PERFORMING NOBILITY.

POVERTY, ART, AND LEGACY:

MICHELANGELO’S QUEST FOR GLORIA

A Thesis in
Art History
by
Margaret Anne Neeley

© 2008 Margaret Anne Neeley

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

December 2008
The thesis of Margaret Anne Neeley was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Brian Curran  
Associate Professor of Art History  
Graduate Officer, Department of Art History  
Thesis Advisor

Charlotte M. Houghton  
Associate Professor of Art History

Craig Zabel  
Associate Professor of Art History  
Head of the Department of Art History

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

Although Michelangelo is probably the most written about artist in the field of art history, little has been said about the impact on his career of his origins in a noble family. The implication is that scholars believe that his nobility had little bearing on his artistic career. I shall argue the contrary: Michelangelo’s nobility had a profound impact on his career. Michelangelo came not simply from a noble family, but from one that had lost its wealth, and, therefore, its relevance among the Florentine patriciate. In this paper, I will discuss how this condition caused a crisis of identity in the Florentines who suffered from it, and resulted in a characteristic raison d’être specific to these individuals. In doing so, I will detail the ways in which Michelangelo was affected by this condition. From this exploration, I conclude that one of Michelangelo’s primary goals throughout his life was to restore his family’s prior status within Florence’s patriciate, and that Michelangelo saw his career and used it as a means to this end. In the process of building these arguments, I reconsider some major themes central to previous analysis of Michelangelo: his poverty and attitude toward money, and his biography (especially as seen through Condivi’s account), in addition to his artistic accomplishments. By considering Michelangelo in these terms, I propose a view of an artist deeply involved in a quest not only to fulfill an aesthetic vision, but, by securing a reputation for artistic brilliance, to restore his family and his own estate to its historical position within Florence’s upper echelons.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................... v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................................................................................................... vi

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1 The Noble Origins of the Buonarroti Family and their Descent into the *Poveri Vergognosi* .................................................................................................................. 16

Chapter 2 Poverty as Performance ....................................................................................... 25

Chapter 3 Biography as Performance .................................................................................. 64

Chapter 4 Art as *Gloria* ..................................................................................................... 90

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 106

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 109

Appendix ............................................................................................................................. 117
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3-1: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Battle of the Centaurs*, 1492. Marble, 8.5 x 88cm.
Casa Buonarroti, Florence. Reprinted from de Tolnay, “The Historic and Artistic
Personality of Michelangelo,” in *The Complete Works of Michelangelo*, 1965, plate
4.................................................................117

Figure 3-2: Giulio Bonasone, *Michelangelo Buonarroti*, 1546. Copperplate print, 23.7 x
18.3cm. British Museum, London. Reprinted from Buonarroti, *The Letters of

Figure 4-1: Signature—a detail from Michelangelo’s *Vatican Pietà*. Reprinted from

Figure 4-2: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Vatican Pietà*, 1497–1499. Marble, 174 x 195cm.
Saint Peter’s Basilica, Vatican City. Reprinted from Baldini, “Sculpture,” chap. 2 in
*The Complete Works of Michelangelo*, 1965, plate 18.. .................................120
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Professors Brian Curran and Charlotte Houghton, I thank you for your support and guidance throughout this project. You both have taught me valuable lessons through which I have become a more able and careful scholar. To Michael St. Clair and the Babcock Galleries; the friends, family, and colleagues of Francis E. Hyslop; and Dean Gunalan Nadarajan; I thank you for awarding me with monies from, respectively, the Babcock Galleries Endowed Fund in Art History, the Francis E. Hyslop Memorial Graduate Fellowship, and the Penn State College of Arts and Architecture Graduate Student Travel Grant. Funds from these endowments allowed me to conduct research for this thesis in Florence. Thus, I was able to get a step closer to my subject and benefit from a cultural experience afforded to few people. To Nicola McCarthy, I thank you for editing this thesis. To my parents, William and Andrena Neeley—my best friends—words can never describe how much you mean to me; I thank you for always making me believe that I can accomplish anything, and that nothing is out of my reach. And to my grandmother, Margaret Neeley: although fate took you away before I was old enough to remember you, my parents tell me that I have developed your personality and interests. It is through our mutual love of art that I feel connected to you. And, it is through my work as an art historian that I hope to honor your memory and can only imagine to match your intellect and your sophistication; I dedicate this thesis to you.
Introduction

Michelangelo (1474–1564) is probably the most written about artist in the field of art history; thousands of publications have been dedicated to his personality and oeuvre. Except for William Wallace and Rab Hatfield who both began publishing on the topic during the first two years of the millennium, almost nothing has been written about his identity as a nobleman. Those academicians who have addressed his nobility have done so only in passing, typically in biographies about the artist for the purpose of introducing his origins, as John Addington Symonds did in *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* (1928).¹ Michelangelo descended from a noble family, but its position had been compromised, so it existed on the shamed margins of the nobility at the time of his birth. This background and the lack of more sustained research into the

¹ John Addington Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo* (New York, Modern Library, 1928), 1–3. Symonds devotes only two pages out of 544 to Michelangelo’s nobility. He uses this history to provide background information about Michelangelo family before he discusses Michelangelo’s birth and childhood. This history, in other words, serves no agenda in Symonds’s biography. He begins the biography: “The Buonarroti Simoni, to whom Michelangelo belonged, were a Florentine family of ancient burgher nobility. Their arms appear to have been originally ‘azure two bends or.’ To this coat was added ‘a label of four points gules inclosing three fleur-de lys or.’ That augmentation, adopted from the shields of Charles of Anjou, occurs upon the scutcheons of many Guelf houses and cities.” To this Symonds adds a few comments about the alliance Michelangelo made with the Count of Canossa to claim that they share part of their lineage, and a brief account of a couple of the positions Michelangelo’s ancestors held in the Florentine government.
impact this position had on his oeuvre suggests that art historians have found little reason to think that such facts are relevant to understanding his artistic achievements. Instead, his background as a member of a family that had experienced a humiliating drop in social status is taken as an unremarkable fact of his origin. It is subsequently ignored as having had little bearing on his sense of artistic purpose and artistic production. The following comment by Charles de Tolnay represents this prevailing outlook:

It is significant, however, that young Michelangelo did not feel bound to class prejudices, as is shown by the fact that he chose his art as his vocation against the wishes of his father and uncle, who regarded it as unworthy of the prestige of their house. Michelangelo on the other hand seems to have been proud of it, so that for a long time he signed his letters ‘Michelangelo scultore.’ He did not care for social conventions, since he liked to be with artisans, stonecutters, and lowly artists; that is, lower-class people.2

Tolnay acknowledges Michelangelo’s patrician origins and recognizes that his artistic career deviated from an acceptable career choice for a Florentine patrician, but he assumes that Michelangelo chose this path, in part, because he cared nothing for class distinctions. De Tolnay’s perspective undervalues the importance the distinction of nobility had in the minds of its possessors, including, I shall argue, Michelangelo. He characterizes Michelangelo as a social deviant, rather than considering how his career may have been a part of a performance of nobility. Tolnay’s interpretation of Michelangelo continues to be the prevailing conception of Michelangelo’s character. It directs many scholars to continue to interpret his works without considering the impact of social conventions.

While Wallace and Hatfield have potentially initiated a new era in Michelangelo scholarship, their work is still cursory: Wallace has explored the impact of Michelangelo’s

nobility on his career, but has only found it to have affected his career by allowing the artist to work without operating a bottega (a workshop with students). Nearly every artist had to operate a bottega in order to attract business, but, Wallace argues, Michelangelo did not need to because the Medici, with whom the artist was socially connected, provided him with commissions and introduced him to other willing patrons. Hatfield has explored Michelangelo’s wealth (his income and investments) and concluded that Michelangelo was fixated on amassing a fortune. Hatfield only casually suggests that Michelangelo did so out of embarrassment for the “mediocre state,” as he calls it, that Michelangelo’s family was in during his childhood, so that he could restore their former dignity. Hatfield instead stresses that Michelangelo was a miser.

Wallace and Hatfield have provided a foundation for the exploration of the impact of Michelangelo’s nobility on his life and career, but as is typical with early explorations, their findings only touch the surface. I will explore both of their topics, but will do so in the context of how they related to his self-identity as a nobleman. My investigation will go in much more depth than theirs. The primary departure of my investigation from theirs is that I will analyze the impact

4 Rab Hatfield, The Wealth of Michelangelo (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2002).
5 Hatfield’s point gets lost because it appears in the middle of a paragraph in the middle of a chapter. He states: “Michelangelo’s pride in his origins no doubt aggravated the embarrassment he felt because of his family’s mediocre state during his early lifetime, a sense of shame which drove him to deprive himself in order to restore his family to their former dignity…” Ibid., 223.
6 Ibid., 188–192.
of Michelangelo’s nobility on his life and career within the context of the culture of the Florentine nobility, and his actions as a performance of this nobility.

