

Vasari's *Vita* of Giotto

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The *vita* of Giotto by Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) is not a biography in the conventional sense. As is now generally recognized, his presentation of the artist in his *Lives of the Artists* (Florence, 1568) is a mixture of fact and fiction, and he derived much of what he says about Giotto from literary sources. Vasari created an image or figure of Giotto out of the various stories about the artist he found in *The Decameron* (ca. 1350) of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) and in the *Three Hundred Tales* (ca. 1390) of Franco Sacchetti (1332–1400), as well as in the writings of other authors, such as the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455) and the architect Antonio Averlino, called Il Filarete (ca. 1400–ca. 1469).¹ Structurally, the stories Vasari used to represent Giotto are variations on paradigmatic tales of artists, especially the fourth-century BCE Greek painter Apelles, by ancient authors. The *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE), which contains several chapters on art and artists, is particularly relevant. Pliny based his account of the life and works of Apelles—elements of which are echoed in Vasari's *vita* of Giotto—in a now-lost book about Greek artists by Duris of Samos (ca. 350–281 BCE). Thus Vasari's stories about Giotto are ultimately rooted “in the realms of myth and saga,” and they transfer “a wealth of imaginative material” from early antiquity into Renaissance literature.² As Vasari surely intended, his representation of Giotto, though constructed from earlier sources, is not merely literary. His Giotto is a mythical figure; he is a culture-hero of the first order; he is Apelles reincarnated.

The New Apelles

Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century authors often claimed Giotto to be the equal of Apelles. Typical in this regard are Boccaccio's reference to “our Giotto, to whom in his era Apelles was not superior,” and the assertion of the Florentine poet Domenico di Giovanni da Corella (1403–83) that Giotto “was certainly on a par with

¹ For a different perspective on Vasari's *vita* of Giotto, see Maginnis, 1993, 385–408. For references to Giotto before Vasari, see the still valuable articles by Falaschi, 1972, and Watson, 1984.

² Quoting Kris and Kurz, 1979, 12.

Apelles the ancient painter."³ The ubiquitous linking of the two painters was an effective, if eventually well-worn rhetorical device, a shorthand way of implying the greatness of the Italian artist and of linking present glory and luminous past. Surprisingly—given the penchant of his predecessors—Vasari never directly refers to Apelles or to any other ancient artist in his *vita* of Giotto. The *vita* of the sculptor Andrea Pisano (1290–1348) suggests one possible reason for the omission. As Vasari explains, Andrea benefited from the “light” of the ancient sculpture he saw in the Campo Santo at Pisa.⁴ Giotto on the other hand had no comparable examples of ancient painting to study. Perhaps, then, Vasari thought that if Giotto, who invented the new, naturalistic style, had no knowledge of ancient painting, he could not be overtly identified as a “new Apelles.” Or perhaps he wished to reserve the association for later artists, such as Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Sandro Botticelli, Andrea Mantegna, and Leonardo da Vinci. In the *vita* of each of them he records an epitaph or, in the case of Leonardo, a poem connecting the modern painter and Apelles.⁵

Even though Vasari avoids any direct association between Giotto and Apelles, he indirectly links them. In the preface to the second part of the *Lives* he praises the works of Apelles, Protogenes, and other Greek painters, which works he had not actually seen. Nevertheless, he claims that everything in the pictures of those artists “is perfect and most beautiful, and nothing better can be imagined, seeing that they painted most excellently not only the forms and actions of bodies, but also the emotions and passions of the soul.”⁶ In a description of a now-destroyed painting he attributes to Giotto, Vasari demonstrates that the modern painter was capable of a similar excellence. The artist, Vasari explains, represented the life of the Blessed Michelina of Pesaro (who died in 1356) in a fresco in the church of San Francesco at Rimini, which painting was “one of the most beautiful and excellent things Giotto ever did.” In one scene he represented a woman,

as beautiful as ever a woman can be, who, in order to clear herself from the false charge of adultery, is taking an oath over a book in a most wonderful attitude, holding her eyes fixed on those of her husband, who makes her take the oath by reason of mistrust in a black son born from her, whom he could in no way bring himself to believe to be his. She, even as her husband is showing disdain and

³ Boccaccio, 1965, 937. For Domenico da Corella's *Theotocoon*, see Baldassarri and Saiber, 2000, 249.

⁴ Vasari, 1996, 1: 135. All translations are from this edition. For the Italian text of Giotto's *vita*, see Bettarini and Barocchi's work, Vasari, 1966–87, referred to below as Vasari-BB; for Giotto see 2: 96–123. I am primarily concerned with the second edition.

