

*Legend, Myth, and Magic
in the Image of the Artist*

A Historical Experiment

Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz

Preface by E. H. Gombrich

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artist, but only with the nature of the information that is identifiable as a typical part of the common fund of tradition.

If we let ourselves be guided by our source material, however, we can fully corroborate our view that the accounts concerning the early manifestations of talent among great artists do indeed constitute a biographical formula.

The tale of the early stirring of artistic talent is indiscriminately used as biographical padding. Thus, to cite a particularly clear example, it was trundled out in the sixteenth century to provide a brief introduction to Vasari's (1:248) entirely fictitious "Life" of Cimabue, even though, as we have already pointed out, there was a complete lack of information about the life and career of that master. Such reports have long been viewed with skepticism, and their formulalike character has been recognized. So when one reads Carel van Mander's account (1906) of the youth of Jooris Hoefnaghel, the smooth succession of incidents leaves one in little doubt as to their origin:

And when the schoolmaster took away his paper, Jooris would scrape together the sand on the floor and, with his fingers or a little stick, draw figures in it. And at home, hidden in the attic, he secretly made drawings with chalk.

One day, Jooris made a picture of his own hand on a board. This was seen by an ambassador of the Duke of Savoy who was a guest in the house of the boy's father. The Ambassador said a good word for the boy, and so did his schoolmaster. Thereafter Jooris was allowed to draw as much as he wished [281].

This story introduces another typical motif—that of the young prodigy triumphing over obstacles put in the way of his chosen profession, often by those nearest to him. Several biographers of artists had a special predilection for

using this motif in many variations, notably Vasari, most clearly in his *Life of Baldovinetti* (2:522), and later *Piles* (1715), in the lives of Lanfranco and Mignard. Evidently this too is intended to underline—as did in its own way the story of the discovery of Giotto's talent—that true genius proves its mettle early.

While it is very tempting to go on with the presentation of biographical material, which can be traced from meager bits of information in scattered biographies to the most elaborately contrived narrations, we shall break off here and secure some of our initial findings.

The flotsam of ancient conceptions of the artist carried forward on biographical waves entirely corresponds to the attitude with which we still approach the artist. He seems to us to be a child prodigy. To delineate the area of feeling into which we have entered here, we quote a writer who had great insight into man and his emotions:

... and there he sat, a gray old man, looking in while this hop-o'-my-thumb performed miracles. Yes, yes, it is a gift of God, we must remember that God grants His gifts or He withholds them, and there is no shame in being an ordinary man. Like with the Christ Child.—Before a child one may kneel without feeling ashamed. Strange that thoughts like those should be so satisfying [Thomas Mann, 1948, 177].

This observation, which springs from a rich knowledge of life, can be further supported by historical considerations. Our starting point is the fact that early biography is rarely concerned with the youth of the person whose life is being described. In a number of cases, however, youth is singled out for special emphasis. Such accounts are invariably connected with personages who are held in high esteem by

their environment: Hercules who strangled the snakes in his cradle belongs to that species of heroes, just as does Plato, of whose childhood at least one remarkable occurrence is likewise related (though only in later times, of course). Heathen mythology and the lives of the saints of revealed religions are full of tales of the childhood of those whose divine origin or special relation to the deity is beyond doubt. From here this practice made its way into the hagiography and even the epics of the Middle Ages, where worldly heroes were sometimes credited with similar marvels in their own sphere as the saints in theirs. Generalizing, one can assert with fair confidence that every achievement related of such exceptional children belongs to the sphere of the miraculous: the term child prodigy (*Wunderkind* in German) has this implication. We shall later have occasion to draw upon a particular source to substantiate this interpretation of the traditional accounts of the artist's youth, but we already can state our view that the special position accorded by the Renaissance to the artist, raising him to the top of the social pinnacle, finds its visible expression in the fact that the biographies not only paid attention to his youth but regarded his genius as a "childhood miracle."

At this point we return to the story depicting the childhood of Giotto, the shepherd boy. So far we have attempted to break it down into its elements and to pursue the occurrence of similar motifs in other biographies. Now we shall turn our attention to the story's external frame, to the milieu in which it is set.

To start with the most obvious: Giotto is a shepherd and is discovered as a boy tending sheep. If we reflect upon the role accorded to the shepherd in mythological thinking—the representation of the hero as a shepherd, and the tradition

that makes shepherds into the foster parents of heroes abandoned as children—this opens up the prospect of connecting a late anecdote transmitted by Renaissance biographies of artists with the broad realm of myth. On the basis of this connection we believe we can understand why the accounts of the artist's childhood lead us so frequently into rustic scenes and especially to his pastoral occupation. For even though the tales of the youth of other artists may not be as elaborate as that of Giotto's childhood, they nevertheless report again and again that several artists were cowherds or shepherds.

Raffaellino da Reggio deserts the geese entrusted to him by his father (Piles, 1715, 232), while Mantegna in the fifteenth century, and Franz Xaver Messerschmidt² in the eighteenth, are both supposed to have begun life as shepherd boys (Vasari, 3: 384); subsequent biographers add that they industriously drew pictures of the animals in their herds. Obviously, these are not facts known about the artists' lives, but represent movable scenery inserted in the biographer's workshop. This at any rate appears to be the case where we have other material that can be checked. Messerschmidt, for example, who is supposed to have been a cowherd in his native Swabia before becoming the leading sculptor in Austria, came on his mother's side from a respected family of Munich sculptors, who took him in when he was still a boy—everything seems to indicate that in his case there were no obstacles in the way of his professional choice. Even in modern times we see occasional attempts to return to the old theme of the shepherd boy, as in the biography of Segantini by Servaes (1902, 12) or that of Meštrović by Planiscig (1910), who transferred the legend of the discovery of the child genius to these

2. In a rare pamphlet giving an entirely schematic account of the artist's life. It was published in 1794 under the title *Merkwürdige Lebensgeschichte*.

