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Giorgio Vasari's *Cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore*: The Eye of God

Liana De Girolami Cheney
UMass Lowell, Lowell, United States

In previous studies on the iconographical symbolism revealed in Giorgio Vasari's fresco decoration for the Cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore (also known as the Dome of Florence, 1572-1574), I discussed three points: (1) the impact of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in particular the *Inferno*; (2) the influence of Coppo di Marcovaldo's mosaic decoration on the cupola of the Florentine Baptistery (1300); and (3) the inspiration of Renaissance Neoplatonism in Vasari's paintings. (Aspects of this study were published in Cheney, 2016, pp. 488-519; Cheney & Hendrix, 2002, pp. 177-188; Cheney, 1998, pp. 35-55; Cheney, 1987, pp. 1-8). In this essay, I will focus on another iconographical representation: the metaphysical and physical symbolism of the eye ("l'occhio") in Vasari's cupola imagery (Figure 1). This approach will connect with Cosimo Bartoli's lecture on Dante's *Divine Comedy* and, in particular, on Dante's *Purgatorio* (Cantos XXX and XXXI) as well as with Vincenzo Borghini's program for the decoration of the Cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore.

Keywords: Dante, *Divine Comedy*, illustrations, Dome of Florence, Giorgio Vasari, Renaissance Neoplatonism

In the humanist and artistic circles of the Cinquecento, fervor for the study of Dante's *Divine Comedy* continued with increased vigor after the Quattrocento publication of Cristoforo Landino's (1424-1504) *Commentary on the Divine Comedy* on August 30, 1484, with subsequent editions in 1536, 1544, and 1551 as well as reprints in 1552 and 1575 (Polonsky Foundation Digitization Project, 2019; Balbo, 1839-1856, p. 437). In 1564, with further reprints to follow in 1578 and 1596, Francesco Sansovino edited another version of Dante's *poema sacro* (Ascoli, 2008, p. 405, No. 152),[1] adding his own notations to and incorporating the previous commentaries of Cristoforo Landino and Alessandro Vellutello (Gizzi, 1993, pp. 71-73; Luchinat, 1989, p. 44). In Florence, the open lectures on Dante presented by Francesco Verini il Vecchio and Pier Francesco Giambullari in Santa Maria Novella during the 1540s (Balbo, 1839-1856, p. 437) were continued by the eminent humanist Cosimo Bartoli (1503-1572), who further cultivated this literary quest. He was a Florentine mathematician, philologist, and humanist who wrote *Ragionamenti Accademici*, which included a commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This collection of essays was from a compilation of lectures on Dante that Bartoli presented to the Accademia Fiorentina in 1547 ("Lezzioni di M. Cosimo Bartoli", 1547, pp. 69-81; Ferrara, 1907, pp. 63-82; Bryce, 1983, pp. 312-313; Davis, 2009, pp. 261-283).

Liana De Girolami Cheney, Independent Scholar, Professor of Art History emerita, UMass Lowell, Lowell, United States.

[1] For the term *poema sacro*, see Albert Russell Ascoli (2008), *Dante and the Making of Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 405, No. 152, notes that Dante refers to *commedia* as *sacrato poema* and *poema sacro* in the *Inferno* (Canto XXX.22.4), and the *Paradiso* (Canto XXV.1).

Figure 1. Giorgio Vasari and Federico Zuccaro, *Last Judgment*, 1572-1574. Cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence. Photo credit: Courtesy of Wikipedia.org. Public domain.

Deeply touched by the poet Dante, many Cinquecento Florentine literati and artists owned copies of the new editions of the *poema sacro*. The humanist Benedetto Varchi, for example, owned a copy and made notations on Dante's *Commedia* (Gilson, 2018, pp. 93-144, 305); Agnolo Bronzino recited by heart the *Divine Comedy* (Parker, 2017; Aloia, 2014); Michelangelo owned a copy of Landino's commentary and quoted the poet in his sonnets as well as in his paintings (Ricci, 1891, pp. xiii, 337; Barolsky, 1996, pp. 1-14; Shrimplin, 2000, pp. 55-78);[2] and Giorgio Vasari, too, inspired by the verses of the *poema sacro*, illustrated several allegorical images for the wedding decorations of Francesco de' Medici and Giovanna of Austria (Pallen, 1999, pp. 103-114; Scorza, 1981, pp. 57-75).