Wallace and Hatfield could only reach surface-level conclusions because of their intentional or unintentional unwillingness to place Michelangelo within the social world around him. This follows the traditional theoretical model used by Michelangelo scholars, including Tolnay, which interprets Michelangelo as an outsider artist. The model derives in large part from a literal interpretation of the biographies written about Michelangelo during his lifetime, first by the Aretine painter and architect Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) in 1550, then by Michelangelo’s friend and student Ascanio Condivi (1525–1574) in 1553, who stated in his preface that he wrote his account to answer the falsehoods he perceived in Vasari’s biography. Both biographers tell colorful stories about the artist, which portray him to modern readers as an eccentric. Vasari and Condivi, in his second edition (written in 1568), tell many of the same stories. These include the

---

7 Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelangiolo* (Florence: Rinascimento del Libro, 1938), 19. Condivi explains: “Dall’ora in que che ’l Signor Iddio, per suo singolar beneficio, mi fece degno non pur del cospetto (nel quale a pena arei sperato di poter venire), ma dell’amore, della conversazione e della stretta dimestichezza di Michelagnolo Buonarroti, pittore e scultore unico; io conoscente di tanta grazia, e amator della professione e della bontà sua, mi diedi con ogni attenzione e ogni studio ad osservare e mettere insieme non solamente i precetti ch’egli mi dava dell’arte, ma i detti, l’azioni e i costumi suoi, con tutto quello che mi paresse degno o di maraviglia o d’imitazione o di laude in tutta la sua vita, con animo ancora di scriverne a qualche tempo; così per render qualche gratitudine a lui degl’infiniti obblighi ch’io li tengo, come per giovar ancor agli altri con gli avertimenti e con l’esempio d’un uomo tale…”

tale that Michelangelo wore his clothing days on end refusing to even remove his leather boots in order to sleep. According to both authors (Vasari in his second edition), Michelangelo left his boots on for so many days that when he finally removed them his skin detached with them. Vasari tells another story in both editions of the artist refusing to let anyone see his statue David until it was finished. They also tell stories (Vasari in his second edition) of Michelangelo exhibiting a ferocious temper—terribilita, as it is called. In one tale he temporarily abandons the Sistine Ceiling project in a fit of anger, accusing the architect Bramante of trying to sabotage his career. According to Vasari and Condivi (in his second edition), Michelangelo accused

---

9 Giorgio Vasari, vol. 6, Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori: nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi (Florence: Studio per edizioni scelte, 1976), 122. (Hereafter cited as Le vite.) “Alle gambe portò invecchéndoli di continuo stivali di pelle di cane sopra lo ignudo i mesi interi, che, quando gli voleva cavare, poi nel tirargli ne veniva spesso la pelle.” Ascanio Condivi, Vita di Michelangiolo, 152. “Mentre ch’è stato più robusto, più volte ha dormito vestito e cogli stivaletti in gamba, i quali ha sempre usati si per cagion del granchio, di che di continuo ha patito, si per altri rispetti: ed è stato qualche volta tanto a cavarselgli, che poi insieme con gli stivaletti n’è venuta la pelle, come quella della biscia.”

10 Vasari retains the exact wording for this story in both editions. (For both versions see Vasari, Le vite, 19.) “…e quello di continuo lavorando, senza che nessuno il vedesse, a ultima perfezione lo condusse.” Condivi does not make a comparable statement in his story about Michelangelo’s creation of David.

11 Both Vasari and Condivi tell similar versions. Vasari makes no significant changes in his second edition to his original account. It is noteworthy that he discusses no rivalry between these artists in his first edition. For both versions see Vasari, Le vite, 33–34. The second version follows: “Mentre che ’l Papa se n’era tornato a Roma e che Michelagnolo aveva condotto questa
Bramante of trying to persuade Pope Julius II to give him, Michelangelo, the Sistine Ceiling project in order to see him fail. According to the authors, Michelangelo was untrained in painting. From tales like this we have inherited the mythological figure of Michelangelo—the troubled but brilliant artist who painted the Sistine Ceiling on his back all by his own hand.12

---

statua, nella assenzia di Michelagnolo, Bramante, amico e parente di Raffaello da Urbino e per questo rispetto poco amico di Michelagnolo, vedendo che il Papa favoriva et igrandiva l’opere ch’e’ faceva di scoltura, andaron pensando di levargli dell’animo che, tornando Michelagnolo, Sua Santità non facessi attendere a finire la sepoltura sua, dicendo che pareva uno affrettarsi la morte et augurio cattivo il farsi in vita il sepolcro; e lo persuasono a far che nel ritorno di Michelagnolo Sua Santità, per memoria di Sisto suo zio, gli dovessi far dipignere la volta della cappella che egli aveva fatta in palazzo; et in questo modo pareva a Bramante et altri emuli di Michelagnolo di ritrarlo dalla scoltura, ove lo vedeva perfetto, e metterlo in disperazione, pensando, col farlo dipignere, che dovessi fare, per non avere sperimento ne’ colori a fresco, opera men lodata, e che dovessi riuscire da meno che Raffaello…” Condivi, Vita di Michelangiolo, 76–77. “Poichè ebbe finita quest’opera, se ne venne a Roma; dove volendo papa Giulio servirsi di lui, e stando pur in proposito di non far la sepoltura, gli fu messo in capo da Bramante e da altri emuli di Michelagnolo, che lo facesse dipingere la volta della cappella di papa Sisto Quarto, ch’è in palazzo, dando speranza che in ciò farebbe miracoli. E tale ufficio facevano con malizia, per ritrarre il papa da cose di scultura; e perciocchè tenevano per cosa certa che o non accettando egli tale impresa, commoverebbe contra di sè il papa, o accettandola, riuscirebbe assai minore di Raffaello da Urbino, al qual per odio di Michelagnolo, prestavano ogni favore; stimando che la principale arte di lui fosse, come veramente era, la statuaria.”

12 Condivi comments that Michelangelo spent so much time looking up at the vault that he could hardly see when he looked down, not even to read a letter: “Spedita quest’opera, Michelagnolo,
Despite a plethora of research on the artist, the scholarly oeuvre has remained largely uniform for the past century and a half. The majority of scholars have religiously used the biographies as their central sourcebooks for analyzing Michelangelo’s artistic intention. This is because the biographies appear to reveal the artist’s essential personality. Condivi’s biography is responsible in large part for this, because he conveys that Michelangelo participated in the biography’s production: he quotes Michelangelo throughout his account as if the artist authorized the biography and comments in his preface that he wrote the biography to correct the errors he perceived to be in Vasari’s account.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{itemize}
\item per avere nel dipignere così lungo tempo tenuti gli occhi alzati verso la volta, guardando poi in giù poco vedeva; si che s’egli aveva a leggere una lettera o altre cose minute, gli era necessario colle braccia tenerle levate sopra il capo.” Condivi, \textit{Vita di Michelangiolo}, 89. Vasari tells a nearly identical story in his second edition (the story does not appear in his first edition): “Fu condotta questa opera con suo grandissimo disagio dello stare a lavorare col capo all’insù, e talmente aveva guasto la vista che non poteva leggere lettere né guardar disegni, se non all’insù: che gli durò poi parecchi mesi.” Vasari, \textit{Le vite}, 38.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{13} In stating his purpose, Condivi comments that he wrote Michelangelo’s biography because Vasari said things that are untrue and left out things that are noteworthy. He leaves the culprit unnamed out of politeness, but gives enough hints that he refers to Vasari: “E mentre tutte due si vanno parte moltiplicando e parte digerendo, è nato accidente che per doppia cagione sono forzato d’accelerare, anzi di precipitar quella della Vita. Prima, perché sono stati alcuni che scrivendo di questo raro uomo, per non averlo (come credo) così praticato come ho fatto io, da un canto n’hanno dette cose che mai non furono, d’altro lassatene molte di quelle che son dignissime d’esser notate; di poi, perché alcuni altri, a’ quali ho conferite e fidate queste mie fatiche, se
This interpretation of Condivi’s account has served generations of scholars well, for it appears to have allowed them to get inside Michelangelo’s character in order to understand his work within the context of the High Renaissance, when artists had begun inserting their personalities into their work. A flaw in the preceding interpretation is that it has caused scholars, in my estimation, to place excessive emphasis on the biographies to the exclusion of important social context, namely, social status. Much of the fascination in Michelangelo on the part of biographers and art historians has centered on efforts to decipher the meaning of his works by trying to make sense of the curious behaviors Condivi attributes to him. Michelangelo’s character has thus become a central component in art historical thinking about the artist: the standard interpretation of his character is that he was an eccentric. His peculiar behavior, including his refusal to operate a bottega and his seemingly reclusive tendencies, present him as a man who lived outside the confines of the social structure around him. He is interpreted as the consummate outsider artist—the prototype for the modern conception of the artist-genius—a man possessed of such genius that his artistic inspiration comes from within and can only be explained by dissecting his mind.

