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BIOGRAPHY



Giorgio Vasari
Selections from

The Lives of the Artists

**Cimabue • Giotto
Brunelleschi
Botticelli
Leonardo da Vinci
Raphael • Dürer
Michelangelo
Titian
and many others**

Read by
Neville Jason

NA691012

1	Preface to The Lives	8:02
2	Cimabue c. 1240-1302? [1240-1300]*	7:00
3	Giotto c. 1267-1337 [1276-1336]	9:10
4	When the Pope had seen these works...	6:10
5	Andrea Pisano c. 1290-1348/9	7:13
6	Luca Della Robbia 1399/1400-1482 [1388-?]	6:26
7	Paolo Uccello 1396/7-1475 [1350-1432]	11:52
8	Lorenzo Ghiberti 1378-1455	5:46
9	Donatello and Filippo, when they perceived...	7:39
10	Masaccio 1401-1428 [?-1443]	5:54
11	Filippo Brunelleschi 1377-1446	3:42
12	Brunelleschi: Filippo was born in the year 1377	7:26
13	On his arrival, the wardens of S. Maria...	8:48
14	It then occurred to Filippo that he would...	7:40
15	The murmurers had now been silenced...	6:08
16	Donatello 1386?-1466 [1383-1466]	11:08
17	Piero della Francesca c. 1410/20-1492	5:25
18	Fra Angelico c. 1410/20-1492 [1387-1455]	6:10

19	Antonello da Messina c. 1430-1479	4:57
20	Fra Filippo Lippi c. 1406-1469 [1381-1438]	7:24
21	Jacopo , c. 1400-1470/71, Gentile 1429?-1507 & Giovanni Bellini c. 1430/40-1516	8:23
22	Sandro Botticelli 1444/5-1510 [1437-1515]	5:55
23	Andrea Verrocchio c. 1435-1488	7:38
24	Andrea Mantegna 1431-1506 [1451-1517]	5:16
25	Luca Signorelli 1441?-1523 [1439-1521]	4:38
26	Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519	7:11
27	He afterwards devoted even greater care to...	6:08
28	Giorgione 1476/8-1510 [1470-1511]	4:25
29	Piero di Cosimo c.1462-1521? [1441-1521]	5:40
30	Bramante 1444-1514	7:38
31	Fra Bartolommeo 1472/5-1517 [1469-1517]	8:52
32	Raphael 1483-1520	9:35
33	While he was engaged in producing these...	5:38
34	In his childhood Raphael imitated the style...	6:30
35	Andrea del Sarto 1486-1530 [1478-1520]	4:39

36	At that time there was a sacristan...	5:55
37	When Andrea left for France,...	7:33
38	Rosso Fiorentino 1495-1540 [?-1541]	9:09
39	Francesco Mazzuoli called Parmigianino 1503-1540 [1504-1540]	8:14
40	Albrecht Dürer 1471-1528	8:08
41	Giulio Romano prob. 1499-1546 [1492-1546]	9:26
42	Sebastiano del Piombo c. 1485-1547 [1475-1547]	8:10
43	Jacopo da Pontormo 1494-1556 [1493-1558]	8:44
44	By these and his other works Jacopo took...	9:28
45	Jacopo Tintoretto 1518-1594	3:16
46	Francesco de Salviati 1510-1563	6:27
47	Accordingly, they united to spread abroad...	4:15
48	Michelangelo Buonarotti 1475-1564	10:01
49	Lorenzo's garden was full of antiquities...	9:35
50	When the statue was finished,...	11:41

51	After the Pope had returned to Rome...	9:35
52	While Michelangelo was at Carrara...	9:48
53	Michelangelo had already finished...	10:00
54	I had returned to Florence to serve...	4:47
55	Michelangelo was employed by Paul IV...	6:31
56	Michelangelo was devoted to the labours...	4:32
57	Michelangelo enjoyed excellent health...	6:29
58	Titian c. 1485-1576 [1480-?]	6:09
59	The year that Andrea Gritti was appointed...	4:39
60	Titian did for Queen Mary a Prometheus...	3:31
61	Jacopo Sansovino 1486-1570 [1477-1570]	6:51
62	The Florentine nation being at that time...	5:38
63	Giorgio Vasari 1511-1574	10:26
64	But as I was thus winning honour, fame and...	9:32
65	I left Rome in October 1546...	9:26

Total time 7:50:41

* The dates in square brackets indicate the dates given by Vasari himself. The first date reflects modern research.

