

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)



PART I



INTRODUCTION

In 1550, a seventy-five-year-old artist was paid six scudi to gild eight knobs on the pope's two beds. The papal secretary recorded the payment to "Michelangelo pittore."¹ This was the world-famous sculptor, painter, architect, and poet, Michelangelo Buonarroti, but to the Vatican functionary, he was just another employee on the pope's payroll.

Michelangelo is universally recognized to be among the greatest artists of all time. His career spanned from the glories of Renaissance Florence and the discovery of a new world to the first stirrings of the Counter-Reformation. Living nearly eighty-nine years, and twice as long as most of his contemporaries, Michelangelo witnessed the pontificates of thirteen popes and worked for nine of them.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Michelangelo

Although his art occasionally has been criticized (he was accused of impropriety in the *Last Judgment*), his stature and influence rarely have been questioned. Many of his works – including the *Pietà*, *David*, *Moses*, and Sistine Chapel Ceiling – are ubiquitous cultural icons. Despite the familiarity of Michelangelo’s art and a large quantity of documentation, many aspects of his art and life remain open to interpretation. Only Shakespeare and Beethoven have inspired a comparable scholarly and popular literature.

Contemporaries began writing about Michelangelo in his own lifetime; as early as 1527, the humanist Paolo Giovio penned a short sketch of the artist in Latin, which celebrated his fame as nearly “equal to the ancients.”² Of these contemporary sources, the biographies written by his young admirers Giorgio Vasari and Ascanio Condivi are the most important. The painter, architect, and writer Giorgio Vasari first published his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* in 1550. Michelangelo, the only living artist to be included, was the hero and culmination of Vasari’s great book. Although flattered by Vasari’s homage, Michelangelo was perturbed by certain inaccuracies. Partly to correct Vasari’s errors, but mainly to tell his own story, Michelangelo prevailed upon his pupil and amanuensis, Ascanio Condivi, to write his own version. Condivi’s *Life of Michelangelo* appeared just three years later.³

Condivi’s life was different from Vasari’s in several respects, the most important being Condivi’s emphasis on Michelangelo’s noble origins. Vasari introduced his narrative by having God the father send Michelangelo into the world to save art from its manifold errors. In contrast, Condivi emphasized Michelangelo’s family and lineage, as well as their illustrious descent from the medieval counts of Canossa. We now know that the Buonarroti were not related to the counts of Canossa, but Michelangelo firmly believed in his noble ancestry. This was the life that he elected to live and the story that he wished to relate to posterity.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

It is curious that Michelangelo's claim to noble birth – about which he was most adamant – is precisely the part of the artist's biography that we treat as fantastic delusion or myth. Instead, we cling to obvious literary fictions of the artist's early life and inevitable rise to fame. The tale of Michelangelo the artistic genius has been told many times, the tale of his social ambitions scarcely at all. I have attempted to tell both stories: Michelangelo the artist, and Michelangelo di Lodovico di Buonarroto Simoni the aristocrat.

Michelangelo is the best-documented artist of the early modern era. Nearly fourteen hundred letters written by him and to him survive, along with more than three hundred pages of his personal and professional records (*ricordi*), and an extensive correspondence among members of his immediate family (440 published letters). There are some three hundred poems, many fragments, approximately six hundred drawings, and, of course, the finished and unfinished works of sculpture, painting, and architecture. Then there are related documents: contracts, business and bank records, a nearly complete picture of the artist's finances and property holdings, and innumerable notices by his contemporaries.⁴

While extensive, the documentation is uneven, both in what survives and in what it reveals. It may come as a surprise that Michelangelo spent more of his life in Rome than in any other city, including his native Florence. Further, we know far more about the end of his life than about the beginning (there are just six letters to and from the artist in the first thirty years of his life).⁵ Yet, often books concentrate on the first quarter of Michelangelo's career, culminating in 1512 with the completion of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling. The artist created many of his most famous masterpieces in these years, including the *Pietà*, *David*, and the Sistine frescoes. But he lived another fifty-two years. Three-quarters of his extant correspondence (and 95 percent of his family's published correspondence) dates from after the completion of the Sistine Ceiling, as do many works: the Medici Chapel and Laurentian Library, the *Last Judgment*,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Michelangelo

the tomb of Julius II, and all the Roman architectural projects, including St. Peter's.

