6

Biography and Autobiography

The biographical method of art history approaches works of art in relation to the artist's life and personality. It assumes a direct connection between artists and their art, and it takes seriously the notion of authorship. The meaning of a work, its conception and execution, is seen as ultimately determined by the artist, with social and economic factors playing a secondary role. Nor are the formal elements of style thought to exist independently of iconography, which, however conventional, reflects the artist's individual choices in some way. The biographical method relies on texts concerning the artist's life, and also requires that one know which artist made which work. In the absence of such data, a traditional biographical method cannot be applied. The first sections of this chapter discuss biographical conventions about art and artists. The remainder takes up specific works, and shows the presence of the artist in them. It is the nature of that presence which reveals aspects of the artist's identification with the work.

Artists and Gods

In the history of Western art, the earliest written references that name specific artists have a mythical character. They associate

artists with gods, the former making lifelike figures and the latter, creating life itself. God's role as the supreme artist is illustrated in a thirteenth-century manuscript illumination [43], where he is shown drawing the universe with a compass. This image reflects the biographical convention that art is divinely inspired and that the artist has a divine or noble origin. Patrons of art, as well, could be inspired by divine intervention. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, King Gudea of Lagash dreamed that the goddess Ninhursag instructed him to build a temple. In Egypt, Imhotep was credited as the originator of monumental stone architecture. His greatest surviving work is King Zoser's step pyramid at Saqqara, which dates to about 2700 B.C. [44]. Imhotep was later deified—made into a god—and worshiped at Heliopolis, literally the "city of the sun."

In ancient Greece, *mimesis* and the ability to create the illusion of nature became another conventional aspect of artists' biographies. We have seen (Chapter One) that this is a feature of the Platonic view of art, but it, too, has its origins in the mythic past. The architect and sculptor Daedalus was reputed to have made figures so lifelike that they seemed able to walk and talk. Prometheus stole fire from the gods in order to make his sculptures come alive. Although they were remarkably lifelike, they lacked breath, or spirit, which the Greeks identified with fire. But Prometheus, in the view of the Greek gods, went too far. They condemned him to eternal torture—he was chained to a rock and a vulture devoured his liver, which continually grew back. In this case, the gods objected because Prometheus went beyond artistic creation and refused to be satisfied with the illusions of art. He attempted to achieve the real thing, and, in so doing, challenged the supremacy of the gods.

In the myth of Pygmalion, by contrast, the artist does succeed in effecting the transformation from art to reality. But rather than achieve this by theft, he does so by praying to a goddess. In remaining subservient to the gods, Pygmalion gained favor with Venus, who answered his prayer and turned art into life.

Despite the association of gods with artists, the distinction between them is carefully guarded by the gods. In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, God became alarmed that the building was reaching into his territory. As a result, he rendered the builders unable to communicate by confounding their language, and they

43. *God as Architect*, from the Bible Moralisée, thirteenth-century manuscript illumination, fol. 1v, Reims, France.

44. Imhotep, Step Pyramid, c. 2750 B.C. Saqqara, Egypt.

stopped working. When human creators such as Prometheus and the tower builders challenge the gods, they, like Arachne, are punished. But when artists are respectful of the gods and acknowledge them as the source of artistic inspiration—as Athena wanted Arachne to do—they are allowed to pursue their creativity.

Many ancient accounts of artists and patrons are assembled in texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Pliny's *Natural History.*[1] Ovid describes the exploits of the mythic artists, and Pliny tends to deal with historical figures. Gudea's building activity is recorded on Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets. In all cases, the biographical approach to art depends on the written word, even if it is only the artist's signature. And even if one undertook a biographical study of an artist based solely on his work, one would need to have identified a body of work. Such an identification would usually rely on written evidence. The most basic biographical "text," therefore, is the name of the artist.

Biography as Literary Portraiture

Pliny's accounts of the Greek and Roman artists emphasize names. Even when he knows nothing of an artist's work, which is the case with several women, if he knows the name of an artist, he records it. His descriptions are, in effect, literary portraits of the lives, personalities, and works of ancient artists.

Pliny is also a rich source for many of the basic conventions that characterize the genre of artists' biography. His discussion of the fifth-century B.C. Greek painter Zeuxis reflects several such conventions, notably that the artist surpassed his predecessors in skill, wealth, and fame. Pliny cites an epigram of Apollodorus that states, "Zeuxis robbed his masters of their art and carried it off with him."[2] The image is one of theft (compare Prometheus), which evokes the convention of the artist as a trickster and a master of artifice. That Zeuxis carries off his masters' art also suggests the spoils of war, and hence the convention of fierce competition among generations of artists as well as between contemporaries.

