

The 2014 Josephine Waters Bennett Lecture: “Certain of Death”: Michelangelo’s Late Life and Art

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This essay is a preliminary sketch for a book that examines Michelangelo Buonarroti’s final eighteen years, from his appointment as architect of St. Peter’s until his death in 1564, that is, from age seventy-one to a few weeks shy of eighty-nine. This period represents nearly a quarter of his approximately seventy-five-year artistic career, yet it remains the least familiar segment of Michelangelo’s long life. It is paradoxical that in the final phase of his career, Michelangelo remained prodigiously creative and influential without being prolific — as he had been earlier in his career. His late life was concerned less with making things than with finding the courage and devotion to continue tasks that he knew he would never see to fruition, and this despite the loss of his closest friends, greatest patron, and his entire family.

IN SEPTEMBER 1556, Michelangelo and his personal assistant, Sebastiano Malenotti, departed Rome, uncertain they would ever return. The two passed through Porta del Popolo and rode north on the ancient and well-traveled Via Flaminia. Their destination was Loreto, not only because Michelangelo had longed to make a pilgrimage to the Holy House of

I am pleased and honored to have this opportunity to expand upon some ideas that were first presented at a stimulating panel monitored by Elizabeth Cropper, dean of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA), at the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Montreal in March 2011. The panel — organized by Deborah Parker — included scholars who had recently published books on Michelangelo, including myself, Leonard Barkan, Deborah Parker, and Paul Barolsky. It was clear that, despite Benedict Nicholson’s complaint a generation ago that we had “milked the bull,” Michelangelo scholarship was alive and well. I have been especially impressed by the current generation of scholars who are making important contributions, including, among others, Joost Keizer, Maria Ruvoldt, Cammy Brothers, Christian Kleinbub, Anna Hetherington, Tamara Smithers, Emily Fenichel, Erin Sutherland, Eric Hupe, and for the poetry, Oscar Schiavone, Antonio Corsaro, Sarah Rolfe Prodan, Ida Campeggiani, and Fionnán O’Connor. As Howard Hibbard emphasized to me when I embarked — not without trepidation — on a Michelangelo dissertation: “There is no such thing as a definitive work of scholarship. Every generation has new questions, new perspectives, and something new to offer to our understanding of great art and great artists.” I am happy to be in such vibrant company.

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the Virgin, but also because his friend, Antonio Barberini, promised “good and beautiful” lodgings in nearby Ancona, far from the “tribulations of Rome.”¹

Barberini’s characterization of Rome suffering from “tribulations” was a serious understatement. War had broken out between Pope Paul IV Carafa (r. 1555–59), allied with France, and Philip II of Spain (r. 1556–98).² In September 1556, Fernando Alvarez of Toledo (1507–82), the Duke of Alba, invaded the Papal States and captured Ostia. In Rome, confusion turned to panic; the ill-prepared city feared another sack. Before the contending forces reached an eleventh-hour agreement, Michelangelo, along with many other citizens, had fled the city. This was the sixth time that politics had impinged upon the artist’s life and significantly disrupted his artistic projects. He was eighty-one years old. He had good reason to believe that his career was finished and this exile would be permanent.

Michelangelo and Malenotti could cover between thirty and forty kilometers a day, but they rested frequently since the octogenarian artist suffered from long hours in the saddle. Just north of Terni, the two travelers entered the lush, mountainous terrain of southern Umbria. The road steadily climbed and narrowed, following a twisting valley shrouded in mountain mists and cold drizzle. The weary travelers had been on the road for four days, staying in hostelries with primitive accommodations and worse food. Rather than face the prospect of another five or six days on the road through increasingly rugged mountains, Michelangelo elected to stop at Spoleto. The rest was not only welcome and restorative, but proved to be one of the most peaceful episodes in the artist’s life.

Michelangelo accepted the hospitality of the Franciscan hermits who lived in the monastery of Monteluco on a mountain overlooking Spoleto (figs. 1 and 2). In the Spartan accommodations of the hermitage, among the sacred wood, fresh spring-fed waters, and the isolation provided by the mountain retreat, Michelangelo experienced a rare tranquility. It is still a place of natural beauty, a landscape and sanctuary that might have reminded Michelangelo of La Verna and the wilds of the Casentino. Monteluco, moreover, had been favored by Saints Francis and Anthony, and more recently by Michelangelo’s friend and patron Pope Paul III (r. 1534–49), now sadly deceased.

Michelangelo spent nearly five weeks in the hermitage of Monteluco. Five weeks does not seem long considering the full span of the artist’s nearly

¹*Il Carteggio indiretto di Michelangelo* (hereafter *Carteggio indiretto*), 2:84. For the correspondence I have relied primarily on Ramsden’s 1963 translation, but any unacknowledged translations are my own.

²For the historical situation, see Pastor, 14:138–74.



Figure 1. Monastery of Montelucio, Spoleto. Author's photo.

eighty-nine years; however, his contentment and peace of mind are evident when, following his return to Rome, he wrote to Giorgio Vasari (1511–74): “Recently, at great inconvenience and expense, I have had the great pleasure of a visit to the hermits in the mountains of Spoleto, so that less than half of me has returned to Rome.” He then makes an unexpected comment: “peace is not really to be found save in the woods.”³

The sentiment may seem incongruous, if only because of a widespread assumption that Michelangelo had little interest in landscape, and because of his well-known disparaging remarks regarding Flemish painting.⁴ Was this peaceful

³ *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo* (hereafter *Carteggio*), 5:76: “veramente e’ non si trova pace se non ne’ boschi”; translation from Ramsden, 2:169. Michelangelo records having been away from Rome “per cinque settimane” (“for five weeks”), and “a Spuleti u[n] meso e cinque di” (“at Spoleto a month and five days”): *I Ricordi di Michelangelo* (hereafter *Ricordi*), 320.

⁴ As expressed in comments found in the dialogues of Francisco de Hollanda, for which see Folliero-Metz, 77. Vasari also suggests Michelangelo’s lack of interest in landscape when he writes: “Michelangelo concentrated his energies on achieving absolute perfection in what he could do best, so there are no landscapes to be seen in these scenes [Pauline Chapel], nor any trees, buildings, or other embellishments and variations; for he never spent time on such things”: Vasari, 1965, 384. For Vasari, I have sometimes used George Bull’s 1965 translation; if that edition is not cited, the translations are my own.



Figure 2. View toward Spoleto from Monteluco. Author's photo.

interlude relevant to the artist's life or art? Although Michelangelo may have believed that his life was nearing its end, he was, in fact, about to enter the final and most significant phase of his artistic career.

In the sixteen years between writing a monograph, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur* (1994), and a biography, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times* (2010), I have become increasingly aware that the heroic story of the artist's rise to fame has deflected attention from his very different but no less enterprising later life. This essay serves as a preliminary sketch for a book that examines Michelangelo's final eighteen years, from his appointment as architect of St. Peter's until his death in 1564, that is, from age seventy-one to a few weeks shy of eighty-nine. This period represents nearly a quarter of the artist's approximately seventy-five-year artistic career, yet it remains the least familiar segment of Michelangelo's long life. I am examining Michelangelo's life and works from the perspective of his advanced age, with a focus on what the artist chose to accomplish in his final years. Thus, this study is not as much an investigation of late style (in the manner of Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, or Beethoven)⁵ as a late life: how Michelangelo lived and worked in the

⁵Sohm.

face of recurring setbacks and personal losses, as well as the nearly constant expectation of his own death.

The overarching themes of Michelangelo's late life are significantly different from his earlier career, which was characterized by the artist's overweening ambition and spectacular rise to fame, manifested in a series of astonishing creations: *Bacchus*, *Pietà*, *David*, the Medici Chapel, the tomb of Pope Julius II, and the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo was no less active as he approached the end of his life, but he worked in a substantially different manner. He is no longer the artist who insisted on doing everything himself, or who, thirty years earlier at San Lorenzo in Florence, directed assistants with near-obsessive attention to detail.⁶ What differentiates Michelangelo's late life is a significant lack of comparable evidence of his day-to-day activity at the building site. The artist's multiple architectural commissions were carried out in a fundamentally different fashion from those earlier in his career. And surprisingly, there is a complete absence of paintings and sculptures made for the public sphere.

After installing the tomb of Pope Julius II in 1545, and still with nearly two decades to live, Michelangelo completed no further sculptures. He carved the Florentine *Pietà* as his own grave memorial, but gave it away broken and unfinished. He worked on the Rondanini *Pietà* until several days before his death, but the sculpture remains radically incomplete. He lived with these unfinished sculptures in his house — as he previously had lived with *Moses* — for nearly two decades.⁷ They were memento mori, perpetually reminding the artist of his impending death and, more poignantly, of a life littered with unfinished and abandoned work.

