

SAGGIO

Giorgio Vasari's Vulcan's Forge, Sala degli Elementi in the Palazzo Vecchio: the Symbolism of Fire

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Abstract

The essay proposed here analyses Giorgio Vasari's works in the Sala degli Elementi in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. He succeeded in creating what is known in Latin as a *camera picta*, that is literally a painted room, in which classical imagery merges with the cultural currents of the 16th century. The study in this contribution also explores Vasari's definition of '*invenzione*' (invention) and its role in the development of new decorative *topos*.

Keywords:

Giorgio Vasari; *camera picta*; Florence art; history painting; 16th century art.

«Everything must have meaning»
(originally in Italian: «Tutto ha da ver significato»)
Giorgio Vasari, *I Ragionamenti* (Vasari, 1970-1979)¹

This essay² examines how Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), in the Sala degli Elementi of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, creates a *camera picta* with elaborate decorative cycles.



*Fig. 1. Giorgio Vasari, West and South Walls, 1555-57, det. Interior view
Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

¹ See also Muccini, 1990, where Vasari mentions the chronicler Giovanni Villani (1280–1248, *New Chronicles*) and the historian Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540, *History of Florence*), for the *invenzione* in the history of paintings of the Salone dei Cinquecento at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. See also *ivi*, pp. 112-119 for discussion on the subject and illustrations of these images.

² This study is part of a larger study on the iconology of the Sala degli Elementi. I presented versions of this study at the several conference, namely, “Giorgio Vasari: Sala degli Elementi, The Symbolism of Air,” University of Bristol, UK, October 10, 2011; “Giorgio Vasari’s Element of Earth,” Renaissance Society of America, Montreal, Canada, April 5–10, 2011; “Giorgio Vasari’s Element of Water,” Renaissance Society of America, Venice, Italy, April 4–10, 2010; and “Giorgio Vasari’s Element of Fire,” Southeastern College of Art Association, Richmond, VA, October 23–27, 2010. Short versions of the Sala degli Elementi were published in De Girolami Cheney, 2014 and De Girolami Cheney, 2009. See also Moore, 1990.



Fig. 2. Giorgio Vasari, *West and North Walls, 1555-57, det. Interior view Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence*
Photo credit: author

Vasari adds to this visual *mise en scène* a mythical emblematic signification, thus revealing as well a *camera intellecta*. For the iconology of these decorative cycles, Vasari appropriates classical and emblematic imagery and fuses the humanistic and cultural pursuits of the sixteenth century (Cinquecento). This study also considers Vasari's definition of invention (*invenzione*) and his role in depicting mythical emblematic paintings as *history painting* in the development of a new topos for secular decorative cycles (De Girolami Cheney, 2007; *Ead.*, 2012)³.

During the Cinquecento artists consulted emblematic and mythological manuals as a source for their visual conceits. With a moral overtone, these manuals contained verbal and visual representations of virtues, vices, passions, and temperaments, revealing as well a Neoplatonic philosophy (Praz, 1947; *Id.*, 1964)⁴. The most important manuals then available were Andrea Alciato's *Emblemata* or *Emblematum Libellus* (first published in 1531); Vincenzo

³ Although the term *history painting* is used mostly to refer to nineteenth-century painting (see Rosenblum, 1957) I suggest that this artistic concept is manifested early in Greek and Roman art as well as in Renaissance art, while in the Cinquecento, Vasari, in his decorative cycles, visually reveals this artistic and thematic concept as well as elaborating on the symbolic meaning, thus creating his own *history paintings*. In this manner, Vasari formulates a new artistic vocabulary for the art and theory of the Cinquecento.

⁴ For further readings, see Russell, 1981. Russell defines the importance of Alciato's book in Cinquecento art and literature: «(it) served as a manual to train readers in a particular approach to artistic artifacts. It taught them to participate actively in the moralizing of visual art, and it showed them how to fragment texts—mainly poetic or dramatic texts, it would appear—into short passages that they could summarize into titular paroemia» (p. 549).

Cartari's *Imagini delli Dei de gl' Antichi* (1556); Natale Conti's *Mythologiae* (1551); Leo Giraldi's *De Deis Gentium* (1548); Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499); Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* (1505); Pierio Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* (1556); and Paolo Giovio's *Dialogo dell'Imprese Militari et Amoroze* (1556)⁵. These emblematic and mythographic texts were compilations of ancient and medieval mythographies, hieroglyphs, and numismatic sources containing traditional moral overtones derived from ancient and medieval philosophical sources, which served as manuals and recipe books for Cinquecento humanists and artists — a kind of figurative encyclopedia or 'dictionary-album for easy consultation when time was lacking to read text and reference in their entirety' (Ripa, 1593; *Id.* 1971)⁶. Since these manuals are well known to sixteenth-century artists and literati, they freely borrow or copy information directly from them without acknowledging the original source (*ivi*, p. 260; Praz, 1947, pp. 289-296). In his writings and art, Vasari, too, appropriates visual, political, and moral concepts from these manuals in order to compose his *history paintings* in the decorative cycles.

In Vasari's mythical emblematic paintings as well as in his writings, *Vite* (Vasari, 1550; *Id.*, 1568)⁷ and *I Ragionamenti* (Vasari, 1970-1979)⁸, he relies on classical sources, both visually and intellectually, revealing the influence of ancient writers such as Plubius Ovidius Naso (Ovid, 43 bce–17/18 ce), Gaius Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Elder, 23–79), and Marcus Vitruvius (80–70 bce–15 ce), as well as Renaissance writers such as Leon Battista Alberti (1414–1472), Giovanni Battista Adriani (1513–1579), Vincenzo Borghini (1515–1580), Annibale Caro (1507–1566), and Paolo Giovio (1483–1552). Vasari's assimilation of the classical tradition in mythological paintings derives from his education in classical studies as well as from his fascination with emblematic and mythographic

⁵ See Praz, 2014; *Id.*, 1939; Bolzoni and Volterrani, 2008; Chastel, 1975; and Sez nec 1961. Sez nec noted that «These mentioned manuscripts include antique mythology, Egyptian pictorial writing arbitrarily interpreted, Biblical motives, and medieval Christian allegory with all sorts of recondite meanings being assigned to human expressions and actions, to the animals, plants, prescribed colors, and all objects natural and artificial which were their symbolic attributes».

⁶ See also Stefani, 1990; Gabriele *et al.*, 2013; Maffei, 2009; and De Girolami Cheney, 2011 on Vasari as a precursor Ripa's *figurazioni*.

⁷ See also Vasari, 1971–1986.

⁸ See also Draper, 1973; Le Mollé *et al.*, 2007; Tinagli, 1985; *ead.*, 2000; *ead.*, 2001; Passignant, 2007; and *ead.*, 2009.

sources such as Andrea Alciato (1492–1550), Vincenzo Cartari (1531–1569), and Piero Valeriano (1547–1558) (De Girolami Cheney, 2007, pp. 23-33). And his aesthetic theory is based on the Renaissance Neoplatonic philosophy of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) (*ivi*, pp. 48-60; Chastel, 1975, pp. 39-56, and pp. 100-106).

