INTRODUCTION

Michelangelo left a treasure in his correspondence. From the first letter written in July 1496 by a twenty-one-year-old Michelangelo in Rome to the last missive written four days before his death, we possess a vast corpus that spans sixty-seven years, totaling roughly 1,400 letters, about 500 of which were written by the artist. Such an impressive archive of material would attract attention under normal circumstances for any artist. The fact that this wealth of documentation exists for a luminary of Western culture, a nonpareil whose accomplishments in sculpture, painting, and architecture have stupefied beholders for centuries, makes the letters the richest of resources. They are inherently compelling because they concern the life and achievements of the artist of the Vatican *Pietà*, the *David*, the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the *Moses*, and St. Peter's vault. Goethe famously declared, "until you have seen the Sistine Chapel, you can have no adequate conception of what man is capable of accomplishing."[1] Adapting his observation, one might say that until one has read the letters of Michelangelo one can have no conception of what is necessary for such lofty creative effort.

Michelangelo's letters contain a wealth of information on the artist's many-sided life, detailing everything from his complicated business affairs, family trials, and anxieties over the problems that hindered his colossal projects to the fabrics he preferred for his clothes. Biographers have mined the letters to unearth information about the artist's ideas on art and to explore what kind of man emerges from this voluminous correspondence. Art historians have combed the letters for details on the sculptor's contractual obligations, the dating of his projects, and his relationships with patrons, friends, business associates, and family. Literary scholars have compared the language

[1] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey* (1786–8), trans. W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 374.

of the poetry and letters. Such enterprises, which examine the letters for documentary evidence, privilege the realism of the letters and their status as an archive of empirical fact. This material has proven enormously fruitful, yielding considerable insight into the activities of the historical Michelangelo. But there are alternative models for reading the correspondence aside from seeing them as sources for biographical reconstruction or the dating of artworks. Michelangelo's correspondence has not been studied for its intrinsically literary qualities. What few observations have been hazarded about the artist's use of language have been limited to generic praise. As one critic observes, "they are stamped with that undeniable artistic quality which was so deeply rooted in Michelangelo's personality."[2] There is a considerable difference, however, between acknowledging the artistic quality of the letters and understanding the means by which this effect is achieved. Ultimately, attention to linguistic ingenuity in Michelangelo's letters enhances our understanding of the artist's creativity in an area of endeavor that has not been examined for its artfulness.

This study seeks to show that Michelangelo's artistry is as evident in this medium as in his sculpture, painting, architecture, and poetry. The artist once confessed to his friend Giovanni Spina, "the pen is always bolder than the tongue." Michelangelo did wield his pen boldly: many of his letters revel in witticisms, bold rhetorical flourishes, and linguistic ingenuity. His letters need not be viewed simply as transcriptions of the artist's immediate thoughts and feelings. Close study of his art of words and modes of self-presentation shows Michelangelo to be a consummate artist who deploys the resources of language to considerable effect.

Although this study alludes to Michelangelo's poetry, it is not one of the primary focuses of this book. Studies of Michelangelo's poetry abound – amply treating his literary sources and his poems to Vittoria Colonna and Tommaso de' Cavalieri, epitaphs for Cecchino Bracci, and religious poetry, as well as comparing the art and poetry, and exploring Michelangelo's Petrarchism and "Bernismo" – to name but some commonly explored subjects. Scholars such as Enzo Noè Girardi, Walter Binni, Charles Speroni, and Paola Mastrocola have analyzed the more general topic of Michelangelo *scrittore*. All these authors have compared the poems and letters, underscored the very different impulses that underlie each genre, and noted the different subjects addressed in each medium. My objective has not been to go over territory that has already been amply investigated but to focus on an aspect

[2] Enzo Noè Girardi, "Writer," *The Complete Work of Michelangelo* (New York: Reynal and Company, 1965), 531.

of the letters that has received little critical attention. Although my analysis of Michelangelo's epistolary prose might stimulate further thoughts about the sculptor's poetry or his writings on his drawings, that is a subject for another study. The object of this book is Michelangelo's art of words: the pellucid eloquence that attends a careful reading.