We know, for example, much more about the day-to-day activity of the building of St. Peter's than we do about the sculpting of the *David* or the painting of the Sistine Chapel. We do not know when Michelangelo carved the *Moses*, but we know about the friends, professional associates, and patrons who interested themselves in the figure during its exceptionally long gestation period. Indeed, Michelangelo recorded less about the *Moses* than about the clothes he wore and the medicines he administered to his mule. During the six years he worked on the *Last Judgment*, the documentary record is almost completely silent. In the rare communications with his nephew during this time, Michelangelo limited himself to abbreviated advice on property investments and marriage prospects, and generally closed, "Altro non achade" – "That's all." And nothing about the *Last Judgment*.

Michelangelo primarily wrote letters to conduct business, air grievances, and resolve problems. He rarely wrote when work was proceeding well, and never merely to chat or express contentment. The letters, therefore, are a nearly complete record of the artist's travails – for which they have been mined frequently – rather than a balanced reflection of his life. If we knew Erasmus only from his correspondence, we might deduce that he was little more than a petty, grasping, dissimulating liar.⁶ As the eminent historian Fernand Braudel observed, happiness and success leave little trace in history and few documents. Or, as Hegel remarked, periods of human happiness are blank pages in history.⁷ On the other hand, Michelangelo's letters are invaluable raw material and quite unlike the self-conscious production of many of his contemporaries, many of whom wrote with an eye toward publication. Moreover, the letters written *to* the artist (few of which have been translated), and the hundreds of letters exchanged among family members, significantly enrich the picture of Michelangelo's world. Indeed, the correspondence offers a remarkable portrait of a family and their everyday concerns.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Many biographies might be forged from this material. I have attempted to reconstruct Michelangelo's world with a special focus on his family, friends, and patrons, as well as the hundreds of persons he dealt with in his daily life. More than eleven hundred persons appear in Michelangelo's correspondence, which represents a broad cross section of Renaissance society. We are permitted a glimpse of that distant society in all its variety and peculiarity. Likewise, a greater understanding of the artist's world offers a unique perspective on a familiar figure. Within the rich texture of this daily life – often mundane but not irrelevant – Michelangelo became a famous artist, created sublime works of art, improved the fortunes of his family, and raised the stature of his profession.

Given the nearly continuous stream of books and exhibitions devoted to Michelangelo, one might justifiably wonder why we need another. “Isn't there *The Agony and the Ecstasy*?” I am frequently asked. Irving Stone wrote a work of fiction. Although utilizing Michelangelo's correspondence, Stone created what he called a “biographical novel,” largely from inside Michelangelo's imagined personality. Stone's is the classic portrait of the irascible and misunderstood genius, isolated from all things mundane, including the routine world of family, friends, and most normal human emotions. Despite the artist's dozens of enduring friendships and his acquaintance with hundreds of persons, we persist in imagining Michelangelo as did Stone: an isolated, tortured genius, with few friends, an unappreciative family, and impossibly demanding patrons.

In comparison to many figures of comparable stature (think of Mozart or Shakespeare), there is a notable dearth of Michelangelo biographies. This is due, in part, to the long shadow cast by Vasari and Condivi, and to the overwhelming success of Stone's best-selling novel and the equally popular movie based on it. The best modern biography remains *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* published by John Addington Symonds in 1893. Symonds offers a well-balanced, sensitive portrayal of the artist's character, works, and many personal

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Michelangelo

relationships. But in the more than one hundred years since Symonds wrote his book, there has been an abundance of new scholarship. Moreover, much that might interest a modern reader was of little concern to Symonds's Victorian audience.⁸

More than subsequent writers, Vasari and Condivi have shaped our image of Michelangelo. They wrote compelling portraits of the artist, but they also initiated a still-flourishing hagiography. I have attempted to avoid the pitfalls of the latter while acknowledging that biography is a form of hagiography. I doubt I have created a saint – I hope, a credible human being. Not even a writer of fiction would have invented a Michelangelo who was responsible for gilding bed knobs for the pope.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I



