

The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission

As canons within academic disciplines go, the art historical canon is among the most virulent, the most virulent, and ultimately the most vulnerable.¹ The simplest analysis of the selection of works included in the history of western European art 'at its best' at once reveals that selection's ideologically motivated constitution. The omission of whole categories of art and artists has resulted in an unrepresentative and distorting notion of who has contributed to 'universal' ideas expressed through creativity and aesthetic effort.

The current official selection of great works of art owes much of its present composition to the ubiquitous standard college text by H.W. Janson, *The History of Art*, first written in 1962 and reprinted at regular intervals ever since.² Janson did not invent this list, although his personal selection from a limited number of possibilities is itself a text worthy of analysis. In fundamental ways, the art historical canon, as it appears in Janson (and in others who follow him with unembarrassed exactitude), ultimately and fundamentally is derived from the sixteenth-century book by the Florentine artist and writer Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite De' più eccellenti Architetti, Pittori et Scultori Italiani*, first published in 1550 and reissued in a much enlarged edition in 1568.³ This text is generally credited with being no less than the first 'modern' exposition of the history of western European art, a claim that acknowledges its influence and privileges its constitution as the generative source.⁴ Vasari introduced a structure or discursive form that, in its incessant repetition, produced and perpetuated the dominance of a particular gender, class, and race as the purveyors of art and culture.

Vasari's book was written at the moment when the accomplishments of the High Renaissance artists Michelangelo and Raphael, under the auspices of papal patronage, were being absorbed as both cultural heritage and Florentine history. Vasari's desire not only to construct that history but also to place Florence at its center motivated both the form and the content of his book.⁵ While modern art historians concede that it is structured to place Michelangelo and his art at the very zenith of all artistic creation, above even the revered ancients, few have seen through the more insidious aspects of his project. This is true, no doubt, because the structural aspects of Vasari's book—

ordering biographies chronologically by generations and making value judgments that stress innovation and influence—continue effectively to dominate the way art history is written today.

The most important premise of Vasari's book is his assertion that great art is the expression of individual genius and can be explicated only through biography.⁶ The stress on individuals' biographies, announced in the book's title, encapsulates those individuals and presents them as discrete from their social and political environments. The inherent and manipulative limitations imposed by such a biographical system are clear. The most significant limitation is that, *as a system*, it at once ties the work of art to a notion of inaccessible genius and thereby effectively removes it from consideration as a real component in a process of social exchange that involves both production and consumption.⁷ This constitution of art history as biography thus occludes an analysis of works of art as material objects and understanding their formulative role in the dynamics of ideological constructs.⁸

Here in Vasari's work we can identify the moment when the myth of the 'artist' as a construct is born—that is to say, invented. This 'artist' is identical to the author whose death is announced by contemporary theorists such as Roland Barthes.⁹ Vasari inaugurates the idea that what is worth knowing about a work of art is explained only through knowledge of the artist. As Barthes wrote, 'the Author' (for Barthes's 'Author,' read 'Artist') when believed in, is always conceived as the past of his book:

book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives it, is in the same relation of antecedence to this work as a father to his child.¹⁰

The individual whom Vasari describes as an artist is, socially, a free agent, and therefore is clearly gendered, classed, and raced; more specifically, he is a white upper-class male. Only such an individual is empowered by his social position successfully to stake a claim to the personal freedom and creative calling that Vasari's construct requires.

