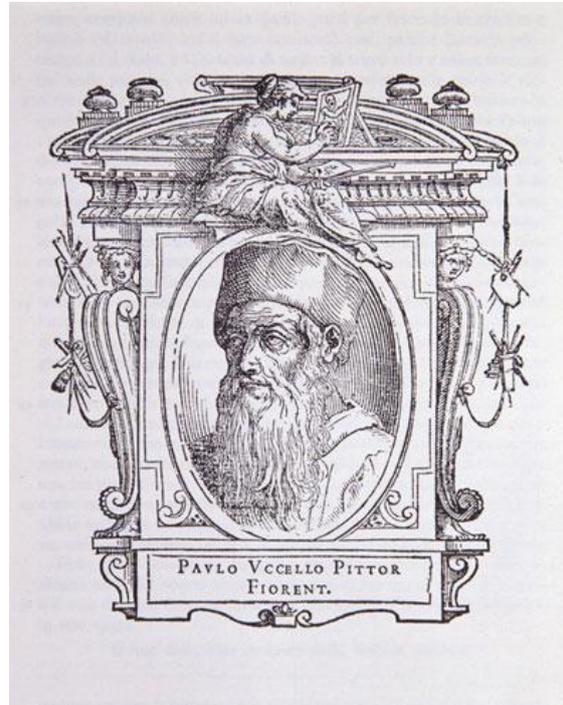


Week IV: Set Reading – Primary Source

Giorgio Vasari on Paolo Uccello

Paolo Uccello (1397-1475)

Paolo Uccello would have been the most graceful and imaginative talent [*leggiadro e capriccioso ingegno*] that was ever devoted to the art of painting, from Giotto to now, if he had laboured as much at figures and animals as he laboured and lost time over the details of perspective; for although these are ingenious and beautiful, yet if a man pursues them beyond measure he does nothing but waste his time, exhausts his powers, fills his mind with difficulties, and often transforms its fertility and readiness into sterility and constraint, and renders his manner, by attending more to these details than to figures, dry and angular, which all comes from a wish to examine things too closely; not to mention that very often he becomes solitary, eccentric, melancholy, and poor, as did Paolo Uccello.



...Now Paolo was forever investigating, without a moment's intermission, the most difficult problems of art, insomuch that he reduced to perfection the method of drawing perspectives from the ground plans of houses and from the profiles of buildings, carried right up to the summits of the cornices and the roofs, by means of intersecting lines, making them foreshortened and diminishing towards the centre, after having first fixed the eye level either high or low, according to his pleasure. So greatly, in short, did he occupy himself with these difficulties, that he introduced a way, method, and rule of placing figures firmly on the planes whereon their feet are planted, and foreshortening them bit by bit, and making them recede by a proportionate diminution; which hitherto had always been done by chance. He discovered, likewise, the method of turning the intersections and arches of vaulted roofs; the foreshortening of ceilings by means of the convergence of the beams; and the making of round columns at the salient angle of the walls of a house in a manner that they curve at the corner, and, being drawing in perspective, break the angle and cause it to appear level.

For the sake of these investigations he kept himself in seclusion and almost a hermit, having little contact with anyone, and staying weeks and months in his house without showing himself. And although these were difficult and beautiful problems, if he had spent that time in the study of figures, he would have brought them to absolute perfection; for even so he made them with passing good draughtsmanship. But, consuming his time in these researches, he remained throughout his whole life more poor than famous; wherefore the sculptor Donatello, who was very much his friend, said to him very often, when Paolo showed him ... [the] fantastic devices on which he spent and wasted his time: 'Ah, Paolo, this perspective of yours makes you abandon the substance for the shadow...'

The first pictures of Paolo were in fresco, in an oblong niche painted in perspective, at the Hospital of Lelmo [in Florence]... Within the church of Santa Trinita, over the left-hand door, he painted stories of St. Francis in fresco, namely, the receiving of the stigmata; the supporting of the Church, which he is upholding with his shoulders; and his conference with St. Dominic. In Santa Maria Maggiore, also, in a chapel near the side door which leads to San Giovanni, where there are the panel and predella of Masaccio, he wrought an Annunciation in fresco, wherein he made a building worthy of consideration, which was something new and difficult in those times, seeing that it was the first possessing any beauty of manner which was seen by craftsmen, showing them with grace and proportion how to manage the receding of lines, and how to give so great an extent to a level space which is small and confined, that it appears far distant and large; and when to this, with judgment and grace, men can add shadows and lights by means of colours in their proper places, there is no doubt that they cause an illusion to the eye, so that it appears that the painting is real and in relief. And not being satisfied with this, he wished to demonstrate even greater difficulties in some columns, which, foreshortened in perspective, curve round and break the salient angle of the vaulting wherein are the four Evangelists; which was held something beautiful and difficult, and, in truth, in that branch of his profession Paolo was ingenious and able.

