

# Introduction

## Modern Lives – Modern Legends: artist anecdotes since the eighteenth century

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### **An idiosyncratic genre**

In John Nichols' *Biographical Anecdotes of William Hogarth* (1781) the author relates the story of how the painter died in the arms of his servant, his demise the result of overindulging in beefsteak. Death from overeating: it is not the most dignified end for the gluttonous artist whose fate has both a comical and a tragic streak - during the feast, Hogarth had still boasted that 'no man in England had a stomach like his'.<sup>1</sup>

Fifty years later, a biography of John Flaxman tells of how the artist, when still a child, busied himself with copying the images from a drawing manual he owned. One day he showed the fruits of his labour to a famous painter who happened to pass by, but the aspiring young boy got dismissed: the famous master asked whether his drawings were meant to represent flounders.<sup>2</sup>

Both anecdotes have one thing in common, apart from painting a rather dire picture of the abilities and mores of their protagonists: they are clearly recognizable as re-adaptations of traditional artist anecdotes which had been repeated countless times since the trecento. Nichols' story refers ironically to Vasari's description of Leonardo's death in the arms of the French King. What was, in the original tale, a mark of upward social mobility and intimacy with the highest of rulers becomes a comical and slightly sad story in Nichols'. It is ironic that the iconic English roast – celebrated by Hogarth in paintings like 'Ye roastbeef of old England' – here becomes less token of national pride than agent of demise. Nichols, it would seem, emphasises a physiological and ethical gap between the staunch Englishman Hogarth and ancient heroes such as Theseus, who (as another anecdote related by Pausanias has it) was raised on beefsteak and not rose petals.<sup>3</sup>

Flaxman's 'flounders' are an equally ironic take on the legend of Giotto's discovery by Cimabue – though this time ending on an anti-climax. Again, the gist of the story is that the very deficiency that the story highlights – Flaxman's 'flatness' – later becomes the hallmark of his outline-focused style. Far from simply providing

<sup>1</sup> John Nichols, *Biographical Anecdotes of William Hogarth; and a Catalogue of his Works Chronologically Arranged; with Occasional Remarks*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: John Nichols, 1785, 94. Cf. Karen Junod, *Writing the Lives of Painters. Biography and Artistic Identity in Britain 1760-1810*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011, 118.

<sup>2</sup> 'A Brief Memoir of the Author', in John Flaxman, *Lectures on Sculpture*, London: John Murray, 1829, xii. See the essay by Greg Sullivan in this edited collection.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Johannes Myssok, 'Canovas Theseus – ein kolossales Missverständnis', *Jahrbuch des kunsthistorischen Museums Wien* 11 (2009), 191.

entertainment, these stories thus offer an opportunity for succinct commentary on the respective artist's work – the 'Englishness' of Hogarth and the 'flatness' of Flaxman. And yet they seem very untypical examples for the genre of 'artist anecdotes'. In the famous and influential Vasarian tradition of the genre there is a clear preference for a rhetorical framing of the 'artist as hero', who eventually overcomes all obstacles holding him back on his path to excellence.<sup>4</sup> As Catherine Soussloff has argued: 'all literary and historical approaches to or representations of the artist that return to the site of early modern *Lives* of artists will persist in supporting the mythical status of the artist in society'.<sup>5</sup>

In the examples cited, little would suggest such a reading; Flaxman and Hogarth both appear as slightly comical figures whose artistic achievements are characterized in an ambiguous light. As Werner Busch has suggested, the anti-idealistic artistic principles pursued by artists such as Flaxman and Hogarth also demanded new life stories, marking the frictions and tensions that came with their departure from academic traditions.<sup>6</sup> Both artists are shown as fallible and all-too-human, giving a pithy commentary on the peculiarities (rather than excellences) of their art, and showing art writing engaging with moments of doubt, license, and idiosyncrasy.