Moreover, we can identify here the moment when Vasari invents/produces the critic, or art historian.¹¹ He does so by giving individual works particular validity through his assertion of value judgments bearing the weight of his authority.¹² His basic strategies are intricately related. Great works of art are treated as the product of the life of an unfathomable genius. Yet, incomprehensible as they are, they can be retrieved and made accessible by the documentation and explanation of the art historian. In consequence, the art historian has the license and the authority to proclaim what has quality and is valuable. The power inherent in the art historian's position was quickly grasped and immediately made overt in the writings of Vasari's follower, Raffaello

Borghini, in his book *Il Riposo*, published in 1584. What was new about Borghini's theoretical position—and soon to become the norm—is that he wrote from the position of a connoisseur rather than that of a practitioner, since he himself was not an artist. Of even greater significance is that he wrote for a new kind of reader, the art lover, the educated individual who wished to be cultured through the proper appreciation of art.¹³ While Vasari implies this wider audience, Borghini emphatically says that he writes his biographies of artists not only for other artists but also for those who, though not artists, wish to be in a position to judge works of art.¹⁴ This is, undoubtedly, the ultimate concern of Janson's *History of Art* as well.

The two most significant developments of Vasari's age that bear a complex relationship to the inception, conditions, and success of his formation of art history were the creation of an art academy and the proliferation of works of art through mechanical reproduction. The former event is directly tied to Vasari himself. His Accademia del Disegno, created in Florence, was fostered by the joint authority of Michelangelo and the State of Florence through the person of Cosimo de' Medici.¹⁵ Just as Vasari's book became the model for histories of male artists for centuries to come, his academy became the model for art academies throughout the European continent up to and including our own century.¹⁶ The art academy became a place where would-be artists could learn to privilege the formal qualities Vasari and his followers had described as great in Michelangelo's art. The academy institutionalized art instruction throughout Europe, and its promise was nothing short of empowering its students with access to divine genius.

As Linda Nochlin has shown, the conditions of the art academy, with its high priority on drawing from the live nude model, excluded women *qua* ladies from the possibility of creating 'great art.'¹⁷ The art academy is at once a historical safeguard against women's entering the canon and a rationale for their exclusion, an exclusion that historically predated the institutionalized academy.

In addition, the mechanical reproduction of unique works of sculpture and painting in prints became popular in Vasari's age. The mass production in engravings of works by Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian broadened the base of culturally literate consumers and gave a viability (one might say an urgency) to Vasari's programs in both the Academy and the *Lives*.¹⁸ At this time, because the exclusivity and proprietorial possession of ideas expressed through representational images were threatened, Vasari's programs intervened to reassert control and management by determining selections.

Once conditions for value have been established, whole histories may be written in which art is ordered and ranked. Art critics or historians can determine the course of art history by establishing binary rela-

tionships in conformity with systems that in their turn reestablish their prerogative to establish them. Eleanor Dickinson's interview with Janson in 1979 is a case in point. When she questioned the exclusion of women artists from his textbook, Janson blithely replied that no woman artist had been 'important enough to go into a one-volume history of art.'¹⁹ When asked what his terms of inclusion were, he said, 'The works that I have put in the book are representative of achievements of the imagination ... that have one way or another changed the history of art. Now I have yet to hear a convincing case made for the claim that Mary Cassatt has changed the history of art.'²⁰ A critical reading of Janson's *History of Art* reveals that his notion of changing history is, like Vasari's, constructed on the ideas of innovation and influence. The internal logic that justifies his selection and thus inclusion in the canon is based on a reenactment of father/son relationships on various levels of the teacher/student project.²¹ This kind of relationship is apparent in the structuring affinities that art historians create between the ancients and the Italian Renaissance, between Raphael and Poussin, between Manet and Degas, and ultimately between themselves, Vasari and Janson. The play set in motion here is a perpetual one, between submission to established authority and innovation within its preset terms. Artists thereby may 'change the history of art' insofar as they can be located within this father/son logic. It is critical to analyze some of the practices that situate women outside this logic.