artists.³ Sometimes the country milieu is divorced from the pastoral occupation. Giovanni da Udine, for example, whose grotesques in the Vatican loggias depict animals with great artistry and whose realism has frequently been lauded, is supposed to have shown an astonishing inclination for art as a child, according to Vasari (6:549): "When he went hunting or fowling with his father, he spent all the time he could drawing—hounds, hares, deer, indeed every kind of bird or beast that came into his hands." It is clear that here Vasari's pragmatic outlook is at work, a factor which his critics, notably Wolfgang Kallab (1908), have recognized as one of the potent ingredients of his portrayals. Whatever stands out in the subsequent achievement of an artist is traced back to the early impressions he received in childhood, about which obviously nothing is known. It therefore occasions no surprise that Vasari (1:221) himself, in the general introduction to his *Lives*, attempted to summarize and elucidate the group of tales concerning the rustic background and the pastoral occupation of artists. He wished to show that the urge to produce art was innate in and part of human nature, and that just as "our earliest ancestors, who stood nearer to the beginning of all things and the divine Creation, and were thus more perfect and endowed with that much more mental vigor, discovered those noble arts by themselves," so in more recent times one could still see "that simple children, brought up in the backwoods without education, have begun to draw by themselves, driven by the vitality of their spirit, with the beautiful paintings and sculptures of Nature as their model." This at least contains the preliminary steps in an attempt at a rationalistic explanation that we mentioned at the outset of this section; it raises in its starkest form the problem of the "factual" life, which we need not discuss again.

3. See also Čurčin (1914, 17), Gotardo Segantini (1923, 11), Schlosser (1924, 277). Similar stories were told of Canova (Hertslet, 1905, 425) and of J. A. Koch (Musper, 1935, 101).

The explanation that we propose tries to present the outline of an overall pattern, into which both the story of Giotto's youth and its subsequent variations will fit. We can begin with the observation that in the motifs of mythology the relation of the hero to his parental home, the origin of the hero, is depicted in a very special way. This theme is dominated by the tendency to deny the real father of the man who is elevated to a hero, and to substitute a more exalted, royal parent; indeed, as far as possible, all mortal taint is removed from the hero's origin. This store of themes, which is found in a wide range of myths, is known to students of comparative mythology as the sagas of royal children who as infants were abandoned in the wilderness and later became the founders of new empires. Just like the hero who was set out as a child, the child artist is recognized by a special mark. But the discoverer of the child artist is sometimes vested with a dual role. Cimabue both discovers the shepherd boy and becomes his teacher—his new, elevated father. Here we must relinquish the further pursuit of the parallels between individual themes and the detailed exposition of findings and suppositions of comparative mythology, but we wish to emphasize one point. The theme of the social rise of the artist, a biographical formula whose roots go back to Duris of Samos, and the theme of the obstacles that the genius has to overcome, appear in a new light when we compare them with incidents which frequently depict the hero who started from a poor and menial position embarking on his triumphal progress in the face of all adversities of fate.

In attempting in this way to link up the themes of an anecdote about artists with those of myths, we are doing no more than following a lead that was given in the most general terms a long time ago, though it was never seriously

pursued. For when the anecdote is characterized as the "younger sister" of saga, traced back to the same formative elements, and only ascribed to a different sphere of operation (Bernheim, 1903, 467); or when we hear that "as the spiritual condensation of the diffuse," and "in relation to the basic disposition of the human mind from which it derives," the anecdote is identical with myth (Löbell, 1859)—then we are offered an interpretation which readily fits the particular case that we are using to prove the connection. The area staked out by this interpretation is wide enough to embrace biographical formulas, which, as in the case of Duris, the historian uses as artificial devices for a particular purpose. The legend of Giotto's childhood has an entirely different origin; it has no identifiable source other than popular tradition handed down by word of mouth. The critical examination of sources as practiced by the historian performed its task when it was able to trace back a legend to these roots, as was the case in Wickhoff's study (1889). The next step required the employment of methods regularly used in the comparative study of sagas and fairy tales, in the study of those great "secular dreams of mankind" (Freud, 1908, 152) which are regularly traceable to a common conception, despite the differences of meaning and significance of particular themes—a circumstance that serves to demonstrate the universal diffusion of such "dreams." These fantasies are deeply rooted in the mental life of man. They repeatedly prove their capacity to become the vehicles of the most diverse realizations, thereby pointing to the roots from which the concatenation of themes and links between them can be understood. We may now add in a few words what modern psychology has been able to contribute to this topic. It teaches us that those motifs of fairy tales that live

on in so many disguises in the consciousness of man regularly appear anew in the fantasies of children; and that those other themes found in sagas and myths are perpetually revived in the dreams of civilized men—the immediate derivative of his unconscious. Finally, to return to the particular concerns of this study, it has proved possible to establish a parallel to the group of motifs that deal with the youth of the hero in myth, legend, or anecdote, in a common but secret fantasy of children and adolescents for which the term "family romance" has been adopted (Freud, 1909; Rank, 1909). Leaving aside the question of the psychological motives of their causation, the core of these fantasies is simply the child's notion that he is not the child of his parents with whom he has come to live by this or that fluke of fate, but is in fact of higher birth, an unrecognized hero who still may hope to be discovered.

On the basis of this psychological foundation we can understand that the anecdote concerning Giotto's youth itself functioned like a motif of mythological thinking and thus was able to migrate far afield. One has the impression that it expresses an intensely satisfying idea of the youth of artists—an idea that for this reason was capable of wide diffusion. For the same reason it sometimes seems to have caught the imagination of poets. We encounter it in Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the Bronze Boar, in which a Florentine street urchin has taught himself to draw; his gifts are discovered when he is found tracing the likeness of a lapdog in his foster father's house where he lives in miserable circumstances. This motif is so immensely potent, however, and corresponds so exactly to the popular notion of how artistic genius comes about that it did not remain confined to the area of the visual arts. In Octave Feuillet's *Dalila*

(act 2, scene 5) the story is told of how the Chevalier Cornioli discovered the hero of the play, Roswein, a musical genius, as a child in Dalmatia. The boy was an orphan, covered in rags; his only possession was a violin, and his only companion was a goat called Sylvia, from whom he refused to part. This brings us back to another motif of mythology, for it has long been a familiar aspect of human imagination occasionally to regard animals as the guardians and caretakers of favored heroes.

