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Progymnasmatic Qualities of Early Modern Art History

Giorgio Vasari's Uses of Ancient Ekphrasis[*]

▼ **ABSTRACT** The present article focuses on Giorgio Vasari's uses of *ekphrasis* in his *Vite* (1550/1568), informed by his rhetorical education and progymnasmatic understanding of *ekphrasis* as it was passed down at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Although some authors have pointed out that the father of early art history followed ekphrastic patterns to describe works of art, no studies examine the progymnasmatic influence on Giorgio Vasari's rhetorical education and art historical writing. Based on the manuals and model *ekphraseis* that were commonplace at that time, this article surveys the ancient concept of *ekphrasis* that Latin teachers presumably conveyed to their students. I argue that this notion was most likely influenced not only by Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata* but also by byzantine sources, indirect knowledge of Nicholas of Myra's progymnasmatic explanations on *ekphrasis* of pictures and sculptures and by collections of model *ekphraseis* attributed to Libanius. An analysis of Vasarian descriptions provides evidence of progymnasmatic qualities in early modern art history and opens new perspectives for a critical comparison with former art historical texts.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Ekphrasis; Progymnasmata; Giorgio Vasari

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Introductory Notes: Definition and Tradition of *Ekphrasis*

Ekphrasis is the rhetorical art of vivid description as explained in the *progymnasmata*, i.e., in the school handbooks of rhetorical preliminary exercises from the Roman Empire (also known as *praeexercitamina* in Latin). As far as we know, the *progymnasmata* were first described in the first century CE by the rhetorician Aelius Theon[1]. Later rhetoricians of the Second Sophistic, such as Aphthonius, pseudo-Hermogenes, and Nicholas of Myra, made minor changes and some significant additions in their *progymnasmata* handbooks. However, *progymnasmata*'s literary influence goes back to Hellenistic and classical times, as demonstrated by literary analysis and archaeological evidence, i.e., ostraca and tablets with inscriptions of school exercises[2].

Second Sophistic rhetoricians defined *ekphrasis* as a λόγος περιηγηματικός ἐναργῶς ὑπ᾽ ὄψιν ἄγων τὸν δηλούμενον, "a guiding speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes", as we read in the *Progymnasmata* handbook by Aelius Theon[3]. Common ekphrastic topics, as presented in all extant *progymnasmata* manuals, are characters (*prosopa*), events (*pragmata*), places (*topoi*), and periods or circumstances (*chronoi* or *kairoi*). Still, this common list is open to other motifs. Aelius Theon (mid-to-late first century) is the only one speaking of "manners of making artifacts" (*ekphrasis tropon*), especially with regard to describing machines and crafted objects, such as the famous shield of Achilles (Hom. *Il.* 18.478-608). Aphthonius (second half of the fourth century) added "plants" (*phyta*) and "animals" (*aloga zoa*)[4], while Nicholas of Myra (*c.* 410-491) included "festivities" (*panegyreis*), "paintings" (*eikona*), and "sculptures" (*agalmata*) in the fifth century[5].

Most rhetoricians considered *ekphrasis* an advanced rhetorical exercise[6] that was often used in combination with other *progymnasmata*, such as narration

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1 Aelius Theon, *Prog.* 118-120, following the edition by Patillon, Bolognesi (1997).

2 Fernández Delgado (2007: 273-306); Fernández Delgado, Pordomingo (2017).

3 Aelius Theon, *Prog.* 118 Patillon-Bolognesi; cf. Ps-Hermogenes *Prog.* 22 Rabe; Aphthonius *Prog.* 36 Rabe; and Nicholas of Myra *Prog.* 67 Felten. For minor differences in the ancient definitions of *ekphrasis*, cf. Webb (2009: 39-59). For an introduction to the literary praxis of *ekphrasis* and the existence of ekphrastic canons in antiquity and Byzantium, cf. Muñoz Morcillo (2019: 475-495); cf. also Muñoz Morcillo (2021: 31-95).

4 Cf. Aphthonius *Prog.* 36-38 Rabe.

5 Cf. Nicholas of Myra *Prog.* 67-71 Felten.

6 In the *Progymnasmata* manual of Aelius Theon, *ekphrasis* appears in fifth place after the anecdote, fable, narrative, and commonplace (Patillon, Bolognesi [2002: xiv]; Kennedy [2003: xiii]). Nevertheless, the popularity of the manuals of Pseudo-Hermogenes (2nd/3rd c.) and Aphthonius (4th c.), in which *ekphrasis* is treated in the tenth and twelfth positions, respectively, led to a rearrangement of the order in the later manuscripts of Aelius Theon's manual (Patillon, Bolognesi [2002: xxxviii-xlv]). The Aphthonian order of the *progymnasmata* can therefore be considered canonical from late antiquity to the Renaissance.

(*diegema*) or praise (*enkomion*), as Nicholas of Myra mentions[7]. Due to its overarching character, *ekphrasis* is present in almost every literary genre.

In late antiquity, some authors wrote *ekphraseis* as "memory images"[8], a concept coined by Ruth Webb to denote ekphrastic texts "with a specific cultural agenda to preserve the knowledge of the traditional narratives of classical literature"[9]. As opposed to classical times, late antiquity *ekphraseis* were not primarily meant for communicating with a listening audience. Therefore, there is sometimes a lack of descriptive "vividness", i.e., *enargeia*, in them. Some of these authors, such as Philostratus, reviewed and recombined mythological, canonical themes into new ekphrastic writings[10]. Others, such as Athenaeus of Naucratis, preferred obscure sources such as Callixenus or Moschion, or renewed existing *ekphraseis* without relying on readers' prior knowledge, i.e., "abolishing", in Ruth Webb's words[11], "the distance between past and present" as the main goal of *enargeia*. However, in eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium, a Hellenistic revival modernized the psychological use of *ekphrasis*, i.e., a description focused on clarity, communication, and persuasion, to which the existence of model exercises significantly contributed. The fascination with ekphrastic texts eventually reached Italian humanists. Guarino's translation of Lucian's *On Calumny*[12] was, for many authors, a new starting point for a Western ekphrastic tradition that fostered both the production of new ekphrastic texts, e.g., encomiastic speeches on Church dedications, and the production of images inspired by ancient descriptions.