Moreover, in 1558, while writing *I Ragionamenti*, Vasari seeks counsel from several humanists friends, all of whom were connected to the Medicean court of Cosimo I. Bartoli is a scholar on Boccaccio and Dante, writing *I Ragionamenti accademici*, a critical commentary on Dante⁹ and instructing Vasari on the new Italian translation of Boccaccio's *Genealogie decorum gentilium (Della geneologia de degli Dei)*¹⁰. Borghini, a philologist, grammarian, and historian as well as “spedalingo” of the Hospital of the Innocent, iconographically formulates most of the decorative cycles painted by Vasari in the Palazzo Vecchio. Adriani, a humanist, rhetorician, and writer, is commissioned by Cosimo I to write a history of Florence (*Istoria dei suoi Tempi*) as a continuation of Guicciardini's historical view (Mazzucchelli, 1753-1760; Rubin, 1995, pp. 148-165). Adriani's knowledge of antiquity contributes to Vasari's *Vite* with an explanatory letter on the history of ancient art (De Girolami Cheney, 2012a, pp. 21-66). These Cinquecento humanists and friends write extensive letters to Vasari projecting the iconographical program for many rooms in the Palazzo Vecchio, in particular the Sala degli Elementi (Frey, 1923-1930; Muccini, 1990).

In his writings, particularly, in *I Ragionamenti*, Vasari speaks usually of his *invenzione*, by which he means a great deal, since he is defining artistic creativity and formulating the conceit of *history painting*¹¹. The word *invenzione* encompasses the artist's conception or idea (conceit), which governs both the iconography and iconology of his work (Draper, 1973; Passignant, 2007, pp. 115-128). Moreover, when Vasari uses *invenzione*, he means an intellectual innovation and an appreciation of beauty, either in the formation of one

⁹ See Bartoli, 1567; Cecchi, 2011, pp. 283-296; Kliemann, 1978, pp. 157-207; and Bryce, 1983, for an insight on this scholar's life.

¹⁰ Giuseppe Bettusi da Bassano translated Boccaccio's Latin edition in 1553, which was published in Venice by F. Lorenzini da Turino.

¹¹ For a more narrow interpretation of *invenzione*, relating it to narration consisting of Vasari's thinking, see Alpers, 1960, pp. 190–215; Scorza, 1981; and Draper, 1973, for an interpretation of Vasari's concept of invention.

image or of a decorative cycle (Draper, 1973; Alpers, 1960; and Scorza, 1981). Thus, in *I Ragionamenti*, he explains the signification of the images in the Sala degli Elementi¹² and, in particular, in those of *Vulcan's Forge*¹³.

These explanations assist in decoding the complex literary, historical and symbolic nature of Vasari's imagery. Constructively and adroitly, Vasari engages the patron to entice the reasoning of questions not only about the imagery, but also about the *clavis interpretandi* of the image. The format is simple. First, there is brief description of the image by the painter, followed at times by a narrative comment from the artist or by an elaborate question from the patron. Then, the response to the patron's question further provides the meaning of the imagery by the artist. Thus, Vasari skillfully formulates his intentions about the creative *history painting*,

¹² In *I Ragionamenti*, on the *Sala degli Elementi*, the dialogue between the prince and Vasari states in the First *Ragionamento*. Giorgio: «These were painted by our Doceno dal Borgo. He so excelled in this profession that, though dead, he deserves to be thought of as living by the world, since whoever knew him realizes that death stole him from this work too soon». Prince: «May God forgive him. His death is surely a loss» (Vasari, 1588).

¹³ In *I Ragionamenti*, on the symbolism of the *Vulcan's Forge*, the dialogue between the prince and Vasari states in the First *Ragionamento*. Prince to Vasari: «Now proceed to the wall with the fireplace, which is certainly very beautiful. What a variety of imagery! Everything fits together. What story is this?». Giorgio: «This represents Fire. In order to stay with the metaphor of Venus she also is sitting with a bundle of arrows, art of lead, and part of gold, as the poets represent it. The lame old man hammering the arrows on the anvil is Vulcan, her husband. Cupid stands by holding arrows to be sharpened, and some putti encircle the forge and make the iron red-hot. Others temper the arrows, or sharpen them, or make shafts and attach the feathers. Still others turn the stone to grind them sharp and made them more beautiful». Prince: What beautiful and imaginative ideas! They make the person want to be in love. Ah! And who are the three working so terribly with their hammers at the forge?». Giorgio: «They are the Cyclopes, Steropes, Brontes, and Pyracmon by name. After they finish making Jupiter's thunderbolts at the infernal forge, they hand them to those other winged putti in the air who fly them to Jupiter in heaven. Above the two doors there are ovals. In one, Father Daedalus is fashioning the shield, helmet, and other armor of Achilles. The other shows Vulcan, who catches his wife Venus with Mars in a net as they embrace each other and calls the gods to witness. The duke our Lord can be related to Vulcan with his forge and machinery because he too was brought together with Venus by Father Heaven to make Love's arrows and Jupiter's thunderbolts. The meaning intended is that our duke makes in the forge of his breast the arrows for rewarding virtue, which fills him with love and makes others enamored of his virtue. The thunderbolts of the Cyclopes are made for punishing the wicked as His Excellency does today. In his breast our duke justly punishes even and regards good, which is truly the duty of a great prince. Making the shield and arms of Achilles refers to how much His Excellency favors the fine arts. Every day he orders a variety of artist to set ingenious machines and equipment in operation. And keeping the best men sharp with these practices, he proceeds to maintain the greatest talents of fine arts with prizes, to the honor of his glory and that of his century. «Prince: The comparisons are beautiful. That leaves Vulcan who catches Venus and Mars in the net made by Daedalus». Giorgio: «The reference here is to all those who deliberately commit evil, living by deceit through plunder and theft, but who unexpectedly fall into the net of his prince and remain caught» (*ivi*).

a compound mythical and emblematic imagery with enigmatic socio-political and philosophical significations¹⁴.

I Ragionamenti is concerned with an explanation of the visual representation in the Palazzo Vecchio and, in particular, Vasari's paintings. For R. W. Carden, «The Prince is made to ask a succession of perfectly inane questions in order that Giorgio, in answering them, may exhibit his knowledge» (Carden, 1910, p. 133). Vasari's explanations, however, are not only helpful but also actually necessary, because of the complex literary, historical, and symbolic nature of Vasari's imagery. In *I Ragionamenti*, Vasari conceives of a new way to convey to his patrons and artists an explanation for the creation of his artistic programs, while revealing his Cinquecento art theory (Barocchi, 1960-1962; and De Girolami Cheney, 2012a, pp. xxxi-lxxiii). Using the Renaissance type of dialogue format for articulating a fictive discourse between patron and artist, he provides a scenario in which he unveils the mystery of his program. In this dialogue, the patron is Francesco de' Medici, son of Cosimo I. The dialogue begins as Francesco de' Medici enters the Sala degli Elementi just as Vasari is resting from his painting labor (*fatica*). «They greet each other as friends, qualified by the natural distance of age and station» (Draper, 1973)¹⁵.