In a cloister of San Miniato outside of Florence, also, he wrought the lives of the Holy Fathers, chiefly in *terra verde*, and partly in colour; wherein he paid little regard to effecting harmony by painting with one colour, as should be done in painting stories, for he made the fields blue, the cities red, and the buildings varied according to his pleasure; and in this he was at fault, for something which is meant to represent stone cannot and should not be tinted with another colour. ...

In the house of the Medici he painted some scenes on canvas and in distemper, representing animals; in these he ever took delight, and in order to paint them well he gave them very great attention, and, what is more, he kept ever in his house pictures of birds, cats, dogs and every sort of strange animal whereof he could get the likeness, being unable to have them alive by reason of his poverty; and because he delighted in birds more than in any other kind, he was given the name of "Paolo of the Birds" [that is, Paolo Uccelli]. In the said house, among other pictures of animals, he made some lions, which were fighting together with movements and a ferocity so terrible that they appeared alive. But the rarest scene among them all was one wherein a serpent, combating with a lion, was showing its ferocity with violent movements, with the venom spurting from its mouth and eyes, while a country girl who is present is looking after an ox made with most beautiful foreshortening. The actual drawing for this ox, by the hand of Paolo, is in my book of drawings, and likewise that of the peasant girl, all full of ear, and in the act of running away from those animals...

Afterwards he was commissioned to paint some scenes in the cloister of Santa Maria Novella; and the first, which are at the entrance from the church into the cloister, represent the Creation of the animals, with an infinite number and variety of kinds belonging to water, earth, and air... He [also] made there the Creation of man and of woman, and their Fall, with a beautiful manner and with good and careful execution. And in this work he took delight in making the trees with colours, which the painters of those times were not wont to do very well; and in the landscapes, likewise, he was the first among the old painters to make a name for himself by his work, executing them well and with greater perfection than the painters before him had done; although afterwards there came men who made them more perfect, for with all his labour he was never able to give them that softness and harmony which have been given to them in our own day by painting them in oil-colours.

It was enough for Paolo to go on, according to the rules of perspective, drawing and foreshortening them exactly as they are, making in them all that he saw – namely, ploughed fields, ditches, and other tiny details of nature – with that dry and hard manner of his; whereas, if he had picked out the best from everything and had made use of those parts only that come out well in painting, they would have been absolutely perfect. This labour finished, he worked in the same cloister below two stories by the hand of others; and lower down he painted the Flood, with Noah's Ark, into which he put so great pains and so great art and diligence into the painting of the dead bodies, the tempest, the fury of the winds, the flashes of the lightning, the shattering of trees, and the terror of men, that it is beyond all description. And he made, foreshortened in perspective, a corpse from which a raven is picking out the eyes, and a drowned boy, whose body, being full of water, is swollen out into the shape of a very great arch. He also represented various human emotions, such as the little fear of the water shown by the two men who are fighting on horseback...; and the whole work is so good and so excellent, that it brought him very great fame.

... Below this story, likewise, he painted the drunkenness of Noah, with the contemptuous action of his son Hamm (in whom he portrayed Dello, the Florentine painter and sculptor, his friend) with Shem and Japhet, his other sons, who are covering him up as he lies showing his nakedness. Here, likewise, he made in perspective a cask that curves on every side, which was held something very beautiful, and also a pergola covered with grapes, the wood-work of which, composed of squared planks, goes on diminishing to a point; but here he was in error, since the diminishing of the plane below, on which the figures are standing, follows the lines of the pergola, and the cask does not follow these same receding lines; wherefore I marvel greatly that a man so accurate and diligent could make an error so notable...

In Santa Maria del Fiore [Florence Cathedral], in memory of Giovanni Acuto, an Englishman, Captain of the Florentines, who had died in the year 1393,¹ he made in *terra verde* a horse of extraordinary grandeur, which was held very beautiful, and on it the image of the Captain himself, in chiaroscuro and coloured with *terra verde*, in a picture ten braccia high on the middle of one wall of the church;² where Paolo drew in perspective a large sarcophagus, supposed to contain the corpse, and over this he placed the image of him in his Captain's armour, on horseback. This work was and still is held to be something very beautiful for a painting of that kind, and if Paolo had not made that horse move its legs on one side only, which naturally horses do not do, or they would fall – and this perhaps came about because he was not accustomed to ride, nor used to horses as he was to other animals – this work would be absolutely perfect, since the proportion of that horse, which is colossal, is very beautiful; and on the base there are these letters: PAULI UCCELLI OPUS [the work of Paolo Uccello].