I shall argue that Michelangelo’s compromised nobility, despite prevailing notions, is relevant to understanding his art. It is not only a fact of his origin, but also a determinative factor influencing his view of himself; of his relationship to others; and, therefore, of his career and works of art. Michelangelo came not simply from a noble family, but from one that had lost its wealth, and, therefore, its relevance among the Florentine patriciate—he grew up within the poveri vergognosi. These individuals composed the disenfranchised branch of the uomini di stato. The shamed poor were nobles who had lost their wealth. They were referred to as shamed for the l’hanno per modo appropriate, che come di sue disegnano farsene onore.” Condivi, *Vita di Michelangiolo*, 20.
simple reason that they could no longer afford to live at the standard expected of nobles: wealth, after all, was an accessory to an individual’s designated social station. Descendants of noblemen were considered to bear the soul of their honored ancestors(s). It was believed, therefore, that the descendants of ennobled individuals must also be honored, so that the memory of their deceased ancestor(s) continue(s) to be honored. Despite the importance of wealth, no fixed poverty line existed. Whether an individual was considered poor depended upon if he or she could afford to live at the level expected of a person of his or her social station. A patrician, for example, who was considered to be poor, may have been so among other patricians, but may have been considered wealthy had he or she been a commoner. This state of poverty is not to be confused with egestas (lack of food), a circumstance in which most of these “impoverished” patricians did not find themselves.

Individuals belonging to the *poveri vergognosi* appear to have felt a familial obligation to restore their families to their prior status as functioning members of the *uomini di stato*.


16 Trexler, 103–104.

17 Ibid., 72.

18 Ibid.
According to Richard Trexler, this is because Renaissance Florentines believed that a natural link existed between high social standing and virtù (Christian virtue). One of the central reasons a person entered the nobility (if not born into it) was because his deeds were believed to exemplify virtù. Noblemen were believed, in theory, to be more ideal Christians than commoners and, therefore, more deserving of charity. Impoverished nobleman were thus called poveri vergognosi because, due to their honorable status as noblemen, it was shameful for them to beg. The problem of the poveri vergognosi was of such concern to the leaders of the Florentine state that in 1442 they put into law mandates for discreetly aiding the poveri vergognosi. The number of poveri vergognosi must have increased enough during the preceding period to warrant a government program to aid them. This is not surprising considering the downturn in the Florentine economy during the preceding decades. Michelangelo’s family, as we shall see later in this chapter, lost its wealth during this period. The government’s concern over the poveri vergognosi continued into the cinquecento; laws including one from 1509 refer to a multitude of poveri vergognosi.

Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), the Florentine architect and humanist, explains another reason nobles felt an obligation to reestablish their families among the uomini di stato. Commenting on the condition of poverty he states: “although I will not say that poverty is wholly repressive, it often throws virtue into the shadows, subjecting it to a hidden and obscure misery.” Poverty, in other words, jeopardized one’s nobility because it negated one’s virtù.

---

19 For a more detailed discussion on this topic see ibid., 64–109.

20 Ibid., 87–88.

21 Ibid., 100.

22 Leon Battista Alberti, I libri della famiglia (Milan: Biblioteca classica economica, n.d.), 274. He writes: “E a chi la fortuna poco seconda, non a costui sarà facile acquistar buon nome e fama
Despite falling into the *poveri vergognosi*, these individuals remained within the nobility because once a family was designated noble, its descendants would always be so. This is because nobility was first and foremost a mark of its possessor’s honor. However, if the family lost its wealth, it would also lose its position within the *uomini di stato*. Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici (1360–1429), the founder of the famous Medici clan, although not a member of the *poveri vergognosi*, but rather a newcomer to the Florentine patriciate, explains how social status depended much on wealth: “when I was poor, far from having been honored, not a citizen who knew me pretended that he’d ever seen me.”

He goes on to imply that while social prestige was granted on the basis of the record of service of one’s family to the Republic, whether in government or in militaristic defense of the state, only the wealthy were given the opportunity to serve the Republic in office: “I know that trade is the source and basis of my being honored by the Republic….” Giovanni implies that if a nobleman were to lose his wealth, he would automatically find himself barred from serving the state in positions of high office. (This topic will be explored further in Chapter 2.) To be prevented from participating in the work of government was devastating socially, since prestige within the Republic was conferred by this very eligibility.

---

23 Giovanni Cavalcanti, *Istorie fiorentine*, ed. Filippo Luigi Polidori (Florence: Tip. all'insegna di Dante, 1838–39), 1:97. “Io conosco che le mercatanzie sono l’origine e il fondamento che la Repubblica mi esalta, e per la Repubblica le mercatanzie non mi glorificano; però che, quando io ero indigente, non che la Repubblica mi alzasse, ma cittadino non ci era che mi conoscesse, e mostrava di non mi avere mai veduto.”

24 Ibid.
The *poveri vergognosi* felt great shame in their circumstances, because as nobles they were likely to believe that they were naturally superior to those of lower birth rank and that the privileges conferred by noble birth rightly belonged to them. To be unable to live in a superior manner was, therefore, disgraceful. Lauro Quirini (c. 1420–1475/79), a Cretan-born Venetian patrician and humanist scholar, argued that just as the natural world has hierarchies in which certain beings are more noble than others, so too should the human world.²⁵

Such beliefs in natural superiority must perforce have affected how nobles thought—about themselves, their relationships with others, their responsibilities, and what was due to them. Michelangelo could hardly have been different in this regard. Leon Battista Alberti expresses the shame the *poveri vergognosi* experienced:

> Often I have marveled and sorrowed that fortune’s cruelty and ill will seemed to have such power over men. Fortune’s fickleness and imprudence actually seemed able to seize families rich in heroes, abounding in all that is precious, dear, and most desired by mortal men, endowed with honor, fame, high praise, authority and public favor, and to cast them down to poverty, desolation and misery. They were reduced from a great number of ancestors to very few descendants, from unmeasured riches to straight necessity, and hurled from the brightest splendor of glory. They were drowned in calamity, plunged into obscure, oblivious, tempestuous adversity. How many families do we see today in decadence and ruin!²⁶

These lines appear in the introductory address to *della Famiglia*—a manual Alberti wrote that instructs members of his *casa* (house) on how to restore their clan’s status within the *uomini di*

---


The Alberti family had been at the top of the Florentine nobility, but had been exiled for supporting the losing side in a political struggle against the powerful House of Albizzi. His comment implies that it was not uncommon for families to lose their place among the nobility, and that those who did so were looked upon with pity, as he does to other poveri vergognosi in this statement. That he wrote an instruction manual for his kin on how to restore their family implies that he, as a nobleman (he was illegitimate, but accepted and nurtured by his kin), felt a strong obligation and desire to reestablish his family.

These contemporary sources strongly suggest that a member of the nobility was likely to believe in his/her own superiority and entitlement to privileges even under conditions of a fall from grace. They imply that members of the poveri vergognosi shared a specific worldview and self-interpretation that made a yearning for the recovery of their old rank a central fact of existence. As such, it is probable that Michelangelo saw himself through the prism of the poveri vergognosi as both a displaced member of society and as an artist of ambition and talent.

In this thesis, I shall argue that Michelangelo devoted his life to reestablishing his family among the Florentine uomini di stato and that he viewed his career as an artist as a means to this end. The following chapters explore three aspects of Michelangelo’s quest—three ways through

---

27 The manual is a dialogue that the author produced as four books. He wrote the first three within ninety days sometime before 1434, and he first circulated them among his family. He wrote the fourth book in 1437 (it discusses friendship rather than family), and presented it to the Florentine Republic in 1441. In 1443 he polished the whole series. Records show that he sent it to “Sicily” presumably to Alfonso the Magnanimous, who was in that year crowned King of the Two Sicilies. See Renée Neu Watkins, “Introduction,” in The Family in Renaissance Florence (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1969), 2–3.

28 Ibid., 1–20.
which he performed nobility and thereby reestablished his family. Each chapter challenges a standard perception about the artist:

Chapter 2 combats the common perception that Michelangelo was a miser who chose to live as a pauper even though he was wealthy. This is an interpretation that Rab Hatfield perpetuates in his book *The Wealth of Michelangelo*. In my view, however, Michelangelo’s own words, when placed within the context of his social position, demonstrate that he conformed to codes of etiquette that were firmly established among the *uomini di stato*. Rather than living like a pauper, Michelangelo lived moderately in accordance with the etiquette demanded of and by Florentine nobles.

Chapter 3 combats the literal interpretation of the biographies. My interpretation follows the newer trend initiated by Paul Barolsky in his book *The Faun in the Garden: Michelangelo and the Poetic Origins of Italian Renaissance Art*, which interprets many individual stories in Vasari’s biography of Michelangelo as metaphorical rather than factual.\(^{29}\) While the biography provides biographical information, such as Michelangelo’s birth and death dates, the people he knew, and the works of art he executed and when, certain stories about events in his life are peculiar and are now believed to be symbolic. I shall argue that these elements acted metaphorically to define Michelangelo’s nobility for the reader. I will apply this theory to a reading of Vasari and Condivi to contend that both of their biographies seek to praise the artist in the fashion appropriate for a nobleman. While Vasari uses metaphor to present Michelangelo as a self-made man turned noble, Condivi uses them to present Michelangelo as a nobleman by birth. I

---

will also argue that Condivi’s biography acts as Michelangelo’s ricordanze (memoir) of sorts, through which he defends his noble birth against Vasari’s account of his life.

