Artists and Cooks

The culture of humanism raised the aspirations of artists and cooks during the Renaissance just as it did for the emerging middle class of bankers and businessmen whose enlightened patronage stood behind them. For those who toiled in studios and over stoves, the quest for higher social and intellectual status prompted attempts to display their individual genius, and as class distinctions of every kind began to dissolve, some cooks and painters inevitably became celebrities. The concomitant blurring of sacred and secular values only heightened the appreciation of earthly achievements. As a consequence, the greatest respect went to those who could transform basic ingredients like pigeons or panels into artful creations for the palate or the eye.

Renaissance aesthetics typically attached greater value to the skill with which an item was made than to the intrinsic value of its raw materials. The most notable example in art occurred in the fifteenth century when gold-ground devotional painting lost favor to pictures that rendered blue skies and compositions in accurate perspective. Although this change obviously paralleled broader shifts in religious attitude during the postmedieval period, it was generally believed that only through the skill of the artist could the humanist vision of bringing heaven to earth be realized.

Early Writings on Art and Cookery

Even before the invention of the printing press, manuscript copies of books on art and cookery circulated throughout Renaissance Italy. The subsequent developments within each genre were remarkably similar, as
we can see by examining three books from each category, paired by date of composition.

The earliest texts are from the fourteenth century: the anonymous *Libro di cucina* and Cennino Cennini’s *Il libro dell’arte*. Both are small, slim volumes of just 74 and 130 printed pages, respectively. The anonymity of the author of the cookbook is typical of the unsung efforts of medieval artisans, just as the generic titles of both books reflect their largely impersonal contents. *Cucina* could hardly be less revelatory. The text consists of 135 short recipes unaccompanied by either a preface or an introduction. Given the occasional notation that a dish is intended “per XII [or far less often, XX] persone,” we can infer that the meals were designed for family or friends rather than for courtly feasts. One copy of the manuscript describes the guest list as “XII gentili homini giotissimi,” or twelve gluttonous men.3

Cennini’s book, which he probably wrote later in the century, is only a little more informative. Its intention, the author discloses, “is for the use and good and profit of anyone who wants to enter the profession,” but his advice is almost exclusively technical. Of the book’s 189 chapters (a number of which are less than a page long), all but the three introductory ones describe workshop practices such as how to gild a panel or apply a coat of varnish. Moreover, the logic of the introductory chapters is not always cogent. Frustrated by Cennini’s “occasional attempts at rhetoric,” one modern translator laments, “He is apt to lose himself in complications.” The book’s most sensible advice is in chapter 3, where the author exhorts would-be artists “to begin by decking yourselves with this attire: Enthusiasm, Reverence, Obedience, and Constancy.” Genius and imagination go unmentioned.4

The next generation of texts—Bartolomeo Sacchi’s *De honesta voluptate et valetudine* (*On Right Pleasure and Good Health*), from the 1460s, and Leon Battista Alberti’s *Della pittura* (*On Painting*), dated 1436—are more concerned with ideas. Both authors were men of learning and letters. Sacchi (1421–81)—better known as Platina—began his career as a Latinist in the Gonzaga court in Mantua, spent five years in Florence studying Greek, and eventually settled in Rome, where he served first in the papal chancery and

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later, under Sixtus IV, as Vatican librarian. A fresco in the Vatican Palace by Melozzo da Forli commemorates the appointment that was to be the capstone of his career. Platina, then, was not a man of the kitchen but a scholar. Among his many literary accomplishments were a commentary on the works of Pliny the Elder, a history of the Gonzaga family, a history of the papacy, and a treatise on love.

Alberti (1404–72) was no less of an intellect. Born to a Florentine family, he studied classics in Padua and took a degree in canon law at the University of Bologna. As an artist, he focused his creative energies primarily on architecture, but his books and essays proved to be the mainstay of his legacy. A prolific author, he wrote nearly two dozen treatises on subjects ranging from cryptography to family life to Italian grammar. His trio of books on painting, sculpture, and architecture—none of which were printed during his lifetime—represent the most progressive ideals of the fine arts in the Renaissance.