Thanks to his skill in painting, according to Pliny, Zeuxis amassed a fortune and spent it advertising his own fame. At Olympia, he had his "*name* embroidered in gold lettering on the

checked pattern of his robes" [italics mine].[3] Zeuxis' pride in his abilities also led him to give away his pictures, on the grounds that their high value was beyond what buyers could afford to pay.[4] The relationship of an artist's sense of his own talents to the value of his work is a fairly constant biographical theme.

Echoes of Pliny-on-Zeuxis reverberate throughout Western biography. In the sixteenth century, for example, Raphael was so determined in his pursuit of wealth that he wrote to his uncle, pointing out that, had he agreed to marry, he would not have saved up three thousand gold scudi.[5] Rembrandt, as we have seen (Chapter Four), marketed his paintings with the aim of amassing wealth. And Rembrandt's biographer Arnold Houbraken wrote that his love of money prompted his students to paint gold coins on the floor, which the artist tried to pick up.[6] Parmigianino took his passion for wealth to unhealthy extremes; he renounced painting and devoted himself to making gold by alchemical means. Zeuxis turned the tables in giving away his work because of its high value. This reveals an arrogance that both asserts his genius and deprives him of money. In a sense, he cuts off his nose to spite his face, which avoids the dangers of *hubris* and turns the artist into a philanthropist.

seeking Wealth

Pliny says that, when Zeuxis was going to paint a *Helen* for the temple of Hera, "he held an inspection of maidens of the place paraded naked and chose five, for the purpose of reproducing in the picture the most admirable points in the form of each."[7] This corresponds to a convention derived from Plato's notion of the essential ideal. It assumes a prior conception of Truth and Beauty that the artist strives to capture. Zeuxis selects the most "truthful" forms from different women (whose individual imperfection prevents a single one from fulfilling the ideal). He then reassembles the forms to arrive at a totality that is more beautiful than the sum of its parts. In the sixteenth century, Raphael described a similar procedure when seeking a model for his painting of *Galatea*. He wrote his friend Castiglione, author of *The Courtier*, that no single woman fulfilled his "idea" of beauty. As a result, in order to paint a beautiful woman, he had to extract forms from several women and combine them.[8]

Zeuxis' rivalry with contemporary artists is exemplified by his competition with Parrhasius of Ephesus.[9] In this case, they were vying for excellence in *mimesis*, and each wanted to outdo the other by

creating the most convincing illusion of reality. Zeuxis painted such a realistic picture of grapes, which he hung on the front of a theater stage, that birds flew up and tried to eat them. In response, Parrhasius painted a curtain, and Zeuxis asked that it be opened to reveal the picture behind it. When he realized his mistake, he acknowledged defeat, for he had fooled only the birds, but Parrhasius had fooled him.

On still another occasion, Zeuxis reprimanded himself for imperfect illusionism. Pliny recounts that he "painted a Child Carrying Grapes, and when birds flew to the fruit with the same frankness as before he strode up to the picture in anger with it and said, 'I have painted the grapes better than the child, as if I had made a success of that as well, the birds would inevitably have been afraid of it.'"[10] In the first instance, Zeuxis fools birds but is himself fooled, and in the second, his grapes rather than his child prove to be convincingly illusionistic.

Parrhasius' victory turned out to be prophetic, for he was able to paint human figures that could be taken for real. And Pliny tells us which skills made this possible: he gave "vivacity to the expression of the countenance," drew outlines that conveyed a sense of three-dimensional volume, and contours that suggested "the presence of other parts."[11] Pliny cites Parrhasius' painting *The People of Athens,* in which he depicts their character as "fickle, choleric, unjust and variable, but also placable and merciful and compassionate, boastful, . . . lofty and humble, fierce and timid—and all these at the same time."[12] In other words, Parrhasius was able to convey the contradictory nature of the Greeks and show psychological conflict as well as the anatomical structure of human form.