*Deus artifex—
divino artista*

Thus far we have dealt with just a few of the themes found in ancient and more modern biographies of artists. Now we propose to view them from a broader perspective, which entails both reexamination and further elaboration. The legend of the discovery of the young Giotto has characteristics that in myths are frequently associated with accounts of the youth of heroes. The nucleus of their agreement evidently lies in the predestination of the child artist to achieve future greatness. All the chance events that lead to his discovery, and thus to his brilliant ascension, appear in the biographical presentations as inevitable consequences of his genius. The miracle of being an infant prodigy is itself merely an expression of the special favors bestowed upon him.

The lack of similar information about artists in ancient Greece or Rome does not warrant the conclusion that this mark of singularity was not accorded to the artist by classical antiquity, because the paucity of existing sources raises doubts about all conclusions based on their silence. In this case, however, we have direct evidence. We know that classical antiquity did not credit painters and sculptors with

"singular or special genius." Here we touch on a question which has often been debated, yet in many important particulars still awaits a solution.

The social position of the artist in the Greek city-state was still a very limited one; it was characterized by "lack of independence, half of the rights before the law, and an uncommonly low estimation of his rank" (Schweitzer, 1925). This tradition has been handed down from earliest times and was codified, for instance, in the Homeric epics. This low estimation appears in the guise of two formulas. The first expresses disdain for the work of painters and sculptors because it is manual labor, which, as a brilliant modern writer (whose premises, however, we cannot accept) has pointed out, was "in a slave-based economy" left to the members of a servile class (Zissel, 1926).

To establish the general validity of this factor one must be prepared to assume, as Zissel does, that all the insults, malign gossip, and mild contempt to which Homer's Hephaistos was subject are attributable to the fact that this highly artistic metalworker labored with his hands. Regardless of whether or not one accepts this explanation as the original cause of the social rejection of the artist, it played a significant role in classical antiquity and, for example, figured prominently in Lucian's famous "dream." Even in the Renaissance, it is occasionally revived, especially in references to the competition of and rivalry between the arts. If in these tediously repetitious disputations in the art literature of the Cinquecento, painting occasionally wins out over sculpture, the decision is sometimes defended by the argument that painting requires less physical effort than sculpture.

The second formula derives from the tenets of art itself and has, in Plato's formulation, achieved enduring significance: art as *mimesis*, as the imitation of nature, can provide

only a distant reflection of true being, of ideas, which art attempts to reproduce at second hand, as it were, by imitating their earthly embodiments.

It was only in the fourth century B.C. that a significant change in the estimation of painters and sculptors began to occur. This is seen most clearly when artists gradually become the subjects of biography. In the writings of Xenocrates and Duris, so far as they can be reconstructed, we can detect signs of this new appreciation of the artist. This "revolution in classical attitudes toward both the graphic arts and their practitioners" (Schweitzer, 1925) accounts not merely for the existence of artists' biographies but also for several of their characteristic features. They show us the artist at the height of his newly acquired fame, frequently in most intimate contact with princes and rulers, toward whom he comports himself proudly and at times even dismissively. The keynote of such portrayals seems to be that the artist confronts the princely layman—who here stands for all laymen—as an expert.

It is typical of a group of these reports which again are linked with Duris (Sellers, 1896, lxi) that Apelles unmercifully hounds Alexander for his foolish remarks about art, and that Alexander cedes his own mistress, Campaspe, to the lovesick artist; or that Demetrios spares the besieged city of Rhodes so as not to endanger the life of Protogenes (Pliny, 35:85–86, 104–06 [see also Reinach, 1917]). Another set of reports is concerned with the pride of artists: Parrhasius called himself a prince of art; Zeuxis gave his pictures away, because he could not sell them at a respectable price; and the same artist was notorious for the splendor of his clothing—at Olympia he wore a cloak that had his name in golden letters woven into its borders (Pliny, 35:71; 35:62).

In the Renaissance the message of these anecdotes became an

influence upon conduct; the halo of their classical origin made them into exemplars and lent them impetus. It was to them that the artist owed his awareness of his own worth—indeed, it was stressed over and over again that in ancient times the artist's achievements were held in much higher esteem, while the prince for his part saw in Alexander the model of the ruler who in no way demeans himself by paying deference to genius. When, in one of Bandello's *Novelle* (no. 58), Leonardo is provoked by the disparaging tone of a cardinal into telling the story of the surrender of Campaspe, he regards himself as a second Apelles, just as Charles V in his dealings with Titian feels that he is another Alexander (Ridolfi, 1:181).⁴ Moreover, we hear echoes of the classical tradition in which artist and prince confront one another as equals in what Francesco da Hollanda (1928, 12) relates of Michelangelo's relationship with his papal patrons, notably Clement VII; in what was told of Donatello's relationship with the Patriarch of Venice (Wesselski, 1929, 27); and of Dürer's with the Emperor Maximilian, who gets a nobleman to hold the ladder for Dürer while he paints (Mander, 1906, 430 [correcting his original version on p. 37]); and of Charles V's retrieving Titian's brush for him (Ridolfi, 1:180).