Platina’s text comprises nearly two hundred pages organized into ten more or less discrete books. At the end of his dedicatory preface to Cardinal Roverella of Ravenna, the author claims that he composed the work in emulation of ancient treatises by Cato, Varro, Columella, C. Matius, and Caelius Apicius. The work by Apicius to which he refers is the De re coquinaria, the earliest recipe collection to survive. Platina’s acknowledgment of the classical texts may indicate a few of his sources, but in citing these works, he also assures the reader of his devotion to the antiquarian ideals of his age. In truth, he borrowed little more than the ten-book format from Apicius and failed to cite Pliny, his principal antique source. More surprising, still, is the discovery that many of the recipes in De honesta voluptate derive not from antiquity but from the recently assembled recipe collection of the so-called Maestro Martino of Como. Only in book 6, chapter 41, does Platina admit to this source: “What a cook you bestowed, oh immortal gods, in my friend Martino of Como, from whom I have received in great part the things which I am writing!” A parallel reading of Martino’s Libro de arte coquinaria with Platina’s text confirms Luigi Ballerini’s observation that De honesta voluptate et valetudine...
was, in fact, little more than an “outright cannibalization” of the earlier manuscript.8

Platina’s title On Right Pleasure and Good Health promises more than just savory meals to delight the palate. Yet the “good health” (valetudine) and nutritional values of which he speaks all derive from humoral theory, the notion that ill health resulted from an imbalance of the four cardinal fluids, or humors: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. This theory stemmed from ancient dietary beliefs (most notably recorded by Hippocrates and Galen), which, in turn, were adopted by Arabic and medieval savants.9 Platina followed the dictates of the regimen sanitatis, the Arabic “rules of health,” and in his introductory chapters, he recounts the bewildering linkages thought to exist between the organs of the body, body temperature, the seasons, and moisture.10 The dietary implications of this view are equally perplexing. Various recipes claim beneficial or detrimental health effects for everything from fig fritters to roasted peacock. For example, the author explains that cabbage is “of a warm dry nature and for this reason increases black bile, generates bad dreams, is not very nourishing, harms the stomach a little and the head and eyes very much, on account of its gas, and dims the vision.”11 Because Maestro Martino made no such medical claims for any of the recipes that Platina so freely borrowed from him, the most original aspect of On Right Pleasure and Good Health is the author’s concern for the salutary benefits of the items his readers might eat and drink.

On Painting was the product of almost the same cultural moment. Like Platina, Alberti was a humanist who looked to antiquity for inspiration as he sought insights into the mysteries of nature. With no ancient texts to use as a model (as that of Vitruvius would later provide when Alberti composed his treatise on architecture) but possessed of greater intellectual ambition than the workmanlike Cennini, Alberti produced the first modern treatise on the theory of painting. The audience for his manuscript—the book’s first printing appeared only in 1540—was also broader than Cennini’s. He extends the discussion of art beyond the painter’s craft, introducing readers to many of the underlying principles of Renaissance art.

In the first of the treatise’s three books, Alberti speaks of linear
perspective, the most fundamental of those principles. Although he was by no means its inventor—credit for that innovation usually goes to Filippo Brunelleschi—Alberti was the first to explicate the mathematical concept of spatial illusionism, doing so with a crisp Ciceronian logic honed by his years of legal study.

Alberti’s second and third books are even more deeply grounded in humanistic thinking. With more than the cachet of classicism in mind, he writes in book 2, “The first care of one who seeks to obtain eminence in painting is to acquire the fame and renown of the ancients.” The key, in his view, lies in choosing elevated subject matter. The term he uses is istoria, a word suggestive of history painting but one that has no modern English equivalent. For him, istoria embraces both subject matter and style, with the subject drawn from ancient literature and the style providing a clear and reasoned expression of human emotion in a formally unified setting. Linear perspective was, of course, central to the illusion along with an accurate interplay of color and light. Though the work of art itself was of paramount importance to Alberti, the renown that accrued to the artist was never far from his mind. His interest in the modern painter’s “search for eminence” led him to praise the “fame and renown of the ancients,” and elsewhere he proclaims, “The greatest work of the painter is not a colossus, but an istoria. Istoria gives greater renown to the intellect than any colossus.” The pride taken in that accomplishment would presumably be shared by patron and painter.

Although Platina and Alberti set out to address different issues and advance different arguments, the authors conclude their respective texts with encomiums to free will, perhaps the central tenet of early Renaissance humanism. For Platina, one must exercise free will to overcome passion, which he describes as “the immoderate seeking for any hoped-for good.” For Alberti, will (along with courage) is the means for overcoming difficulty, a necessity, he confesses, even in writing his own text. The next generation of authors would celebrate the willful imagination even more enthusiastically. By the time Scappi and Vasari began their treatises, creative self-expression had already evolved into the excesses of Mannerism.
Both Bartolomeo Scappi (c. 1500–77)—not to be confused with Bartolomeo Sacchi, the man known as Platina—and Giorgio Vasari (1511–73) practiced their art as well as wrote about it. Scappi’s origins remain a little vague, but his *Opera dell’arte del cucinare* (*Work on the Art of Cooking*, 1570) seems to have been the capstone of a long career spent mainly in Rome preparing meals for a succession of cardinals and popes.¹⁶ The book’s title page identifies him as *cuoco segreto*, or private cook, to Pope Pius V (1566–72), the last of the five pontiffs he is known to have served. Vasari, in turn, spent many years as a painter in Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice before undertaking his *Vite de’più eccellenti pittori scultori e architetti* (*The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 1550, expanded in 1568), the work that would eventually eclipse his artistic reputation altogether.