Recent years have seen a surge in publications on the literary creativity and multifaceted rhetorical means employed in art historiography, soon novelistic, soon fictional and experimental.<sup>7</sup> Especially the rich well of art writing from eighteenth-century Britain has attracted scholarly attention, with authors such as Werner Busch and Karen Junod analyzing in sophistication and detail the innovations and transformations of anecdotal writing in this period, and the art-theoretical positions explored through these stories.<sup>8</sup> There is also a growing number of publications surveying the reception of individual artists, and the legends attached to their lives.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Robert Folkenflik, 'The Artist as Hero in the Eighteenth Century', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 12 (1982), 91-108.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist. The Historiography of a Concept*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Werner Busch, 'Gainsborough's "Blue Boy": Sinnstiftung durch Farbe', *Stüdel Jahrbuch*, NF17, 1999, 333 ('Es wäre dringend erforderlich, daß die Überfülle der englischen Künstleranekdoten des 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhunderts als literarische Gattung untersucht würde, denn im Gegensatz zu dem von Kris und Kurz untersuchten älteren, rhetorisch determinierten Material, schreiben sie zwar kunsttheoretische Topik fort, sind aber zugleich in verstärktem Maße Markierungen neuer, antiakademischer oder zumindest gebrochen idealistischer Positionen').

<sup>7</sup> See for example Mark Ledbury, ed., *Fictions of Art History*, Williamstown/MA: Clark Institute, 2013; Catherine Grant and Patricia Rubin, *Creative Writing and Art History*. Special Issue of *Art History* 34.2, April 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Busch, 'Gainsborough's "Blue Boy"'; Junod, *Writing the Lives of Painters*. See also Emmanuelle Hénin, François Lecerle, Lise Wajeman, eds, *La théorie subreptice: les anecdotes dans la théorie de l'art (XVIe - XVIIIe siècles)*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Michael Thimann and Christine Hübner, eds, *Sterbliche Götter. Raffael und Dürer in der Kunst der deutschen Romantik*, Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2015; Michael Yonan, *Messerschmidt's Character Heads. Maddening Sculpture and the Writing of Art History*, New York: Routledge, 2018.

This collection of essays aims to take up this cue and explores the revisions and re-adaptations of traditional artist anecdotes and their function in the literary and art-theoretical context of their time. What was the purpose of such re-writings? How does this flood of new anecdotes relate and react to the rise of 'scholarly' biographical writing? Which art-theoretical subtexts were carried in these ironic deflections from tradition? And how do they intersect with the equally prominent rise of depictions of anecdotal scenes from artists' lives?

The contributions provisionally map this terrain and re-assess the status of artist anecdotes for the art literature (and artistic production) from the eighteenth century to the establishment of art history as an academic discipline. In exploring this topic, the edited collection attempts to develop a fresh perspective on the evolution of different genres of art writing, the literary dynamics of art historical discourse, and the professionalization of art writing.

### **Artist anecdotes between myth and literature**

Artist anecdotes have proven a fertile ground for the historiography of art literature over the last hundred years. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, in their groundbreaking primer *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (1934), have demonstrated that artist anecdotes are to be read as rhetorical texts that draw upon traditional anecdotal motives for explaining and exploring 'the riddle of the artist's creative activity'.<sup>10</sup> Instead of providing an accurate historical account of the life of an artist, anecdotal writing is more akin to myth in that it provides an explanatory story that aims to elucidate said 'riddle'. By elevating the artist to a heroic if not magically-gifted figure, anecdotes provide a mythology for the explanation of the essence of artistic creation.

Kris and Kurz' argument was primarily concerned with the genre of the *Wanderanekdote* (wandering anecdote<sup>11</sup>) – the phenomenon that 'biographical themes ( ... ) can be traced back, point by point, to the god- and hero-filled world before the dawn of history'.<sup>12</sup> This approach is undeniably indebted to Kris' and Kurz' teacher, Julius von Schlosser – author of the seminal *Die Kunstliteratur* (1924) and pioneer of so many research strands in art historiography.<sup>13</sup> Schlosser had already outlined how ancient artist anecdotes circulated in artist's studios and were adopted by art

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, New Haven / London: Yale Univ. Press, 1979, 132.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of terminology see Heinz Grothe, *Anekdoten*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984, 143 et seq. It seems unclear when and where 'Wanderanekdote' was first used as a technical term in philology; one (not very academic) candidate quoted by many authors is William Lewis Hertslet, *Der Treppenwitz der Weltgeschichte*, Berlin: Haude, 1912. By the 1920s, the term is fairly commonly used in scholarship on ancient and folk traditions, e.g. Heinrich Lessmann, *Der deutsche Volksmund im Lichte der Sage*, Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1922, 388 (with some remarks on the frequently imprecise use of terminology).

