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PAUL BAROLSKY

Art History as Fiction

Although the following essay is about the way we write the history of Italian Renaissance art, it also implicitly concerns the manner in which we talk about the art of other periods. I am interested here both in the uncertainty of interpretation and in the vast body of writings that we dismiss as “incorrect” or in “error.” I believe there are more fruitful ways of describing these interpretations than saying they are “wrong.” Since I am not arguing for particular interpretations but about their implications, I will not take up space with the vast bibliography to which I allude. In other words, although this essay refers to various specific problems of interpretation, it sees them in a broad perspective and does not argue specific cases. The reader who is a specialist in the Renaissance, and even many who are not, will recognize familiar controversies alluded to below, whereas the reader less versed in such matters can turn conveniently to Frederick Hartt’s *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, which exemplifies the kinds of interpretation discussed here, remembering all the while that the issues found in Hartt’s text are similar to and indeed typical of those in other areas of art history.

The West honors a long tradition of writing about art, a tradition millennia old, in prose and poetry. From Homer to Philostratus, from Dante to Vasari, from Malvasia to Winckelmann, from Diderot to Goethe, from Baudelaire to Apollinaire, from Picasso to Barnett Newman, artists, poets, novelists and art historians have written elo-

quently, thoughtfully, and instructively about art, defining a tradition to which the modern field of professional art history, now less than two centuries old and still in its infancy, uncomfortably belongs. Art history has sought to distance itself from this tradition, which is highly poetical, and rhetorical—indeed deeply imaginative. Whereas Vasari or Malvasia, for example, employed fables as part of their historical narratives, professional art historians have sought to transcend fiction as an instrument of historical interpretation. It is my contention, however, that the modern professional art historian, even if he writes less eloquently than a Hazlitt or a Gautier, still writes in a highly imaginative manner. The impulse to invent fables is so great that, despite the desire to move beyond poetry and fiction, or mere impressionism, the scholar continues to tell tall tales, to write, like Vasari, fables of art.

Take the story of Raphael’s girlfriend. Vasari says that the painter would not work in Agostino Chigi’s villa unless his lover was allowed to stay with him in the villa. It is probably the case, whatever the exact facts of Raphael’s love-life might have been, that Vasari wishes, in an exemplary fiction, to associate the artist’s erotic frescoes of Eros and Psyche in the villa with the circumstances of his life. Vasari’s portrait of Raphael’s lover is the seed from which grew the seventeenth-century fable of the Fornarina, the baker’s daughter, who was a Cinderella of sorts, the humble girlfriend of the



1) Raphael, «Fornarina». Rome, Palazzo Barberini.



2) Raphael, «Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia» (detail). Bologna, Pinacoteca.

“prince” of painters. One of the great personages of art historical fiction, she lives on in the unwittingly imaginative literature of professional art history. Some art historians still profess to see her in the portrait of a Venus-like semi-nude woman in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome, even though, in fact, we have not the slightest clue as to who this woman is [Fig. 1]. Certainly her venereal aspect kindles the scholar’s imagination as he wishes to imagine the artist’s love-life, to see the voluptuous subject of the painter’s erotic devotion. Art historians also frequently profess to see the Fornarina in the guise of Mary Magdalene in the painter’s *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia*—a particularly suggestive sighting, given the Magdalene’s own erotic history

[Fig. 2]. Embellishing Vasari, the modern art historian, writing his own fables, sees Raphael’s erotic autobiography in the painter’s art. Projecting the painter’s lover into the portrait of an unknown woman or the image of a saint, the scholar poetically invents his own fictional images. In this respect, he is like Ingres or Picasso when they imagined the Fornarina in their art.