Michelangelo's public life was now largely devoted to architecture. In his final years, he was associated with more than a dozen architectural projects and actively supervised half of them, including, most notably, new St. Peter's. However, at the time of his death, not a single one of these projects was anywhere near completion. The two frescoes in the Pauline Chapel, completed in 1550, were the last works of art Michelangelo ever finished, whether in sculpture, painting, or architecture. We are faced with the seeming paradox of an aged artist who, despite a plethora of incomplete undertakings, never wavered in his devotion to work, whose power of expression never waned, and who continued to exercise a tremendous influence on the art and architecture of his time. How do we assess Michelangelo's final accomplishments given that they are substantially different from the achievements of his earlier career? How do we account for the artist's stature and prestige given the absence of completed work?

⁶See Wallace, 1994.

⁷The Florentine *Pietà* may still have been in Michelangelo's Roman house in Via Macel de' Corvi as late as 1561: see Wasserman, 75–76.

Most importantly, how do we understand Michelangelo's art in light of his growing preoccupation with death, sin, and salvation?

In order to illuminate these themes, I will focus on three life-altering episodes in the final years of Michelangelo's life. The first spans a few months between 1546 and 1547 when a series of deaths devastated the artist at the very moment he became architect of new St. Peter's. The second episode is marked by the death of his patron, Pope Paul III, and the publication of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors* (1550) — dual events that forced the artist to take stock of his life and legacy. The final episode is the rarely considered political disruptions of 1556, which resulted in his flight from Rome to Spoleto and the suspension of every one of his artistic endeavors — in Michelangelo's mind, probably forever.

Do such brief episodes have long-lasting resonance? What was the effect of the few weeks Johannes Brahms spent walking down the Rhine from Mainz to Bonn?⁸ What about the six weeks Percy Bysshe Shelley was in France and Switzerland with Mary Wollstonecraft, or the nine days that Samuel Coleridge spent walking in the fells of the Lake District? Such moments stand out in memory and possibly change lives. For Michelangelo, the three episodes I will consider had long-term consequences for his life and art, and each was accompanied by significant personal losses, including the deaths of his closest friends, his greatest patron, and the last remaining members of his family. Yet even in the face of tragic loss and the constant expectation of his own death, and despite repeated disruptions to his artistic endeavors, Michelangelo remained committed to carrying forward the most important work of his career. Ultimately, these life-altering episodes helped Michelangelo define, and then pursue with increasing tenacity, the paramount goals of his late life: the perpetuation of his artistic and family legacies and the salvation of his soul.

Michelangelo's late life begins in 1546, when the artist turned seventy-one years of age. Although old, the artist had ample reason to be content. With the installation of the tomb of Pope Julius II, the artist finally was free of his most burdensome obligation. Like his literary hero Petrarch, Michelangelo had just been made an honorary citizen of Rome; he was working for an enlightened patron in Pope Paul III; he enjoyed a tight-knit circle of extremely close friends; he had money to invest in property; and Lionardo Buonarroti (1522–99), his nephew and heir, had initiated the search for a suitable bride, thereby ensuring the continuation of the Buonarroti line. Michelangelo was finally realizing his lifelong ambition to “raise up” his family.⁹ He enjoyed the patronage of princes, the protection of the pontiff, and the attentions of the rich and powerful.

⁸Macdonald, 76–81.

⁹As he stated in December 1546: “Mi son sempre ingegnato di risuscitar la casa nostra” (“I have always striven to revive our house”): *Carteggio*, 4:249.

Michelangelo's closest friend at this time was Luigi del Riccio (d. 1546), a functionary in the Roman branch of the Strozzi bank, who efficiently handled the artist's business affairs.¹⁰ Del Riccio was, in Michelangelo's words, "molto mio amico."¹¹ He was also an enthusiastic reader of the artist's poetry, and actively assisted Michelangelo in publishing a volume of his verse. The publishing project was motivated, in part, by Michelangelo's warm relationship with another friend and poetic muse, Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547). Colonna had given Michelangelo a "little book" of her poems, which he considered among his most treasured possessions.¹² The publication of a selection of Michelangelo's poetry would be a reciprocal gift and a means of thanking Colonna for her friendship and spiritual counsel.

Michelangelo and Luigi del Riccio selected eighty-nine of the artist's poems; they were given final revisions, written out in fair copy, and placed in numbered order.¹³ On the verge of going to press, Del Riccio died. Just three months later, Vittoria Colonna also was dead. These completely unexpected losses so profoundly affected Michelangelo that he entirely abandoned the publishing project. Adding to the dual blow were the further deaths of Michelangelo's humanist friend Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) and the poet Jacopo Sadoletto (1477–1547), both in 1547. Not only was the publication project now defunct, but Michelangelo's literary world had been decimated. In the last eighteen years of his life, the artist penned, at most, thirty-five poems and possibly as few as half that number. Most are fragments, and few had readers, as many of his closest friends and fellow poets were now dead.

¹⁰No one, noted the artist gratefully, looked after "my affairs . . . better or more devotedly than he": Ramsden, 2:82; *Carteggio*, 4:279. On Michelangelo's relationship with Luigi del Riccio, see Steinmann, 1932; Wallace, 2014b.

¹¹*Carteggio*, 4:279.

¹²Michelangelo described the book to his nephew as "un Librecto in carta pecora, che la mi donò" ("a small book on sheepskin that she gave me"): *Carteggio*, 4:361. A Vatican Library manuscript (Cod. Vaticano Latino 11539) containing 103 neatly written poems has been identified as the book given to Michelangelo: see Vecce; Scarpati, 2004 and 2011; Brundin, 2005; Brundin, 2008, esp. 57–76. On the importance of the two friends exchanging gifts, see Nagel, 1996; Nagel, 2000, esp. 169–87.

¹³The poems intended for publication have been identified by Carl Frey (see Frey, 112–207 [no. 109]), and translated as an intact collection by Sydney Alexander (Alexander, 141–239 [nos. 113–210]). For a reconstruction of the collection, see Corsaro; Fedi. The publishing and translation history of Michelangelo's poetry is nicely summarized in Saslow, 53–61. Scholars benefit from a long and distinguished tradition of translators who have tackled Michelangelo's sometimes difficult Italian. In my discussion of the poetry, I have utilized whichever translation I felt best captured Michelangelo's sense in that particular context. Unacknowledged translations of the poetry are my own.

But things got worse. In the span of just a few months between 1546 and 1547, death claimed more than a half-dozen persons of importance to Michelangelo, including — in addition to Vittoria Colonna, Luigi del Riccio, and Pietro Bembo — his friend and sometime collaborator Sebastiano del Piombo (ca. 1485–1547); his patron Ottaviano de' Medici (1482–1546), for whose son Michelangelo acted as godfather; and the king of France, François I (1494–1547), an eager patron and the artist's final hope for the liberation of Florence.¹⁴ The artist was already older than most of these friends and patrons. With a deepening melancholy, Michelangelo wrote: "I am an old man and death has robbed me of the dreams of youth — may those who do not know what old age means bear it with what patience they may when they reach it, because it cannot be imagined beforehand."¹⁵ In the few verses he continued to write, he longed for death: "Di morte certo, ma non già dell'ora":

Certain of death, though not yet of its hour,
 life is short and little of it is left for me;
 it delights my senses, but is no fit home
 for my soul, which is begging me to die.¹⁶

The sonnet is a relentless drumbeat of pessimism: in addition to the repeated appearance of death and its cognates ("morte," "mora," "mortale"), we encounter the blind world ("Il mondo è cieco"), light extinguished ("spent'è la luce"), the triumph of error ("trionfa il falso"), a curtailment of hope ("tronca la

¹⁴Even the death of François I — a much less personal loss than many of the others — must have been a shock. In April 1546, Michelangelo replied to the king's earnest request for a work. Writing that he was an old man (nearly twenty years older than François I), Michelangelo nonetheless declared his desire, "which, as I have said, I have had for a long time, to execute for Your Majesty a work, that is, in marble, bronze, or paint": *Carteggio*, 4:237. Michelangelo concluded by praying God "to grant Your Majesty a long and happy life." Less than a year later, the king was dead.

¹⁵Ramsden, 2:72; *Carteggio*, 4:258: "Io son vecchio, et la morte m'ha tolti i pensieri della giovinezza." Further, Michelangelo wrote: "I go on as usual, bearing with patience the failings of old age": Ramsden, 2:120 (*Carteggio*, 4:344). As he wrote to a close friend: "As regards old age, the state in which we both alike find ourselves, I should be glad to know how you, for your part, are faring, because I, for mine, am not well content": Ramsden, 2:118 (*Carteggio*, 4:339). In the course of a single letter when he was sixty-seven years old, Michelangelo first reports that he is "vecchio" and then later in the same missive he is "molto vecchio": *Carteggio*, 4:135–37. Later in 1547, he lost a major source of his income when the Po Ferry benefice was taken from him, and then his great-nephew died, the youngest child of his only niece, causing Michelangelo to grieve "as if it had been [his] own son": *Carteggio*, 4:276.