Giorgio Vasari

Selections from

The Lives of the Artists

'Comes the hour, comes the man', the saying goes, and in no case is it more apt than that of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574). His emergence at the height of the Renaissance was a remarkable and fortunate stroke of luck for the history of art. The seismic explosion of artistic creativity that was taking place in Italy during the 15th and 16th centuries cried out for a chronicler – and who better to undertake the task than someone who was not just an historian, but an artist among other artists, situated in the eye of the storm, someone whose own gifts and training gave him the ability to recognise genius when he found it, and to distinguish the greater talents from the lesser.

Vasari was a considerable artist in his own right, who earned sufficient respect and renown during his lifetime to be offered commissions to decorate and design some of Italy's most important churches, palaces and state buildings. He was ideally placed to know the great patrons as well as his fellow artists. He was able to assess the quality of the work of his colleagues and competitors, to analyse their technical proficiency and to appreciate



David by Michelangelo (marble)
Florence

their imaginative invention and spiritual depth. He could recognise innovative practices when he came across them and appreciate their contribution to the progress of art. In many instances he was personally acquainted with the people about whom he was writing, either as friends, teachers, colleagues or pupils. When Vasari wrote about an artist who had died before he started *The Lives*, he was often able to speak to those who had known him, and note down reminiscences, apocryphal stories or just plain gossip.

But none of this would have fitted him for his task had he lacked the personal qualities necessary to carry it out. Here again he was the right man for the job. Vasari was ambitious, determined, dogged, methodical, diplomatic and, though not a natural writer, able to produce a clear narrative in a direct and personal style. What is more, by the time he was persuaded to write *The Lives of the Artists*, he had already been collecting information about artists and their work for some time. It would seem that he was doing so without any particular purpose in mind. Perhaps he saw it as a resource to help him further his career, whether by keeping tabs on what other artists were doing, knowing what commissions were completed and what opportunities might present themselves in the future, or as a means of measuring himself against the opposition.

He describes how the plan to write a comprehensive treatise on artists' lives came about as the result of a conversation over dinner at the table of Cardinal Farnese. Vasari's friend Paolo Giovio, Bishop of Nocera, a scholar and man of letters, made the suggestion to Farnese, who in turn asked Vasari whether he thought it a good idea. Vasari replied in the affirmative, but being aware that despite his learning Giovio had confused various artists, he added that he thought it would be wise for him to have someone from the profession to help him. The assembled company all urged Vasari to take on the job of assistant, and he agreed. But when, later on, he came to provide Giovio with notes, Giovio declared that Vasari was far more suited to the task than he, and persuaded him to take it on himself.

There is some doubt about the exact date of this famous dinner party, but scholars think it must have been around 1543. If this is so, it is an extraordinary feat for Vasari to have completed the work by its publication date of 1550, a period of only seven years. In fact he must have considered it finished even sooner, because it is recorded that he gave his manuscript to have a fair copy made as early as 1547, only four years after he agreed to undertake the work. What is absolutely astonishing is the number of painting commissions on which he managed to work at the same time, a tribute to his remarkable



David by Donatello (bronze)
Uffizi, Florence

energy and devotion to the task.

Although some of the artists about whom Vasari writes were known to him personally, and it is frequently his personal contact which lends his reports their immediacy and authenticity, it would have been impossible for him to have known all. *The Lives* includes some 265 artists, beginning with Cimabue who died in 1302,

over 200 years before Vasari was born. But he certainly knew many of the artists of his time – Titian, Signorelli, del Sarto, Salviati and Giulio Romano to mention but a few – and he corresponded with many others.

But the friendship of which he was most proud – and who shall blame him? – was that of Michelangelo. We are privileged to be able to hear from someone who was sufficiently close to the great man to have corresponded with him and to have had private conversations. Vasari quotes from their letters to each other and recounts his experience of seeing the Sistine Chapel's Last Judgement soon after it was unveiled. It is the immediacy of such accounts which gives *The Lives* its unique authenticity.

In addition to collating and recording the mountains of information which make up the accounts of hundreds of artists' lives, and as well as keeping a model workbook and detailed business records, Vasari was a prolific correspondent, and there are more than 1,000 surviving letters. His correspondents include six popes, thirty-six cardinals and an assortment of dukes, princes, high-ranking clerics, literary celebrities, artists, merchants, bankers and other people of note. As a corollary to *The Lives*, these documents add greatly to our knowledge and understanding of life in 16th-century Italy.

He also collected the drawings of artists

he admired in his famous *Libro dei Disegni*, a remarkable series of volumes containing works by such luminaries as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo as well as those of lesser lights, set in elaborately decorated surrounds drawn by Vasari himself. This became an invaluable source of reference for him when it came to writing *The Lives*. This unique document was sent to France after his death, and unfortunately split up and dispersed.