As a fictional being, the Fornarina has distant roots in the ancient legend of Campaspe, the beloved of the painter Apelles. More immediately, she descends from Petrarch’s Laura. No matter that Laura is celestial, Fornarina carnal. They are both imaginary beings. No compelling reason exists, as scholars have recognized, to believe there ever was such a person as Laura, who, most likely, was a poetic fiction. When Petrarch famously writes in his *Canzoniere* that his friend Simon Martini made a portrait drawing of



3) Raphael, «School of Athens» (detail). Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura.

her, it is no less probable that this portrait is itself a poetic fiction, one that heightens our sense of Laura's "reality." At least one scholar has listed this fictive rendering under Martini's "lost works." Suspending disbelief, he uses the poetry as an historical document of what really happened. How remarkable. Imagine using *Orlando Furioso* as such a document? Anything would then be possible in art history, and anything is! Martini's "lost portrait" of Laura is no less real to the unconsciously imaginative scholar than the imaginary portraits of Fornarina. We often speak of the ways in which artists fictionalize real people, including themselves, as they create elaborate personae. By the same token, we might well contemplate the way in which fictional characters, for example, Laura or Fornarina, are brought to life, become real, so real that many scholars, creating their own fables, believe in the reality of these imaginary beings.



4) Raphael, «Expulsion of Heliodorus» (detail). Vatican, Stanza d'Elidoro (detail).

If we think we know what the Fornarina looked like, we also suppose we know what her lover Raphael looked like. Vasari tells us that the gracious youth with a black cap in the right foreground of the *School of Athens* is a self-portrait, and we acquiesce in this identification, although the figure appears to be younger than the painter was in 1510 [Fig. 3]. Modern art historians also profess to see the artist helping support the papal litter in the *Expulsion of Heliodorus*, painted just a few years later, in a figure that does not look at all like the "Raphael" of the *School of Athens* [Fig. 4]. They blithely accept both identifications, because they delight in seeing the painter idealized among philosophers and as a papal courtier. The two presumed images of Raphael become moments from the artist's pictorial autobiography, but this biography may be more fictional than the scholar realizes, especially if Raphael did not paint himself in one fresco or the other.

The claim for the so-called "portrait" of Raphael in the *Expulsion of Heliodorus* is based on its presumed similitude with the head of a bearded man, said to be Raphael's self-portrait, in the so-called



5) Raphael, «Raphael and His Fencing Master». Paris, Louvre.

Raphael and His Fencing Master in the Louvre [Fig. 5]. I say presumed similitude because the two heads are not that similar at all. The art historian, however, has no less difficulty than the poet in suspending disbelief. He wants to know what Raphael looked like, so he conveniently finds him in the Louvre portrait, exactly as he wants him to be, cool, aloof, dignified. But is this man in fact Raphael? If not, and here we must remain suspended in dubitation, then the possibility exists that he belongs to the gallery of “imaginary portraits” poetically conceived by that modern fabulist, the professional art historian.

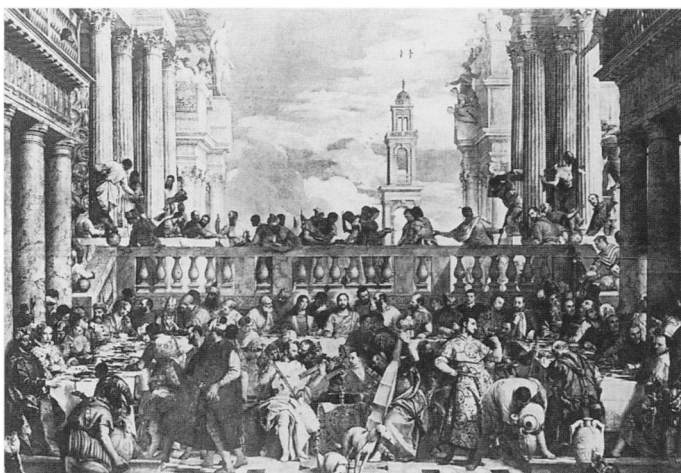
Raphael's pictorial biography has further ramifications. When the painter supposedly appears in the *School of Athens* [Fig. 6] he is united with other great artists of his day, or so the claim has been made by art historians. Vasari saw Bramante's likeness in the figure of Euclid, a witty identification, since architecture is based on geometry. No matter, as at least one observer has remarked, that this personage looks not at all like Bramante as he appears on a contem-