¹⁶Saslow, 490 (no. 295).

speme”), the soul in mortal danger (“l’alma fa mortale”), and life without refuge (“senza alcun refugio”).¹⁷ There are more than a half-dozen pessimistic expressions in the course of this single fourteen-line sonnet. Death was now omnipresent. As my mentor Howard Hibbard once quipped: “Michelangelo started dying at age forty, and continued for the next fifty years.”

It is difficult to measure the full impact of these multiple deaths, much less appreciate the implication for Michelangelo’s art, beyond their immediate effect of killing his literary aspirations. However, it is certain that from this moment forward, Michelangelo became increasingly preoccupied with his own death. In the medieval tradition of the *ars moriendi*, Michelangelo spent his final years preparing for death. But, unlike a medieval communicant, he did not retreat from the world. Rather, this was the moment he became architect of new St. Peter’s.

After more than forty years of demolition and new construction, St. Peter’s was a depressing sight. Vaults linked the four massive piers but the central crossing was still open to the sky. The grave of Saint Peter was protected from the elements by a temporary structure, but pilgrims would have had difficulty negotiating the chaotic work site or feeling any sense of veneration.¹⁸ Broken pieces of the nave columns and entablature lay where they had been pulled down in ruinous haste by the first architect, Donato Bramante (1444–1514), occasionally maligned as “Bramante ruinante.”¹⁹ The construction was encased in scaffolding, festooned with ropes, cranes, and hoists, and littered with disordered piles of building stone and equipment: clamps of old and new bricks, sand and pozzolana for mortar, carts, nails, rope, pulleys, wood, and mud everywhere. The foul stench of animals and refuse and the cacophony of work pervaded St. Peter’s. The largest construction site in the world looked more like a Roman ruin than a new church.

The building was granted a reprieve from further indignity when the architect Antonio da Sangallo (1484–1546) died in September 1546. After some wrangling over Sangallo’s successor, Pope Paul turned to Michelangelo. But why should Michelangelo, busy with the painting of the Pauline Chapel, enter the scene? He, after all, claimed that “architecture is not my profession,” and he was so busy with his multiple obligations that he didn’t even have time

¹⁷Ibid. The poem’s conceit, which Enzo Girardi characterized as “dantesquely Christian,” is, according to him, among the most notable statements in Michelangelo poetry or letters of the problem of individual salvation in the face of collective sin: see Girardi, 1974, 125. Oscar Schiavone notes that *morte* appears with an insistence throughout Michelangelo’s poetry, including 152 times in the *canzoniere*: Schiavone, 75. See also Clements, esp. 287–97.

¹⁸For the *tegurio* (or *tegurium*) — the temporary structure built to protect the grave of Peter — see Shearman; Tronzo.

¹⁹Ackerman, 1974.

to write to his family.²⁰ Pope Paul was undeterred by his artist's "intense dismay," and appointed Michelangelo supreme architect of St. Peter's in January 1547.²¹ The artist inherited a recalcitrant workforce as loyal to Sangallo as they were rightly skeptical of a comparatively inexperienced Michelangelo. Facing an entrenched bureaucracy and still painting the Pauline Chapel frescoes, Michelangelo took on the new obligation with understandable reluctance.

The sorry condition of the new church, the constellation of recent personal losses, Michelangelo's advanced age, and his expectation of imminent death were more than enough to justify his hesitation. On the other hand, St. Peter's gave new purpose and focus to his life, turning Michelangelo's private concerns into his greatest public responsibility. St. Peter's offered a final mission and the best reason not to yield to old age, despair, or death. His salvation, he came to realize, depended on restoring life to the dilapidated church. Thus, throughout the remaining years of Michelangelo's life, St. Peter's was the artist's principal and ever-present concern. The church is the central narrative of his late life.

The second significant episode unfolds in 1550 when Michelangelo was seventy-five years old. In November 1549, Pope Paul III, the artist's near contemporary and the person who had entrusted St. Peter's to Michelangelo, died, causing the artist "the greatest sorrow."²² Given his advanced age, Michelangelo doubted that the new pope "would need me owing to my age."²³ But he was wrong; Pope Julius III (r. 1550–55) confirmed Michelangelo in his position as papal architect, and soon employed him in a number of additional tasks.²⁴ Just a few months later, Michelangelo's life became a matter of general interest with the publication of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors*. Michelangelo's problems with St. Peter's and his current state of mind — sorrow at the loss of his friend and greatest patron, abject subjugation to God's will, and a fervent desire for his own salvation — could hardly have contrasted more with the triumphant and laudatory picture presented in Giorgio Vasari's encomium. The publication of Vasari's book in 1550 forced Michelangelo to confront the disjunction between his private person and his burgeoning public reputation and responsibilities.

²⁰His niece Francesca was fearful that he had forgotten her: *Carteggio*, 4:248.

²¹Vasari, 1966–87, 6:77. Ten years later, Michelangelo wrote that he was put in charge of the Fabbrica of St. Peter's by Pope Paul III, "under duress and against my will": Ramsden, 2:174 (*Carteggio*, 5:105).

²²*Carteggio*, 4:337: "grandissimo dispiacere."

²³Ramsden, 2:119 (*Carteggio*, 4:341).

²⁴*I contratti di Michelangelo*, 284.

Vasari began his life of Michelangelo with a sentence of biblical proportions, a masterpiece of hagiographical hyperbole: “Meanwhile, the benign ruler of heaven graciously looked down to earth, saw the worthlessness of what was being done, the intense but utterly fruitless studies, and the presumption of men who were farther from true art than night is from day, and resolved to save us from our errors,” and on and on. The single sentence is 222 words in the original Italian, that is, three times longer than the opening of Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. Vasari’s first sentence concludes with God deciding “to send into the world an artist who would be skilled in each and every craft, whose work alone would teach us how to attain perfection in design.”²⁵ In short, a savior, a new Christ. When Vasari sent a copy of his book, Michelangelo reciprocated with a sonnet and a letter thanking the author for having “prolong[ed] the life of the living.”²⁶ While Vasari’s *Vita* gave new life to the artist, it also prompted Michelangelo to reflect on the achievements and failures of his seventy-five years. Most importantly, Vasari’s book motivated Michelangelo to become an editor and author of his own biography.²⁷

In our time, the life stories of celebrities and political figures appear with alarming rapidity. Biographies of Pope Francis appeared in bookstores within a month of his election. Prior to the modern age, however, biographies generally were written after the deaths of their subjects. The appearance of Vasari’s life in 1550 introduced the curious and unusual situation of the biographical subject reading his own biography. Michelangelo is among the first persons in history to read a biography of himself. Except for Petrarch, who likely read Boccaccio’s *De Vita et Moribus Domini Francisci Petracchi* (1340s), there are few precedents.²⁸ Kings may sometimes have heard their deeds proclaimed in public, or read aloud to them, as we see, for example, in the Sistine Chapel pendentive that shows Ahasuerus in bed listening to the chronicles of his kingdom. But the famous subjects in Plutarch and Suetonius did not read their own biographies, nor did Charlemagne read Einhard’s *Vita Caroli Magni*, nor did Samuel Johnson read Boswell. The

²⁵Vasari, 1965, 325. For the Italian, see Vasari, 1966–87, 6:3–4. On the rhetorical brilliance of the sentence, see Barolsky, 1990, 67–68; Barolsky, 1994, 139–41; Eriksen, 1997; Eriksen, 2001, 79–109.

²⁶“Che voi allung[h]iate vita a’ vivi”: *Carteggio*, 4:346; and Saslow, 467 (no. 277).

²⁷Wallace, 2014a.

²⁸Scholars generally agree that Petrarch read Boccaccio’s *Vita* and responded to its characterizations in his own autobiographical “Letter to Posterity.” Thus Petrarch — who Michelangelo greatly esteemed and emulated as a poet — serves as an important precedent and model for the artist editing his own life. My sincere thanks to Timothy Kircher for this information. See also Barolsky, 1990.

experience of reading his own biography prompted Michelangelo to become an active author of his own life.

