
Homer and the Poetic Origins of Art History

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1. from vasari to homer

Throughout the history of literature in the West—from Homer to the present—authors have sung or written extensively about what are called the visual arts. They can be defined in various ways, for example, the arts of design, that is, the interrelated spatial arts Vasari treated in his monumental sixteenth-century *Lives* of the painters, sculptors, and architects—those individuals who gave shape to space, made objects that filled such space, or created the illusion of space. Art can also be defined even more broadly as the class of artifacts or things made with skill, knowledge, or imagination. Clothing, jewelry, weapons, furniture, and various household objects are examples often displayed in museums as art.

Writing about art and artists is found in many genres: epigrams, epitaphs, poems, anecdotes, short stories, novels, biographies, critical essays, memoirs, guidebooks, theoretical treatises, technical manuals, and what came to be called “art history,” which is in fact less a genre of literature than a variety of academic conventions or approaches—some might call them techniques, tools of analysis, or even “methods”—like iconography, connoisseurship, the social history of art, etc.

In “The Poem of Herodotus,” John Herington established how a pioneering work of history (in our modern sense of a factual record and its interpretation) was also, indissolubly, a work of traditional ancient Greek poetry. In the course of doing so, Herington usefully pointed out how our distinction between verifiable historical fact and myth distances us from “a feeling for humanity’s place in a cosmos that was still felt as a unity.” While that outer unity may not be re-

coverable, it is enlightening to work back through the interpenetration of fact and fiction, to the creative energies of artists working out of Homer's feeling for the wondrous beauty and the plenitude of art. And it is important to distinguish, further, between the fictive effort to intuit something like a "whole" truth and the irresponsibly fictional that results from mere wish or daydream.

Although the distinction has justifiably been made between history as an investigation of the past and historical fiction, history and historical fiction are intimately related, if not intertwined. Indeed, they nourish each other. As history aspires to veracity, so a great deal of historical fiction is similarly devoted to the truth, which it renders with verisimilitude. If history is based on facts, so too is fiction. As novelists and readers of fiction are keenly aware, one cannot write fiction without facts. (Think of *War and Peace*.) Without facts, fiction would be meaningless. Although facts and fiction are often seen as opposed to each other, they are closely related in one respect: both are rendered fictively, in the root sense of the word, from *fingere*, to mold or give shape. History, more than an assemblage of facts, is a form of narrative art in which the facts are shaped. So too is fiction. Historical fiction, we might say, is history written with poetic license—sometimes in the extreme. (Think of *Desirée*.)

In the broad history of literature about art, Vasari's epoch-making *Lives* of the artists is one of the greatest and most influential books ever written. It has contributed much to modern poetry and fiction about art and it has also powerfully shaped the scholarly field of art history. Like modern scholars, Vasari collected documents with facts about artists and their works; but at the same time, he also employed tall tales or fables either borrowed from other authors or of his own invention. Some stories in Vasari's pages are undeniably and eminently fiction, for example, the well-known story of how the painter Andrea del Castagno murdered his fellow painter and friend Domenico Veneziano, a deep fiction about envy and rivalry that Vasari embellished by portraying

the satanic painter as a type of Judas. We know that this account, which Vasari inherited from an earlier tradition, is a tall tale, since Domenico in fact outlived Castagno.

Sometimes, however, we have no way of confirming that a story told by Vasari is true. Did Leonardo, as Vasari says, in fact employ musicians and buffoons to entertain Mona Lisa to elicit the smile that he rendered so effectively and unforgettably—as some believe—or did Vasari invent the story as a way of celebrating the singular smile of Leonardo's portrait? I would suggest that Vasari's story of Leonardo's clowns and music makers is like the fable of Castagno, a poetic fiction true to the art of its subject. As Castagno's fictional violence is true to the harshness of the painter's pictorial style, so the fable of entertainers who brought a smile to Mona Lisa's lips is true to the expressive effect of Leonardo's portrait. Vasari's fable has verisimilitude, since it explains why Mona Lisa smiles, which in turn explains why some readers believe it to be a true story.

Many would say that it does not matter whether Vasari's story of Leonardo's buffoons and musicians is true, since it is plausible and thus related to the truth of the picture itself. I would suggest, however, that it matters greatly whether Vasari's is a true story or a fiction, because if it is a fiction, then it is a poetic invention and is itself art, literary art. In response to Leonardo's painting, Vasari has transformed that art into his own art, that is, the poetry of his historical fable—which, incidentally, has contributed significantly to the modern historical legend of Mona Lisa, whatever the factual bare bones of her life story might be.

One modern scholar reluctant to abandon the idea that Vasari's story is, strictly speaking, true has proposed that because Mona Lisa might still have been alive when Vasari wrote and might have talked to him, she might have told him about the musicians and buffoons—a notion that is tenuous at best. If I am correct, however, the modern scholar has written his own fable, if unwittingly, given his intention, which is to establish what really happened. For he has, in the

terms of Walter Savage Landor, rendered an “imaginary conversation” between the author of the *Lives* and Leonardo’s subject. Although more than one art historian has said that the characterization of Vasari’s tales as fiction diminishes his history, it is more accurate to say, on the contrary, that when we deny or ignore the role of fiction in the *Lives*, we diminish our understanding of the poetic richness of Vasari’s historical account. For the whole truth depends not only on facts but on imagination too—meaning the human creativity that engages with those facts.

Vasari’s way of writing historical fiction, or if you will, fictional history not only leads us to the modern historical novel about art and to art history, it also carries us back through Boccaccio’s tales about artists to the anecdotes about art of classical antiquity, above all, the stories found in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*. Many of these stories—of Apelles and Zeuxis, among others—which have been retold over and over again and which have sometimes been transformed into modern variations, are appropriately called legends. They endure because they celebrate the skill and power of artistic illusion that we in fact find in ancient art. Pliny’s anecdotes are poetic fictions true to the art of antiquity. As ancient Greek art was true to the appearances of things, so Pliny’s fables are true to the mimetic power and skill that inform such art.

Pliny tells us famously, for example, that Zeuxis painted grapes so convincingly that they attracted birds. Whether of Pliny’s own invention or dependent on an earlier lost source, the story is a compelling fable. Pliny also tells us that Apelles fell in love with his model, Campaspe, the concubine of Alexander the Great, who held the painter in such high esteem that he gave his lover to the artist. Here too the story, improbable as a record of what really happened, nonetheless has a kind of verisimilitude, since it is true to the fact that art is an expression of desire. As such, Pliny’s fable is related to the myth of Pygmalion in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, composed not long before Pliny wrote his book. In Ovid’s fable the

artist creates his own ideal beauty, embodied in his statue, which he similarly desires and comes to possess.