<sup>12</sup> Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> For Schlosser see most recently the special issue of *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. LXVI, 2019 (forthcoming), edited by Sebastian Schütze with contributions by Michael Thimann, Marthe Kretschmar, Hubert Locher and Raphael Rosenberg.

writers in the Renaissance and beyond.<sup>14</sup> Focusing on the *Wanderanekdote* means focusing on the persistence of anecdotes throughout history, and to theorize the genre as survivals from a 'legendary past, in which the image of the artist originated'. Kris and Kurz's book is proudly international in focus and argues against the exclusivity of the Western tradition, founded in Grecian antiquity. Instead, the authors highlight the parallels between Western and 'oriental', especially far-Eastern art writing, thus arguing for a certain anthropological universality of the 'legend about the artist'.<sup>15</sup>

In many respects, Kris and Kurz's book is a characteristic child of its time, reacting to a burgeoning field of research into literary anecdotes. In the early 1900s, 'anecdotes' and other 'simple forms' of literature were one of the most popular research topics in disciplines such as German literature studies and ethnography.<sup>16</sup> Scholars such as the literary anthropologist Robert Petsch argued that anecdotes, alongside genres like folk legends and ballads, were among the 'Urformen des Erzählens' – the 'primal forms of narrative'.<sup>17</sup> Rooted in folk tradition, anecdotes were seen as prime sources for an anthropology of literature that uncovered the most deep-seated beliefs about the fabric of society and culture. The long-term impact of such hypothesis are still to be found in more recent art historiographical literature on the subject, such as Catherine Soussloff's *The Absolute Artist*, who characterises the earliest artist anecdotes as 'cells', as narrative units that 'survive' throughout history with remarkable consistency.<sup>18</sup> Such *Wanderanekdoten* are thus explicitly seen as foundational, anthropological documents of civilization, again bringing them closer to the category of 'myth' than literature.

Yet, as the two introductory anecdotes might have indicated, eighteenth-century artist anecdotes mark a significant departure from this somewhat essentialist view, and suggest a more reflective and less mythologized view of the tradition of artist anecdotes – a shift in perspective undoubtedly also facilitated by

<sup>14</sup> 'Überall, wo sich ein reiches, persönliches Kunstleben entfaltet hat, wie später in Florenz oder in den Niederlanden, zeigt sich diese Neigung des Publikums, das Leben und Schaffen seiner Helden in intimer Weise sich anzueignen ( ... ) in häufig trefflich erzählten, mit griechischer Fabulierkunst erfundenen und erborgten Geschichten oder Bonmots' (Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur. Ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, Wien: Schroll, 1924, 10. See also Julius von Schlosser, 'Zur Geschichte der Kunsthistoriographie. Die florentinische Künstleranekdote', in *Präludien. Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Berlin: Bard, 1927, 248-261.

<sup>15</sup> Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> See Heinz Schlaffer, 'Anekdote', in *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1997, 87-89. On the notion of 'simple forms': Andre Jolles, *Simple Forms. Legend, Saga, Myth, Riddle, Saying, Case, Memorabile, Fairytale, Joke*, trans. Peter J. Schwartz, London: Verso, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Petsch, *Wesen und Formen der Erzählkunst*, Halle/Saale: Niemeyer, 1934 (2nd ed. 1942).