6) Raphael, «School of Athens». Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura.

porary portrait medal. Many still see the architect in Raphael's work. For years scholars thought they saw Leonardo's likeness in the face of Raphael's Plato at the center of the fresco, an attractive idea, since it places the learned painter among other learned men. Most spectacular of all is the nearly universal claim in the modern literature that Raphael portrayed Michelangelo as the brooding philosopher Heraclitus. We easily suspend disbelief here, too, since the figure is rendered in Michelangelo's own style, as if in the guise of the artist's Sistine prophets. No matter that Heraclitus does not look like Michelangelo as he appears in a portrait painted by Bugiardini not so many years later. When we see Michelangelo in Raphael's fresco, we pay homage to the great painter of the Sistine ceiling through our identification. How likely is it, however, that Raphael would himself have paid homage in this way to his hated rival at the Vatican?

Taking a broad view of the modern art historical story of the *School of Athens* as an assemblage of great artists among philosophers, we see that the scholar, in an unwittingly poetical way, follows the example of Vasari, who pretended he saw Cimabue, Arnolfo, Lapo, and Simone Martini in the fresco of the *via veritatis* in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella, a sort of trecento “School of Athens.” Our modern art historical fable is not only grounded in Vasari's historical practices of inventing portraits to celebrate artists; it is also rooted in Ingres's *Apotheosis of Homer*, a painting inspired by the *School of Athens*. As Ingres saw the great artists in his painting, the art historians, following him, see an assemblage of great

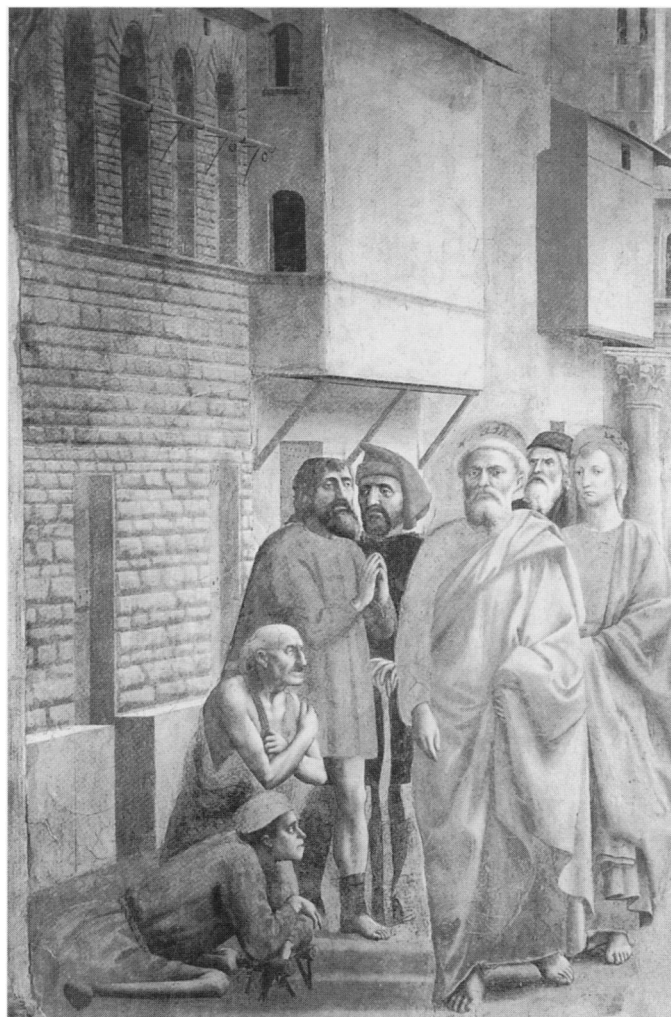


7) Veronese, «Marriage at Cana». Paris, Louvre.

artists in the very work that inspired his own pictorial fiction. Scholars implicitly see in Raphael's fresco a kind of historical allegory, for Raphael, they imagine, has painted the very founders of the "High Renaissance" in Italy.