Chapter 4 combats the perception that Michelangelo’s career as an artist was motivated solely by a desire to excel in his chosen medium—that his own self-definition inhered most strongly and almost exclusively in his career as an artist. This exploration builds upon William Wallace’s inquiry in his article “Michael Angelvs Bonarotvs patritivs Florentinvs” in which he investigates the role that Michelangelo’s noble birth played in his career. I shall argue that Michelangelo’s nobility played a more extensive role in his career than even Wallace allows: Michelangelo saw his art as a means to achieve gloria and to enrich himself, thereby restoring his family to full status within the nobility.

The conclusion explores the broader implications of my interpretations. I shall argue that my study provides a new model for both exploring the meaning of Michelangelo’s works and understanding their public reception during the cinquecento. My work also contests the traditional interpretation of Michelangelo as an eccentric who functioned outside the bounds of standard society—an interpretation that has dominated the field for more than one hundred years. Michelangelo was quite the contrary.
Chapter 1

The Noble Origins of the Buonarroti Family and their Descent into the *Poveri Vergognosi*

Michelangelo was born Michelagnolo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni. He came from a distinguished lineage that afforded him a place among Florence’s nobility, referred to as the *uomini di stato* and the *uomini di bene* (good people). Its most famous families included the Albizzi, Strozzi, Pazzi, Alberti, and Rucellai, just to name a few. Only *cittadini* (official citizens of Florence) were admitted into this class. The *cittadini* were those individuals who could boast a long *consorto* (patrilineal lineage) and service to the Republic, whether in public office or in defense of the state.

Florence’s nobility was not an aristocracy, but rather a patriciate, because it functioned within a republic, which operated as an oligarchy. No official titles of nobility were conferred upon its members by the state. To do so would have been to formally rank certain families higher than others and to give the former precedent to claim the right to rule over the others. In this sense, it was an open aristocracy. Prestige within this group was accorded to families based on their wealth and their participation in the Republic’s governing body. The holders of public office were rewarded with a modest salary during their time of service. The *uomini di stato* earned their wealth, instead, through trade, for Florence was (and is) a merchant economy. And, in such an economy wealth naturally played a particular role in social prestige. Florence’s elite was, in fact, a merchant elite, not a landed gentry, although many members of the *uomini di stato* also owned country estates in addition to their townhouses in Florence’s city proper. The majority of the city’s members of the *uomini di stato* had made their fortunes and achieved social prominence
through trade or banking, and continued to operate their family businesses over many

generations.\textsuperscript{30}

Only the \textit{cittadini} were eligible to hold office. Their names were drawn at random to fill
the public offices. The Simoni, as the Buonarroti were called until Michelangelo’s adulthood,\textsuperscript{31}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{30}] Gene Brucker, “The Economy,” in \textit{The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence} (Princeton,
N.J.: Princeton University, 1977), 51–88; and Samuel Kline Cohn, \textit{The Laboring Classes in
  \item[\textsuperscript{31}] Until Michelangelo became famous, his family had used variants of what would eventually
become the surname by which we know the clan: Buonarroti Simoni. They signed their letters to
each other with variations on this surname, including Buonarotta, Buonarroti, and Simoni, just to
name a few. On December 3, 1547, Michelangelo, wrote to his nephew, Lionardo, evidently
responding to a question posed by the latter as to how he should sign their surname. The artist
told Lionardo that about a year earlier he had read a book written by a Florentine chronicler in
which he found the name of a certain Buonarroto Simoni, who was a member of the \textit{Signoria}, a
Simone Buonarroti, a Michele di Buonarroto Simoni, and a Francesco Buonarroti. Michelangelo
concluded that Lionardo should sign his name “Lionardo di Buonarroto Buonarroti Simoni.”

Michelangelo Buonarroti, \textit{Il carteggio di Michelangelo}, ed. Giovanni Poggi, et. al., (Florence:
mano di cronache fiorentine, dove trovai circa dugento anni fa, se ben mi ricordo, un Buonarroto
Simoni più volte de’ Signori, dipoi un Simone Buonarroti, dipoi un Michele di Buonarroto
Simoni, dipoi un Francesco Buonarroti…Però a·mme pare che tu·cti scriva: ‘Lionardo di
Buonarroto Buonarroti Simoni.’” By Michelangelo’s adulthood, the family name became
popularly known in Rome as “Buonarroti,” presumably due to Michelangelo’s own practice of
signing his surname “Buonarroti,” especially when he signed the \textit{Vatican Pietà} (1498–99) in this

had first distinguished themselves during the founding of the Republic. They were members of the Parte Guelfa,32 who had fought in the Battle of Montaperti on September 4, 1260. In this famous battle pro-Imperial Sienese Ghibelines overtook the Florentine Guelf forces, effectively conquering Florence.33

After the Guelfs reestablished the Republic, the Simoni enjoyed six continuous generations of public service in the Florentine government, beginning in 1295 when Simone di manner, a work that first brought him notoriety. In a letter he wrote to Lionardo on April 14, 1543, Michelangelo addresses this. He instructs Lionardo to address his letters to him as Michelangelo Buonarroti, not “Michelangelo Simoni,” or anything else, because in Rome his is known as “Michelangelo Buonarroti.” Ibid., 166. “E quando mi scrivi, non far nella sopra scritta: ‘Michelagniolo Simoni’, né ‘scultore’. Basta dir: ‘Michelagniol Buonarroti’, chè così son conosciuto qua. E così n’avisa il Prete.” By 1529 he signed his letters to associates using only “Buonarroti” as his surname.


33 Florentines descended from members of the Parte Guelfa were respected among the citizenry. After the Sienese defeated the Florentines at the Battle of Montaperti, Sienese Ghibelline forces ruled Florence, and a group of Florentines fled their city and lived in exile in Lucca. Combining forces with other Guelfs, these exiles retook Florence. The leaders of the exiled Florentine Guelfs reestablished the Florentine Republic. For accounts of the pride Florentines took in this history, see Leonardo Bruni, “Panegyric to the City of Florence,” in The Earthly Republic, ed. Benjamin G. Kohl, Ronald G. Witt, and Elizabeth B. Welles (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1978), 171–72; and Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, trans. Charles Eliot Norton (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952).
Buonarrota served on the Consiglio dei Cento Savi (Council of the One Hundred Wise Men). \(^{34}\) His son Buonarrota served on the Nineteen (later renamed the Sixteen) and in the Signoria as Prior. \(^{35}\) Buonarrota’s son Simone also served in the Signoria as Prior and on the Sixteen, in addition to serving on the Twelve. \(^{36}\) Simone also held seventeen internal and external offices, and three domestic offices. These included positions in the Ten of Liberty; Offices of the Sea; Condotta, which was responsible for hiring troops; Grascia, which oversaw Florence’s grain supply; and Camarlingo (Bursar) of the Prestanza. \(^{37}\) Simone’s son Buonarrota served in the Signoria as Prior, on the Sixteen, and on the Twelve. \(^{38}\) Buonarrota also served in thirteen internal offices and six minor external offices. In the former he served as Captain of the Guelf party,

\(^{34}\) See Tratte, Archivio di Stato, Florence, 59 (Priorista, 1282–1373), 50r; and 897 (Fragment, 1325–28), 6v: Hatfield, 201; Barocchi, et al., eds., Il carteggio indiretto di Michelangelo (Florence: S.P.E.S., 1988–1997), 1:X–XIII.

\(^{35}\) Tratte, Archivio di Stato, Florence, 59 (Priorista, 1282–1373), 50r; and 897 (Fragment, 1325–28), 6v. The dates of service for each position are, respectively, from 1326 to 1327 and 1343.

\(^{36}\) Tratte, 746 (Vari Uffici, 1365–69), 25r and 142r, 747 (1349–51), 41r; 750 (1355–57), 67r; 752 (1358–59), 106v; 754 (1360–61), 14r; 755 (1362–63), 19v, 45r, and 47v; 756 (1363–64), 22v; 757 (1365–66), 26v, 86r, and 115v; 758 (1366–67), 57r; 760, 11r, and 47v; 761, 199v; 762, 7r and 106r; and 763, 22v, and 103r: Hatfield, 202. The dates of service for each position are, respectively, 1355, 1366 and 1371; 1357 and 1364 to 1365; and 1357 to 1358, 1368, and 1371.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Tratte, 60 (Priorista, 1373–1458), 21r and v, 22r, 55r, 86r, and 87r; 596 (Tre Maggiori, 1381–92), 64r, 111r, and 130v; and 597 (1392–1401), 95v and 174r (Tratte, 131, 94v and 105r):
Hatfield, 202–203. The dates of service for each position are, respectively, 1390, 1397 and 1404; 1386 and 1402; and 1388 to 1389 and 1401.
Camarlingo of the Camera del Comune, Ufficio della Condotta, Ragioniere (Accountant) of the Commune, and on the Ten of Liberty, Grasia, and Abbondanza, which supervised Florence’s food supplies. Buonarrotta’s son Leonardo (Michelangelo’s grandfather) served on the Signoria as Prior and on the Twelve. Like his father and grandfather, he also held other less important positions. These included Castellano of both Donoratico and Santa Maria a Castello; podestà of Chiusi, Figline and Caprese; and member of the Ten of Liberty. Until this point, in addition to holding many minor offices, Michelangelo’s forebears were consistently given posts in the Tre Maggiori (the three major—and most prestigious—offices of the Florentine government: the Twelve, the Sixteen, and the Signoria).