<sup>18</sup> Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, 139. Soussloff explicitly follows Kris/Kurz in this, who characterised anecdotes equally as 'primitive cells' (97).

the rapid rise of print culture in the eighteenth century, and an ever-expanding audience consuming a wide variety of print media.<sup>19</sup>

The eighteenth century has long been acknowledged as a period that saw an unprecedented rise in interest in biographical writing, and put the genre on new foundations, leading to an 'explosion in both the kinds and the sheer numbers of life narratives'.<sup>20</sup> Biographical writing – the art of 'representing man in the conditions of his time', as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe phrased it – became key for understanding the past, with the individual life seen as mirror of the spirit of the age.<sup>21</sup> But, as a reviewer of Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography wrote in 1771, biography was also commonly considered as the genre that is 'most entertaining and instructive'.<sup>22</sup> A similar approach to this genre is also found in Johann Gottfried Herder, who wrote in a comment on Pierre Bayle's notoriously controversial (but also highly diverting) *Dictionnaire historique et critique*: 'Since his dictionary contains such a cosmos of life stories of famous individuals, with unexpected treasures of useful truths, facts, remarkable fates, sometimes even curiosities and little flavours of suggestive stories on certain times and classes – how could it possibly have lacked readers?'<sup>23</sup> Samuel Johnson concurred with Herder and claimed that Bayle's *Dictionnaire* is a 'very useful work for those to consult the biographical part of literature, which is what I love most'.<sup>24</sup> Again, the entertaining nature of biographical writing is evidently what drove readers in scores to the blossoming genre of anecdotal life writing. The incredible spurt of publications with 'anecdote' in their title (Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England* are just the best-known example) are testimony to the raising awareness of the literary potential of such a polite and entertaining genre.

At the same time – and intrinsically connected with these developments – the genre of the anecdote underwent a profound re-definition. Towards the

<sup>19</sup> On eighteenth-century print culture and history of reading see for example Ian Jackson, 'Approaches to the History of Readers and Reading in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Historical Journal*, 47, 2004, 1041-54; James Raven, 'New Reading Histories, Print Culture and the Identification of Change: The Case of Eighteenth-Century England', *Social History* 23.3, 1998, 268-287. For references relevant to art literature more specifically see Francis Haskell, 'The old masters in nineteenth-century French painting', *The Art Quarterly* 34.1, 1971, 79.

<sup>20</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography. A Guide for Interpreting Live Narratives*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010, 115. See also: Olaf Hähner, *Historische Biographik. Die Entwicklung einer geschichtswissenschaftlichen Darstellungsform von der Antike bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt a. M. et. al.: Peter Lang, 1999, 68.

<sup>21</sup> '( ... ) den Menschen in seinen Zeitverhältnissen darzustellen' (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, (Goethe's Werke, vol. 24), Stuttgart and Tübingen: Cotta, 1829), 7; for Goethe, this crucially also worked the other way round, with ingenious individuals such as Winckelmann seen as the key figures defining the 'spirit of the age', cf. Goethe, *Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*, Tübingen: Cotta, 1805.

<sup>22</sup> Anon., 'The Life of Benvenuto Cellini', *Critical Review*, July 1771, 30. Cf. Junod, *Writing the Lives of Painters*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Herder, 'Adraesta', Leipzig 1801-3, in *ibid.*, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 23, Berlin: Weidmann, 1877, 86, cf. Hähner, *Historische Biographik*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> This passage from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* was also quoted in most reviews, e.g. *Critical Review*, September 1791, 263.

eighteenth century, the anecdote gained a decidedly biographical bend, as a 'secret history' from the private life of a public figure, often serving little more than a sentimental purpose. As an eighteenth-century author defined the genre: they are 'occurrences that belong to the private, not the public life of eminent men', and are interesting in as far they 'illustrate their character, their manners, and make us acquainted with their spirit'.<sup>25</sup> Our modern notion of 'anecdote' as a pithy, revealing, and characteristic event in a person's life<sup>26</sup> came into being in the eighteenth century. Up to this point it had little to do with *biographies*; it was perfectly possible to write a book on 'Physical Anecdotes of Natural History'.<sup>27</sup> The remarkable semantic shift can be concisely illustrated by comparing two entries from *Adelung*, the reference dictionary of the German tongue. In its first edition, 'anecdote' was defined in the classical sense, as a 'secret history': 'a secret, unknown circumstance, a matter that is meant to remain unknown'.<sup>28</sup> The second edition in 1793 however defines it as 'a small unimportant aspect of private life'.<sup>29</sup>

All this should encourage to look at artist anecdotes less as a 'timeless' carrier of art theoretical *topoi*, but to focus on anecdotes as a literary genre and its situatedness in the publishing market and social historical background of its time. We propose to assess this genre dynamic and growing consciousness about art historiography as a literary tradition with regard to three interconnected themes: (I) the audiences for anecdotal art writing; (II) anecdotes and artistic traditions; and (III) the shifting role of artist anecdotes vis à vis the emergence of 'academic' art history.