The identification of the group portrait of artists in painting is a topos of modern art history. We universally identify the group portrait of Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, and Bassano as a music-making quartet in Veronese's great *Marriage at Cana* in the Louvre [Fig. 7]. Here we see the four Venetians portrayed in concert, making music before Jesus, or so we think. We can easily forget that this identification stems from the eighteenth century, and if we do recall that it was made two hundred years after the fact, we probably suppose it was rooted in oral tradition. We are reluctant to question the identification of the four great Venetians, because we want to see them as part of their Venetian setting and because the very harmony of their music so easily stands for that of their own art; thus, when we see the painters in Veronese's picture, we suspend disbelief, as we do when reading a novel.

Group portraits often contain or imply little stories. In Tintoretto's *Christ among the Doctors* in Milan there is a row of figures in which both Michelangelo and Titian have been identified. Why? Because according to the theory of the day, Tintoretto combined the drawing of Michelangelo with the color of Titian, and so it is supposed that Tintoretto pictorializes this theory in the form of portraits. One writer has even suggested that Tintoretto portrayed himself as a youthful figure between his aged teachers, completing his story. A good story indeed, but not a very likely one.



8) Masaccio, «St. Peter Healing By His Shadow». Florence, Brancacci Chapel.

Some of the most delightful sightings of artists have been made in the Brancacci Chapel. On the wall behind the altar table, in the scene of *St. Peter Healing by his Shadow*, various identifications have been suggested [Fig. 8]. The youthful blond at the right is said to be Masaccio himself, the old man with a beard next to him is believed by some to be Donatello, while others prefer to see Donatello in the figure with the red cap on the other side of the saint. It is indeed appealing to see Donatello and Masaccio together as



9) Michelangelo, «Last Judgment». Vatican, Sistine Chapel.

they walk down a Florentine street, before our very eyes, even though, in fact, we scarcely know what they looked like. Our impulse to find portraits of artists in the Brancacci chapel or elsewhere is similar to the desire in the Middle Ages and Renaissance to gather the relics of saints, only now the images of artists have become our relics. When we see the portraits of artists before our very own eyes, when we project them into works of art, we behold our cultural heroes

as if they were present or, rather, as if we were in their presence, as they are supposedly in the presence of Masaccio's St. Peter.

No less probable is the sighting of four artists on the left wall of the Brancacci Chapel. In the corner of the lower fresco, near the throne of St. Peter, four artists are said to appear in a group: the author himself, Masaccio, his associate, Masolino, Brunelleschi, and Alberti. There is no compelling reason to believe that this communi-



10) Botticelli, «Primavera». Florence, Uffizi.

ty of artists appears here, but the imaginative Vasarian tradition of envisioning such groups, alive in the literature on Raphael and the Venetians, encourages us to accept their identification. Besides, we want to see these painters, we want to know what they look like. And so we do.

Nowhere is the impulse to see the portrait of the artist greater than in the writings on Michelangelo. Indeed, it would almost appear that at one time or another every figure in Michelangelo's art has been identified as a self-portrait. Sometimes Michelangelo's portrait is found more than once in the same work, as in the *Last Judgment*, where his face is seen in the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew and

again in one of the blessed souls in Heaven [Fig. 9]. It is one thing to say that Michelangelo, who saw himself as a martyr saint, would have identified himself with Bartholomew; it is quite another to say that he portrayed himself as the saint. No matter that the features of Bartholomew's flayed skin are indecipherable. If we want to see Michelangelo here, we will not be denied.

