Monthly Packet* in 1873, but he 'is an ass with precious things in his panniers'.¹⁴⁰

Ruskin's dialogue with Vasari's *Lives*, spanning four decades and running like a thread throughout his thinking on Italian art, shows him to have been, like many Victorian writers, locked into a biographical mindset that was hard to overcome. Yet as an index of influencing factors upon the major components of his thought, it offers insights into the development of Ruskin's art-historical knowledge of the old masters, his teaching methods and his own view of the value of the records of the past. It remains to give Ruskin the last word, when, returning to the much-loved subject of his younger years in *Mornings in Florence*, he writes, 'my general directions to all young people going to Florence or Rome would be very short:

¹³⁹ These editions included Giorgio Vasari, *Vies des peintres, sculpteurs et architectes*, eds, L. Leclanché and Philippe-Auguste Jeanron, Paris, 1839–42, 10 vols; Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' Più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architetti*, eds, V. Marchese, C. Milanese, C. Pini, Florence, 1846–57, 13 vols; and Giorgio Vasari, *Leben der ausgezeichnetsten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister. Aus dem Italienischen*, eds, Ludwig Schorn and Ernst Förster, Stuttgart, 1832–49, 6 vols. The edition most based on extensive new archival research was that edited by Carlo Milanese: Giorgio Vasari, *Le Opere di Giorgio Vasari, con nuove annotazioni e commenti di Gaetano Milanese*, Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1878–85, 9 vols. For a short but informative account of the continental literature on Vasari in the nineteenth century, see Carlo Ginzburg, 'Battling over Vasari: A Tale of Three Countries', in Michael F. Zimmermann, ed, *The Art Historian: National Traditions and Institutional Practices (Clark Studies in the Visual Arts)*, Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2003, 41–56; 42, 45. I am grateful to Professor Zimmermann for sharing this essay with me.

¹⁴⁰ Ruskin, 'Art Schools of Mediaeval Christendom', 1873, published in *On the Old Road*, 1885; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXXIV, 132.

Jenny Graham 'An ass with precious things in his panniers': John Ruskin's
reception of *The Lives ...* by Giorgio Vasari

"Know your first volume of Vasari ... look about you, and don't talk, nor listen to talking."¹⁴¹

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¹⁴¹ John Ruskin, *Mornings in Florence*, 1875; *Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, 370.