Two particularly famous examples of Parrhasius' illusionism, in Pliny's view, depict men in the throes of physical exertion. One, *Runner in the Race in Full Armor,* "seems to sweat with his efforts."[13] The other, *Runner in Full Armor Taking Off His Arms,* is "so lifelike that he can be perceived to be panting for breath."[14] Because of his skill, Parrhasius is described by Pliny as arrogant to the point of coining his own epithets (modifiers of his *name*), including "Prince of Painters." He also claimed descent from Apollo, the Greek sun god, thereby conforming to the biographical convention of divine lineage.

According to Pliny, the greatest of all painters before or after his own era was the fourth-century B.C. Apelles of Cos. His competition

with Protogenes of Rhodes to determine who could draw the finest line is well known. Apelles won, and his victory is the source of the ancient maxim "No day without a line." He was also something of a trickster, and liked to hide when his work was exhibited in order to hear spontaneous criticism from observers. On one occasion, a shoemaker remarked that in a painting of shoes, Apelles had left out one of the loops. When Apelles corrected his mistake, the shoemaker fell prey to his own *hubris* and, at a later exhibition, criticized a leg. At this, Apelles appeared from behind the painting and said "that a shoemaker in his criticism must not go beyond the sandal"—an incident that gave rise to the proverb "Let a shoemaker stick to his last."[15]

Pliny makes much of Apelles' illusionistic genius. He notes, for example, that the artist concealed the blind eye of King Antigonus by depicting him in three-quarter view. His *Alexander the Great Holding a Thunderbolt*—which means Alexander with the attributes of Zeus—showed the fingers in three dimensions so that they appeared "to stand out from the picture."[16] His *Nude Hero* "challenged Nature herself."[17] So lifelike were his portraits that the physiognomists—people who foretell the future by reading foreheads—could work as well from the pictures as from the real people. And when he showed his picture of a horse to living horses, the living horses were fooled and neighed at the picture.[18]

In addition to his artistic skill, according to Pliny, Apelles had a gracious and courteous manner. This endeared him to Alexander, who liked to visit the artist's studio and, in fact, had officially decreed that only Apelles be allowed to paint his portrait. Alexander conferred on Apelles the even greater honor of painting his mistress, Pancaspe, in the nude. When Apelles fell in love with his model, Alexander gave her to him. In this way, Pliny says, Alexander gave both his lover and his affections to the artist, and Pancaspe, once the "mistress of a monarch, . . . now belonged to a painter."[19] Apelles is thus associated with the king, who rules by divine right, and therefore implicitly claims descent from the gods.

Hagiography Replaces Biography

From the Early Christian period (fourth century A.D.) to the fourteenth century, the biographical approach to art history is hampered

by a dearth of names. Exceptions such as the name GISLEBERTUS carved on the Romanesque tympanum of Autun Cathedral in Burgundy [45] highlight the relative anonymity of medieval artists. During that time, hagiography—the lives and miracles of the saints—largely supplanted the brief, but memorable, biographical accounts of artists in antiquity.

Nevertheless, certain conventions persist. In the New Testament apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Saint Thomas, for example, Christ is described as a child sculptor who makes birds out of clay. At his command, they come to life and fly.[20] This instance is consistent with the biographical—and autobiographical—convention attributing signs of early promise to artists. It also incorporates conventions in which artists are seen as masters of illusion, and hence as magicians, as well as alluding to their divine origins. In Christian art, the iconography of the baby king, which shows Christ as a miniature