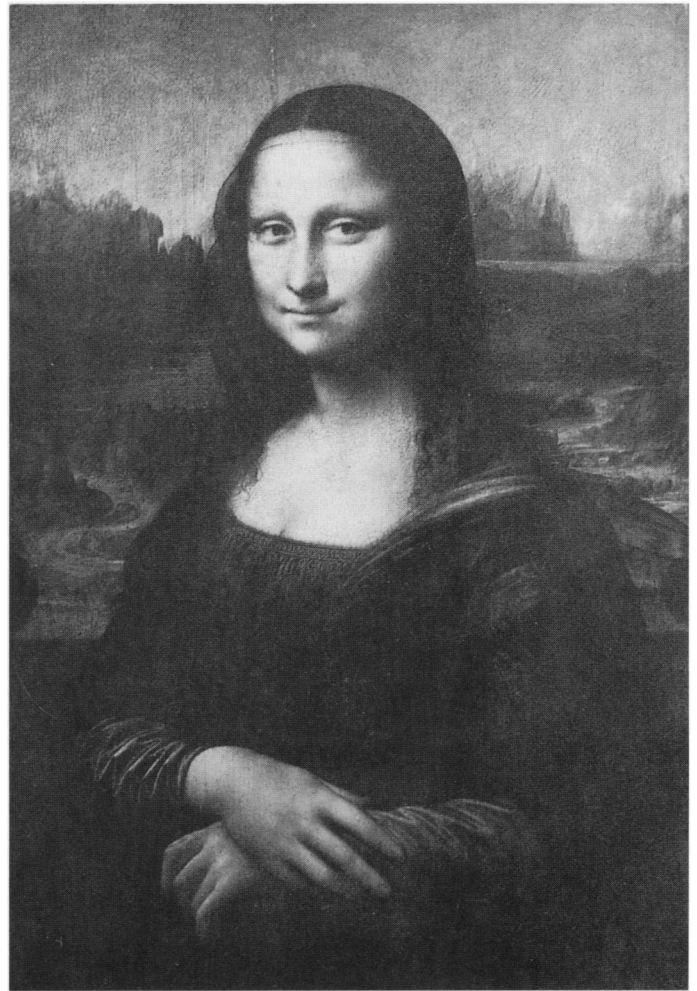
Michelangelo's fresco is far more than an image in which the artist supposedly portrays himself. It is a gallery of portraits, of personages who figured in Michelangelo's life, or so it has been said. Vasari says that Minos is a portrait of a papal functionary who ridiculed Michelangelo's art, now placed by the artist in Hell, and



11) Giorgione, «Tempesta». Venice, Accademia.

modern commentators have sometimes recognized Pietro Aretino, who similarly criticized the painter, as the figure holding Michelangelo's flayed skin. Moreover, some historians have found in the fresco Tommaso Cavalieri, the subject of Michelangelo's intense love and devotion, and at least one art historian has claimed that San Lorenzo might portray Lorenzino, who assassinated Michelangelo's hated enemy Duke Alessandro. Another scholar has argued that Michelangelo's patron, Pope Paul III, also appears in Michelangelo's work. All in all, the fresco becomes an illustrated autobiography, appropriate to an artist whose poetry is autobiographical, an artist who dictated his autobiography to *Condivi*. It does not matter that some, if not all, of these identifications are probably fabulous. The fresco lives in our imagination as a great autobiographical fable filled with allusions to Michelangelo's suffering, his harsh treatment by critics, his politics, his love-life, and his spirituality.

Sometimes the fables of art historians are deeply moving. At least one scholar has claimed to see in Botticelli's *Primavera*, in the



12) Leonardo, «Mona Lisa». Paris, Louvre.

guise of Venus, a portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici's beloved, as if the picture were a poetic hymn to her [Fig. 10]. Unfortunately, however, we have no conclusive evidence concerning the circumstances in which the picture was made. Moreover, we have no reason to suppose that the face of Venus is a portrait at all. Other art historians have linked the painting to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici. According to one theory, now widely diffused in our textbooks, the picture is a moral allegory, closely related to the teachings of Ficino, the tutor of the presumed patron, the young Lorenzo di

Pierfrancesco, who was urged by Ficino in a letter to wed Venus, the personification of *Humanitas* or virtue. According to another art historical story, the picture was made on the occasion of the actual wedding of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco; and, as a garden of love, the picture is here seen as a pictorial epithalamium. It is not my purpose to adjudicate between these overlapping but rival interpretations, all of which have something to commend them, even if they are not "true." The picture can only have been made in one particular situation, for one purpose, whether one of those alluded to here or one still to be discovered. In this case, some of the proposed interpretations must necessarily be fictions, artful fables in their own right.

