Contents

PART I
Rivalry Begins, 1500–1545

In 1500, Venice, Florence, and Rome were separated by more than distance, more than the three to four days it took to ride a horse from Venice to Florence, or the nearly ten days required to travel from Venice to Rome. The cities were different worlds, cultures, and cuisines, and their residents spoke different dialects. Titian and Michelangelo pursued careers in what would have seemed then like two different countries linked by politics, diplomacy, and finance. How did they learn about one another?

Venice Has Ears: "A Bocca"

Rhetoric, one of the seven liberal arts of classical antiquity, is the skill of speaking effectively, usually for political persuasion. Cicero called rhetoric "the Queen of the Arts." It was both an art and a weapon, to be used for positive or nefarious purposes, depending on who wielded it: Cicero or Catalina, Brutus or Mark Anthony. Passed down from the ancients, those living during the Renaissance rediscovered the art and the artifice of rhetoric and sought to speak well and smoothly, with a "silver tongue." Machiavelli, well aware of rhetoric's power, attempted to educate rulers on

how to manipulate its potential and remain impervious to its wiles. The English, for example, were constantly wary of Italian diplomats with their well-honed rhetorical skills, invariably distrusting them as "Machiavellian." Whatever one may think about rhetoric and its place in the early modern era, it represents the "high end" of speech. It was the art of speaking well and of oral persuasion. It was rarely accurately recorded.

In the political and diplomatic arenas, spoken communication was widespread and often more effective than writing, because it was performative and could be finessed. The fact that it was not documented made it safer. Although characterized by lengthy dispatches, much diplomatic business was never committed to paper. As it became more sensitive, diplomacy was first carried on in code and then by word of mouth, "a bocca." When, for example, the Florentine Signoria sent Michelangelo to Ferrara in 1529 to negotiate for military assistance from Duke Alfonso d'Este, he was charged with this sensitive mission "di bocca"—orally.[1] In a time of war, avoiding written communication was strategically advisable. An emissary conveying information by word of mouth was less vulnerable to interception. He could elaborate upon whatever written communique was delivered, and could dissemble with impunity. In the personal realm, too, oral expression could be more refined and subtle than written communication. When Michelangelo sent drawings to his new friend of passionate interest, Tommaso de' Cavalieri, he did not entrust his delicate sentiments to paper.[2] Rather, a mutual friend was enlisted to add the most important message "a bocca." Thus, even though Michelangelo was an exceptionally adept writer, we witness him deferring to speech for delicate matters of feeling best expressed by a sympathetic friend.

If the carefully prepared, oftentimes formulaic speeches of diplomats and courtiers were not recorded for posterity, what of the

rest of the verbal communication that accompanies, follows, and comments on it?[3] Much of the discussion and chatter among court officials, courtiers, spies, servants, and hangers-on revolved around political or commercial matters. Such discourse carried threads of hearsay, rumors, stories, and gossip. In this way, artists enter the worlds of court and diplomacy through the side door.

Michelangelo in Turchia

Michelangelo *sculptore* or *schultore*. The spelling varied, but not the profession. That is how Michelangelo proudly signed himself for the first three decades of his career. At age twenty-one, he completed the *Pietà*—"the most beautiful work in marble to be found in Rome"—proudly signing with his family name in Latin majuscules: MICHEL ANGELUS BONAROTVS.[4] Four years later he completed the *David*, referred to by awestruck Florentines as "the Giant." These were unique marvels that catapulted Michelangelo's career; he was suddenly the most respected sculptor of his time. Commissions proliferated, as did the beginnings of an international reputation.[5] By age thirty, word of the Florentine sculptor had spread so much that two of the most powerful persons on earth sought his services.

In 1505, Pope Julius II summoned thirty-year-old Michelangelo to Rome, tasking him with creating a monumental marble tomb. The following year the sultan of Turkey—that is, the ruler of the other half of the world—attempted to lure the same young artist to Constantinople. The sultan, Bayezid II (1481–1512), arranged for letters of credit to cover the artist's traveling expenses, and promised that Michelangelo would be met in Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik) and "honorably accompanied" to his court. The fledgling artist was enticed by the sultan's offer. Michelangelo's

contemporary and biographer Ascanio Condivi reflected Michelangelo's pride at such an important invitation when he noted: "Such arrangements are not usual, everyday occurrences; they are new and out of the ordinary and they do not happen except in instances of singular, outstanding talent, like that of Homer, for whom many cities contended, each one of them claiming him for its own possession."[6]

The sultan desired to build a bridge across the Golden Horn, a proposition that certainly attracted Michelangelo, in part because Leonardo da Vinci had failed to fulfill a similar invitation some years earlier. Flattered, Michelangelo created a design for the bridge and was still considering making the journey to the infidel court more than ten years later. However, he never left Italy, as Pope Julius II soon commandeered his full-time services.

How did Sultan Bayezid hear about a Florentine sculptor named Michelangelo Buonarroti? There are no letters or contemporary accounts, much less Turkish descriptions of the *Pietà* or *David*. Moreover, written or oral accounts of such works could hardly inspire a Muslim sultan to entrust the most challenging engineering project in the world to a Christian sculptor. While lacking written documentation, we can imaginatively reconstruct the oral culture that was the means by which the sultan, and subsequently Titian, first learned about the ambitious Florentine.