45. GISLEBERTUS signature, c. 1130. Autun Cathedral, France.

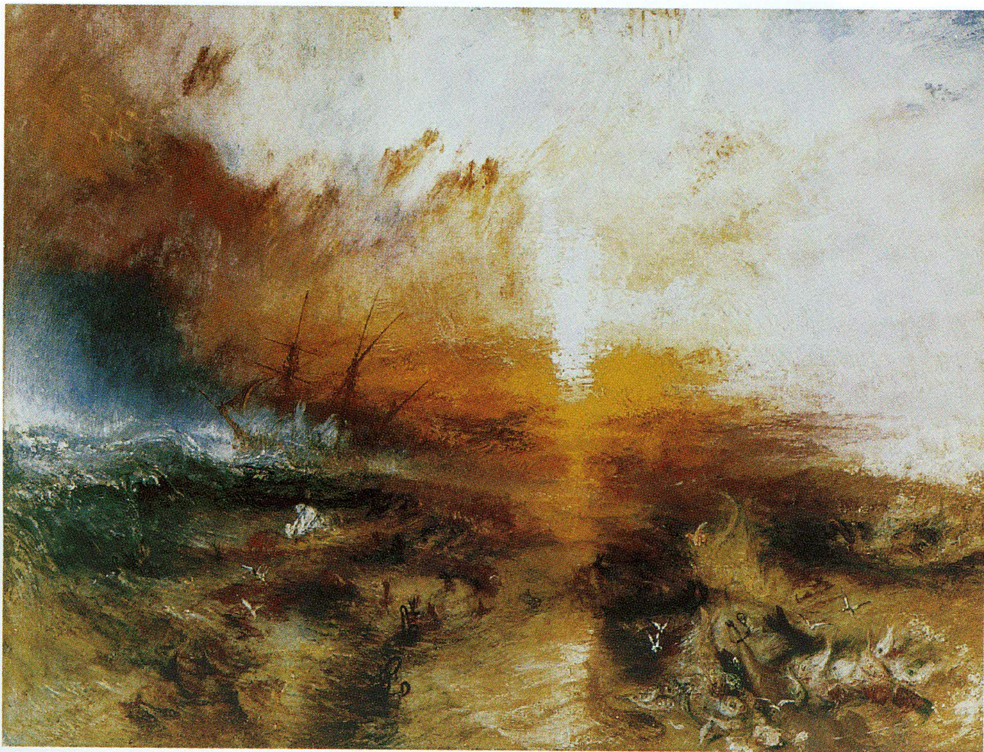

Plate 1. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Slave Ship*, 1840. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Plate 2. Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space,* 1940. Musée National díArt Moderne, Paris.

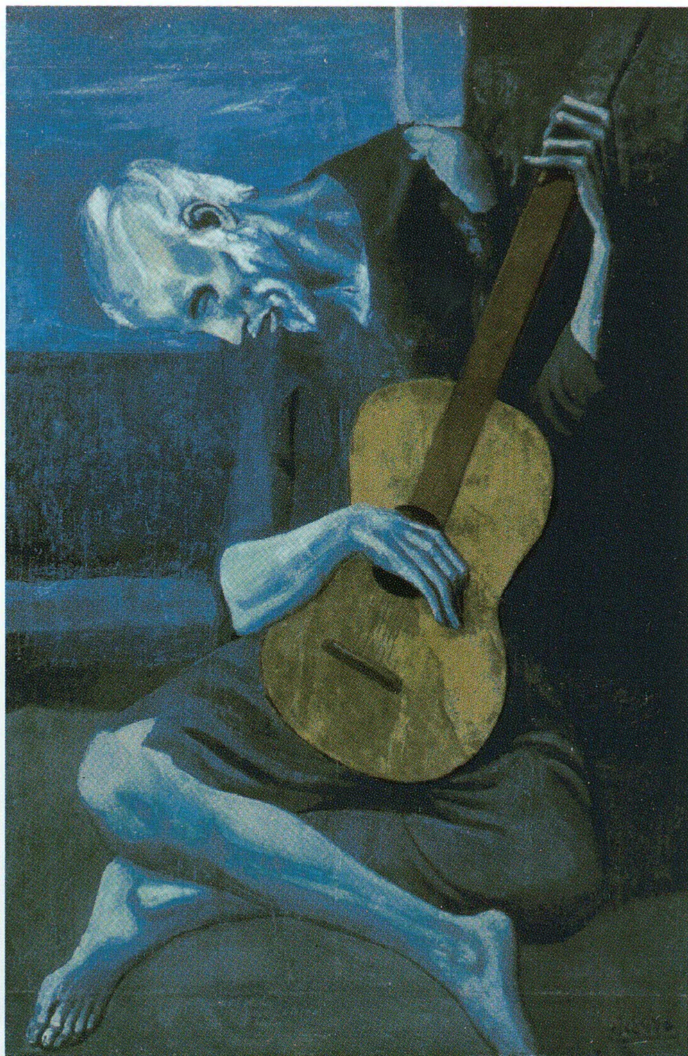

Plate 3. Pablo Picasso, *The Old Guitarist*, 1903. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Plate 4. Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Louvre, Paris

adult sitting upright and blessing the world, combines the promise of childhood with adult greatness into a single image. At the age of ten, Christ disputes with the Doctors in the temple, which also shows a precocious intellectual development.[21]

Christ became an example that the saints and martyrs tried to follow. Saint Francis of Assisi, in particular, set out to lead his life "in imitation of" Christ's life. The intensity of the saint's identification with Christ is shown when he renounces his father's wealth to assume a life of poverty, and when he receives the stigmata, or wounds suffered by Christ on the Cross. Saint Francis did not make art, but the tradition of his ability to speak with birds reveals the depth of his community with nature and with the sense of God's presence in it. Instead of producing illusionistic statues, Francis and other saints—like Christ—perform miraculous resuscitations. They do not actually create life, but they do, on occasion, restore the dead to life.