### (I) Audiences – decoding anecdotes

Revisiting the two anecdotes on Flaxman and Hogarth quoted at the beginning of this introduction, one thing is notable: in order to understand the wit of the respective story, the reader needs to be fairly well acquainted with the early modern tradition of artist' *vite*. Both anecdotes are appealing only to those 'in the know' who can 'decode' the references. The story about Flaxman's flounders is simply unintelligible and puzzling for a reader who doesn't see the intertext. These are anecdotes written for the connoisseur of art literature – which indicates at the very

<sup>25</sup> Johann Adam Hiller, *Anecdotes zur Lebensgeschichte großer Regenten und berühmter Staatsmänner*, vol. 1, Leipzig: Lankische Buchhandlung, 1766, quoted after Sonja Hilzinger, *Anekdotisches Erzählen im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, Stuttgart: M&P, 1997, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Herder defined the anecdote as 'a characteristic expression of heart or mind of a person' ('eine charakterisierende Herzens- oder Geistesäußerung einer Person'), cf. E. Rohmer, 'Anekdoten', in Gert Ueding, ed., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 1, Darmstadt: WBG, 1992, 567.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Antoine Boulanger, 'Anecdotes physiques de l'histoire de la nature', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Pierre Boutin, Paris: H. Champion, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Johann Christoph Adelung, *Versuch eines vollständigen grammatisch-kritischen Wörterbuches der hochdeutschen Mundart, mit beständiger Vergleichung der übrigen Mundarten. Besonders aber der oberdeutschen*, Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf und Sohn, 1774, Vol. I, 251.

<sup>29</sup> Johann Christoph Adelung, *Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch der hochdeutschen Mundarten, besonders aber der Oberdeutschen*, Leipzig: J. G. I. Breitkopf, 1793, Vol. I, 284.

least that there was a substantial body of readers that was acquainted with this literature. Further evidence for this is given by books such as William Beckford's *Biographical Memoirs*: the young author here penned a series of fictional 'lives' of artists, all drawing in a satirical way on the early modern canon of artist anecdotes.<sup>30</sup> Again, these parodies only make sense for a reader familiar with the Vasarian blueprints behind it.

This allows for a fresh perspective on the different audiences of artistic literature since the eighteenth century. As Karen Junod has argued, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century artistic biographies were authored 'by a highly heterogeneous authorial community and usually intended for a no less highly diverse readership'.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, the abounding popularity of artist's anecdotes is a prime example for the rapidly increasing reading public in the eighteenth century. But there were also limitations to the popular appeal of artist anecdotes. One attempt to bring the genre to a wider audience is discussed in the essay by **Hans C. Hönes**. In 1739, the engraver and author Georg Wolfgang Knorr published a 'dialogue of the dead' between Albrecht Dürer and Raphael, who meet and converse in heaven. Knorr turned to one of the most popular genres of the day, clearly hoping to appeal to the wide and diverse readership that consumed such publications – unsuccessfully, as it turned out.

Knorr's case confirms the abovementioned impression of art writing as a confined field, appealing to those in the know. This is also emphasised from a different angle by **Mark Ledbury's** essay on William Hazlitt's *Conversations of James Northcote RA* (1830). Ledbury analyses the cultural and political subtexts that are indicated in many of Hazlitt's seemingly innocuous anecdotes, highlighting that not every anecdotal *vita* that has artists as its protagonists was primarily intended as an intervention in artistic discourses. Hazlitt's and Northcote's many references to contemporary politics and qualms between different individuals on the cultural scene highlight the often-understudied ephemeral moments in art writing, designed as interventions in the literary arena of the day. Instead of negotiating universal 'truths' they are contingent, incidental, and context-dependant.