At some point in the early years of the new century, Sultan Bayezid lent a curious ear to a traveler, perhaps a Florentine merchant, a Venetian diplomat, a Turkish agent, or a Genoese spy who described the outsize talent of a young Florentine who had carved a marble giant, "Il Gigante." The sultan was drawn to the report of its colossal size: more than three times as tall as the tallest court Janissary, or elite soldier, and it required more than six elephants to move it . . . like the Colossus of Rhodes! A verbal description

would have excited the wonder of a foreign prince, who, because of his religion, favored words more than pictures.

Of course, this is an imagined scene, dependent upon rhetoric. It is actually ekphrasis, a word description so vivid that one sees it in the mind's eye.[7] This means of oral communication, which would be employed to describe the excitement of a work of art, will be of central importance to our story, despite the fact that such verbal traces rarely find their way into documents or archival sources. And importantly, ekphrasis, or, more simply, vivid verbal description, was a natural language among artists.

It was through spoken means that the sultan of the Ottoman Empire and a future doge of Venice first learned of a Florentine with an unusual name, Michael Archangel, and his burgeoning reputation as a creator of marvels. By the first years of the new century, word of Michelangelo's colossal *David* had spread beyond his native city. It likely reached as far as Turkey via the highly developed Venetian trade and diplomatic network in Constantinople, as well as the regular traffic of ambassadors, agents, spies, couriers, and courtiers between Rome, Florence, and Venice. One likely conduit of communication was the Venetian patrician Andrea Gritti, who spent nearly twenty years of his early career in Constantinople. Gritti (1455–1538) was first engaged in mercantile trade until his appointment in 1492 as the Venetian representative to the Ottoman court. He would have returned to service in Venice at the beginning of the new century, as an informed insider.

In October 1505, Gritti was staying in Rome as part of a Venetian delegation sent to negotiate with Pope Julius II. Michelangelo was in Carrara quarrying a mountain of marble for the pope's tomb. While in Rome, Gritti witnessed Julius's ambitions for the artistic renewal of the city. The new construction at St. Peter's, Bramante's Cortile di Belvedere, and the monumental marble

mausoleum were unmistakable evidence of Julius's transformation of the dilapidated city. A rapidly rising star in Venetian politics, Gritti shortly afterward became head of the Council of Ten, and in 1523, was elected doge of Venice. Both in Constantinople and Rome, he was well situated to hear murmurings of the Florentine sculptor now working on a megalomaniac papal project. Gritti is only one of dozens of figures—but perhaps the earliest—who directly and indirectly connect Titian and Michelangelo. We will meet him again—as doge—when Michelangelo visits Venice in 1529 (see Plate 40).

Word of artists traveled within this oral culture, along the margins of diplomacy and barely above the level of gossip. And artists thrive on gossip, especially about one another. Thus, it was through such means that Titian first heard about a Florentine artist working in Rome, who, it was rumored, was invited to Constantinople by the sultan. Long before Titian met or saw a single work by Michelangelo, he was aware of the Florentine master through word of mouth, "a bocca." Titian's ambitions and competitive spirit were stimulated by such descriptions. As he listened, what more might he have heard?

Michelangelo in Rome, 1505

In 1505, Michelangelo was summoned to Rome by Pope Julius, whose papal name signaled his ambition to create an imperial Rome in emulation of Julius Caesar. Julius was known as the "warrior pope" for he led troops into battle in a campaign to reestablish hegemony over the Papal States. He was headstrong, displayed a fierce temper, and brooked no opposition. Contemporaries referred to him as *terribilità*—frightful even dreadful—a strong-willed and often difficult individual. At the same time, he

was a brilliant manager of his equally difficult and headstrong artist. Michelangelo was thirty years old, short in stature but giant in ambition. Thus, he was—along with Donato Bramante and subsequently Raphael—a perfect partner to help Julius realize his ambitious program of artistic and urban renewal.

Recognizing their mutually outsized ambitions, Julius and Michelangelo imagined creating a magnificent papal mausoleum, an imposing work on the scale of a Roman emperor. In July 1505, Michelangelo, entrusted with a thousand ducats, departed for the quarries of Carrara to extract hundreds of marble blocks for the giant tomb. He remained six months. Through the hot summer and the cool weather of fall, Michelangelo searched for marble, increasingly in the grip of his grandiose vision: a three-story monument with forty life-size figures, replete with ornament, including bronze reliefs. It would take years to complete. Forty years! There, among the sublime peaks of the Apuan Alps, Michelangelo's soul soared and his imagination was unleashed. While looking at the scarred mountain face, he imagined using the entire peak as raw material to carve a colossal figure. "And he certainly would have done it," Condivi confidently asserted, "if he had had enough time."[8] Like Alexander the Great's sculptor Dinocrates who carved a colossus from Mount Athos, Michelangelo imagined doing the same. His enthusiasm transcended the realm of the possible, yet word of this colossal enterprise circulated "a bocca," long before Condivi wrote it down.