⁵ For the epitaphs and the poem, see Vasari, 1996, 1: 324, 411, 542, 564, and 640, respectively. In the second edition of the *Lives*, the only artist to whom Vasari (Vasari-BB, 4: 266) refers directly as “a new Apelles” is the painter Vincenzio Tamagni (1492–ca. 1516). See also Vasari, 1996, 2: 762, where he refers to an image of Apelles painting a portrait of Alexander the Great on the funeral decorations for Michelangelo.

⁶ Vasari, 1996, 1: 248. Vasari echoes Socrates' conversations with the fourth-century BCE Greek artists Parrhasius and Cleiton as presented by Xenophon, “Memoirs of Socrates,” in Waterfield, 1990, 164–165.

distrust in his face, is making clear with the purity of her brow and of her eyes, to those who are intently gazing on her, her innocence and simplicity?

In several other places in Giotto's *vita*, Vasari praises the artist's representations of “the emotions and passions of the soul.” For the attentive reader of the entire *Lives*, such praise implies that Giotto, in a very important respect, was on a par with Apelles and another fourth-century BCE painter, Parrhasius, who was especially admired for his depiction of human emotions.

Cimabue and Giotto

Vasari's association of Giotto and ancient artists is even less obvious in the first tale of the *vita*, which tale is an embellished version of a story he found in Ghiberti's *The Commentaries* (ca. 1450).⁷ As Vasari's story goes, the accomplished painter Giovanni Cimabue (ca. 1240–ca. 1302), a member of a noble family, discovers the young Giotto, who is the son of a poor, unsophisticated shepherd named Bondone. Recognizing the lively intelligence of his child, Bondone sets him to watching over a flock of sheep. Because of his God-given abilities as an artist, Giotto, with no prior instruction, begins to draw in the sand, on a stone or on the ground. Sometimes he draws directly from nature, at other times from memory. One day Cimabue, who happens to be traveling from Florence to Vespignano, where Giotto was born, observes the boy depicting a sheep. Using a pointed rock, Giotto scratches the image on a clean, flat stone. Astonished by what he sees, Cimabue asks Giotto if he would like to stay with him, and the boy responds that he would if his father gives his permission. Bondone, delighted with the prospect of his son becoming a painter, consents to the arrangement, and Giotto goes to Florence, where he soon not only masters Cimabue's essentially Italo-Byzantine style, but also surpasses it. He, the first artist since antiquity to make accurate drawings from life, becomes the first to succeed in completely revitalizing the art of painting, which had been dormant for centuries.⁸

As has been long recognized, Vasari's story is in some respects structurally similar to Pliny's account of the circumstances leading to the decision of the fourth-century BCE Greek artist Lysippus to quit his occupation as a coppersmith and “venture on a higher path” as a sculptor. He made the decision after he happened to overhear the painter Eupompos answer a question about which of his predecessors he followed. In response, Eupompos “pointed to a crowd of people, and replied that nature should be imitated not [the works of] any artist.”⁹ As with Lysippus, Giotto's career as an artist

⁷ Vasari, 1996, 1: 108.

⁸ For Ghiberti's tale of the finding of Giotto, see Ghiberti, 1998, 83–84.

⁹ See Boccaccio, 1995, 457–459: Giotto “brought back to light an art which had been buried for centuries beneath the blunders of those who, in their paintings, aimed to bring visual delight to the ignorant rather than intellectual satisfaction to the wise.” I have used the Italian text in Boccaccio, 1983, 102–103.

¹⁰ Pliny the Elder, 1952, 9: 48–49. Kris and Kurz, 1979, 14–15, connect the story with Vasari's account of Cimabue's discovery of Giotto. Bellori, 2005, 180, tells a similar story about Caravaggio.

is launched as a result of a chance encounter, and like his illustrious predecessor, he rises from humble circumstances to follow "a higher path" to become a great artist. Again like Lysippus, Giotto is a student of nature: dwelling in the countryside, he uses a sharp stone to depict an animal on a rock, and although he benefits from Cimabue's teachings, he is not a slavish imitator of his master's style.

Giotto's O

In one of the most often discussed tales about Renaissance artists, the story of Giotto's O, Pope Benedict XI, hearing of the artist's fame and wishing to have some paintings made in the church of Saint Peter in Rome, sends one of his courtiers to discover the character of the man and the quality of his works.¹¹ Before arriving in Florence, however, the courtier visits many artists in Siena with the intention of obtaining some drawings from them. Eventually the pope's emissary appears at Giotto's workshop and after explaining to the artist what the pope has in mind, asks for a drawing to send to His Holiness. Always a courteous man, Giotto takes some paper and a pen, which he dips in a red liquid, and placing his arm firmly against his side, draws a perfect circle. He then gives the drawing to the courtier, who, thinking he is being made a fool, asks, "Is this the only drawing you will give me?" Giotto replies that the drawing is sufficient and tells the courtier to send it to the pope with the others. Realizing Giotto will not give him another drawing, the dissatisfied courtier departs. Nevertheless, when he sends the drawings by the Siennese artists to Rome, he includes the one by Giotto, explaining how the artist made the circle without a compass. The pope and some of his more knowledgeable courtiers fully understand the implications of Giotto's drawing and see clearly that he is of a superior character and more skillful than all the other painters who submitted examples of their art.