In the Cinquecento, a significant polemic arises among artists and humanists, which leads to a new role for artists (Chastel, 1975, pp. 115-117; and Klein *et al.*, 1966, pp. 73-79, 146)¹⁶. The debate consists of the transformation of the artist's status from a medieval interpretation of artist-maker of things (magus or designer) to a Renaissance conception of artist-inventor and intellectual creator. Vasari emerges as an artist with a profound humanistic interest, particularly in his early decorative cycles: his Aretine and Florentine houses (1542–1554 and

¹⁴ See Giuseppe Cascione *et al.* 2007), and Giuseppe Cascione *et al.* 2009, for a discussion on and coining of the term *iconocrazia*, an image with an emblematic symbol of political power and thus a political icon for power in Cinquecento art. See also de Jong, 2012), on using papal decorative cycles for their political and religious propaganda.

¹⁵ Draper notes: «The dialogue takes place in the palace, usually in front of the paintings. The dialogue's tone is diplomatic and cordial. The artist always clarifies for the Prince the complex meaning of the paintings or program. At times, the dialogue focuses on recollections of historical events or stories about the ancient gods. These recollections emphasize the symbolic content of the imagery».

¹⁶ Between 1561 and 1563, with the support of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, Vasari established the *Accademia delle Arti del Disegno*, asserting the artist's new status. See also Wazbinski, 1987, and Barzman, 1966–1967, pp. 14–32.

1560), the Bolognese (1540) and Neapolitan (1545) refectories, the Venetian *apparatus* (1542), and the Roman Farnese *sala* (1546) (De Girolami Cheney, 2011). These serve as a prelude to Vasari's later works, the decorative cycles for the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence (1555–1570), namely, the Sala degli Elementi.

In the early decorative period, Vasari promotes artistic conventions by appropriating *all'antica*, emblematic, iconographical, and artistic inventions, as seen in the paintings of the Casa Vasari (De Girolami Cheney, 2006; Jackobs, 1984).



Fig. 3. Giorgio Vasari, *Chamber of Fortune*, 1548, Interior view
Casa Vasari, Arezzo
Photo credit: author

Later, in his mature decorative period, Vasari elaborates and expands upon his earlier artistic conventions in a complex and fanciful visual and intellectual manner. With these artistic patterns in place, he transforms the concept of creating a mythical emblematic painting into a conceit depicting a *history painting*, as visualized in the Sala degli Elementi of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.

In 1555, Cristofaro Gherardi assists Vasari in designing and painting a mythological and cosmological theme in the Sala degli Elementi, an apartment belonging to Duke Cosimo I de' Medici at the Palazzo Vecchio. The iconography or the program for this room is such that the ceiling depiction relates to the *istorie* in

the wall and, in turn, the *istorie* of the walls relate to each other, forming not only a *camera picta* but also a *camera intellecta* with *history paintings*.

The Sala degli Elementi or Apartment of the Elements is dedicated to the four elements (air, earth, fire, and water), which in antiquity are considered to be at the origin of the world or cosmos. The four elements are personified as a *history painting* theme. These are depicted in the ceiling with oils and in the walls on fresco. In a Venetian-like sunken ceiling is the element of Air, personified by several events. Its center is depicted with *Saturn Mutilating Heaven*.



Fig 4. Giorgio Vasari, *Saturn Mutilating Heaven (Element of Air)*, 1555-57

Ceiling, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

Photo credit: author

Surrounding this scene are *The Chariots of the Sun and the Moon* and the images of *Day and Night*. In the corners of the ceiling reside the virtues of *Peace, Mercurial Justice, Fame, and Truth*.

On the walls of the chamber are personifications of the elements of Earth, Fire, and Water. In walking around the *sala*, the frescoes on the left-hand wall relate to the element of Earth. In the center of the scene, the first fruits of the Earth are offered to Saturn, *The First Fruits of the Earth Offered to Saturn*.



*Fig. 5. Giorgio Vasari, The First Fruits of the Earth Offered to Saturn (Element of Earth), 1555-57
North Wall, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio
Photo credit: author*



*Fig. 5A. Giorgio Vasari, The First Fruits of the Earth Offered to Saturn (Element of Earth), 1555-57, drawing
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Roger Fund, 1971 (1971.273)
Photo credit: Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Roger Fund (1971.273)*

The opposite wall depicts the element of Water, which is symbolized with *The Birth of Venus*.



*Fig. 6. Giorgio Vasari, The Birth of Venus (Element of Water), 1555-57
South Wall, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio
Photo credit: author*

On the adjacent wall, above the fireplace, is a scene relating to the element of Fire with the depiction of *Vulcan's Forge*.



*Fig. 7. Giorgio Vasari, Vulcan's Forge (Element of Fire), 1555-57
West Wall, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

And on the opposite wall, on the window wall, are two large niches containing simulated sculptures of Hermes-Mercury and Hades-Pluto, which thematically connect with the wall decoration of the elements and the pantheon of the gods in the ceiling and walls.



*Fig. 8. Giorgio Vasari, Mercury and Pluto, 1555-57
East Wall, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

In this *sala*, symbolically, Vasari creates a virtual cosmos, a heavenly realm, while compositionally, he designs a terrestrial realm composed of geometrical spatial relations. The frescoed wall decorations, for example, consist of an *istoria* placed in a rectangular format in the center of the wall. Adjacent to this, two oval cartouches heavily decorated *all'antica* depict other stories associated with the *istoria* placed in the center of the wall. The bronze coloration of the cartouches and the gray-colored ornamentation surrounding them are fictive recollections of ancient paintings. Below the rectangular format where the main *istoria* is depicted, there is a series of square, *dadi*, containing mythological stories. These narrations also connect with the *istoria* in the center of the wall. The *dadi* area is also painted in fictive bronze, matching the above cartouche's decoration, thus imitating an ancient Roman decorative style.

Furthermore, the *history painting* or thematic cycle evolves in three levels, in an ascending crescendo: from the first level or *dado*, which is the lower level of the wall, constituting the physical or organic realm, to the second level or center of the wall, representing the mythical and intellectual realm, and up to the third level or the ceiling, revealing the metaphysical or divine realm.



*Fig. 9. Cheney's levels of the history painting in the Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

The *istoria* unveils the physical world (*dado*) through a transformation into the metaphysical world (ceiling). In Renaissance Neoplatonic terms, the signification of the *history painting* develops in successive stages, from the natural realm into the spiritual realm¹⁷.

This brief study only focuses on one of the decorative cycles in the walls of the Sala degli Elementi, the *Vulcan's Forge*. The wall of the Element of Fire or *Vulcan's Forge* faces the wall with the imagery of Mercury and Pluto and adjoins with The Element of Water and The Element of Earth. The connection of this frescoed wall and the wooden ceiling is noted by the imagery of *Saturn's Castration* in the center of the ceiling, the personification of *Day* just above *Vulcan's Forge*; and, in the corners, framing *Vulcan's Forge*, the personifications of *Peace*



Fig. 10. Giorgio Vasari and assistance, *Peace*, 1555-57
Ceiling, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author

¹⁷ Marsilio Ficino, *Sopra Lo Amore: ovvero Convito di Platone*, ed. Giuseppe Rensi (Milan: Pioltello, 2003), 47–53.

and *Mercurial Justice* reside in sunken octagonal frames.