Recognizing the social honor this lignaggio (lineage) afforded him within the uomini di stato, Michelangelo spoke proudly of it. In a letter dated July 1524 to Giovan Francesco Fattuci, chaplain of Santa Maria del Fiore, Michelangelo boasts that his family had been paying taxes for more than three hundred years. The number of years that a consorto had been paying taxes

---

39 Tratte, Uffici Intrinsechi, bobina 1 (Tratte, 900), 27, 33, 56, 103, 111, 269, 218, 371, 379; Tratte, 769 (Vari Uffici, 1380–81), 145v; and 771 (1386–88), 203r and 222v: Hatfield, 202–203; Barocchi, et al., eds., 1:X.

40 Tratte, 776, 177v; 778 (Vari Uffici, 1448–60), 113v; 809, 151v; 810 (Diurnale, 1418–20), 72r; and 984, 76r, 88r, and 109v: Hatfield, 203–204. The dates of service for each position are, respectively, 1456; and 1451 and 1458.

41 Ibid. The dates of service for each position are, respectively, 1415, 1418, 1425, 1451, around 1454, and 1453.

42 Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 3:89. “Abbiàno pagato trecento anni le gravezze a Firenze.” Michelangelo made this comment while referring to a tax matter with which he was dealing at the time.
defined how long its members had been *cittadini*, and, therefore, how old their *lignaggio* was. Michelangelo claims that his family had been *cittadini* since the early *duecento*. They had at least been a part of the *uomini di stato* since 1295 when Simone di Buonarrota was drawn for the Consiglio dei Cento Savi. The Simoni were distinguished members among the *popolo fiorentino* (Florentine people), and possessed the physical assets of this status: a coat of arms, an ancestral burial plot (in Santa Croce), and an ancestral estate (in Settignano).

The Simoni lost much of their wealth, and hence their prestige and relevance, during Leonardo’s lifetime. It is unclear whether he squandered the family’s money or if it had decreased gradually over the years and finally ran out during Leonardo’s adulthood. Leon Battista Alberti implies that it was relatively common for those in the *uomini di stato* who inherited their wealth to squander it, for he took the time to warn his relatives about it. In *della Famiglia*, Alberti states that inheritors of wealth pose a threat to their family’s social position because they have a tendency towards sloth and gluttony. Regardless of how the Simoni lost their wealth, Leonardo became a debtor and was, therefore, declared *a Specchio* (a tax debtor) by the Florentine government. This distinction rendered him ineligible for public office.

The Simoni were in and out of tax debt for two generations until Michelangelo restored the family’s wealth and repaid its debts. But meanwhile, the effect of being declared *a Specchio* was significant: The only important position Michelangelo’s father, Lodovico, received was a

---


44 Leonardo received the aforementioned appointments after he had been declared *a Specchio* numerous times for other offices. See Tratte, 602 (Tre Maggiori, 1435–43), 28v, 29r, and 64r (each for the Sixteen); and 603 (1444–53), 79r (for the Twelve); 604, 58v (for the Signoria): Hatfield, 204.
position on the Twelve from 1473 to 1474. After this point he was never again drawn successfully for any of the Tre Maggiori. He was elected to ten other offices (during the time periods when he was not a Specchio). None were of these posts was of real significance, however. Francesco, Lodovico’s brother, also suffered; the first four times his name was drawn for one of the Tre Maggiori he was under age, but instead of being declared ineligible for this reason, he was declared a Specchio. Like their uncle, Michelangelo and his brother Buonarroto were also drawn for one of the Tre Maggiori when they were underage, and they too were disqualified as a Specchio.

The nature of the family business, which was in small-scale money changing at interest (usury), contributed to the family’s fall into the poveri vergognosi. By the mid-trecento usury

45 Tratte, 605, 171v: Hatfield, 205.
46 These included Sindaci del Capitano, Povveditore of Or San Michele, podesà of Caprese and Chiusi, and Castellano (Keeper of the Castle) of Facciano Tratte, Uffici Intrinseci, bobina 4, 101; and bobina 7 (Tratte, 906), 224; and Tratte, 836 (Uffici Intrinseci e Estrinseci, 1513–17), 165r and 265r; Tratte, 822 (Vari Uffici, 1472–76/77), 334v (and 357v). The dates of service for each position are, respectively, 1470); 1509 to 1510; September 30, 1474 to March 29, 1475; and 1476: Hatfield, 205.
47 Tratte 603, 184v (131, 207v); 604, 51v (131, 226r); 131, 244v; 605, 121r; and 606, 2v (131, 277r) and 230r: Hatfield, 206.
48 Tratte, 606, 284r; Tratte, 820 (Vari Uffici, 1466–68), 15r, 20r, and 27r; 945 (Cittadini alle Porte, 1457–71), 22v; 946 (1476–90), 34r; and Tratte, Uffici Intrinseci, bobina 4, 37; bobina 5 (Tratte, 904), 41; and bobina 6 (Tratte, 905), 13: Hatfield, 206–207.
49 Giovanni Morelli referred to this matter in a letter he wrote to Giovansimone on August 25, 1509. He writes: “Simone mio, sono sano, Iddio lodato: il simile istimo di tutti voi, a d Dio
was banned and usurers were precluded from holding important offices.\textsuperscript{50} Usury had become a damnable business among the \textit{uomini di stato}, for it offended their codes of \textit{virtù}. It was a sin according to Catholic canon law, but the Florentine government only at this point began enforcing it because at last it now longer needed to use moneylenders for its own funding. Prior to the mid-	extit{trecento} the Florentine government funded itself by borrowing at interest from its \textit{cittadini}. After this point it funded itself through a public debt, the \textit{Monte}, which it created using tax revenue. Paolo da Certaldo (c.1320–c.1370), a Florentine merchant and moralist, explains: “Usury is certainly destructive … just as it ruins the goods and honor of the world, so it corrupts the body and soul.”\textsuperscript{51} Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli (1371–1444), a Florentine merchant and diarist,}

\textsuperscript{50} See Lawrin D. Armstrong, \textit{Usury and Public Debt in Early Renaissance Florence: Lorenzo Ridolfi on the Monte Comune} (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2003); for a short account of the Florentine government’s attitude toward usury in the \textit{trecento} see Marvin B. Becker, “Three Cases Concerning the Restitution of Usury in Florence,” \textit{The Journal of Economic History} 17, no. 3 (Sept. 1957): 445–450; and Hatfield, 206–08.

\textsuperscript{51} Paolo da Certaldo, \textit{Libro di buoni costumi}, ed. Alfredo Schiaffini (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1945), 185. “Quella cosa che molto guasta…questa sì è l’usura; e come guasta l’averre e l’onore del mondo, così guasta l’anima e’l corpo.” For a more detailed discussion of Florence’s social
concurred, stating that nothing was more damaging to one’s honor and good name than usury. It is likely that the Simoni left the business because of the government’s crackdown on Catholics practicing usury. It is unclear what other business opportunities the family engaged in after this point. It is clear, however, that Michelangelo’s father, Lodovico never had a profession. Instead, he lived off the miniscule income he earned from rented properties that he inherited, and the occasional income he received the few times he held a government post.

And so, we see that Michelangelo was thus born into a family with a conflicted social identity due to lost wealth and the corresponding fall in status. In the next chapter, I will explore how during his adult life Michelangelo dealt with this poverty and compromised social position.