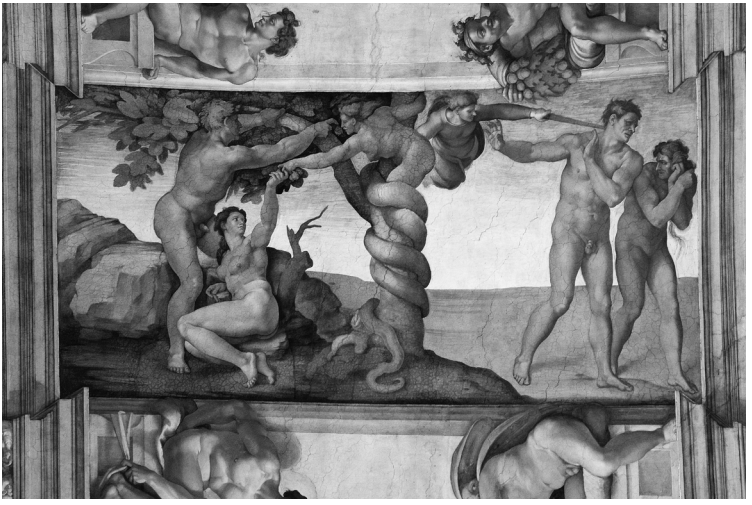
Soon, blocks of marble began arriving at the Ripa Grande, the riverport of Rome. A growing number of gawking citizens watched the laboring workmen (*facchini*) who unloaded the unwieldy blocks as barges deposited a seemingly infinite quantity of freshly quarried Luna marble. Gossip on the street became rampant; the pope was building an imperial monument to himself!

It must have been exciting to witness the pope's frenetic building activity across Rome. The papal architect Bramante was busy designing a three-tiered garden court enclosed by long corridors connecting St. Peter's to the Belvedere Villa. He was also supervising the building of a circular Tempietto over the place of Peter's crucifixion on the Janiculum Hill. And Michelangelo was moving a mountain of marble from Carrara to Rome. But suddenly the pope's attention turned elsewhere, to a scheme to have Bramante replace the venerable Constantinian basilica of St. Peter's with a new church. At the same time, Julius redirected the energies of a resistant Michelangelo to a different and seemingly unsuitable project for a sculptor: the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. What and when did Titian hear about what was transpiring in Rome?

Titian in Padua, 1510–11

Titian's breakout moment came not in Venice but in its subject city of Padua. In December of 1510, he contributed to a cycle of frescoes relating the life and miracles of St. Anthony, patron saint of Padua. The paintings lined the walls of the Scuola del Santo, a lay confraternity dedicated to children and the poor. Among the works he painted in the Scuola was an audacious composition of a husband murdering his innocent wife (Plate 5).[9] In a tour de force of dramatic narrative, an insanely jealous, knife-wielding husband looms over his sprawling wife who turns back toward him in a desperate but failed appeal for mercy. Deeply repentant of his crime, the husband will be forgiven by Anthony, as we see in the background vignette.

In a posthumously published lecture delivered more than fifty years ago, the great Michelangelo scholar Johannes Wilde made



4. Michelangelo, det. *Fall of Man*, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, 1508–12.

a passing observation. The entwined poses of husband and wife appeared similar—in reverse—to Adam and Eve from Michelangelo's *Fall of Man* on the Sistine ceiling (Fig. 4). The observation has been repeated frequently despite Wilde's cautionary query: "You will rightly ask: how could he [Titian] know Michelangelo's fresco which was unveiled on 15 August 1511?"[10] That is, how might Titian, who did not visit Rome until 1545, know what Michelangelo was painting at the same moment in the mostly shuttered Sistine Chapel? A more difficult follow-up question not asked or answered by Wilde is: by whom and by what means would Titian in Padua have been alerted to Michelangelo's frescoed ceiling?

Scholars have confronted Wilde's challenge by attempting to explain that Titian may have been informed via drawings or an engraving, thereby explaining the reversal of the pose.[11] However, no such drawings or engravings exist; moreover, one is still left explaining who was responsible for transmitting the information

from Rome to Padua, and exactly how. This supposed connection between Titian and Michelangelo at a time when they were working simultaneously, more than three hundred miles distant from one another, quickly becomes more convoluted than likely. It is also unnecessary.

Interesting suggestions over time have a tendency, through repetition, to crystalize into facts.[12] The relationship of Titian's *Jealous Husband* to Michelangelo's *Fall of Man* in the Sistine has been repeated so often as to have become a generally accepted truism—an early instance of Titian adopting a figural invention from the older master. I would like to suggest another way to benefit from Wilde's insight, by placing it in the longue durée history that is our subject.

Wilde made a purely formal comparison. In following him, we are allowing formal analysis to occlude subject and significance. Let us ask instead: what are the subjects of the respective frescoes; what and how are they narrating those subjects, and how different in action and meaning are the poses and gestures?

Michelangelo's *Fall of Man*—the guile of temptation and the impending tragic fall from grace—is a subject radically different in character, magnitude, and significance from Titian's murderous scene (see Plate 5). Titian painted a swarthy, bearded, and bedraggled husband violently yanking the hair of his collapsed and pleading wife, exposing her neck and half-naked breast to the long dagger that he is about to plunge into her innocent flesh. The rust-red stripes of the husband's belted tunic anticipate the streams of blood that are beginning to stain his wife's white chemise and lemon-ochre dress. In her vain appeal, she raises a hand to deflect the brutal final thrust.

Titian painted a vivid, violent, and rapidly unfolding narrative of murder, quite the opposite of Michelangelo's slow-moving, intimately entwined figures facing temptation. Eve, Michelangelo's

artless ingenue, gazes with open lustrous eyes at the pleasantly florid face of a seemingly congeneric creature. Eve's fixed attention and raised arm prevent her from recognizing that her interlocutor is actually a monstrous serpent wound tightly around the tree. Having been lured to temptation, Eve pays no attention to Adam and his coeval fall from grace. Equally distracted from his consort, Adam willfully transgresses God's commandment by assertively plucking fruit from the forbidden tree.

In Michelangelo's rendition of the *Fall of Man*, the traditional Christian subject is presented as an alluring double entrapment. As spectators, we are drawn into temptation, ultimately realizing that we inherit Adam's and Eve's fallen state. It is a very different experience from Titian whose rapidly unfolding narrative action nonetheless allows us to remain detached witnesses to the violently murderous scene.

