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INTRODUCTION

For a half year in Rome, I looked from my window on the dome of St. Peter's, the dome that Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475–1564) designed but never actually saw. The fact that Michelangelo remained committed to building this crowning feature of St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City for seventeen years with no hope of finishing the task made writing this book seem simple by comparison.

In the fifteen 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 became increasingly aware of how much the story of the artist's heroic rise to fame had deflected attention from his very different but no less enterprising later life. Resisting the attraction of that well-rehearsed narrative, this book examines the final two decades of Michelangelo's career, from the installation of the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome's San Pietro in Vincoli in 1545 to his death in 1564—that is, from age seventy to a few weeks shy of his eighty-ninth birthday. Notably, while this period represents fully one-fifth of the artist's long life and constitutes nearly a quarter of his approximately seventy-five-year artistic career, it remains the least familiar segment of the artist's biography.

I examine Michelangelo's life and works from the perspective of his ever-advancing age—his seventies and eighties—with a focus on what the artist chose to accomplish in his final years. This study is not as
much an investigation of “late style” (in the manner of Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, or Beethoven) as it is a probing into a late life: how Michelangelo lived and worked in the face of recurring setbacks and personal loss, advancing age, and the constant expectation of his own death. The artist’s aspirations to future fame and glory, his concern with family status, and his interventions in shaping his biography and legacy are all informed by this ever-present specter of death. But Michelangelo did not retreat from the world in the medieval tradition of the *ars moriendi*, with its preoccupation with a “good death”; rather, he became more productive than ever. Most importantly, despite the repeated efforts of others to lure him back to Florence, Michelangelo never abandoned his commitment to St. Peter’s in Rome. Indeed, the artist firmly believed that he “was put there by God,” and he vowed never to abandon the project. Dutifully, he worked at St. Peter’s for a succession of five popes, but he toiled above all for God and for his own salvation. He accepted the burden of being God’s architect.

*The Artist in His Seventies and Eighties*

The overarching themes of Michelangelo’s late life are significantly different from those of his earlier career, which was characterized by the artist’s remarkable productivity and spectacular rise to fame, manifested in a series of astonishing creations: *Bacchus*, the Rome *Pietà*, and *David*, the Medici Chapel and the Laurentian Library in Florence, 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. With the elderly Michelangelo, we are no longer dealing with an artist who insisted on doing everything himself or who, as he did at the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, directed assistants with near-obsessive attention to detail.¹

In another contrast to his earlier career, there is a notable absence in his later work 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 more sculptures. He carved the Florentine *Pietà* as his own grave memorial,
but gave it away damaged and unfinished. He worked on the Rondinini Pietà until several days before his death, but the sculpture remained radically incomplete. He lived with these unfinished sculptures in his house—as he previously had lived with the Moses—for nearly two decades. There, they served as memento mori, perpetually reminding the artist of his impending death and, more poignantly, of a life littered with unfinished and abandoned work.

Michelangelo's final years were largely devoted to architecture. Between 1545 and his death, in 1564, he was associated with more than a dozen architectural projects and was principally responsible for half of them, including, all in Rome, the Capitoline Hill (or Campidoglio), the Farnese Palace, Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri, the Porta Pia, the Sforza Chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore, the never realized plan for a new church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, and, most important of all, New St. Peter’s. At the time of his death, however, not a single one of these projects was anywhere near completion. Strikingly, Michelangelo's two monumental frescoes in the Vatican's Pauline Chapel, completed in 1550, when he was seventy-five, were the last works the artist ever finished. 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? Most importantly, how do we understand Michelangelo’s art in light of his growing preoccupation with death, sin, and salvation?

Michelangelo’s “late life” begins in 1545, when he turned seventy years of age. Although old, the artist had ample reason to be content. With the installation of the tomb of Pope Julius II, Michelangelo had just completed one of his most important commissions and his final work of public sculpture. He was already well beyond the age of normal life expectancy, yet he was about to embark on a wholly new, and
arguably the most significant, phase of his career. For the next seventeen years, Michelangelo devoted himself to God and St. Peter’s.