2. the arts of homer

the close relations of history and poetic fiction from Vasari back to Pliny can be pursued even further back to the very dawn of literature in ancient Greece. It was in the epic poetry of Homer that history and poetic fiction were intertwined in the first place. Homer, it might be objected, was the author of great poetry, not history as it came to be defined later by Thucydides and by modern scholars. But as I have suggested, history is often not easily separated from historical fiction. In fact, classicists and scholars of ancient art history, even when they disagree about details, are forever attempting to demonstrate the different ways in which the world of Homer's poems reflects the real world of Greek history. When Homer invokes the massive walls of Tiryns, for example, he obviously refers to the reality of Greek architecture, of which the imposing evidence is still preserved. When he celebrates the artifice of Hephaistos, Homer sings of a mythological figure; but the god of the smithy is the personification, indeed the deification, of the real smiths of ancient Greece who did wonderful work in metal, smiths to whom Homer's deity is, however imaginatively, in fact related. Scholars of ancient art history and of classical literature know full well that when Homer sings of Achilles' shield and other works of art he is responding poetically to the facts of art history, no matter how much these facts are transformed. For the great shield fabricated by the divine smith is, in Homer's embellishment, an imaginary record of the kind of craftsmanship in metal in fact practiced prodigiously both in Homer's day and in earlier times.

Hephaistos, the mythological artist, may stand apart from Apelles or Leonardo because the latter were actual artists. But in Pliny's account of Apelles and in Vasari's of Leonardo, real people are transformed into mythological beings, just as

in Homer the real smiths of ancient Greece are deified in the person of Hephaistos. As myth reflects historical facts in Homer, and as history is mythological in Pliny and Vasari, myth and history converge and are intertwined. Both history and mythological fiction aspire to a kind of historical truth that is far more than a chronicle of what happened in the past and is more than the sum of the facts.

Although Homer's songs are poetry, not history as we conceive it, the historical fiction of his poems has implications for the history of art. Many of these implications have been observed previously, above all in discussions of the shield of Achilles, but there is much in Homer's account of art that is still ignored, taken for granted, or noted only in passing. I believe that this is so because his poems are primarily about war and its aftermath, about the great deeds and adventures of warriors; art therefore plays only a secondary role as a subject in the larger narrative. Nevertheless, one could fill an imaginary museum with Homeric works of art—above all, armor, but also different kinds of artifacts, and the catalogue of such craftsmanship would be extensive.

Today art historians aspire to break down the boundaries between the fine arts so-called and the supposedly lesser arts. In this respect, they return to the broad overview of all the arts in Homer, who speaks extensively of what have been called the minor or decorative arts—clothing, armor, jewelry, weapons, furniture, household goods, and funerary urns, for example, all of which the anthropologically-minded art historian refers to as the materials of culture. Whereas the modern scholar seeks to restore works of art to their original context, in Homer all objects of art are grounded in a narrative and thus have a context—for example, the golden urn made by Hephaistos in which the remains of Achilles and Patroklos are placed, or all the golden cups used in libations to the gods. In Homer's story, art is never abstracted from this narrative. Whereas Homer is a great storyteller, the modern art historian is often not a storyteller at all. In modern art history, the scholar usually replaces storytelling with analysis and theoretical interpretation.

Yet Homer also presents his readers with a lucid and coherent theory of art, and we can rightly speak of his appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of art objects as art criticism. He also gives us a rich anthropology of art when he discusses the uses of artifacts in warfare, worship, banquets, and funerals and dwells on the exchange of artifacts or the giving of such artifacts as gifts. Homer details the materials, scale, and colors; he describes the ways in which works were made. He dwells on them as symbols of power—a subject of great moment for art historians today—and he has a keen sense of how the visual or spatial arts are related to other art forms, above all, music. Granted, Homer's allusions to art are sometimes tantalizingly brief and leave us wanting to know much more, but were we to journey to Hades and engage the poet in conversation, he would no doubt present the countercharge that we moderns over-interpret works of art and pile onto our often overloaded accounts more information than is useful or relevant.

To survey the arts in Homer, by no means exhaustively or systematically, let us begin with a brief account of his theory of art and his interrelated art criticism, which are essential to the Greek tradition of art as imitation. Homer famously describes various vivid incidents from life on the shield of Achilles, for example, a scene in which two lions tear apart the belly of a bull and gulp down its blood and guts as dogs nip at them to no avail. Such lively slices of life (or death, as the case may be) are found elsewhere; on a smaller scale, for example, on a brooch of Odysseus' that depicts a hunting dog pinning down with its forepaws a spotted fawn convulsed in agony, its hooves flying outward. Both descriptions imply a theory of art as illusion, an illusion that the poet celebrates and justifies critically when he says that the image on the brooch was "wonderful to behold."

Homer also brings the brooch into the larger context of dress when he says that the piece, made of gold, was set against Odysseus' purple cloak and close-fitting tunic—which itself was as fine as dry onion skin, both soft and

shining. Here Homer focuses on the art of dress; and in the Homeric world of relationships, sources and origins are to be borne in mind, in this case, weaving. And just as the art of clothing is woven throughout Homer's poems, his songs are themselves the interweaving of various narratives in the larger web of his art. The tutelary deity of such weaving, Athena, weaves Hera's wondrous gown, and Aphrodite wears a beautiful, glimmering, embroidered robe fashioned for her by the Graces. Many are the women weavers of Homer: Helen, Andromache, Calypso, and Circe. Above all, Penelope is a crucial figure in the world of weaving, for she is renowned for weaving and unweaving a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. Buying time, like Scheherazade with her seemingly endless storytelling, Penelope makes us ponder the very threads of the Fates. Sometimes, too, finely woven goods are offered up to the gods, as when Hector asks his mother to bring a beautifully shimmering robe to the shrine of Athena and place it on the knees of the goddess' effigy. With wonderful effect, Homer tells us that the brocade glittered like starlight. Athena and the various women who weave in Homer stand for the weaving of countless women whose works have either vanished or been forgotten because weaving is easily dismissed as a minor art. Homer helps us to remember—as part of his cultural world—the gorgeously woven fabrics, the fine linens, and the dazzling embroidery of the many anonymous but highly accomplished women artists of ancient Greece.