These derivatives of classical sources have taken us far beyond our point of departure, to which we return. All the high esteem expressed in Hellenistic biographies that put artists on a par with princes never quite succeeded in silencing those who voiced mistrust of, or even contempt for, art as a profession. The evidence for such an attitude is found in the writings of a Lucian or a Seneca. "One venerates the divine images, one may pray and sacrifice to them, yet one despises the sculptors who made them" (Zilsel, 1926, 27). The distinction that is here drawn between the artist and his

4. See Winner (1962) on Apelles and Campaspe in Renaissance and later paintings.

work is not exclusively or even chiefly attributable to the work of art serving a religious rather than an aesthetic function. Nor did the undisputed appeal of works of art succeed in dispelling the mistrust of the artist's station: "For even if a thing charms us, it is nevertheless not necessary to desire to emulate its creator" (Plutarch, *Pericles*, chap. 2). Only a sample of such opinions need be given here to round out the material contained in the biographies. In spite of the fact that they portray painters and sculptors and architects as the friends of princes, they succeeded neither in banishing doubts about the social position of artists nor in bringing about a fundamental reevaluation of the artist's achievements. The Greeks did not listen to their claim to a higher place in the ranking of creative accomplishments. If we cursorily survey the findings of the extensive and carefully interpreted researches on the subject—foremost among them the investigations of Schweitzer (1925) and Pöschel (1925)⁵—we may say that the painter or sculptor continued to be seen as banalistic, entirely lacking the divine inspiration that, according to Plato, was granted to the poet. The latter was an "instrument of the deity," graced with genuine inspiration and endowed with enthusiasm. As Plato indicated in his *Phaedrus*, the idea of the divine possession of the poet sprang from religious practice; it is an offshoot of the belief that the predictions and auguries of priestesses and prophetesses are fulfilled by "divine madness." This divine ecstasy is ascribed to the poet and the rhapsodist, but is denied to the painter or sculptor (Plato in *Ion*). In contrast to the "enthusiasts," he—like the military strategist, the doctor, and the charioteer—

5. See also Dornseiff (1936, 19), Kristeller (1951–52, 502f.), Otto (1956, 38f.), and Bianchi-Bandinelli (1957, 1–17).

performs his work "with the aid of skill [τέχνη] and knowledge." Another prerequisite of his activity is his φύσις or natural endowment. These two elements are reminiscent of those found in the account of Lysippus's choice of profession for one can connect teaching oneself and natural endowment, and associate the traditional linkage of a genealogical succession of teachers with the principles of art. The self-taught artist represents the exceptional case of one whose accomplishment is due primarily to natural endowment.

Alongside the view that regards the painter or sculptor as a mere imitator of nature and therefore holds him in low esteem, there already existed in the fifth century B.C. another view which, it is true, seems to have had little effect on the social prestige of the artist in antiquity, but which decisively shaped subsequent developments. While the first maintained "that the work of art is less than nature, in that at best it can only imitate it to the point of deception," the other maintained "that the work of art is greater than nature, in that it makes up for the deficiencies of nature's individual products, which it confronts with a newly created and independent image of beauty" (Panofsky, 1924). The best known formulation of this view is found in Xenophon's Socratic *Memorabilia* (III, chap. 10, i–iv). In a conversation with the painter Parrhasios, Socrates defines the task of art when he asks whether the artist who finds difficulty in discovering a flawless person as a model might not combine the beauty of individual features, which are found in many people, in one entirely beautiful body. This view corresponds exactly with Plato's opinion (*Republic*, 472D) that the painter does not need to prove that the beautiful beings he depicts in his works exist in reality. This viewpoint, too, in the form of an anecdote, made its way into biography.

When Zeuxis was in the city of Croton to paint his portrait of Helen, he chose five virgins, in order to copy the finest feature of each. This tale, which was cited frequently and in many variations even in antiquity (Overbeck, 1868, nos. 1667-69), found its way into the world of medieval thought, formed the conclusion of a charming novella in the *Gesta Romanorum* (Floerke, 1913, 337), became a permanent feature of Renaissance biography, and can even be found outside art-historical writings, for example, in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (canto XI, v. 71).

We have before us here the basis upon which a new outlook toward the artist was to arise. Having been expressed clearly in the art theory of the late classical period, it was raised to the status of dogma in the philosophy of Plotinus. In a passage devoted to Phidias's Zeus, he asserted that the operations of the imagination, the inner vision, were of greater moment than any imitation of reality. Phidias, he claimed, depicted Zeus as the god himself would appear were he to be inclined to reveal himself to the gaze of humanity. According to the tenets of Plotinus's metaphysics, the image of Zeus that Phidias carried within him was not a representation of Zeus but his essence (Panofsky, 1924). This assertion paved the way for a revised judgment of the artist, who now took his position as an equal with the other creative persons—the poets who even in antiquity had been revered as seers.

Thus Callistratos saw the influence of the gods not merely in the voice of the poet, but also in the hands of the sculptor; they too were divinely inspired to create. That these are harbingers of a new attitude finds confirmation in the fact that early sources preserved by a Byzantine lexicographer (Suidas) explicitly credit

Phidias and Zeuxis with "genuine enthusiasm" (Overbeck, nos. 1164 and 800).

Yet this conception of the artist failed to achieve concrete expression either in biography or in his social esteem. By the time it was fully formulated, the flesh-and-blood figure of the artist prevalent in classical antiquity had long since faded away and had retreated into the shadows of an anonymity symptomatic of a new formal and intellectual approach to art. However, the image of the artist as it evolved in late antiquity was never entirely lost in the Middle Ages, and was revitalized in the Renaissance when the artist once more became the object of biography. Even the genius of the boy Giotto, the inner voice which speaks in his first endeavors, partakes of this legacy. From now on whatever emerges as a typical feature of the descriptions of artists' lives can be associated, trait by trait, with this basic conception of the artist's genius. This attitude is of course most clearly discernible when we are in a position to compare it directly with that of classical antiquity. An example that lends itself particularly well to clarification by such comparison concerns a strange and impressive circumstance—one that has long engaged man's imagination: not art alone, but chance as well, sometimes succeeds in producing objects that appear to be meaningful and to have been created intentionally. This motif is frequently referred to in classical biographies of artists.