Michelangelo's correspondence falls into the largest category of Renaissance epistolography – private, vernacular letter writing. Unlike famous contemporaries such as Pietro Aretino, Niccolò Machiavelli, Pier Vettori, and Annibal Caro, Michelangelo did not harbor ambitions to have his letters published. Although Michelangelo acquired the glimmers of a humanist education living in the household of Lorenzo de' Medici as a young adolescent, his letters bear little resemblance to the correspondence of humanists. The rhetoric employed by humanists, chancellors, and professional men of letters, some of whom edited their letters for publication, was often more formal and more self-consciously literary.[3] Michelangelo did not write in Latin, discuss political matters, or base his writing on antique or humanist models. Michelangelo's letters also differ from other private vernacular correspondence by artists and Florentine household heads.[4] Moreover, although Michelangelo wrote about some of the same subjects as Florentine household heads and their wives –births, deaths, marriages, dowries, family lineages, investments, and wayward relations – his style tends to be *sui generis*. Michelangelo wrote letters largely to transact business, guide his family, and lament the vicissitudes that hindered his work. Often penned in haste, his letters display little of the lengthy narrative style employed by Bonaccorsi Pitti in his *Ricordi* or the ruminations found in Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi's

[3] For two excellent overviews of Renaissance epistolography, see Cecil H. Clough, "The Cult of Antiquity: Letters and Letter Collections," *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance. Essays in Honour of Paul Oscar Kristeller*, ed. Cecil H. Clough (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), 33–67 and John M. Najemy, "Renaissance Epistolarity," *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli–Vettori Letters of 1513–1515* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 18–57. Other studies that provide useful insights include Claudio Giullen, "Notes toward the Study of the Renaissance Letter," *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 70–101; Janet Gurkin Altman, "The Letter Book as a Literary Institution 1539–1789: Toward a Cultural History of Published Correspondences in France," *Yale French Studies* 71 (1986), 17–62; and Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau, Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Christopher Woodall (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

[4] Michelangelo's exceptionally economical expression contrasts strikingly with, for example, Vasari's more overblown epistolary style. See Filippo Tuena, *La passione dell'error mio. Il carteggio di Michelangelo. Lettere scelte 1532–1564* (Rome: Fazi, 2002), ix for a comparison of Vasari and Michelangelo's epistolary styles.

letters to her sons.[5] Michelangelo's letters are an exception in the arena of private vernacular correspondence, just as the artist himself was an exception within his profession.[6]

The artist corresponded with more than 225 different persons, from potentates such as Clement VII and Cosimo I de' Medici to stonecutters and Cornelia Colonelli, the widow of his beloved servant Urbino. Most were penned on Saturday, the day the artist tended to reserve for correspondence. Although the documentation is abundant, it should not be regarded as comprehensive. The correspondence does not cover the entire course of his artistic career. For some periods we must content ourselves with only shards of evidence: there are only six letters to and from Michelangelo from the first thirty years of his life; none written from 1500 to January 1506 have survived. In other instances the epistolary record survives but not the work: thirty-four letters are extant from 1506 to 1508, the two years in which Michelangelo was working on the bronze of Julius II in Bologna, a sculpture that the Bentivoglio had destroyed upon their return to the city.[7] Roughly three-quarters of the correspondence dates from the completion of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Hence we have more information on the artist's activities at the end of his career than at the beginning.

The epistolary record would not be this rich were it not for the fact that for most of his life Michelangelo lived apart from his family. Roughly two-thirds of the surviving letters were written to family members.[8] The artist exercised the moral and economic governance of his family through more than six decades of correspondence. Thanks to this separation we become

[5] For Strozzi's letters, see Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, *Tempo di affetti e di mercanti. Lettere ai figli esuli* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987) and *Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi*, translation and Introduction by Heather Gregory (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). For a good overview of the writings of Tuscan merchants, see *Mercanti Scrittori. Ricordi nella Firenze tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Rusconi, 1986).

[6] Michelangelo was something of an outsider as an artist, as he belonged to two important social groups, the Florentine patriciate and the Florentine practitioners of the crafts of painting, sculpture, and architecture. On this point, see Rab Hatfield, *The Wealth of Michelangelo* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2002), xxviii.

[7] The period of greatest intensity was 1518, when 177 letters were exchanged while Michelangelo was working in the quarries of Pietrasanta, Seravezza, and Carrara and corresponding regularly with persons in Florence and Rome.

[8] Of Michelangelo's roughly 500 extant letters, 350 are to family members. Paola Barocchi's five-volume edition of the *Carteggio* includes forty-six letters to his father Lodovico; seventy-eight to Buonarroto; nine to Giovansimone; three to Gismondo; and 214 to Lionardo, Buonarroto's son. Written when he was twenty-one, Michelangelo's first family letter (19 August 1497) was written to his father; the last in his own hand, dated 28 December 1563, is to Lionardo. After the death of Lodovico in 1531, aside from sundry letters to Giovansimone or Gismondo, there is no significant family correspondence until he begins writing to Lionardo in 1546. From 1546 to Michelangelo's death in 1564, Lionardo was the sculptor's most regular correspondent.

privy to accounts of his working conditions, frustrations, and property investments. Many of his correspondents were relations or friends who helped him transact business. They include his brother Buonarroto, Leonardo Sellaio, a friend in Rome who looked after the artist's house, Bartolomeo Angelini, a writer of sonnets and madrigals, Giovanfrancesco Fattucci, chaplain of Santa Maria del Fiore, Luigi del Riccio, and the artists Sebastiano del Piombo and Giorgio Vasari. All these persons were highly devoted to the artist and acted as intermediaries, providing vital conduits of information between Rome and Florence.