Rather than connecting Titian's figural pose to Michelangelo, it is more fruitful to consider the younger Venetian artist ambitiously and successfully experimenting within a genre of dramatic narrative. The *Jealous Husband* is an outlier among the Paduan frescoes. All the other scenes in the cycle lack a similar level of action; rather, they are stilted, tableau compositions belonging to a conservative Venetian idiom and style. As an experiment in action painting, the *Jealous Husband* marks a significant advance over another painting by Titian in the fresco cycle, *The Miracle of the Speaking Infant* (Fig. 5). This work, like the others in the Paduan Scuola, is an artificially posed, planar composition lacking the sudden and shocking drama of the murder scene.[13] For Titian to make this artistic evolution—probably within weeks, if not days—did not require Michelangelo, and certainly not the *Fall of Man*, a subject diametrically different in every respect, except for the limited formal similarity recognized by Wilde.

5. Titian Vecellio, *Miracle of the Speaking Infant*, fresco, 11×11.5 ft (340×355 cm), Scuola del Santo, Padua, 1511.

Let us imagine a more likely scenario, taking greater account of the circulating oral culture of the early modern period. As an ambitious upcoming artist, Titian had his ear to the ground. He did not need an engraving or drawn copy of Michelangelo's contemporaneous creation to invent the *Jealous Husband*. By mid-1511, there was a pervasive murmuring about Pope Julius and the bevy of artists whom he brought to Rome, including the much talked about master from Florence now painting in the papal chapel. Titian may have heard rumors of Michelangelo's ambitious undertaking,

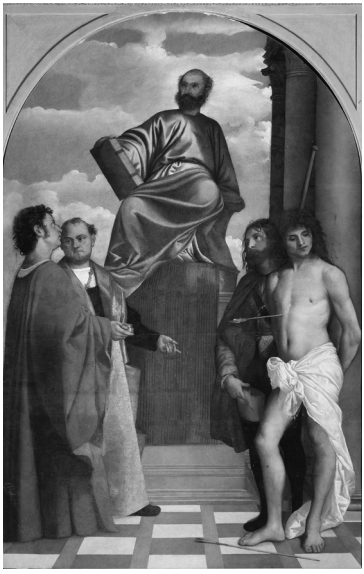
thereby piquing his competitive interest, but these did little to assist his own specific invention.

Thanks to diplomats, ecclesiastics, artists, friends, visitors, and pilgrims, certain foreign names were circulating in the contemporary media-sphere, most prominently those of Donato Bramante and his young compatriot Raphael. Conversations possibly also included talk of Leonardo da Vinci. Venetians knew about Leonardo as he had passed through the city in 1500 and was one of the most discussed artists of the day. However, by the beginning of the second decade of the sixteenth century, Leonardo had disappeared to Milan, and talk turned to his compatriot, a Florentine sculptor named Michelangelo. By 1511, even Titian would have heard something of the marble colossus called "il Gigante," and maybe—through the Venetian grapevine, the sculptor's invitation to the court of Sultan Bayezid II. That would be news of interest to any Venetian!

So why, Titian might have asked himself, was a Florentine sculptor in Rome painting in the pope's chapel? He has heard little more than vague gossip, even if gossip can be enormously stimulating to a young and ambitious Titian. As of yet, however, he was inventing *on his own*.

Muscular Nudes

Following the completion of the Scuola del Santo frescoes in Padua, Titian painted several pictures that featured seminude figures: the *Baptism of Christ* and a *Noli me Tangere* (Fig. 6).[14] His altarpiece for the church of Santo Spirito on the island of Isola, included a scantily clad St. Sebastian standing in a relaxed, contrapposto pose (Fig. 7). We see a near twin of this figure in the San Niccolò altarpiece, now in the Vatican Museum (Fig. 8).[15] Given the



6. *(top left)* Titian Vecellio, *Noli me Tangere*, oil on canvas, 43.5×36 in (110.5×91.9 cm), The National Gallery, London, c. 1513–14.

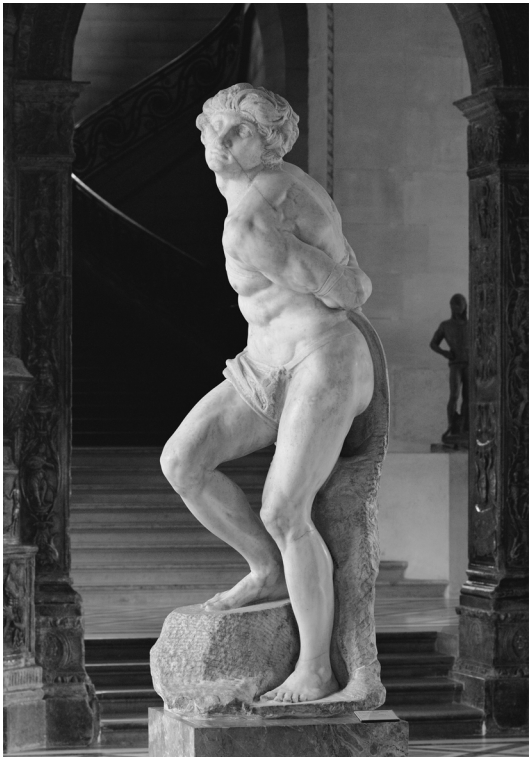
7. *(top)* Titian Vecellio, *San Marco altarpiece*, oil on panel, 7.5×4.75 ft (230×149 cm), Santa Maria della Salute, Venice, c. 1511–12.