*Fig. 11. Giorgio Vasari and assistants, Mercurial Justice, 1555-57
Ceiling, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

In *Vulcan's Forge*, the element of fire is inherited in the name of the protagonist Vulcan, whose name derives from the Latin *Volcanus* or *Vulcanus*, meaning firing, lighting, or burning of flames or fire obtained from a volcano (Varro, V, X). Traditionally in art, Vulcan is associated with metalworking, since in antiquity he was known as a metalworker, a skillful manufacturer of tools and jewels for the gods and heroes as well as a crafty inventor and imaginative artisan. For example, Vulcan provided arrows for Apollo and Diana and a shield for Achilles, he designed a magical chair and a beautiful necklace for Juno, he formed Minerva from the head of Jupiter, and he molded from clay the first woman, Pandora.

The ancient Romans considered Vulcan to be a god of Fire with a dual nature—one destructive and one creative. The destructive nature employed fire to cause harm and chaos, while the creative nature had the potential to inspire ideas on how to manipulate fire in making useful objects. In the Renaissance, Vulcan was also regarded as an alchemist and a physician who had potential to transform, with the assistance of the element of fire, the natural properties of materials such as metal

into weapons, helmets, cuirasses, armors, and arrows, as well as an intellectual capacity to transform creative powers into reality (Jacobi, 1951; and Waite, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 86-88). These cultural associations are appropriated in Vasari's *Vulcan's Forge* and bracketing cartouches.

In the center of the wall is the *istoria* of Vulcan, creating a thunderbolt for Jupiter. The lateral oval cartouches framing the central *istoria* depict in an *all'antica* mode stories about *Vulcan Discovering Venus and Mars*



Fig. 12. Giorgio Vasari, *Vulcan Discovering Venus and Mars*, 1555-57
Left Cartouche, *Vulcan's Forge*, Sala degli Elementi,
Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author
and *Vulcan (Daedalus) Creating a Shield for Achilles*¹⁸.

¹⁸ See Homer, *Iliad*, XVIII, lines 478–609, on the arms of Achilles and Virgil; and Virgil, *Aeneid*, VII, 370–453, on the arms of Aeneas. In Homer, *Iliad*, line 369, the poem recounts the artistic commission. When Achilles lost his shield defending his friend Patroclus, Thetis, Achilles's mother, requests Hephaestus (Vulcan) to create a shield or armor for her son. The passage describing the shield becomes a topos for Hesiod in describing *The Shield of Hercules*, Virgil's in narrating the poem on the *Shield of Aeneas* (Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VIII). See also Scully, 2003.

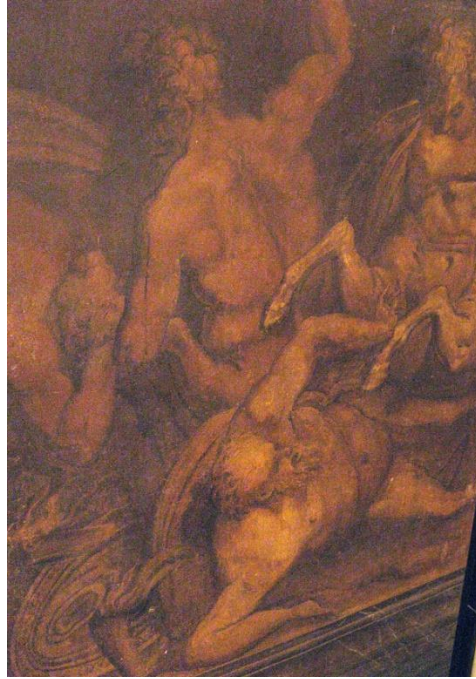


Fig. 13. Giorgio Vasari, Vulcan (Daedalus) Creating a Shield for Achilles, 1555-57

Right Cartouche, Vulcan's Forge, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

Photo credit: author

These stories correlate with the central narrative, as they are associated at the physical level with Vulcan's human passion (*furor humanus*) and at the metaphysical level with Vulcan's creativity (*furor poeticus* or *artisticus*) (Chastel, 1975, pp. 129-135). Below the central wall, there is an actual fireplace. Framing the fireplace, in the *dado* of the wall, inside the rectangular format, also in an *all'antica* design, are depictions of battles of the centaurs, centauromachy.



*Fig. 14. Giorgio Vasari and assistants, A Centauromachy, 1555-57
Left Dado below Vulcan's Forge, Sala degli Elementi,
Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*



*Fig. 15. Giorgio Vasari and assistants, A Centauromachy, 1555-57
Right Dado below Vulcan's Forge, Sala degli Elementi,
Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

These types of depictions allude to the instinctual passion or bestial fury. In Cinquecento art it is *de rigueur* to find above a fireplace an allusion to the signification of fire. The lintel below the central scene and above the mantel of the fireplace contains a dedicatory with a Latin inscription acknowledging the patron, *Cosmus Medi Flore Dux II*.

A brief stylistic analysis reveals Vasari's fascination with combining the *all'antica* motifs and mythological legends with Medicean *history painting*. Vasari adroitly constructs a narrative story that takes place in a landscape filled with ancient Roman ruins, particularly, reminiscent of the Velian Hill in the Roman fori with columns, alcoves, and niches selected from Apollodorus' Temple of Venus and Roma of 121 CE



*Fig. 16. Apollodorus, Temple of Venus and Roma, 121-135
Velian Hill, Roman Fori, Rome
Photo credit: author*

and the Basilica of Maxentius-Constantine of 306 CE.



*Fig. 17. Basilica of Maxentius-Constantine, 306-12
Velian Hill, Roman Fori, Rome
Photo credit: author*

In this manner the three segments of the fresco are unified. At the left the first group is formed: putti assist Cupid in filing and sharpening his bow and arrows for Jupiter. In the center the second group is composed: surrounded by putti, Venus, and Cupid, Vulcan hammers at an arrow in his workshop surrounded by the instruments of his trade—an anvil, hammers, pinchers, and a burning oven.

Vulcan is working on earth on a divine commission making arrows and thunderbolts. He is known to have had a limp, and other putti carry to heaven Vulcan's completed work, golden thunderbolts for Jupiter. The jagged arrows or thunderbolts are symbols of divine authority or might. Assisting Vulcan is Cupid, who is presenting his arrow for Vulcan to copy. On his anvil, Vulcan is in the process of striking another arrow. Seated next to Vulcan is his wife, Venus, who curiously observes her husband's dexterity (Fig. 18). Her beauty is revealed with her being dressed *all'antica*, partially exposing her breast, while her tresses are embellished with a pearl-ribbon and a crown of pink-roses and laurel leaves (*Laurus nobilis*). She is embracing a stack of arrows. The fasten arrows, like fasten stalks of wheat (*fasce*), are associated with the personification of Concord (*Concordia*) (De Girolami Cheney, 2011; *ead.* 2001)¹⁹.

¹⁹ Familiar and enamored with this theme of the triumph of Peace over War, Vasari depicts it several times, e.g., in 1546 in the *Sala dei Cento Giorni* of the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome..