According to Vasari, the story of Giotto's drawing was told far and wide and gave rise to a saying used to describe thick-headed people: "*Tu sei più tondo che l'O di Giotto*" (You are rounder than Giotto's O). As Vasari explains, the significance of the proverb lies in the double meaning of the word *tondo*, which in Tuscany could refer either to a perfect circle or to a slow-witted person. Giotto's O is both an example of the artist's skill and, as Andrew Ladis explained, "a deft characterization of the fool who ran the errand" for the pope.¹²

Giotto's simple drawing is, in effect, a response to Pope Benedict's questions about him: "What kind of man is he? And how talented an artist?" The answers to those questions are, respectively, he is a witty man and a singular artist. He can skillfully draw a perfect circle without the use of a compass, and in drawing that simple shape

¹¹ Vasari, 1996, 1: 102–103. Vasari mistakenly refers to Pope Benedict IX. I am especially indebted to the following discussions of this story: Ladis, 1986, 581–596; Bärlosky, 1990, 135–137; and Rubin, 1995, 309.

¹² Ladis, 1986, 576. For a discussion of the story of Giotto's O in another context, see Land, 2009.

he conveys an important dimension of his character, namely his visual wit, for Giotto's O is a kind of double autograph. The perfection of the O-shape embodies his skill, and the letter O appears twice in his name. That is to say, his name—GiOTTO—contains a double portion of the very symbol of his excellence as an artist. The O also might have signaled that he was a man of rotund physique, for Giotto's name recalls the word *ghiotto*, which can mean "gourmand," or "glutton." The drawing and the tale of its creation allow the pope to see immediately not only Giotto-the-artist but Giotto-the-man. Within the context of the entire *vita*, the story serves another purpose, too, for the son of the poor shepherd is now a famous artist, sought after by a pope, who understands his intelligence and wit, even from afar.

Vasari's story of Giotto's O is a variation on Pliny's account of Apelles' visit to Protogenes' studio.¹³ According to Pliny, Apelles, eager to become familiar with the works of Protogenes, who is known to him only by reputation, sails to the island of Rhodes where his fellow painter lives. Upon disembarking, Apelles goes to Protogenes' studio, only to meet the artist's servant, who is watching over a large panel resting on an easel. She tells Apelles that Protogenes is not present and asks whom she might say has called. Taking a brush dipped in color, Apelles draws a fine line on the empty board. When Protogenes returns to his studio, his servant tells him what has transpired. Having carefully examined the line, Protogenes announces that Apelles was the visitor, for such perfection, he says, is the work of no one else. Protogenes then draws a finer line over the first and again departs, leaving instructions with his servant to show the panel to Apelles, if he reappears. Apelles returns and draws an even finer line over the one left by Protogenes. Later, when Protogenes sees what Apelles has done, he admits defeat and hurries out to find his guest.

As Vasari was surely aware, there are some important similarities between his story of Giotto's O and Pliny's account of Apelles and Protogenes. In both tales, the action takes place in an artist's workshop or studio. Both Apelles and Giotto draw abstract lines that simultaneously display their skills and express their wit, and just as Protogenes recognizes Apelles by his mark, the pope understands something of Giotto's identity. Furthermore, just as Apelles triumphs over Protogenes, Giotto defeats his rivals, the Siennese artists.

In his *Treatise on Architecture* (ca. 1465) Filarete records a tale about Apelles that is also similar in certain important respects to Vasari's story about Giotto's O. The tale is a garbled retelling of Pliny's story of Apelles and Protogenes in which the author has Zeuxis take the place of the latter. Filarete refers to squares and circles as examples of geometrical shapes that are made with compasses, squares, and straight edges. He goes on to explain that an artist can make those shapes

in a drawing without the use of a compass or square or ruler, but not so exactly as with these instruments, unless of course you can do as they say Apelles and Zeuxis did. They say he [that is, Zeuxis] drew his straight lines with a brush exactly as if he had done it with a ruler. Moreover, the former [Apelles] drew another line over the very fine line that he [Zeuxis] had already made. It was much thinner, but he drew another in one stroke through the