Svetlana Alpers was the first art historian to point out that Giorgio Vasari followed ekphrastic patterns to describe works of art[13]. She referred in general terms to Philostratus' *Imagines* as Vasari's ancient model for *ekphrasis* – an assumption that can be sustained through the presence of the *Imagines* as a Greek copy or in Latin translation in Renaissance humanist circles, such as Papst Nicolaus V, Ambrogio Traversari, Sixtus IV, Federico da Montefeltro, Bessarion, or Antonio Bonfini, who translated it for king Matthias of Corvinius, not to mention the first printed edition by Aldus Manutius in Venice (1503)[14].

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7 *Prog.*, 67-71 Felten.

8 Webb (2007: 463-480).

9 Webb (2007: 464).

10 Concerning this topic, cf. Webb (2000: 218-226).

11 Webb (2000: 225).

12 Περὶ τοῦ μὴ ῥᾳδίως πιστεύειν διαβολῇ, translated into Latin as *Non temere credendum esse delationi*.

13 Alpers (1995: 217-253); Alpers (1960: 190-215) (cf. also Rosenberg [1995: 297-318]; Winner [1995: 259-278]). As for analyses of Vasari as an author, the presumed literary influence of Dante and Petrarch (cf. Conti [1992: 26-36]; Posselt [2013]) or even Pietro Aretino (cf. Zwecker [2018]; Patrizi [2004: 421-430]) has had more weight than the progymnasmatic facture or the rhetorical structure of his text that points to ancient and byzantine sources.

14 Cf. Foerster (1904: 16-17); Schönberger (1968: 64-65); on the distribution of manuscripts of the *Eikones* in Italy in the thirteenth century cf. Bachmann (2015: 22-25).

However, the connection between Vasari's usually short descriptions of actual works of art and Philostratus' long rhetorical exercises, which create detailed mythological scenes with words, is slightly unbalanced and diffuse[15]. Additionally, Vasarian *ekphrasis* was by no means limited to descriptions of works of art. A plausible approach to Vasari's understanding of *ekphrasis* involves looking at the Latin and Greek curriculum at the Latin School of Arezzo and at the progymnasmatic tradition that may have influenced the author.

Although Vasari's *Lives* is probably the best-known case of early modern ekphrastic literature from Arezzo, the Aretians Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini wrote *ekphraseis* in their epideictic discourses long before him. These three humanists went, at different times, to the Latin School of Arezzo, one of the few pre-university educational centers in Renaissance Italy free of charge[16]. We know about this school tradition through the history of education in Italy and Arezzo thanks to authors such as Donald Lemen Clark, Robert Black, Paul F. Grendler, and Federica Ciccolella. Still, nothing has been written about the progymnasmatic tradition at this Latin School.

Traditionally, the humanist curriculum of this type of school started with the *Donatus* for learning Latin. On a secondary level, students learned to write and to declaim with the help of the *progymnasmata*, which became once again popular in the Renaissance. As we know, one of the most advanced *progymnasmata* was the *ekphrasis*, "a descriptive speech" that "brings the subject shown before the eyes vividly", i.e., ἐναργῶς (*enargos*), as described by the rhetoricians Theon, Aphthonius, pseudo-Hermogenes, and Nicholas of Myra. These exercises were already known in the Middle Ages in some parts of Western Europe thanks to Priscian's translation of Hermogenes' *progymnasmata* manual at the beginning of the sixth century CE[17]. Indeed, the grammarian Priscian made a simplified version, in Latin, of the *progymnasmata* attributed to Hermogenes around the year 500 CE[18]. In Priscian's translation, the part handling description is concise, and it substitutes the few examples given in Greek with Latin ones. In this sense, the description of Thersites as an example of ἔκφρασις προσώπων[19], which we find in all Greek rhetoricians, has been substituted with the Virgilian verses describing Aeneas' mother, Venus, "looking and dressed as a girl with Spartan arms" (*Virgins os habitumque gerens et virginis arma Spartanae*)[20].

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15 In this regard, a comparison of Philostratus' *Imagines* "Erotes" (*Im.* 1.6) and the "Andrians" (*Im.* 1.25) with the Vasarian descriptions of Titian's paintings inspired by these two *ekphraseis*, i.e., *The Feast of Venus* (1518-1520) and *The Bacchanal of the Andrians* (1523-1526), reveals that Vasari avoided a detailed description, picking out only some distinctive details, such as the cupid urinating in the river in *The Feast of Venus*, or the naked woman in *The Bacchanal of the Andrians*.

16 Black (1987: 171-237); Black (1996); Grendler (1989); Blum (2011).

17 Passalacqua (2005: 511-519); Passalacqua (1987); Passalacqua (1978).

18 Cf. Halm (1863: 551-560), i.e., number XVII; Kennedy (1994: 281).

19 Hom. *Il.* 2.217: φολκὸς ἔην, χωλὸς δ᾽ ἕτερον πόδα.

20 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

However, the types of *ekphraseis* coincide with the Greek ones since they are descriptions of characters, i.e., *personarum*, of events, i.e., *rerum* (such as land or sea battles), of seasons, i.e., *temporum* (such as spring or summer), of situations, i.e., *status* (such as peace or war), and places, i.e., *locorum* (such as cities, coasts, mountains, etc.). Furthermore, the critical advice for creating a good description, i.e., the claim of visual evidence (*enargeia* or *demonstratio*) and clarity (*sapheneia*, i.e., *claritas*), and the description's polyvalent and overarching character, is also mentioned in Priscian's translation of pseudo-Hermorgenes' handbook. For example, the *commixta* description corresponds to the *ekphrasis mikte*, and the example mentioned by Priscian is a *nocturnam pugnam*, i.e., the *nychtomachia* that we find in the Greek manuals. The use of descriptions in other exercises, such as *narratio* or *fabula*, is also present in Priscian's translation. However, Italian humanists only knew the whole progymnasmatic tradition after the publication of the Latin translations of Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata* and the popularization of works by authors of the Second Sophistic, such as Philostratus' *Imagines* (*editio princeps* 1503), Lucian's writings (already known in the Quattrocento and broadly disseminated through the Latin translations by Erasmus and Thomas More in the first half of the sixteenth century), or Libanius' *Progymnasmata* (i.e., "model exercises", *editio princeps* 1520 and published with a Latin translation by Joachim Camerarius in 1541).