8. *(left)* Titian Vecellio, *San Niccolò altarpiece*, oil on panel (transferred to canvas), 13.75×9.5 ft (420×290 cm), Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City, c. 1520–25.

9. Titian Vecellio, *Resurrection polyptych*, oil on panel, 9 × 4 ft (278 × 122 cm), SS. Nazaro e Celso, Brescia, 1519–22.

repeated appearance of these muscular, nude figures in Titian's art in the first two decades of the sixteenth century, one might ask, as scholars have, if Michelangelo was a source of inspiration.

For an important commission in Brescia, Titian painted a multipanel altarpiece of the *Resurrection*, which includes a bound, arrow-pierced St. Sebastian hanging from rope restraints (Fig. 9).[16] This figure is more muscular and energetic than any of Titian's previous nudes and is widely thought to have been inspired by Michelangelo's *Rebellious Slave* (Fig. 10). But was it? When did Titian first see this or any work by Michelangelo?



10. Michelangelo, *Rebellious Slave*, marble, h. 7 ft (215 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, c. 1513.

A drawing in Frankfurt attributed to Titian is the key piece of evidence in this investigation (Fig. 11). When Titian's drawing is put alongside Michelangelo's *Rebellious Slave*, a relationship seems evident (compare Figs. 10 and 11). As the cataloguer of Titian's drawings baldly stated, Titian's drawing of St. Sebastian "is *based directly on* Michelangelo's *Rebellious Slave*"[17] (my emphasis). Yet, the obvious but often skirted question is: how could Titian have known Michelangelo's sculpture? Michelangelo carved the *Rebellious Slave* in his Roman workshop where it was seen by few people, and only by those who enjoyed privileged access. Michelangelo

11. Titian Vecellio, *St. Sebastian*, pen, ink, and brush, 6.25×5.25 in (162×136 mm), Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett (Inv. K.d.Z. no. 5962), Berlin, c. 1518.

was so reticent about the sculpture that even informed persons close to the artist knew little about it.[18] How could Titian draw this sheet *directly* from Michelangelo's statue, given that his first visit to Rome only occurred in 1545? And if Titian didn't see the statue, who may have transmitted knowledge—visual or verbal—to him in Brescia? How precisely did such an unlikely communication take place? More importantly, did Titian require such a model and inspiration?

Titian was more likely influenced by well-regarded paintings of St. Sebastian created by contemporary Venetian masters, such as Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna. Or we might simply consider Titian's nude as an example of his ability to paint naturalistic figures "who seem alive . . . lifelike . . . composed of real flesh."[19] That is how the biographer of Venetian artists Carlo Ridolfi described Titian's St. Sebastian, painted "delicately" and "with a certain grace," which are scarcely terms to describe Michelangelo's contorted marble slave.

It is time to cut the Gordian knot. Titian, having already painted several fleshy nude figures in contrapposto, did not need Michelangelo's sculpture to paint a three-dimensional, muscular nude. Moreover, a more critical comparison of the *Rebellious Slave* with Titian's scratchy preparatory drawing reveals that they share only a meager and superficial resemblance. In short, we are comparing apples and oranges. Titian has not yet seen Michelangelo's work, and certainly *not* the *Rebellious Slave*. He is possibly *hearing* about the Florentine artist and the monumental tomb now underway for the pope with its many nude figures, some in exaggerated contrapposto poses. But Titian has already and independently embarked on a similar path of invention (*invenzione*). Titian forged his own path to artistic success. We need not trace every nude to Michelangelo.

* * *

In 1525, Michelangelo turned fifty, and Titian was approaching forty. Both were in the prime of their careers and had created a number of early masterpieces that helped establish their artistic preeminence: Michelangelo's *Pietà*, *David*, and the Sistine ceiling; Titian's paintings in Padua, Brescia, and Venice. Each had a strong

reputation at home and increasing fame, but they inhabited separate worlds. Their lives and careers had advanced without either artist having seen a single work by the other. Titian may have been "listening" more attentively than Michelangelo, although the latter would soon become interested thanks to his first encounter with Venice and Venetian art. It is time to visit Venice, asking when Michelangelo first traveled to the lagoon city and what he saw there.

Michelangelo in Bologna, 1494–95

During the two years following the death of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1492, hostility to Florence's premiere family mounted, especially as Lorenzo's haughty and politically inept son, Piero de' Medici, squandered the public trust. When the Medici were expelled from Florence in 1494, Michelangelo, who had been nurtured in their household, found himself in urgent and suddenly unsettled circumstances, without secure patronage or proper employment. Hoping to maintain relations with his only source of support, Michelangelo followed his Medici benefactors north to Bologna.

He remained in Bologna for nearly a year. Thanks to his Medici connections, he was welcomed into the household of Giovan Francesco Aldrovandi, a Bolognese nobleman and Medici sympathizer. For nearly a year, Michelangelo lived a mostly desultory life, making the most of his nascent courtier-like skills honed within the Medici entourage. In turn, the Bolognese gentleman arranged for Michelangelo to carve some figures for the tomb of Saint Dominic, Bologna's most important pilgrimage site.