The literary fervor was paralleled by these artists' fascination with visualizing Dante's poetical imagery, and was manifested in their numerous illustrations of the commentaries and reproductions of the *poema sacro*, as well as in their various interpretations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Arqués, 2017/2019; 2019; Ricci, 1908; Gizzi, 1993, pp. 71-73; 1994, pp. 13-63; Gizzi, 1999; Guido Biagi, 1892/1893; Cheney, 2016, pp. 488-519). Another part of these endeavors was the richly decorated and annotated edition by the Florentine Francesco

[2] In Casa Aldrovandi in Bologna, Michelangelo read the *poema sacro*, and in 1519, when the Accademia Medicea sent Leo X *il noto memoriale* requesting that the remains of Dante be transferred from Ravenna to Florence, Michelangelo composed a famous poem in honor of this event: "Io Michelangelo scultore, il medesimo a Vostra Santità, supplico oferendomi al divin poeta fara la sepoltura sua, chondecente e in loco onerevolei n questa città", cited in Corrado Ricci (1891), *Ultimo Rifugio di Dante Alighieri* (Milan: Hoepli, 1891), pp. xiii, 337. See also Paul Barolsky (1996), "The Visionary Art of Michelangelo in the Light of Dante," *Dante Studies, 114*, 1-14; and Valerie Shrimplin (2000), *Sun Symbolism and Cosmology in Michelangelo's Last Judgment* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press), pp. 55-78.

Sansovino entitled *Dante con l'esposizione di Cristoforo Landino, et di Alessandro Velutello, sopra la sua Commedia dell' Inferno, del Purgatorio, et del Paradiso of 1564*.[3] As a result of this impetus, Cinquecento painters also were inspired to represent Dante's *poema sacro*, in particular the *Inferno* in the *Last Judgment* scenes, which can be seen in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (Shrimplin, 2000; Barnes, 1995, pp. 65-81), Jacopo Pontormo's drawings of the *Last Judgment* for the Medicean church of San Lorenzo (Ciletti, 1979, pp. 764-770), and Giorgio Vasari's drawings of the *Last Judgment* for the main altarpiece of the Santa Croce at Boscomarengo (Merlano, 2010) as well as his drawings and paintings for the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore of 1572-1574 in Florence (Luchinat & Dalla Negra, 1995).

In 1568, Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, in response to the religious Tridentine movement and the Counter-Reformation, decided to commission the decoration of Brunelleschi's cupola in Santa Maria del Fiore (Luchinat, 1989, pp. 44-47; Hall, 1979; Bosch, 2014, pp. 33-131). This artistic patronage would be viewed as his support for the new religious quest, his support for the papacy, and for his own aggrandizement as a Christian ruler and promoter of religious art in Florence. He invited two of his close cabinet members—Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), his court painter, and Vincenzo Borghini (1551-1580), his literary and theological adviser—to compose a *Last Judgment* scene. Vasari suggested the subject, probably inspired by Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Borghini instead composed a literary iconographical program about this universal scene, which was most inventive (Guasti, 1857/1974, p. 205).[4] There is an extensive correspondence between Vasari and Borghini as well as between Vasari and Bartoli dealing with the preparation and development for the decoration of the Cupola (Frey, 1923/1930, 2:523-525, 598-599, 663, 680, 754-755, 761-762, 910). These exchanges emphasize the bond and intellectual interchange, in particular during the Cinquecento, between humanists and artists in the formation of a religious and secular decorative program.

Borghini's *Invenzione per la pittura della Cupola* focused on the apotheosis of Jesus Christ's triumph as both man and God, to create a divine court of Celestial Beauty, Good (Love), and Heavenly Blessings. He designed what he referred to as "il cielo della chiesa" (the Heaven of the church) (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 133). This symbolism of the Christian victory is in accordance with the apocalyptic vision in Saint John's Book of Revelation 1:17-18 and 4:4, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in particular *Purgatorio*, Cantos XXX and XXXI. In Borghini's program, there are only a few references to Dante's *Inferno*.[5]

In his *Invenzione per la pittura della Cupola*, Borghini elaborated on the descriptive layout of the program for Vasari's painterly execution in *buon fresco* (Figure 2) (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 133; Milanesi, 1906/1970, 8:223-225; Frey, 1923/1930, 2:524).[6] The theological program was to be unveiled in

[3] This edition was published in 1564 by Giovanni Battista il Giovane & Melchiorre Sessa il Giovane, a Venetian printing press.

[4] According to Guasti, Vasari suggested to Cosimo I the subject for the decoration of the cupola. See Cesare Guasti (1857/1974), *La Cupola di Santo Maria del Fiore. Illustrata con I documenti dell'archivio dell'opera secolare* (Florence: Barbera, Bianchi, & Co.; repr. Bologna: Forni, 1974), p. 205; Giorgio Vasari's letter of June 6, 1972, to Tommaso de Medici, in Archivio dell'Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, F.I. 2.a, *Memoriali* (an.1561-1574), No.140, for selection of the subject.

[5] The intention of this essay is to show the influence of some aspects of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Borghini's iconographical program but not to formulate a literary paragone between the two texts. The same follows for Borghini's assimilations of Saint John's Book of Revelation, Chapter 1.

[6] The original manuscript is in the Biblioteca degli Uffizi, MS 9; and Gaetano Milanesi, ed., *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori scritte da Giorgio Vasari, Pittore Aretino con nuove annotazione e commenti*, 9 vols. (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1906; rev. 1970), cited hereafter as Vasari-Milanesi, 8:223-225, esp. 224-225 with the layout of the visual program for each compartment (*spicchio*) of the cupola. For Borghini's sketches for the layout of the cupola's design, see Frey, *Der Literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris*, 2:524.

Brunelleschi's octagonal dome, segmented by eight triangles (*spicchi*), culminating into the lantern (Milanesi, 1906/1970, 2:333; Vinassa de Regny, 1988).[7] Compositionally, this vertical construction is intersected horizontally by five concentric levels, which produces a spherical rotating movement from left to right and top to bottom, implying a latitudinal and longitudinal continuous rotation and thus creating the impression of a cosmic sphere. The iconography of the program, to explain in brief, is composed as moving in a downward direction, from the lantern of the cupola to the choir of the altar, in a concentric spiral movement. Vasari, in visualizing and following Borghini's program, designed three Dantesque realms: Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Heaven is subdivided in the four upper levels, while Earth and Hell occupy only one lower level. The heavenly realm is visualized with a blue sky and platforms composed of white clouds, which in turn subdivide the levels. The top level of the celestial realm is composed of classical tabernacles supported by flying angels. Inside these tabernacles are thrones framed by double piers, whose bases contain a scroll with a Latin inscription and pertinent attributes. Twenty-four Elders are crowned and enthroned residing inside these tabernacles, "with ever-wakeful eyes" (Revelation 4:4 and 4:8) (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 133).[8] They are accompanied by their respective attributes, for example, King David with the lyre, Saint Peter with the keys of the Church, and Saint Paul with a sword (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 139). At the base of the piers framing each tabernacle are apocalyptic animals holding referential Latin scrolls, including the lion, the bull, and the eagle, referring respectively to the Evangelists Mark, Luke, and John. Other scrolls identify the function of each Elder, e.g., Peter, Apostle; or Paul, Servant [of God] (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 140).

The second level represents an angelic chorus with a variety of musical instruments and angels holding the instruments of the Passion, including a cross, a chalice, a column, a crown of thorns, dice, a flagellum, nails, a pitcher for vinegar, a pincher, a robe, a sponge, and a sword (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, pp. 136-137). The third level describes a majestic Resurrected Christ with his mother, Mary, saints, and elected people. The enthroned Christ, seated on a beautiful large cloud, is encircled by several nimbuses. The first aureole is a golden halo that expands into a large one, which opens out into a circle with rays of light, culminating in a large circle of golden seraphs (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 135; Klein, 2018; Aquinas, 2019).[9] Around them, blue cherubs form a canopy, one of whom holds a large scroll bearing the Latin inscription *Ecce Homo* (Behold the Man, John 19:5) (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 136).[10] This inscription is situated above Christ and axially below King David, who resides in one of the tabernacles of the Elders, and refers to Christ's biblical lineage. Adjacent is a smaller scroll, also held by a cherub, with an inscription that reads: INRI (Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum—Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, John 19:19). This allusion to the crucifixion is reinforced by the visible wounds of the body (hands, feet, and side) of the Resurrected Christ.

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[7] In the *Vite*, Vasari commented on the influence of Dante's geometrical references in Brunelleschi's architecture: "Diede molta opera alle cose di Dante, le quali furon da lui intese circa i siti e le misure; espresso nelle comparazioni allegandolo, se ne serviva né sui Ragionamenti"; See also P. Vinassa de Regny (1988), *Dante e il simbolismo pitagorico* (Genoa: Fratelli Melita), for Dante's symbolism of numbers referred to in the *Divine Comedy*, e.g., for number 8, 84-85; for number 5, 86-90; and for number 6, 90-91. These references are selected in connection with the cupola's numerical formation of eight, five, and six circles.

[8] In Borghini's invention, the Elders are a combination of ancient and Christian holy figures, Old and New Testament figures.

[9] In the conception of the formation and function of angels, Borghini was influenced by the views of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas.

[10] And the concept of *Corpus Domini* (The Body of Our Lord).

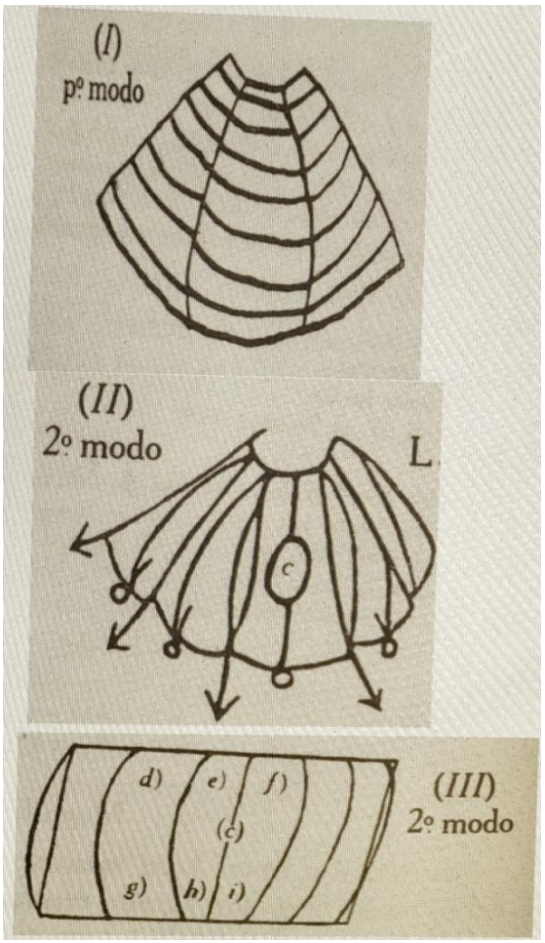

Figure 2. Vincenzo Borghini, *Three Sketches for the Design of the Cupola*, 1570. Photo credit: In Karl Frey (Ed.), *Der Literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris* (Munich: Georg Mülller, 1930), p. 524. Public domain.

The fourth level is composed of a triad of figures representing the gifts from the Holy Spirit, including the seven beatitudes and seven virtues, e.g., Fear of the Lord, Fortitude, Justice, Knowledge, Patience, Peace, Piety, Prudence, and Wisdom (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 134).[11]

The fifth level includes the Earth, represented by areas of sky, sea, mountains, and terrain where people are rising to be blessed or condemned. In this last level and lowest level, the area of the Earth is unified with the region of Hell that is populated by the seven deadly sins or capital vices, e.g., anger, avarice, envy, gluttony, lust, sloth, and pride (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, pp. 134-137).[12]

Borghini provided a further innovative connection between Heaven and Earth in the east triangle (*spicchio*) of the cupola's octagon, which contains no aspects of Hell. In an axial movement starting from Earth and ascending to Heaven, there is a personification of Nature as dormant on the mount of a hill. This composition of Nature consists of the Seasons, which have fallen into an eternal sleep and surround a latent aging figure that is naked, with numerous breasts, a symbol of Nature (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 135). Framing this vignette are the personification of winged Time, holding the attribute of the hourglass, and the personification of Death, carrying the attribute of a scythe (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 135). As a pivotal union between Heaven and Earth,

[11] Borghini's inclusion of the beatitudes and gifts of the Holy Spirit refer to Dante's *Purgatorio*, Cantos XII, and XXXIII.
[12] Borghini's incorporation of the seven deadly sins or "seven roots of sinfulness" refers to Dante's *Paradiso*, Canto 1.

Borghini placed the once-armed Minerva, who is disarming herself with the assistance of angels. Minerva, as a personification of Peace, here is also a personification of the Church (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 140). In Borghini's description, angels are crowning the figure while holding palms of glory. One angel robes Minerva with a golden mantle, while another embraces an escutcheon decorated with Saint George's Cross, with its red cross on a white background (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 139). The signification of this imagery relates to the once-militant Church now triumphantly at peace through Jesus Christ. Above the vignette with Minerva, in a perpendicular ascending movement, the Theological Virtues of Hope, Charity, and Faith evoke the credo of the Church (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, pp. 134-135).

In the creation of this celestial realm, Borghini commented that he was inspired by Dante's description of the Starry Heaven (*Cielo Stellato*), Primum Nobile (*Primo Nobile*), and Empyrean (*Empireo*) as well as Dante's inclusion of the planetary spheres (the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) in Dante's *Paradiso* (Canto II, The Spheres of Heaven) (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 136).[13] These planetary conceptions indicated in the formation of the program are no longer visible in the decoration of the cupola (Milanesi, 1906/1970, 8:224-225; Borghini/Guasti, 1857, pp. 141-143).[14] In his original program, Borghini conceived of Hell as an entrance into a dragon's fiery mouth, in accord with a Dantesque or Medieval tradition (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 134; Monbeig-Goguel, 1972, p. 192, for Vasari's drawings pp. 276, 279).

Under the iconographical guidance of Borghini, Vasari designed numerous drawings and began creating a celestial kaleidoscope and celestial tapestry recalling Dante's *Paradiso* and some sections of the *Inferno* (Monbeig-Goguel, 1972, pp. 177-284). Unable to finish the paintings on the walls of the cupola due to his sudden death in 1574, the commission was a year later granted to Federico Zuccaro, who changed many of Vasari's designs (Luchinat, 1988, pp. 153-176; Luchinat, 1989, pp. 33-56, also for an extensive bibliography on this subject; Luchinat, 1998, pp. 238-252). Francis I de' Medici, the new Duke of Tuscany and the new patron of the project, was displeased with Zuccaro's changes and charged him for the expenses (Guasti, 1857/1974, p. 222; Piccini, 1979, pp. 86-88). When the cupola's cycle was officially unveiled, Florentines also raised their voices in discord, wanting the decoration of the cupola to be whitewashed (Luchinat, 2000, p. 21). This was quite a different reception from the Florentines to previous unveilings in their city, such as of Marcovaldo's mosaics for the Baptistery of Florence, which were highly praised (Di Cagno, 1997, pp. 23-48; Luchinat, 1994, pp. 23-25, 38-47).

In visualizing Borghini's program for the cupola, Vasari embodied in his design the presence of God through the filtration of the natural light, beaming from the eye ("l'occhio") of the cupola revealing the existence of the divine light of God's omnipresence. In order to develop this concept, Vasari envisioned the cupola as a physical and metaphysical eye. He was aware of two main historical events regarding the physical light or the physical "eye" of the cupola. The Florentine cartographer, mathematician, and astronomer Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397-1482) had worked with Brunelleschi on the mathematical construction of the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore. He also had designed a marble solstice disc to measure the physical light and the image of the sun at noon of the summer solstice, placed into the pavement of the Chapel of the Cross, a chapel adjacent to the church main altar (Figure 3) (Barbolini & Garolfalo, 2016, pp. 19, 39). In addition, Toscanelli

[13] Citation of Dante's *Stellato*, *Primo Nobile*, and *Empireo*; see also pp. 137-139.