Vasari's Teachers and Greek-Latin Education

Giorgio Vasari started learning Latin when he was a child. In his main work *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (*The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, hereafter *Lives*, 1550/1568), Vasari mentions two Latin teachers: Antonio da Saccone, who was probably an assistant Latin teacher, and Giovanni Pollastra, the head Latin teacher in Arezzo during Vasari's school days. We do not know anything about Antonio da Saccone, but we can reconstruct who Vasari's teachers probably were according to the city's archives[21]. From 1516 to 1518, the *coadiutore* or assistant Latin teacher was likely Messer Baccio di Terranuova, *canonico* in Santa Maria della Pieve in Arezzo. He was elected *coadiutore* of the head grammar master on December 11, 1515[22]. Very little is known about him. Vasari likely learned only the basics of Latin in his early youth. In the *Vita* of Francesco Salviati, Vasari refers to Giovanni Pollastrino, known as Pollastra, as his Latin teacher[23]. According to documents of the city of Arezzo[24], Pollastra was first an assistant Latin teacher, who eventually became a head teacher from 1515 to 1521. Unlike his colleague Baccio di Terranuova,

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21 Cf. Black (1996).
22 Cf. Black (1996: 790).
23 Feser, Lorini (2009: 14); cf. Blum (2011: 38).
24 Black (1996).

Pollastra was not just a Latin teacher who dealt with the basics of the Latin language. Pollastra, author of the celebrated comedy *Parthenio* (1516), also had experience in creating new literature. During Vasari's time at school, a new assistant teacher not mentioned in *Le Vite* joined the Latin School of Arezzo – Francesco Griffolini[25], who translated, among other things, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Lucian's *Calumny*, and Philostratus' *Imagines* – i.e., outstanding and influential ekphrastic pieces of literature. This constellation of Latin teachers in Arezzo shows that Vasari was exposed to experienced humanists, translators and authors themselves, who knew the Latin and Greek language, Second Sophistic literature, the progymnasmatic tradition, and how to produce something new by relying on classical culture.

Indeed, in documents from the commune of Arezzo at the beginning of the sixteenth century, we read that Latin teachers were expected to master both Latin and Greek grammar and literature[26]. Therefore, as Robert Black suggests, Vasari may have enjoyed a Greek-Latin education – probably not to become a *studioso*, but with the practical goal of evolving as a writer in his vernacular language. Indeed, the Latin School was not meant only to produce *studiosi* but was more an institution for passing down classical culture and literature that could easily be applied to the current needs of stakeholders, intellectuals, or artists. This would explain Vasari's use of encomiastic and psychological descriptions, which, to some extent, recall Byzantine and Second Sophistic *ekphraseis*, or even those attributed to Libanius[27]. As we shall see, there are clear markers of a vivid and productive progymnasmatic education in Vasari's writings.

Progymnasmata in Sixteenth-Century Italy

With regard to the use of *progymnasmata* in schools between 1475 and 1565, Manfred Kraus argues that the emphasis was on the pedagogical use of rhetorical exercises rather than on the understanding of Greek texts[28]. The earliest

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25 Black (1996: 790).

26 Black (1987: 224).

27 For a translation of Libanius' model exercises cf. Gibson (2008). Libanius was already present in some fifteenth-century *Donatus* manuscripts. For example, there is evidence of the use of four of Libanius' letters in the *Donatus Graecus*, along with sentences attributed to Demosthenes, Socrates, Nicocles, Alexander the Great, and others, as well as six fables by Aesop and other authors and the *capita admonitoria* attributed to Agapetus, all preserved in one manuscript (Bibl. Marciana, MS.gr.X.9 on folios 123v-136v.). Libanius' letters sometimes completed the readings for practicing Greek grammar (Ciccolella [2008: 200]). Another example is the Bodleian MS Barocci 72, containing one speech and one letter by Libanius (Ciccolella [2008: 166]), in this case, a paper manuscript from the late fifteenth century with Greek material for the elementary and intermediate levels, along with other texts by Annaeus Cornutus (*De natura deorum*), Palaephatus (*Historiae incredibiles*), and a distich by Palladas.

28 Kraus (2008: 64).

translation of Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata* was made by the Dutch humanist Rodolphus Agricola in 1478 in Ferrara. The first printed version of this translation was edited in 1532 by the Alardus of Amsterdam. However, the first printed translation, and most likely the one used in many Italian Latin schools at the beginning of the sixteenth century, was produced by Giovanni Maria Cattaneo; it was printed in Bologna in 1507 and was reprinted at least 25 times before 1559, according to Manfred Kraus. Much of this edition has survived in the most successful book on Aphthonius' *progymnasmata*, edited by the professor of rhetoric at the University of Marburg, Reinhard Lorich. This new version combined Agricola's and Cattaneo's versions, including many own and borrowed model exercises. This version of Aphthonius' manual first appeared in 1542, and a revised version came out in 1546; it continued to be reprinted until at least 1718[29].

Using model exercises from ancient sources, rhetoricians, and teachers was a standard measure in Vasari's times. However, masters of Latin had the freedom to use whatever model exercises they considered best suited to their goals. The interest in Aphthonius' manual correlates with the concerns of humanists about how to recover classical rhetoric. The handbook's structure combining theory and practice was suitable for education purposes, especially in a time dominated by Erasmus' recommendations[30].

If Vasari's main teacher Pollastra did indeed use a printed translation of the *Progymnasmata*, it was certainly Cattaneo's *Aphthonius* (Bologna 1507) – published by Caligula Basilerius. This edition included the translation of Lucian's *De conscribenda historia* – also a literary ekphrastic reference. The second edition, which contained some significant changes, was printed by Jacobus Mazochius in Rome (1517).

According to Trinidad Arcos Pereira[31], there are lexicographical and morphological differences between both editions, as well as some additions, omissions, and a reworking of the Latin text so as to be closer to the classical norm. However, the most significant changes are related to a new philological attitude towards the Greek sources compared with Priscian's Latinization of pseudo-Hermogenes' handbook. Especially remarkable is the fact that Cattaneo, unlike Priscian, did not substitute the Greek examples provided by Aphthonius with examples from the Roman literature, as in the description of Thersites being replaced with Virgil's account of Aeneas' mother, Venus. On the contrary, Aphthonius' translation

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29 Ibidem.
30 See, e.g., Erasmus reference to Aphthonius' *progymnasmata*: Nunc epistolae breuis argumentum, sed argutum, lingua uulgari proponat, Latine Graeceque aut utroque sermone tractandum. Nunc apologum, nunc narratiunculam non insipidam, nunc sententiam ex quatuor constantem partibus […]. Nunc argumentationem quinque tractandam partibus, nunc dilemma duabus, nunc expolitionem quam uocant septem partibus explicandam […] cuiusmodi Progymnasmata scripsit Aphthonius (Erasmus [1528: 13]).
31 Arcos Pereira (2017: 137-153).

introduces the programmatic use of model exercises as an essential part of the Latin curriculum, with the description of the temple of Alexandria being the one presented in this manual[32]. The fact that this description was not from a classical source but a text written by Aphthonius is meaningful for understanding the new, creative attitude towards the classical world. Learning rhetoric was mandatory for those who wanted to practice with model exercises. Accordingly, reading Vasari's *Lives* from the progymnasmatic perspective is an insightful, productive option.