To be sure, significant differences exist between the *Opera* and the *Vite* apart from their subject matter. Vasari’s concern for the historical development of his discipline was certainly more extensive. His *Lives* begins in the thirteenth century with Cimabue (1240–1302) and ends with biographies of artists who were still alive at the time he was writing. In contrast, the earliest meal described in the *Opera* took place in 1536, just thirty years before the author began his manuscript. Regional differences also play a minor role in Scappi’s account, whereas Vasari’s *Lives* is more sensitive to geography, particularly in the first edition, where his preference for the art of his native Tuscany is quite pronounced. Even in the second edition, one sees a marked contrast between the brevity of his biographies of important, long-lived Venetian artists like Titian (sixteen pages) and the length of his lives of less important, short-lived Florentines like Francesco Salviati (twenty pages). Vasari’s aesthetic preferences were not based on patriotism or xenophobia alone, however. Throughout his text, he emphasizes the importance of Florentine *disegno*—by which he means both drawing and design—over Venetian *colore* in artistic expression. Finally, only Scappi thought to include illustrations with his text. Ironically, the *Opera* contains more than two dozen full-page woodcuts of kitchen utensils and food preparations, whereas the *Lives* has no reproductions of the countless works of art that Vasari describes.
What, then, do the two books have in common? Both, of course, are encyclopedic volumes. Not counting its illustrations, Scappi’s original text is nearly nine hundred pages long and includes over a thousand recipes along with the name of every dish served at more than a hundred multicourse dinners and suppers. The standard modern edition of Vasari’s opus, in turn, comprises four volumes totaling over thirteen hundred pages, with individual biographies of more than 150 artists. The encyclopedic nature of the Opera and the Vite was hardly unusual for the time. Each work in its way exemplified the rethinking of knowledge in the later sixteenth century. The publication of historical treatises on every subject and the collecting and cataloging of all manner of natural specimens were widespread at the time.17 Cardinal Baronio’s twelve-volume history of the church, the Annales ecclesiastici (1588–1607), and the creation of the Museo degli Uffizi in Florence during the reigns of Cosimo and his successor Francesco de’ Medici were parts of the same epistemological trend.

Each book was also the product of a courtly environment: Scappi’s, for the most part, answered to the requirements of the Roman Curia, and Vasari’s was shaped by Medici court circles in Florence. The dedication of the books to Pope Pius V and the archduke Cosimo de’ Medici leaves little doubt about their respective loyalties. But these were also anxious times. Although Scappi makes no mention of this and Vasari only refers in passing to “the troubles” that followed the Sack of Rome (1527) and the expulsion of the Medici (1529), the artificiality of so much of the art produced in this period undoubtedly reflects the insecurities of the age of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Together, the Vite and the Opera, like Baronio’s Annales and the Medici collections, helped secure the political and public reputation of courts whose boundaries were tightly circumscribed and whose legitimacy was under constant challenge.

More than anything, the virtuosity of a creative performance impressed Scappi and Vasari. For example, one of the menus reproduced in the Opera recounts a modest three-course banquet given on a meatless Friday in an unnamed “garden in Trastevere.”18 Only about forty unidentified guests were on hand, but the first two courses consisted of fifty dishes served
on four hundred pieces of gold, silver, and maiolica tableware. Next came twenty-seven desserts served in two hundred sixteen bowls and dishes. Most extraordinary of all were the table decorations. Before the arrival of each course, six edible statues were placed on the table, the first made of sugar; the second, butter; and the third, pasta. The pieces included groups of music-making nymphs, exotic natural creatures, and mythological deities. Given that the iconography of this statuary was neither armorial nor allegorical and the groupings adhered to no coherent theme, the creations were clearly intended for show. The meal ended with the serving of scented toothpicks and, for each guest, a posy of silk flowers with gold stems.

Because the banquet took place on a day of abstinence, the menu consisted entirely of fish, vegetables, and fruit. Individual recipes for every type of food, including meat and fowl, appear elsewhere in the treatise. One of the author’s special favorites, to judge from the unusual length of the entry, was roasted peacock. In the previous century, Platina described the bird as “more suitable to the table of kings and princes than the lowly and men of little property,” an assessment with which Scappi surely would have agreed. Preparing the bird for the table offered a special challenge. Inspired no doubt by Platina’s recipe for cooking the “vainglorious” creature, Scappi is even more extravagant in his use of spices and method of presentation. Once cooked, he suggests, the bird should be reassembled with metal rods and have its feathers reattached come se fosse vivo, “as if it were still alive.”