It hardly seems necessary to say that a fundamental condition of canonical selection as construed by Vasari and his followers, up to and including Janson, is that only male artists are taken seriously. Women are not simply omitted. Before the twentieth century, there is barely a history of art that completely omits women, and Vasari himself included some in the *Lives*—evidence of what must surely have been their undeniable presence in the art world that Vasari set out to chronicle.²² These women artists remind us that women's participation in the somewhat rarified world of art, as in society in general, at some point in history was much greater than the accounts of modern historians suggest.²³ In fact, as Joan Kelly demonstrated, it was precisely in the period we call the 'Renaissance' that the systematic diminution of social and personal options for women began.²⁴ In this context, Vasari's *Lives* may be seen as part of the apparatus that abrogated women's direct and unproblematical participation in cultural life. In discussing the creativity of women, Vasari strategically enhanced their marginalization by using patronizing and demeaning terms to explain their art and its oddity, their exceptional status as women artists. For example, his treatment of the Cremona artist Sofonisba Anguisciola includes all of the by-now-clichéd references to women's creative abilities in childbirth, as well as astonishment at her exceptional abilities as a visual artist. The notion

of the 'exceptional' woman artist may be one of the most insidious means of undermining the likelihood of women's entering the creative arts.

A primary strategy of Vasari/Janson is to establish a narrow focus through the imposition of a standard or norm. This standard is defined by classical art and by the recuperation of the achievement of classical culture as most perfectly realized in the art of Michelangelo.²⁵ The implications of this standard are complex and require dismantling on a variety of levels. I shall return presently to the inherent meaning of classical imagery and classicism for constructing notions of gender and sexuality. First, however, I discuss the more overt consequences of this standard. It functions to create a hierarchy of insiders and outsiders. The stigma of 'otherness,' as applied to the 'outsider,' can be bestowed equally on some male artists as it has been on female artists. The classical paradigm defines the 'Renaissance' of central Italy as the art with the greatest value and successfully marginalizes all other artistic traditions.²⁶ Artistic traditions contemporary with the Italian Renaissance, no matter how diverse, are simply lumped together under the heading 'art north of Alps.' The rationale for discussing these complex and varied traditions as a single tradition can only be that their differences from one another are deemed irrelevant and their singular difference from Central Italian classicism crucial. For example, Vasari, discussing northern European artists, indiscriminately uses the term *fiamminghi* (that is, someone from Flanders), even when discussing the German artists Martin Schongauer and Albrecht Dürer.²⁷ In addition, he relegates his comments on these artists to his book on technical instruction rather than including them in the *Lives* proper, thereby locating them with the practical and manual aspects of art as craft, rather than with the more elevated position of art as an intellectual activity. It is true that some northern artists are discussed at the very end of the *Lives*, but in a section that has no name.²⁸

Vasari/Janson's stated preference for classical forms as the basis of an absolute system of aesthetic evaluation enables them to judge all other European traditions according to how close they come to accepting classicism as a paradigm. Thus Janson writes: 'Gifted though they were, Cranach and Altdorfer both evaded the main challenge of the Renaissance so bravely faced—if not always mastered—by Dürer: the image of man.'²⁹

The devaluation of 'art north of the Alps,' like the devaluation of the art of the 'pre-Renaissance' Medieval period, can be seen as a strategy with a deeper import for us than might at first be suspected. Women in these cultures were more essential to, and better integrated into, the workings of economic and social life and thus, by extension, were better integrated into the production of works of art than women were in Italy.³⁰ Michelangelo's reputed comments on Flemish paint-

ing, reported by Francisco de Hollanda in 1538, recognize the importance of women in the constructs of Netherlandish painting: 'Women will like it, especially very old ones, or very young ones. It will please likewise friars and nuns, and also some noble persons who have no ear for true harmony.'³¹ As late as 1718–21, Arnold Houbraken's book on the lives of the great Dutch painters not only includes both men and women artists but also acknowledges their joint contributions in its title, *De Grootte Schoonburgh der Nederlandtsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*.³² The decided prejudice in favor of Italian male artists and art therefore can be understood not only as a statement asserting the superiority of men over women but also as a prejudice in favor of whole systems that supported and made possible that superiority.