Vasarian Ekphrasis and Rhetoric Tradition

Vasarian descriptions often focus on emotions, i.e., on the psychological level of perception, as in his description of Giotto's *Navicella Mosaic*, where Vasari renders the suffering of the apostles during the storm in contrast to the patience and hopeful attitude of a nearby fisher[33]; or on the work's narratives, as in his description of Raphael's *Parnassus*, where he points out the current actions of each poet[34]; or on describing artifacts following traditional patterns consisting in the balanced combination of technical details with a visualization of the machine's functionalities, as in his description of Brunelleschi's stage machinery[35].

Vasari mentions that his friend Francesco Salviati painted allegorical figures described by Lucian on one of the walls he decorated with his most famous frescos in the audience chamber in front of the chapel of the ducal palace, i.e., the Sala dell'Udienza in Palazzo Vecchio: "In the middle is Favor as a naked youth on a wheel, with Envy, Hatred, and Slander on the side, and Honors, Delights, and all the other things described by Lucian on the other"[36].

Here, the connection between the description of Salviati's frescoes and the subsequent topic of slander embodied by Vasari's enemy Tasso the wood-carver

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32 Cattaneo's translations of the title of this description changed slightly in the second edition (from *Descriptio sacri Alexandriae cum arce* [d2r] to *Descriptio arcis Alexandriae* [E4v]): cf. Arcos Pereira (2017). The changes in the definition of description (from *Descriptio est sermo narratiuus rem significatam ante oculos euidenter agens* [d1v] to *Descriptio est oratio expositiua, quae rem significatam ante oculos euidenter representat* [E4r]) are documented by Arcos Pereira (2017: 151).

33 For references to the Italian text, I use the historical edition of 1568 as follows: Vasari's *Vite*, volume number, page(s) number. Here: Vasari's *Vite* (1568, vol. 1: 124); cf. Alpers (1995); Alpers (1960: 192).

34 Vasari's *Vite* (1568, vol. 1: 70-71); cf. Winner (1995: 259-278), here 264, 267-269, and 276.

35 Cf. Larson (1957: 287-299).

36 Vasari's *Vite* (1568 vol. 2: 634). Translation by A. B. Hinds in Gaunt, Hinds 1980. All references to Vasari's *Lives* are from Hinds' translation. For the sake of simplicity, all translations by Hinds will be referred to as Vasari's *Lives*, volume number, page(s) number. Here: Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 4: 61-62).

recalls Lucian's description of Apelles' *Calumny*[37]. Indeed, Vasari formulates Salviati's *Vita* in similar terms of envy and defamation in order to justify why Salviati, after this work, lost the favor of the Medici. Recent research demonstrates that this story was a rhetorical construction to avoid the truth, i.e., recognizing that the mannerist style of his friend displeased his patrons[38].

The fact that Vasari was familiar with examples of *ekphraseis* written by Italian humanists becomes evident in the *Lives* when he comments on Leon Battista Alberti's painting and writing qualities: "Another work of Leon Battista on the side of the Ponte alla Carraia at Florence, in a small chapel of Our Lady, is a small altar-slab containing three scenes with perspectives, much better described by his pen than they were painted by his brush"[39].

With this comment, Vasari indicates that he was aware of the rhetorical tradition of *ekphrasis* and its incidence as an aesthetic category in Renaissance Italy in the context of the *paragone*.

Another illustrious Aretian, the historian and humanist Leonardo Bruni, wrote an encomium of Florence with ekphrastic features, the *Laudatio florentiae urbis*, a panegyric of the city of Florence inspired by Aelius Aristides' Panathenaic Oration[40]. However, he was probably also inspired by a tradition shaped through Libanius' famous encomiastic *ekphrasis* of Antioch, which became a model text for ἔκφρασις τόπου in Byzantium[41].

Uses of *Progymnasmata* in Vasari's *Lives*, especially *Chreia* and *Ekphrasis*

That Vasari was probably trained in *progymnasmata* can be inferred not only from his ekphrastic texts but also because he used other *progymnasmata* in the *Lives* usual for writing a biography, especially the *chreia* or anecdote (e.g., Vasari's *Lives*, vol. 1, pp. 85-86; *Lives*, vol. 2, p. 167), the *enkomion* or encomium (especially

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37 Cf. similar slander episodes in Vasari's own *Vita* (concerning Carl V in Bologna) and in Michelangelo's *Vita* (concerning Sangallo).

38 Feser, Lorini (2009: 143-144).

39 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 1: p. 350).

40 Griffins (1988: 104).

41 Cf. Hunger (1978 vol. 1: 170-188; vol. 2, 109-110), e.g., John Phokas' *ekphrasis* of Antioch. Indeed, even the most beautiful description of an ideal landscape described as a *locus amoenus* in late Latin poetry by Tiberianus, during the Constantine period, was formulated according to the six causes of joy that Libanius mentions in his famous *Ekphrasis of Antioch* (Lib., *Or.* 11). As Libanius says, the "causes of delight are springs and plantations and gardens and soft breezes and flowers and bird-voices". Translation by Curtius (1990: 197) – originally published in German in 1948 and translated into English by Willard S. Trask; cf. Lib. *Or.* 11, following the edition by Foerster (1903, vol. 1: 505, § 200): πάσης δὲ εὐθυμίας ἀφορμαὶ πηγαὶ καὶ φυτὰ καὶ κῆποι καὶ ἄνθη καὶ ὀρνίθων φωναὶ καὶ τὸ πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπολαῦσαι τῶν ἠρινῶν.

in combination with the *ekphrasis prosopon* or description of characters/persons, see infra), or the *psogos* or invective (Vasari's *Lives*, vol. 4, pp. 61-62, 282-283)[42].