*Fig. 18. Giorgio Vasari, Venus, det., 1555-57
Vulcan's Forge, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*



*Fig. 19. Giorgio Vasari, Concord (Concordia) 1544-45
Drawing (GS 9629), Museumslandschaft Hessen (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen),
Kassel*

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Museumslandschaft Hessen, Kassel

These attributes, fasten arrows and crown of laurel, are symbols of concord, peace, and martial victory, thus adding another role for Venus's presence in Vulcan's forge. Venus is not only a personification of Love but also a personification of Peace.

Above *Vulcan's Forge*, located on the left of the ceiling, the personification of Peace holds a crown of laurel and an olive tree branch, both traditional symbols of peace. Her stresses are ornamented with a green pearl-ribbon. Vasari might be

alluding that Venus, the goddess of Love, represents as well personifications of Concord and Peace (Wind, 1968), p. 196). Thus *Vulcan's Forge* connects the central scene of burning fire and creation of arms with the ceiling personification of Peace, and Venus being a conduit to temper martial arts with her love, concord, and peace (Ficino, 1959, vol. 2, p. 1339; Moore, 1990, p. 188).

On the opposite corner of the ceiling, the virtue of *Mercurial Justice* is winged, holding a winged caduceus, a symbol of peace (Fig. 11). The attributes held by this virtue link with the symbolism of peace. Alchemically, the caduceus signifies a harmonious healing union of opposites. The wings in the caduceus allude to the transformation of events in a victorious end. The wand, *axis mundi*, is a symbol of power as well as a mediator between the changes of heaven and earth. The double serpents are depiction of hermetic operative forces in the universe, alluding to the mediation between the upper and lower realms in the cosmos (Moore, 1990, pp. 148-155)²⁰. *Mercurial Justice* is a comparable virtue to Peace, both needed in life's vicissitudes and, in particular, in war. Peace and Justice are the offspring of Jupiter (Zeus), a divine mythological ruler, and Themis, the goddess of Law.

In the ceiling, the virtues of *Peace* and *Mercurial Justice*, placed above *Vulcan's Forge* and bracketing the scene of *Saturn's Castrations*, connect with the mythological reference of the Battle of the Titans, where Zeus (Jupiter) survives the fury of his father, Chronos, and establishes a peaceful heavenly society.

In the central scene of the *istoria* of the *Vulcan's Forge*, the third group consists of the Cyclopes, Steropes, Brontes, and Pyracmon, who are hammering at Jupiter's thunderbolt. They symbolize passion and brutal force. The *dado* area below them depicts a battle of centaurs, in particular, the Battle of Typhon, a fearful centaur. Not by accident, Vasari connects the symbolism of his imagery in horizontal and vertical movement, thus orchestrating a unity of meanings: peace defeats war, wisdom overpowers instinct, and artistic passion triumphs over instinctual passion.

²⁰ For further informations see Scott, 1992, pp. 75–78, on the meaning of the cosmos; and Slavenburg, 2012, pp. 4, 7, 21–23, 111–14, and 299–341.

In the *Vulcan's Forge*, the *history painting* symbolism reveals several levels of conceits associated not only with the promoter of peace and political role of Cosimo I de' Medici as Duke of Florence, then of Siena and ultimately of Tuscany, but also with the signification of his name, Cosimo, as cosmos. Thus these conceits are metaphors for the duke as a cosmic ruler of peace (Rousseau, 1983, p. 124; Cox-Rearick, 1984; Crum, 1989). The many levels of symbolism are connected with literary writings as well as *all'antica* imagery. Both manifestations reveal Vasari's manner of, as well as the Cinquecento's taste for, combining mythology and alchemy in the pursuit of political power and advocacy of peace as well as artistic virtuosity.

Humanist writings of the time by Cosimo Bartoli²¹ and Alobrando Cerratini²², as well as Vasari, attest to this symbolic image of Cosimo I as cosmos, eulogizing and aggrandizing the duke as the god Apollo, who rules the universe (van Veen, 2006, p. 31). The most significant primary source for decoding the meaning of the imagery is found in Vasari's own writings, *I Ragionamenti*, edited and published by Vincenzo Borghini, Cosimo Bartoli, and Vasari's nephew also called Giorgio Vasari, after Vasari's death in 1574.

The complex symbolism of the Element of Fire, with its rich allegorical and mythological associations, reveals many levels of signification, both physical and metaphysical. In the physical or natural realm, the symbolism alludes to the function of fire as a conduit for material transformation, e.g., art is matter transfigured by an artist (a creator as well as a magus/chemist). In the metaphysical or theoretical realm, the signification of fire refers to the physical world as an emanation (hypostasis) of the transcendental world. It is through the *furor poeticus* or *artisticus* that the artist transfigures matter into art, e.g., the artistic form becomes a bridge and a portal through which the artist can begin the ascent to the divine.

²¹ For example, Vasari's friend Cosimo Bartoli, a humanist and advisor to Cosimo I, dedicates to the duke *Ragionamenti Accademici* (Venice: Franceschi, 1567).

²² In the 1550s, Duke Cosimo I commissioned Aldobrando Cerratini to translate into the Tuscan language Vergil's *Aeneid*, where in Book IV Anchises prophesies the reigns under the sign of Saturn in Latium and a Cosimo in the land of the Etruscan. See van Veen, 2006, pp. 9–31; and Chastel, 1990.

Vasari's conception of artistic creativity (*furor poeticus*) is related to his theory of painting, partaking of the physical and metaphysical realms. He considers two alternatives for achieving artistic creativity for a painter: imitation (*imitazione*), e.g., Vulcan copying Cupid's arrow; and invention (*invenzione*), e.g., Vulcan creating a thunderbolt or a shield for Achilles. Imitation is the exercise of copying art as a method of learning, whereas invention is autonomous from imitation and is the means for conceiving artistic ideas. Imitation guides and teaches the artist in composing and creating perfection. For Vasari, imitation draws from two different sources: copying from nature (*copia dal vero*); and selecting from one's work (*imitare se stessi*) (De Girolami Cheney, 2012a, pp. xvi, xl,xliii, on imitation; *ivi*, pp. xxxii, lii, lv, on invention; *ivi*, liv, on appropriating or copying). He emphasizes the notion that copying from nature is important for the artist in order to learn to create forms that are alive. It also facilitates the artist's ability to draw so that eventually the artist may draw anything from memory without the aid of a model. Hence, an artist demonstrates the manner in which the arts surpass nature when an artist copies or quotes from his own work.

In the depiction of Vulcan's Forge, Vasari makes a parallel between human and divine powers of creativity on artists, the ancient gods, and the Christian God. In the ceiling of the sala, above the scene of the Vulcan's Forge, Vasari depicts Saturn Mutilating Heaven as a personification of the Element of Air. In the left side of this composition, Vasari paints a male figure flying and breathing into clay statues to transform them with the exhalation of his breath into living forms.



Fig 4. Giorgio Vasari, *Saturn Mutilating Heaven (Element of Air)*, 1555-57

Ceiling, *Sala degli Elementi*, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author

He describes this imagery in *I Ragionamenti*:

The sculptor is God's son Wisdom who has the power to create all things. The third attribute is Providence. He is also flying above and breathing on the statues, which represent the Providence that God has in instilling the spirit into all creatures. The clay statues stand up and take on the color of flesh, showing that they are given life (Draper, 1973, pp. 95-102).

