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Giorgio Vasari: La fabrique de l'allégorie: culture et fonction de la personnification au cinquecento by Antonella Fenech Kroke

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Antonella Fenech Kroke. *Giorgio Vasari: La fabrique de l'allégorie: culture et fonction de la personnification au cinquecento.*

Biblioteca dell'Archivum romanicum, Serie I: Storia, Letteratura, Paleografia 380. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2011. xxi + 554 pp. €59. ISBN: 978-88-222-6055-0.

It is almost impossible to write a review of a valuable book such as the highly acclaimed and learned work by Antonella Fenech Kroke, *Giorgio Vasari: La fabrique de l'allégorie*, without entering into the current ongoing discussion regarding the authorship of Vasari's *Vite*. This is even more evident given the fact that, in 2011, Marco Ruffini published an equally acclaimed work on Vasari based on directly contradictory assumptions (*Art without an Author: Vasari's Lives and Michelangelo's Death*).

Antonella Fenech Kroke concentrates on the omnipresence of Vasari as an artist but does not focus on the question of the authorship of his reputed writings. In fact her aim is to explore the issue of "culture and function" of personification during the sixteenth century, as her subtitle indicates. We should begin by stating that the author's central assumption, which is frequently repeated, is that, around the middle of the century, the language of allegory is still in its heyday, thanks above all to Vasari as a painter, before it fell into a rigid and formalized repertory.

The author is in fact firmly convinced that the fifth decade of the century was the golden age of allegory ("l'apogée du langage allégorique"), mainly thanks to Vasari, citing the example of his cycle on the vaults of the Monte Oliveto refectory in Naples. Allegory at that moment acquires a symbolic and semantic pregnancy never hitherto attained, even substituting the future linguistic tools through which it would itself be diluted, for example at the time of the complicity between Vasari and Borghini.

Kroke inserts a long chapter as a bridge between one era and the other and between the two phases of Vasari's activity before and after his constant engagement at the court of Cosimo from the 1550s on. In these pages she reconstructs the main developments of both *trattatistica* dedicated to the behavior and of that dedicated to the education of the prince. In doing so she comes to important conclusions, on one hand concerning the status of the ideal artist personified and disseminated by Vasari and, on the other, concerning the ideal sovereign exemplified in Cosimo I.

The definition of this model-orientated aspect is useful for explaining that effect of semantic amplification, as it is defined in the book, in which we can find

also the allegoric system displayed in Palazzo Vecchio. The consequence is that the author reevaluates fully the function of Vasarian *Ragionamenti*, the importance of which has been necessarily, yet foolishly, mortified by those who deny Vasari the full authorship of the *Vite*.

The most convincing and fascinating part of the book is, however, the section dedicated to “tools,” i.e., to the ways in which Vasari uses personification through time from Venice to Naples to Florence, inserting it in ever differing contexts and therefore diversifying its role and function. These are precious pages in which the well-known frames — so dear to Panofsky — of Vasari’s *Libro de’ disegni*, are now compared to what we know about the scenes of Aretino’s *Talanta* and to three different systems of arranging the *spartimento*, recognized by Kroke within the decoration following the transformation into a royal palace of Palazzo Vecchio.

Among the *annexes*, the author inserts an incredibly useful *Répertoire des personifications vasariennes*. Organized in alphabetical order, each entry includes the definition of the respective allegory, a relative description, textual sources, and the place in which the work was executed and is conserved.

Reservations could arguably be made regarding the fact that the author takes for granted, without a preliminary discussion, categories such as Mannerism or Counter-Reformation, considering them absolute concepts. The content, however, is well researched but at times a little lengthy with numerous digressions, resulting in a work that perhaps could be considered too expansive. A slightly shorter and more succinct work might have been preferable.

The virtue of this work lies in its bringing to the surface the methods employed by Vasari in conceiving and executing his painted cycles, which are rich in allegories. This invites the reader of the *Vite* to rethink the text in the light of these patterns. In this respect the book is highly recommended, precisely because terms such as *disegno* or *spartimento* are now enhanced with a fuller meaning.

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