Typical cases of *chreia* in the *Lives* are, for example, the anecdote of Leonardo following people on the street in order to memorize their physiognomy, the story about Giotto drawing a perfect O[43] to demonstrate his artistic skills to the Pope, and also the comparison between Donatello's and Luca della Robbia's works, which is an adaptation of the contest between Phidias and Alcamenes for Vasari's own time – probably following John Tzetzes' account of this story, as pointed out by Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*[44].

Indeed, Vasari and other Renaissance authors could have accessed the Italian edition of John Tzetzes' *Historiai* (also known as *Chiliades*), which was first printed in 1546. However, handwritten copies of Tzetzes' works were also common among Greek scholars living in Italy before that date. Gombrich was the first to spell out the connection between Tzetzes' story on the contest between Phidias and Alcamenes and Vasari's use of it for describing and comparing the different relief techniques of Donatello and Luca della Robbia for two singing galleries in the Florentine cathedral[45].

Even if Vasari does not mention Tzetzes directly, this anecdote was most likely known to him, and it became a *locus classicus* in Vasari's *Life* of Luca della Robbia.

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42 One of Vasari's enemies was Tasso the wood carver, an architect at the Florentine palace when Vasari's friend Salviati worked there (Vasari's *Lives* [1980, vol. 4: 61-62, 282-283]). When Tasso appears in the *Vite*, Vasari resorts to short but effective brushstrokes of *psogos*, inserting them into the main narrative's entanglement. For example, Tasso, who usually criticizes everything, praises Salviati's work ceaselessly. This was probably an attempt to reduce Tasso to the incarnation of Mockery (Momus) in the reader's mind. Mockery praising a painting is a *locus communis* also found in Tzetzes (*Chil.* 12 *Hist.* 427). The saying that not even Momus could criticize something was the sign of an artwork's perfection, which is also evident from an anonymous epigram on a Priapus sculpture by Praxiteles. Cf. *Greek Anthology* 16.262: ΑΔΗΛΟΝ / Ὁ τραγόπους, ὁ τὸν ἀσκὸν ἐπηρμένος, αἵ τε γελῶσαι / Νύμφαι, Πραξιτέλους, ἥ τε καλὴ Δανάη. / Λύγδινα πάντα, καὶ ἄκρα σοφαὶ χέρες. Αὐτὸς ὁ Μῶμος / Φθέγξεται Ἄκρητος, Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἡ σοφίη. "Goat-Footed Pan with the wine-skin on his shoulder, and the Nymphs, and lovely Danae, are all by Praxiteles. They are all of marble, and the hands that wrought them were supremely skilled. Momus himself will cry out 'Father Zeus, this was perfect skill'". Translation by Paton (1918: 314).

43 Vasari's *Vite* (1568, vol. 1: 123).

44 Gombrich (1995: 161-162).

45 Gombrich (1995: 161-162); cf. also Montes Serrano (2009: 137-142). John Tzetzes tells the story of the contest between Phidias and his former disciple Alcamenes in *Chil.* 8 *Hist.* 193. Rather than describing the appearance of the two artists' sculptures of Athena, Tzetzes focuses on relevant details about their making in a kind of short ἔκφρασις τρόπων. Especially noteworthy is the description of Phidias molding a "wide open mouth" (ἀνεῳγός τὰ χείλη) and "distended nostrils" (τοὺς μυξωτῆράς τε αὐτοῦ ἔχον ἀνεσπασμένους). Phidias, whose work follows the principles of optics and geometry, demonstrated that distortion might be necessary to achieve a faithful rendering, in this case for the Athena sculptures that would be erected on high pillars (ἐπὶ κιόνων ὑψηλῶν). This description, embedded in a *diégema*, presented an attractive and memorable explanation of how perspective and foreshortening work.

Della Robbia's work was very neatly finished, but Donatello, according to Vasari, proceeded with better judgment:

> he did almost the whole of the work in the rough as it was, not delicately finishing it so that it should appear much better at a distance than Luca's; as it does, for with all his care and skill the eye cannot appreciate it well because of the very polish and finish, which are lost in the distance, as it can the almost purely rough-hewn work of Donatello[46].

This example of a χρεία, which includes the *progymnasma* of σύνκρισις, i.e., "comparison", is by no means an isolated one. The *Lives* rely on many anecdotes, short and long. A further example of *chreia* that goes back to an ancient *topos* is Giotto's drawing of a fly on the nose of a figure that his master Cimabue was painting. Giotto's fly was said to be so realistic that "when his Master turned round to go on with his work, he more than once attempted to drive the fly away with his hand, believing it to be real before he became aware of his mistake"[47]. This episode recalls the contest between Parrhasius and Zeuxis, in which Parrhasius deceived Zeuxis with the earliest known trompe-l'oeil: a very realistic drawing of a curtain that Zeuxis tried to remove in vain, believing the actual picture to be behind the curtain. Vasari's short anecdote is, without a doubt, a version of the *locus classicus* documented by Pliny[48].

A further memorable anecdote in progymnasmatic terms could be Vasari's account, in *The Life* of Michelangelo, of how the artist helped a stonecutter find a talent that he did not think to possess: "While Michelangelo was finishing the tomb of Julius II, he caused a stonecutter to execute a caryatid to be placed on the tomb of S. Piero ad Vincola, saying, 'Cut away here, plane it here, polish it there' so that the man had made a figure without knowing it"[49].

Progymnasmatic *Ekphrasis* in Vasari's *Lives* Beyond Descriptions of Works of Art

When writing ekphrastic passages, Vasari does not limit himself to descriptions of works of art. As an evident example, Vasari systematically cultivates the *ekphrasis prosopon* or description of characters/persons. Indeed, at the end of each artist's *Life*, Vasari describes the artist's character, with the most extended and

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46 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 1: 225).
47 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 1: 85-86).
48 Pliny, *NH.* 35.36.65-66.
49 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 3: 178). Another example would be the broken arm of Michelangelo's *David* (Vasari's *Lives* [1980, vol. 4: p. 55]). In general terms, we should also note that when Vasari reproduces monologues, he is probably relying on the *progymnasma* known as ἠθοποεία (*ethopoeia*), which consists of an imagined speech assigned to a specific character.

accurate description being that of Michelangelo, both as a living person and as a corpse.