¹³ Pliny the Elder, 1952, 320–323.

middle of it. They say he could also turn a perfect circle without a compass. The other [Zeuxis] then placed a point in the middle [of the circle]. When the compasses were set up, he [Apelles] had done it exactly. This was certainly a gift given by nature and not [attained] through practice, otherwise it would have been made by accident, if chance had not already made it.¹⁴

According to Filarete, Apelles made a freehand drawing of a circle, in the center of which shape Zeuxis marked a point, so the accuracy of Apelles' drawing could be tested with compasses. The circle was found to be perfect. As Filarete also explains, Apelles' ability to draw a perfect circle was not learned, nor was it an accident. Rather, Apelles' ability was a gift of nature.

Vasari probably drew upon a story or stories about Giotto's O that had been circulating since at least the middle of the fifteenth century, although he would have known of Filarete's tale of Apelles and Zeuxis.¹⁵ In any case, given Filarete's anecdote, Vasari's story about Giotto implies that when the pope saw Giotto's O and heard how it had been made, he immediately recognized the artist as one who possessed an Apelles-like wit and ability, an ability that was an innate gift.

Giotto and the King of Naples

Not only did a pope commission work from Giotto, King Robert the Wise of Naples (1277–1343) summoned him to paint some frescoes in the newly constructed church of Santa Chiara and elsewhere. The king also commissioned Giotto, who actually visited Naples from 1330–1334, to paint the portraits of several famous people and so admired the artist he told him to include a portrait of himself among them. Often the king would visit him, liking to watch Giotto at work and enjoying his witty conversation and sense of humor. On one occasion the king announces he wants to make Giotto "the first man in Naples." The painter replies, "And for that end I am lodged at the Porta Reale, in order to be the first in Naples."¹⁶ Like many stories of the time, this one turns on a pun. The king says he will raise Giotto to the premier place in Neapolitan society; modest Giotto says he is literally the first man because his lodgings are at the entrance to the city. Vasari, however, lifted the joke from the *Metamorphoses* (or *Golden Ass*, 1: 21) of the Latin author Apuleius (ca. 125–180 CE). The hero of the book asks an old lady about a character named Milo, who is "one of the first men of the city." The woman, making a pun on the word *primus*, replies

¹⁴ Antonio di Piero Averlino was called Il Filarete: see Filarete, 1965, 1: 298 and 2: fol. 174v. I have slightly altered Spencer's translation. For the Italian text, see Filarete, 1972, 2: 642–643.

¹⁵ The line "Che più che l'O di Giotto mi par tondo" appears in a sonnet, "Contro al Cancelliere della Signoria," attributed to Domenico di Giovanni, called "Il Burchiello" (1404–49); see Burchiello, 1923, 230. Virtually the same line ("Tu sei più tondo che l'O di Giotto") is recorded in the so-called *Detti Pincivole* (or *Il Bel Libretto*) attributed to the Florentine poet Angelo Poliziano (1454–94); see Poliziano, 1985, 386.

¹⁶ Vasari, 1996, 1: 107.

that Milo is indeed the first man because he lives in the first house to be encountered as one approaches the city.¹⁷

According to Vasari, on another occasion, when the weather was very warm, King Robert says to Giotto, "If I were you, now it is hot, I would stop painting for a little while," to which the artist replies, "And I would, too, if I were you."¹⁸ Giotto seems jokingly to expose the fatuity of the king's remark. As his response implies, if he were the king, he would no longer be a painter and therefore would stop painting, but because he is who he is, he continues to paint, even in the heat. Likewise, if the king were Giotto, he would no longer be the king, but a painter who would paint in the heat.

In yet another tale, which also appears in *Il Libro di Antonio Billi* (ca. 1540), Giotto exhibits both verbal skills and visual wit. As the story goes, the king capriciously asks the artist to make an emblematic representation of his realm.¹⁹ Accordingly, Giotto paints an image of an ass with a saddle on its back sniffing another saddle at its feet as if he desires it. An image of the royal crown and a scepter, symbols of sovereignty, appears on both saddles. When Robert asks Giotto to explain the image, the artist answers that it represents the kingdom of Naples and his royal subjects, who every day desire a new lord. In other words, Giotto seems to have been humorously drawing attention to the constantly disgruntled people of the king's realm.²⁰ Possibly the story alludes to the peasants who were heavily taxed when Robert waged war on Sicily from 1325 to 1341.