This Christian creation in transforming an amorphous substance such as clay into a sculptural form, a statue, is similar to the artistic act of the pagan god Vulcan, who in his foundry, with the assistance of a burning fire, shapes an arrow out of metal. These divine artistic creations are paralleled to the human act of creation in which an artist, as Vasari himself, transforms the substance of paint into a visual scene or a decorative cycle, depicted, for example, in the *Vulcan's Forge* and *Saturn Mutilating Heaven*.



Fig. 20. Giorgio Vasari, Vulcan's Forge and Saturn Mutilating Heaven, 1555-5, det.

Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author

Furthermore, Vasari continues elaborating on the artistic creativity in the cartouches of *Vulcan Discovering Venus and Mars*, and *Vulcan (Daedalus) Creating a Shield for Achilles*, which bracket Vulcan's Forge. Here, he conflates two mythological sagas associated with symbolism of fire: one is physical, alluding to human passion (e.g., the love scene of Mars and Venus unveiled to the gods by jealous Vulcan); the other is intellectual, alluding to the ability of the artist to create (e.g., the scenes of Vulcan holding the magic net created by Daedalus to entrap Mars and Venus, and [Vulcan] Daedalus creating a shield for Achilles).

As Vasari describes in *I Ragionamenti*, in these cartouches he also alludes to two types of entrapments in passions: human and artistic. In the cartouche of *Vulcan Discovering Venus and Mars*, the entrapment reveals a human passion. The ancient legend recounts how jealous Vulcan commissioned Daedalus to create a magical net for him to cast over Mars and Venus, catch them in *flagante delicto* and expose them to the gods of Mount Olympus. Here the allusion of love between Mars and Venus has a mythical twist, since Venus, goddess of Love, dominates with love the belligerent nature of Mars, god of War. However, Daedalus's net serves two purposes: to capture Mars and Venus misbehaving; and to control Vulcan's jealousy as the gods mock him for being a cuckold. For Vasari, this cartouche scene, *Vulcan Discovering Venus and Mars*, has a political allusion, referring indirectly to the cunning actions of his patron Cosimo I during the Florentine wars; that is, the duke's ability to capture his martial enemies (signified in the image of Mars and the action of the magical net) and detain war in searching for peace (signified in the depiction of Venus love for Mars and Vulcan's reconciliation with Venus).

The other human passion is intellectual, visualized in the other cartouche scene, *Daedalus (Vulcan) Creating a Shield for Achilles*. Here Vasari reveals the positive aspect of human passion, i.e., not being enchained by one's passions and being inspired to think freely. Hence passion (*furor*) becomes a conduit for artistic creativity, *invenzione*, as seen in the painting where, in the foundry, Daedalus (Vulcan), assisted by cupids, is composing armor for Achilles. Also visible in this foundry are numerous tools of the trade such as anvils, hammers, measuring devices, and drawings. In the background, the burning fire of the furnace helps

Daedalus form the metal into the shape of a shield. In this cartouche scene as well, Vasari alludes to clever strategies of Cosimo I in defending the Florentines and bringing peace to his land by building arms to defeat war enemies.

In these compositions, Vasari as an artist invents and imitates himself, alluding to previous compositions on the theme of Vulcan, e.g., the bozzetto of Vulcan's Forge of 1565

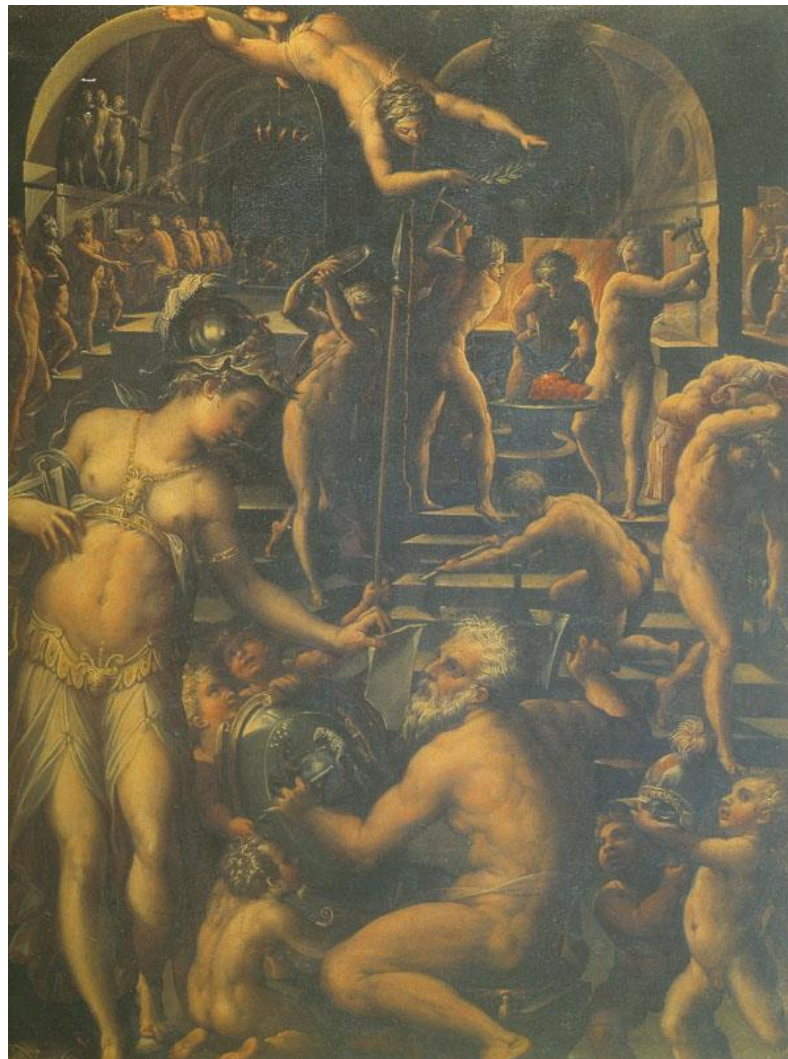


Fig. 20. Giorgio Vasari, Vulcan's Forge and Saturn Mutilating Heaven, 1555-5, det.

*Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

and its corresponding drawing at the Cabinet des Dessins in the Louvre (Monbeig-Goguel *et al.* 1968, pp. 89-93; Monbeig-Goguel, 1972, p. 175, fig. 223)²³.



*Fig 22. Giorgio Vasari, Vulcan's Forge 1565, drawing
Cabinet des Dessins, Musée du Louvre, Paris
Photo credit: Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Paris*

These secular compositions reveal Vasari's artistic creativity, which is based on the notion of *disegno* (design or drawing) as a reflection of Renaissance Neoplatonic philosophy of art. Vasari further elaborates his artistic theory of *disegno* in the *bozzetto* of Vulcan's Forge as well as in the cartouche on the frescoed wall with Vulcan (Daedalus) Creating a Shield for Achilles. His concept of invention (*invenzione*) is visualized in creating a different image of Minerva, not as a goddess of Peace and War but as a muse of drawing or as a creator of the art of drawing (De Girolami Cheney, 2011, pp. 139-144). Another aspect of Vasari's

²³ In 1589 the painting is recorded in the Medici collection. A copy of the painting is found at Windsor, and another copy of the drawing is in the Corsini collection in Florence.

theory of drawing refers to an artist who quotes himself by borrowing from his previous works. Vasari coins the term *imitare se stessi* (to copy oneself), as indicated by Vulcan, who is copying the drawing provided by Minerva in the *bozzetto*, and Vulcan, who is copying a drawing for the shield of Achilles in the *cartouche*.