[14] See Vasari-Milanesi, 8:224-225, for Vasari's layout of the planetary placement and overall design for the cupola. Today on the cupola one can see an angel sculpting the stars on a celestial globe below the feet of the Triumphant Christ, perhaps this was an artistic license undertaken by Zuccaro in his interpretation of Borghini's program.

placed a gnomon, a small bronze plate, into which a 4 cm hole was cut, in the eye of the dome to allow the sunlight to penetrate inside the cupola and the church (Barbolini & Garolfalo, 2016, pp. 62-63, Figures 5 and 6, for the trajectory of the sunlight).

Figure 3. Summer Solstice, passing through Vasari's cupola, 2013. Photo credit: Archivio Fotografico, Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza. Museo Galileo, Florence.

Vasari also was familiar with or even had witnessed some of the many lightning strikes to the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore recorded in Luca Landinucci's *Diario fiorentino dal 1450-1516* (*Iodoco del Badia*, 1883, p. 337),[15] which would have made him aware of the physical light penetrating through the cupola. Furthermore, as an admirer of Dante, Vasari probably attended or was informed about his mentor Cosimo Bartoli's lectures on Dante's *poema sacro* in 1541 at the Accademia Fiorentina (Ferrara, 1907, pp. 45-53; Gigli, 1883/2010).[16] Bartoli's lecture of January 8, 1541, is most intriguing. He interpreted the poetical notions of Dante's eye and perceiving in *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXI, in terms of the eye's physiological composition and the physical and

[15] See repr. with additions till 1542, ann. and ed. *Iodoco del Badia* (Florence: C. S. Sansoni, 1883), p. 337, for entries recording flashes of lightning passing through the cupola in 1542: on August 6, September 18, and October 14. None of these caused severe damage, but the thunderbolt of December 22 that hit on the cupola and lantern damaged and fragmented the marble construction, costing the city more than 12,000 scudi to repair them.

[16] Original letters are in the Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze, Codice IV, I, da carta 189r. a c. 193r.

mental abilities of the faculty of sight. Bartoli cited in particular a stanza in Dante's *Purgatorio* when he encountered the beautiful Beatrice and their eyes met:

> A thousand longings, hotter than any flames,
> Made me state into those shinning eyes,
> That were still fixed on the Griffin.
>
> Like the sun in a mirror, that was how
> The double nature creature shone within,
> Showing one nature and then another.
>
> (Mille desiri piú che fiamma caldi
> Strinsermi gli occhi agli occhi rilucenti
> Che pur sopra il Grifone stavan saldi;
>
> Come in lo specchio il Sol, non altrimenti
> La doppia fiera dentro vi raggiava
> Hor con uni, hor con altri reggimenti).
>
> (Ferrara, 1907, p. 49; for a modern reference to the passage, Chiavacci Leonardi, 2000, p. 568; Hollader & Hollander, 2003, p. 646 in Italian, 647 an English translation.)

Moved by this passage, Bartoli began to analyze the act of seeing, noting that the eyes are corporeal instruments and that through them knowledge is acquired; hence they are windows of the mind. Through this metaphysical observation, Bartoli referred to the ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle and compared their notions with Dante's writings, in particular, the *Convivio*, where Dante called the eyes "the balcony of the soul" (Ferrara, 1907, p. 51; Rutledge, 1995, pp. 151-165; MacCurdy, 1939, p. 225; Ackerman, 1978, pp. 108-146).[17] For Dante, seeing is part of perfect seeing ("perfetto vedere"), which is associated with love and light (Snider, 1803, p. 451).[18] This is a concept well understood in theological circles when explaining Jesus Christ's comments on eyes and light and on keeping the eyes toward God as a source of blessings and salvation since they are the "window" or "lamp" of the soul (Matthew 6:22-23; Luke 11:34; John 2:12-18).