Vasari praised artifice in equal measure. In his life of Leonardo, he marvels at the “horrible monster” that the artist reportedly had fashioned nearly a century earlier out of “lizards, newts, maggots, snakes, butterflies, locusts, bats, and other animals of the kind.” Emerging “from a dark and broken rock, [the creature] belched poison from its open throat, fire from its eyes, and smoke from its nostrils.” Leonardo was so engrossed in his effort, Vasari reports with fascination, “that he did not notice the stench of the dead animals.”

In truth, Vasari’s aesthetic criteria rose above the level of illusions, and
he reserved his greatest praise for the most refined artistic styles of his day. He revered Michelangelo (1475–1564) above all other artists, and in this biography (at eighty-four pages, the longest of the lives), Vasari discloses what mattered most—and least—to him. His description of the artist’s achievement in the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel (1536–41) is particularly revealing: “Suffice it to say that the purpose of this remarkable man was none other than to paint the most perfect and well-proportioned composition of the human body in the most various attitudes.”

Nowhere in his description of the Last Judgment does he mention the fresco’s horrifying depiction of the Second Coming (Matthew 24:30–31) nor its radical departure from the structured composition of the chapel’s ceiling, which Michelangelo had painted thirty years earlier. Indeed, he gives no indication of the artist’s tormented state of mind or the skill with which he expressed the uncertainties and pessimism of his age. Rather, in Vasari’s view, the Last Judgment was a great feast for the eyes; the anatomical idealism, unerring foreshortenings, and uniquely varied poses of its myriad figures struck him “as an example of what can be done when supreme intellects descend upon the earth, infused with grace and divine knowledge.” Grazia, or grace, was of key importance to Vasari’s aesthetics. Although he never defines the term as such, his repeated use of it in the Lives indicates that grazia is not something to be learned, or even understood by rational means. It is, instead, a natural gift from heaven, free from any trace of labor or industry. Words like sweetness, facility, and elegance frequently accompany its appearance in the text.

Scappi thought along similar lines, although he refrains from suggesting that fine cuisine is a gift from heaven. The first chapter of the Opera opens with a general discourse on the requirements of a master cook, whom he likens to “a judicious architect, who after making a good design, builds a strong foundation above which he constructs marvelous buildings.” The analogy he makes between art and cuisine is primarily visual, for the cook’s disegno should be “beautiful, orderly, and pleasing to the eye.” In his opinion, the source of the eye’s delight is “bel colore and vaga prospettiva.”

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Bel colore suggests the lovely patina that spices like saffron or cinnamon can add to a dish, but vaga prospettiva implies something more ethereal and not so easy to define. Vaghezza, the likely root of the word vaga, was, like grazia, a term linked to the appeal of stylized natural forms. When applied to food, vaga prospettiva seems to indicate a preference for mannered appearances over authentic flavors, as when, on one menu, he describes fish molded in the shape of a goat’s head and a counterfeit ham made from salmon in gelatin. Both Scappi and Vasari were lovers of artifice, and each in his own way exemplified the period’s preference for matters of form over content.

The second part of Scappi’s initial chapter discusses the ideal traits of the cook. In addition to being neat, clean, practical, and polite, cooks should embody the virtues of prudence, patience, humility, and sobriety. Vasari does not recommend a comparable set of traits for members of his profession, although throughout the Lives, he expresses reverences for most of the same temperament constants. Thus, for example, he praises Fra Angelico for being “quiet and modest” and “of the highest character” while disapproving of “the vulgarity of the vice of envy” and the “false friendship and rancor” of Andrea del Castagno. For both Scappi and Vasari, the model of ideal moral conduct would have been that prescribed in Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier (1528), the most widely read book of manners of its age. In the realm of professional performance, one imagines the artist and the cook, like the courtier, aiming to comport themselves with the sprezzatura, or seemingly effortless nonchalance, that Castiglione recommends.