Vasari's brief tales about Giotto and King Robert echo several of Pliny's stories about Apelles. For example, Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) was very fond of Apelles and often visited his studio, sometimes speaking at length about the art of painting. On one of those occasions, the artist, who was always courteous, respectfully advises Alexander to be silent because the boys who ground the painter's colors are laughing at him.²¹ Another time, Apelles again speaks freely to Alexander. Seeing one of the artist's portraits of him, Alexander exclaims the figure in the painting is not a good likeness. All of a sudden the general's horse neighs at the portrait as if it is his master, prompting Apelles to remark the horse understands art better than does Alexander.²²

In addition to the stories about Apelles, Vasari probably knew another structurally similar tale about Giotto from the last half of the fourteenth century. The story, which is about Giotto's casual response to a person of superior social standing, this time a cardinal, appears in the Anonimo Fiorentino commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which commentary was written between 1308 and 1321. Like King Robert, the cardinal admires the artist's skill and verbal wit. After describing the artist as "a perceptive, able and eloquent man," the author says Giotto was in Bologna painting a chapel where the

¹⁷ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 1922, 36–37. Kris and Kurz, 1972, 99, mention Apuleius' story.

¹⁸ Vasari, 1996, 1: 107.

¹⁹ Anonymous, 1991, 40. This version refers to "King Charles of Naples," probably Charles I of Naples (Charles of Anjou), who was appointed vicar general of Tuscany in 1267. For Parrhasius' *Demos*, an allegorical representation of the people of Athens, see Pliny the Elder, 1952, 9: 69–73.

²⁰ Vasari, 1996, 1: 107.

²¹ Pliny the Elder, 1952, 324–325. Plutarch, *Moralia* (58D) tells virtually the same story about Apelles and Megabyzus; and Aelian, *Varia Historia* (2.2) does the same using Zeuxis and Megabyzus as characters.

²² Aelian, 1997, 64–65.

unidentified cardinal often visited him.²³ One day as Giotto is depicting the miter of a figure of a bishop, the cardinal, simply to hear the artist's reply, asks him what the two "cornua," or peaks of the miter, signify. Giotto, who knows the cardinal is teasing him, replies that the two peaks signify that whoever holds the position of bishop must know both the Old and New Testaments. The cardinal is so pleased with Giotto's reply that he asks him about the significance of the two strips of cloth, or lappets, hanging behind the miter. Giotto, seeing he can joke around with the cardinal, this time replies in jest. The lappets, he explains, mean that nowadays pastors know neither the Old Testament nor the New, which they have thrown behind them.

Like Apelles, Giotto feels at ease when addressing social superiors in a casual manner. The implication of the stories by Vasari, Pliny, and the Anonimo Fiorentino is that skillful and witty artists, namely Giotto and Apelles, deserve to be honored by such people as generals, kings, popes, and cardinals; and because of their outstanding talent and elevated genius, they have earned the license to be spontaneous in their witty responses to powerful patrons.

Giotto's Eloquence

Near the end of Giotto's *vita*, Vasari refers for a second time to a *novella* in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (6.5) about the painter and a famous jurist, Forese da Rabatta.²⁴ In the story, Giotto appears as a modest man of outstanding talent, and as a painter who deserves to be called *mestro*. He is also an accomplished teller of tales and possesses a sharp wit and a keen sense of humor. When he and Forese are returning from a visit to the countryside around Florence, they are soaked with rain, covered in mud, and dressed in peasant clothing. The jurist, whose success would have depended in part on his verbal skills, remarks no one seeing Giotto in his present condition would believe him to be the best painter in the world. Giotto immediately responds that anyone seeing Forese in his present condition would not believe he knows the alphabet.

Just after mentioning Boccaccio's story, Vasari repeats verbatim a *novella* from Franco Sacchetti's *Three Hundred Tales* in which the artist interacts with a person of low social standing. Surprisingly, Vasari offers no comment on the significance of the tale; he says only that it demonstrates Giotto's ability to make ingenious and witty remarks. He offers the tale, too, because it preserves "certain modes of speech and expressions of those times."²⁵ Perhaps the deeper significance of the story escaped Vasari, or, more likely, its implications were so obvious to him he felt no need to explain them.

If in the *Decameron* Giotto's brilliant wit surpasses that of a jurist, in Sacchetti's *novella* the painter himself plays the part of a lawyer when he argues his own defense in a complaint brought against him by a dissatisfied customer. A crude artisan has so risen

²³ Original text in Anonimo Fiorentino, 1866-74, 2: 187-188. My translation.

²⁴ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1995, 102-103.