## (II) *Negotiating traditions - 'transforming' anecdotes*

The creative and intentional reception and re-writing of traditional artist anecdotes and *topoi* has, as said, one prerequisite, namely the familiarity with and accessibility of the canonical life writings from Vasari to van Mander and beyond. Since the mid-eighteenth century numerous translators and editors produced and published a range of inexpensive editions of these books in all European vernaculars, thus

<sup>30</sup> [William Beckford], *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters*, London, J. Robson, 1780. See Junod, *Writing the Lives of Painters*, ch. 2; Laurent Chatel, 'Subverting "Lives of Artists"'. William Beckford's memoirs of extraordinary painters (1780)', in Anne-Pascale Bruneau-Rumsey, Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada, Shannon Wells-Lassagne, eds, *Ecrire l'art*, Paris, Mare & Matin, 2015, 87-100.

<sup>31</sup> Junod, *Writing the Lives of Painters*, 7.

enabling a wide popular reception of these works.<sup>32</sup> By the 1850s Vasari's *Vite* were available in all major European languages such as German, English and French.<sup>33</sup> Vasari's model became the obligatory point of reference for any art writer, whether aspiring academic, artist-theorist, or popular journalist.

Further evidence for this is not only provided by the ever-increasing popularity of anecdotal paintings depicting scenes from the lives of the 'old masters'<sup>34</sup>, but also by book publications such as Wilhelm von Schadow's *Der Moderne Vasari* [the modern Vasari].<sup>35</sup> Already the title indicates the conscious historical referentiality of the work, again assuming general familiarity with the *Vite*. In Schadow's novella, we encounter many of the most familiar anecdotal motives retold, with the obligatory discoveries of raw artistic talent on the countryside in the shape of a young man sketching his cows. The parallel to the story of Cimabue and Giotto is openly acknowledged<sup>36</sup> – allowing the author to give the story a different bend by emphasising that the young peasant is not only a gifted copyist of nature, but also deeply and crucially inspired by the 'poetry of Christianity'.

This story, authored by one of the leading Romantic painters of his day, demonstrates an active attempt to negotiate art's relation to tradition through rewriting of anecdotes: here, the Vasarian primacy of 'nature' is complemented and in part countered by an insistence on the importance of Christianity for artistic creations. A similar case is analysed by **Lois Oliver** who demonstrates in her essay how different concepts of artistic identity and self-perception were discussed through depictions of episodes from old master's lives in the exhibitions of the Parisian Salon. By focusing on a painting by Alexandre Antigna, the essay explores how conflicting artistic identities (in this case: the ideals of the artist as sexually prolific 'creator', versus the ideal of a devout and contemplative monk) are negotiated through historic anecdotes, repositioning Antigna's practice vis à vis the canon of tradition.

The availability of Vasarian anecdotes also brought about another reaction towards the canon, namely the attempt to translate Vasari's project, focused on the artistic achievements of Medicean Florence, to different geographies. *Sammelbiographien* in the Vasarian tradition were particularly suitable for mapping and defining national schools of art; Joachim von Sandrarts *Teutsche Akademie* is an

<sup>32</sup> Most recently on the reception of Vasari: Fabian Jonietz, ed., *Vasari als Paradigma. Rezeption, Kritik, Perspektiven*, Venice: Marsilio, 2016, esp. the chapters by Michael Thimann, Hans Bloemsmas, Johannes Rößler, and Fabian Jonietz (on nineteenth-century receptions of the *Vite*).

<sup>33</sup> Editions in these three languages appeared in quick succession, beginning with the German translation by Ludwig Schorn and Ernst Förster in 1832, a French edition by Léopold Leclanché in 1839, and Jonathan Foster's English version in 1859.

<sup>34</sup> Haskell, 'Old Masters'.