Portraits of Professionals

Significantly, Scappi’s Opera and Vasari’s Vite were among the first books of their kind to contain engraved portraits of their authors on the title page. Although Vasari’s is a self-portrait, the two likenesses (figures 1 and 2) are remarkably similar in composition and mood. Each is set within an elaborately framed oval format with a stemma, or coat of arms, adjoining the portrait.
In both woodcuts, the men appear bust length, their heads turned slightly to the right. Each sports the full beard fashionable in their day, and both are attired like gentlemen, thereby deflecting our attention from the professional worlds in which they made their living. Throughout the Lives, Vasari followed the physiognomic theories popular at the time, at one point even remarking, “The outer man tends to be a guide to the inner, and to reveal what our minds are.” In drawing each of the volumes’ 144 portraits, he created likenesses that serve as parallel texts to the biographies. Viewing the images of Vasari and Scappi together suggests certain visual/textual analogies. Apart from their common preference for courtly dress, their facial expressions share an intelligent, alert, and self-conscious demeanor. Scappi’s professional ideals of “serious,” “sober,” “prudent,”
and “modest” behavior resonate in both portraits. Although neither man was of high birth, each presents himself as the embodiment of the noble virtues that Castiglione praised in the *Book of the Courtier*.

Portraiture and self-portraiture were primary expressions of Renaissance humanism and hubris. Portraits, in particular, grew more numerous as social conventions trickled down from the upper classes, extending the reach of the genre beyond princes and cardinals to include bankers, businessmen, and even members of the artisanal class. As far as the evidence suggests, many years would pass before cooks would be commemorated in this fashion, but painters began to include themselves as bystanders in narrative paintings as early as the 1420s. Among the first to do so was Masaccio (1401–28), one of the founding fathers of Renaissance pictorialism. In one of the frescoes he painted in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence—a commission that proved to be the most important of his brief career—Masaccio favored his Carmelite patrons and the public at large with a portrait of himself and four shadowy associates standing in the company of Saint Peter (figure 3). The artist appears in the scene showing Saint Peter being enthroned as bishop of Antioch, the saint’s reward for performing the series of miracles depicted elsewhere in the chapel. At the time, the picture’s convincing reenactment of human behavior, no less than its mastery of linear and atmospheric perspective, must itself have seemed like a miracle. Masaccio stands proudly to the side as if to acknowledge the audience’s acclaim for this tour de force of pictorial illusionism. He does not take all the credit, however, for three of his four companions are also identifiable as progressive artists. Standing in front of the master is his collaborator, Masolino, a diminutive painter literally overshadowed by Masaccio’s achievement. Standing behind him are the theoretician Leon Battista Alberti and the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, the presumed discoverer of linear perspective. Curiously, the facial features of the fifth man are invisible. Who might he be? In all likelihood, he personifies the medium of sculpture, the only art form not represented in this avant-garde cast of Renaissance artists. Since Lorenzo Ghiberti (c. 1381–1455) and the man known as Donatello (1386–1466) were both deserving of the honor, Masaccio may have sought to avoid giving offense by depicting neither.
FIGURE 3. Masaccio, detail from the
*Raising of the Son of Theophilus.*
Mise-en-scène portraits and self-portraits remained popular throughout the Renaissance. Later in the quattrocento, Botticelli included himself among the noble bystanders in his Adoration of the Magi, now in the Uffizi, whereas Ghirlandaio appears as a passerby in the Visitation fresco in the Tornabuoni Chapel in Santa Maria Novella. Sixteenth-century artists tended to make these appearances more meaningful by casting themselves or their peers in narrative roles. The most famous of such historiated or disguised portraits are in Raphael’s frescoes in the Vatican Stanze, begun in 1508 at the brightest moment of the High Renaissance. These images constitute more than clever omaggi to deserving friends or rivals because...
they are, in fact, key elements in a program that emphasizes the unity of past and present in the classical and Christian worlds. The message of the *School of Athens* (figure 4) is one of reincarnation, specifically the notion that the enlightened papacy of Julius II (who reigned from 1503 to 1513) had engendered a revival of ancient learning and ideals in the artists and savants of his era. Thus, Plato, who stands under the central arch carrying the *Timaeus* under his arm, is represented as Leonardo da Vinci, whereas in the foreground, the seated Heraclitus (to the left of center) and the stooping Euclid (at the right) portray Michelangelo and Bramante, respectively. Raphael, for his part, stands at the extreme right and gazes out at the viewer with the proud expression of someone blessed with a natural sense of *sprezzatura*.