Judgment (*giudizio*) is the third aspect of drawing, and it guides the artist to select from nature as well as from artistic conventions. For example, Minerva's figure derives from ancient sculptures—a Roman Minerva statue, a Venus type (a Praxitelean Venus or Medici Venus), or an Apollo prototype (Apollo Belvedere). The depiction of Minerva also alludes to the art of judgment by means of the goddess' dual nature—peace and war, wisdom and artistry, beauty and domesticity.

Thus Vasari's description of the fire's symbolism of the Sala degli Elementi in *I Ragionamenti* assists in identifying the fire imagery in the fresco painting. In the dialogue, Vasari as the painter responds to questions presented by his patron or his prince. Furthermore, Vasari's *invenzione* in this *camera intellecta* on the symbolism of fire through the Vulcan's forge conflates several astral notions associated with alchemy as well as planetary and mythological references to the patron, Cosimo I Duke of Tuscany. Noting the duke's enthusiasm for alchemy, Vasari reveals in this *sala* a program that reflects not only the alchemical interests of the duke but the duke's natal chart as well. The duke was born on June 12, 1519, at 9:00 p.m., under the zodiac sign of Gemini. This Mercurial astral influence is accompanied by the planetary impact of Jupiter, a fire element, and Saturn, an air element like Mercury. Although Mercury is Cosimo I's astral birth sign and Gemini is his zodiac sign, Cosimo appropriates the sign of Capricorn to affiliate himself with the ancient Roman emperor Augustus and the present emperor, Charles V, both of whom were born under the astral sign of Capricorn and the planetary governance of Saturn (Crum, 1989, pp. 237-253; van Veen, 2006, p. 31; De Girolami Cheney, 2012b, pp. 27-38). Not by accident, Vasari depicts the image of Mercury facing the wall of the *Vulcan's Forge*, associating the Mercurial element of fire and Mercury's cosmic power with his own wall of the Element of Fire.



Fig. 7. Giorgio Vasari, *Vulcan's Forge (Element of Fire)*, 1555-57
West Wall, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author

Vasari visualizes these astral combinations by depicting in the ceiling of the *sala* the mythological story of the Saturn's castration. In the scene of *Vulcan's Forge* below, Saturn is a personification of Air in the program as well as the potency of Jupiter. In another wall of the *sala*, Vasari presents the image of Mercury, attributing some of Mercury's virtues—such as shrewdness in commerce and medical power in healing with gems—to Duke Cosimo I. For example:

[Cosimo] who is very mercurial, for his ability in negotiating with eloquent men, for his knowledge like Mercury, of mineral wealth and of sophistry and for his delight in subtle talk and for the number of men with whom he has conversed (Muccini *et al.*, 1991, p. 57).

The connection of Vasari's *Vulcan's Forge* with the two images of Mercury and Pluto/Hercules, on the opposite wall, and Duke Cosimo I is significant.



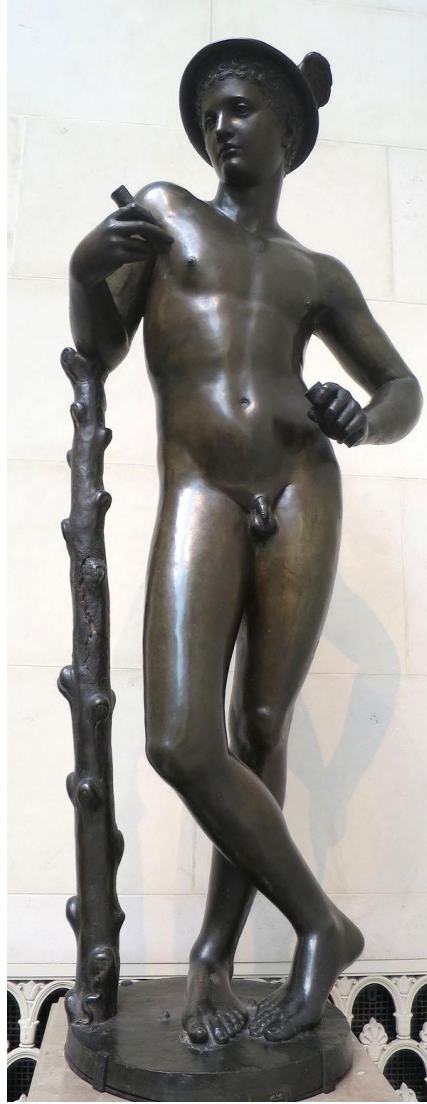
*Fig. 8. Giorgio Vasari, Mercury and Pluto, 1555-57
East Wall, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

When the duke assumed control of Florence in 1537, he developed a passionate interest in collecting Etruscan sculpture and artifacts (Hillard, 2013, pp. 1029-1031). In 1550 he received a remarkable gift from Pope Julius III: a statue of Mercury, much battered then restored, and originally located in a covered gallery located just behind the statue court of Belvedere (Haskell *et al.*, 1981, p. 138). Additionally, Vasari's classical composition and expression of the painted Mercury in the Sala degli Elementi indicate his close familiarity with the newly acquired Medicean Mercury and the Roman Apollo Belvedere. With the exception of Vasari's stylistic appropriation of the Mercury statue, there was little interest in Florence in the Roman image, despite its replica in bronze commissioned by Cosimo I for this favorite courtier, Antonio Montalvo (perhaps the statue at the Pitti Palace or the one at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC) (*ivi*, p. 138)²⁴.

²⁴ Vasari's contemporary sources are, of course, Donatello's *David* of the 1430s, sometimes referred to as the Mercurial-David; Michelangelo's *David* of 1504; and Cellini's *Mercury* of 1558, placed at the base of the Perseus statue.



*Fig. 24. Giorgio Vasari, Mercury, 1555-57, det
East Wall, Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*



*Fig. 25. Ancient Mercury, nd
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Photo credit: author*

Vasari associates the symbolism of fire, along with the virtues of Peace and Mercurial Justice, to Cosimo I's recent victory in the prolonged war with Siena. With this victory Cosimo I conquers the territory of Siena, which later will grant him governance over Tuscany. At one level, the political level, this alludes to the transformation of war and conflict through a peaceful resolution. At another level, the war and peace expand Cosimo I's governance and reflect the new political achievements and honors bestowed on him by Emperor Charles V. Thus Vasari associates the influences and proclivities of the planets such as Saturn and Mercury,

both elements of Air, and Vulcan, an element of Fire, which are Cosimo I's natal planets, and with his persona, destiny, and role as a ruler.

In the imagery of *The Element of Fire*, Vasari alludes as well to Ficino's Neoplatonic transformation of forms from descending to ascending mutations, from chaotic disorder to rational order, from substances to metaphysical essence or inorganic matter to divine forms.