<sup>35</sup> Wilhelm von Schadow, *Der Moderne Vasari: Erinnerungen aus dem Künstlerleben. Eine Novelle*, Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1854. See Cordula Grewe, 'The Künstlerroman as Romantic Arabesque: Parody, Collaboration, and the Making of The Modern Vasari (1854)', in Cateriona MacLeod, Veronique Plesch and Charlotte Schoell-Glass, eds, *Elective Affinities. Testing Word and Image Relationships*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009, 77-97.

<sup>36</sup> Schadow, *Der Moderne Vasari*, 144.

early example of what later became a widespread genre that also gained popularity in more marginal geographies, as demonstrated for example by the 1858 *Dictionary of South Slav Artists* by the Illyrian and later Croat nationalist Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski.<sup>37</sup>

In many instances, however, such projects took the distinct shape of a counter-history, intended to transport broader narratives of cultural identity and nationalism by defining them in opposition to the artistic ideals of Vasari and the Early Modern tradition. **Matthew Greg Sullivan** elucidates how Allan Cunningham made extensive use of the anecdotal in his *Lives of the most eminent British painters, sculptors and artists* – by on the one hand side criticising and dissecting the topical anecdotes of the past, while on the other hand propelling a new canon of anecdotes in order to champion a vernacular British tradition of art.

### (III) Anecdotes and academic art history

Anecdotes are often considered a typically early modern genre: a mode of biographical writing before the advent of ‘professional’ art writing, scrupulous biographical research, and the establishment of the modern discipline of art history. As Mark Ledbury has succinctly remarked, the

familiar narrative of the history of our discipline (...) insists that the antiquarian waves of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries marked the beginning of the professionalization of institutions and discourses of history and a new model of art history that began to marginalize the anecdote.<sup>38</sup>

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries undoubtedly witnessed a crucial period of discourse formation that saw the rapid rise of self-consciously ‘scientific’ art writing, leading eventually to the formation of art history as a university discipline. The relation between the rise of academic art history and the traditions of anecdotal writing are another key point of interest in this collection. The tension is apparent when considering that important defenders of a ‘rigorous’ approach to art history, such as Heinrich Wölfflin, were often dismissive of anecdotes for their perceived lack of historical accuracy - a sentiment frequently shared by more recent historiographers of the genre.<sup>39</sup>

True enough, the nineteenth century, saw an exponential rise of publications of dedicated collections of anecdotes, titled ‘lexicon of anecdotes’ or ‘almanac of

<sup>37</sup> Maximilian Hartmuth, ‘The making of a heritage: A Croatian Vasari and his “Dictionary of South Slav artists” as an essay in collective memory construction’, *TheMA*, II/1, 2013, 28-36.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Ledbury, ‘Anecdotes and the Life of Art History’, in Mark Ledbury, ed., *Fictions of Art History*, Williamstown/MA: Clark Institute, 2013, 175.

<sup>39</sup> For Wölfflin’s dismissal of ‘Kunstlergeschichte’, see Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der Neueren Kunst*, Munich: Bruckmann, 1915, VIII; on the more recent debates: Lynette Bosch, ‘Men, Myth, and Truth [Review of Paul Barolsky, *Michelangelo’s Nose; Why Mona Lisa Smiles; and Giotto’s Father*]', *Oxford Art Journal* 16.2 (1993), 62-72; Charles Hope, ‘Can you trust Vasari? (Review of Patricia Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 1995)’, *The New York Review of Books* October 1995, 10-13.

anecdotes'. While this is testimony to the genre's popularity, it also gives evidence of a growing differentiation between 'objective' biographical writing, and the entertaining and/or moralising anecdotal tales, now regarded as a categorically different genre.<sup>40</sup> This is undoubtedly a conviction held by many nineteenth-century biographers who insisted on the historicist objectivity of their work; the subtitle of a book on literary history by the antiquary and journalist John Nichols, published in 1818, consequently states that it is based on 'authentic memoirs and original letters of eminent persons; and intended as a sequel to the Literary anecdote'.<sup>41</sup>