Partly to correct Vasari, but mainly to tell his own story, Michelangelo prevailed upon his pupil Ascanio Condivi (1525–74) to write a life that appeared just three years later, in 1553.²⁹ The most important difference between Vasari's and Condivi's lives must be attributed to Michelangelo himself, for it concerned his family history, which at this point was of intense interest to the septuagenarian artist. Only one of the five Buonarroti brothers ever married; therefore, the continuation of the family was wholly dependent on the artist's nephew, Lionardo, the sole surviving male child. Michelangelo fully recognized Lionardo's critical role, exhorting him "to remake and perpetuate the house," "so that our existence may not come to an end."³⁰ In 1549, Michelangelo invited Lionardo to Rome to discuss property investments, improvements to the family house in Florence, and the young man's marriage prospects. The aged artist clearly expected to die soon and, therefore, as he wrote, "I want to put my spiritual and temporal affairs in order."³¹

Michelangelo felt a deep obligation to his family lineage since, as he frequently reiterated, "we are citizens descended from one of the noblest families,"³² and further, "it is well known that we are old Florentine citizens and as noble as any other family."³³ Michelangelo's proud claim was founded on his family's antiquity and their descent from the illustrious counts of Canossa. The traditional family belief had been confirmed in 1520, when the current Count of Canossa, Alessandro, addressed the artist: "My much loved and honored relative Messer Michelangelo Buonarrotto of Canossa." The count reported that a search among his family papers had established the connection between their families, and he invited Michelangelo to visit the ancestral home ("la casa vostra").³⁴ Nothing was more important to Michelangelo's self-perception.³⁵ His belief in his noble ancestry governed the manner in which Michelangelo conducted

²⁹On the relationship between Vasari's and Condivi's lives, see Barocchi; Wilde, 1–16; Pon; Hirst.

³⁰*Carteggio*, 4:210: "a rifare et acrescere la casa"; and *ibid.*, 4:376: "accìo che l'esser nostro non finisca qui."

³¹Ramsden, 2:102; *Carteggio*, 4:315: "voglio aconciar le cose mia dell'anima e del corpo."

³²*Carteggio*, 4:249: "perché noi sià(n) pure cictadini discesi di nobilissima stirpe."

³³Ramsden, 2:98; *Carteggio*, 4:310: "perché gli è noto che noi siàno antichi cictadini fiorentini e nobili quante ogni altra casa." Therefore, it was imperative that Lionardo purchase "una casa onorevole," as Michelangelo reiterated time and time again: see, for example, *Carteggio*, 4:248, 249, 385, 386; 5:14.

³⁴*Carteggio*, 2:245: "Al mio molto amato et parente honorando messer Michelle Angelo Bonaroto de [Cano]ssa."

³⁵See Wallace, 2000 and 2010.

himself as a gentleman-artist, and it fully manifested itself in his rewriting of Vasari's life.

In contrast to God's divine plan as described in Vasari's exaggeratedly rhetorical opening sentence, *Condivi*, writing at Michelangelo's behest, penned this first line: "Michelangelo Buonarroti, that outstanding sculptor and painter, traced his origin from the counts of Canossa, noble and illustrious family of the territory of Reggio through their own quality and antiquity as well as their relationship with the imperial blood."³⁶ No major artist has ever claimed to have imperial blood in their veins, and, moreover, believed it. This incredible claim was followed by a lengthy description of the family's origins, surname, and coat of arms — all upper-class attributes possessed by few artists. *Condivi* clearly was emphasizing what mattered most to Michelangelo: the artist's noble birth, family history, and social status. The engraving by Giulio Bonasone that served as the frontispiece and only illustration in *Condivi*'s book may legitimately be regarded as the artist's officially sanctioned portrait (fig. 3).³⁷ The Latin inscription proudly proclaims Michelangelo a patrician and a Florentine, although it might also have been a poignant reminder that the artist had not seen his native city for nearly twenty years.

Having two biographies published in his lifetime prompted Michelangelo to take stock of his career and to reflect on his many wasted years and many incomplete endeavors. He also was forced to recognize that his life and works were matters of public interest and fostered contemporary expectation.³⁸ For example, toward the end of his narrative, Vasari briefly mentions some of Michelangelo's works in progress, including the Campidoglio, St. Peter's, and the unfinished Florentine *Pietà*, which he anticipates "will surpass every other work of his."³⁹ After observing that "it is enough to say that whatever he touches with his divine hand is given eternal life,"⁴⁰ Vasari concludes with a rhetorical flourish: "When he departs this life, his immortal works will yet remain, the fame of which, known throughout the world, will live gloriously forever in men's praise and the pens of writers."⁴¹ Such fulsome praise and promise of future glory must have jarred uncomfortably with the current state of affairs, since Michelangelo was acutely aware of his many incomplete endeavors. These

³⁶*Condivi*, 7.

³⁷See Steinmann, 1913, pl. 39; Rotili, 60 (no. 24).

³⁸Pon.

³⁹Vasari, 1966–87, 6:114.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 6:113.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 6:119. Unsurprisingly, this passage was eliminated in the revised 1568 edition; instead, Vasari remarks on the paucity of finished work, noting that most of Michelangelo's completed works were done when he was young: *ibid.*, 1:966–87, 6:92.



Figure 3. Giulio Bonasone. Portrait of Michelangelo. Engraving. 1546. Author's photo.

included not only the three mentioned by Vasari — the Campidoglio, St. Peter's, and the unfinished *Pietà* — but also the abandoned marble façade for San Lorenzo in Florence, the imperfectly realized Medici Chapel, the still-incomplete Laurentian Library, and a host of unfinished sculptures: *St. Matthew*, *Dying Slave* and *Rebellious Slave* (Louvre), four Accademia Gallery *Prisoners*, *Victory*, *David/Apollo*, and *Medici Madonna* — all unfinished and most languishing in his abandoned Florentine workshop.⁴² Over the course of his seventy-five-year career, Michelangelo started some thirty-seven marble sculptures, but fully finished and delivered just eighteen of them, that is, less

⁴²For the works still in the Via Mozza workshop, see Vasari, 1962, 2:317–32; and *Carteggio*, 5:95–96.

than half.⁴³ Once he accepted the responsibilities of papal architect, the number of incomplete projects multiplied.

Perhaps to counter Vasari's implied expectation that Michelangelo would complete many of these unfinished projects, Condivi wrote that the current pope, Julius III, "recognizes and relishes [Michelangelo's] greatness, but he refrains from burdening him with more than he wishes to do. And this respect, in my judgement, enhances Michelangelo's reputation more than any of the work all the other pontiffs employed him to do."⁴⁴ In other words, Condivi suggested that Michelangelo's reputation and future glory would not depend solely on the artist's works. Indeed, Condivi did not even mention the Campidoglio, and his brief discussion of St. Peter's largely absolves Michelangelo of much responsibility for that commission since "he never wished to follow the profession of architect." Condivi continues: "Indeed . . . when Pope Paul wished to appoint Michelangelo [as architect of St. Peter's] . . . he refused this employment, alleging that it was not his craft; and he refused in such a way that the Pope had to order him to do so and issue a most ample *motu proprio* which was subsequently confirmed for him by Pope Julius III."⁴⁵ Altogether, Condivi wrote little about St. Peter's, and nothing about the Capitoline. He eloquently described the Florentine *Pietà*, as Michelangelo was still carving it, but Condivi was unaware that the artist would soon abandon the work. Having read Vasari and having collaborated with Condivi on his biography, Michelangelo could hardly escape from reflecting on all that he had not accomplished.

We glean from Michelangelo's poetry and correspondence an increasing pessimism regarding his art and career. He ruefully observed, "No one has full mastery before reaching the end of his art and his life."⁴⁶ He especially lamented his misguided efforts and the ultimate futility of art, which he had come to

⁴³Vasari was fully aware of the paucity of finished sculptures, "which altogether do not amount to eleven, the others, I say, and there were many of them, were all left unfinished": Vasari, 1965, 404. The eighteen marble sculptures that Michelangelo completed and delivered are three figures for the tomb of Saint Dominic in Bologna, *Bacchus*, *Pietà*, two figures for the Piccolomini altar (and possibly two others), *David*, Pitti and Taddei *tondi* (although both were considered unfinished by contemporaries), Bruges Madonna, two Medici Dukes, *Risen Christ*, *Moses*, *Rachel* and *Leah* for the tomb of Julius II, and *Brutus*. Naturally, one looks upon the Louvre *Slaves*, *Victory*, the *Madonna and Child*, and the four allegories in the Medici Chapel as finished, but these sculptures were either not delivered to their intended recipients or they were not installed in their intended locations by Michelangelo. See also Schulz.

⁴⁴Condivi, 61–62.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁶Saslow, 517 (no. A35): "Non ha l'abito intero prima alcun, c'a l'estremo dell'arte e della vita."