To understand the literary qualities of Michelangelo's epistolary style we might begin with a consideration of the handwriting itself. Michelangelo's luminous and elegant cursive script, most readily recognizable in his signature, has become as iconic as his most famous works of art. At the 2006 British Museum exhibition of the artist's drawings, the museum guards stood out from the crowds in black t-shirts emblazoned with Michelangelo's signature. Like so much else in Michelangelo's life, the artist's handwriting was consciously crafted. In his earliest letters, those written between 1496 and 1498, the artist employed a hybrid cursive script. The hand employed in the July 1496 letter to his father (Fig. 1) has elements of the *mercantesca*, the hand used by and taught to merchants writing in the vernacular, notably in the writing of "ch" with the large bowl on the "h" extending well below the line, as well as humanist elements such as the lower-case "g"'s with the large loop below the line and the tendency to use a lower-case "d" with the vertical stroke at ninety degrees from the horizontal line of writing. But the script's ductus at this point is not slanted to the right, as we find in documents written after 1501. The hybrid cursive used in the early letters is similar to hands found in late fifteenth-century Medicean–Laurentian documents. From the early 1500s, however, Michelangelo employed a humanistic cursive script.[9] Whereas his brother Buonarroto employed the *mercantesca*,

[9] Michelangelo's handwriting remains an understudied subject. He may have learned handwriting from his grammar teacher, Maestro Francesco di Giovanni da Urbino, about whom very little is known. For a brief notice on Francesco da Urbino, see Robert Black, *Education and Society in Florentine Tuscany. Teachers, Pupils and Schools, c. 1250–1500*, vol.1 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 401. See Black, 54–60 on the teaching of writing. As a grammar teacher, Francesco da Urbino would have written some kind of humanist cursive italic script. In a private communication Robert Black surmises that the artist's earliest instruction in writing likely came from an abacus teacher or elementary teacher, rather than from a full-fledged grammarian, who conceivably could have influenced him in a humanist direction. The upper case "D" that opens the second paragraph is a strong vernacular, possibly *mercantesca* element. Essays by Lucilla Bardeschi Ciulich on Michelangelo's "grafia" have tended to focus on the artist's spelling. In "Michelangelo: Un percorso attraverso gli autografi," *Michelangelo. Grafia e biografia di un genio* (Milan: Biblioteca di Via Senato, 2000), 32, Bardeschi Ciulich confines herself to observing, "Il carattere rotondo delle lettere e l'impiego della *j* con

Michelangelo consciously chose and perfected the elegant cursive handwriting employed by humanists. Whether writing to a workman, a *ricordo*, or his family, Michelangelo's hand is at all times graceful – even when the content is explosive. When he copied poems or addressed important personages the hand was more distinctly calligraphic. As Fig. 2 shows, Michelangelo's cursive was slanted toward the right. The elegant formation of some of the letters themselves – the use of maiscule "Q" for minuscule "q," the lower half of "c" descending below the line (and often including the letter that follows), the decorative "f," and formation of "ss" and "ct" ligatures – resembles traits found in the handwriting of famous copyists such as Bartolomeo Sanvito (1435–1518) and Antonio Sinibaldi (1443–1528). Although Paduan by birth, Sanvito worked in Rome; hence Michelangelo could have seen manuscripts copied by Sanvito or his imitators. Antonio Sinibaldi, one of the most accomplished Florentine humanist scribes, was one of the first copyists to adopt features of Northern Italian scripts. Michelangelo's minuscule "c'"s and "q"'s may have been influenced by manuscripts copied by Sinibaldi and copyists in his employ or ones he had seen in Lorenzo de' Medici's library. Although his hand shares features of the writing of these copyists, there are also some idiosyncratic features: the artist's formation of minuscule "m," "n," and "u" is more angled and less rounded than in other humanistic scripts.[10] With his having endeavored to refine his own hand,