But who was Giorgio Vasari? He was born in Arezzo, a town forty miles from Florence, and baptised on July 30, 1511. Named after his grandfather, he came from a long line of craftsmen potters skilled in reproducing the black and red Attic vases for which the area was famous. This is reflected in the family's surname, a variant of the word *vasaio*, or vase. Giorgio's great-grandfather was a little-known painter by the name of Lazzaro Vasari, whom he included proudly in *The Lives*.

The painter Luca Signorelli was also a relative, and it was he who first encouraged Giorgio's father to have his son trained as an artist. Another family member, Cardinal Silvio Passerini, was responsible for taking him to Florence in 1525 to further his studies. Vasari says he was apprenticed at first to Michelangelo, but as he was called away to Rome, was sent to study under Andrea del Sarto. He became a servant of



The Virgin and Child Enthroned and Surrounded by Angels by Cimabue
Uffizi, Florence

the Medici, and this was the beginning of a lifelong association with the family who were to become his greatest patrons. In 1527 the Medici were expelled from Florence, and Vasari was forced to return home to Arezzo. His father had died of the plague in the meantime, and he now found



Madonna in Glory by Giotto
Uffizi, Florence

himself head of the family, and obliged to shoulder new responsibilities. He spent this period struggling to provide for his mother and his brothers and sisters by decorating and restoring paintings in churches in the vicinity. In 1529 he returned to Florence, but

when the city came under siege, Vasari made his escape back to Arezzo.

In 1531, after the restoration of the Medici, Cardinal Ippolito de Medici, who was travelling through Arezzo, discovered Vasari there and took him to Rome. Vasari set himself to study the work of Raphael, Michelangelo and da Vinci until illness forced him to return to Florence. He continued to serve the Medici family until the death of Ippolito, which was rumoured to have been caused by poison administered on the orders of Alessandro de Medici, who now became Vasari's protector until he, in turn, was assassinated by his cousin Lorenzino. From this moment Vasari understandably decided to give up court life, and live independent of princely patronage. He returned to his home in Arezzo where he lived quietly, undertaking commissions from the Camaldoline monks.

After a time he returned to Florence and from there to Rome. For Vasari Rome was 'the true school of the noble arts'. He believed that without being exposed to the highest expressions of the human spirit, even the most gifted artist would never achieve true greatness. As his reputation increased, he travelled widely to undertake various commissions in Venice, Naples, Bologna and elsewhere in Italy.

In 1550, the year the first edition of *The Lives* was published, Vasari took a momentous decision; he decided to get married. He did

so on the advice of Cardinal Gianmaria del Monte and reports that he might never have done so but for the encouragement of the Cardinal. It would seem that Vasari was reluctant to involve himself in any activity that might distract him from his work.

He chose for a wife a young woman called Cosina, the daughter of a well-to-do Aretine apothecary. Although the match appears to have been an unromantic one, made for reasons of practicality rather than passion, it seems to have been an affectionate union, with Cosina looking after his household and, later, caring for him in his old age. The fact that they had no children was an enduring source of sadness.

In 1554 Cosimo de Medici, having finally managed to vanquish the rebel forces ranged against him, offered Vasari a place in the ducal court. Vasari, who had travelled extensively over the past years, did not wish 'to end my days as a gypsy' and was grateful for the opportunity of settling down in Florence with his wife and aging mother.

In 1560 he was given what was to be his most famous architectural commission. Cosimo charged him with the construction of a building between the Palazzo Vecchio and the River Arno to house the civil magistrates. This is the magnificent building we know today as the Uffizi Gallery. Like his idol Michelangelo and other artists of his time, Vasari was expected to be able to



Madonna and Child with Angels
by Fra Filippo Lippi
Uffizi, Florence

turn his hand to the design of buildings as well as to painting and sculpture, today's strict boundary between art and architecture being unknown at that time. Having carried out this task with triumphant success he then embarked on the rebuilding and refurbishing



Self-Portrait at 26 by Albrecht Dürer
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

of the Palazzo Vecchio in order to transform it into suitable living quarters for the Medici family.

Vasari was influential in the foundation of the Academy of Design in Florence in 1563. As he remarks in *The Lives*, the

existence of the recently-formed Academy was a great boon the following year when, on the death of Michelangelo, its members combined to produce funeral obsequies of extraordinary creativity and magnificence to honour the great man.

In addition to his heavy workload as a painter and architect, Vasari found time to amend, rewrite and add to *The Lives* with a view to producing a new edition, despite having to interrupt its preparation for periods of other work sometimes lasting several months. The revised edition appeared in 1568, and was nearly three times as large as the previous one. It included a separate new volume dedicated to artists working between the publication of the first and second editions.

Relations between the Medici family and Rome were becoming normalised once more, and in 1570 Vasari was given three chapels to decorate in the Vatican by Pope Pius V, and a series of frescoes in the Sala Regia. At the same time he was working on his designs for the cupola of the cathedral in Florence, which he had started to paint. By 1574 his health was failing and he was no longer able to climb the scaffolding to reach the interior of the dome, and had to be pulled up in a basket. In April that year his old patron Cosimo de Medici died, and on June 27 Vasari followed him.

If Vasari's painting lacks the spontaneity



*Allegory of Fecundity and Abundance by Luca Signorelli
Uffizi, Florence*

and magical transcendence of true genius, it cannot be said to fall short due to lack of effort. As Malvolio says, 'Some are born great, and some achieve greatness...' Vasari used what gifts he had to the full, and achieved as much as it is possible to achieve through natural skill, hard work and application. His passionate interest in his subject, and his ability to learn from the best examples, allowed him to triumph over others more talented who lacked his

tenacity and dedication.

The same might be said of his literary achievement. He was not a natural writer, but he leaves behind him a record which is wonderfully entertaining, due to his enthusiasm and his appetite for knowledge. However conventional his viewpoint or his manner of expressing it, and despite his occasional pomposity or partiality, the essential decency of his personality shines through. Although he reports the intrigues



Leda and the Swan by Jacopo Tintoretto
Uffizi, Florence

and envious behaviour of other artists – sometimes with a gossip's relish – there is little or no malice to be found in his own attitude.

Vasari's achievement is the result of the power of his ambition. Ambition for him was not something of which to be ashamed, but a quality to be celebrated and admired, an honourable spur to the highest attainment. As an artist, his efforts brought him honour, respect and prosperity; as an historian and critic, his work has earned him eternal fame.

Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists* is unique

in its scope and achievement. Its only classical predecessor and model is Pliny's *Natural History*, but there was no previous model for artistic biography on such a scale. Modern scholars with access to documents that were unavailable to Vasari have discovered many inaccuracies in facts and dates, but what is extraordinary, given the circumstances in which he lived and the exigencies of his working life, is not how much he got wrong, but how much he got right.

The Lives remains the greatest source of knowledge and understanding of the artistic life of the Renaissance available to us and to generations yet to come. Perhaps the finest tribute to Vasari is the following sonnet, written in appreciation of *The Lives* by the artist he admired above all others, Michelangelo:

With pencil and with palette hitherto
You made your high art Nature's paragon;
Nay more, from Nature her own prize you won,
Making what she made fair more fair to view.
Now that your learned hand with labour new
Of pen and ink a worthier work hath done,
What erst you lacked, what still remained her own,
The power of giving life, is gained for you.
If men in any age with Nature vied
In beauteous workmanship, they had to yield
When to the fated end years brought their name.
You, re-illuminating memories that died
In spite of Time and Nature have revealed
For them and for yourself eternal fame.

Notes by Neville Jason

The Naxos AudioBooks abridged selection is drawn from Vasari's *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* translated by A.B. Hinds, published by J.M. Dent, 1900. The translation of Michelangelo's sonnet is by J.A. Symonds, *The Sonnets of Michelangelo Buonarotti*, London 1878.



The Birth of Venus by Sandro Botticelli
Uffizi, Florence

Cover Picture: Self-Portrait by Giorgio Vasari, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
Courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library.

The music on this recording was taken from the NAXOS catalogue

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8.554129

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8.553833

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MUSIC OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Shirley Rumsey, Lute

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PALESTRINA MISSA DE BEATA VIRGINE I

Soloists of Cappella Musicale di St. Petronio di Bologna / Sergio Vartolo

8.553313

Music programmed by Nicolas Soames and Sarah Butcher

Giorgio Vasari

Selections from **The Lives of the Artists**

Read by **Neville Jason**

The Lives of the Artists was the first truly comprehensive history of art. Originally published in 1550, it remains our greatest source of information about that explosion of artistic creativity in sixteenth-century Italy, the Renaissance. Vasari, himself a painter and architect of renown, was a personal friend of such major figures as Michelangelo and Titian, and his accounts of the lives of his contemporaries have an authenticity and immediacy which is unique. In this selection, forty of the greatest artists of the period are featured.



Neville Jason trained at RADA where he was awarded the Diction Prize by Sir John Gielgud. He has worked with the English Stage Co., the Old Vic Company and the RSC as well as in films, TV and musicals. He is frequently heard on radio. As well as *Remembrance of Things Past*, he also reads Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, *Far From The Madding Crowd*, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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