One could go on to review the countless stories art historians tell so poetically about Renaissance art from Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ* to Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time*, tales disguised as definitive interpretations. To catalogue all of them here would be otiose. One typical, if extreme, example, summing up the art historian's impulse to use art to tell his own stories will suffice. I am speaking of Giorgione's elusive *Tempesta*, which has been subjected to countless interpretations or, as I would prefer to say, fables [Fig. 11]. Among the dominating stories of recent years is the explanation that in some mysterious way the picture is related to the military situation in Venice, darkly symbolized by the storm above, even though there is virtually nothing to support such a claim. This particular story has a special appeal nowadays, because we believe that all art has deep political resonances. In time, this fable may seem as improbable, if not laughable, as the now almost forgotten nineteenth-century fable according to which the picture is a portrait of the artist's family. If one of the interpretations of the *Tempesta* is true, it follows that the others are fables—whether the fabulous claim that the picture represents a hunter with Ceres, the tale of a mother in the wilds with her son, a future hero, the story of Adam and Eve, or an allegory of Fortitude and Charity. The subject of many modern tales, the *Tempesta* is the painted music that inspires many an art historical libretto.

I wish to conclude with one final topic that reflects our need for fables. I am speaking of Vasari's *novella* concerning the painting of Mona Lisa and a modern scholar's recent response to it [Fig. 12]. According to the well-known tale, Leonardo, in order to give Mona

Lisa a pleasing smile, employed buffoons and musicians to entertain her while he painted. It has recently been suggested, however, that this delightful story is a fable that explains the origins of *la Gioconda's* very jocundity. How likely, after all, is the story of a painter employing entertainers while he works? The tale is more suggestive of how a royal personage at court, a queen or duchess, might have been entertained. It has more to do with Leonardo's courtly milieu in Milan or Vasari's own situation at court than with the practices of portrait painting in Florence. Who ever heard of such procedures? If the painter wanted a smile, he could more simply have told his sitter, "say cheese," or have imagined the smile himself. Even so, one recent writer objected to the suggestion that Vasari's story is a fiction, clinging to it as evidence of what really happened. He writes that it is "moving" to discover that Mona Lisa was "probably" still alive when Vasari wrote and, therefore, we cannot "exclude the possibility" that Vasari "need not have invented the story," for he "might conceivably" have had it from Lisa herself. The art historian's diction betrays the way in which he clings to a tale as a "true story" because he wants to believe it, as do many of us. For we want to imagine the exact circumstances in which the painter worked, and Vasari's *novella* provides us with such a "picture," or so we think or hope. I would suggest, however, that this modern interpretation, embellishing Vasari, is itself a fable, the account of what was called in the nineteenth century an "imaginary conversation," an imaginary conversation between a legendary personage and a great and famous writer.

Although I have selected here examples of art historical interpretation concerning Italian Renaissance art, readers will recognize that they are typical of writing about art in general, from Phidias to Bernini, from Manet to Pollock. I am not saying that art history is altogether fanciful, that it is without factual foundations, that it does not teach us a great deal about the past, about art and the society in which it was made. I am saying, however, that modern professional art historical interpretation is far more deeply imaginative than most art historians recognize or are willing to admit, and that art history, despite its efforts to reject the poetical, belongs, if unwittingly, to the imaginative tradition of writing about art that descends from Homer and Vasari. In the study of literary genres, it should be categorized under historical fiction.