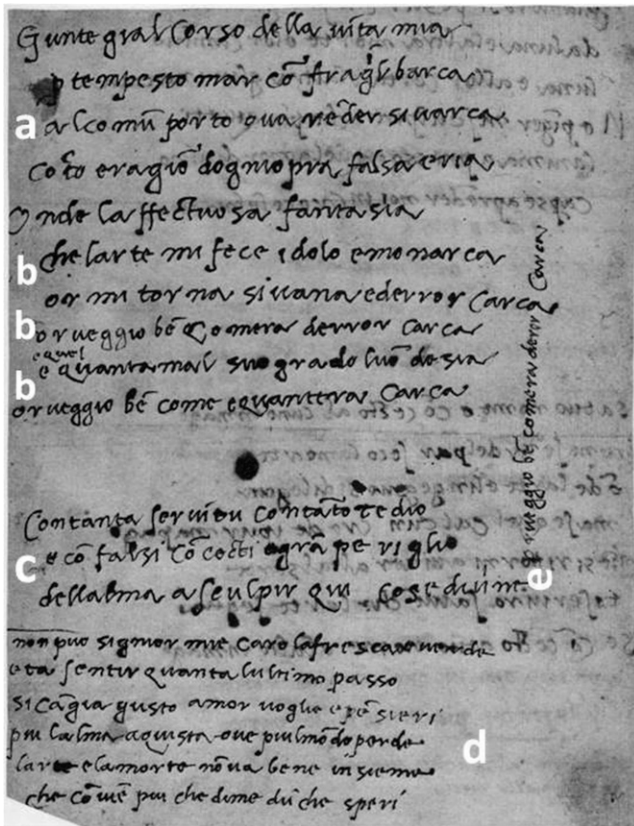


Figure 4. Michelangelo. Sonnet draft and miscellaneous poetic fragments. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana: Cod. Vaticano Latino 3211, fol. 95^r. Author's photo.

realize was a “mistaken notion.”⁴⁷ With evident despair, he wrote, “art and death do not go well together.”⁴⁸ These depressing observations were written on the same sheet and just below an incomplete draft of one of Michelangelo’s most famous sonnets, “Giunto è già’l corso della vita mia” (fig. 4).⁴⁹ However, the sheet is less interesting for the sonnet fragment than for what it reveals of Michelangelo’s current agitated state of mind. The page also offers eloquent testimony of the artist’s creative process, which was discursive, fragmentary, nonlinear, and frequently incomplete — whether the medium was words or stone. Let us look more closely at what this single page reveals.

⁴⁷Nims, 149 (no. 282); Saslow, 473 (no. 282): “falsi concetti.”

⁴⁸Saslow, 474 (no. 283); Nims, 149 (no. 283): “l’arte e la morte non va bene insieme.”

⁴⁹Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Manoscritti: Cod. Vaticano Latino 3211, fol. 95^r; *Carteggio*, 4:380–81; Saslow, 476 (no. 285); Nims, 150 (no. 285). On the sonnet and praise for Nims’s excellent translation, see Barolsky, 2000.

Michelangelo drafted the first quatrain of the sonnet (fig. 4-a), but at line three of the second quatrain he began searching for words, writing three different versions of a couplet that expressed his realization that his life's journey had been "laden with error" ("error carca") (fig. 4-b).⁵⁰ Without having resolved the compositional impasse, he gave vent to an overwhelming pessimism in writing, "In such servility! and all so boring! mistaken notions! and in deadly peril to my own soul, here chiseling things divine" (fig. 4-c).⁵¹ At this point, the composition of the sonnet, which began, "Giunto è già'l corso della vita mia," has been interrupted and temporarily abandoned.

In composing a poem whose subject was the voyage of life, Michelangelo inevitably would have recalled Dante's own life journey as described in the *Divine Comedy*. While Dante loses his way in a dark wood, Michelangelo travels a tumultuous sea in a fragile bark — both pilgrims having lost their direction in life. Michelangelo's sense that he has erred in life echoes Dante losing his way, "la diretta via era smarrita" ("the straight way was lost").⁵² However, Dante had the advantage and sympathy of his guides, Virgil and Beatrice, whereas Michelangelo is accompanied only by his Lord. Yet Michelangelo's Lord is less a helpful companion than an unknown, expectant being, to whom the artist now cries out in plaintive appeal. In six more lines written toward the bottom of the page, Michelangelo poignantly expresses his sense of the futility of art in the face of impending death (fig. 4-d):

The springtime, fresh and green, can never guess
 how, at life's end, my dearest Lord, we change
 our taste, desire, love, longing — years' debris.
 The soul means more, the more the world means less;
 art and impending death don't go together,
 so what are You still expecting, Lord, from me?⁵³

Finally, he turned the sheet ninety degrees and scribbled a fourth version of the line ending in "error carca," thus reiterating his lament of a life "laden with error" (fig. 4-e).⁵⁴

⁵⁰For the sheet, see Tolnay, no. 423^f. Nims, 150 (no. 285), translates "error carca" as "a pack of lies."

⁵¹Nims, 149 (no. 282). While Nims's exclamation marks perfectly convey the sentiment of the three lines, Michelangelo did not, as usual, provide any punctuation. See also Saslow, 473 (no. 282): "In such slavery, and with so much boredom, and with false conceptions and a great peril to my soul, to be here sculpting divine things."

⁵²Dante Alighieri, 1996, 26 (*Inferno* 1.3).

⁵³Nims, 149 (no. 283); see also Tolnay, no. 423^f; Saslow, 474 (no. 283).

⁵⁴All four versions of this line (for which, see Tolnay, no. 423^f) are different from the one Michelangelo eventually sent to Vasari: "or ben com'era d'error carca": Saslow, 476 (no. 285). See Glauco Cambon's analysis of these variants, what he calls "Michelangelo's verbal craftsmanship" with its many "cryptical torsos of language": Cambon, 128–36.

The disrupted composition of the sonnet and the writer's descent into increasingly negative ruminations on art and life are not evident if we only read the finished, less depressing version of the sonnet that Michelangelo ultimately sent to Giorgio Vasari in September 1554:

So now it's over, my day's long voyage, through
 tumultuous ocean, in a hull unsteady;
 I've come to the world's last anchorage, and make ready
 life's log with its every reckoning, foul and fair.
 The daft illusion once so cuddled there
 that art was a sovereign lord to idolize,
 I've come to know — how well! — was a pack of lies,
 such as, to their grief, men treasure yet as true.
 Fond, foolish, the lovesick longings felt before,
 what becomes of them, my double death approaching?
 One certain-sure, one muttering harsh alarms.
 Painting and sculpture soothe the soul no more,
 its focus fixed on the love divine, outstretching
 on the cross, to enfold us closer, open arms.⁵⁵

Michelangelo's accompanying letter further lightens the mood since he mocks himself as "old and crazy in wishing to write sonnets," and admits that "many people say that I am in my second childhood."⁵⁶ The sonnet sent to Vasari is the version that Enzo Girardi published in his critical edition of 1960, and the one that most subsequent scholars have considered definitive.⁵⁷ In contrast, the autograph draft reveals a complicated compositional history and a much more dispirited artist. For example, the final verse of the finished sonnet, "Painting and sculpture soothe the soul no more, its focus fixed on the love divine," is less pessimistic than the same line in the first draft: "The soul means more, the more the world means less; art and impending death don't go together."⁵⁸ The last line of the finished sonnet has Christ offering succor, "love divine, outstretching on the cross, to enfold us closer, open arms" ("amor divino c[h]aperse, a prender no', in croce le braccia"), which is more uplifting than the plangent lament of the

⁵⁵Nims, 150 (no. 285); *Carteggio*, 5:21–22. For an image of the neatly written sonnet and accompanying letter, see Ciulich, 70, pl. 1.

⁵⁶*Carteggio*, 5:21: "io sie vecchio e pazzo a vole' far sonetti" and "molti dicono ch'i' son rinbanbito."

⁵⁷Girardi, 1960, no. 285. See also the earlier publication of the poem in Guasti, sonnet 65; and Frey, 486–88 (no. 147). Both editors, while privileging the version sent to Vasari, nonetheless indicate the multiple variants in their respective notes.

⁵⁸For the draft verse, see Nims, 149 (no. 283); Tolnay, no. 423^r.

draft: "so what are You still expecting, Lord, from me?" ("che convien più che di me dunche sperì?").⁵⁹ Between draft and final version, Michelangelo transformed his despairing cry, "what are You still expecting, Lord, from me?" into a hope for salvation, with Christ on the cross reaching out to embrace the penitent artist in his open arms.

In the same way that we admire Michelangelo's drawings and unfinished sculptures for what they supposedly reveal of the artist, we should pay comparable attention to the fragmentary and inchoate form of much of his poetry. Michelangelo's drawings, sculptures, and writing all reveal the artist immersed in the laborious, and not always successful creative process.⁶⁰ And while we rightly admire Michelangelo's prodigious artistic accomplishments, it is well to recall that toward the end of his life, he looked upon art as false and futile, even a "deadly peril to my own soul."⁶¹ Art, once the artist's "sovereign lord," was now a "pack of lies."⁶² These unsettling sentiments were expressed shortly before Michelangelo fled Rome — the third of our significant episodes, and the one that forcefully confirmed his most pessimistic reflections on art and life.