Later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the fashion was for artists to paint themselves less heroically. Michelangelo did so most famously in the *Last Judgment* by modeling the face of the flayed Saint Bartolomew after his own likeness. Caravaggio, ever aware of his art-historical predecessors, also portrayed himself as the victim in the *David and Goliath* (figure 5) he painted around 1609–10 for Cardinal Scipione Borghese in Rome. At the time, Caravaggio was in Naples—having fled the papal city after committing a murder several years earlier—and had a death sentence hanging over his head. Given that Scipione's uncle, Pope Paul V, was about to consider the artist's petition for a pardon that would have allowed him to return to Rome, Caravaggio's decision to portray himself as the vanquished Goliath may, in effect, have proffered his fictive head in place of his real one. The mise-en-scène would thus have constituted a pungent conceit in which the personal needs of the artist outweighed those of the narrative. In the end, the pope granted the pardon, but in a final and tragic irony, the artist died while making the circuitous journey back to Rome. The mordant wit of Caravaggio's plea was not lost on Scipione's favorite sculptor, the young Gianlorenzo Bernini. Engaging in some interpictorial play of his own, Bernini went on to fashion a *David* for the Borghese Collection in which he depicted himself as the victor.
Artistic self-expression became increasingly important in Mannerist and Baroque painting, as did the market for self-portraits. The trend reached a climax in later seventeenth-century Florence when Cardinal Leopoldo de’ Medici decided to house his collection of self-portraits in the so-called Vasari Corridor, the long passageway that crosses the Arno River and links the Uffizi to the Boboli Gardens.

No equivalent means of self-expression was available to those who plied their trade in the kitchen. Authors of culinary treatises were better remembered than cooks, particularly after the middle of the sixteenth century, when texts like Vincenzo Cervio’s Il trinciante (The Carver, 1580) or Giovanni Batista Rossetti’s Dello scalco (The Steward, 1584) began to promote the individual skills of their authors. About the same time, printed portraits like Scappi’s became standard on the frontispieces of cookbooks.

Maestro Martino has been called “the first celebrity chef,” but Platina was almost certainly the first to have his portrait painted. He kneels before Pope Sixtus IV in Melozzo da Forli’s famous fresco of 1477 in the Vatican Palace, not to receive recognition for his culinary achievements, however, but to enjoy the honor of having been named prefect of the papal library a year or two earlier. Because Renaissance portraits generally eschewed individual professional attributes in favor of fashionable social conventions, the identity of middle-class sitters could easily be lost after their likenesses ceased to be family property. Thus, we cannot discount the possibility that portraits of early cooks lurk among the countless anonimi and ignoti that populate galleries of Renaissance painting.

Although portraits of individual cooks were rare, generic depictions became common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nearly a third of the engravings in Scappi’s Opera depict men (never women) at work in kitchens. The figures are fairly nondescript and their clothing typical of their social class. Men attired in similar jackets, breeches, and caps are among the tradesmen Annibale Carracci sketched in the 1580s and those whom Cesare Vecellio included in his famous costume book of 1590. In Scappi’s renderings, only the aprons around the men’s waists

FIGURE 5. (Opposite) Caravaggio, David and Goliath.
give a clue to their vocation. Whereas Italian artists had no hesitation
ridiculing individuals who sold food in the marketplace—a topic I explore
in chapter 5—they seem to have treated those who prepared it with more
respect. In this regard, the contrast with attitudes in northern Europe is
rather striking. An engraving by Albrecht Dürer from around 1510 (figure
6) depicts an overweight cook standing next to his prim wife and looking a
little tipsy. The association of cooks with drunkenness in northern culture
seems to have originated much earlier. The medieval phrase “a temperance
of cooks” is heavy with sarcasm, and in more than one of the Canterbury
Tales (1387–1400), Chaucer writes of a cook who “loved the tavern better
than the shop” or “gets so drunk he falls off his horse.”

Overindulgence in food and drink would remain central to the folk cul-

Figure 6. Albrecht Dürer, Cook.
ture of northern Europe for centuries to come. Rabelais made banquet imagery a key element in the grotesque realism of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, and artists tapped the comedic and allegorical possibilities of comestible imagery, especially in scenes of seasonal feasts and festivities. Among the twelve “months” depicted by the German artist Joachim von Sandrart in 1642 for the dining room of Prince Maximilian of Bavaria was a cook who personified the month of February (figure 7). Though the man appears to be sober, observers would have seen his ample girth and jolly nature as natural signs of the hearty appetites they attributed to those in his profession.

Italian artists of the Renaissance by and large shunned the somatic imagery so common in the post-Reformation north in favor of other types of wit and humor. While Scappi depicted anonymous cooks at work in the kitchen (as in figure 8, for example), the earliest identifiable likeness of an Italian cook dates from the early eighteenth century, long after painters had risen to prominence on stages of their own. This work is not an oil painting but a drawing (figure 9), and happily the artist, the celebrated Roman caricaturist Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674–1755), inscribed the sheet’s verso with the following notation:

*Portrait of Marco Ballarini,*
*Cook of Giovanni Leoni*
*Made by me Pier Leone Ghezzi*
*On May 27, 1707*

Because Ballarini, like Leoni, was otherwise destined to remain in the historical shadows, we have no way of knowing how imaginative or memorable his culinary creations were. He is dressed in a gentleman’s frock coat but stands before the fireplace in his master’s kitchen holding an empty pot and spoon with a full array of cooking utensils visible behind him. Ghezzi emphasized the man’s dominance over his craft and his humanity over any demonstration of professional skill. In setting and mood, the portrait of Ballarini resembles Nicolas Poussin’s canonical self-portrait (figure 10) from 1650. Both figures express a degree of self-consciousness that borders on diffidence, if not outright reluctance. Poussin was unusual.
FIGURE 7. (Opposite) Joachim von Sandrart, Allegory of the Month of February.