Vasari's Lives

With the beginning of the Renaissance, especially in Italy from the early fourteenth century, biographies of artists begin to reappear. A new emphasis on individual achievement and personal fame entered the contemporary literature—for example, Boccaccio's (1313–75) lives of famous men and women, and Petrarch's (1304–74) *Triumph of Fame*. By the middle of the fifteenth century, artists such as Ghiberti and Alberti had written autobiographies. Humanist authors writing on the dignity of man and the revival of Classical texts further contributed to the artist's emergence from the relative anonymity of the Middle Ages.

The text that is generally considered a landmark in the transition from anonymity to fame is from Dante's (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy*. His lines in Canto XI of *Purgatory* proclaim Giotto's triumph in obscuring the fame of Cimabue:

> Once, Cimabue thought to hold the field
> In Painting; Giotto's all the rage today;
> The other's fame lies in the dust concealed. [Dorothy Sayers][22]

But the work that epitomizes the biographical approach to art history more than any other is Giorgio Vasari's (1511–74) *Lives of the*

Artists of 1550 (revised in 1568). It begins with the life of Cimabue (c. 1240–1302) and ends with Vasari's autobiography. The author's intention, as stated in the preface, is to preserve the *names* of artists and to link them with their works. The "ravening maw of time," he writes, ". . . has . . . blotted out and destroyed the names of all those who have been kept alive by any other means than by the right vivacious and pious pens of writers."[23] For Vasari, therefore, there is a necessary link between the preservation of names and the written word.

Vasari's purposes in writing the *Lives* have certain affinities with the miracles of the saints. In recording names, he hopes to ensure that they are remembered: "to defend them . . . from this second death [i.e., being forgotten], and to preserve them as long as may be possible in the memory of the living."[24] He also describes resuscitating artists from the dead by recovering their biographies. It was only through the greatest diligence, he asserts, that he was able to "draw them from the tales of old men and from various records and writings, left by their heirs a prey to dust and food for worms."[25]

Vasari revives the biographical conventions of antiquity in his Renaissance *Lives*. He begins by comparing God to a sculptor, calling man the "first statue."[26] He cites Pliny's account of Apelles, and then names his own "greatest artist"—Michelangelo. God, he says, created Michelangelo, who excelled in painting and in sculpture, the "king of sculptors, the prince of painters, and the most excellent of architects," and who, "after the manner of God, . . . can give us infinite delight."[27] Vasari "deifies" Michelangelo in metaphor as *il divino*. He says that he was born under a star—like Christ—and was descended from the noble counts of Canossa. The conventional rather than actual nature of these claims is evident, for the "star" is possible, and can have an astrological meaning, but the counts of Canossa are a fiction.

In addition to the "deification" of Michelangelo, Vasari notes that some artists were sent by heaven, as if God had lent them temporarily to the world. This notion is related to the conviction that artistic genius is inborn, a given of nature—a view rejected by the Marxists and some feminists.

In the "Life of Cimabue," Vasari cites Dante's verse (opposite), but it is his "Life of Giotto" that best embodies the conventions of

artists' biographies. Vasari describes Giotto's early childhood promise, according to which he was ten years old when Cimabue happened upon him drawing a sheep on a rock. The older artist instantly recognized the boy's talent, obtained his father's permission to train him as a painter, and then was surpassed by his pupil.[28] In tending sheep, Giotto is implicitly compared with Christ, who is traditionally portrayed as a shepherd, and with the shepherd boy David, who is one of the Old Testament types for Christ.

As with Michelangelo's fictive genealogy,[29] however, the conventional nature of Giotto's reputed genius in drawing sheep is readily evident from his *Nativity* in the Arena Chapel [17]. In that painting, the sheep are not particularly striking for the accuracy or brilliance of their execution. But other aspects of the painting are. For example, Giotto was the first artist since antiquity to render figures—here, the shepherds—in back view. To do so requires the construction of a three-dimensional picture space, which he also pioneered. His depiction of the intense gaze exchanged between Mary and Christ shows a new, and insightful, awareness of the mother-child relationship, and his dozing Joseph is a masterpiece of volumetric form.