Meanwhile, most of the Medici family and entourage moved on to Venice, where they had important banking and commercial interests. Given that he was not overly busy carving three or four modestly sized marble sculptures, it is possible that Michelangelo went

to Venice sometime during his year-long sojourn.[20] If so, this would be the twenty-year-old's first exposure to Venice and Venetian art. As scholars have suggested, an encounter with Tullio Lombardo's nude marble *Adam* may have inspired Michelangelo when, a half dozen years later, he carved the *Bacchus* and then an unexpectedly nude *David*.[21] However, the primary purpose of such a trip would have been to maintain contact with his faltering patronage network. In any case, Michelangelo would not have heard anything of a young Titian growing up in provincial Pieve di Cadore.

Bologna, 1506–8: A Venetian Sojourn?

Another opportunity for Michelangelo to visit Venice occurred during his second, fifteen-month residence in Bologna between November 1506 and February 1508. Following Pope Julius's reconquest of Bologna, Michelangelo—having abandoned Rome and the Julius tomb—traveled north to repair relations with the pope. Hoping to renew his interrupted work on the Julius tomb project, Michelangelo was instead charged with casting a larger-than-life-size bronze statue of the pope. The marble sculptor was profoundly unhappy with his circumstances in Bologna but could not say "no" to "Papa terribile." We know much about this episode thanks to a regular stream of letters that Michelangelo exchanged with his family in Florence, complaining about unreliable assistants, the envious Bolognese, and the city's wine, which was "expensive and as bad as it could be." Moreover, he had to sleep with three assistants in a single bed "in a terrible room."[22]

While a resident in Bologna and struggling with the manifold problems of casting the Julius statue, Michelangelo may once again—or, for the first time—have traveled to Venice. As with the first supposed Venetian trip of 1494/95, this hypothesized visit

sometime in 1506–8 has no documentary foundation. Despite the lack of evidence, and overlooking what would have been Michelangelo's significant preoccupation with casting the bronze statue of Pope Julius, scholars nonetheless have widely embraced the notion of a possible Venetian sojourn. It is a hypothesis that has been repeated so frequently that it too has become a widely accepted fact.[23] The supposed visit is again based purely on visual connections made between works in Venice and some that Michelangelo subsequently carried out in Rome. Let us momentarily consider the implications of this generally accepted trip to Venice.

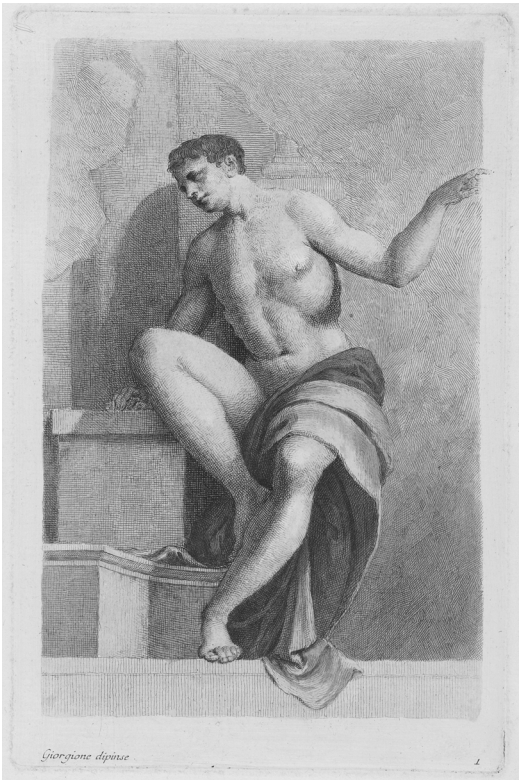
Michelangelo may have been impressed, as many visitors still are, by the giant, multi-tiered tombs in many Venetian churches, such as the Niccolò Tron monument in the Frari and the recently installed tomb of Doge Pietro Mocenigo in San Giovanni e Paolo (Fig. 12). It has been suggested that the monumental scale and sculptural abundance of these wall tombs might have inspired Michelangelo in designing a three-tier, multi-figure tomb for Pope Julius II.[24]

Had Michelangelo visited Venice, he undoubtedly would have passed through the commercial heart of the city encountering the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, the "German" warehouse and community center at the Rialto bridgehead. In 1508, Giorgione was busily frescoing a series of large-scale figures on two principal facades of the building. Famous for his inventive, avant-garde approach to style and subject matter manifested in mostly small, exquisitely painted "cabinet" pictures, Giorgione was perhaps an inappropriate choice to paint large-scale frescoes on the exterior of a prominent public building. Nonetheless, he painted a series of large-scale figures in the heart of commercial Venice. The frescoes garnered much attention, even if contemporaries were unable to discern their subject. Giorgio Vasari admired the "very finely painted and vivaciously

12. Pietro Lombardo, *Tomb of Doge Mocenigo*, SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Venice, 1481.

coloured" figures, but was "not able to interpret the meaning" even after consulting knowledgeable Venetians.[25]

Because of their exposure to the damp conditions in Venice, the frescos rapidly deteriorated. A selection of fragments and a series of engravings made by A. M. Zanetti in the eighteenth century provide an idea of some of the imposing figures, including a few sometimes attributed to Giorgione's young assistant, Titian (e.g., Fig. 13). Although we have only a dim view of these frescoes, they were a novel and highly public decoration that may well have attracted the attention of Michelangelo.



13. Antonio Maria Zanetti, figure from the facade of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, engraving, 8.5×5.5 in (217×140 mm), c. 1760.

Did Michelangelo see the fresco decorations on the Fondaco dei Tedeschi sometime before the spring of 1508, when he is documented as having been in Rome preparing to undertake the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Are they, as some scholars have suggested, a generative inspiration for his large-scale prophets and sibyls? An alternative scenario has also been advanced: might Giorgione have profited from Michelangelo—either from his concurrent work in the Sistine Chapel, or possibly from the artist's celebrated *Battle of Cascina* cartoon?[26] But, as with the Wilde hypothesis, one must ask how.