53 Hatfield, 204–208.
Chapter 2

Poverty as Performance

In the eighth chapter of his book *The Wealth of Michelangelo*, Rab Hatfield discusses the artist’s curious relationship with his fortune. Michelangelo was superbly wealthy for his era; by the time he died at age eighty-eight, he owned an estate worth in excess of f24064.54 In property alone, he had acquired f12239.5 worth of farmland and townhouses.55 To put this amount in perspective, Hatfield points out that Eleonora di Toledo (1522–62), consort of Cosimo I de’ Medici (1519–74), Grand Duke of Tuscany, purchased the Palazzo Pitti in 1539 for f9000,56 Michelangelo had f9985 in liquid capital at the time of his death—at a time when f1000 was considered to be a fortune. He had become well-off financially by the age of thirty-one in 1506 at which point he possessed enough capital to purchase his first piece of property.57

54 Ibid., 473–477, no 15. f is the symbol for Florins. It is defined here as large gold florins or florins worth seven lire.
55 Ibid., 175.
57 Hatfield, 428: F3. The property was a farm located in an area referred to as Capiteto, which is located just beyond the southern border of the village Pozzalatico, five miles south of Florence. Michelangelo’s father, Lodovico, purchased the property on Michelangelo’s behalf on January 27, 1506. Lodovico was Michelangelo’s primary agent in the acquisition of most of the artist’s properties until the former’s death in 1530.
In this chapter Hatfield describes a man who had assiduously amassed a fortune, yet lived in the style of a pauper. He cites Lodovico’s letter from February 14, 1500, addressed to his twenty-five-year-old son. In it Lodovico reproaches him for not having any bread to eat and tells him to eat more.\(^5\) Hatfield also refers to a letter dated ten months later on December 19, 1500. In it Lodovico lectures his son for living in miserable conditions; he had just received this unfavorable report from his other son Buonarroti who had recently returned to Florence after visiting the artist in Rome.\(^5\) Hatfield paints the portrait of a miser—a man who upon receiving a letter from Buonarroti requesting financial assistance for himself and his father tartly replies, “If I had [money], I should assist in my own case, in which much more is involved,”\(^6\) and a man who during the last years of his life, at the height of his wealth, genuinely advised his young


\(^5\) Hatfield, 187. “Bonarroto mi dicie chome tu vivi chostì chon grande masserizia o vero miseria. La masserizia è buona, ma la miseria è chattiva, però che è vizio che dispiacie a·Dio e alle gienti del mondo, et inoltre ti farà male all’anima et al chorpo; e mentre se’ giovane sopporterai qualche tempo chotesto disagio, ma chome mancha la virt[ù] della giovanezza, si schuopre poi delle malattie et infermità che·ssi sono inf[g]ienerate per chotesti disagi et per vivere male et chon miseria. Chom’è detto, la masserizia è buona; ma soprattutto non fare miseria: vivi moderatamente et fa’ di none stentare.” Buonarroti, *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, 1:9.

nephew, Lionardo, to marry a poor girl. Michelangelo’s particular relationship with his wealth begs further investigation; he grew up moderately, purposely sought to enrich himself from a young age, and on numerous occasions pocketed money from the funds designated by patrons for the overhead on his projects (discussed in more detail later). On surface, Michelangelo appears to be a miser as Hatfield concludes.

Hatfield persuasively concludes that Michelangelo sought to amass a great fortune for his descendants, but this conclusion does not go far enough. I would take it a step further to argue that Michelangelo did so so that the Buonarroti Simoni family would regain full membership in

61 Michelangelo made this comment numerous times during the 1540s and 1550s. The following are three samples: “Io credo che in Firenze sia molte famiglie nobile e povere, che sarebbe una limosina a’mparentassi con loro, quando bene non vi fossi dota, perché non vi sarebbe anche superbia. Tu ài bisogno d’una che stia teco e che tu gli possa comandare, e che non voglia stare in su le pompe e andare ogni di a conviti e a nozze; perché dove è corte, è facil cosa diventar puctana, e massimo chi è senza parenti.” Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 310. (Letter is dated February 1, 1549.) “A me pare, quando si trovassi una fanciulla nobile, bene allevata e buona e poverissima, che questa sarebbe, per istare im pace, molto a proposito: torla senza dota, per l’amore di Dio; e credo che in Firenze si truovi simil cose: e questo a me piacerebbe molto, acciò che tu non ti obrigassi a pompe e a pazzie, e che tu fussi ventura a altri, come altri è stato a te. Ma tu·cti truovi richo, e non sai come.” Ibid., 4:365. (Letter is dated June 28, 1551.) “…e ingegniati di trovare una di sorte che non si vergogni, quando bisogni, di rigovernar le scodelle e l’altre cose di casa, a ciò che tu non t’abbi a consumare im pompe e im pazzie. Io intendo che in Firenze è gran miseria, e massimo ne’ nobili; però, non guardando a dota, io credo che si possa trovar cosa al proposito…” Ibid., 375. (Letter is dated April 23, 1552.)

the Florentine patriciate. His letters, after all, reveal a preoccupation with promoting the social fact that he was a nobleman, and more importantly, a nobleman by birth. “It is well-known,” Michelangelo reminded the young Lionardo in a letter dated February 1, 1549, “that we are old Florentine citizens [cittadini] and as noble as any other family.” The Florentine cittadini were the city’s residents who possessed citizenship, and therefore the right to hold office in the city government. They enjoyed elevated status among the city’s populous, and many of them ranked among the oldest—and most prestigious—families in Florence. Michelangelo expressed concern that his family keep up the appearance of nobility: in a letter dated December 4, 1546, Michelangelo instructed Lionardo to “get [their brother] Gismondo to return to live in Florence, so that it should no longer be said here [Rome], to my great shame, that I have a brother at Settignano who trudges after oxen.”

Michelangelo sought to reestablish his family among the uomini di stato, and used his wealth to do so. For the last three decades of his life, for example, Michelangelo lived exclusively in Rome, yet he sent Lionardo to purchase a palazzo for the family in Florence, specifically in Santa Croce, the family’s ancestral neighborhood. “…you should seek to buy an imposing house,” Michelangelo instructed Lionardo in the same letter, “…because an imposing house in the city redounds much more to one’s credit, because it is more in evidence than farmlands, since

---


64 Buonarroti, The Letters of Michelangelo, 2:64; “…e che Gismondo torni abitare in Firenze, acciò che con tanta mia vergogna non si dica più qua che io ò un fratello che a Sectigniano va dietro a’ buoi.” Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 4:249.
we are, after all, citizens descended from a very noble family.” He kept up appearances in many ways: as a landed gentleman with fifty-six acres of farmland composing a unified landmass of 755 meters by 515 meters (this rural estate was worth only £212.5 less than the Medici estate at Careggi), as the financier of wool businesses for his brothers and nephew, as the owner of a

65 Michelangelo Buonarroti, _The Letters of Michelangelo_, 2:64. (Letter is dated December 4, 1546.) “…cioè che cerchiate di comperare una casa che sia onorevole… perché una casa onorevole nella cicità fa onore assai, perché si vede più che non fanno le possessione, e perché noi sià(n) pure cicitadini discesi di nobilissima stripe.” Buonarroti, _Il carteggio di Michelangelo_, 4:249.

66 Hatfield, 113–114; for a nineteenth-century tax record of the properties Michelangelo acquired (his descendants neither sold nor purchased any property until the mid nineteenth century) see Ibid., 311–316.

67 Ibid., 105–107. Michelangelo financed Lionardo’s share of £1600 in a partnership with Matteo Quercetani on January 24, 1548, for opening the firm “Lionardo Buonarroti and Co., _lanaiuoli_.

By the year 1500, Michelangelo began thinking about setting up Buonarroto and Giovansimone in a wool business. In May 1505, he invested £100 for Buonarroto to partner with Lorenzo Strozzi, and gave Buonarroto more on January 12, 1514. Ibid., 506: Pr12, AB, 38, 100b–102a.

“Circha al fatto de’ danari che·ttu vuoi porre in su ’n’ una abottegha a Bonarroto e a Gian Simo[ne], io ò ciercho e tuttavia ciercho.” (Letter is dated December 19, 1500 addressed to Michelangelo from Lodovico.) Buonarroti, _Il carteggio di Michelangelo_, 1:9. De’ casi della boctega io son d’animo di fare tanto quanto v’ò promesso, chome torno costà; e benché io abi scrito che adesso si comperi una possessione, io son d’animo anchora di far la boctega, perché finendo qua, e risquotendo quello che io resterò avere, ci sarà per fare quello v’ò promesso. Del trovar tu ora chi ti vole mectere in mano dua o tre mila ducati larg[h]i e che tu facci una boctega,
palazzo in Florence,\textsuperscript{68} as a Roman patrician with a well-appointed townhouse in Rome,\textsuperscript{69} and as a bon vivant with a fondness for fine things—he owned a horse (a luxury even among the
\begin{quote}
questa è migliore borsa che la mia. Parmi che tu accecti a ogni modo…” Ibid., 123. (Letter is dated January 10, 1512.) E’ quarto ciento ducati che voi avete di mio, voglio che si dividin in quattro parte e che e’ ne tochi ciento per uno; e così ve gli dono: ciento a·ILodovicho, ciento a·cte, cento a Giovan Simone e ciento a Gismondo; chon questo, che voi non possiate farne altro che tenergli insieme in sulla boctega.” Ibid., 143. (Letter is dated July 30, 1513.) For additional examples see Barocchi, et al., eds., 1:33–35, 1:86–88, and 1:33.
\end{quote}
\textsuperscript{68} On March 9, 1508, Michelangelo purchased three adjacent townhouses on Via Ghibellina in Florence. One townhouse had a loggia and a courtyard, another had a well, and another had a stable. The combined price of all three properties was f1050 larghi di grossi (approx. f882). His family moved into the townhouses during the year 1508. Hatfield, 454–458, no. 1; 460–461, no. 4; 432.
\textsuperscript{69} Michelangelo bought a house in Marcel(lo) de’ Corvi in Rome in 1532. Michelangelo wrote of the property to his nephew on October 4, 1550: “Credo sapra’ in Roma trovar la casa, cioè a·rriscontro a Santa Maria del Loreto, presso al Marcello de’ Corvi.” Buonarroti, \textit{Il carteggio di Michelangelo}, 4:354. It was the only property he owned outside of Florentine territory. It was located across from the Church of Santa Maria di Loreto, and had a vegetable garden. He began living there in 1513 when Cardinal Leonardo Grosso della Rovere loaned it to the artist as his lodging and workspace for Julius II’s tomb. The Cardinal was one of Pope Julius II’s nephews and one of the executors of his will. Sebastiano del Piombo wrote to Michelangelo about the townhouse on July 22, 1531: “Et credo che de lui se ne faria quello se volesse; ma trovai messer Hieronimo Ostacoli alquantro bravo, et disse: ‘Io so molto meglio de vui quello vorebbe Michelangelo.’ Et me disse: ‘Michelagniolo voria vender la casa, et de quelli denari abréviar
nobility), and high-quality shirts and doublets. Hatfield’s research on Michelangelo’s wealth has made a significant early contribution to the study of Michelangelo’s nobility. However, Hatfield’s conclusion Michelangelo was a miser misses the mark. It appears more accurate to conclude that it was a part of his scheme to reestablish his family within the *uomini di stato*.