Even more conspicuous than beautiful dresses or tunics, all of which pertain to the domestic sphere, is the art of armor, in other words, military attire: breastplates, helmets, and shields, along with the artfully crafted chariots of gods and mortals. Over and over, Homer pictures the gleaming brightness and shimmer of such beautifully crafted armor, some of it made by Hephaistos, but most of it fashioned by, again, anonymous smiths to whom the poet refers by way of scattered allusions to their tools, craft, and materials. Homer rises to great heights when on occasion he compares light-re-

flecting armor to the stars above, in particular when celebrating Diomedes' arms, a passage we might almost call an example of the Homeric sublime. In praising the luminosity of Achilles' shield, he similarly likens its radiance to the light of the full moon, a reflectivity of metalwork dependent on the artifice of smiths capable of bringing their work to a high polish. And Homer is not only sensitive to the optical properties of well-crafted arms; he is also attentive to their sonority, above all, the clang of armor, of metal against metal, the sounds that ring out in battle. In Homer's rendering of sounds and scintillating sights we have the origins of "son et lumière."

If Achilles' arms are the most famous of all the martial garb that Homer describes, we should not neglect those of Agamemnon, which are also of great interest as objects of military significance and aesthetic quality. The poet describes them in vivid detail as Agamemnon dresses for battle. Upon his legs Agamemnon first fits beautiful greaves with silver ankle straps. Next, around his chest he buckles a cuirass, a gift long ago from Lord Kinyres, with ten bands of dark enamel, twelve of gold, and twenty of tin and further decorated with dark blue enameled serpents, three on each side, arched like rainbows toward Agamemnon's neck. Across his shoulders and chest he then hangs a sword, the hilt of which bears shimmering golden studs; silver bands gleam on his scabbard, which is attached to a gilt baldric. He next takes up his broad shield with ten bronze circles and twenty tin studs around its rim. Upon the shield—the strap of which is silver with a three-headed serpent writhing upon it—glares a terrifying fire-eyed Gorgon accompanied by figures of Terror and Rout. Then Agamemnon puts on his ridged helmet with white crests of horsehair. Finally, he takes up two spears, the heads of which are tipped with bronze that reflect the gleaming sunlight.

Homer presents—not only vividly but also concisely—the iconography of Agamemnon's shield (the Gorgon and other allegorical figures appropriate to war), the materials of his

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arms (gold, silver, bronze, tin, and horsehair), their colors (gold, silver, blue, white), their luminosity, and the beauty of the craftsmanship. If Agamemnon is described in an epithet as lord of golden Mycenae, the gold of his arms only magnifies this identity. Gold, beautiful as well as an expression of wealth, demarcates and defines the social station of the great lord. The overall effect of Homer's appreciation of Agamemnon's arms is splendid in the totality of its details, even as we are impressed by their place in the context of the poem. The modern art historian, who often tends to talk around art rather than describe it in all its particularity, can still learn a thing or two here.

Not all the artifacts of warfare are made principally of metal. I refer here to one of the most impressive weapons described, the bow of Pandaros,

his bow of polished horn—horn of an ibex
that he had killed one day with a chest shot
upon a high crag; waiting under cover,
he shot it through the ribs and knocked it over—
horns, together, a good four feet in length.
He cut and fitted these, mortised them tight,
polished the bow, and capped the tips with gold.

(*Iliad* 4.105–11; Fitzgerald trans.)

Here too Homer is specific about the use of the artifact in war, since it is with this bow that Pandaros is to wound Menelaos and later Diomedes (5.95–105). All-dominant as the war itself is, nevertheless Homer does not fail to note that the warrior is also an artificer who crafts his weapon with skill, making of it a beautiful object. There are other fine or noble materials for use in making weapons that are not only fit for war but exemplary of the culture: the leather used for loin guards, both bull's hide and ox hide, for example, and the teeth of a wild boar, as used on the helmet of Odysseus.

The poet is also attentive to the scale of things, for example the shield of great Ajax that he likens to a tower, or the

spear of Achilles, made of Pelian ash, so heavy that other warriors cannot even lift it. Scale is especially significant in Homer's architecture. The halls of the gods on Olympus are lofty and spacious, and flash with gold. Some palaces of mortals are truly vast, for example, Priam's palace with its bright colonnades and fifty rooms of polished stone for his sons and their wives, and an additional twelve rooms also of polished stone occupied by his daughters and their husbands. Here scale is an expression of prosperity and power. Although Homer's descriptions of architecture are more evocative than detailed, he nonetheless offers us some suggestive particulars. In beautiful similes, he evokes the tight-fitting stones of walls, and he even alludes to the chalk line used to make a beam straight. He also speaks of the massive stones of buildings—the structures themselves made of ashlar and with timber roofs, but supported by great piers and bright colonnades.

Homer is exceptionally vivid when, for example, he pictures the palace of Menelaos with its entry wall of stone, its interior spaces glittering throughout and filled with beautiful furnishings and accoutrements, including tall thrones, a polished table, and various vessels such as a silver bowl, a golden pitcher, and cups of gold. No less magnificent is the palace of Alcinous:

Odysseus, now alone before the palace,
meditated a long time before crossing
the brazen threshold of the great courtyard.
High rooms he saw ahead, airy and luminous
as though with lusters of the sun and moon,
bronze-paneled walls, at several distances,
making a vista, with an azure molding
of lapis lazuli. The doors were golden
guardians of the great room. Shining bronze
plated the wide door sill; the posts and lintel
were silver upon silver; golden handles
curved on the doors, and golden, too, and silver
were sculptured hounds, flanking the entrance way,

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cast by the skill and ardor of Hephaistos
to guard the prince Alkínoös's house—
undying dogs that never could grow old.
Through all the rooms, as far as he could see,
tall chairs were placed around the walls, and strewn
with fine embroidered stuff made by the women.

Ultimately, for Homer there is no distinction between fine arts and minor arts, since they both serve the fulfillment of living:

And fifty maids-in-waiting of the household
sat by the round mill, grinding yellow corn,
or wove upon their looms, or twirled their distaffs,
flickering like the leaves of a poplar tree;
while drops of oil glistened on linen weft.
Skillful as were the men of Phaiákia
in ship handling at sea, so were these women
skilled at the loom, having this lovely craft
and artistry as talents from Athena.

(*Odyssey* 7.81–97, 103–11; Fitzgerald trans.)

Architecture and its decoration are indissolubly one as part of culture and intelligence, and even if Homer's descriptions do not permit us to reconstruct his great palaces, his evocations of color, materials, scale, and light incite us to imagine these magnificent dwelling spaces.