... In many houses of Florence there are many pictures in perspective by the hand of the same man, for the adornment of couches, beds, and other little things; ... in particular, on a terrace in the garden which once belonged to the Bartolini, there are four battle-scenes painted on wood by his hand, full of horses and armed men, with very beautiful costumes of those days; and among the men are portraits of Paolo Orsini, Ottobuono da Parma, Luca da Canale, and Carlo Malatesta, Lord of Rimini, all captains-general of those times. And these pictures, since they were spoilt and had suffered injury, were restored in our own day by Giuliano Bugiardini, who did them more harm than good.

¹ Giovanni Acuto, that is, Sir John Hawkwood, actually died in March 1394.

² Braccio = brace, ie the length represented by a man's outstretched arms, about 66-68cm.

Paolo was summoned to Padua by Donatello, when the latter was working there, and at the entrance of the house of the Vitaliani family he painted some giants in *terra verde*, which, as I have found in a Latin letter written by Girolamo Campagnola to Messer Leonico Tomeo, the philosopher,³ are so beautiful that Andrea Mantegna held them in very great account. Paolo wrought in fresco the Volta de' Peruzzi, with triangular sections in perspective, and in the angles of the corners he painted the four elements, making for each an appropriate animal: for the earth a mole, for the water a fish, for the fire a salamander, and for the air a chameleon, which lives on it and assumes any colour. And because he had never seen a chameleon, he painted a camel, which is opening its mouth and swallowing air, and therewith filling its belly; and great, indeed, was his simplicity in making allusion by means of the name of the camel to an animal that is like a little dry lizard...

Truly great were the labours of Paolo in painting, for he drew so much that he left to his relatives, as I have learnt from their own lips, whole chests of drawings. But, although it is a good thing to draw, it is nevertheless better to make complete pictures, seeing that pictures have longer life than drawings. ... Paolo, although he was an eccentric person, loved talent in his fellow craftsmen, and in order that some memory of them might go down to posterity, he painted five distinguished men with his own hand on a long panel, which he kept in his house in memory of them. One was Giotto, the painter, standing for the light and origin of art; the second was Filippo Brunelleschi, for the architecture; Donatello, for sculpture; himself, for perspective and animals; and, for mathematics, Giovanni Manetti, his friend, with whom he often conferred and discoursed on the problems of Euclid.⁴

It is said that having been commissioned to paint, over the door of San Tommaso [St Thomas] in the Old Market, that Saint feeling for the wound in the side of Christ, Paolo put into that work all the effort that he could, saying that he wished to show the full extent of his worth and knowledge; and he caused a screen of planks to be made, so that no one might be able to see his work until it was finished. Donatello, meeting him one day all alone, said to him: "And what sort of work may this be of yours, that you keep it screened so closely?" And Paolo said in answer: "You will see it. Let that satisfy you." Donatello would not constrain him to say more, thinking to see some miracle, as usual, when the time came. Afterwards, chancing one morning to be in the Old Market buying fruit, Donatello saw Paolo uncovering his work, whereupon he saluted him courteously, and was asked by Paolo himself, who was curious and anxious to hear his judgment on it, what he thought of that picture. Donatello, having studied the work long and well, exclaimed: "Ah, Paolo, you should be covering it up, and here you are uncovering it!" At this Paolo was much aggrieved... and not having courage, lowered as he was, to go out any more, he shut himself up in his house, devoting himself to perspective, which kept him ever poor and depressed up to his death. And so, growing very old, and having but little contentment in his old age, he died in the eighty-third year of his life, in 1432 [sic],⁵ and was buried in Santa Maria Novella...

Translation, from the 1568 edition of *Le Vite*, by G. du C. de Vere, with minor revisions and annotations by David Rundle, © David Rundle 2014.

³ Girolamo Campagnola (1433/35-1522) and Niccolò Leonico Tomeo (1456-1531) were both Paduan humanists, though Tomeo was born in the Venice of Greek parentage; he taught philosophy at the University of Padua.

⁴ This appears, in fact, to be Antonio di Tuccio Manetti (1423-1497), who built a book collection of scientific and literary works, was acquainted with Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) and wrote a *Life* of Filippo Brunelleschi. In the first (1550) edition of his work, Vasari attributed this panel to Masaccio.

⁵ Vasari is in error by over forty years: Uccello died in 1475.