The new historicism is clearly intended to overcome an earlier model of anecdotal writing. In many cases, the cherished old *vite* by Vasari and others slowly crumbled under the pressure of new historical evidence. A good example for this is the first attempt at a German translation of Vasari, by Christoph Gottlieb von Murr. Here, Vasari is still regarded predominantly as a historical source, and not as a monument of literary history. Yet Murr felt the need to add a critical apparatus to his translation where he listed new discoveries and historical evidence, frequently contradicting and correcting Vasari's claims.<sup>42</sup> The same principle also dominates the first artist monographs, for example the earliest standalone monograph on Albrecht Dürer, by a local Nuremberg historian, Heinrich Conrad Arend. Here, the main text is still mainly informed by the narratives of Vasari and Sandrart; the footnotes however have swelled considerably, and the addenda, corrigenda, and emendations presented in the critical apparatus threaten to dwarf the main text. The historicist commentary begins to eclipse the old anecdotal life writing.

A similar tension can still be seen in the debates surrounding Ernst Guhl's *Women in Art History* [Die Frauen in der Kunstgeschichte] (1858), analysed in **Anna Frasca-Rath's** essay. As the close-reading of Guhl's text elucidates, the author took a more positivist approach to ancient anecdotes, namely on the female artists Ixia and the daughter of Butades. Guhl searched for the grain of historical veracity within Pliny's accounts, whereas his contemporary Wilhelm Lübke treated the same episodes as 'poetical fairy-tales', in order to prompt his understanding of 'women's art'.

Yet anecdotes persisted. As Mark Ledbury has pointed out, even Heinrich Wölfflin begins his *Principles of Art History* – the primer for an 'art history without names' – with an anecdote about four Romantic painters sketching a landscape scenery. Even the most 'rigorous' or self-professedly formalist branch of art writing seemingly cannot do entirely without the informal and subjective modes of writing provided by the anecdote. A similar case is analysed by **Benjamin Harvey** in his essay on Roger Fry, who included two pertinent anecdotes on Paul Cezanne in his otherwise strictly formalist monographs on the artist's work.

<sup>40</sup> Hilzinger, *Anekdotisches Erzählen*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> John Nichols, *Illustrations of the literary history of the eighteenth century: consisting of authentic memoirs and original letters of eminent persons, and intended as a sequel to the Literary anecdotes*, 3 vols, London: Nichols and Bentley, 1818.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Dirk Kemper, 'Litterärhistorie - romantische Utopie - kunstgeschichtliche Poesie: drei Modelle der Renaissancerezeption, dargestellt anhand gedruckter und ungedruckter Vasari-Übersetzungen 1778-1832', in Silvio Vietta, ed., *Romantik und Renaissance. Die Rezeption der italienischen Renaissance in der deutschen Romantik*, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1994, 122-126.

Harvey's essay gives fresh evidence to the fact that the hypothesis of a binary opposition of 'pre-scholarly' and 'scholarly' art writing is too simplistic. Such a simple dichotomy also underestimates the variety and creativity in art writing. Recent interdisciplinary scholarship on art historiography and literature has highlighted that many art historians such as Carl Justi intentionally turned to novelistic modes of writing for their multi-volume biographies of artists and writers from Velazquez to Winckelmann.<sup>43</sup> However, though writers such as Justi demonstrate a high degree of awareness for the literary tools of their trade, few art historians were as daring as August Hagen – the subject of the final essay in this collection, by **Christine Hübner**. Here we have the case of a respected art historian, chair at the university of Königsberg, who spent most of his time writing historic novels, loosely based on historical facts from the lives of Dürer and others. To modern ears, this might ring more of *Wolf Hall* than academic art history – but it is a striking case that highlights just for how long a predominantly fictional take on the history of art was even acceptable in reputable academic settings.

Anecdotes, as said, permuted and persisted. Hagen's might be an extreme case. But it is a useful example to end on, and to reiterate one of the main aims of this collection: to take art historiography seriously as a literary genre, aware of its own tradition and with aims and ambitions that go beyond both the disciplinary discourse and the art theoretical frameworks that are often taken as its limits.

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Johannes Rößler, *Poetik der Kunstgeschichte. Anton Springer, Carl Justi und die ästhetische Konzeption der deutschen Kunstwissenschaft*, Berlin: Akademie, 2009.