The palaces are not only abundantly filled with furnishings and many kinds of household goods; they are also adorned with sculptures, the most splendid examples of which are those two immortal dogs fashioned of gold and silver, which presumably stand for the eternal grandeur of the king himself. Within the palace are yet another two statues, also in gold, of boys who hold aloft bright torches.

Light, by the way, whether flooding interior spaces, reflecting from polished stone and polished wooden furniture, or reflected by armor, is a crucial aesthetic phenomenon in the Homeric poems and evokes the brilliance of Mediterranean sunlight. Whether depicting great palaces or the bat-

tlefield, whether describing works of art large or small, Homer's sense of light as atmosphere and enhancement captures not only the splendor of the art, but also the total sense of life and setting—the wealth, magnificence, and above all, the power that such art suggests.

Homer frequently mentions one type of object which, standing for authority, social harmony, and power, is often overlooked. I mean the ruler's staff, an artifact that belongs in any comprehensive history of art and its objects. (As far as I know, however, a comprehensive history of the staff and all its cognate forms—baton, mace, crozier, and even magic wand—has yet to be written.) Homer refers throughout his poems to the staffs of Khryses, Achilles, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Telemachus, Calypso, Circe, and Minos. Let us consider the two most elaborately described of these objects.

In the clash between Achilles and Agamemnon at the outset of the *Iliad*, Homer has Achilles dwell on the staff he is holding:

“But here is what I say: my oath upon it
by this great staff: look: leaf or shoot
it cannot sprout again, once lopped away
from the log it left behind in the timbered hills;
it cannot flower, peeled of bark and leaves;
instead, Akhaian officers in council
take it in hand by turns, when they observe
by the will of Zeus due order in debate:
let this be what I swear by then: I swear
a day will come when every Akhaian soldier
will groan to have Akhilleus back. That day
you shall no more prevail on me than this
dry wood shall flourish—driven though you are
and though a thousand men perish before
the killer, Hektor. You will eat your heart out,
raging with remorse for this dishonor
done by you to the bravest of Akhaians.”
He hurled the staff, studded with golden nails,
before him on the ground.

(*Iliad* 1.233–46; Fitzgerald trans.)

Homer traces the history of the object directly from nature as he outlines the metamorphosis of a tree into a symbol of power. That Achilles' staff was studded with golden nails makes it an object with aesthetic value, but it also can take on the role of a weapon, since its nails inflict pain upon anybody who challenges the bearer's authority and power. The staff functions in just this way when Odysseus uses his to thrash the loutish Thersites after the latter delivers his famously ill-tempered and abusive speech. In its various uses, the staff is meant to bring about social order and harmony. Homer tells us that it is used at council meetings where all who participate take it in hand as they speak. Binding the body politic and creating community, the staff is thus of deep social significance, though it plays a still more complex role here. When Achilles hurls it to the ground, it is a weapon that will not be used (Athena already having "persuaded" him to sheathe his sword); but it also expresses Achilles' exasperated hope and his deep conviction that his place, forfeited just as he has thrown down the staff, will be recognized and restored.

The other principal staff, seen in opposition to Achilles', is Agamemnon's. It is described in book 2 when Agamemnon addresses the host of Achaeans:

Before them now arose Lord Agamémnon,
 holding the staff Hêphaistos fashioned once
 and took pains fashioning: it was a gift
 from him to the son of Krónos, lordly Zeus,
 who gave it to the bright pathfinder, Hermês.
 Hermês handed it on in turn to Pélops,
 famous charioteer, Pélops to Atreus,
 and Atreus gave it to the sheepherder
 Thyestês, he to Agamémnon, king
 and lord of many islands, of all Argos—
 the very same who leaning on it now
 spoke out among the Argives.

(*Iliad* 2.100–9; Fitzgerald trans.)

Once again we have here a genealogy of art, what the modern scholar calls the provenance of the object, this time tracing it from its divine origins to the time of Homer's story. Surely, the poet's account of this and related staffs reflects the realities of Greek history—including its art history—and helps us to imagine a kind of artifact, long since destroyed, that the poet knew well. When we think of art in anthropological terms—who uses it and how, and the authority it represents and brings—we cannot ignore the staff as an object of great significance, linking the human world to nature and to the divine.

3. homer's artists

if homer's poems abound in art, they are necessarily populated with artists, many of whom, as I have observed, were anonymous, for example, countless weavers or smiths, including the smith who fashioned the sword belt of Heracles with beautiful intaglio representations of savage lions, bears, and boars as well as scenes of fighting. We have already encountered two artists, Hephaistos of course, but also Pandaros, who made his beautiful bow. We might also mention here Paris who, Homer tells us, built his own palace with the help of others, master builders as the poet calls them. As an architect, Paris is a reminder that throughout the history of art in the West rulers or patrons of high station have been actively involved in the design of their palaces.

Homer identifies other artists by name: Phereklos, a man who knew both the art of building and handicraft; the goldsmith Laerkes, who with his hammer, anvil, and tongs prepares the gold that adorns the horns of a sacrificial heifer; Ikmalios, the craftsman who fashioned the throne of Penelope with its silver whorls and ivory decoration. And let us not forget Epeios who built the Trojan horse, a horse that we can consider a sculpture surely, indeed, the ancestor of all the great equestrian monuments, both ancient and modern—for example, the colossal equestrian monuments designed but never fully realized by Leonardo. I have talked

about the importance of scale in Homer's art. Although he does not give us a precise account of the dimensions of the Trojan horse, he indicates its large scale when he says it contained the Greeks who came forth to destroy Troy. In the spirit of the Homeric sublime, Virgil would later embellish Homer by saying that the horse was as big as a mountain—a reminder that at least one ancient sculptor wanted to carve a figure out of a mountain.

The hollow horse was an especially clever invention, since horses had a powerful allure for the Trojans, as trainers or breakers of horses. It thus played to the very identity of the Trojans who fell under its spell and took it into their city. We can, I believe, reasonably speculate that if Epeios executed the enormous horse, Odysseus, who was hidden within and who led the expedition against the Trojans, was its inventor. After all, Odysseus, as Homer presents him over and over, is a master of tricks and dissembling, a man of infinite guile, a canny strategist who excels in deception and invention. Throughout the history of art, the distinction can often be made between the inventor of a work of art and its executor. In this case, I propose such a collaboration between Epeios and Odysseus, a collaboration not explicitly stated but implicit. The great illusionistic horse, true to the Greek theory of imitation, is a masterpiece of mimetic art. It is also a great work of artful military strategy and thus deserves a special place in the pantheon of Homeric masterpieces along with Hephaistos' shield for Achilles.