Protogenes is supposed to have tried in vain to depict the foam forming on the jaws of a panting dog; in sheer frustration he threw his sponge at the picture—and the sponge created the desired effect. "Fecitque in pictura fortuna naturam" (Pliny,

35:103; see also Sellers, ix and 232). Similar stories are told of Apelles (see Dio Chrysostom, *Orations*, 63:4, cited in Overbeck, no. 1889; for the veracity of this, see Sauer, 1917-18, 536), and also of Nealkes (Overbeck, nos. 1907, 1.24 and the introduction to no. 2103); in all these cases the prime consideration is that chance comes to the aid of the painter. These stories, which are widely scattered in numerous classical sources, probably originated in a comparison of the effects produced by chance and those created by the artist. In Renaissance biographies this phenomenon was seen in another light. According to Vasari (4:134), Piero di Cosimo would sometimes stop and "stare at a wall onto which sick people had vomited, and out of it conjure up for himself battles between mounted horsemen and the strangest cities and vastest landscapes ever seen. He did the same thing with clouds." Here it is a chance configuration that affords the artist the opportunity to give free reign to his imagination, to see figures in fortuitous arrangements. One might easily imagine that this happened to be an idiosyncrasy of Piero, whose personality as Vasari depicts it abounds in bizarre traits. But what Vasari reports about Cosimo's attempts to read meaning into chance formations had a recognized place in contemporary thought. In his notebooks Leonardo recommended that the artist interpret damp spots on the wall in order to exercise his imagination and keep it alive. And it is not too far-fetched to suggest that Piero, who we know was artistically dependent on Leonardo, may also have gotten the idea for adopting this practice from him (M. Herzfeld, 1926, 146; see also Leonardo, 1956, part II, cap. 93).⁶

Leonardo's recommendation is not an isolated incident. We become aware of how extraordinarily widespread these connections are when we learn that the eleventh-century Chinese painter Sung-Ti advised Ch'en Yung-chih to create a picture of a landscape in accordance with the ideas suggested by a tumbledown

6. Compare Leonardo (1939, 1:311); see also Armenini (1587, 193), Janson (1961), Harris (1969, 22), Du Gué Trapèrie (1940, 13).

wall. "For then," he said, "you can let your brush follow the play of your imagination, and the result will be heavenly and not human" (Giles, 1905, 100).⁷

Whereas classical biography puts chance configurations on a par with the products of the artist, to which they may also happen to contribute, in Leonardo's conception they were means of training the artist's fantasy and creative forces. Goethe expressed a similar thought in connection with another group of chance configurations—clouds:

The mind's own power to shape now boldly wakes,
As definite from indefinite it makes.
[Nun regt sich kühn des eignen Bildens Kraft,
Die Unbestimmtes zu Bestimmten schafft.]

Howards Ehrengedächtnis

(For those who enjoy historical perspectives we might add a further link in the chain. The practice recommended by Leonardo as an exercise of the imagination has been taken up by modern experimental psychology—in Rorschach's form interpretation test which uses chance configurations made by ink blots. Here a tendency of the human mind is utilized to provide a statistical basis for psychodiagnostic purposes.)

This emphasis on the artist's imagination was also responsible for the new heights to which Renaissance art theory raised the artist's accomplishments. The Cinquecento no longer regarded the imitation of nature as the acme of artistic achievement, but rather viewed "invention" as its foremost aim. It no longer valued "diligenza e fatica delle cose pulite," the diligence and labor expended upon careful

7. In Japan Hokusai once drew "the curves of a mighty river. Then, dipping the feet of a cock in orange-red, he allowed the bird to walk over his design, and so brought to the mind of all his beholders the famous river Tatsuta, with the maple leaves of autumn floating on its stream" (Strange, 1906, 9).

execution; its new measure of appreciation was "il furore dell'arte," artistic ecstasy. This view gained wide diffusion in Vasari's formulation at an early time, but could in fact be traced back to the theory of art propounded in what remains of Aretino's writings (Venturi, 1924).

This point of view also decisively influenced the evaluation of the work of art itself. The new interest in drawing as the earliest evidence of the creative process emerges during this period; and it is no coincidence that Giorgio Vasari, one of the first literary proponents of this new appreciation of the artist, should also have been one of the earliest collectors of drawings. Here we shall not pursue in detail how this new appreciation of sketching was reflected in the development of Italian art, nor shall we examine the methods by which as late as the eighteenth century certain groups of art works can be distinguished solely by the degree of their finished execution. Soon, however, the unfinished was highly appreciated in its own right; and the strange statement found in guidebooks to Florence, that Michelangelo's unfinished slaves in the grotto of the Boboli Gardens are in that state more beautiful and more impressive than if the master had completed them, is nothing but a reflection of the same aesthetic that has continued to exert its influence to this day (Kris, 1926). This is in complete contrast to what was valued in the Middle Ages which used as the aesthetic yardstick the degree to which a work was finished in the sense of craftsmanship. This illustration of divergent views demonstrates the intimate links between the criteria on which aesthetic judgments are based and the role and esteem accorded the artist by society.

The new image of the artist which evolved in the sixteenth century found its clearest expression in the opinion that "wonderful and divine thoughts" come into being only when ecstasy complements the operation of the intellect (Vasari, 2:204). This is at the same time a reminder which

leaves no doubt that artistic creation rests upon inner vision, upon inspiration. Thus, inevitably, there emerged an image of the artist who creates his work driven by an irrepressible urge, in a "mixture of fury and madness" akin to intoxication. This idea has its roots, as we have attempted to indicate, in Plato's theory of art; but it was not until the Renaissance that painters and sculptors were credited with possessing genuine ecstasy. Thus transformed into "the stylus of god," the artist himself was honored as a divine being. The "religion" among whose saints he is counted is the modern-day worship of genius.

