



A
BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE
ARTIST FROM GOD
TO PICASSO

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VASARI AND THE QUIXOTIC PAINTER

Let us now descend from the sublime heights of Dante's paradise to the ridiculous—to the purgatory of art history, in which we encounter one of the most delightful of all artists. I speak of Paolo Uccello. We all know him. He's the lovable fifteenth-century Florentine painter who pictured Sir John Hawkwood, "that ghostly chessman," as Mary McCarthy called him, in the dark Gothic cathedral of Florence. He is also the designer of three equally famous paintings of the Battle of San Romano, chivalric romances in which brightly colored toy soldiers or equestrian puppets deploy their richly patterned lances in, of all places, an orange bower, going to war in a garden.

Uccello has always worked his magic in weird ways. Arshile Gorky kept large photographs of the San Romano battle paintings tacked to his studio wall, and we can almost see the complex, multifaceted forms of the Florentine's highly intricate art dissolving into the evocative, still surreal abstractions that float in the dreamworld of the Modernist's canvases. Italo Calvino, who loved the romance of Ariosto and who even invented a "nonexistent knight," imagined the armor of Uccello's horsemen momentarily voided of human presences, filled with birds, next transformed into crustaceans—all this transmogrified into a fantastical battle between avian creatures and shellfish. Gregory Corso, that

beatnik lyricist who spoke lightheartedly of the "knitted lances" of Uccello's battle, as if evoking so many gigantic knitting needles, listened to the paintings' metallic music, to "each combatant's mouth . . . a castle of song / each iron fist a dreamy gong." Although Uccello's pictures show soldiers dying in perspective, Corso sees them alive for eternity, never expiring, and he wishes to enter into this timeless enchantment. "How I dream to join such battle," he writes, "never to die but to be endless / a golden prince of pictorial war." The playful turn of Corso's fantasy is unmistakable, for he evokes the "flowery tale" of Keats's "Grecian Urn," a pastoral of "happy, happy boughs," of "happy, happy love," of lovers "forever young." Like Keats's lovers, Corso's soldiers, suspended in art beyond time, will never die.

But who was this painter who so fired the imagination of other artists and poets? Will we ever know? Six years before he died in 1475, Uccello wrote to the Florentine tax office, in one of the few documents we have of his life, "I am old and sick, my wife is ill, and I can no longer work." Such utterances by themselves, however, do not a biography make, and it was not until seventy-five years after his death that Vasari wrote the painter's biography in his fabulous *Lives* of the artists. Uccello emerges here, like the personages of his own art, as himself a fictional character. He is a bit of a simpleton or fool, who paints a camel where he should have painted a chameleon. He is an artist lost in the study of his "sweet perspective" when his wife calls him to sleep. He is a painter who entered through such perspective into the realm of uncertainty, as Donatello said when shown one of Uccello's overwrought works. The painter became increasingly melancholic, solitary, and strange, almost savage in his decline, dying in poverty and discontent. Uccello says that the abbot at San Miniato, where he is painting, has given him so much cheese to eat that he doesn't know anymore whether, if this diet is continued, he will remain himself or turn to cheese. He reminds us of Boccaccio's goofy Calandrino, another painter easily deceived, who is convinced on one occasion that he is invisible and on another that he is pregnant. He reminds us too of the fat carpenter, who is tricked by Brunelleschi (with the help of Donatello) into believing he is not himself. Playing on Uccello's name, which means "bird," Vasari metamorphoses him into a simple reincarnation of the proverbial Calandrino, whose name also suggests a bird, in this case, a titlark. The word "bird" in Italian also means a simpleton, and as Calandrino is a featherhead, a

dodo, a booby, or a turkey, as we might say, Uccello is a bit of a bird-brain, a gull, a gullible fellow. Who ever heard of a painter who became a cheese?

Why was Paolo Uccello, whose legal name was Paolo di Dono, called Uccello? Vasari claims or pretends that he was so named because the painter, who especially loved birds (as well as all animals), painted them into his works because he was so poor that he could not afford to purchase them. But "who has scared all these birds away?" Italo Calvino asked. There are almost no birds in Uccello's known works, although, as Vasari says, the painter did render "birds in perspective" in one fresco at Santa Maria Novella. Did all the other birds fly away, like those painted by Bartolo Goggi in one delightful story of the fourteenth century told by Franco Sacchetti? Or is Vasari fantasizing?