Why, then, does Vasari repeat the anecdote about the sheep, when there is more than enough to account for Giotto's fame in his new way of representing space, weight, form, and dramatic portrayal of character? It would seem that Vasari uses the sheep to satisfy the requirements of biographical convention, specifically the convention associating artists with gods.

Having been "recognized" by the reigning artist of the older generation, Giotto, in Vasari's biography, proceeds according to convention. Years later, the pope's messenger arrives at Giotto's studio, seeking an artist for Saint Peter's, in Rome. Giotto draws a circle with such precision that the pope recognizes his genius, and hires him. This increased Giotto's fame and wealth considerably, for the pope paid him six hundred gold ducats.

Like Apelles, Giotto was known for his humor and wit.[30] This is manifest throughout the Arena Chapel scenes—for example, the detail of Enrico Scrovegni's cloak that illusionistically overlaps the edge of the entrance arch [26]. Sometimes, like certain of the ancient artists described by Pliny, Giotto used illusionism to play tricks on people. "It is said," Vasari wrote, "that Giotto, while working in his

boyhood under Cimabue, once painted a fly on the nose of a figure that Cimabue himself had made."[31] Cimabue believed that the fly was real, and tried to brush it off.

Just as Apelles had admonished the shoemaker for *hubris* in criticizing more than the sandal, so Giotto was intolerant of pretension. When a low-class fellow brought Giotto a buckler, and asked him to paint a coat of arms on it, the artist took offense. Instead of a coat of arms, Giotto painted "a helmet, a gorget, a pair of arm-pieces, a pair of iron gauntlets, a cuirass and a back-piece, a pair of thigh-pieces, a pair of leg-pieces, a sword, a dagger, and a lance."[32] When his client returned and became angry at the work, Giotto replied that he had painted him an entire suit of armor.

These and other conventions of artists' biography fill the pages of Vasari's *Lives*. Because of the mythic tradition relating artists to gods, there is a theme in artists' biography that establishes a genealogy of art and artists, in which both are descended from gods. Pliny describes this in terms of the material of art—for example, types of stone or metal, and the development of colors—and Vasari in family terms. He makes a point of mentioning both the biological and the artistic "fathers" of the artists. Giotto's father agreed to have Cimabue train him; Castagno's father died, but he was discovered by one of the Medici, who took him to Florence; Mantegna's birth was lowly, but he was adopted by an artist who worked for the Carrara lords in Padua; Raphael's father arranged for his apprenticeship to Perugino, and Leonardo was apprenticed by *his* father to Verrocchio. Michelangelo's father opposed his wish to be a sculptor, but eventually apprenticed him to the painter Ghirlandaio. Like Castagno, Michelangelo was discovered by the Medici, the leading patrons in fifteenth-century Florence.

This constructed kinship system among the artists also assumes a spiritual cast in Vasari. He records as popular wisdom that "the spirit of Masaccio had entered the body of Fra Filippo [Lippi]"[33] and that Raphael's spirit "passed into the body of" Parmigianino.[34] Vasari cites Greek epigrams linking Donatello with Michelangelo: "Either the spirit of Donato works in Buonarroto, or that of Buonarroto began by working in Donato."[35] This is consistent with the fact that Donatello and Michelangelo are the sculptural giants of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, respectively, and that both

were patronized by the Medici. They were also adherents of attempts by Neoplatonic philosophers to integrate Christianity with Platonism and made works illustrating mythological as well as Christian subjects.

To the degree that artists become a "family," the convention of competitive rivalry among them has a sibling quality. In 1401, in Florence, artistic competition became a civic event. Artists submitted reliefs illustrating the Sacrifice of Isaac for the commission to create a new set of doors for the Baptistery. One of the two leading contestants was Ghiberti, the goldsmith and author of the *Commentarii,* in which he discussed art and artists and included his own autobiography. The other main contestant was Brunelleschi, an architect, engineer, and sculptor. Vasari notes that all the competing artists, with the exception of Ghiberti, worked in secret to prevent their ideas from being copied. Ghiberti preferred to have people in and, like Apelles, to hear their comments so that *he* could learn from *them.* When Ghiberti won the commission, Brunelleschi went to Rome and renounced sculpture.