In a book that is basic to modern art history Erwin Panofsky (1924) has demonstrated that the idea of the inner voice of the artist is rooted in Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy, and he described the ways in which the concept of the "idea" dominated the theory of art. He has shown that "ideas," which "in Platonic doctrine have absolute being in every respect," were ultimately transformed, in a process that culminated in the writings of Saint Augustine, "into the thoughts of a personal God" who creates the world in accordance with a divine idea. When Dürer speaks of the painter "being inwardly filled with forms [*Figur*]"—echoing Seneca's statement that God "plenus his figuris est, quas Plato ideas appellat" ("he is filled with these shapes, which Plato calls 'Forms'")—he is combining this view with that of divinely conferred inspiration. The adulation of the divine artist runs like a thread through all biography since the Cinquecento. This notion was permanently fixed by another remark of Dürer's, who characterized artistic activity as "creating just as God did"; an Italian parallel is Alberti's designation of the artist as *alter deus*. This became the dominant theme of art theory; we encounter it in one form or another

so frequently that we no longer can survey its many transformations. What the biographers attempt to present is best described in the artist's own words. Leonardo (1956, parte I, cap. 35), for instance, calls the painter, who summons at will beautiful, terrible, or droll things into this world, "signor e dio," lord over these creations of his. That "certain image of beauty" that Raphael carried within him (as he confessed in an incomparable letter to Baldassare Castiglione) may likewise be taken as evidence of this new outlook, as may Michelangelo's conception of a world of figures which he merely liberated from the marble.

In drawing attention to this attitude we find ourselves back at the starting point of our investigation, for the inner voice in which we again recognize divine ecstasy, the "enthusiasm" of the Greeks, can already be heard in the story of the discovery of Giotto. It is in accord with this notion that in the Renaissance we witness the prevalence of the view that artistic creativity is determined not by schooling or practice, but by a special endowment, the $\phi\upsilon\varsigma\iota\varsigma$ of the Greeks. This view appears as the formulation that the artist is born an artist.

The literature on art and artists is steeped in this assumption. Mander (1906), who puts words of high praise for Geertgen tot Sint Jans into Dürer's mouth, has him say, "Truly, he was a painter in his mother's womb," adding that "by this he intended to say that he was destined to be one by nature before he was born" (p. 41). In Francesco da Hollanda's *Dialogues* we often find the assertion that the true painter is so born—nobles can be created by the Emperor, but painters only by God (p. 15). Thus formulated this idea emerges simultaneously in a host of anecdotes, all of which use this device to proclaim the special position of the artist; one instance is Mander's biography of Holbein (86ff.). The artist

becomes embroiled in an argument with an English earl, whom he throws down the stairs of his house. When the earl complains to the king, he receives the answer, "I'll tell you this, my lord, if I so fancied, I could make seven earls out of seven peasants, but never a Hans Holbein out of seven earls." Mander used similar words in his description of the lives of Dürer and Goltzius (37 and 371) as did Passeri (1772, 75) in that of Guido Reni. One might mention that a distant version of the same thought can also be found in Johannes Pauli's book of jests (1:72) where, in a competition between knight and doctor, the latter plays the role usually assigned to the artist.⁸

While all these and many other allusive or discursive accounts seek to underline the special position of the artist by referring to the divine origin of his genius, the divinity of his birth was also more directly asserted in biographies. Occasionally, this appears in connection with the belief in astrology, that most important repository of surviving classical thought. Such a view occupies a central place in Vasari's life of Pierino da Vinci (6:120), whose splendid future was predicted when he was a child of three by an astrologer and a palmist.

The portents of a special astrological constellation also marked the hour of Michelangelo's birth. In Vasari's words (7:136), "Since God saw that it was just in Tuscany that sculptors, painters, and architects devoted themselves most diligently to the noble arts . . . , He desired that this spirit that He sent out should have Florence as its home."

At this point the biographer becomes a prophet, and the life history assumes the qualities of a myth. "This son, of

8. Luther (*Werke*, 44:657) attributed the same saying to the Emperor Maximilian I.

whom I am speaking, was born on March 6th, a Sunday, toward eight o'clock in the evening. He was given the name of Michelagnolo. Without further reflection, as if under the influence of higher forces, one thereby wished to signify that he towered above every human measure, and possessed heavenly and godlike gifts."

Birth is here depicted as in a myth. The word-play of the naming is exploited to portray the feelings of those standing around the cradle. It is consistent with the structure of the myths and the succession of their motifs when next we hear that the boy was brought to Settignano, where he was nursed by a stonemason's wife, so that Michelangelo, as he himself is subsequently supposed to have reiterated, "sucked in the attraction to hammer and chisel with the milk of his wet-nurse."

The premonitors that dominate the preface to Michelangelo's life necessarily recede into the background in the subsequent course of events, but the sense of pathos with which not only Vasari, but other historians as well, narrate the life of the great master reaches beyond the domain of biography.

If we glance back at the legend of Giotto's youth and relate it to this report of Michelangelo's birth, we become aware of the factor that distinguishes this view of the artist from that of the Greeks: the myth of the hero has now been joined by a myth of the artist. It is true that this myth did not evolve into a set form of its own under the probing glare of modern Western culture, but it is woven into the fabric of biography. The heroization of the artist has become the aim of his biographers. Historiography, having once accepted the legacy of myth, is never fully able to break its spell.

Yet, the glorification of artistic genius in the Renaissance

cannot be explained solely in terms of the causes that we have so far uncovered. Alongside the art theories prevalent in classical antiquity we now have the concept of God the Creator, whose work was regarded as that of an artist.

We can distinguish two groups of ideas: God as the builder of the world, and God as the modeler of man. In the first, God is seen as engaging in two crafts. The figure of God the Creator as an architect first appeared in Babylonian texts, and as that of a smith in Indo-Germanic mythology. Ancient Indians, Greeks, and Germanic people all conceive of heaven as an iron vault. While we cannot pursue the forms in which these two conceptions persisted, we want to mention that the idea of God as the world's architect underlay the mystic tradition of the medieval lodges, and that the idea of the divine smith was still alive in the natural philosophy of the sixteenth century, its renunciation of anthropomorphism notwithstanding. "Everything in nature is endowed with a sidereal emanation called the firmament or astrum, even the hidden smith and master of the workshop, who causes form, structure, dimension, and color to exist" (O. Crollius, probably following Paracelsus; see Schlegel, 1915, 11). The most widespread image, however, is that of God who, like a sculptor, forms mankind out of clay. The biblical creation story, through which this idea became the common property of Western thought, has parallels in an analogous Babylonian myth in which mankind is made out of blood and clay (in Jeremias, 1930, 45ff.); and in the Egyptian tale of Chnum, who formed the body of the child and his *ka*, or guardian spirit, on his potter's wheel, whereupon Heket, the goddess of birth, breathed life into these earthen figures (Erman, 1923, 61; and Sethe in Pauly, vol. 3, col. 2349). In more recent times, some attempts have been made to demonstrate the presence of similar ideas among primitive tribes, especially those of south-east Australia. The concept of a divine being creating men out of clay is indeed widespread among these people and, in the opinion of many researchers, antedates any possible