²⁵ Vasari, 1996, 1: 116. As Karen Goodchild suggested to me, Vasari might be signaling his awareness of the so-called *Questione della Lingua* and the value of the fourteenth-century vernacular. For an introduction to the subject, see Hall, 1942, 1-10. See also Rubin, 1995, 166-167.

in the social world that he feels the need to have an escutcheon or buckler decorated with his arms. Accordingly, he visits Giotto's shop and asks the artist to carry out the task. Giotto agrees and tells the man to leave the buckler and to return for it in a few days. He also notices the man's manner: although courteous to Giotto, he has brought a servant who walks behind him carrying the buckler. The implication is that the artisan acts as if he is socially superior to Giotto.

After the artisan departs, Giotto is puzzled and offended by his visit and behavior. He wonders if the man had been sent as a joke to mock him, for no one had ever brought a buckler for him to paint and certainly not an upstart simpleton acting as if he were French royalty. Giotto then draws a design on the buckler as odd and uncouth as the artisan and gives it to an assistant to paint. His cluttered design, another example of his visual wit, includes a bevy of heraldic devices—"a helmet, a gorget, a pair of bracelets, a pair of iron gauntlets, a pair of breast-plates, armor for both legs, a sword, a knife, and a lance."

When the artisan returns and asks for his buckler, Giotto does not bring it to him. Rather, he orders his presumptuous patron to step and fetch it. Examining the buckler closely, the thick-headed man is dismayed by the nonsense of Giotto's design and refuses to pay for the work. Giotto asks him if he has not received what he ordered (in other words, his arms), and the artisan, oblivious to the true significance of the artist's design, exclaims it seems so. Giotto then gives the man a thorough tongue-lashing, calling him a no-account fool who does not know the identity of his ancestors. His actions, Giotto continues, might be appropriate to someone from the Bardi family or to the Duke of Bavaria, but not to a nobody like him.

The artisan replies that Giotto has insulted him and ruined his buckler. The angry man then leaves the artist's shop and goes straight to the Grascia, which was an official body having authority over the various guilds, including the one Giotto joined in 1320, the *Arte de Medici e Speziali*. The artisan has Giotto summoned, and the artist appears, only to make an appeal against his patron for the money owed him. The man in turn makes a counter-claim against Giotto. Each party to the dispute has a turn at presenting his claim, but Giotto wins the day because he states his case better than the artisan argues his. In the end, the artisan is ordered to take his buckler and to pay Giotto his fee; and the artist is exonerated.²⁶

In this story Sacchetti illustrates another facet of Giotto's singularity. As an artist, he has attained a social status superior to that of the lowly artisan. Indeed, as Sacchetti hints, he is worthy of serving only the best people—wealthy bankers, royalty, and the nobility—and once again Giotto appears not only as an accomplished painter, but also as a man of visual wit and verbal skills, for he eloquently and successfully argues his case before judges.

In his story Sacchetti is not clear on two points. He is not specific about the location of the buckler when the artisan leaves Giotto's studio. Does the artisan take the object with him, or does he leave it with Giotto? If Giotto simply hands over the buckler without receiving payment for it, the artisan has no reason to seek redress from the Grascia. Presumably, Giotto keeps the buckler. Sacchetti is also vague about the nature of Giotto's argument and of the artisan before the Grascia. As the context

²⁶ Vasari, 1996, 1: 116-117. For the original story, see Franco Sacchetti, 1970, 158-160 (*novella* 63).

of the story suggests, the painter might have pointed out to the judges how ridiculous the lowly and presumptuous artisan and his novel request seemed to him but, from a legal perspective, this argument probably would not have carried the day, for Giotto agreed to serve the man.

Another, more compelling explanation of Giotto's argument is that Sacchetti's tale illustrates a particular point of law. In other words, the tale might have been suggested to Sacchetti by a certain passage in the *Documents of Love* (composed between 1309 and 1313) by Francesco da Barberino (1264–1348). There, briefly paraphrasing an argument in the *Institutes* by the Roman emperor Justinian (ca. 482–565 CE), Francesco explains it would be absurd for a painting by Cimabue or Giotto to be considered the mere decoration of a panel which is otherwise without value.²⁷ Seemingly, Sacchetti also knew of Justinian's argument, which is as follows: if an artist paints a picture on a patron's panel,

*some think the board belongs ... to the painter, others, the painting, however great its excellence, becomes part of the board. The former appears to us the better opinion, for it is absurd a painting by Apelles or Parrhasius should be an accessory of a board, which, in itself, is thoroughly worthless. Hence, if the owner of the board has possession of the picture, and is sued for it by the painter, who nevertheless refuses to pay the cost of the board, he will be able to repel him by the plea of fraud. If, on the other hand, the painter has possession, it follows from what has been said the former owner of the board ... if he refuses to pay the cost of the picture, he can be repelled by the plea of fraud, provided the possession of the painter be in good faith*²⁸

Read with Justinian's example in mind, Sacchetti's tale, which by a circuitous route links Giotto with Apelles and Parrhasius, seems to offer an answer to this question: in a dispute between patron and artist, who owns a panel once its value has been increased by the addition of a painting or other design by a superior artist?

