



Michelangelo: the last decades

Sarah Vowles, Grant Lewis

Tracing the final 30 years of Michelangelo's career, this book examines how the great master used art and faith to explore the common human experience of ageing in a rapidly changing world.

£35, Hardback

250 x 230 mm

256 pages

175 images

9780714126982

May 2024

per la mano di miseria
po da ora inanzi farò
scrivere a lei e so sotto scrivere

I am an old man and death has robbed me of the dreams of youth – may those who do not know what old age means bear it with what patience they may when they reach it, because it cannot be imagined beforehand.¹



04 The Sistine Chapel ceiling, 1508–12. Fresco. Vatican Palace, Vatican City.

(with the brief interruption of Adrian VI, who served for only a year) by his Medici cousin Giulio, who took the name Clement VII, and who initially kept Michelangelo busy with works in Florence, where he was now also charged with designing a new building to house the Laurentian Library.

These numerous distractions meant that, by 1534, only one of the numerous statues planned for Julius II's tomb had been completed: the *Moses*, which was stored in Michelangelo's workshop at his home on Macel

de' Corvi in Rome. Indeed, the house and workshop were themselves part of the contract, although Michelangelo now regarded them as his own. It had been thirty years since he had signed the contract and the whole project had become an embarrassment and a liability. Michelangelo fretted that he was gaining a reputation for leaving work unfinished and, more seriously, that he was rumoured to have taken money for a project he had never intended to complete. After years of negotiation, stress, and intermediary



1. RETURN TO ROME

(detail 123, see p.63) Michelangelo, *Studies for the Last Judgment*, 1530s.

In April 1532, the 57-year-old Michelangelo made a brief trip to Rome. He had last seen the Eternal City nine years earlier, during a flying visit after the election of his childhood companion Giulio de' Medici as Pope Clement VII, and it was for Clement that he came back. Though the two men had been in constant correspondence as Michelangelo worked on the Pope's Florentine projects at San Lorenzo, much had changed since their last meeting. Clement had fled for his life during the disastrous Sack of Rome in 1527, an event that haunted him for the rest of his days, while in Florence Michelangelo had also been hit by the aftershocks. As word of the catastrophe spread, the Pope's family were expelled following an attempt to restore the old Florentine Republic, and in the ensuing maelstrom the sculptor's famed *David* (see fig. 0.3) was damaged. Michelangelo's ongoing work for the Medici at San Lorenzo was also put in jeopardy. With aborted commissions already littering his career, this new setback was a bitter blow, and to avert another failure Michelangelo doggedly continued working at San Lorenzo despite supporting the Republic (see Introduction).¹

The artist's prominent role in the ensuing Siege of Florence did not go unnoticed by the Medici, who felt betrayed by someone their family had nurtured. Michelangelo therefore found himself in a precarious situation when the Republic fell in 1530, running into hiding in fear of his life before a worried Clement sent word that his friend was not to be harmed. This fear was more than justified: as the Medici returned, they unleashed a wave

In order, lofty lady, to be less unworthy
of the gift of your immense graciousness,
on first encountering it, my lowly genius
wanted to use my own with all my heart.

But now that I've seen that my own worth can't open
a path for me to rise up to that standard,
my guilty audacity asks for your pardon,
and I'll grow ever wiser from my failure.