FIGURE 8. (Above) Bartolomeo Scappi, a cook in his kitchen, from L’opera dell’arte del cucinare.
in his time—at least among male artists—in portraying himself so matter-of-factly amid the artifacts of his studio rather than as a gentleman or man of leisure. In contrast, Ballarini, like so many premodern female artists who painted themselves before an easel, was probably only too pleased to be remembered for his accomplishments in the kitchen. Ghezzi, for his part, exploited the informality of the drawing medium over the course of his long career, filling several albums with caricatures of individuals in every walk of life. Along with his portrayals of churchmen and aristocrats, he occasionally depicted craftsmen and common laborers, and by chance, his drawing of Ballarini now finds itself in the company of a stonemason named “Beretta” in the same American museum.

Social Inversions

The sixteenth century witnessed upheavals in the social order that manifested themselves in a variety of cultural expressions. These, for the most part, rejected the reasoned ideals of the High Renaissance for ones of a more whimsical or irrational nature. Parmigianino’s Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror and Cellini’s gold saltcellar (which I discuss in chapter 8; see figure 69), like Scappi’s description of edible table decorations or menus that include fish molded in the shape of a goat’s head, reflect the capricious wit, even the perversity, of the Mannerist age. Professional identities were equally unstable. The phenomenon is particularly evident in Tomaso Garzoni’s encyclopedic treatise Universal Piazza of All the Professions of the World, first published in Venice in 1585 and reprinted no fewer than twenty-eight times over the next century. Cooks and painters are among the 150 professions the author catalogues and presents to the reader, in an order so random as to defy traditional hierarchies of “high” and “low” vocations. In taking this approach, the Universal Piazza reflects the general leveling of professions—or aristocratic anxieties about such leveling—that characterized the culture of late-Renaissance Italy in general. Although Garzoni’s tone is serious, his remarks are often comical—
for instance, when he hails cooks as “philosophers” and mocks lawyers as “pig gellers.” The author’s learning is equally obvious in his regular references to classical sources. He cites Athenaeus’s *Deipnosophistae* (*Sophists at Dinner*) in support of his recommendation that the ideal cook be versed in medicine, music, astrology, architecture, and nature as well as in philosophy. Elsewhere in the same chapter, Garzoni compares the cook to a military commander and cooking to the military arts. And if that analogy were not enough, he goes on to liken them to “prelates” of a scullery crew and Turkish functionaries who rule a domestic domain:

Rais (naval captains) in charge of the servants, Eunuchs of the house commanding respect, Pashas in control of the wine, Janizaries in charge of the keys, Viziers entrusted with securing the house, in sum, like so many Bellerbei (governors) in being held in the highest regard.

Losing all touch with reality, Garzoni ends the chapter with an allusion to the cook as master of the legendary land of Cockaigne:

Therefore the most illustrious *panigoni* [gluttons] of Cockaigne go about their business proud and haughty, because they are the *capi* of the pantry, *padroni* of the cellars, *overseers* of the kitchens, *regents* of salami, *jailers* of prosciutto, *captains* of grease, *master executioners* of meat balls. . . . May everyone take off his hat to the cook, because his majesty among other things has dealings with the Emperor Suleiman and . . . it is necessary to stroke him so that he not sometimes mix the alms-box with the kitchen pots.38

What cooks thought of such hyperbole about their profession will never be known. Garzoni’s portrait of painters, however, was rather less fanciful, even somewhat prosaic.39 With tangible evidence like Vasari’s *Lives* available for consideration—not to mention the paintings themselves—he clearly had less need for fictional embellishment. In real life, of course, painters had little hesitation in creating myths and inversions of their own.
Beyond private musings in the studio, membership in one of the academies could also inspire a fictive identity. Academies were fraternal organizations that proliferated during the sixteenth century to promote conversation among like-minded individuals. In truth, the visual arts occupied a fairly marginal position among them, but two institutions, the Accademia del Disegno in Florence (founded in 1562) and the Accademia di San Luca in Rome (founded in 1593), represented the interests of artists exclusively.40 Like most academies, these groups were at first loosely organized, but over time, they became elaborately rule-bound. As academic strictures grew tighter, more unruly spirits were moved to rebel, leading them to create so-called counteracademies. This phenomenon again originated with free-thinking literati before eventually extending to artists, but it proved to be the inspiration for some of the period’s most bizarre professional inversions.