Michelangelo was concerned in other ways with reasserting his family among the *uomini di stato*. This includes one of the most significant revisions Condivi made to Vasari’s biography of Michelangelo. Condivi’s version of Vasari’s account of Michelangelo’s donation to the chiesa del Carmine in May 1538 was altered by Condivi to reflect Michelangelo’s actual death date, which was in April 1564:

> L’opera et finirla come a lui paresse: dil che non è honesto. Lui ha avuto dieci milla ducati; cominci a spendere de quelli, et vedasi che l’opera vada inanti, che in ultimo, quando si vederà che l’opera sia in termine che si venda la chasa per questo effecto, la si venderà.”

Ibid., 3:317.

---


— to introduce it with a long, detailed account of Michelangelo’s noble ancestry. Condivi states in the preface of his biography that he wrote his version to correct the errors he perceived to be in

72 Condivi writes: “Michelagnolo Buonarroti, pittore e scultore singolare, ebbe l’origin sua da’ conti da Canossa, nobile ed illustre famiglia del territorio di Reggio si per virtù propria ed antichità, si per aver fatto parentado col sangue imperiale. Perciocchè Beatrice, sorella d’Enrico II, fu data per moglie al conte Bonifazio da Canossa, allora signor di Mantova, donde ne nacque la contessa Matilda, donna di rara e singular prudenza e religione: la quale, dopo la morte del marito Gottifredo, tenne in Italia, oltre a Mantova, Lucca, Parma e Reggio e quella parte di Toscana, che oggi si chiama il patrimonio di San Piero: ed avendo in vita fatte molte cose degne di memorie, morendo fu sepolta nella Badia di San Benedetto fuor di Mantova, la quale ella aveva fabbricata e largamente dotana. Di tal famiglia adunque, nel 1250 venendo a Firenze per podestà un messer Simone, meritò per sua virtù d’esser fatto cittadino di qualla terra e capo di sestiere; chè in tante parti allora era la città divisa, essendo oggi in quartieri.” Condivi, Vita di Michelangiolo, 25–27. Vasari introduces his first and second editions almost identically. His changes are minor, mostly the addition of exclamatory adjectives. Vasari begins both versions by exclaiming Michelangelo’s artistic talent—one sent from God and enlightened by Giotto and his school. For both versions see Vasari, Le vite, 3. The following is the beginning of his second edition: “Mentre gl’industriosi et egregii spiriti col lume del famosissimo Giotto e de’ seguaci suoi si sforzavano dar saggio al mondo del valore che la beignità delle stelle e la proporzionata mistione degli umori aveva dato agli ingegni loro, e, desiderosi di imitare con la eccellenza dell’arte la granezza della natura per venire il più ch’è’ potevano a quella somma cognizione che molti chiamano intelligenza, universalmente, ancora che indarno, si affaticavano, il benignissimo Retore del cielo volse clemente gli occhi alla terra, e veduta la vana infinità di tante fatiche, gli ardentissimi studii senza alcun frut|II.”
Vasari’s account. His comment implies that his preface is his thesis, and that the remainder of his account argues for Michelangelo’s nobility. A look at Michelangelo’s letters from his early adulthood in the 1490s throughout the remainder of his life reveals that his concern with asserting his noble birth began early and remained unwavered. Considering the attention he paid to his noble origins, it seems that Michelangelo’s objective in enriching himself was to use his fortune to reestablish his family among the Florentine *uomini di stato*.

Michelangelo’s stated his objective to be the restoration of his *casa*: “I have always striven to resuscitate our house,”73 Michelangelo stated in a letter dated December 4, 1546. “But,” he added, “I have not had brothers worthy of this.” Clearly the resuscitation of his house, as he calls it, was a personal goal for Michelangelo. Could there be a more complex reason than miserliness that Michelangelo was so concerned with enriching himself? Could his apparent penchant for living in the style of a pauper be a misinterpretation of the condition in which the *poveri vergognosi* lived, interpreting it to be *egestas*? Despite the entrenched perception, there is reason to believe that Michelangelo was not so much living in the style of a pauper as he was cultivating the impression that he was living moderately. This is because, as will be discussed below, nobility involved much more than the outward display of wealth. A strong component of nobility was behavioral with a moralistic code in which, despite wealth, modesty was central.

Michelangelo did live in the style of a pauper when he was a young aspiring artist. We learn that six years after Lodovico admonished Michelangelo for not feeding himself well, Michelangelo was still living poorly: on December 19th of that year Michelangelo wrote to his brother Buonarrotto that their brother Giovansimone should not visit him in Bologna, where the artist was

working at the time, because he had only bought one bed and four people were sleeping on it. Lodovico’s admonition implies that Michelangelo possessed the means to live better, but that he chose to live as a pauper anyway. Once Michelangelo began to accumulate real wealth, however, he began to focus on living in the style of a nobleman. The following comment typifies Michelangelo’s attitude by this time towards money and lifestyle: “I’m thinking of using up the little [money] I have on hostries,” he wrote to Luigi del Roccio in November 1545, “rather than staying cooped up like a beggar in Rome.” Michelangelo lived nearly ninety years; naturally, his attitude towards money evolved over the years as his circumstances changed. As an ambitious artist looking for success he sacrificed earthly pleasures to save money, and did so for the sake of his family. Once he achieved success, however, he became concerned with keeping up appearances.

Aside from the parsimony Michelangelo practiced as a young artist, and the complaining letters he wrote as an elderly man, the idea of Michelangelo’s self-denying style of living, and

74 Michelangelo writes: “De’ casi del venire qua Giovan Simone, non ne lo consiglio anchora, perché son qua in una cactiva stanza, e o comperato uno lecto solo, nel quale stiàno quarto persone, e non arei el modo accectarlo come si richiede.” Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 1:19. Michelangelo added that Giovansimone should wait until the artist had cast the bronze statue of Julius II at which point the former said he would send Giovansimone a horse, so that he does not arrive like a vagabond: “Ma sse llui ci vuole pure venire, aspecti che io abbi gictata la figura che io fo, e rimanderonne Lapo e Lodovicho che m’aiutano, e manderogli un cavallo acciò che e’venga, e non com’una bestia.” Ibid. A horse was a great luxury item during this time period when all but the wealthy traveled by donkey. By this point in time, Michelangelo clearly wanted to cultivate the patrician image of the Buonarroti.

75 Quirini, 160–163.
interpretations associated with it, come from the stories Vasari and Condivi relate, not from Michelangelo’s own words. These stories include the aforementioned tale of a more robust Michelangelo who would sometimes leave his boots on for days at a time. Condivi adds the flair that when he did finally take them off, Condivi notes that his skin came off with them, “like a snake’s.” Their stories have been looked to over and over again by scholars attempting to document the life of the artist and to understand his personality and habits. This is only to be expected since both writers knew Michelangelo personally. It is difficult to argue against their veracity, especially when Condivi quotes Michelangelo, as he does here: “Ascanio, however rich as I may have been, I have always lived like a poor man.” Characterizations like these made by Vasari and Condivi have been interpreted as evidence of his eccentricity and miserliness. However, when interpreted within the specific context of the social culture of the Florentine patriciate, they must be read differently. Vasari and Condivi wrote their biographies with the intent of honoring Michelangelo, and they knew that Michelangelo was both an artist and a nobleman—two divergent identities. In order to compose tributes to his life and his achievements, Vasari and Condivi had to demonstrate that Michelangelo was an exceptional man. They would have had to do so by showing that he exemplified the character traits regarded in a man of his social station: they would have sought to show that he exemplified the virtù demanded of a member of the uomini di stato, for whom a detailed and specific code of mores governed them.