Between Vasari's *Lives* and Janson's *History of Art*, many variations of art history were written. Yet, despite the many versions produced by art historians of different nationalities at different times, fundamental constants can be discerned. We can attribute these constants to the unchallenged influence of Vasari, the orthodox source to whom writers returned again and again.³³ While Venetian, French, and Dutch art histories featured their own artists, they all adhered strongly to Vasari's structural prototype and maintained his classical bias. Vasari's structure itself took on canonical status. This characteristic structure emphasizes individual contributions, fixes the terms of a generational and stylistic development of the history of art, and provides standards for aesthetic judgments along classical lines. This structure is repeated in the art historical writing of Janson and most other contributors to this genre in the intervening four centuries. The project of the early art histories served nationalistic motives. Yet, clearly, more was at stake—that is, maintaining the control of culture for a privileged few. In the late seventeenth century, Joachim von Sandrart, Filippo Baldinucci, André Félibien, and Roger de Piles broke away from allegiance primarily to nationalistic motives and included an international array of artists in their texts.³⁴ Significantly, despite the tendency of art historians in the late seventeenth century to amplify their texts by adding artists of different nationalities, they systematically eroded and finally erased the presence of women.

In our own historical moment, women have fought for and regained the privilege and the responsibility of having a say in the ways culture gets produced and disseminated. Feminists have opened places within canonical discourse to allow for the inclusion of women as artists and women as critics. But at this juncture, inclusion alone is not enough. Feminist practice has produced several strategies for dealing with the academic field of art history and its canon. Primary among these is the archeological excavation of women as creators. The second is the appearance of women as critics and interpreters, receiving and in-

flecting works of art in ways meaningful for them. The implications of the two developments—women recovered as artists and women as critics—are vast, and they are, of course, not mutually exclusive.

Among the most useful consequences of the first strategy, the recovery of women artists, is bringing 'normal' selection under direct scrutiny and thereby denaturalizing and politicizing it. What heretofore had appeared to be an objective account of cultural history, the 'Western European Tradition,' suddenly reappears as a history with a strong bias for white, upper-class male creativity and patronage. It is a history in profound support of exclusively male interests. Feminists' insistence on exposing exclusions reveals the ways in which works within the canon cohere with one another in terms quite different from those traditionally advanced. Rather than appearing as paradigmatic examples of aesthetic value or meaningful expression, or even as representative of major historical movements and events, canonical works support one another as components in a larger system of power relations. Significance and pleasure are defined as projected exclusively through male experiences. The simple corrective gesture of introducing women into the canon to create a more accurate picture of what 'really happened' and to give them a share of the voice that proclaims what is significant and pleasurable does not really rectify the situation. Our understanding of the political implications of what is included and excluded from the repertoire of canonical works and, even more, our understanding of historical writing itself as a political act render this, at best, a tactic with limited effects. The terms of art historical practice themselves, whether formalist or contextualist, are so laden with ideological overtones and value judgments as to what is or is not worthwhile—or, as it was expressed in the past, 'ennobling'—that questions of gender and class are designed to be irrelevant to its discourse. These crucial questions not only seem to be *beside* the point of traditional art historical questions; they are specifically *outside* the point.

Chronologically, in feminist art historical writing, the introduction of 'great women artists' was the first real attempt at bringing women into the iconic system of the art historical canon.³⁵ A host of probing, but to my mind unanswerable, questions were asked. They remain unanswerable because they are wrought with essentially the same methodological tools that so restrictively govern the traditional art historical enterprise. For example, there is the question deriving from the Morellian tradition of connoisseurship: Can one tell from looking at a work of art that the artist was a woman? And one deriving from Panofskian iconology: Do women interpret themes differently than men? And from the Gombrich model: What are the social conditions that led women to paint and draw the way they did?