ROME, 1496

A slight breeze relieved the waves of heat rising from the broad river valley. The distant city of Rome, circled by the famous Aurelian walls, shimmered through the haze and humidity. From the tableland where the two travelers stood, the Via Flaminia dropped into the Tiber Valley and ran straight to the Porta del Popolo. The once majestic highway was mostly overgrown, and many of its perfectly fitted flagstones were broken and dislodged. Anonymous ruins, mostly of brick and rubble, lined the ancient road and excited speculation. One squarish towerlike structure, although badly weathered, rose more than four and a half meters and still retained fragments of its once splendid marble revetment – a melancholic reminder of the transience of fame and empire.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Michelangelo

There was little relief from the intense summer sun until Michelangelo and his traveling companion, a family servant, rode through the dilapidated city gate. It was Saturday, the twenty-fifth of June, 1496. A dusty and tired Michelangelo found himself in a state of nervous anticipation. He was short in stature and not particularly handsome thanks to a flattened nose, but he was strong – a strength that would only increase with years of wielding a sculptor’s heavy hammer. Michelangelo was twenty-one years old and unemployed; this was his first visit to the Eternal City.

Passing into Rome was anticlimactic. The walls, which rose to more than fifteen meters (almost fifty feet), suggested the image of an imperial capital; the reality, however, was much less impressive. No one stopped or questioned them; no one offered greetings or advice about where to eat or sleep. In fact, there were few people and few intact buildings in the whole desolate vista that lay before them. They had entered a city, but there was no city. The expansive area inside the walls was little different from the unkempt properties immediately outside.

A swineherd lazily eyed a group of pigs rooting in a refuse pile at the base of the Pincian Hill. Above, and reached only by muddy paths, were the famous *horti*, once the grand private estates and luxury gardens of ancient Roman patricians. Here the aristocracy had built lavish and splendid pleasure villas and parks; now the *horti* were little more than rural pasturage. In the opposite direction, untended fields extended to the muddy Tiber. A few shallow draft boats plied the river; more were tied up at what was euphemistically called a port. There was no customs office and no regulations governing the “Porta alla Ripetta,” which was little more than a muddy riverbank where the overladen barks unloaded grain, wine, oil, and other foodstuffs shipped downriver from the northern reaches of Latium. The impressive bulk of Castel Sant’Angelo loomed in an indeterminate distance.

The travelers had entered the *disabitato* – the uninhabited part of Rome, mostly a vast and sparsely settled wasteland interspersed with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11199-7 - Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times

William E. Wallace

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Rome, 1496

ruins and occasional buildings. Indeed, most of the land enclosed within the eighteen-kilometer (more than eleven miles) circuit of walls was *disabitato*. The city of a million persons under the Roman emperor Augustus had been reduced to fewer than fifty thousand inhabitants; the magnificent marble metropolis was once again a city of wood and reused brick. In its shrunken, miserable condition, Rome was smaller than their native Florence, and not nearly as beautiful. Rome may once have been the center and capital of the world, *caput mundi*, but Florence was now a more important commercial center: wealthier, and far more civilized.

Almost the entire city of Rome was now huddled in the least salubrious location. Avoiding the waterless hills, the populace crowded the squalid Campus Martius, the low-lying land in the bend of the river between Castel Sant'Angelo and the Tiber Island. The city clung to the Tiber despite frequent, sometimes devastating floods.

Stretching before the new arrivals was a rutted, dusty road, the extension of the Via Flaminia inside the gate. It was sometimes called the "Corso," so named because of the races that were run along its great length during Carnival. Farther on it was known as the Via "Lata" because it was comparatively broad. As they proceeded, the column of Marcus Aurelius rose before them, and beyond, almost in a direct line of sight, the Column of Trajan. Just to the left and on the heights of Magnapoli rose the massive brick tower, the Torre delle Milizie, one of the many spots from which Nero supposedly watched Rome burn. Michelangelo was uncertain about the identities of these prominent landmarks, but he was awed by their great height, especially as they formed such a dramatic contrast to the surrounding squalor.

Near where the Trevi Fountain would be constructed in the eighteenth century, the travelers happened upon an inn with a stable. An ancient Roman aqueduct, the Acqua Vergine, still functioned and provided the neighborhood with clean, fresh water. Nearby was the church of Santa Maria in Via Lata, one of the oldest ecclesiastic