The Roman Accademia dei Vignaiuoli, or Academy of Vintners, was a case in point. Founded in the 1530s, it was a center for burlesque poetry of a homoerotic nature that frequently took the clergy as its target. Poets like Francesco Berni and Francesco Molza—both of whom I discuss in chapter 5—were especially adept at casting fruits and vegetables as sexual metaphors in innocent-sounding verses like “Ode to the Peach.” In contrast, the inversions of academic painters rarely carried similar erotic intent; they generally seemed more interested in the rituals of eating and drinking.41 One particularly imaginative example was the Accademia della Valle di Bregno, a Milanese “academy” that pretended to reside in the Val di Bregno, a picturesque region of southern Switzerland whose inscrutable dialect the group adopted as its official language. The choice of Bregno (or Blenio, as it was also called) was not just a matter of whimsy, for the region supplied many of the facchini, or wine porters, of Milan. Accordingly, the organization’s seal depicted the god of wine riding in a chariot drawn by tigers with the motto “Bacco inspiratori,” and its regular programming included mock-Dionysiac drinking rituals.

Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo was the most famous artist to belong to the Accademia della Valle di Bregno, which at its height numbered more than
a hundred members. In 1568, he was inaugurated as its second elected director, or “abbot,” and it is in this role that he appears in a self-portrait now in the Brera Museum (figure 11). Self-portraits, as we have seen, were commonplace in the period, but Lomazzo’s compact image carries

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an unusually complex iconography. Numerous interpretations of it have focused on the symbolism of his bizarre costume and attributes, but most would agree that the allusions primarily center on Bacchus as protector of the academy.42

Even more dedicated to subverting academic procedures and social decorum was the society of Dutch and Flemish painters in Rome known as the Schildersbent.43 Founded around 1620 and disbanded by papal decree a century later, this group of artists also called itself the Bentvueghels (birds of a feather), and in its prime, numbered over two hundred members. The polemical nature of the organization was twofold: in addition to refusing to pay annual taxes to the Accademia di San Luca, as was required by law after 1633, the members favored genre scenes that, by Italian standards, were “low” in both subject matter and style. Typically their work combined a fascination with everyday life with contempt for the classical tradition. Membership in the Schildersbent was attended by a set of arcane initiation rituals that aimed to undermine any social pretensions the enrollee might possess. As contemporary witnesses describe this so-called rite of baptism, the initiate first had to stand in a darkened room and undergo a test of courage that might involve gunpowder explosions or frightening ghostly apparitions. Next he had to kneel—in some cases naked—while one of the members intoned “mysterious” words and poured wine over his head. The wine that dripped from his face was then collected in a goblet and given to the novice to drink. The entire affair was presided over by a veldpaap, or field pope, whose presence underlined the parodic nature of the ceremony.

With the initiation came the bestowal of a nickname that typically alluded to a personality trait of the groentje, or greenhorn. Most were harmless enough, but demeaning aliases like “Elephant” and “Ferret” or “Crab” and “Goatsbeard” were not uncommon either. Indeed, the popular name Bamboccianti has been given to those Bentvueghels who worked in the manner of Van Laer, a man whose physical deformity led to his nickname of Bamboccio, or “Clumsy Puppet.”44
The Bentvueghels’ initiation ceremony was a banquet, paid for by the initiate, that could last an entire night and day (“il meno 24 hore,” according to a contemporary Italian source). As one might imagine, the wine flowed freely at such events, which typically ended with the participants stumbling out of the inn after daybreak to make their way across Rome to what they mistakenly believed was the Temple of Bacchus (actually the mausoleum of Santa Costanza), where they poured libations on the supposed grave of the god. Finally, as the party drew to an end, the initiates committed more enduring acts of desecration by affixing their signatures and sobriquets to the walls of the ancient structure.

The Bentvueghels, of course, were not Italian, but their subversions of the prevailing artistic and social proprieties were symptomatic of the self-indulgence and lassitude of the Baroque age as a whole. With them, the Renaissance project came full circle. If as painters they were indifferent to the antiquarian longings and traditional iconographies of previous centuries, they owed their existence to the Renaissance invention, or re-invention, of free will. In a period when food became cuisine and virtuoso cooks were poised to become chefs, painters in general—a narcissistic crowd to begin with—increasingly looked to themselves as the subject of their narratives. By the middle of the seventeenth century, practitioners of both professions, whether expressing their artistry on canvas or at the dinner table, had brought the hedonism and hubris of the Renaissance to the point of no return.