The third event is the one with which I began: Michelangelo's flight from Rome in 1556. This is the most fleeting of the three biographical episodes, and perhaps for that reason it has prompted little interest among scholars. Moreover, the long-term ramifications are not immediately obvious. What do five weeks matter in an artistic career that spanned seventy-five years? But five weeks is actually a significant amount of time for an eighty-one-year-old artist, and especially if we acknowledge that the long-term psychological implications were more important than its temporal extent. Let us put this episode in perspective.

The year 1556 began as one of the worst of Michelangelo's life. He had been in charge of St. Peter's for nearly ten years, but had made only limited progress. He had devoted most of that time to reinforcing Bramante's crossing piers and eliminating the ill-conceived exterior ambulatory constructed under Antonio da Sangallo. Vasari praised Michelangelo for having "liberated St. Peter's from the hands of thieves and assassins, and transformed that which was imperfect to perfection."⁶³ But there was nothing perfect about St. Peter's. This was merely

⁵⁹For the draft verse, see Nims, 149 (no. 283); Saslow, 474 (no. 283); Tolnay, no. 423^r; cf. the final line of the finished sonnet in Nims, 150 (no. 285).

⁶⁰See Cambon, esp. 28–176; Masi; as well as the recent studies by Leonard Barkan and Oscar Schiavone who are particularly sensitive to Michelangelo's tendency to incessant revision.

⁶¹Nims, 149 (no. 282); Saslow, 473 (no. 282).

⁶²Nims, 150 (no. 285).

⁶³*Carteggio*, 5:19 (letter of 20 August 1554): "ha liberato San Pietro dalle mani de' ladri et degl'assassini et ridotto quel che era imperfetto a perfettione."

Vasari's extravagant means of describing Michelangelo's limited success in ridding himself of the most problematic members of the Sangallo clique and for having asserted a degree of control over a meddlesome bureaucracy. The truth is that, even after ten years, Michelangelo had little to show for his Sisyphean efforts, and few contemporaries, other than Vasari, recognized that he had made much progress. Moreover, private concerns intruded upon his public duties.

His brother Gismondo (1481–1555), the last surviving member of his immediate family, died in September 1555. Michelangelo accepted it with his usual Christian resignation, but his faith was severely tested when Urbino (d. January 1556), his beloved servant and confidant of twenty-six years, died less than three months later. Michelangelo, who loved Urbino “as if he were my own son,” was so emotionally distraught that he recorded the wrong month when he wrote to inform his nephew: “I must tell you that last night, Francesco, called Urbino, passed from this life to my intense grief, leaving me so stricken and troubled that it would have been easier to die with him . . . I now seem to be lifeless myself and can find no peace.”⁶⁴ As he soon discovered, the only peace he would experience would be in the woods near Spoleto. However, he was now accompanied by the sad realization that, with the deaths of his brother and closest companion, he had lost the last remaining members of his immediate and extended family.

In departing Rome in September 1556, Michelangelo might have had no expectation of ever returning. The city was in turmoil, threatened by an advancing Spanish army. Work at St. Peter's had been suspended, Michelangelo had dismissed his household servants, and his closest companion was dead.⁶⁵ Michelangelo's housemate and the current overseer at St. Peter's, Sebastiano Malenotti, wrote of the troubled times to the artist's nephew: “And God help us, for here one sees cruel things.”⁶⁶ A week later, Malenotti again wrote: “Here we are in danger; and you can imagine that I am unable to leave Michelangelo much alone because I see him in the greatest vexation.”⁶⁷ Shortly thereafter, the two left for Loreto. Michelangelo was eighty-one years old. What would become of his many unfinished projects? What sort of future could he reasonably expect?

Michelangelo had an invitation to seek refuge in Ancona, and another from a dear friend, Bishop Ludovico Beccadelli (1501–72), who encouraged the artist to escape Italy altogether and come to Ragusa in Dalmatia. Duke Cosimo de'

⁶⁴Ibid., 5:51–52; modified translation of Ramsden, 2:160.

⁶⁵The Fabbrica of St. Peter's had closed for lack of funds; fifty stone carvers had been released, and more would soon follow. Michelangelo was still without female domestic servants some six months later: *Carteggio*, 5:87.

⁶⁶*Carteggio indiretto*, 2:81: “Et Dio ci aiuti, che qua si vede cose crudeli.”

⁶⁷Ibid., 2:83.

Medici (1519–74) also offered hospitality, enlisting Giorgio Vasari in a concerted campaign to lure the artist to Florence. Vasari employed all his rhetorical skill to persuade Michelangelo to escape “Babylonian Rome”: “like Petrarch, your fellow citizen, oppressed by similar ingratitude, who elected the peace of Padua; so I promise that you will find peace in Florence.”⁶⁸

But while Michelangelo could safely escape the current crisis, the immediate debilitating effect of this episode has not been sufficiently calculated, nor its ultimately positive consequences. Earlier in his life, Michelangelo twice fled Florence — in 1494 with the exile of the Medici, and in 1529 during the turbulent last republic. He experienced three further significant disruptions to his artistic career: with the reinstatement of the Medici in 1512, the collapse of the last Florentine republic in 1530, and again when he exiled himself from Florence in 1534. Thus the flight from Rome in 1556 was the sixth time in his career that Michelangelo’s artistic endeavors were completely interrupted and he was forced to confront an extremely uncertain future. These repeated ruptures drove home the painful fact that he was not master of his own fate and that art was of little consequence in the face of war, politics, uncertain financing, and fickle patrons.

Meanwhile, what was he doing in the remote Franciscan hermitage of Monteluco? Other than a few letters exchanged with his exiled friends, there is little evidence of any activity other than his desire, as he stated, to make his devotions.⁶⁹ Michelangelo lived more like a hermit than the world’s most famous artist. It is difficult to imagine Michelangelo with nothing to do, and with no reasonable prospect of renewing his career. We have little except his unexpected reflection that “peace is not really to be found save in the woods.”⁷⁰

It is approximately a thirty-minute walk — perhaps slower for the octogenarian artist — from the hermitage of Monteluco (now fronted by Piazzale Michelangelo), where he likely lodged, to the mountain summit where the Franciscan brothers lived and observed their daily routines. He could have walked in the Sacro Bosco, where Saints Francis and Anthony found solace, and where the latter retreated to a tiny rock-cut cell overlooking the valley, with the distant sounds of farm life drifting on the clear mountain air. Perhaps at times during his stay, Michelangelo rode the seven kilometers down the steep mountain path into Spoleto — to visit the beautiful Romanesque duomo or to observe an important feast day, such as that of Saint Francis, which was

⁶⁸ *Carteggio*, 5:19.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5:74. There is little written evidence from the Spoleto trip; however, one document from this time may be the undated *ricordo* (*Ricordi*, 373 [no. 316]), a record of medicine prescribed by “Beato Cherubino da Spoleti” for the artist’s kidney stones.

⁷⁰ Ramsden, 2:169; *Carteggio*, 5:76.

celebrated on 4 October, shortly after his arrival. The duomo is decorated with impressive frescoes by Filippo Lippi (ca. 1406–69), and there, in the transept of the same church, one finds Lippi's tomb, paid for by Michelangelo's first patron, Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92). One can imagine Michelangelo asking himself who would pay for his tomb, and how would it be marked, now that he had violently attacked and abandoned the *Pietà* sculpture meant to adorn it. Who was still alive to finance his burial and commemoration?

Michelangelo had intended to continue his journey to Loreto and possibly Dalmatia, but, as he subsequently reported to his nephew, "I was unable to carry out my intention, because someone was sent expressly to say that I must return to Rome."⁷¹ It might have been flattering to have been summoned back to Rome; on the other hand, it reminded Michelangelo that he was a papal servant. He tacitly admitted as much when he wrote to Vasari: "in order not to disobey, I set out for Rome." But he also observed that "less than half of me has returned."⁷²

In returning to Rome, Michelangelo also returned to his many incomplete endeavors, which he surely now realized he would never live to see finished. Take, for example, the Campidoglio, his longest outstanding architectural commission.⁷³ He had positioned the Marcus Aurelius and two river-gods, but more than a quarter of a century after beginning the project, the Capitoline was still far from complete. There was no façade on the Senate palace and no entrance ramp (the *cordonnata*) to the unpaved piazza. Only three of seven bays of the Palazzo dei Conservatori were under construction before Michelangelo's death, and its mirror building was not even begun until 1603.⁷⁴ The Campidoglio was a constant reminder, since Michelangelo lived nearby, of the molasses-like pace of Renaissance architectural construction and the near impossibility of realizing one's vision, even if you lived as long as Michelangelo. The same pertained to every one of his current architectural projects: San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, the Sforza Chapel, Porta Pia, Santa Maria degli Angeli, and new St. Peter's — all would be left incomplete, just like so many of his sculptures. The realization might easily have inspired despair. Rather, following

⁷¹Ramsden, 2:168–69; *Carteggio*, 5:74–75: "ché mi fu mandato un huomo a post ache io mi dovessi ritornare in Rome."

⁷²Ramsden, 2:169; *Carteggio*, 5:76: "io son ritornato men che mezo a Roma."

⁷³On the history of the Capitoline and its condition during Michelangelo's lifetime, see Ackerman, 1961, 2:54–74; Thies; Argan and Contardi, 252–64; Bedon, esp. 51–203. As Caroline Bruzelius notes, "immense scale might be viewed as a predictor of conspicuous incompleteness and for significant changes in design": Bruzelius, 114. The observation pertains to nearly every one of Michelangelo's Roman architectural projects.

⁷⁴Payments for the execution of a brick pavement in a herringbone pattern were made between 1563 and 1564, evidently one of the final aspects of the project witnessed by Michelangelo, but still not complete at his death: Bedon, 124.

his retreat to Montelucio, Michelangelo experienced a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to his and to God's work.

After Michelangelo returned to Rome, it was still several months before funding was restored and work could be renewed at St. Peter's. The building had been under construction for fifty years, yet it still looked much like Maarten van Heemskerck (1498–1574) drew it in the 1530s.⁷⁵ Cosimo de' Medici perceived this to be an opportune moment to redouble his overtures, suggesting the artist might wish to return to Florence and see his "sweetest homeland."⁷⁶ Cosimo's chamberlain, Leonardo Marinuzzi, who wrote this letter on behalf of his duke, joined the chorus: "Therefore, dear messer Michelangelo, now is the time for you to comfort our prince, help your family, and honor Florence with your presence."⁷⁷ But despite pressure and Cosimo's repeated blandishments, Michelangelo never again left Rome. He devoted his remaining seven years to St. Peter's. As he wrote: "many people believe, as I do myself, that I was put there by God" ("esservi stato messo da Dio").⁷⁸ Expressed shortly after his return from Spoleto, this sense of divine purpose was nourished during the weeks he spent in the woods "attending to my devotions." Given the importance of Saint Francis in Michelangelo's life, it is likely that the artist's stay in the Franciscan hermitage inspired thoughts of that saint's mission to rebuild the church — metaphorically as well as physically, as Francis did at San Damiano in Assisi.⁷⁹ For Franciscans, the spiritual mission to "repair Christ's house" and the physical building of churches were directly related; it was a message and a mission that Michelangelo appears to have imbibed deeply.

⁷⁵For which, see Filippi, pls. 25–33. On Heemskerck's Roman drawings, see Hülsen and Egger; Bartsch and Seiler; Thoenes. My thanks to Marisa Bass for some of these references.

⁷⁶*Carteggio*, 5:82.

⁷⁷*Ibid.* See Duke Cosimo's further letter in *ibid.*, 5:97, and Vasari's accompanying effort at persuasion in *ibid.*, 5:98–99.

⁷⁸Ramsden, 2:177; *Carteggio*, 5:110. Michelangelo's sentiment echoed that of the current pontiff, Pope Paul IV, who also was firmly convinced that "God Himself had chosen him for the furtherance of His designs": Pastor, 14:74.

⁷⁹My thanks to Erin Sutherland for this suggestion. Michelangelo's lifelong associations with Saint Francis and the Franciscans are numerous, beginning with his mother, named Francesca. Francesca gave birth to the artist near Francis's retreat at La Verna; Franciscan Sta. Croce was the Buonarroti family's neighborhood church; the same church was the site of Michelangelo's earliest artistic efforts, as well as his and his family's final resting place. In addition, the subjects of two of the artist's (supposed) earliest paintings were of the saints most closely associated with Montelucio: *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Kimball Museum, Fort Worth) and a (lost?) painting of Saint Francis for San Pietro in Montorio in Rome.

Michelangelo's promise "not to fail St. Peter's nor to fail myself" was encouraged by his friend Ludovico Beccadelli.⁸⁰ Although fully aware of the incomplete state of St. Peter's, Beccadelli described the building as "that magnificent temple, immortal sign of Your Lordship's divine virtue."⁸¹ Beccadelli clearly realized, as did Michelangelo, that St. Peter's gave compass to the artist's life and endowed it with purpose. Informed of Michelangelo's recent escape to Spoleto, Beccadelli wrote comfortingly of his own exile in Ragusa: "As regards matters of the flesh, I am in exile; but with regards to the spirit I thank God for having called me to his service."⁸² Michelangelo also felt called to God's service: "I serve for the love of God," he wrote, "in Whom is all my hope."⁸³ More than once, Michelangelo declared that he worked "for the love of God"; therefore, to abandon St. Peter's "would be the cause of great ruin, a great shame and a great sin."⁸⁴

While Michelangelo hoped that his devotion to St. Peter's would guarantee his personal salvation, he also worked for the greater glory of the church — as he said, for "God and St. Peter."⁸⁵ Michelangelo was indeed a servant, but to a higher purpose. Thus he prayed that God would "help and advise me."⁸⁶ Vasari ultimately came to better understand Michelangelo's final mission, since, in the expanded 1568 edition of the *Lives*, he too linked God, Michelangelo, and St. Peter's when he wrote: "God, who looks after good men, favoured Michelangelo during his lifetime and never ceased to protect both him and St. Peter's."⁸⁷

Aside from the spiritual and salvific significance of St. Peter's, there still remained the practical matter of getting the church built. Following Spoleto, in letter after letter — to his nephew, to Giorgio Vasari, and to Duke Cosimo himself — Michelangelo reiterated his commitment to St. Peter's. Certain that he would not live long, Michelangelo repeatedly

⁸⁰ *Carteggio*, 5:109.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5:67: "quel magnifico tempio di San Pietro, segno immortale della divina virtù di Vostra Signoria."

⁸² *Ibid.*, 5:89. Beccadelli sent this letter to Spoleto believing that Michelangelo was still there "in exile."

⁸³ Ramsden, 2:177; *Carteggio*, 5:110. See the nearly identical sentiment expressed in a letter to Lionardo dated 2 December 1558: *ibid.*, 5:145.

⁸⁴ *Carteggio*, 5:35: "sare' causa d'una gran ruina, d'una gran vergogna e d'un gran pechato." The sentiment was reiterated to Duke Cosimo in May 1557: "I could not leave St. Peter's without causing great harm to the building and bringing the greatest shame upon myself" (*ibid.*, 5:102), as well as to Vasari: "that to abandon it now would be the greatest shame" (*ibid.*, 5:105). See also Barolsky, 1990, 48–52.

⁸⁵ *Carteggio*, 5:35.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5:109: "Prego Dio che m'aiuti e consigli."

⁸⁷ Vasari, 1965, 416; Vasari, 1966–87, 6:106.

promised not to “leave here until I had brought the fabric of St. Peter’s to a stage at which my design could not be spoilt or altered.”⁸⁸ He never again wavered from this resolve, which was as important to saving his soul as it was instrumental in shaping the future of the building. Having heard it repeatedly from Michelangelo himself, Vasari, in the expanded 1568 edition of the *Lives*, paraphrased the artist’s letters in writing that Michelangelo “continued working on various parts of St. Peter’s, with the object of making it impossible to change what was done,” and further: “for seventeen years, Michelangelo had devoted himself entirely to settling the essential features of the building.”⁸⁹ In turn, Michelangelo wrote to Vasari expressing his commitment “to work here on the fabric of St. Peter’s until it had reached a stage at which it could not be altered into another form.”⁹⁰ This was indeed the artist’s strategy, but he must have wondered what he could realistically expect to accomplish in the little time remaining to him.

At eighty-one years of age, and after six major disruptions in his life, Michelangelo fully realized he could no longer control or do everything himself. He also suffered from the excruciating pain of kidney stones, and some days was too feeble even to appear at the worksite. Moreover, the micromanagement that characterized his earlier career was not a practical means of overseeing a project as large as St. Peter’s, not to mention a half-dozen other architectural sites scattered across Rome. Rather, Michelangelo extended his reach and authority via a small group of individuals who understood his directives and trusted his vision. These friends and assistants are among the unsung heroes of Michelangelo’s old age, including the three successive overseers (*soprastanti*) who worked under his direction at St. Peter’s: Sebastiano Malenotti, Cesare Bettini, and Pierluigi Gaeta. They worked alongside Michelangelo, carrying out his plans and directions, but, just as often, they worked independently, as the master’s on-site representatives and with his full authority. Sebastiano Malenotti and Pierluigi Gaeta actually lived in Michelangelo’s household, therefore they were in constant contact with the master. In recommending Gaeta for the position as overseer, Michelangelo described their effective working relationship: he is “an honest and capable person suited to work at the fabric,” and, importantly, one who knows its “needs and requirements.” “Also,” added Michelangelo, “because he is accustomed to the work and lives in my house, he can explain to me in the evening what is to be done the next day.”⁹¹ Work on

⁸⁸Ramsden, 2:177; *Carteggio*, 5:110. He expressed a similar sentiment even before Spoleto: see *ibid.*, 5:35.