The invention of the horse is not the only masterpiece by Odysseus. He invented and carved out of an olive tree the nuptial couch he shared with Penelope, a work perhaps too easily forgotten because it is furniture. No builder, Homer tells us, had the skill to move the bed, and so Odysseus shaped a room with stone walls and smooth-fitting doors around it. Here Odysseus was both architect and sculptor. Odysseus himself recounts how he cut off the branches and leaves of the tree that he metamorphosed into a bed and then gave form to the stump by turning it into a bedpost. He

used silver, gold, and ivory inlay to adorn this glorious piece of matrimonial furniture. In his account, Homer is really singing an epithalamium, a song of Odysseus and Penelope's bed and bedchamber, which is at the same time no less a hymn to the craft of its maker.

Odysseus' artistry is deep and extends far beyond the horse and the bed. He is a great storyteller and, as Homer also demonstrates, a superb orator. When he shrewdly returns to Ithaca in the guise of a beggar, his fateful deception recalls the illusions of the gods who come to earth in the personae of mortals. Although there are obviously no direct relations between Odysseus' disguise and the subsequent art of theater, I think we can nevertheless speak of Odysseus as a consummate actor when he performs in the persona of somebody other than himself. We ordinarily do not dwell sufficiently on Odysseus as an artist because this aspect of his life story, though surely recognized, is secondary to his greatness as king and warrior. To put it differently, one of the greatest artists at the dawn of Greek art history was also a glorious monarch and soldier.

Of all Homeric works of art, the shield of Achilles is surely the most famous and extensively discussed. As much as this work has been previously analyzed, I believe there is more that we might say about it and its maker. I would suggest that, like Leonardo's painting of *Mona Lisa*, the shield is so familiar as a masterpiece that we can easily take it for granted or consider it inadequately. For historians of Greek art history, as we have seen, it has obvious relations to Greek traditions as well as myths of metalwork. For students of art in general, Homer's account of the shield is also the foundational text in the history of rhetorical or poetical descriptions of works of art. As such, it is the great ancestor of a whole tradition of poetic writing about art, which we often refer to as *ekphrasis*, that flourished later in the pages of Vasari and many, many others, even though this tradition has receded in importance in the age of modern art history.

As used in warfare, the shield prompts us to remember

that for the pre-Socratic philosophers, writing in Homer's wake, war was the father of all things. War, we might therefore say, was the father of the shield. From the death, destruction, and discord of war emerged the concord of Homer's poetry and more specifically the cosmic shield made by Hephaistos. War and peace, life and death, which are Homer's central themes, define each other by antithesis both in the poem in general and in the shield in particular, where Hephaistos juxtaposes images of cities at peace and at war. The city at war upon the shield serves as a foil to the poet's emphasis on peace and harmony. Most significantly, the shield's emphasis on music, the depiction of song, dance, and music-making, conveys the dominant theme of harmony, the harmony associated with peace, which is underscored by the depiction of the fruits of husbandry and agriculture, arts that flourish in peacetime. The harmonious image of an ideal city under the rule of law on the shield anticipates Plato's attempt to define a perfect republic or commonwealth; it even foreshadows Lorenzetti's famous allegory of good government in Siena, a fresco of a city at peace, harmoniously rendered with dancing women like those in Homer's city; it is similarly the ultimate ancestor of other pictorial utopias, above all, the serene and harmonious panels of the ideal city associated with Piero della Francesca.

Homer's beautiful and artful, indeed poetic, description of the shield of Achilles, the supreme example in the poem of the art of Hephaistos, is saturated with images of various kinds of art. Elders are portrayed sitting on benches of polished stone, a reminder of the importance of finish in Homer, as we saw in his descriptions of armor, shields, architecture, and furniture. In the peaceful city of the shield, we behold a wedding seen by torchlight, with singers and dancers and musicians performing on pipes and lyres. Later, in the scene of a vineyard, we behold a boy singing a delicate dirge, while others break into song. Then, too, there is architecture that also pertains to music: the dancing floor built by Daedalus, in other words, the great labyrinth. Some of

the dancers are related to yet other arts besides music, since the women wear soft gowns of linen and the men have well-knit chitons, in other words, artfully woven clothing of great beauty. Furthermore, the men who dance are wearing objects beautifully crafted, namely, daggers set in golden hilts hanging from silver lanyards. Once again, but in microcosmic form, we have the prominent arts of weaving and metalwork, set in a musical context that highlights the music of Homer's own song. Long before Ovid unified the arts by seeing them all as forms of metamorphoses, long before Wagner aspired to the unity of all the arts, or Baudelaire sang of the correspondences of the arts, Homer had created on the shield of Achilles a new world of all the various arts.

We might recall here, as another way of highlighting the importance of art, that when Achilles is not in battle, but retreats to his tent, he is found playing his lyre. As a figure of great might, he is not unlike the powerful and destructive Apollo who accompanies the Muses, playing his well-known lyre.

Homer grounds the art of the shield by likening the circle of those dancers upon the dancing floor to the circular motion a potter gives to a clay pot as he builds and shapes it with his hands. In the end, however, music is the dominant art of the shield, as an extension of the music of the bard who sings his song about art, his song about song. We might well say in the words of Walter Pater that in Homer all art aspires to the condition of music, and in particular, Homer's music. Although Homer is impersonal—even on the rare occasion when he speaks in the first person—he is nevertheless very self-conscious and his attention to music is a reflex of his own musical art. Such self-consciousness is a hallmark of both the history of art and the interrelated history of literature in the Western tradition.

Homer came to be thought of as a blind poet, much like his Demodocus, the blind bard at the court of Alcinous, and so he may be thought of as singing of himself. As Hephaistos the cripple may speak to a reality about lame smiths, so the blindness of Demodocus and Homer touches an ancient

intuition about the powers of blind minstrels and blind prophets of ancient Greece. The poet's blindness is a tragic gift, which in its poignancy magnifies through antithesis our sense of how much Homer in fact sees, whether he pictures an entire world at war so vividly throughout his poem or whether he concentrates it in his description of the shield.