svolazzi al di sotto del rigo sono una caratteristica esclusiva delle prime lettere inviate da Roma negli anni 1496–98." On the type of writing and drawing implements employed by Michelangelo in his architectural drawings, see Caroline Elam, "Funzione, tipo e ricezioni dei disegni di architettura di Michelangelo," *Michelangelo e il Disegno di Architettura* (Vicenza: Marsilio, 2006), 52–5. According to Kathleen Loach Bramanti, Michelangelo employed a "scrittura mercantesca stilizzata" in his first letters, but from 1505 on he used a cursive hand merely because he wanted to write more quickly. See Kathleen Loach Bramanti, "Note sulle abbreviature rinascimentali: Studi nell'archivio Buonarroti," *Studi di grammatica italiana* 9 (1980):212. As I note, Michelangelo's adoption of a humanistic cursive reflects both a general trend and a personal decision. Florentine humanists and famous scribes such as Antonio Sinibaldi began assimilating the hand of eminent Northern Italian copyists such as Sanvito toward the end of the Quattrocento. For examples of Sinibaldi's "c" and "q," which may have influenced Michelangelo's formation of these letters, see *All'ombra del lauro. Documenti librari della cultura in età laurenziana* (Florence: Amilcare Pizzi Editore, 1992), 63. For another comparison, see Michelangelo's double "ll" in a 1501–2 *Sketch for the Bronze David* and a similar formation of these two letters in *All'ombra del lauro*, 27, which features a page of Lorenzo's *Comento* copied by Francesco Redi. Michelangelo's handwriting is best examined against other contemporary autograph documents. Such comparisons show the extent to which the artist's handwriting is indebted to contemporary models. I am greatly indebted to Teresa De Robertis and Robert Black for their assistance on this subject.

[10] This is a feature of the cursive of the famous Venetian calligrapher, Giovanantonio Tagliente, who published his handwriting manual in 1525. The angled forms of Michelangelo's "m," "n," and "u" however, predate Tagliente's manual.

it comes as no surprise that Michelangelo had nothing but contempt for a poor one. One need only recall the many criticisms he made of his nephew Lionardo's illegible writing. In one fit of pique the artist snarled "e non mi scriver più, che ogni volta che io ò una tua lectera mi vien la febbre, tanta fatica duro a leggierla" ("don't write me any more; because every time I get a letter from you, I'm thrown into a fever, such a struggle do I have to read it").[11] It was a harangue made on more than one occasion. For Michelangelo, who took great pride in his family's aristocratic ancestry, handwriting was as important an element of self-presentation as dress and comportment. Michelangelo adopted the humanist cursive (later deemed *cancelleresca*) for reasons beyond mere practicality. In adopting the humanistic cursive and submerging any traces of a mercantile cultural formation, Michelangelo consciously aligned himself with an elite class of writers. The decision, a clear act of self-fashioning, is but one of many ways in which the artist sought to establish himself as an aristocrat among artists.

Michelangelo's handwriting is but one element to consider when weighing the evidence furnished by the letters, one of the more subtle aperçus that open a window into the character of one of the world's greatest artists. What Michelangelo says in his letters is one thing, what others have made of it another. To understand the importance of Michelangelo's epistolary legacy, we must begin with the interpretive and bibliographic history of the letters. Chapter 1, "The Role of Letters in Biographies of Michelangelo," examines how biographies of the artist have been shaped by the complex transmission history of the letters. It focuses on two periods – the Renaissance and the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After showing how Giorgio Vasari edited the roughly fifteen letters he received from Michelangelo in the 1568 *vita*, I turn to an analysis of how the very different interests of nineteenth- and twentieth-century biographers shaped their characterizations of Michelangelo. The artist's letters were a crucial resource in this enterprise. From the earliest account of Vasari to William Wallace's recent *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times* (2009), Michelangelo's biographers have employed the letters in a variety of ways to construct different portraits of the artist.

Chapter 2, "From Word to Image: Epistolary Rhetoric and Artistic Form," analyzes the most distinctive features of Michelangelo's epistolary prose, among them his use of aphorisms, repetition, oppositions, and hyperbole. A study of the intrinsic literary qualities of Michelangelo's epistolary

[11] *Carteggio*, 4: 242; trans. Ramsden, 2:63. For other examples of similar harangues, see *Carteggio*, 4: 293, 329.

prose will help us plumb the depths of his artistry and character. For example, Michelangelo's propensity for aphoristic sayings allowed him to be brisk and witty, as well as to frame the contents of a letter. Michelangelo deploys the terseness intrinsic to the aphoristic form with considerable force. The letters reveal pervasive patterns in Michelangelo's thinking that have deep parallels in his art. The intensification of language wrought by his aphorisms has an analogue in the concentrated and expressive use of gesture in his sculptures and paintings. One need only think of the celebrated image of *The Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling: the contact about to take place between God's extended index finger and Adam's outstretched hand forms one of the most indelible images in the history of art.