The relationship between Giorgione and Michelangelo must remain in the arena of learned conjecture, especially because Michelangelo's visits to Venice in either 1494 or sometime between 1506 and 1508 are undocumented hypotheses. Thus, despite repeated assertion by scholars, we are left with speculation based purely on formal comparisons of figures and poses. What is certain, however, is of central importance to our story: even if Michelangelo went to Venice, he would not have known anything of Giorgione's young assistant. To Michelangelo, Titian, as yet, was an unknown figure.

Sebastiano Veneziano: "A Meeting of Minds"

Sebastiano del Piombo (1485–1547) was the important catalyst and earliest intermediary between Titian and Michelangelo.[27] Trained in the studio of Giovanni Bellini and attracted to the art of Giorgione, Sebastiano enjoyed a brief but successful career in Venice before moving permanently to Rome. He was painting monumental organ shutters for the church of San Bartolommeo di Rialto at the same time Giorgione and Titian were painting exterior frescoes on the nearby Fondaco de' Tedeschi. Like Titian, Sebastiano may have completed some of Giorgione's pictures when the latter died prematurely in 1510. Thus, he and Titian were well acquainted by the time the fabulously wealthy banker Agostino Chigi lured Sebastiano to Rome in 1511. Chigi provided entrée to Roman society and commissioned Sebastiano to help decorate his love-nest villa on the Tiber River (subsequently known as the Villa Farnesina), which we will visit shortly.

In one of his first paintings made in Rome, Sebastiano combined a Venetian setting in luminous color with figures inspired by Michelangelo and ancient sculpture (Plate 6). We don't know

how they first met, but Sebastiano and Michelangelo became fast, albeit seemingly unlikely friends. Was it the Venetian's brushwork and brilliant color that attracted the Florentine sculptor, or was it his humor and cheeky manners? Sebastiano was proud, vain, and convinced of his superior painting abilities. Incredibly witty, he delighted Michelangelo with his ribald and irreverent badinage—a welcome relief to the simpering sycophants and bureaucrats who sullied the papal court.

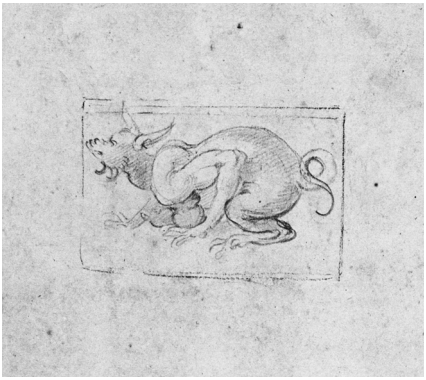
Michelangelo especially appreciated Sebastiano's special brand of humor. We can almost hear the two friends chuckling, especially when reading each other's salty letters. "I know you will laugh at my chatter," wrote Sebastiano in one long letter that included a dig at the money-pinching, irritating duke of Urbino "who will have to take medicine in order to shell out 8,000 ducats" (for the tomb of Julius II).[28]

Sebastiano and Michelangelo were wildly dissimilar personalities—one worldly, lazy, and certainly impious, the other taciturn and increasingly concerned with his aristocratic status—and due to these differences, they eventually drifted apart. But, for some years they were "dearest colleagues" who enjoyed a creative partnership—the first true collaboration in Michelangelo's career. Moreover, Sebastiano quickly established himself as a Vatican insider, providing Michelangelo with eyes and ears in Rome when the latter was working in Florence between 1513 and 1534. Sebastiano was a faithful proponent of Michelangelo's interests, which proved an invaluable asset in the slanderous and competitive papal court. Michelangelo remained sincerely grateful to his friend, even agreeing to stand as godfather to Sebastiano's son.[29]

Indeed, Sebastiano not only represented Michelangelo's interests, he helped relieve the artist's multiple anxieties, once by teasing him that the bailiff's ugly hag "is in love with you." The unnamed

wife cared for Michelangelo's house while the artist was absent from Rome. Sebastiano intimated that, "she made an offer of the beds, the furniture, and everything in the house, even the hens. I didn't want to accept anything without your permission."[30] Another time he reminded the officious functionaries at the papal court who were carping about the artist's reticent manner: "You should be glad for what you have, because it does not rain Michelangelos."[31] The two friends took huge delight in the fact that the unholy Venetian was required to take holy orders prior to accepting the lucrative office of *Piombatore*—the Keeper of the Papal Seal—for which Sebastiano received a lifelong sinecure, a paid position with few responsibilities. Sebastiano joked about his new peacock-like attire: "If you saw me I'm sure you would laugh. I am the handsomest friar in Rome."[32]

Michelangelo played well at this bantering game. After all, he was a Tuscan with an acerbic, often cutting wit, which manifested itself both verbally and visually.[33] For example, on the verso of an exquisite drawing of the Resurrected Christ (Fig. 14) made to assist Sebastiano in painting an altarpiece for Santa Maria della Pace, Michelangelo drew an amusing doodle completely at odds with the serious character of the sheet's recto (Fig. 15).[34] Responding to Sebastiano's self-deprecating comment that he had been forced to take priestly orders to become a papal functionary—the office of Piombatore, a functionary stamping and sealing papal documents—Michelangelo drew a ridiculous animal weighed down with two engorged, lead-like breasts. Michelangelo was cleverly alluding to an old Venetian expression, "tette di piombini"—that is "breasts of lead"—thereby poking fun at his friend who was now weighed down as the keeper of large lead papal seals. Thus, while helping his friend paint an important sacred altarpiece, Michelangelo simultaneously indulged in a private joke on the sheet's verso. An inclination to humor—sometimes playful, sometimes



14. *(left)* Michelangelo, *Risen Christ*, black chalk on paper, 13 × 7.75 in (330 × 198 mm), Casa Buonarroti 66F recto, Florence, 1520s.