The uncritical insertion of women artists into the pre-existing structure of art history as a discipline tends to confirm rather than challenge the prejudicial tropes through which women's creativity is dismissed. Logically, the women artists who were hailed by the feminists of the 1970s were exactly the ones easiest to excavate, because their work most closely approximated that of traditional, mainstream movements as defined by academe. Yet, precisely because those women had achieved some measure of traditional success, they were by definition appropriate for comparison with the textbook male 'genius' whose work their art most resembled. Like a knee-jerk reaction or a Pavlovian response, the device of 'compare and contrast' was proffered to situate these new-yet-not-so-new entries into the canon. This device, the staple of art historical analysis since the days of Wölfflin,³⁶ continually serves as an instrument for ranking value and establishing a hierarchy of prestige. The device compels its users to put 'versus' between two artists. Thus, Artemisia Gentileschi is inevitably and detrimentally compared to Caravaggio; Judith Leyster, inevitably and detrimentally, to Frans Hals; Mary Cassatt, inevitably and detrimentally, to Degas. When the rules of the game are neither challenged nor changed, the very structure of such binary oppositions insists that one side be master, the other side pupil; one major, the other minor. These comparisons, in a disheartening way, seem to prove once and for all that women have not produced anything either innovative or influential. They were rather on the receiving end of the influence exchange, with all of the attendant anxiety assigned to that undesirable position in modernist discourse.³⁷ Their only form of retreat and solace comes in the ghettoized subcategory 'women artists.'

Whereas Vasari used the device of biography to individualize and mystify the works of artistic men, the same device has a profoundly different effect when applied to women. The details of a man's biography are conveyed as a measure of the 'universal,' applicable to all mankind; in the male genius they are simply heightened and intensified. In contrast, the details of a woman's biography are used to underscore the idea that she is an exception; they apply only to her and make her an interesting individual case. Her art is reduced to a visual record of her personal and psychological makeup.

No doubt the most egregious example is the seventeenth-century Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi. Her rape by her 'mentor,' the artist Agostino Tassi, and the litigation brought against Tassi by her father Orazio Gentileschi, enter into every discussion of her art. Not to discuss it is to avoid it. The degree to which Artemisia Gentileschi's sexual history is the most discussed aspect of her persona contrasts sharply with the embarrassment about and denial of the equally documentable sexual histories that are an integral part of great male artists' biographies (the most obvious example being the homosexual-

ity of Michelangelo and Caravaggio).³⁸

Artemisia Gentileschi's history is brought to bear on her images of what Mary Garrard calls her 'heroic women,' particularly her paintings of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and *Susanna and the Elders*.³⁹ In the end, these paintings are reduced by critics to therapeutic expressions of her repressed fear, anger, and/or desire for revenge. Her creative efforts are thus compromised, in traditional terms, as personal and relative.

The fact that her father waited ten months before bringing charges against Tassi seems strange to modern-day researchers, as does her apparent consent to be Tassi's lover after the rape.⁴⁰ While the proceedings of the trial may or may not add to our understanding of Gentileschi's art, they can do so only when seen as part of the highly coded discourse of sexuality and the politics of rape in the seventeenth century. Perhaps more than anything, they emphasize the fact that Artemisia, body and soul, was treated as the site of exchange between men, primarily her father/mentor and her lover/rapist/mentor, but also between Tassi and Cosimo Quorli, orderly of the Pope, who, presumably because of his own jealous desire for her, asked Tassi not to marry her. Tassi complied with his request. The process of exchange began when she was 'given' to Tassi as a pupil, and it continued when he violently 'took' her, when her honor was 'redeemed,' and when she was given and taken again. The homosocial bonding ritual enacted and reenacted among these men render 'Artemisia' a historically elusive construct. If the testimony of the trial reveals anything, it is a person with an obstinate sense of her own social and sexual needs. Her paintings thus look less like 'heroic women' than like the nexus of a series of complicated negotiations between convention and disruption, between 'Artemisia' and Artemisia.