Homer implicitly competes with the artist whose shield he describes. On *his* shield—a pictorial illusion of complexity beyond anything ever created in relief, either in ancient Greece or after—Homer surpasses all visual artists or illusionists. But the relations of poet to pictorial artist are circular, since the poet defines himself in terms of the metalworker's imagery in the first place; that is, the visual art of the smith is the point of departure for the poet. Homer may be superior to the smith, but only by competing with him; for it is the smith's activity that becomes the poet's imagery and gives substance to the poet's song of the shield. Even before Homer competes against the smith, though, he talks about artistic competition when telling the story of Thamyris the Thracian who challenged the Muses in song, for which he was punished by being maimed. This often forgotten story anticipates the stories of Marsyas and Apollo or Arachne and Minerva.

(The competition between Homer and the smith, between poet and pictorial illusionist, is the foundation for a long tradition of comparison or competition between the arts, both within and across artistic media, a tradition that extends down to the present. We find such competition between Michelangelo and Leonardo and more recently between Picasso and Matisse.)

In discussing artists and art, works of art both real and imaginary, I have been circling towards the greatest of all of Homer's artists, Hephaistos, whose creations the poet refers to throughout his poems. In addition to fashioning the shield of Achilles, his masterpiece, he also made, we recall, the staff of Agamemnon, which is just one among many objects that we might list in the catalogue of his works. He fashioned the

shield of Apollo, the cuirass of Diomedes, a golden and silver bowl for Calypso, and the urn for the remains of Achilles and Patroklos. As an architect, he was unmatched. He built, we remember, the palaces of the gods and the palace of Alcinous adorned by the dogs and torch-bearing youths. The catalogue of Hephaistos' works would grow over time. Ovid, no doubt competing with Homer, would later present an elaborate description of the palace of Sol built and richly decorated in gold, silver, bronze, and ivory by Hephaistos.

Homer not only celebrates the works of Hephaistos, he also gives us details from his life story, his life in art. In effect, we have here, however abbreviated, the first biography of an artist in the history of Western literature. Hephaistos is prominent on four occasions in Homer's poems. At the beginning of the *Iliad*, when the gods are in conflict during the clash between Achilles and Agamemnon, Hephaistos brings about a momentary harmony by serving them drink. The gesture is appropriate, in character: this is the artist who turns war into the harmony of art in his magnificent shield. He is next featured at the moment when he makes the shield of Achilles, and later he is prominent in battle when he clashes with the river Skamander, in what is really a battle between water and fire, fire being crucial to the god's art at the forge. In the *Odyssey*, he makes his final Homeric appearance when he discovers that he has been cuckolded by Aphrodite, who sleeps with Ares—an episode that amuses the other gods greatly. Learning of his wife's duplicity, the god of the forge entraps the lovers with a net so subtle that they do not see it. We might well include this artful and deceptive invention in the catalogue of the god's art—an art of cunning we associate more often with Odysseus.

Nietzsche once said that one can construct a biography of a person from just a few anecdotes, and indeed, Homer provides us with some other telling details and minor episodes that fill out the life of the divine smith. Homer alludes briefly in two different accounts to the crucial, defining moment in Hephaistos' life story. In the first version, the god

himself relates that when he took Hera's side in a dispute with Zeus, the lord of the gods grabbed him by the foot and hurled him from the heavens so that he fell all day until he landed on the island of Lemnos nearly dead. He was, however, rescued and nursed back to health by the people of the island. We learn from the second version that after his long fall, Thetis and Eurynome took him in and for nine years he stayed with them in a cave where he made various artifacts—brooches, bracelets, and necklaces. These details are not only part of the biography of the artist; they are the seeds of his sense of himself and his place; and since the story of his fall and subsequent training in art is recounted by Hephaistos himself, Homer has originated a new genre, the artist's self-portrait.

So often in biography we encounter the rise of a subject to glory and then a fall or decline. There are ever so many such stories in the history of art, in Vasari's *Lives* of the artists, for example, which chronicles the decline of Torrigiani, Pontorno, and Parmigianino, among many others. At the dawn of literature in Homer, however, we encounter the story in reverse: a fall followed by a glorious ascent, for Hephaistos is recognized by the Olympians as a great artist.

Although he fashions works of great beauty and skill, he is at the same time deformed and ridiculous. His entire being is made up of a series of such antitheses. Only think of Achilles, for whom he makes the shield, who is both handsome and fleet of foot. Hephaistos his benefactor is ugly and slow. Yet if he is brutish in appearance, his bride is beautiful: in one version of his myth, he is married to Charis, meaning Grace; in another he is married to Aphrodite. Although he makes tripods that, as Homer says, roll about with ease, he limps along with difficulty because he is lame. Whereas he fabricates living maidens with the power of motion, he needs them to support himself, since he is not so stable and moves with difficulty. In short, Homer juxtaposes Hephaistos' deformity with the beauty of his work, his lameness with the graceful movement of his creations, his cripple's awkward-

ness with his dexterity in making art. These dualisms are also evident in the contrast between the harmony of his art and the discord of the war to which that art is related.

Homer's portrayal of Hephaistos is part of a whole network of related dualities in his poetry. Although Odysseus is handsome by contrast to Hephaistos, his identity is also defined by oppositions. Antenor reports that on first appearance Odysseus seemed slow of wit and empty-headed, whereas he was really astonishingly eloquent, with a strong voice. Similarly, although Odysseus is a man of godlike radiance and beauty, like a work by Hephaistos, he returns to Ithaca seemingly a beggar in rags. Such dualism came to define Homer himself. For, as we have observed, although reputed to be blind, he had penetrating powers of vision attested by a poetic capacity to make things visible. Both Homer and his subjects are defined by the tension between appearance and reality.

This Homeric distinction became essential to Plato's definition of Socrates who, famously ugly without but beautiful within, was a type of Silenus. Socrates, who came to personify the very dualism of Plato's philosophy, has everything to do with the Homeric dichotomy between being and appearances.

Indeed, it is not unreasonable to see a Socratic dualism, the contrast between ugly appearance and beautiful inner being, descending from the same dichotomy that defines Hephaistos. As Erasmus would later say in *Praise of Folly*, "Vulcan has always acted the buffoon at the banquets of the gods and delighted the company by his limping or taunts or other funny things he says." At the very beginnings of art history, then, the central artist, Hephaistos, combines within himself the figure of artistic greatness and the figure of ridicule. We tend nowadays to think of an art history in which the artist is heroic if not tragic, and there are many such examples of pathos and tragedy, from Michelangelo to Caravaggio, from Rembrandt to Rothko. But Homer initiates another tradition—the story of artists who are ridiculous. That story extends from Hephaistos to Boccaccio's

proverbially gullible painter Calandrino and his progeny, to the fat carpenter in a well-known Renaissance tale by Antonio Manetti, in which the craftsman is duped into believing he is somebody other than himself. The story of ridicule in the history of the artist, which has yet to be written in full, extends in recent times to Picasso dressing up as a clown and to Marcel Duchamp, the clown prince of Modernism, famous for his ludicrous gags, jests, and jibes. In short, the mythic “Homeric laughter” elicited by Hephaistos spills into the history of the artist, how he behaves and how he acts.