According to Justinian, some believe the panel belongs to its original owner, no matter what the painter has added to it. In Sacchetti's story that must have been the argument of the hapless artisan, who certainly would have claimed the buckler belonged to him and would have claimed, too, that Giotto's ridiculous design was worthless and he should therefore not be required to pay the artist.

Giotto would have argued the other point of view described by Justinian. He would have explained to the judges the buckler was relatively worthless until he drew upon it and had it painted by his assistant and, even though he made a nonsensical design, it was nevertheless by his hand, the product of his skill. Like Apelles and Parrhasius, whose designs increased the value of the panels on which they were painted, he, Giotto, transformed a worthless buckler into a valuable work of art and deserved to be paid for his design.

Above all, Sacchetti's tale, which in this context carries Vasari's message, is about the value of the artist's skill. Because Giotto is a painter of great talent, everything he

²⁷ Francesco da Barberino, 1905–27, 2: 94. Francesco's reference is briefly discussed by Falaschi, 1972, 4.

²⁸ Justinian, 1913, 42–43. For the Latin text, see Justinian, 1987, 12.

touches turns to gold, even if the design of his work is unacceptable to his patron. The patron, in other words, does not decide the value of the work of art; the character of the particular artist and the quality of his hand determine value. Had Giotto been a mediocre and ineloquent painter, the artisan no doubt would have been able to retrieve his buckler without paying the artist for his silly design.

Giotto's Fly

The last story in Vasari's *vita* of Giotto concerns an incident that supposedly occurred when the artist was still young and an apprentice in Cimabue's shop. Giotto, Vasari says, "once painted on the nose of a figure, which Cimabue had completed, a fly so natural looking that the master, returning to continue the work, tried more than once to chase the fly away with his hand, thinking that it was real, before he realized his error."²⁹ According to Vasari, Giotto's fly was so convincing it fooled Cimabue more than once, and he continued to try to brush the fly away until at last he realized his mistake and presumably recognized Giotto's skill and sense of humor, particularly his sense of visual humor.

Although Vasari does not say as much, this story recalls Boccaccio's description in the *Decameron* (6.5) of Giotto's genius and naturalistic style:

*there was not one thing in Nature ... that he with the stylus, with the pen, or with the brush could not paint so like her that it appeared not [merely] a similitude, so that in many instances with the things made by him one finds the sense of sight in men in error, believing that to be true which was painted.*³⁰

Like others who viewed the objects in Giotto's paintings, Cimabue's eyes were so deceived he believed he saw a living fly rather than a representation of a fly.

Both Vasari's anecdote about Giotto's fly and Boccaccio's description of Giotto's style recall tales about the deceptive nature of ancient art. For example, Pliny recounts a contest between Parrhasius and Zeuxis. As the story goes, the two artists compete with one another to determine which of them can most convincingly imitate nature. When their respective paintings are brought before all to see, Zeuxis removes the cloth covering his painting. Immediately a bird flies down and begins pecking at the grapes the artist has depicted. Zeuxis then triumphantly turns to Parrhasius and demands that he remove the cloth covering his painting. Parrhasius replies that there is no cloth. He has so faithfully imitated a cover for his painting that he has fooled Zeuxis into believing the depicted cloth is real.³¹ Parrhasius wins the day because he dupes a human being rather than a mere bird. In Vasari's variation on the tale, Giotto's skill at representing a lifelike fly makes him superior to Cimabue. He plays Parrhasius to Cimabue's Zeuxis.

²⁹ Vasari, 1996, 1: 116. For more on Vasari's anecdote, see Kris and Kurz, 1979, 64–65, and Barolsky, 1978, 17.

³⁰ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1974, 422. My translation.

³¹ Pliny the Elder, 1952, 9: 111.

Also related to Vasari's story of Giotto's fly is a letter of 1426 by the scholar and teacher of Greek literature, Guarino da Verona (1374–1460) about the relationship between subject matter and skill. Guarino rhetorically asks if Apelles should be less admired because he "painted naked and unconcealed those parts of the body which nature prefers hidden?" Likewise, he asks, if Apelles "depicted worms and serpents, mice, scorpions, flies and other distasteful creatures, should we not still admire and praise his art and skill?"³² Like Giotto, Guarino's Apelles was capable of depicting disgusting flies with a skill worthy of admiration.