Much writing on Artemisia Gentileschi and her art exemplifies the ways in which the conventional structures of art-historical discourse safeguard their deepest subtexts—those that preserve power for and endow with significance a privileged few. The motives behind this writing need not be seen as willful or even conscious. Their strength lies in their centuries-old history and in the mutually supportive, reciprocal relationship between that history and the ends such motives produce.

Mary Garrard's attempt to 'heroize' Artemisia Gentileschi and the women she depicted reveals her desire to enroll Gentileschi in the canon as presently constructed. She wants for Gentileschi the status afforded to men who make 'heroic' images and whose art, which is an extension of their biography, sets positive examples for others, in this case women. As most recently pointed out by Patricia Rubin, the aim of Renaissance biography in general and of Vasari in particular was to make heroes of exemplary men.⁴¹ Yet we are rudely reminded that what can and has been done for men cannot simply and unproblematically

be done for women. To cite Rubin again, our interest in Renaissance men 'arises from the representative nature of these figures, taken to embody values that match and confirm basic themes which organize and characterize cultural understanding.'⁴² The hierarchical relationships established by Vasari are still intact and his preferences profoundly and successfully potent.

It may seem 'natural' that Vasari put his fellow citizens above all others and that, within Italy, his Florentine bias was tolerated. It is less 'natural' (that is, less understandable) that his heroes became the heroes of similar texts written by German, Dutch, French, English, and American authors, up to and including H.W. Janson.⁴³ The success of Vasari's canon with its classical bias must be accounted for on grounds more complex than its articulation of a proprietary turf for 'men only.' That canon creates a position of dominance for a certain kind of man who can understand and appreciate classical and classicist art as most perfectly embodied in the art of Michelangelo. The ideological value of the classical model in the constitution of power relations through the coding of gender and sexuality can be uncovered only by feminist analysis.

The art of Michelangelo and classical Greek sculpture, his primary source of inspiration, took as their ideal form the male nude youth, whom they viewed as equally the ideal of art and of 'nature,' predicated on a notion of beauty that they defined as specifically male.⁴⁴ For the Greeks and for Michelangelo, as in nearly all cases where the object of aesthetic admiration is the human form, the enjoyment of the male body is conjoined with homoerotic desire. For the Greeks this conjunction seemed a natural one, and surely that socially legitimate desire contributed to constituting the male nude as an ideal.⁴⁵ The conjunction for Michelangelo was far more problematical, yet not so problematical as to have been prohibitive.⁴⁶ Homoerotic desire and the artistic production of the idealized male nude youth clearly have a historical relationship. Yet, as important as that relationship is, it is equally meaningful and informative that there is no mention—in fact, can be no mention—of homosexuality in Vasari/Janson.⁴⁷ Their repression of homosexuality is facilitated by another fundamental principle of classicism, that a perfect body contains a beautiful spirit, that physical and moral beauty are inextricably united. This principle framed homosexual desire in a larger moral and aesthetic discourse. Art history, produced in patriarchal yet officially heterosexual Christian times, could use, and indeed embrace, the presumptive moral and aesthetic aspects of the desire that fostered the works of art, but only after severing them from any traces of sexual meaning. The erotic appreciation of artistic nudes was masked by the concept of pure aesthetic pleasure, unpolluted by either the sexual desires of the producers or the threat of corresponding sexual desires in the viewers.⁴⁸ The fiction created by this

'purification' of the art object renders it sound currency in a heterosexual world that cannot bear to acknowledge homosexuality as anything but deviance.⁴⁹

The form central to the art of Michelangelo and his Greek sources, the one heralded as the most brilliant of Western civilization by Vasari/Janson, is the freestanding sculpture of an idealized male nude youth. This form exhibits features worth considering in this context. It—or he—is characterized by the conflation of an athletic and a military iconography resulting in the 'heroic.' The nude stands unselfconsciously present, in the sense that he neither flaunts nor covers his penis. It is, rather, represented as is any other body part in the classical homoerotic system that sexualizes the youth as a complete and coherent being without fetishizing his genitals.