In the second part of his lecture, Bartoli continued dissecting the anatomical construction of the eye, similar to an architect constructing or deconstructing architectural sections in an edifice, or a painter explaining the levels of meanings in a visual program. Bartoli employed the physiological composition of the eye in order to explain the meaning of seeing in Dante's complex stanza (*Paradiso*, Canto XXXI). In his enquiry, Bartoli then moved from an analysis of the particular and physical to the general and metaphysical: from the anatomical configuration of the eye to the abstract meaning of perceiving. In this latter concept, seeing the natural light is metaphorically paralleled to the light in a reflected mirror or the projection of the rays of light from the sun (Dante's line: "come in lo specchio il sol"—"like the sun reflecting in a mirror").

Next, Bartoli's lecture turned to the metaphysical aspect of light, which is a transformation of the physical light captured by the eye into the spiritual light experienced by the soul. He focused on the biblical tradition

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[17] Monica Rutledge (1995), "Dante, *The Body and Light*", *Dante Studies, 113*, 151-165, demonstrating Dante's knowledge of the physiology of the eye as well as the Neoplatonic metaphorical allusions about metaphysical light. Years later, in his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci will restate Dante's motto as the "eyes are the window of the soul". See E. MacCurdy (Ed.) (1939), *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock), p. 225; and James S. Ackerman, "Leonardo's Eye", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 14*, 108-146.

[18] Dante's *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXI, cited in Denton J. Snider (1803), *Dante's Purgatorio and Paradiso* (Saint Louis, MO: Sigma), p. 451.

that states that the eyes are windows of the mind or the soul. Hence the physical light becomes the spiritual light or celestial light. Bartoli continued, explaining that celestial light is apprehended through perceiving beauty and wisdom in Dante's stanza. With the presence of Beatrice, a personification of Spiritual Beauty, Wisdom, and Theology, Dante pondered on the essence of celestial light or divine light. With her shining and fixed eyes, for example Beatrice embodies the essence of divine light. This heavenly light is the manifestation of Christ's dual nature: human and divine, metaphorically implied with the presence of a griffon, which also has a dual nature, being part lion and part eagle (Dante's line: "il Grifone … La doppia fiera, dentro vi raggava"—"The Griffin … The double nature creature shone within"). In the early medieval tradition, "Christ is a lion because He reigns and has strength; Eagle, because after the Resurrection He rises into Heaven" (Barney, Lewis, Beach, & Berghof, 2006).[19]

In the paintings of the cupola, Vasari, like his humanist and theological friend Borghini and his mentor Bartoli, viewed Brunelleschi's cupola as a physical and metaphysical analogy to the human eye. Familiar with the natural disaster from the effects of lightning on the cupola, Borghini's description of the interior of the cupola as "[la cupola] essendosi bello spatio … come dir … in facia all'occhio" ("[la cupola] being a beautiful space … as saying … being in front or seeing the eye") (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, p. 132), and Bartoli's physiological description of the eye, Vasari integrated these observations in a poetical visual manner. Metaphorically, for him, the eye of the cupola was physically composed by the circle of the lantern that is the eye's pupil; the concentric circles or horizontal levels of the cupola formed the eye's iris, while the vertical levels, the octagonal structure of the cupola, formed the eye's cornea. Vasari experienced the natural light of the sun filtering through the lantern, diffusing and permeating throughout the cupola. Metaphorically, then, the eye of the cupola perceived the natural light. But the metaphorical allusion of the light also extended to a philosophical or spiritual conceit, a more engaging experience of perceiving. Metaphysically, Vasari alluded to the concept of the eye as an instrument of perceiving by constructing a physical metaphor of the eye based on the physical property of the cupola's architecture, perceiving natural light, and at the same time abstractly conceiving the concept of seeing as a manifestation of God's light, perceiving divine or spiritual light. In connecting Borghini's program for the cupola with Bartoli and Dante's explanation of Christ's human and divine nature in term of celestial light, Vasari visualized in his paintings God's grace.