influence exerted by missionaries. (In this case one would have to accept that this belief was intimately associated with the primitive monotheism that Schmidt and Koppers (1924), the originators of the theory of cultural spheres, are inclined to see as one of the earliest manifestations of man's religious beliefs.) The universality of this myth and its repetition in almost identical terms make it readily understandable that it was ideally suited to become the vehicle of ideas that are deeply rooted in the emotional life of man.

As Panofsky has shown, two conceptualizations had their origin here. In one, God is compared with the artist—the means by which “the Middle Ages were accustomed . . . to render God's work of Creation comprehensible”; in the other, prevalent since the Renaissance, the artist is compared with God—a comparison that subserves the aim of “heroizing artistic creativity.” The medieval concept is rooted in the Bible, but owes its refinements to late classical thinkers.

Over and above its usefulness as an elucidation of the divine processes of creation, the metaphor of God as an artist possessed an inherent cogency that enabled it to function as a testimony to the existence of a Creator, whether in the Old Testament (Isaiah, 29:16), Greek (Empedocles, cited by Diels, 1922, 1:234), Gnostic (Poimandres, 5:8), or Christian literature (Singer, 1939, 33). It thus emerges as the forerunner of the cosmological proof of God's existence, which argues from the conditionality of all that is to the existence of a first cause. In a similar vein, the “physio-theological” proof of God's existence, as Kant called it, argues from the rational structure of the world—comparable to the “articulation of a fabricated construction”—to the existence of an “architect of the world.” “But at any rate we must admit that, if we are to specify a cause at all, we cannot here proceed more securely than by analogy with those purposive productions of which alone the cause and mode of action are fully known to us” (Kant, 1781, 522).

If, says Athanasius, a work of Phidias is identifiable without a label because of its harmony and correct proportions, this must apply even more to the world as the masterpiece of the Greatest Sculptor (Borinski, 1914, 1:69). This idea lives on in medieval literature right up to the time of Nicholas of Cusa, who describes God as if he were a painter mixing various colors, so that ultimately He can paint Himself and have His own likeness, “whereby His art is satisfied and finds peace” (*De visione Dei*, chap. 25). This idea already permeates the early art literature, from Cennini onward, still persists in the sixteenth century, and even becomes the object of the arts themselves—in the delightful painting, for instance, in which Dosso Dossi portrayed Zeus as the painter of the world (Schlosser, 1927, 296).⁹

As a late offshoot of this tradition, one might mention the popular treatises on arts and crafts in which, since the earth is round, God is called the First Turner (Teuber, cited by Ilg, 1881, 9); or the compilations (drawing on the Bible) of the catalogues of the works of God the Father, Christ, and the apostles (for example, in the very curious piece entitled “Well-taught Narrative Writers and Painters Experienced in the Arts,” by Dauw).

In the Renaissance the idea of God's artistry passed into that of the artistry of Nature. We encounter it as early as in the writings of Leone Battista Alberti (1404–72). Contemplating the strange shape of some marble fragments, he expresses the thought that it looked as if at times Nature delighted in painting (see Ilg, 1881, 11ff.)¹⁰ In the seventeenth century, however, admiration for “Nature as the artist” extended even to the practice of art itself. Selecting one idea from among many found in the cabinets of

9. The picture is in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. See also Klauner (1964).

10. See also Baltrusaitis (1957, 47–72) and Janson (1961, 254ff.).

rare arts and curiosities, we can cite the fashion of painting on marble as a characteristic example. Only a few portions of the slab were given over to the brush, and every effort was made to use the natural stratification of the marble in the composition of the painting.

The tales of the cultic objects that came into being by "their own devices" marginally touch upon the problem raised here. There is a line starting in heathen antiquity when the Palladia fell from heaven to the images of Christ produced by contact with the face of God (Veronica's handkerchief), as Dobschütz (1899) has shown. Similar themes can be detected in the Lamaistic literature of Tibet (Laufer, 1913, 254ff.), which also contains references to the painter's inability to depict the face of God and to miraculous likenesses.

The idea of God's artistic greatness can be pursued in several different directions. One that immediately comes to mind and attests to the significance of this concept is a story told about El Greco. The power of his pictures to stir the emotions was due to his having broken the arm off a crucifix with the aid of which he then painted (Roessler, 1924, 74). Here we see God's own hand actually put to the work of art—in the form of a magical superstition. In an indirect form, Fra Angelico professed the same belief, according to Vasari (2:520). It was his custom never to improve or retouch anything that he had painted, but to leave it as it first emerged from his brush, since, as he is reported to have said, he believed that God's will was thus done. In the same range of ideas are stories relating that the artist was singled out by God to execute a particular work or destined for an especially important mission, thereby enabling him to carry it out. We read, for instance, in Exodus (35:30-35) of the artists chosen to direct the making of the tabernacle,

"See, the Lord hath called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri . . . and he hath filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship . . . both he and Aholiab the son of Ahisamach." The calling of these biblical artists and their infusion "with the spirit of God" can be directly compared with the Greek concept of inspiration; in the biblical account, this is still firmly embedded in the actual cultic activity, from which it steadily emancipated itself in Greek thought. In the sphere of religion, this notion survived unchanged for a long time.