The male nude youth stands in startling contrast to the female nude youth, the other standard icon of the Vasari/Janson canon—whose portrayal, it must be said, is completely absent from Michelangelo's sculpted work. The fashioning of the female nude as it—or she—appears in ancient art and in the art of the Italian Renaissance (in, for example, the art of Botticelli or Titian) is also produced within the framework of sexual desire. That desire is also repressed in formal art-historical writing, despite recent attempts by some art historians to acknowledge it.

The history of the form raises interesting problems in evaluating the main subjects of the canon. The so-called 'classical' female nude in monumental sculpture was, in fact, not introduced in Greek art until the postclassical period. It was invented by the fourth-century sculptor Praxiteles, whose life-sized sculpture of Aphrodite, entitled the *Cnidian Aphrodite* for the name of its ancient site, is known to us only through Roman copies.⁵⁰ This sculpture is the source for a massive number of works representing Aphrodite/Venus in the art of the Western world, not only because it is the first monumental female nude but also and more significantly because it is the first to be fashioned covering her pubis. This gesture is repeatedly interpreted as one of modesty, which the ancients called 'pudica.' Despite its name, the gesture signifies a great deal more than modesty. It is so endemic to our culture that its effect has been 'naturalized'; that is to say, we no longer 'connect' with the pernicious narrative of fear expressed by a woman shown trying to protect her pubis against violent assault. The 'pudica' pose has become for us the epitome of aesthetics or artfulness. Nevertheless, looking at a naturalistically crafted sculpture of a woman who does not want to be seen cannot help but titillate, even if we react subconsciously. The gesture, with all it connotes, is more than an image of fear and rejection. Merely by placing the hand of the woman over her pubis, Praxiteles—and every artist since him who has used this device—creates a sense of desire in the viewer and constructs a

Peeping-Tom response. This voyeuristic response is installed in all types of viewers, male and female, heterosexual or homosexual. However, it is clearly male heterosexuals who are encouraged to translate that desire into socially sanctioned acts. These acts, not to be confused with private acts of sexual behavior, are rather publicly displayed appreciation of the totally sexualized female form. As high culture, this appreciation is synonymous with the appreciation of a work of art signified by a female nude; as low culture, this appreciation is synonymous with lewd remarks made to women on the street by men in groups. In the end, the high and low forms of appreciation conditioned by the 'pudica' pose create special opportunities for publicly shared male sexual experience without overt homosexual overtones. The female nude is the site of, and the public display of heterosexual desire the medium for, a male bonding ritual.⁵¹

The role of Vasari/Janson in promoting the heroic male nude and the sexualized, vulnerable female nude as paradigms cannot be underestimated. Historically, the two forms were created within the framework of constructing two male desires, one homosexual and the other heterosexual. The disparate erotic treatments of the male and female tell us a great deal about the different ways in which men and women were and are viewed as objects of sexual desire. Yet formal art historical texts like those of Vasari and Janson treat the male and female nudes in ways that prevent conscious consideration of them as dynamic components in establishing power relations that are expressed in sexual terms. Rather, more covert ways of giving the works their significance in structuring gender and sexuality become effective. In modern society, where heterosexual dominance has prevailed at least since the sixteenth century, the artistic fashioning of the male and female nude defines a cosmopolitan and international club of culturally literate heterosexual males whose ardent allegiance is to one another. The love and admiration of men for one another is thus made acceptable through the shared expression of their overt and irrepressible heterosexual drives.

Vasari's invention of the artist, the critic, and the canon is tied to the economic and social conditions of his moment in history. While these conditions have changed, the deeper stratifications of gender, race, and class continue to operate within the culturally expressed power relationships that he articulated. Vasari thus furnished the discursive forms that remain potent in Janson's moment—and ours.