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

William E. Wallace

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MICHELANGELO

The Artist, the Man, and His Times

Michelangelo is universally recognized to be one of the greatest artists of all time. In this vividly written biography, William E. Wallace offers a substantially new view of the artist. Not only a supremely gifted sculptor, painter, architect, and poet, Michelangelo was also an aristocrat who firmly believed in the ancient and noble origins of his family. The belief in his patrician status fueled his lifelong ambition to improve his family's financial situation and to raise the social standing of artists. Michelangelo's ambitions are evident in his writing, dress, and comportment, as well as in his ability to befriend, influence, and occasionally say "no" to popes, kings, and princes.

Written from the words of Michelangelo and his contemporaries, this biography not only tells the artist's own stories but also brings to life the culture and society of Renaissance Florence and Rome. Not since Irving Stone's novel *The Agony and the Ecstasy* has there been such a compelling and human portrayal of this remarkable yet credible human individual.

An internationally recognized authority on Michelangelo, William E. Wallace is the Barbara Murphy Bryant Distinguished Professor of Art History at Washington University in St. Louis. He has been a Fellow at Villa I Tatti, Harvard University's Center for Renaissance Studies in Florence, and the American Academy in Rome. The author of *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo*, he served as the principal consultant for *The Divine Michelangelo*, a two-part film produced by the BBC, and he recently completed a 36-lecture audiovisual course entitled "The Genius of Michelangelo" for The Teaching Company.

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The Artist, the Man, and His Times

WILLIAM E. WALLACE

Washington University in St. Louis



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Preface



In the preface to his classic study of Leonardo da Vinci, Sigmund Freud warned of the danger of identifying too closely with one's subject. I am particularly conscious of this since I share a birthday with Giorgio Vasari. But this is an amusing coincidence rather than reason to write a book, especially given that Michelangelo probably would object to my portrayal of him, as he did to Vasari's.

In preparing to write a life of Michelangelo, I read more than a hundred biographies. Many were pedestrian affairs, but a few stand out in my mind as exceptional: *Samuel Coleridge* by Richard Holmes, *James Joyce* by Richard Ellmann, *Berlioz* by David Cairns, Maynard Solomon on Mozart and Beethoven, and Jack McClaughlin's biography of a house and its builder, *Jefferson and Monticello*. In bringing a subject sympathetically to life, Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* is an especially poignant and compelling portrait. This was the pleasurable part of my research, and it gave me the courage and conviction – although I have been writing on Michelangelo for more than twenty years – to attempt a modern biography of the artist.

During this book's long gestation, I naturally incurred many debts. For more than fifteen years, Paul Barolsky and Ralph Lieberman have been my constant companions in all things

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“michelangesque” and “michelangeloid.” Especially pleasurable were the times I spent in Italy, sharing meals and long conversations with these and other dear friends: the late Philipp Fehl and his wife, Raina; Paul and Ruth Barolsky; Ralph Lieberman and Valerie Krall; Roy and Berit Eriksen; Eric Apfelstadt and Rebecca Edwards; and Mark and Phoebe Weil. I have shared much with friends Eric Denker and Daniel Reich, as well as a gut-wrenching drive to Castel Focognano with Lisa Pon and James Amatruda.

Many others, sometimes unwittingly, have encouraged and helped me. To all, I offer sincere thanks, far more than is suggested by this impersonal alphabetical list: James Ackerman, Francis Ames-Lewis, Edith Balas, Leonard Barkan, Bernadine Barnes, the late James Beck, Caroline Bruzelius, Steve Bule, Melissa Bullard, Simona Capelli, Silvia Catitti, Hugo Chapman, Elizabeth Childs, Claudia Comforti, Janet Cox-Rearick, Roger Crum, Claudia Echinger-Maurach, Sam Edgerton, Caroline Elam, Philip Gavitt, Creighton Gilbert, Rab Hatfield, Mark Haxthausen, the late Howard Hibbard, Arthur Iorio, Paul Joannides, Bill Kent, the late Andrew Ladis, Norman Land, Golo Maurer, Sarah McHam, Mauro Mussolin, Jonathan Nelson, Michael Orlofsky, John Paoletti, Mary Pardo, Alan Pascuzzi, Livio Pestili, Gary Radke, Pina Ragionieri, Sheryl Reiss, Katherine Rinne, David Rosand, Ingrid Rowland, James Saslow, Carl Smith, Deborah Stott, Ron Witt, Alice and Helmut Wohl, Jeryldene Woods, Shelley Zuraw, and Steve Zwicker. Laura Agoston, Paul Barolsky, Marcia Hall, Jonathan Nelson, Deborah Parker, Eric Scigliano, and Richard Wertime all read versions of the manuscript and offered invaluable assistance. Ross King kindly introduced me to his agent, Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson, who fortunately agreed to become my agent. It is a privilege to once again publish a book with Beatrice Rehl, of Cambridge University Press, who fifteen years ago published my first book on Michelangelo.

It was a special pleasure to have completed this book while living in and near the former Florentine community of Rome around the

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Banco Santo Spirito near Ponte Sant'Angelo. In this neighborhood lived some of Michelangelo's closest friends and associates, including Roberto Strozzi, Luigi del Riccio, and Tiberio Calcagni. If, in the following pages, they emerge as more than obscure names, I will have partially succeeded in my task of re-creating Michelangelo's world.

Rome 2005 and 2008

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Note to the Reader



The literature on Michelangelo is vast. Rather than burden the notes with bibliographic citations, I have limited myself to references to the primary sources, with citations of particularly relevant and more recent secondary literature.

In translating sixteenth-century Italian into English, I have used various sources, especially for Michelangelo's poetry, but also for his letters and the lives by Vasari and Condivi. In each case, I have selected the translation that best fits the circumstances while also being faithful to the original Italian. Where translations are not credited to others, they are my own.

Throughout Michelangelo's life, the ducat and Roman scudo were approximately equivalent to the Florentine florin (*florino*). One florin = seven lire. A skilled worker earned approximately one lira a day, that is, between fifty and sixty florins a year, which was a decent wage. Michelangelo earned fifty florins per month when he worked for Pope Clement VII at San Lorenzo, 1523–34; therefore, he easily earned ten times the wage of the stonecarvers in his employ.

Florentines dated the new year from March 25, the feast of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary (*ab incarnatione*), thus, a letter written on March 18, 1564, for example, would have been dated 1563,

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Note to the Reader

since it was still a week before the new year began. All dates have been regularized to conform to modern practice.

At three points, I purposely depart from the historian's objective voice. I open the book with an imaginary account of Michelangelo's arrival in Rome in 1496, based, however, on letters he wrote home during his first weeks in the Eternal City. Toward the midpoint in Michelangelo's career, I reconstruct a hypothetical "week in the life" of the artist. And, finally, at the end of the book, I use contemporary accounts to relate the circumstances of the clandestine removal of Michelangelo's body from Rome after his death. These episodes are informed reconstructions based on extant evidence, but I have employed the documentation to create a narrative. Ultimately, my purpose has been to bring Michelangelo to life, in conversation with his family, friends, patrons, numerous acquaintances, and occasional enemies.

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