However, let us begin with a more standard *ekphrasis prosopon*. In his description of Francesco Salviati, Vasari mentions:

> Salviati was naturally amiable but suspicious, credulous, sharp, subtle and penetrating. When he spoke on art, whether in jest or from duty, he would sometimes offend and sometimes cut to the quick. He loved the society of the learned and great and always disliked plebeian artists even if they possessed talent[50].

According to recent research, this description did not correspond with reality[51]. It was a rhetorical construction for consistency reasons. Describing Salviati as "suspicious" and "penetrating" was more convenient than recognizing that his "manneristic" style did not please the Medici, which would have drawn some criticism of Vasari's own style. Vasari was most likely aware of this inaccuracy, which challenges the idea that Vasari created the biographical method of art history.

When Vasari describes Leonardo da Vinci, he praises his rhetorical skills, strength, and personal qualities in a hyperbolic way:

> By the splendor of his magnificent mien, he comforted every sad soul, and his eloquence could turn men to either side of a question. His personal strength was prodigious, and with his right hand he could bend the clapper of a knocker or a horseshoe as if they had been of lead[52].

To generate a concrete idea about Leonardo's strength in the reader's imagination, Vasari resorts to the progymnasmatic recommendation to build on the public's general knowledge. Therefore, when Vasari says that Leonardo was able to "bend the clapper of a knocker or a horseshoe as if they had been of lead", he is making use of the progymnasmatic recommendation of concision and vividness as explained by the first of the rhetoricians known to us who wrote a *progymnasmata* handbook, Aelius Theon. We also find this symbiotic practice of brevity and *enargeia* through the involvement of the public's general knowledge in texts quoted by the rhetoricians, such as Herodotus' description of the ibis as a kind of *krex*, a stilt-like bird, probably well-known to the Athenians, or even in descriptions produced by rhetoricians of the Second Sophistic, such as Lucian's description of Apelles' *Calumny*, in which he describes the personification of Envy (i.e., τὸν Φθόνον) in terms of a pale and deformed person whom a long sickness has consumed.

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50 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 4: 70).
51 Cf. Feser, Lorini (2009: 143-144).
52 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 2: 167).

Vasari was also good at describing characters briefly, which he does throughout most of the *Lives*. For example, he says the following about Leon Battista Alberti:

> He was a person of the most courteous and praiseworthy manners, a friend of distinguished men, generous and kind to all. He lived honorably like a nobleman all his days, and after having attained a somewhat advanced age, he passed quietly and contentedly to a better life, leaving an honored name behind him[53].

Moreover, about his own great-grandfather, Vasari adds the following: "Lazzaro [Vasari] was an amiable man, and very quick in argument and although much addicted to pleasures, yet he never strayed from the path of virtue"[54].

For older artists he never personally knew, such as Cimabue or Giotto, Vasari resorts to timely accounts; e.g., he has recourse to a commentator on Dante in order to write his description of Cimabue[55]. All of this indicates that Vasari was aware of the vernacular descriptive tradition as well.

However, the most impressive *ekphrasis prosopon* we find in Vasari's *Lives* is his description of Michelangelo, which was formulated according to the recommendations that we find in the last of the rhetoricians to write a *progymnasmata* handbook, namely, Nicholas of Myra, even though, as Kennedy points out[56], Nicholas' work was most likely not directly known in the Italian Renaissance[57].

Indeed, Nicholas recommended describing *kata meros*, i.e., in detail. He even omitted the recommendation of conciseness. Ruth Webb argues that model exercises written in late antiquity were conceived as "memory images" that no longer relied on the public's knowledge to spark the audience's imagination. Instead, these texts were designed to save and disseminate precious knowledge that otherwise might have disappeared. In Vasari's *Lives*, the length of an *ekphrasis prosopon* is usually linked to the relevance of the artist whose edifying life he was preserving in words for future generations. Since Michelangelo is the most relevant artist in Vasari's *Lives*, it is no surprise that Vasari chose the code of a "memory image" to conserve Michelangelo's memory on all possible levels:

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53 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 1: 350).
54 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 1: 352).
55 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 1: 26).
56 Kennedy (1983: 66).
57 Nicholas' *progymnasmata* manual was known to Byzantine rhetoricians and manuscripts of it circulated, but the first publication of the manual is the edition that Leonhard von Spengel collects in the *Rhetores Graeci* in 1856, which is not even based on the original text.

his personality, his physical appearance, his clothes[58], and even his incorruptible corpse[59], following in this latter regard a hagiographic tradition.

However, Michelangelo's physiognomic description was borrowed without acknowledgment from Ascanio Condivi's *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti*, published in 1553[60], long before Vasari's corresponding enhanced *Vita* was printed in the second edition of the *Lives* in 1568.

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58 "Michelangelo enjoyed excellent health, being thin and wiry, and had only experienced two serious illnesses as a man, though he had been a delicate child. He supported every fatigue, but in his old age, he suffered from his kidneys, and eventually, with the stone, of which his friend Realdo Colombo cured him by means of injections after many years. He was of medium stature, with broad shoulders, though in proportion with the rest of the body. As he grew old he wore shoes of dog's skin on his bare feet during winter for months together, and when he wished to remove them the skin often came with them. Over his stockings, he wore shoes of Cordovan leather, buttoned inside, a shim of his. His face was round, his forehead square and roomy with seven straight lines, and his temples projected considerably beyond his ears, which were rather large and standing out. His body was in proportion to his face and somewhat large; his nose was flat, having been broken, as related in the *Life* of Torrigiano; his eyes were rather small, of horn color, with bluish-yellow sport. His lids had few hairs, his lips were thin, the lower thicker and projecting a little more than the upper. His chin was well-proportioned; his beard and hair were black sprinkled with many white hairs, his beard not being very long or thick and bifurcated. He was sent into the world by God to help artists to learn from his life, his character and his works what a true artist should be", Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 4: 178-179).

59 "Those present expected to see signs of decay, as he had been dead twenty-five days, and twenty-two in the coffin, but we saw him untouched, without any bad smell, so that he seemed to be quietly sleeping", Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 4: 183).

60 Condivi writes the following: "Michael Angelo is of a good complexion; his figure rather sinuous and bony than fleshy and fat; healthy above all by nature, as well as by the use of exercise and his continence of life and moderation in taking food; nevertheless, as a child he was feeble and sickly, and as a man he had two illnesses. He has suffered much for several years in the passing of urine, which trouble would have turned into a stone if he had not been relieved by the care and diligence of the before-mentioned Messer Realdo. Michael Angelo has always had a good color in his face; he is of middle height; he is broad shouldered, with the rest of the body in proportion, rather slight than not. The shape of his skull in front is round; the height above the ear is a sixth part of the circumference round the middle of the head, so that the temples project somewhat beyond the ears, and the ears beyond the cheek-bones, and the cheek-bones beyond the rest of the face; the skull in proportion to the face must be called large. The front view of the forehead is square, the nose a little flattened, not naturally, but because when he was a boy, one Torrigiano, a brutal and proud fellow, with a blow almost broke the cartilage, so that Michael Angelo was carried home as one dead; for this Torrigiano was banished from Florence, and he came to a bad end. Michael Angelo's nose, such as it is, is in proportion to the forehead and the rest of the face. His lips are mobile, the lower one somewhat the thicker, so that seen in profile it sticks out a little. The chin goes well with the above-mentioned parts. The forehead in profile is almost in front of the nose, which is little less than broken, except for a small lump in the middle. The eyebrows have few hairs; the eyes are rather small than otherwise, the colour is that of horn, but changing, with sparkles of yellow and blue; the ears in proportion; the hair black, and beard also, but, in this his seventy-ninth year, plentifully sprinkled with grey; his beard is forked, four or five fingers long and not very thick, as

Ascanio Condivi was a minor figure in mid-sixteenth-century Rome. He was a Michelangelo pupil but was unsuccessful as an artist. In recognition of his *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti*, Ascanio was elected to the Florentine Academy. As pointed out by Piers D. Britton[61], the changes made by Vasari to Condivi's physical description of Michelangelo can be understood as revealing "distinctive physiognomic interests"[62]. According to Britton: "In imaginatively reconstructing his hero, Vasari sought to make Michelangelo resemble Aristotle's model of the virile, courageous man from the *Physiognomica*" (*ibidem*). In the few alterations we find, Vasari tends to simplify Condivi's description of Michelangelo, especially geometric subtleties regarding his face. For example, Condivi's exact observation that the front of Michelangelo's skull was shaped like "a half-circle and a sixth" disappears in Vasari's text, where Michelangelo's face is simply "round". Condivi's detailed description of Michelangelo's brow is replaced with the simple remark that his forehead was "square and roomy" ("quadrata e spaziosa"), adding an interesting, new detail: "with seven straight lines". These seven lines are present in Da Volterra's bronze bust of Michelangelo. Britton[63] identifies this detail with Aristotle's mention of the "cloudy brow", which signifies "self-will as in the lion or the bull" (Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomica* 811b 35-36, 812a)[64]. Britton's explanation that Vasari's deviation from Condivi's description was the result of the application of practical knowledge from Pseudo-Aristotle's *Physiognomica* is without a doubt very interesting and intriguing. However, as Britton admits, the use of this treatise in the *Lives* seems to be limited to a handful of authors, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Andrea Sansovino, and Giulio Romano.

Furthermore, the bronze bust of Michelangelo attributed to Daniele da Volterra was produced almost two years before the second edition of the *Lives* appeared with Vasari's new version of Condivi's description. The connection between bodily features and characters in Vasari's *Lives* did not necessarily follow Pseudo-Aristotle's *Physiognomica*, nor did it follow similar physiognomic connections discussed in Aristotle's *History of Animals*. The ambiguities and contradictions raised by physiognomics make it challenging to create consistent connections, except for Leonardo da Vinci's physiognomic description, which is consistent with the famous analogy of the virile man and the lion. However, in general terms, Vasari follows the less philosophical tradition of the *progymnasmata*. In addition to Nicholas of Myra's recommendation of a detailed description from the feet to the head – which suits the present case –, Libanius' model exercises offered symbolic *ekphraseis prosopon* of heroes, such as Heracles or

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may be seen in his portraits", tr. by Holroyd (1903: 90-92). For a new (German) translation, see Walter (2018).

61 Britton (2009: 13-18).

62 Britton (2009: 15).

63 Britton (2009: 16-17).

64 Translation after Loveday, Forster (1984, vol. 1: 1244, 1247); here quoted from Britton (2009: 17).

Alexander the Great (Lib., *Descr.* 13 and 27). In those examples, the symbolism resulted from explaining the *logismos* of the sculpture representing these figures. However, other descriptions of characters, such as a drunken man or a beautiful girl, are also rich in details and meanings (cf. Lib., *Descr.* 6 and 30)[65].

We still need to determine whether Vasari was familiar with Libanius' model exercises. However, there is a tradition of producing descriptions similarly by creating "memory images", images with psychological strength, or just recognizable sketches, depending on the author's needs and intentions. The combination of terminological simplicity with detailed and symbolic descriptions connects with the Byzantine revival of *ekphrasis* as a vehicle for epideictic oratory and knowledge dissemination[66].

Describing Unseen Things: The Mona Lisa

The most famous Vasarian description of a painting he probably never saw is his account of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, where he even points out the astonishing naturalism of her mouth and the hollow of her throat:

> The mouth, with its opening joining the red of the lips to the flesh of the face, seemed to be real flesh rather than paint. Anyone who looked very attentively at the hollow of her throat would see her pulse beating: to tell the truth, it can be said that the portrait was painted in such a way that would cause every brave artist to tremble with fear, whoever he might be[67].

How could Vasari describe a painting that, according to what we know, he had probably never seen[68]? He could have relied on the autoptic experience of others, of course. However, at the same time, he seems to have resorted to established rhetorical techniques such as the suggestion of immersion creating a narrative – which we know from Philostratus' *Images* –, the *topos* of realism appealing to the senses of the beholder, or the use of hyperbolic language[69]. The Petrarchan tradition may also have contributed to Vasari's depiction of La Gioconda as an idealized Renaissance woman. Still, from a progymnasmatic point of view, we see that Vasari refers to nonexistent details such as the wet eyes of Mona Lisa and her eyelashes, both of which are missing in the actual painting, but serve to evoke vividness in the description; that is to say, he includes enough *enargeia* to convince

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65 Gibson (2008: 506-507).
66 On a possible connection with John Tzetzes' works, cf. Muñoz Morcillo (2021: 162-167).
67 Vasari's *Vite* (1568, vol. 4: pp. 39-40). English translation after Flanigan (2019: 183-230), here p. 200.
68 Feser, Lorini (2019: 106-107, n. 104).
69 Cf. Alpers (1995); and for techniques for creating *enargeia*, cf. Webb (2009: 57-59).

the reader that the painting is a masterpiece. If Giotto could deceive Cimabue with a painted fly, Vasari deceived his readers with a living Gioconda that looks even more realistic in his ekphrastic version than the unseen original one.

Descriptions of Machines

Vasari's descriptions of stage machinery do not have the degree of accuracy that modern readers would expect in order to be able to reproduce or even sketch them. In a 1957 article on Vasari's description of stage machinery, the theater historian Orville K. Larson complains that translations of Vasari's text are too literal, resulting in complicated or confusing descriptions. He also states that Vasari could not do better since he was an art historian. However, Vasari was not an art historian in the modern sense. He also designed complex buildings as an architect. The reason for the inaccuracies in Vasari's descriptions of machines can be found in the medium, i.e., in the rhetorical tradition of technical *ekphrasis*, especially when describing something for a broad audience. The *Paradiso*, an artificial heaven that Brunelleschi invented for the "sacra rappresentazione" of the Annunciation performed in S. Felice di Piazza in Florence, was, according to Vasari:

> truly marvelous, and displayed the ability and industry of the inventor. On high was a heaven full of living and moving figures, and several lights flash in and out. I will take pains to describe exactly how the apparatus of this machine was devised, seeing that the machine itself is destroyed, and the men are dead who could have spoken of it from experience[70].

Vasari does not forget to use everyday language and a sentence summarizing the perception of its functionality from the beholder's perspective when describing every section of the machinery. Indeed, even if we only read those parts of the description, we can still see the intended effect of the *ingegno*:

> From the ground, the half-globe resembled a veritable heaven. […] Twelve children […] on pedestals and dressed like angels with golden wings and golden wigs, joined hands at the proper time and extending their arms, they appeared to be dancing, especially when the half-globe revolved. […] From the ground, these lights looked like stars, and the beams, which were covered with cotton, looked like clouds[71].

The "technical" description of the device and the actions carried out by it are intertwined within a narrative that recalls Tzetzes' description of Archimedes' machines used during the Second Punic War. Because of its high degree of detail,

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70 Vasari's *Lives* (1980, vol. 1: p. 295).
71 Tr. by Larson (1957).

Vasari's narrative also recalls Athenaeus of Naucratis' description of Heron of Alexandria's ship, the Syracusian. In a very plausible analysis of the appearances of the Annunciation device in the *Lives* and contemporary accounts, Larson has demonstrated that it is possible to deduce a great amount of detail about the device. However, even if we infer that Vasari would have known almost all the details of the *Paradiso*, the Aretian obviously decided to use rhetorical techniques in his description in a way that recalls the famous machine-writers of antiquity.

As Courtney Ann Roby states in her book *Technical Ekphrasis in Greek and Roman Science and Literature* (2016), the main challenge in describing mechanical devices is the need for more accuracy of the textual coding for describing the construction process. This problem was well-known to many technical writers, such as Vitruvius, Hero, Galen, and Eratosthenes. Roby consequently points out that technical knowledge of mechanical artifacts cannot be obtained in its entirety except through personal experience, i.e., the author in question can only provide sufficient textual "indications", that is, *gnorismata* (γνωρίσματα), for the reader[72]. As Roby states, "Galen compares these limitations to the problem of verbally describing a person's likeness; no one can recreate an individual's form (ἰδέα) accurately, but one can, for example, give verbal 'indications' sufficient to recognize runaway slaves from herald's descriptions"[73]. Except for descriptions of functionality, these *gnorismata* are mostly absent in Vasari's machine descriptions. However, Vasari was interested in emphasizing the machine's functionality similar to former amateur "technical writers" such as Tzetzes and Athenaeus of Naucratis and even with experts such as Hero of Alexandria to attract attention and facilitate knowledge transfer. The brevity and variety of most descriptions interwoven with the narrative of Brunelleschi's device allow Vasari to win the reader's attention.

Final Note

In the existing research on Vasari, a critical approach that focuses on the rhetorical rules of the early modern period, especially on the revival of the *progymnasmata* and Greek literature in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italy, must be included. Sometimes, the use of *enargeia* is even confounded with Vasari's religious piety or Vasari's own emotions[74]. I have pointed out that Vasari's narrative and encomiastic descriptions work as memory and knowledge images, even if

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72 For the origin of the term "written machine" – i.e., γραφομήνον ὄργανον – in Hero's work *Dioptra* and its comprehensive meaning as a textual encoding of the machine itself, including instructions for constructing and operating it, cf. Roby (2016: 3, 225 n. 121, 302). Tzetzes refers to the authors of such descriptions in a similar way, namely, as "machine writers", i.e., μηχανογράφοι.

73 Roby (2016: 298-299).

74 Cf. Barolsky (2011: 10-13).

Vasari primarily pays attention to the psychological and communicative aspects of *ekphrasis* when describing works of art.

Indeed, the essence of modernity in Vasari's *Lives* lies in that work's revival of ekphrastic description, its psychological strength and vividness, its overarching character, and its utility for preserving precious knowledge. If a work of art is considered relevant, the more inaccessible or endangered the painting, the more details seems Vasari to provide, as seen, e.g., in the description of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. However, works of art are not the only motifs in Vasari's ekphrastic practice: descriptions of characters or machines and combinations with other *progymnasmata*, such as the narration, the anecdote, or the comparison, are common in the *Lives*.

I have argued that Tzetzes' and Pliny's uses of *ekphrasis* had an influence on Vasari's *Lives* in the sense that Vasari borrowed the main idea and structure of specific artists' stories. Vasari's innovation can be found in the modification of classical models, which is consistent with a humanist formation linked to the curriculum at the Latin School of Arezzo.

However, there is still much work to do to understand all processes implied in the progymnasmatic transfer. If Robert Black bridged the gap between the codicological approach and the reconstruction of the Latin curriculum with the help of communal archives, it is now time to bridge the gap between the use of the *Donatus* and the *Progymnasmata* and what this implied for rhetorical education and literature in sixteenth-century Italy. As for Vasari, a new reading approach that considers the progymnasmatic perspective is needed to discern better where he was innovating and where the biographical method has been subordinated to rhetorical means, personal preferences, or even biased opinions. In any case, a research approach that takes the rhetorical perspective of his time as its starting point would help provide a more accurate assessment of the innovations of his biographical method over earlier, pre-aphthonian traditions, such as Lorenzo Ghiberti's *I Comentarii* (*c.* 1447).

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