



# CASVA

## Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

### Carlo Cesare Malvasia's *Felsina pittrice*: A Response to Vasari

Among Italian writers of the Renaissance, Giorgio Vasari runs a close second perhaps only to Niccolò Machiavelli in terms of fame: one has come to be known as the father of the history of art, the other as the father of modern political theory. Like Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Vasari's *Lives* continues to be read widely, although recognition of factual errors and literary embellishments has meant that the text is treated often as criticism, or even fiction, rather than history. Less studied is the reception of the *Lives* by artists and writers in the century after Vasari's death, when

many of his prejudices and errors were already identified.

Among Vasari's early critics the most vocal was Carlo Cesare Malvasia, whose *Felsina pittrice* is the most important source for the history of Bolognese and Emilian painters, from Lippo di Dalmasio to the Carracci, Guido Reni, and Elisabetta Sirani. The Malvasia project at CASVA is dedicated to producing a critical edition and an annotated translation of the *Felsina pittrice* in sixteen volumes, making it more accessible to both Italian and Anglophone readers. The first volume of the CASVA edition, published for the National Gallery of Art by Harvey Miller/Brepols in 2012, contains Malvasia's fundamental discussion of the "primi lumi" of Bolognese painting—those contemporaries of Cimabue and Giotto who were ignored by Vasari. In this text Malvasia dismisses the whole notion of the Renaissance, insisting that the Tuscans had not revived painting because it had never died, and setting out in opposition to Vasari his own historical principle of tradition.

The first printings of the *Felsina pittrice* bear the date 1678, although the book probably went to press in Bologna early in 1677. The final stages were fraught. Malvasia hoped to dedicate his work to the Bolognese senate, but he made a last-minute, politically and economically astute decision to dedicate it to Louis XIV, king of France. The dedication was accepted, and in return Malvasia sent to Paris a copy of his two volumes, bound in red morocco and stamped in gold with ornamentation and Latin inscriptions referring to the Sun King. This royal copy is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (fig. 1).

The CASVA edition is based on a copy of the *Felsina pittrice* in the Gallery's

Library. Purchased in 1972, it has a simple nineteenth-century binding, but a significant provenance. It came from the library of distinguished art historian and Samuel H. Kress Professor Rudolf Wittkower (1901–1971) and had previously been owned by Francis Hare Naylor (1753–1815). In 1784, with the support of Georgiana Cavendish, duchess of Devonshire, Hare Naylor eloped with Georgiana Shipley, the duchess' extraordinary cousin. Befriended by Benjamin Franklin, who wrote an epitaph for her pet squirrel Mungo, Shipley studied painting with Sir Joshua Reynolds. Her infant son Francis George sat for a portrait by Reynolds in 1788 before the penniless family had to leave England for Europe. The Hare Naylor family lived in Bologna in the 1790s, and it is logical to believe that the copy of the *Felsina pittrice* was acquired there on behalf of Georgiana. The book was rare in England and was not to be found in the library of the Royal Academy. Reynolds, however, had visited Bologna in 1752 and was certainly a reader of Malvasia's work.

The Gallery's Wittkower copy does not date to 1678 as the title pages imply. The two volumes were completed more likely in 1682, and they differ in several ways from the early copies that Malvasia sent to Paris. One important difference is the inclusion of two poems by Malvasia regarding the gift from Louis XIV of a diamond-encircled miniature portrait by the painter Jean Petitot (fig. 2). Such valuable portraits were the king's way of giving payment without seeming to engage in commerce, and few survived with diamonds intact. In Malvasia's case the first portrait was stolen on its way to Italy, and he had to await