No doubt Vasari was also aware of an earlier version of the anecdote about Giotto's fly. In his treatise on architecture, Filarete writes: "One reads of Giotto in one of his first works he painted flies and his master Cimabue was fooled by them, thinking they were alive, and wanted to chase them away with a cloth."³³ In this version the youthful Giotto, exhibiting his innate ability to imitate nature in a lifelike manner, depicts more than one fly and on his own picture, and Cimabue uses a cloth in his attempt to brush the insects away.

Filarete tells the anecdote in the context of his discussion of the *paragone*, or parallel, of painting and sculpture. Sculpture, he explains, always appears to be the color of its material. For example, a figure carved in marble will have the color of marble. Figures and objects in a painting, on the other hand, will be made of colors and, thus, will appear to be more like the thing depicted. Filarete, echoing Boccaccio's description of Giotto's style, also says, when looking at a painting many viewers "remain fooled, believing that the [depicted] thing is the actual object." He then gives examples of the force of representation in colors. Recalling stories by Pliny about Apelles, Zeuxis, Parrhasius, and others, he says that Greek artists depicted grapes that fooled birds into mistaking them for real fruit, and they painted horses and dogs in such a lifelike manner that they fooled real horses and real dogs.³⁴ Filarete ends his discussion with the story about Giotto's painted flies.

For Filarete, Giotto's insects are testimony to the power of painting, particularly its ability to imitate the colors of nature. His story has another dimension, too, for Filarete associates Giotto with ancient Greek artists, including Apelles. Like them, Giotto can paint things such as flies in such a lifelike fashion they deceive the people who view them. Indeed, he surpasses the ancients for, as Filarete implies, he can fool people, whereas the Greek artists (other than Parrhasius) duped mostly birds, dogs, and horses.

Although Vasari's version of the story is a variation on Filarete's tale, it has a somewhat different intention. Like Guarino's Apelles, Giotto's insect is a sign of his superior abilities in the representation of nature. The painting of the fly is also an example of his biting visual wit, for he depicts the creature on Cimabue's picture, as if to contrast his naturalism with Cimabue's lingering Byzantine manner. Vasari seems to have wanted to insinuate that the decaying style of Cimabue's painting drew filthy flies. That Cimabue uses his hand—the instrument of his skill and

³² See Baxandall, 1971, 40, for the original text.

³³ Filarete, 1965, 2: 121r.

³⁴ Filarete seems to echo Ficino, 1944, 233: "Zeuxis painted grapes in such a manner that the birds flew to them. Apelles painted a steed and a she-dog in such a manner that in passing by horses would neigh and dogs bark."

imagination—to drive away the flies also seems pertinent. He uses his hand to unsuccessfully confront Giotto's "hand," his naturalistic style.

Conclusion

Vasari creates both a convincing *vita* of Giotto and a believable image of him as a singular artist. He fluidly unites various stories from a variety of sources to create a compelling myth in which he, in effect, draws a circle, the very emblem of Giotto. At the beginning of the *vita*, noble Cimabue sets Giotto on the path to fame and fortune. At the end of the *vita*, after the reader has learned of Giotto's tremendous success in the new style of painting, Vasari returns to the artist's youth and to a moment when Cimabue is the butt of his protégé's practical joke. Between the two tales, Vasari represents Giotto's metamorphosis from a lonely shepherd boy to a widely famous artist.

Essentially, Vasari describes Giotto's genius and talent. Specifically his skill in the naturalistic representation of things and people, including the emotions of the human soul, makes him like Apelles and Parrhasius. Vasari also depicts Giotto's character and personality. He was not only a great artist, but again like Apelles, also a modest and courteous man, although he did not gladly suffer fools. Like Apelles, Giotto possessed a keen wit, both verbal and visual, and an engaging sense of humor. Vasari also traces Giotto's upward mobility. Unlike Cimabue, who was born to nobility, Giotto, the son of a shepherd, possessed a God-given nobility of soul and intellect, and just as the world-renowned general Alexander the Great admired Apelles, popes, kings, and other socially elevated people recognized Giotto's skill and sought to employ him. His powerful patrons also admired him as a person and often engaged him as a near equal.

For Vasari, Giotto's importance as an artist extends beyond the fourteenth century, and in the famous opening sentences of his *vita* of Michelangelo, he underscores that importance. Rescuing and restoring the art of design, Giotto completed what Cimabue had only begun, therewith providing the light that guided the generations of painters who came after him. Those subsequent artists, however, toiled in vain until God took pity on them and sent Michelangelo, who once again saved, and this time perfected, the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture. For Vasari, Giotto, the "new Apelles," is the necessary *Alpha* to Michelangelo, the modern Pygmalion and the inevitable *Omega*.