The Materiality of Art

In a review of Herbert von Einem’s monograph on Michelangelo, John Pope-Hennessy noted that “never, or scarcely ever, do modern scholars look at Michelangelo’s works and ask themselves how they came into being and why.” One of the principal emphases of my writing about Michelangelo for more than thirty years has been to address this lacuna. I continue to be fascinated with the difficulty of making art, the arduousness of carving marble, the challenge of transporting and lifting heavy objects, the tedious necessity of erecting scaffolding, and the quotidian preoccupation with the mechanics, detail, and complexity of building. In the face of these difficulties, Renaissance artists, with Michelangelo chief among them, created some of the most sublime works the world has ever seen. There is enough evidence to suppose that Michelangelo mused on the evident incongruity of fashioning sublime works of art from mundane material and toilsome labor. This book is about a final paradox in Michelangelo’s long life, when the aged artist desired spiritual salvation yet was mired in the incessant materiality and minutiae of his craft.

Art is first and foremost about stuff, the materials from which it is made and the means by which it is fabricated. Artists know materials, their nature, source, availability, quality, durability, beauty, and cost. Art is about obtaining materials, moving them, working them, and moving them again. In the Renaissance, and still today, lifting a five-ton sculpture is a difficult, costly, and dangerous task. Architecture in particular requires an inordinate amount of labor and time. But Michelangelo had little time, even as a young man and ever less as he advanced into old age. He was seventy-one when he took over as architect of St. Peter’s. From the beginning, Michelangelo knew that a building of that scale would take much longer than the number of years he had remaining on this earth. As it turned out, Michelangelo was able to devote only seventeen years to the enormous project, which required 150
years to complete, from its beginning with Donato Bramante in 1505 to its acknowledged completion under Gianlorenzo Bernini in the mid-seventeenth century. While long predating Michelangelo’s tenure and still under construction well after his death, St. Peter’s is arguably the artist’s greatest accomplishment. I wish to tell that story.

The reader might accuse me of resorting occasionally to a fictionalized voice or what the writer Michael Orlofsky has termed “historio-grafiction.” This tendency is something of a current trend (dubbed “narrative truth”), even among serious scholars of history. Michelangelo is the best-documented artist of the entire Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci may have left a greater number of drawn and written pages, but Michelangelo left much more information about his personal and professional life. Thanks to his extensive familial and professional correspondence, his voluminous business and financial records, and the masses of documentary notices by friends, associates, and contemporaries, not to mention three biographies written in his lifetime—two of which Michelangelo himself read and helped to shape—the artist is unmatched as a biographical subject. Certainly there is little reason to fictionalize when one can garner so much from the documents we have. Yet, one still needs to rationally glean much by reading between the lines and often to reconstruct what is missing. Given the immense quantity of primary and secondary documentation, I would argue that I am filling in some missing gaps rather than fictionalizing my subject. In part, I do this by reading both sides of Michelangelo’s correspondence, even if one side is missing. And I read both central and peripheral source materials, since they so richly evoke the world and society of Renaissance Italy. In addition, by observing engineers, masons and carpenters, marble sculptors and quarry workers, the construction of scaffolding, the repair of old structures, and even the laying of paving stones, I have learned about continuities in the building industry from ancient to modern times. Even if there is more mechanization in our modern world, manual labor, tools, and construction sites remain similar, and builders still face challenges comparable to those of Renaissance architects. This is some of the “research” that informs my reading of the extensive documentary rec-
ord left by Michelangelo and his contemporaries. In the words of the
historian John Elliott, the writing of good history is “the ability to enter
imaginatively into the life of a society remote in time and place, and
produce a plausible explanation of why its inhabitants thought and
behaved as they did.”5 And further, I am in sympathy with the biogra-
pher Richard Holmes, who, faced with “an astonishing lack of solid
evidence,” concluded his compelling portrait of Samuel Johnson and
Richard Savage by writing, “I have given the evidence as I have found
it, and allowed the story to create its own emotional and artistic logic.”6

There is one additional factor that possibly inflects my writing. I
was born on July 30, which also is the birthday of Giorgio Vasari,
Michelangelo’s greatest biographer and one who precedes me in cre-
atively fashioning his subject’s life. And just as Michelangelo found
much to correct in Vasari’s life of the artist, so too, I am certain, would
he find much to criticize in my account. I anticipate that a few critics
may accuse me of writing a Vasarian-style account of Michelangelo.
Given that we increasingly recognize Vasari to be a great literary writer,
I will be happy to be so accused and happier still to be as widely read.

Note to the reader:

We benefit from a long and distinguished tradition of translation
of Michelangelo’s sometimes difficult Italian. In my discussion of the
artist’s correspondence and poetry, I have utilized whichever transla-
tion I felt best captured the sense in that particular communication or
cultural expression. Unacknowledged translations of the correspon-
dence and poetry are my own.
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