Plato’s Hephaistean Socrates is father to Boccaccio’s Giotto in the *Decameron*. Whereas the greatest painter of his day achieves great beauty in his work, he is himself, as Boccaccio writes, ugly. The artist in a peasant’s cape, disheveled and soaked in a rainstorm, is mocked by his friend Forese because his looks belie his supreme reputation. If Giotto’s Socratic persona in Boccaccio is well understood, it’s all the more essential to reiterate that the deep roots of this bemocked image of the artist are to be found earlier, in Homer.

Later, Vasari would appropriate Boccaccio’s Hephaistean Giotto for his biography of Filippo Brunelleschi, contrasting the deformity of the great architect with the beauty of his work. In a clever variation on this theme, Vasari contrasts Brunelleschi’s shortness with the great heights he rose to when he built the dome of the cathedral of Florence, soaring high above the city.

In Vasari’s *Lives*, there are three different periods in the history of modern Italian art. The first is epitomized by Giotto, the second by Brunelleschi, and the third by Michelangelo—the pinnacle of the history of art. Once again the theme recurs: Vasari notes Michelangelo’s deformity, his nose broken by a rival, which marked him for life; and Michelangelo himself wrote of his ugliness on several occasions in his poetry, including a long, self-mocking poem telling how his face frightens others.

In another variation on the theme, it was proverbially said of Giotto that although he painted beautiful figures, the chil-

dren he sired were, like him, ugly. It usually escapes notice that the idea of comparing one's progeny to works of art descends from Plato, who speaks in the *Symposium* of the works of Homer and Hesiod as their progeny. According to Vasari, this idea was echoed by Michelangelo who, growing up in a world saturated with Plato, said that he had no need for a wife, since his works of art were his children.

Michelangelo is of significance in the history of art for various reasons. He is, to begin with, the first artist consciously described and defined as the culminating figure in the history of art. Whereas Pliny ascribes to Apelles the perfection of painting, the teleology of his history is not so stringently defined as Vasari's view of historical progress, which is grounded in the linear history of the Bible, the writings of Joachim of Flora, and the *Comedy* of Dante. In Michelangelo, we see the confluence of the two great Western traditions, the Hebraic and the Hellenic. When Michelangelo painted the *Creation of Adam*, Vasari, recalling the biblical image of God as a potter, compared him to God the Creator, the first sculptor who fashioned Adam out of clay. Echoing Dante, who imagined God as a smith and thus assimilated the Hellenic idea of the artist to the Hebraic divine artificer, Michelangelo implicitly compares his own art to that of the Olympian smith with whom the Creator was now identified. Like the Hebraic Creator as sculptor and the Hellenic divine smith Hephaistos at once, Michelangelo personifies the synthesis of both major traditions in the history of the idea of the artist in the West.

The lineage of artists ridiculed for their deformity or ugliness extends beyond Michelangelo to Rembrandt. Writing in the late seventeenth century, Filippo Baldinucci says that Rembrandt wore shabby clothes, an evocation of Boccaccio's disheveled Giotto in his peasant's cape. And when he observes that Rembrandt was ugly and had a plebeian face, he further underlines the painter's descent from Giotto. Writing in the following century, Arnold Houbraken also remarks that as he painted his canvasses, Rembrandt was like

a bricklayer using a trowel. His suggestion of the painter's crude manner of applying a thick impasto to his pictures thus links him to the world of rough workmen that Shakespeare called "rude mechanicals."

These outlandish artisans perform a mock Ovidian play about Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. That one of these rude artificers, Francis Flute, is a bellows-maker links them to the world of the forge and the smith. Shakespeare's mockery is rendered with sympathy, if not affection. Although they are ingenuous and artless in one respect, they are in their own way quite ingenious, as when one of them, Tom Snout the tinker, is made to play the famous chink in the wall that divides the lovers. Imagine that! And Shakespeare expressly identifies with these ridiculous but clever artisans, for he has one of them, Quince, who is playing the Prologue, speak of their collective "skill," twice rhyming the word with "will," which is of course the author's own name. Shakespeare is, as we would say, a smith, a wordsmith, in short, a craftsman, like the tinker, carpenter, joiner, and other comic characters who produce the play within his play—which is at bottom the production of the self-conscious playwright himself.

The crude, deformed, or ugly artist pervasive in the histories of art and literature emerges also in the life story told by Roger de Piles of another Dutch painter, Pieter van Laer, who worked in Rome in the early seventeenth century. This artist apparently had a short body and a head sunk into his shoulders. No wonder he was called "Bamboccio," rag doll. When his biographer adds that "the deformity of his body stood apart from the beauty of his mind," the contrast is especially suggestive of the Socratic—and Homeric—tradition.

We encounter another type of Socrates in the painter and printmaker of the same period Hendrick Goltzius. When this gifted artist traveled to Rome, as Karel van Mander relates, he wore shabby clothes so as not to draw attention to himself because there was danger from outlaws. His dress again brings us back to the disheveled Socratic Giotto of Boccac-

cio. But that is not all. Eventually, a companion recognized the painter by the identifiable deformity he exposed when extending his right hand—a deformity that stood in striking contrast to the grace and eloquence of the monogram on his handkerchief, made with beautiful interlaced lines—or, as we might say, with a “beautiful hand.” Here once again we have the archetypal dualism of Hephaistos.

Not all ugly or deformed artists are expressly related to Socrates or Hephaistos. Consider the case of the Bolognese painter Guercino. According to Malvasia, the artist had a significant defect, for he squinted and was therefore *guercio*, hence the name Guercino, which, as a diminutive, also suggests that he was little. Malvasia makes this defect vivid in our imagination by saying that it resulted from an episode in childhood when the painter was sleeping and heard a loud noise, which woke him and caused him to turn around suddenly in such a way that his pupil got stuck in the corner of his eye. Although we do not doubt the factuality of Guercino’s defective or deformed eye, one cannot but wonder at the ingenuity—itself a kind of archetypal instinct—deployed to make the painter’s defect unforgettable.