Paolo Uccello is part of the menagerie of Vasari's imagination. He is like the strange and eccentric Piero di Cosimo, who draws lots of birds and beasts and is himself a wild man, bestial in his ways. Although Piero, like Uccello, is a painter in real life, his biography, for all its facts, is deeply fictional—a fact that many literal-minded art historians have trouble assimilating, since they ignore the role of fiction in shaping history. To say that Piero's or Uccello's biography is conceived imaginatively is not to deny that the artists existed or that Vasari's biographies of these artists are filled with facts. It is to recognize that these biographies are shaped, are deeply fictive.

Uccello also resembles Leonardo, who similarly loved birds, but whereas Uccello wished to keep them, Leonardo would buy them so that he could release them from their cages, giving them their freedom. A lover of other living creatures, like Uccello, Leonardo brought lizards, serpents, and insects into his studio, where he fashioned a creature like Medusa, or so Vasari pretends, and applied quicksilver to a lizard, adding wings to turn the creature into a sort of terrifying dragon in order to frighten his visitors. Otherwise a paradigm of courtly grace, Leonardo was sometimes just a bit weird and indulged in his own "madness" when he made balloons out of the guts of animals.

Strange artists who love animals are everywhere in the poetical imagination. Vasari says that Leonardo's disciple Rustici, himself a magician, had many snakes in his home. He also kept a porcupine under his table, which rubbed itself like a dog against the legs of his visitors, to their considerable discomfort. Animals were everywhere to be seen in

the house of the painter Sodoma, who was called "Little Fool" by one of his patrons. Sodoma kept badgers, squirrels, marmosets, asses, horses, jays, fowl, turtledoves, even a raven which answered in perfect imitation of its master's voice whenever anyone knocked at the door. Sodoma's house was, Vasari states, a veritable Noah's Ark. The painter possessed all the animals and birds that poor Uccello desired. We do not know all the facts of Sodoma's life, but we can be reasonably confident that Vasari's account of the painter is at the very least a poetical embellishment of the facts, an account enriched by fiction.

Whereas Uccello is related by implication to all of Vasari's strange, animal-loving painters, he is explicitly connected to the eccentric hermetic Pontormo, who also lived in solitude. The art of both painters, Vasari says, comparing them directly, is overdone, too labored, and transcends the bounds of the respective artists' natural gifts. No less than Uccello does Pontormo fantasticize contrived-pictorial devices that, leaving the real world behind, reach beyond the boundaries of the acceptable in art.

When we step back and look at Uccello afresh, we see that in the excessive fantasy and obsessive fervor of his quest for perspective, he is the Don Quixote of painters, an artistic ancestor of the Knight of the Doleful Countenance. Poetically seeking to refashion the world in accord with his perspectival dreams that rise beyond "reality," Uccello is a knight-errant of painters, as Quixote, steeped in the conventions of romance, is himself a poet, reimagining the world in accord with his chivalric fantasies. No matter that the Arno Valley of Uccello is far in time and place from the plain of Quixote's La Mancha. No matter that we cannot easily trace the path from one place to the other in the maze of imagination. The simple, foolish, deluded, even mad Florentine painter is a Don Quixote *avant la lettre*, tilting at the windmills of perspectival fantasy. The beloved books of Euclid on geometry and optics are to Uccello what *Amadis of Gaul* is to Don Quixote.

Is not our quixotic painter, possessed by perspective and out of touch with the real world, as Vasari imagined him into being, not the first obsessive artist in the history of art? And if so, is he not one of the ancestors of Frenhofer in Balzac's "The Unknown Masterpiece?" Balzac's crazed old painter had labored for ten years on a portrait of a courtesan, seeking not just to paint her likeness but to invest her with the spirit of life! When he finally reveals his picture to Poussin, the image is

a multitude of fantastical lines, a fog of formlessness. Under this confusion, no less baffling than Uccello's overdone perspective studies shown to Donatello, there does appear a perfectly rendered foot—a dim clue of the unattainable goal of the mad painter, who expires immediately after exposing his "masterpiece."

Although we cannot easily trace the obscure path from Uccello to Quixote, the maze from Uccello to Frenhofer and from Frenhofer back to Uccello is threadable. Half a century after Balzac told his romantic tale of futile artistic ambition, Marcel Schwob retold Vasari's fable of the legendary Uccello, rewriting it through Balzac's own tale of art. Schwob's story, told in his *Imaginary Lives*, is a fable of tender pathos. Lost in the folly of his perspective studies, Uccello lives like a hermit. One day he beholds a young girl, his Beatrice, his Laura, who smiles at him. Noting all the subtle forms of her face, as only he can, Uccello loves her and takes her home with him. In the evenings when Brunelleschi comes to study with Uccello, she falls asleep in the circle of the shadow cast by the painter's lamp. When she awakens in the morning she is surrounded by all the birds and beasts painted by Uccello. Although the artist never painted her portrait, he nevertheless distilled all of her forms in the crucible of his art, likened to that of an alchemist, in which he also gathered all the lineaments of plants and stones, of the rays of light, of the waves of the sea. Lost in his studies like a hermit in his devotion or an alchemist in his search for a universal elixir, Uccello becomes forgetful of the young girl, who eventually perishes, starving to death. Uccello now studies the contours of her inert body, as he once recorded them in life, creating not a portrait as such but new forms of art.

Uccello grows old, Schwob writes, and no one can comprehend his work. One sees in it only a confusion of lines. After working for years on an *oeuvre suprême*, Uccello creates not the image of the earth, plants, animals, or men, but only a jumble of lines. Although Donatello thinks his painting flawed, Uccello believes he has worked a miracle in art. When Uccello finally dies in his garret, his eyes are fixed on the mystery revealed to him, as if he had achieved his unattainable goal. In his hand he holds a round piece of parchment covered with interlacing lines that radiate from the center to the circumference and back again. Schwob's Uccello believes that he has created a masterpiece, whereas all that one sees in his supreme achievement is a confusion of forms like those of Frenhofer.

The labyrinth of literary history is often more complex than we allow. Might we not wonder in the first place about the sources of Balzac's story? Whatever the exact intermediary path might be, it is rooted in Vasari's fables of strange, solitary artists like Uccello, who, aspiring to the perfection of their art, labored slowly and haltingly over a long period of time only to produce works that were confused or deformed. Although Balzac sets his tale in a Paris of earlier times, writing an allegorical "fable of modern art," this fact should not prevent us from penetrating to its taproots in Italian legend. If ever the full history of obsession is written, including the history of the obsessive artist, this account will need to be channeled into the meandering migrations of Vasari's fables of artistic obsession into the mainstream of Modernism.

Balzac's fable of art, appropriated by Schwob and projected retrospectively into Vasari's fable of Uccello, worked its spell on Zola, whose novel *L'oeuvre* (translated with license as *The Masterpiece*) is about the Frenhofer-like artist Claude Lantier, inspired in part by the real painter Cézanne, who later identified himself spiritually "as the very person" of Balzac's story. This fusion of fact and fiction induces vertigo. A real painter identifies with a fictional artist, who descends from an imaginary Boccaccesque painter, who is fabricated from a real artist. In the intricate maze of history, the boundaries between the real and the imaginary dissolve, the real becoming fictional, the imaginary becoming real. Uccello is a type of Calandrino or fat carpenter; Frenhofer, who descends from Uccello, comes to life as Cézanne, who says, in effect, "Frenhofer, c'est moi."

But the story does not end here, for the obsessive Frenhofer also becomes the subject of contemplation for Picasso, some of whose playful drawings for an edition of "The Unknown Masterpiece" evoke the elaborate jumble of lines of Schwob's Frenhoferian Uccello and Vasari's proto-Frenhoferian Uccello lost in the uncertainty of his overly contrived perspective devices—an artist who labors unrelentingly, if not anxiously, against the freight of negative critical judgment and failure. Uccello also comes to mind when Picasso's friend Apollinaire writes in praise of Douanier Rousseau, a painter of animals, flowers, and children, of primitive dreams and jungles, the supposedly naïve painter whom the poet likens to Uccello. The fifteenth-century Florentine painter thus emerges in the modern imagination as a sort of quattrocento primitive

like Douanier Rousseau, although Apollinaire does acknowledge that Uccello's technique is superior.

The labyrinthine paths of Uccello lead us back and forth through history, as through a maze—back to Ruskin, convinced that the painter "went off his head with love of perspective," forward to Joan Miró, fascinated by the artist's pictorial structures, and back again to Swinburne's contemporaries, who saw the poet's very likeness in the *Battle of San Romano*. But before we depart this bewildering network of poetical fantasy, let us attend to one of the most beguiling transformations of Uccello in the modern period, this a poem by Giovanni Pascoli from the *Italic Poems*, recalled by Calvino—a free rewriting of Vasari's biography of Uccello no less imaginary than Schwob's *vie imaginaire* of the painter.

In Pascoli's poetical fantasia, after Uccello returns from the market, where he has seen all the birds he cannot afford to purchase, he sadly paints one of them; he also adorns his room with field, flowers, and trees, filled with all the other birds he could not acquire—titmice, nightingales, swans, ravens, eagles, doves, birds with blue, red, green, and yellow plumage. So lost is Uccello in the contemplation of his beloved, imaginary birds that he is deaf to the bells of the cathedral, sounding the hour of Ave Maria. Saint Francis appears to *frate Uccello*, telling him that he must not covet the little birds, which should be allowed to keep their freedom. Speaking to Uccello as he had once preached to the *uccellini*, the little birds themselves, the saint miraculously brings to life all the birds that Uccello had painted in his house. They fly down to the artist, who blissfully falls asleep as a nightingale sings.

The real Paolo Uccello, as we noted, is a shadowy figure, scarcely known to us from the relatively few paintings and documents that have survived, all of which by themselves hardly constitute a "life." The painter nonetheless looms larger than life in the imagination as a legendary figure. A quixotic, obsessive painter, no less preoccupied with birds than with reaching the unattainable perfection of perspective, he is a great-grandfather of all modern artists, real or imaginary, who strive to achieve the unattainable in their art. But in contrast to the complex, dark temperaments of the Modernists, real and imaginary, of Frenhofer and Cézanne, Uccello, who pursues the complexities of perspective, is, finally, and perhaps paradoxically, a bit of a simpleton. Working in solitude, he is a saintly hermit, a devoted scholar of Euclid, an alchemist

among painters. Scarcely tragic, he is pathetic, sweet, and ingenuous, a primitive, a child, a madman, who embodies the fantasies of Romantic innocence, spirituality, imagination, and even insanity. Contemplating this odd, gentle fool, who was once almost turned into a cheese, as he thought, we can only wonder at the amazing powers of fantasy itself, which has metamorphosed the historical Paolo di Dono into the strange, captivating, and fictional being who haunts our poetical imagination no less than he was once so sweetly possessed by his own strange perspective.

SIX



LEONARDO, VASARI, AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Although Vasari's *Lives* of the artists is the foundational text in the formation of modern art history and has consequently inspired a huge body of criticism and scholarship, the investigation of his fecund work remains partial, some might even say superficial. Aspects of his book have been carefully examined, such as his use of sources, his theory of art, and his criticism, but surprisingly little attention has been paid by students of Renaissance culture—by historians, art historians, and scholars of literature alike—to his historical imagination.

As deeply poetical as it is historically shrewd, Vasari's imagination abounds in his fine prose, nowhere more clearly than in the fables or *novelle* which inform his biographies of the artists. Of all these tales one of the richest and most famous is the story Vasari tells of how the young Leonardo, on a small, wooden shield or buckler, painted a monster that was intended to produce the effect of the fabled Medusa. In the nineteenth century, Walter Pater sensed that this story was a fiction, "perhaps an invention," as he said, but he also recognized its "air of truth," by which he meant its historical verisimilitude. Although for a very long time art historians often misread Vasari, either misconstruing his fictions as facts or misidentifying them as errors, in recent years they have returned increasingly to Pater's point of view, recognizing the deeper