Renunciation in the face of either defeat or superior talent is another biographical convention for artists. Thus Verrocchio is said to have renounced painting when he saw what the young Leonardo could do. In Flanders, Hugo van der Goes reportedly fell into a depression and attempted suicide in 1481, when he realized that he would never produce a work as great as van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece.* But Brunelleschi did not renounce architecture, and came up against his earlier competitor when he was working on the dome of Florence Cathedral.

Ghiberti and Brunelleschi had received the commission jointly, and Brunelleschi objected. He felt that Ghiberti owed his job to political influence and attempted to have him removed. Eventually Brunelleschi resorted to trickery to achieve his ends. He stayed home, saying he was ill, and referred all questions on engineering techniques to Ghiberti. It soon became clear that Brunelleschi, and not Ghiberti, had the knowledge and skill to construct the dome, and Ghiberti was laid off. To Brunelleschi's irritation, however, Ghiberti continued to be paid a stipend for the work.

The resort to trickery, as we have seen in the account of Apelles, is an ongoing convention of artists' biographies. It is related to artifice, *mimesis,* and, in Vasari, to the theme of counterfeiting nature.

He says of Masaccio that his interest in fame led to his recognition "that painting is nothing but the counterfeiting of all things of nature. . . ."[36] Ghiberti, according to Vasari, who had read his autobiography in the *Commentarii*, "delighted in counterfeiting the dies of ancient medals."[37] And Parmigianino amused himself "by counterfeiting everything" once he had noticed the effects of distortion in a convex mirror at the barber shop.[38]

In the case of Parmigianino, counterfeiting took a perverse turn when the artist became obsessed with alchemy. But with Castagno, it became personal and assisted him in covering up the murder of Domenico Veneziano. Castagno's envy of the artist from Venice, particularly of his talent for color, drove him to waylay his rival and violently kill him. He feigned grief, according to Vasari, and confessed only on his deathbed.[39] The conventional character of this story is proved by its inaccuracy, for it has since been shown that Domenico Veneziano outlived Castagno.

Another convention that appears in Vasari is the notion that art can save the artist from danger. As the biblical Joseph was rescued from prison because of his ability to interpret dreams, so Vasari recounts the rescue of Fra Filippo Lippi. The artist had been captured and imprisoned on a ship by the Moors. When he drew a likeness of the master in his elaborate turban, he was freed, and was asked for more portraits. Eventually, because his talent was recognized, he was taken to Naples, where, like Joseph, he worked at court for the king.

A convention that applies mainly to male artists is the role played by women in their lives and art. The woman as a muse who inspires the artist has been a biographical convention since antiquity. In the myth of Pygmalion, it was the imperfection of mortal women that inspired the artist to create the ideal, marble Galatea, whom he treated as a real woman. He thus conflated the image with the person it represented. And just as Apelles fell in love with Pancaspe, Fra Filippo Lippi liked to paint women who aroused his passion. On one occasion, according to Vasari,[40] he had been commissioned to produce a panel painting for a convent. He caught sight of a beautiful novice, and persuaded the nuns to let her pose for his image of the Virgin. The result: he fell in love with his model, and they eloped. Their son, Filippino Lippi, also became a painter.

For Vasari, even more than for the Classical authors, the artist's personality was reflected in his style. In antiquity, the artists who painted illusions were themselves tricksters. But Vasari makes the connection even more explicit. He relates the rough and rugged quality of Castagno's style to his reputation for violence and revenge. He also compares his artistic talent to the ability to deceive in the real world: "Andrea was no less crafty in dissimulation than he was excellent in painting."[41]

Vasari's "Life of Uccello" exemplifies the convention of identifying artists with their art. Endowed by nature with a great talent for painting, Uccello disappointed his biographer by having spent too much time investigating mathematics and perspective. This preoccupation, which made even his wife jealous, resulted in the artist's painting "dry and angular" figures. Furthermore, according to Vasari, Uccello defied the convention in which artists strive to become rich, and made less money than others born with equal talent. He "remained throughout his whole life more poor than famous."[42]

Vasari concludes the *Lives* with his autobiography. Although it is not the earliest example of this genre, it reflects the relationship of biographers to their subjects. Vasari himself was an artist, although less talented than many of those whose lives he translated into written texts.

Developments Since the Renaissance

Since the dawn of the Renaissance, which provided Vasari's starting point for the *Lives*, there has been a proliferation of biographical genres. These range from brief anecdotal comments to autobiographies (Ghiberti and Cellini), notebooks (Leonardo da Vinci), poetry (Michelangelo), memoirs (Vigée-Lebrun), journals (Delacroix), letters (van Gogh), fictional biography (*The Moon and Sixpence*), and occasionally even the artist's signature. Biographical and autobiographical sources are now extensive, and the available material is vast. From Ghiberti's *Commentarii* to the present, artists have written about themselves. For example, Leonardo's notebooks cover a wide range of topics that justifies his reputation as a universal, Renaissance man. He advised artists on how to draw and paint, created architectural plans and maps, and described flowers, rock

formations, the properties of wind, rain, floods, and the physics of flight; he designed flying machines and war machines, composed riddles, and recorded one early childhood memory.

Michelangelo's sonnets are primarily expressions of his inner life. At the same time, however, they can be connected to features of his iconography and to his relationships with people. The memoirs of Vigée-Lebrun reveal herself as well as her time. They include facets of her artistic development, and also portray different aristocratic societies of eighteenth-century Europe. Delacroix's journals can be read as a biography of the artist's art. That they were closely studied by van Gogh is apparent from his letters to his brother Theo, who was an art dealer in Paris. The letters of van Gogh, in turn, chronicle his own life and art, and the influence that other artists had on him.

Today, videos of artists at work record their techniques. Simulated studio visits, taped interviews, and film biographies have been made possible by new visual media. Biographical films on Michelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*), van Gogh (*Lust for Life*), and Toulouse-Lautrec (*Moulin Rouge*) have become classics of their genre. As we saw in Chapter One, some environmental projects (by Smithson and Christo, for example) are largely dependent on the new media for their continued presence in the historical record.

With all these technological developments, we seem to have come a long way from the mythic association of artists with gods. But the biographical approach to artists remains imbued with traditional conventions about the nature of genius. The term *genius,* in fact, originally referred to a divinity, and the conventions associated with it still inform biographies and autobiographies of artists. It is no accident, therefore, that the genius of Picasso, and his domination of twentieth-century Western art, has led to a proliferation of biographical material on him. The very abundance of publications on Picasso, in effect, amounts to a kind of deification. He has been photographed and filmed, taped and interviewed; many people, from casual acquaintances to dealers, critics, intimate friends, and mistresses, have published memoirs describing their relationship with him. The works by his longtime friend and secretary, Jaime Sabartès, have proved to be valuable sources for the artist's life. In 1948, Sabartès published *Picasso: An Intimate Portrait,* which he calls "a narrative and no more . . . of events lived with Picasso, as I remember them."[43]

The account by Sabartès makes no secret of his admiration for Picasso's genius and the satisfaction he felt in sharing Picasso's life. It exemplifies the intimacy that many biographers feel with their subjects, although, in this case, the connection was *lived* and not only researched. The biography combines Picasso's memories as told to Sabartès with Sabartès's recollections of the artist. Its very inception was inspired by an interchange between Picasso and his biographer, for the artist recommended work as an antidote to the negative effects of idleness. His suggestion that Sabartès *work* at *writing* is a corollary to his own prodigious creative energy. It is consistent with what Gertrude Stein, the American expatriate living in Paris and a collector of Picasso's pictures, wrote in her own rather distinctive *Prose Portrait* of the artist: "One whom some were certainly following was one working and certain was one bringing something out of himself then and one who had been all his living had been one having something coming out of them. . . . This one was one who was working."[44]

Taking Picasso's suggestion, Sabartès knew at once that his subject would be Picasso, but he needed a point of view. When he found it, he turned the tables on conventional biography, and used Picasso's portraits of *him* as markers in *his* "portrait" of Picasso. Sabartès recalled that Picasso did portraits of him whenever they spent time together. He "decided, therefore, to take those portraits as texts, to try to imbue with warmth Picasso's pictures of me, to make them live anew, to enrich them with fragments from the life of their creator and shreds from my own."[45] Sabartès's "portrait" of Picasso is also a self-portrait and an autobiography. His assertion that he is taking Picasso's portraits as "texts" to reveal aspects of himself as well as of the artist is significant. For it is, in fact, possible to read imagery as an autobiographical "text."

Visual Biography and Autobiography

The image as a text that reveals the artist is perhaps most obvious in self-portraiture, where the artist consciously depicts his own image. When we see the artist's physiognomy, we naturally have the impression that we know something about him.

Sometimes one artist will make a portrait of another artist, or will comment on a past work that illuminates both of them. For exam-