There are many other artists with deformities who are not associated with Socrates or Hephaistos: Toulouse-Lautrec, for example, the famously deformed painter who, despite appearances, was capable of rendering arabesques of exquisite grace; and the aged, infirm, indeed crippled Henri Matisse making brightly colored, lyrical flower forms, as if in a miraculous rebirth of nature herself.

There are of course artists known for their good looks and grace. One thinks of Leonardo, Giorgione, and Raphael, of Bernini, Rubens, and Van Dyck; and let us not forget the dandyish Courbet and Whistler. In these cases, the comely appearance and grace of the artist can be seen as mirrored to a degree in his art. But in any meditation on the appearances of artists, the physical beauty of such handsome and dashing figures throws into relief and magnifies our sense of the dramatic contrast between the ugliness or deformity of Socratic

and Hephaistean artists and the beauty of their works. I believe that the tradition of contrasting the ugly artist with the beauty of the artist's work that descends from Homer addresses, indeed intensifies, the wonder we experience when we encounter any work of art by a great artist. For no matter how the artist appears, his appearance can never quite prepare us for that of his work. We are always left to wonder how a mere mortal, be he ugly, ordinary-looking, or even handsome, could produce a work so awe-inspiring. There is inevitably a gap between the appearance of the artist and his work—a gap that Homer defined archetypically.

If many artists descend from Socrates, there is at least one who leads us back once again to Plato's Socrates and Homer's Hephaistos—Anthony Van Dyck. According to the biographer Houbraken, Van Dyck went to visit Frans Hals in his studio. Saying only that he was a stranger, Van Dyck asked Hals to paint his portrait. When the picture was painted, Van Dyck praised it, but in such a way as not to reveal his identity. Then he took a canvas and, putting it on an easel, invited Hals to sit so he could paint *his* portrait. Hals could tell from the way in which Van Dyck held his palette and brush that he was no novice. He realized, Houbraken says most pointedly, that his visitor was a kind of "Odysseus in disguise" who would soon reveal his true identity. Which is in fact what Van Dyck did when he completed the portrait. Homer casts a long shadow over the history of art.

4. from homer to vasari

hephaistos' influence on the idea of the artist brings us back to Homer himself—to Homer's own competition with Hephaistos when he sang so brilliantly of a shield more magnificent than anything a smith could possibly make. If Homer competed with Greek smiths past and present, he also inspired the poets who followed to compete with him. Inventing the grandiose self-image of the epic poet, he made

all epic poets after him conscious of their own status, and this self-conscious idea of the epic poet would eventually shape the modern idea of the heroic artist. In other words, the competition of the poets after Homer who sought to surpass him in various ways is therefore not without consequences for the history of art. Let me explain.

Although Homer was an impersonal artist, he was very self-conscious when he competed with the art of the smiths. So too was Virgil when he competed with Homer. An example here will clarify. Homer says that Helen wove scenes from the Trojan war, though he does not identify the episodes she represented. Virgil, however, describes scenes painted in a temple in Carthage in which particular moments of the Trojan war are explicitly identified. At one point, Aeneas even sees himself in one of these painted narratives. In competition with Homer, Virgil surpasses his model by creating specific pictorial narratives on a larger, more monumental scale than those portrayed by Homer's Helen.

When Aeneas looks at these images, he foreshadows his admiration, later in the poem, of his own shield: he is so much more conscious the connoisseur than Homer's Achilles. Competing with Homer, Virgil departs from him by dwelling distinctively on the beholder's consciousness of art. We might almost say that Aeneas' subjectivity here is a reflection of the poet's own self-consciousness or what has been called his "subjective style"—a style which points him in the direction of Ovid.

When Ovid wrote his epic—or mock epic, as one might better describe it—he self-consciously parodied his sources in Virgil and Homer. Unlike the earlier poets, Ovid is very personal; his poem is not just about the glory of the Greeks, or the Trojans, or the Romans. Ovid metamorphoses their martial glory into the glory of the poet himself. Ovid's self-consciousness is also manifest in his role-playing. As a kind of Proteus of art, he assumes the personae of all of his artist subjects; for example, he is like his own Arachne, a weaver of a text, just as he is like Daedalus as author of a labyrinth of lit-

erary architecture. Moreover, his self-consciousness as a poet is evident in the fundamental idea that all art is metamorphosis. In other words, all of the metamorphoses that Ovid describes are displays of the metamorphoses of his poetry—exhibitions of his own artistic virtuosity.

When Dante wrote the first modern epic, he not only followed Virgil's example, he also relied heavily on Ovid's sense of himself as a poet. Whereas Ovid assumed the personae of his artistic subjects, Dante went a step further: he made himself the principal subject of his poem. Here was an epoch-making shift from the Homeric idea of the warrior as hero to that of the poet as hero of his own epic. Dante's self-image as epic poet was fundamental both to Michelangelo's persona—his own consciousness of himself—as artist and also to Vasari's presentation of Michelangelo's Dantesque identity in the *Lives*, wherein the grandiose modern artificer is the summit of all art history.

There is no direct relationship between Homer and Michelangelo's life story or self-portrayal in his poetry. There is no simple (or simplistic), timeless pattern to which these artists are reducible. Their creative achievements are unique in the chain of history. However, without Dante, Vasari's mythic Michelangelo would not be the Michelangelo whom we know so well. Similarly, without Ovid, Dante would not be the poet-hero of his own poem, and without Virgil and ultimately Homer, Ovid would not be the self-conscious epic poet so familiar to us. An historical chain extends from Homer to Virgil, from Virgil to Ovid, from Ovid to Dante, and from Dante to Michelangelo and Vasari's representation of Michelangelo. The crucial link in this concatenation for the history of art is that connecting Dante to Michelangelo the painter, sculptor, and architect who assumed the persona of the epic poet. But along with the heroic grandeur of Michelangelo's Dante-inspired self-image also came, as we have observed, the antithetical self-mockery of his poetry, where the artist ridicules his ugliness, his frighteningly grotesque appearance. In this respect, Michelangelo, who is

both ugly and ridiculous, leads us back via Vasari's Brunelleschi and Boccaccio's Giotto to Plato's Socrates, but ultimately to deeper roots in Homer, who had created in Hephaistos the complex, paradoxical, if not ironic image of the great but ugly artist—a foundational figure not only for Plato, but, more broadly, for the richly intertwined poetic histories of Western art and literature.

note

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