BOOKSHELF

Review: 'The Collector of Lives' Taught Us the Art of Art History

We usually talk about art by talking about the artist. For good or ill, we learned this habit from Vasari. Cammy Brothers on 'The Collector of Lives' by Ingrid Rowland and Noah Charney.

By Cammy Brothers
Oct. 13, 2017 4:22 p.m. ET

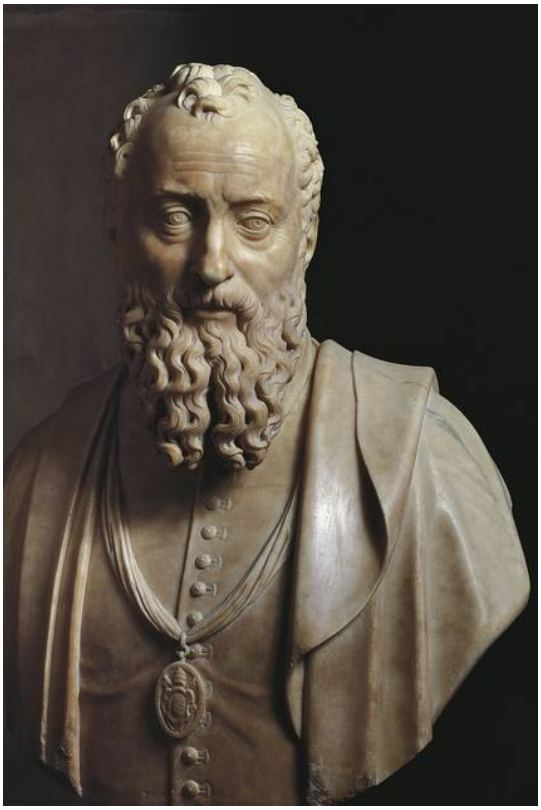
Filippo Brunelleschi demonstrated his radical idea for building the dome of Florence Cathedral by cracking an egg so it would stand on its end. Paolo Uccello was so obsessed with his experiments on perspective that, for months at a time, he barely left his house; his wife could not even induce him to come to bed. Fra Filippo Lippi, a friar and religious painter, fell in love and ran off with a young nun. (The son she bore him, Filippino Lippi, would also become an accomplished painter.) Michelangelo hacked away at his sculptures deep into the night, fashioning a cap with a candle so he could see, slept in his clothes so as not to waste time putting them on again and spoke to almost no one.

These and many other stories—of the exploits and adventures, eccentricities and foibles, of the most prominent and successful artists of the Renaissance—feature in Giorgio Vasari's "Lives of the Artists," which gave us the Renaissance as we know it today. Art historians continue to learn much from Vasari's "Lives," a page turner that blends history, description, criticism and biography. The artists Vasari championed, such as Leonardo da Vinci, remain our cultural heroes. Those he neglected, Mantegna and Francesco di Giorgio among them, never recovered the reputation they once enjoyed.

Despite being first published in 1550, with a second edition following in 1568, Vasari and his book have over the past few decades received renewed academic attention as part of a broad scholarly turn toward the study of primary texts. Scholars such as Paul Barolsky, Andrew Ladis and Patricia Rubin have emphasized the literary virtues of Vasari's text, its rhetoric and wit. Building on these excellent studies, Ingrid Rowland, from the University of Notre Dame, Rome, and Noah Charney, the author of several books about art crime, have written a brisk account of Vasari's achievements, complete with gossipy details from the original text and snippets from the latest scholarship. "The Collector of Lives" focuses on the cultural politics of the 16th century and the vicissitudes of fortune, both Vasari's and those of the artists he describes.

Writing was not even Vasari's day job. Born in Arezzo, Italy, in 1511, he was a prolific artist at the Medici court and an accomplished architect—of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, no less. His architecture demonstrated to his contemporaries how to use Michelangelo's idiosyncratic buildings as models, pulling out particular details and reproducing them in a more regular, disciplined way. But his greatest legacy among his varied achievements is as the author of the "Lives."

Ms. Rowland and Mr. Charney's book opens in the Palazzo Vecchio with a tantalizing, Dan Brown -style tale of the hunt for Leonardo's lost painting depicting the Battle of Anghiari, which some believe to be hidden under one of Vasari's own frescoes. The story centers around the recent efforts of Maurizio Seracini, a self-described "diagnostician of art" with a background in bioengineering and medicine, who has courted publicity and controversy in his efforts to uncover Leonardo's painting. The media love Mr. Seracini; scholars, however, have been more skeptical, and not just for reasons of tribalism. Some think the painting may be in another position altogether; others doubt it was ever executed at all. The authors use this unsolved puzzle to show that even after 500 years of



Bust of Vasari (1511-74) by his young contemporary Giulio Mazzoni. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

THE COLLECTOR OF LIVES

By Ingrid Rowland & Noah Charney

Norton, 420 pages, $29.95

continuous study initiated by Vasari, mysteries in Renaissance art remain.

Barely discussed by the authors are the problems that have most preoccupied scholars: the distinctions between the two editions, the question of who among Vasari’s collaborators wrote what and how to define the volume’s authorship overall. Writing in the New York Review of Books in 1995, Charles Hope, the former director of the Warburg Institute in London, suggested that while Vasari was largely responsible for “Lives,” the prefaces (which are hardly mentioned in Ms. Rowland and Mr. Charney’s book) were written by others. Since then, other scholars have debated the specifics, but the broader idea—that it is a work of collaboration—has been generally accepted.

These are far from idle or pedantic questions, but the authors are more interested in demonstrating Vasari’s continued relevance. This is a case that hardly needs making; Vasari remains on the lips of every Renaissance art historian. Nonetheless, Ms. Rowland and Mr. Charney make frequent reference to contemporary culture and art. These comparisons reach their height (or nadir) toward the end of the book, when the authors speculate what Vasari would have made of Marina Abramović, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and other such conceptual artists of our day.

As the authors rightly claim, Vasari merits all this attention because without him there would be no art history as it is practiced and taught today. Through his example, we talk about art by talking about the artist—we aim to know the work by knowing its maker. We owe the idea of the artist as a tormented genius, for instance, to Vasari’s account of Michelangelo: solitary, misanthropic and devoted to his art to the point of obsession. This is one reason art historians have struggled with non-Western traditions, and why medieval art often gets short shrift. Biography has its pitfalls, among them the way it diminishes significant questions such as the nature of collaboration. It also casts many otherwise interesting paintings and drawings into the dustbin when their author cannot be identified.

Vasari raises further problems for the contemporary reader. How can we think beyond his many intrinsic biases: his idea of the steady march of progress and the improvement of art over time, and his belief in the superiority of Tuscan artists over everyone else. For a sense of Vasari’s influence, just look at the outsize attention Florentine artists receive in Renaissance textbooks today.

Readers curious about the making of Renaissance art, its cast of characters and political intrigue, will find much to relish in these pages. This is a lively, highly readable point of entry into an important and fascinating text. Yet Vasari needs no introduction. A faithful translation of the “Lives” by Gaston du C. de Vere has been in print since 1912 and is now available in an unabridged edition from Everyman’s Library. The immediacy and charm of Vasari’s writing is undiminished half a millennium later. One could do worse than to pick up a copy of the “Lives” and start reading.

—Ms. Brothers is an associate professor at Northeastern University and the author of “Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture.”