The story that an angel revealed the structure of the Hagia Sophia to its architect in a dream belongs here (Mordtmann, 1922), as does the legend of the skillful monk Tuotilo, whose work was finished by the Virgin Mary (Schlosser, 1892, 417). The divine personage demonstrated her artistic ability by aiding the artist, but her help is contingent upon a character trait of the artist—his piety. St. Luke painting the Madonna is the progenitor of numerous others enjoying the same privilege (Dobschütz, 1899, 278); even as late as Michelangelo, we hear that the Queen of Heaven herself posed as the model for his statue in the Medici Chapel (Doni, 1928; Thode, 1908, 4:507). While in this case one cannot mistake the influence exerted by the tale of Zeus posing for Phidias, in the case of Guido Reni it is explicitly stated that the Madonna appeared to him on account of his piety (Malvasia, 1841, 2:53).¹¹ A popular version of the same idea occurs in medieval legends. There the painter who with an ailing hand portrays the Madonna recovers his health at the first brushstroke; or the artists who endeavor to concentrate all beauty in the figures of Christ and the Virgin thus provoke the hatred of the Devil:

11. Buddhist legends tell of an artist who was taken up to Heaven so that he could see the Maitreya Bodhisattva and make an image of him (Giles, 1936, 9; Wegner, 1929, 167).

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the latter attempts to topple the painter from the scaffolding, but the Virgin comes to his rescue (Ilg, 1871, cli; 1881, 37 [see also Odenius, 1957; Tubach, 1969, no. 3573]). Buffalmacco's words, "we painters always make the Devil horribly ugly and, what is worse, we do no more than to paint saints on walls and panels to make people better and more devout, so as to spite the Devil" (Sacchetti's *novella* 191; Vasari, 1:500), refer in jest to the same theme to which Christian Morgenstern still devoted his poem "The Painter." The Devil's intervention must be understood as the counterpart of divine intervention: he too helps the artist at his work, but not as the creative spirit and designer; he performs manual tasks, speeding the execution and enabling especially the architect to finish his work on time (Ilg, 1871, cil; Kinkel, 1876, 186ff.). In a typical version of this motif, the artist pledges his soul to the Devil, a legend that was still told about Messerschmidt as late as the eighteenth century (Kris, 1932, 224). In other versions the pious builder compels the Devil to serve as his assistant, as St. Wolfgang did when he erected a church (of whom there is a lovely painting by Moritz von Schwind in the Schackgalerie in Munich); or, in a much earlier legend, King Solomon forced the demons to assist him in building the Temple (McCown, p. 69). In the Swedish saga of the building of Lund Cathedral—a saga that has affinities with the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltsken—a heathen giant takes the place of the devil (Gyllander, 1917, 213 [Puhvel, 1961; Boberg, 1955, 8ff.]).

In these legends the image of *deus artifex* which culminated in the concrete representation of an artistically active deity or one who collaborates with or aids the artist corresponds to the image of the divine artist, an image that has continued to recur since the Renaissance. In the fifteenth century Leone Battista Alberti described the artist's activity as that of a "second God," and in the sixteenth century Aretino was one of the first to use the words "persona divina" in ad-

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dressing Michelangelo and the much-quoted phrase "divine paint brush" of Titian. The attribute "divino," first bestowed on Michelangelo and other artists, has found its way into ordinary language and has become an automatic figure of speech. It is still used today in the epithet "diva" applied to opera singers and actresses.

Biographical accounts such as that of Michelangelo's birth by Vasari derive from the same group of ideas. In these the birth of the divine artist is presented as the birth of a son of God. Here the belief in the actual identity of what is being compared can to some extent be discerned.

This need occasion no surprise when one reflects that in the Renaissance the idea of genius also had two meanings. On the one hand genius was simply used to designate the category of an individual's mentality, while the second meaning becomes clear, for example, in the *Poetics* published in 1561 by Scaliger who believed that a poet's genius possessed an external existence (Zilsel, 1926, 285). The idea of the creative powers of the *divino artista* is, however, inseparably linked with the idea of genius. We have attempted to show that the Renaissance took this idea from what was transmitted of the Platonic theory of art and gave it new life; and we believe that the story of Giotto's youth can be regarded as the first evidence for the correctness of this interpretation.

In conclusion we should like to point out that several individual themes of this legend can be explained in terms of their particular origin. The myth of the creation of the world early emancipated itself from the sphere of religious ideas in which it was rooted, and became subject to the formation of a series of new legends. Among the many Gnostic apocrypha that became attached to the Gospels,

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there is one that portrays the Christ child Himself as an artist (The Infancy Gospel of St. Thomas; see James, 1924, 49).¹² The Savior models birds of clay, which take wing at his command. (This theme inspired the Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf to write her *Christ Legends*, an imaginative story of great psychological subtlety.) In the apocryphal gospel this theme is combined with features that characterize the childish miracle worker as a magician, as an evil, malevolent, and all-powerful sorcerer.

This apocryphal account was known in fifteenth-century Florence, and it is tempting to assume that the theme of the artist's fabulous childhood owed some of its features to that account. Oral tradition born of popular imagination soon mingled with other motifs, in which we believe we can recognize features of other myths. Thus the childhood miracle of Jesus, which shows us the Savior as a young sculptor who playfully copies sparrows in clay and summons them to life, forms the bridge between the ancient conception of an artist god—the Lord of Creation of the Judaic tradition—and that of the artist child, whom we encountered at the beginning of biography in more modern times.

12. See also the Koran (3:48 and 5:10).

3

The Artist as Magician

The Work of Art as a Copy of Reality

The evaluation of the artist's achievement seems to depend to some extent upon a comparison between the work of art and nature, even though the connection may at times be so remote that it is not consciously perceived. This comparison proceeds from two opposite points of view. One of them can be summed up by the anecdote about Zeuxis. Painting his picture of Helen, he selected the most beautiful feature of five different girls and incorporated each into his portrait. The conception on which this anecdote is based views the task of the artist, in accordance with Plato's theory of art, as surpassing the model of nature and, by improving on nature, to realize an ideal beauty in his works. We have already mentioned the role which this conception of the artist's task played in Western thought. It gave rise to the idea that the artist creates like God, that he is an *alter deus*. This idea finds its expression in biographies when the artist is elevated to the *divino artista*—in his heroization.

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