Chapter 3, "The Rhetoric of Captivity in Michelangelo's Letters," explores how the literary strategies he favors in his letters can broaden our understanding of his art and poetry. The rhetorical features favored by the artist having been analyzed in the previous chapter, the focus narrows to concentrate on the way in which the artist elaborates the theme of enslavement in his poetry, letters, and art. Although this subject has been examined in his poetry, particularly in the poems to the Roman nobleman Tommaso de' Cavalieri, and in his art, notably the Louvre *Prisoners*, little has been said about the myriad ways in which Michelangelo speaks about being enslaved to a project or person in his letters. The expressions used to express the sensation of being beholden to others, shackled or burdened, usually against his will but sometimes with his consent, are richly varied. Close examination of the language of captivity in Michelangelo's letters reveals key differences between his poetic and epistolary styles. After analyzing the artist's adaptation of Petrarchan motifs in poems dealing with imprisonment, I explore the complex dynamics that underpin his relations with family, friends, and patrons before turning to the broader forces that shaped the artist's conception of obligation, notably Florentine patronage networks.

Chapter 4, "Michelangelo's Words: Saying, Doing, and Meaning," focuses on some key words employed by the artist in order to investigate some of the artist's deepest investments. In looking at words and clusters of words favored by the sculptor we can learn a great deal about how Michelangelo defined his world. This is not to say that the material content of any given letter is not important. Although the propositions he forms with words are important, my greater interest lies in the patterns of words that the artist creates. Certain words, and more tellingly clusters of words, occur regularly. Some combinations acquire importance through frequency, some through repetition within the space of a passage or sentence, some through the very particular inflection he imparts to them. The clusters of words favored by

Michelangelo have a meaning that goes beyond their immediate context. Michelangelo is not so much a man of few words as one of key words. Given this tendency, there is much to be learned from reading across various instances of clusters, linking these clusters, and examining them outside their immediate contexts as symptoms or indices of more profound commitments.

Michelangelo's letters are a rich, yet from the perspective of a literary scholar, strangely neglected area of scholarship. Although the study I have undertaken is not a biography, its focus on the intrinsically literary qualities of Michelangelo's epistolary prose will help us plumb the depths of his artistry and character. In this respect *Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing* complements two recent studies, William Wallace's biography, *Michelanglo: The Man, the Artist, and His World*, and Leonard Barkan's *Michelangelo: A Life on Paper*. In exploring how biographers have used the letters to shape different portraits of Michelangelo, the poetic, artistic, and epistolary languages of captivity, and what patterns of emphasis emerge from the artist's use of language, I hope to spur further investigations into the artist's rich and diverse modes of artistic expression. If we understand the strategies Michelangelo employs in his writing, the "living oracle," as his contemporary biographer Condivi deemed him, can speak to us in an entirely new way.

1

THE ROLE OF LETTERS IN BIOGRAPHIES OF MICHELANGELO

Michelangelo's biographers have always recognized the importance of obtaining firsthand testimony from the artist himself, the "vivo oraculo" ("living oracle") as Condivi called him.[1] In his 1553 biography Condivi drew extensively on his personal friendship with Michelangelo. Subsequently Vasari not only absorbed much of Condivi's biography wholesale, but also exploited the source that best substituted for the sculptor's living voice, namely his letters, for the considerably expanded 1568 *vita*. The importance of personal letters in writing a biography is a long-standing truism. As the principal source of information on Michelangelo's life, his letters provide considerable information about the sculptor's many-sided existence, from his complicated business affairs, his family trials, and his anxieties over the obstacles that hindered his many projects to the fabrics he preferred for his clothes. As one might expect, the letters have been an invaluable resource for art historians and biographers. As the letters became available, Michelangelo's biographers steadily employed them in their discussion of the artist's personality, relationships, and extraordinary achievements. As biographers seek to fashion a portrait of Michelangelo, they bring to this enterprise different vested interests. The object of this chapter is to uncover some of these investments in order to illustrate how particular concerns and different material conditions affect the way in which biographers used the letters. To this end I shall focus on the two periods that witnessed the greatest outpouring of biographies – the Renaissance, which saw the publication of biographies from two of the sculptor's contemporaries, Giorgio Vasari (1550, 1568) and Ascanio Condivi (1553), and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which time no less

[1] Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti*, ed. Giovanni Nencioni with essays by Michael Hirst and Caroline Elam (Florence: S.P.E.S., 1998), 6.