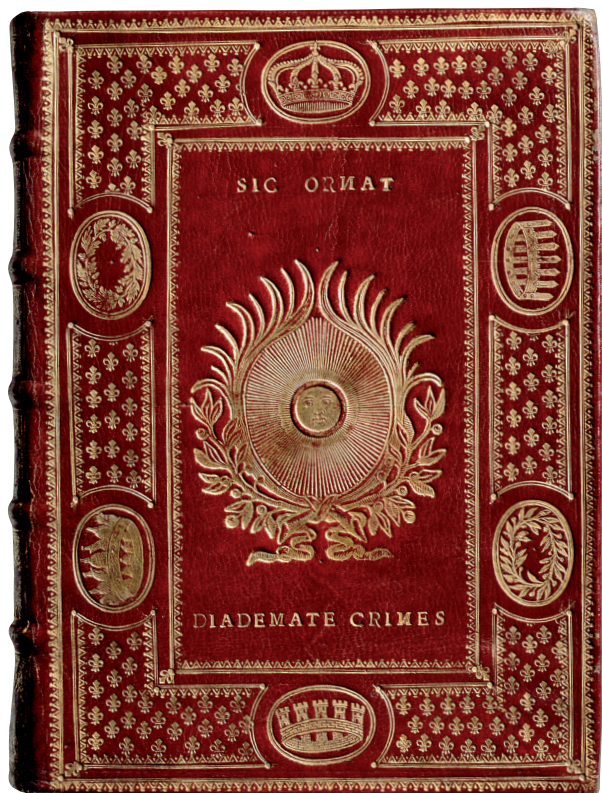


Fig. 1. Front coverboard of the first volume of the *Felsina pittrice* sent to Louis XIV, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Rés. K.693 (Pa1)

a replacement before adding the poems about the gift to the first volume. Malvasia kept the portrait and its diamonds throughout his life, bequeathing it to his own confraternity at the church of the Madonna della Vita in Bologna.

The Gallery's copy reflects other changes Malvasia was forced to make to his text. Among these, the most urgent concerned his disparaging reference to the ideas of Raphael as those of a "boccaliaio urbinato," or potter from Urbino. Malvasia's sustained polemical attack in the *Felsina pittrice* on Vasari's *Lives*, which had been republished in Bologna in 1647, was damaging enough to his reputation among literary and artistic circles in Florence and Rome. His challenge to the preeminence of the Tuscan school, moreover, was read as a threat to the ambitions of the Medici dukes of Tuscany. Such animosity, in addition to the author's difficult and dense prose, guaranteed that Malvasia's book would not be reviewed in Italian journals of the day. But the attack on Raphael, who had achieved near divine status both in France and in Italy, was scandalous and unforgivable. Malvasia immediately realized the danger and withdrew the phrase from subsequent printings, replacing "boccaliaio urbinato" with a statement that the great Raphael's ideas were both learned and bold.

The history of the production of printed books and the establishment of various issues and states, not merely editions, is a relatively new field in scholarship. The first volume of the CASVA edition includes a groundbreaking essay by Carlo Alberto Girotto on the history of the production of the *Felsina pittrice*. Another important contribution is by Lorenzo Pericolo (University of Warwick) on relevant sections of Malvasia's preparatory notes, published here for the first time. Sometimes these derive from his reading, but often they are based on Malvasia's own observations, or "ispezione oculare," of works

of art, a practice that he shared with the natural scientists and astronomers of his time. Unlike Vasari, whose descriptive prose often bore little connection to the works he was recording, Malvasia was interested in the materials of art, in questions of condition, chronology, patronage, and attribution in ways that are remarkably modern.

Unfortunately, what is remembered most often about Malvasia is his attack on Raphael and his criticism of Vasari. Whereas Malvasia's dedication to the art of Bologna was dismissed as local patriotism in the nineteenth century, Vasari's promotion of the art of his own city, and especially of the manner of Michelangelo, became official history. For information about several Emilian painters, including Marco Zoppo (1433–1478), whose *Saint Peter* was given to the Gallery by Samuel Kress in 1937 (fig. 3), Malvasia found Vasari's account useful, but always lacking in detail. In Malvasia's view, Zoppo's reputation rested on the greatness of his pupil Francesco Francia, "for the glory of the master resides in a good pupil." Vasari had dismissed this Bolognese upholding of tradition by inventing an impossible story that Francia had died upon seeing the radically new style of Raphael's *Saint Cecilia*. The collections of the Gallery, like many others, reflect a predominantly Vasarian view of Italian Renaissance art, and the Gallery is indeed fortunate to be so rich in Raphaels. To see great works by the "primi lumi" Lippo di Dalmasio, Simone dei Crocefissi, and Vitale da Bologna, however, it is necessary to go to Bologna, preferably with the new translation and edition of the first part of the *Felsina pittrice* in hand.

• Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*



Fig. 2. Jean Petitot, *Gioiello della Vita*, second half of the seventeenth century, enamel on metal with diamonds, set in gold, Azienda USL di Bologna, Museo della Storia di Bologna, Genus Bononiae-Fondazione Carisbo



Fig. 3. Marco Zoppo, *Saint Peter*, c. 1468, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection