Art history

The firstartists’

biographer

The Collector of Lives: Giorgio Vasari and

the Invention of Art. By Ingrid Rowland and

Noah Charney. Norton; 432 pages; $29.95

and £23.99

T

OWARDS the end ofhis life Michelan-

gelo Buonarroti, the mostfamousartist

of the Italian Renaissance, began burning

his drawings. He did not consider them

works ofart in their own right so much as

pictorial scaffolding. They aided the diffi-

cultprocessofdecidingwhata painting or

sculpture would looklike when it was fin-

ished and demonstrated his very real

struggles to achieve aesthetic perfection.

By eliminating these drawings he wanted

posterity, when thinking of the great Mi-

chelangelo, to be confronted with a tower-

ing figure of insurmountable genius, one

as cold and stiff as the marble he worked

with—in short, a man who conjured up the

great masterpieces in Western art with

minimal effort.

That people can see behind this façade

isdue to the timelyintervention ofanother

influential figure ofthe Renaissance: Gior-

gio Vasari (1511-74), a painter, architect and

author, who saved many drawings from

the artist’s purge. Safeguarding the legacy

ofthose around him, aswell asthatof their

predecessors, became Vasari’s obsession.

In 1550 he published his magnum opus,

“Lives of the Most Excellent Painters,

Sculptors, and Architects”. In it he records

the many flaws, rivalries, vices and eccen-

tricitiesthattogethercreate a family photo-

graph ofthe Quattrocento and Cinquecen-

to. Vasari pulls his subjects down off their

artistic pedestals, and sketches in charac-

teristics that are all too human. Masaccio

was absent-minded. Filippo Lippi had an

insatiable libido despite being a monk.

Paolo Uccello once fled from his work

when served cheese.

In “The CollectorofLives”, an insightful

and gripping new book about Vasari, In-

grid Rowland and Noah Charney avoid

the endlessdebate overwhich ofthe biog-

rapher’s stories are true or false. Instead,

they focus on what has been included in

the biography as a way of learning more

aboutVasari himself.

Thus a suspiciously melodramatic

story of Leonardo da Vinci dying in the

armsofKingFrancisI ofFrance, bitterly la-

mentinghisown lackofdevotion to his art,

reveals more about Vasari’s attitude to

work than Leonardo’s. Vasari achieved

contemporary fame and wealth by his rig-

orous work ethic. His ability to stick to

deadlines often exhausted him, but it en-

sured a steady stream of important com-

missions from the Medici and the papacy.

Shrugging off taunts from jealous rivals

abouthisshortstature, Vasari created work

across the Italian peninsula that was lau-

ded by contemporaries and made him as

celebrated as many ofthe artists he wrote

about. His unattractive appearance may

well be the reason, the authors believe,

that Vasari championed the similarly

plain-looking Giotto and Brunelleschi, re-

mindingthe readerthat“lumpsofearth of-

ten conceal veinsofgold.”

Ms Rowland and Mr Charney draw a

panoramic view of the art-world during

the Renaissance, placing Vasari at the cen-

tre. He went to great lengths to preserve

pieces of scrap paper. They contained

sketchesbyMichelangelo, and he deemed

them valuable. This was a time when art-

istswere traditionallyanonymous, unedu-

cated craftsmen of“prettythings”. Byprio-

ritising the creators themselves over what

theycreated, championingtheirdeeds and

elevatingtheirstatus, Vasari helped laythe

foundationsforarthistoryaswell for how

art is understood today. This is an impor-

tant book and long awaited. The authors

have done a commendable job of return-

ingto hisrightful place the man who inflat-

ed the reputation of art and artists so suc-

cessfullythathe himselfwassqueezed out

ofthe picture