15. *(right)* Michelangelo, *Joke sketch* (*scherzo*), black chalk on paper, 13 × 7.75 in (330 × 198 mm), det. Casa Buonarroti 66F verso, Florence, 1520s.

bawdy, mostly verbal but sometimes visual—was something that Michelangelo, Sebastiano, and Titian all shared. We will have reason to reconsider Sebastiano's unfulfilled commission for Santa Maria della Pace when Titian arrives in Rome.

Amid this idle chatter and low-level whimsy, Michelangelo was befriending an exceptionally skilled artist who expanded his artistic horizons, primarily by fostering his interest in painting and color. Michelangelo enjoyed Sebastiano's Venetian patois and admired his versatile brush. For the first time in his life, and contrary to his tendency to do everything himself, Michelangelo elected to collaborate with a painter, and significantly with a Venetian colorist. Recognizing Sebastiano's exceptional talent, Michelangelo willingly furnished his friend with drawings. Their partnership

was short-lived but remarkably fruitful. It was a meeting of two artists with special and complementary talents—Michelangelo's drawing (disegno) and Sebastiano's color (colorito). If relatively brief, it proved to be one of the most important collaborations in the history of art, resulting in several notable masterpieces, including a large painted *Pietà* for Viterbo, the monumental altarpiece, the *Raising of Lazarus*, painted in competition with Raphael (see Fig. 26), and the Borgherini Chapel in San Pietro in Montorio (Plate 7), which Sebastiano would proudly show to Titian when the latter came to Rome in 1545-6.

It is somewhat sad to observe the gradual demise of Michelangelo's and Sebastiano's once lively friendship and fruitful collaboration. Michelangelo was generous in providing his friend with drawings; Sebastiano returned the favor by giving unwanted and unhelpful ideas about how to go about painting the *Last Judgment*. The friendship faltered on the shoals of their very different personalities; however, it is important to emphasize that, for a brief period, Michelangelo benefitted from his first, truly collaborative relationship. It exposed him to Venetian painting and demonstrated what *could be* achieved by working with the talents of other artists. It opened Michelangelo to a much wider receptivity to the art of painting, especially Venetian color, and, somewhat surprisingly, given his well-known disparagement of the genre, to portraiture, an arena in which both Sebastiano and Titian excelled. In a warm letter to Sebastiano, Michelangelo lauded the Venetian's abilities as a portrait painter as "unique in the world" ("unicho al mondo").[35] And, perhaps most importantly for our story, it was from his garrulous friend that Michelangelo first learned of Titian. Sebastiano, who was well acquainted with his Venetian contemporary, prepared fertile ground for Michelangelo's first and transformative encounter with Titian.

The Die Is Cast: Ferrara, 1529

From the accession of Pope Clement VII in November of 1523, Michelangelo worked like a demon on Medici commissions associated with San Lorenzo, the family's parish church in Florence. The newly elected pontiff (Fig. 16) charged Michelangelo with a succession of architectural and sculptural projects that included completing the Medici burial chapel and designing the Laurentian Library. Responsible for hiring and managing hundreds of workers, Michelangelo was designer, architect, sculptor, engineer, project manager, personnel coordinator, site supervisor, and overall chief executive responsible for every facet of the multiple and massively complicated endeavors. Unfortunately, he could not avoid the intrusion of contemporary politics.

Clement was a generous and understanding Maecenas but an unfortunate, vacillating politician who stood on the brink of a European conflict. He attempted to juggle the contending powers of the Holy Roman emperor and the king of France, to contain the bickering and villainous behavior of the various Italian states, and to stem the tide of defection from the Catholic Church. He failed, and catastrophe lay on the near horizon. Meanwhile, Michelangelo remained focused on his work despite a significant curtailment of funds available for Medici projects. Characteristically myopic to politics, Michelangelo inquired of Pope Clement whether his salary would be continued, given "that the times are unfavorable to this art of mine."[36] On the verge of an international crisis, Michelangelo worried about funding for his projects, oblivious to the ancient proverb: "In arma silent artes" ("during war, the arts fall silent").

Intrigue and hesitation brought Clement face-to-face with disaster. In May 1527, for the first time in more than a thousand years, Rome was sacked by the unpaid, unruly soldiers of the imperial

16. Sebastiano del Piombo, *Pope Clement VII*, oil on canvas, 57×43.25 in (145×110 cm), Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples, 1526.

army of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The defeat dealt a devastating blow to papal prestige with far-reaching consequences for Florence. Soon, Michelangelo was caught up in circumstances beyond his control.

Shortly after the Sack of Rome, the Florentines expelled the governing Medici and instituted an independent Republic. Betrayed by his native city, Clement worked tirelessly to reestablish his family's hegemony over rebellious Florence. The Treaty of Barcelona, signed by Pope Clement and Charles V in June of 1529, sealed Florence's fate, as the two potentates agreed to a restoration of Medici power. Every Florentine citizen suddenly faced a difficult choice: flee the city or face the superior forces of a hostile army.

(continued...)

Index

Note: Page numbers in italic type indicate illustrations.