In the Cinquecento, philosophical Neoplatonic and theological concepts of emanation, redemption, and contemplation were understood by artists Brunelleschi and Vasari, as well as by humanists Dante, Bartoli, and Borghini (Borghini/Guasti, 1857, pp. 136, 140).[20] For Vasari, under the influence of his humanist teacher and Christian faith as noted in a previous study (Cheney, 2016, pp. 488-519), the trajectory of the grace of God or divine light begins from the sky and is transmitted to earth through natural light or sunlight**.** Thus Vasari envisioned a visual interpretation of Saint John's apocalyptic vision, recorded in John's Book of Revelation as well as in Ficino's Neoplatonic explanation for the symbolism of natural and divine light (Niccoli, 1987, p. 117 for a discussion on the gift of love and contemplation). His paintings in the cupola visualized John's apocalyptic visions in Revelation 1:7 and 1:8: "Behold, He cometh with the clouds, and every eye shall see Him"; and "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, said the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty". In the cupola, Vasari depicted a Resurrected Christ enthroned on a heavenly

[19] Saint Isidore of Seville, *Origines* (*Etymologies*), xv.3.32.
[20] In his program for the cupola, Borghini referred to Dante's *poema sacro* several times.

cloud residing with his angelic court, saints, and elect in Paradise. He emanates divine grace to all faithful and participants of the religious service in the church (Manetti, 1996, p. 90 for the connection between Brunelleschi and Marsilio Ficino; Jayne, 1985, pp. 38-39; Toussaint, 1997, pp. 52-82, 114-116; Chastel, 1954, pp. 81-85 for Ficino's light symbolism in art).

In addition, with the guidance of Borghini, Vasari depicted in the cupola the five levels described in the Book of Revelation along with Dante's three parts from the *Divine Comedy*, in order to explain the individual salvation through the grace of God and the Neoplatonic concept of the desire for the individual to contemplate God. For example, Vasari's depictions of Saint John's Revelation are visualized in the first three levels or the horizontal bands, viewing them from top to bottom: Saint John's Tabernacle of God with Twenty-four Elders; *Ecce Homo* with the court of Angels; and The Holy Figures and Saints. These three levels revealed how Vasari was also influenced by Dante's *Paradiso*, Cantos I-XXIII, and *Purgatorio*, Cantos XXVII-XXX. In the fourth level of the cupola's program, Vasari portrayed the Beatitudes or Gifts of the Holy Spirit, which corresponds to Saint John's Revelation and Dante's *Purgatorio*, Cantos XIII-XLVII. Vasari's fifth level in the cupola represents Earth and Hell (*Inferno*) as described both in the Book of Revelation and in Dante's *Inferno*.

From the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore, through the eye ("l'occhio"), divine and natural light descends into the church, the House of God, illuminating the painted levels of Paradise and Purgatory on the walls of the cupola. As the faithful experience the blessings of the light in seeing its reflection on the images, their bodies mystically transform into spirits, who ascend to Heaven to love and contemplate God.

In other words, in the imagery of the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore, Vasari symbolically revealed the blessings of the grace of God as light that emanates from the eye of the lantern permeating down to the altar and diffusing throughout the church (Scarpi, 1987, pp. 49, 61-63, for a discussion on the Neoplatonic spiritual concept of descending and ascending). The grace of God is experienced by the faithful inside the church at the altar. Here the spirit of the faithful is nurtured and purified through the sacraments. The spirit then ascends toward the divine (Scarpi, 1987, pp. 61-63). Harmony between the individual and God is achieved, and the faithful now can love and contemplate God in the "cielo della chiesa" (the Heaven of the church).

As a faithful Christian, Vasari portrayed in the cupola the visualization that enabled the devotee to achieve the wisdom and grace of God and the sanctification of the individual by identifying God as *Ecce Homo* and as the *sol-justiae* or Christ-Judge (Prophet Malachi 3:17-20). Using the vehicle of the church's architecture, the devotee achieves sanctification through a ceremony of purification, such as Baptism, or spiritual healing through the Eucharistic ritual. The *sanitas*, or healing of the individual, is obtained for the believer through God's love and wisdom. This is the God of Love, Justice, and Wisdom explained in the Tridentine Doctrine of Justification of 1547 and introduced by the Council of Trent (Luchinat & Verdon, 1997, pp. 34-35). Thus, in the program for the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore, Vasari unveiled a Christian and Neoplatonic cosmic harmony between the individual and God. For him, the eye of the cupola in Santa Maria del Fiore guided the Florentines to experience the blessings of the "Eye of God" (*Coram Deo*, Proverbs 15:3).

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