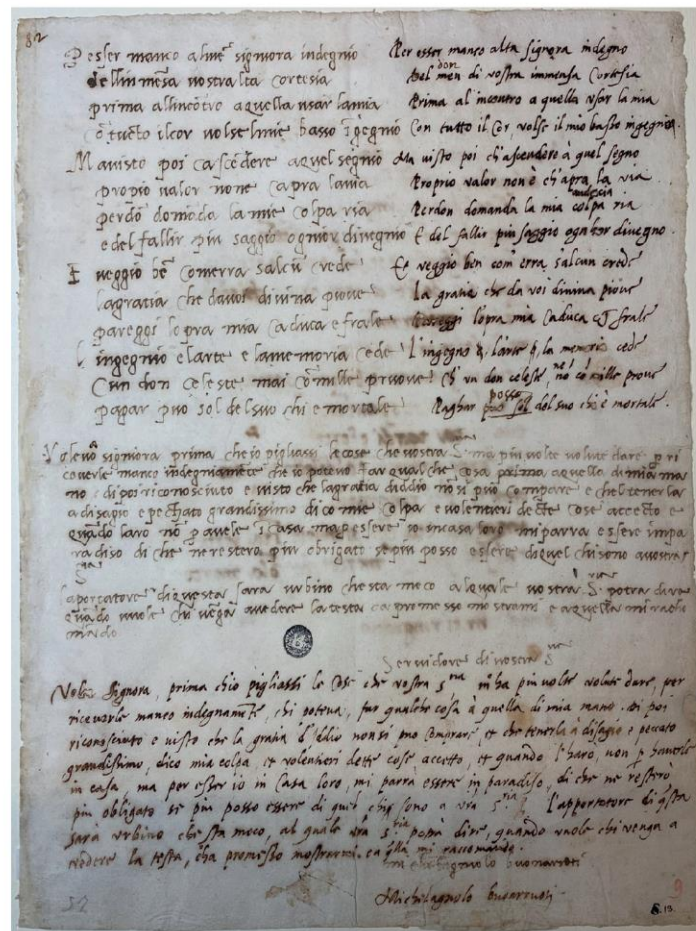
And I see clearly how anyone's mistaken
who believes the grace that rains down from divine you
could be equalled by my feeble and fleeting work.

Genius, and art, and memory give up:
for one who's mortal can't, from himself, repay
a heavenly gift, even with a thousand tries.²⁵

Together, the letter and sonnet form a remarkable affirmation of justification by faith: a sign of Michelangelo's sympathy for this central tenet of reformed faith. Anxious to present his work to Vittoria at its best, he sent his drafts to his writer friend Donato Giannotti who, along with Luigi del Riccio, was frequently called upon to judge and edit Michelangelo's poems. Giannotti dutifully polished both pieces, copying them out alongside the originals and correcting Michelangelo's idiosyncratic Tuscan spelling to render them more elegant for their illustrious recipient (fig. 2.10).

Not long after sending her manuscript to Michelangelo, Vittoria was unexpectedly forced to leave Rome when the antipathy between her brother Ascanio and Pope Paul III erupted into outright rebellion, prompted by Paul's attempts to impose a hefty salt tax on Colonna lands. Vittoria withdrew to the safety of a convent in Orvieto, although she remained intimately involved in negotiations to bring about a peace, writing not only to Ascanio and Paul but to other powerful figures affected by the conflict, among them her long-time admirer Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. After months of rebellion, Ascanio's men were forced to surrender to papal troops, who promptly destroyed the fortifications of three towns held by the Colonna: a devastating blow to the family's honour, but one that Vittoria – conscious of the need to appear unaffected – greeted with sangfroid: 'Possessions come and go,' she told the governor of Orvieto, 'so long as people are safe'.²⁶

Her return to Rome was brief: late in 1541 Pole was appointed papal legal to the town of Viterbo and Vittoria, devoted to her spiritual lodestar, decided to follow him. Other prominent reformers gathered in Viterbo, among them Marcantonio Flaminio and other former followers of the Spaniard Valdés, drawn by Pole's interest in theories of justification by faith and by his





5.6 (cat) Michelangelo, *Crucifixion with two male figures*, c. 1555–63. Black chalk and lead white on paper. 27.8 × 23.4 cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, WA 1846.89.



5.7 (cat) Michelangelo, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John the Evangelist*, c. 1555–63. Black chalk and lead white on paper. 38.2 × 21 cm. Royal Collection Trust / HM King Charles III, RCIN 92775.



5.8 Michelangelo, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John the Evangelist*, c. 1555–63. Black chalk and lead white, partially discoloured, on paper. 43.5 × 29 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, 700.



5.9 (cat) Michelangelo, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John the Evangelist*, c. 1555–63. Black chalk and lead white, partially discoloured, on paper. 41 × 27.8 cm. British Museum, London, 1895.0915.510.