⁸⁹Vasari, 1965, 402, 416; Vasari, 1966–87, 6:90, 106.

⁹⁰Ramsden, 2:155; *Carteggio*, 5:35.

⁹¹Ramsden, 2:202–03; *Carteggio*, 5:272.

St. Peter's continued long after the day laborers had been dismissed. Note that it was Gaeta who knew the "needs and requirements" of the building, and it was his responsibility to explain the day-to-day progress of work to Michelangelo, not vice versa.

Most importantly, in the final eighteen years of his life, Michelangelo worked for five successive popes and every one gave the artist his unqualified support. Thanks to the authority that derived from this privileged position, Michelangelo could enlist influential individuals who served in the papal bureaucracy. Especially critical were the deputies of the Fabbrica, among whom were Michelangelo's friends, Ludovico Beccadelli and Cardinal Rodolfo Pio da Carpi (1500–64), as well as Bishops Francesco Pallavicini and Bartolomeo Ferratini (1537–1606), all loyal supporters of the artist.

Cardinal Pio da Carpi proved to be a particularly important figure in Michelangelo's final years. Carpi was an eminent and cultured man, an effective diplomat, and an influential deputy of the Fabbrica, whom Michelangelo considered a friend and addressed as "my most worshipful patron."⁹² It was Cardinal Carpi who encouraged Michelangelo to complete the wood model of the dome, and it was to Carpi that Michelangelo articulated his laconic theory of architecture: "one thing is certain: the parts of architecture are derived from the parts of man. Nobody who has not been or is not a good master of the human figure, and especially of anatomy, can hope to understand this."⁹³

In the same manner that he made drawings and carved sculpture, so Michelangelo concentrated on a building's torso, its anatomical center and structure; the rest was appendage. Thus it mattered little that subsequent architects — most notably Giacomo della Porta and Carlo Maderno — deviated from Michelangelo's designs since he had already fixed the principal form of the building's core: plan, space, and proportions. As Vasari clearly recognized, Michelangelo "settled and established the form of the building."⁹⁴

⁹²*Carteggio*, 5:230: "padron mio colendissimo." Cardinal Carpi is listed by Vasari as one of Michelangelo's close friends: Vasari, 1966–87, 6:109.

⁹³Mortimer, 147; *Carteggio*, 5:123. Despite the pithy nature of Michelangelo's comment (in a letter that may never have been sent), this statement is often taken as constituting Michelangelo's "theory of architecture"; see, for example, Ackerman, 1961, 1:1–10; Summers.

⁹⁴Vasari, 1965, 409; Vasari, 1966–87, 6:101: "il fermamento e stabilimento di quella fabbrica." While subsequent architects made additions and alterations to St. Peter's, Michelangelo's design remained authoritative. For example, Carlo Maderno demonstrated the utmost respect for Michelangelo's building: see Kuntz.

Although Michelangelo's goal was to define the plan and essential features of St. Peter's, the slow pace of construction and numerous setbacks meant that he could never completely free himself of responsibility for the project.⁹⁵ Thus, despite his express desire "to return to Florence with a mind to rest there in the company of death,"⁹⁶ he never reneged on his commitment to St. Peter's. The artist's beloved Dante (1265–1321), a fellow exile, may have offered some consolation. In canto 5 of *Paradiso*, Beatrice addresses the poet's concerns about unfulfilled vows, which resonated with Michelangelo's regret for his many incomplete tasks and unfulfilled promises. Beatrice assures Dante, "You have both Testaments, the Old and New, you have the Shepherd of the Church to guide you; you need no more than this for your salvation."⁹⁷ Christ was Michelangelo's shepherd and St. Peter's his salvation. Michelangelo may have taken further comfort from Cicero's essay on old age, *De senectute*, in which the aged Cato describes the elderly landowners planting and "working at things which they know they will not live to see." Cato then quotes the poet Caecilius Statius, who wrote: "He plants trees for the use of another age."⁹⁸ The best that Michelangelo could do was plant the seeds for the future of St. Peter's. And he did.

St. Peter's was Michelangelo's greatest achievement and, as he declared, his best hope for salvation and the forgiveness of his sins (fig. 5). Despite changes inflicted on the building during its 150-year construction history, we rightly think of the church as Michelangelo's creation, and his masterpiece. One of his most brilliant contributions was to revive Bramante's initial conception and correct its engineering deficiencies, thereby reinvesting the church with exterior and interior clarity. In removing much

⁹⁵One of the principal setbacks occurred shortly after he returned from Spoleto: the vault for the chapel of the king of France was incorrectly constructed: see *Carteggio*, 5:102–03, 113–14, 117–18. Alessandro Brodini, who offers a lucid analysis of what went wrong, suggests that the *capomaestro* (project foreman), Giovan Battista Bizzi, who oversaw the day-to-day technical aspects of the work, was likely unable to correctly interpret Michelangelo's intentions. Michelangelo himself admitted to being partially at fault, since at his advanced age, he was unable to be on site every day and to give specific technical instruction to the *capomaestro* in charge of the cutting of the blocks. See Brodini, 115–26.

⁹⁶*Carteggio*, 5:103: "tornarmi a Firenze con animo di riposarmi co la morte."

⁹⁷Dante Alighieri, 1982, 42 (*Paradiso* 5.76–78).

⁹⁸Cicero, 222 (*De senectute* 7.24). If Michelangelo had not read Cicero himself, he nonetheless was probably familiar with the work. In his *Dialogues*, Michelangelo's close friend Donato Giannotti describes Michelangelo wondering whether he could not learn Latin in his seventies given that Cato the Censor had learned Greek in his eighties, a story that is related in Cicero's *De senectute*, immediately after Cato describes the pleasure of farming in old age.



Figure 5. View of the dome of St. Peter's, Rome. Author's photo.

intervening construction, Michelangelo reversed nearly forty years of building history, which demanded enormous faith, courage, and vision on the part of both artist and a succession of papal patrons.⁹⁹ In just seventeen years he corrected what had gone before and largely shaped what came afterward.

From the outside, the church is a compact sculptural mass; inside it is a luminous, expansive, uplifting space. The vertical rise is so majestic that only the substantial attic and emphatic cornices counteract the upward surge. The dome both continues and concentrates these vertical forces. From ground to

⁹⁹Pope Julius III, for example, expressed a faith in Michelangelo that was not widely shared, even by the deputies of the *Fabbrica* who, in 1550, addressed a letter to the pope complaining of Michelangelo's secrecy and expressing disapproval "of the manner in which Michael Angelo is proceeding, especially as regards the demolition. The destruction has been, and is still to-day, so great, that all who have witnessed it have been deeply moved": Pastor, 13:334. On the building practices in the *cantiere* at St. Peter's, and the extraordinary fact that construction proceeded by destroying parts of the *fabbrica*, see Thoenes; Bredekamp. On Michelangelo's tenure at St. Peter's, see Millon; Bellini, esp. 1:23–149. On the incremental, episodic, ad hoc nature of large-scale construction projects, see Burns; Trachtenberg; Bruzelius.

lantern, the building rises in one continuous sweep. Although he did not live to see it built, the dome is the centerpiece of Michelangelo's design and his greatest contribution to St. Peter's. Its soaring magnificence dominates the skyline of Rome in a manner that its ancient predecessor — the Pantheon — never has. Michelangelo died deeply uncertain of his accomplishment, yet he did, in fact, succeed "in bringing the building to the stage at which [his] design could not be spoiled."¹⁰⁰ St. Peter's is the crowning achievement of Michelangelo's art as well as the most prominent symbol of papal authority and the universal Catholic Church.

How many persons die before completing their life's work? Michelangelo was painfully aware that his final project was yet another unfinished work. But while his life's journey was ending, his greatest masterpiece was just coming to life, and here we are 450 years later marveling at that achievement.

It is paradoxical that in the final phase of his career, Michelangelo remained prodigiously creative and influential without being prolific, as he had been earlier in his career. His late life was concerned less with making things than with finding the courage and devotion to continue tasks that he knew he would never see to fruition, and despite the loss of his closest friends, greatest patron, and his entire family. Yet thanks to a succession of trusting papal patrons, influential friends, hand-picked supervisors, and the judicious appointment of subsequent architects sensitive to his intentions, Michelangelo ensured the eventual completion of his many architectural projects, even long after his death. His authorship is not dependent on how many bricks or travertine blocks were laid in his lifetime, but on the clarity and compelling quality of his conceptions. Thus we rightly give Michelangelo credit for the Campidoglio, Porta Pia, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Sforza Chapel, and, of course, new St. Peter's. What most distinguishes Michelangelo's late life is the number, scale, and importance of the projects for which he was simultaneously responsible. Thanks to what he accomplished in his final years, Rome once again could claim its place as *Caput Mundi*.

¹⁰⁰ *Carteggio*, 5:110.

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