*Fig. 9. Cheney's levels of the history painting
in the Sala degli Elementi, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

The ascending movement starts from the *dado*, a chaotic realm, through the centaur's world, rises to a human realm through the making art, and culminates in the ceiling, where a divine realm, the creation of the cosmos, is accomplished. In the *dado*, for example, the bottom layer of the wall, Vasari visualizes the formation of chaos or low earthly forms with the depiction of the battles of centaurs. In the ascending level, in the scene of *Vulcan's Forge*, there are several layers of transformation, e.g., from amorphous metal to arrow and thunderbolt; instinctual passion to artistic creative passion; and terrestrial survival to heavenly harmony. These fiery transformations imply alchemical as well as Neoplatonic mutations, which manifest in Cosimo I's psyche and persona as well as in his governance.

The cosmological and magical qualities attributed to Mercury, Pluto, and Vulcan link with Cosimo I's persona as well as with his interests in astrology,

alchemy, and gemology. In the depiction of Mercury and Pluto in the Sala degli Elementi, Vasari reveals the fascination that Duke Cosimo I, and later his son Francesco, have for minerals and gems as well as an interest in alchemy (Aakhu, 2008; Maresca, 2012, pp. 105-130). Cosimo I commissioned two foundries, one in the basement of the Palazzo Vecchio, the other in the Uffizi. He manipulated minerals and metals in the laboratory of the foundries, in particular, separating, diluting, and preparing mercury. The love for alchemy is a Medicean trait. One hundred years earlier, Cosimo de' Medici had requested Marsilio Ficino to translate *Pimandro*, a text attributed to Hermes Trismegistus²⁵. Ficino titled the translation *Mercurii Trismegisti liber de potestae et sapientia Dei*. The Medicean library also contained the following books: Basilio Lapi's *Libro de' minerali et distillatini*, Giordano Bruno's *De la trasmutazione dei metallic*, and Tommaso Campanella's *La pratica dell'estasi filosofica*²⁶.

Appropriately, Vasari honors his patron, Cosimo I, and connects Vulcan's forge with the duke's recent building of the two foundries. Both foundries were originally located in the basement of the Palazzo Vecchio, but after Vasari's complaint that «*fuoco e fumo dannegianodo I nuovi Quartiere appena creato*» (trans.: «fire and smoke are damaging the new apartments [Sala degli Elementi] that I just created» (Berti, 1967, p. 51), one of the foundries is moved to Boboli Gardens, and the other to the basement of the Uffizi (*ivi*, pp. 43-60; Maresca, 2012, pp- 67-70). In the depiction of the shield imagery, Vasari allegorically acknowledges the duke's fascination with manipulating minerals and metals in the laboratory of his foundries.

Studies on Vasari's paintings for Francesco I's *Studiolo*

²⁵ For further readings, see Salaman *et al*, 2004; Chastel, 1975, pp. 7-22 and 136-140; Voss, 2006, pp. 15-21; and Maresca, 2012, pp. 51-59.

²⁶ See also le Mollé, 1995, p. 318; Lensi Orlandi, 1978; Maresca, 2012, pp. 105-130; and Slavenburg, 2012, pp. 229-230.



*Fig. 26. Giorgio Vasari and assistants, Francesco I' de' Medici's Studiolo, 1570
Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

and Tesoretto



*Fig. 27. Giorgio Vasari and assistants, Francesco I de' Medici, Il Tesoretto, 1570
Palazzo Vecchio, Florence
Photo credit: author*

in the Palazzo Vecchio by Luciano Berti's cultural analysis and Scott Schaefer's extensive iconology, and later expanded by Valentina Conticelli²⁷, reveal the alchemical connections of the elements depicted in the *Studiolo*, *Tesoretto* and the Sala degli Elementi at the Palazzo Vecchio. In 1570 Vasari and his assistants paint this treasury room to house the precious gems, gold, and other precious materials for Francis I, duke of Tuscany. Several years before, Francis's father, Cosimo I, had requested that Vasari paint the Sala degli Elementi, where the seeds for the iconography of the elements are established. Thus, the cosmological and magical qualities attributed to Jupiter, Mercury, Venus, and Saturn are linked with Cosimo I's persona as well as with his interests in astrology, alchemy, and gemology (Maresca, 2012, pp. 83-86; Lensi Orlandi, 1978). At another level, Vasari's imagery attests to his *invenzione* for creating *history paintings* in a *camera intellecta* grounded in a Cinquecento culture.

In sum, the *sala* is a *camera intellecta*. In particular, the imagery on the wall depicting the Element of Fire or the *Vulcan's Forge* reveals a Mannerist conceit. It becomes clearer why, in the sixteenth century, visual images of personifications have roots in mythology, alchemy, hieroglyphs, and emblems and, in particular, the art of visual memory—a condensation of illustrations in astrological doctrine related to the signs of the zodiac and the parts of human body. Thus the image becomes a compendium or repertoire of a pictorial world, a theater of memory.

With his personifications Vasari creates an encyclopedia or library of visual images and a visual museum as well. This museum provides him with a mental recollection and a visual aid for the depiction of paintings and, in particular, the decorative cycles²⁸. With his mental and visual recollections, Vasari establishes a theater of memory or a theater of art where he can find cabinets or shelves of memories with images composed in the past for other commissions and readily available for use in current and future commissions. Memory may be defined as the act of thinking of things in their absence, which may be stimulated in response to perceived objects, or as the realm for housing objects to provoke a recollection of

²⁷ See Berti, 1967, pp. 43–60; Schaefer, 1976; Conticelli, 2007; and Maresca, 2012, pp. 103–168 and 105–120.

²⁸ See De Girolami Cheney, 2011, pp. 31–49, on Vasari's antique museum with the images of Pliny's stories; De Girolami Cheney, 2013, pp. 41–77, for a discussion on Vasari's role as a collector and museum designer; and Wellington Gahtan, 2014.

the past (Schaer, 1993, p. 16; Arendt, 1978). Vasari too wishes to endow his images with meanings, creating a museum of representations where the creations of forms are assisted by memory. The realm of preservation is characterized by the function of memory as well as by the conservation of collections in a museum. Vasari's preoccupation with historical continuation and fascination with the past recalls the goals of Renaissance humanists and collectors such as Niccolò Niccoli, who collected ancient biographies, Poggio Bracciolini, who collected ancient artifacts and manuscripts, and Ciriaco d'Ancona, who searched for and collected ancient sculptures (Schaer, 1993, p. 16). Evidence of Vasari's quest to conserve the art of the past is found not only in his works of art and in his collection of artist's drawings²⁹ but also in the writings on the artists' lives, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptures and Architects*, to preserve the memory of artistic creations. Thus, in *Vulcan's Forge* in the Sala degli Elementi, Vasari depicts a *history painting* on the Medicean power—a Mannerist *iconocrazia*—and in the Sala degli Elementi, he composes a visual museum with mythical emblematic mysteries.

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²⁹ See Bjurström, 2001, for a most complete collection of Vasari's surviving drawings of fellow artists; and Collobi-Ragghianti, 1974, for a complete catalogue of Vasari's collected drawings.

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