76 See footnote 9.


78 These “codes” will be discussed throughout this thesis. For a collection of Renaissance Italian humanist treatises on nobility that discuss these “codes,” see Rabil.
“A nobility that has arisen out of poverty is preferable to a nobility based on wealth,” proclaims Lionardo of Chios (c. 1395–1459), a humanist born of humble parents, in his treatise *On True Nobility Against Poggio*. His comment concisely summarizes the definition of nobility given by many other writers in their treatises on the topic. Carlo Marsuppini (1398–1453), a humanist born into a noble family in Arezzo, explains this preference in a poem:

The falsely noble conspicuously displays in his foyers statues of his ancestors, sculpted from marble, and recites at great length their wonderful deeds.

I beg you, Muse, let me not be noble like him. No more than I should be mockingly compared to Tantalus. But let me be poor like Fabricius, Curius.

The authors are saying that nobility in its true form is not about expensive possessions, nor is it about living lavishly; in its true form, nobility is a way of thinking, and a way of conducting oneself in a virtuous manner. They imply that nobility in its ideal form is based entirely on virtù. In practice, however, nobility was based, most often, on wealth and lignaggio. Although virtù came second to wealth, it remained an important component of nobility. To put it in another way, wealth admitted a person into the upper strata of society, but virtù supported one’s case for deserving to be a part of this society.

Poverty here, of course, does not suggest egestas, but rather living below the standard expected of one’s social station. Therefore, when Condivi offers Michelangelo’s statement, “I

---


have always lived like a poor man,” he does not suggest that the artist suffered from *egestas* (lack of food), but rather that he lived moderately for a person of the *uomini di stato*. When it came down to practice, wealth was an important component of the conception of nobility among the *popolani*. The authors, however, remind their readers that this was a corrupted form of nobility. By arguing that nobility should arise from poverty, they imply that men should strive for nobility through the virtuousness of their character, not through the splendor of their possessions. Condivi, therefore, argues that Michelangelo fulfilled a true requirement of nobility.

The virtue of moderation was particularly important in Florentine patrician codes of decorum. While no such written code existed [with the exception of etiquette manuals, such as Giovanni della Casa’s *il Galateo* (1550)], it did exist ideologically in the behavior members of the *uomini di stato* demanded of each other. Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444), a celebrated Florentine humanist, observes that moderation was taken seriously: “So we see that in the beginning Florence observed a principle of great wisdom: Do nothing for ostentation nor allow hazardous useless display, but instead use great moderation and follow solid proportion.”

81 Bruni, “Panegyric to the City of Florence,” 136–137.
kingly expense they build bedrooms with regal furnishings, couches everywhere, dining halls and eating halls, vaulted storerooms...they wish to show off all they possess through vanity.82

Landino’s comments imply numerous things: that the older families lived moderately; that the Florentine uomini di stato felt the difference between true, old nobility and the pretended nobility of the gente nuova (nouveaux riches); and that the uomini di stato resented wealth when it was not accompanied with moralistic behavior. It follows that by reporting that Michelangelo lived modestly, Condivi presents him as a man from the old nobility.

Let us explain these last two points by returning to Michelangelo’s advice that Lionardo should find a bride from a noble, but poor, family.83 In his discussion of this comment, Hatfield disregards the word “noble” and emphasizes the word “poor.” Given that Michelangelo was raised with the values of the uomini di stato, his advice reads not as that of a miser, but as that of a nobleman trying to ensure that his nephew finds a virtuous noblewoman to marry. He explains this reasoning in the same letter: she will be humble and demand little materially. In a letter dated May 2, 1549, Michelangelo expressed similar concern that Lionardo should avoid marrying an ostentatious woman: “I’m apprehensive about the airs and graces which this sort of family looks for.”84

Michelangelo did, in fact, live as Condivi presented him: modestly. In 1513 Bernardino di Pier Basso, the son of one of Michelangelo’s servants, planned to travel to Rome, and he had arranged to stay with the artist. Michelangelo agreed, but wrote to Lodovico to warn Basso that


83 See footnote 61.

84 Buonarroti, The Letters of Michelangelo, 2:108.
he lived simply and preferred it that way.\footnote{Ibid., 84. (Letter is dated January 5, 1513). “It is true that I live simply in my own house and intend to do so; tell him this, and not to delay; and if after a week he does not like my way of living, he can return home and I will give him enough money to return.”} Basso would have had reason to expect to live well with Michelangelo. By this time, Michelangelo’s wealth would have been visible, for he had already acquired the vast majority of lands that were to compose his estate at Settignano. Michelangelo was wealthy by this point in time; according to Rab Hatfield, the artist was saving at an annual rate of £1390.\footnote{Hatfield, 227.}

If we take my theory that Condivi connects Michelangelo’s performance of modesty with the 	extit{uomini di stato} code of decorum as plausible, then perhaps other behaviors described by Condivi that are generally interpreted as peculiar may also be viewed differently. It may be that some of the stories that for the modern reader paint Michelangelo as an eccentric are less mimetic presentations of fact and more metaphorical in nature. Like the story of modesty, they may be designed to demonstrate that Michelangelo exemplified the 	extit{virtù} demanded of members of the 	extit{uomini di stato}. These behaviors include his unmentioned sex life, his tendency to play the victim, and his defense of the Florentine Republic against the Medici family.

The lack of information about Michelangelo’s sexual life in Condivi’s biography is well-known, but also a bit unusual.\footnote{Vasari does not mention Michelangelo’s sexual life either.} While there is considerable primary source information regarding many other aspects of his life, little new data is available regarding this topic. What there is consists of poems to and a few letters from the Roman patrician Tommaso de’ Cavalieri, which
have prompted speculation that Michelangelo was in love with the young man.\footnote{See Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Love Sonnets and Madrigals to Tomasso de’ Cavalieri*, trans. and ed. Michael Sullivan (London: P. Owen, 1997).} There is also Condivi’s comment in which he defends Michelangelo against any speculation that he was homosexual: “He has also loved the beauty of the human body as one who knows it extremely well, and loved it in such a way as to inspire certain carnal men, who are incapable of understanding the love of beauty except as lascivious and indecent, to think and speak ill of him.”\footnote{Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, 105. “Ha eziandio amata la bellezza del corpo, come quello che ottimamente la conosce; e di tal guisa amata, che appo certi uomini carnali, e che non sanno intendere amor di bellezza se non lascivo e disonesto, ha pôrto cagione di pensare e di dir male di lui…” Condivi, *Vita di Michelangiolo*, 149–150.} The absence of concrete evidence about his sexual life should be put into context: for example, there is little primary information about other artists, such as Raphael and Florentine artist Benvenuto Cellini, yet specific details about their sexual lives have been recorded. Vasari, in his biography of Raphael, attributes the artist’s death to his supposedly insatiable amorous appetite.\footnote{See Giorgio Vasari, “Raffaello da Urbino (Raffaello Sanzio): Painter and Architect,” in *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, ed. Philip Jacks (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 296.} Legal documents demonstrate that Cellini was convicted of sodomy under the jurisdiction of the same man who had tried to persuade Michelangelo to join his court: Cosimo I.\footnote{See Benvenuto Cellini, *My Life*, ed. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter E. Bondandella (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 2002). Cellini eventually married. Also see Margaret A. Gallucci, “Cellini’s Trial for Sodomy: Power and Patronage at the Court of Cosimo I,” in *The
Although there are numerous plausible reasons why Michelangelo’s sexual life remains speculative, one may be the difference between their respective social stations: all three were artists, but only Michelangelo was a patrician. The absence of information may relate to the ideal of moderation. Leonardo of Chios stated clearly that an appetite for sex is a vice. He explains why: “The noble person will so fill his mind with virtue, will so regulate the actions of his body, that he will offend no one … What is more beautiful, what is more worthy, than that the noble not deviate by word or deed from the right path? That he not be inflamed by appetite for sex? … vices are a sickness of souls. For this reason, one who desires to be noble must be called back to moderation.” This would explain Condivi’s aforementioned defense of Michelangelo against any deviant sexual behavior.

The penchant for playing the victim that Condivi attributes to Michelangelo has been a source for the more modern interpretation of Michelangelo as melancholic. One of Condivi’s most famous accounts of Michelangelo in the role of victim is his tale that Bramante attempted to destroy Michelangelo’s career by convincing Pope Julius II to have the sculptor paint the Sistine ceiling. Condivi accuses Bramante of doing so in order to further Raphael’s career. The two


92 Leonardo of Chios, 114–115.

93 Ibid.

94 Condivi, Vita di Michelangiolo, 76–77. “Poiché ebbe finita quest’opera, se ne venne a Roma; dove volendo papa Giulio servirsì di lui, e stando pur in proposito di non far la sepoltura, gli fu messo in capo da Bramante e da altri emuli di Michelagnolo, che lo facesse dipingere la volta della capella di papa Sisto Quarto, ch’è in palazzo, dando speranza che in ciò farebbe miracoli. E tale ufficio facevano con malizia, per ritrarre il papa da cose di scultura; e perciocchè tenevano
artists rivaled each other for the Pope’s favor, and Condivi claims that since Michelangelo was unpracticed in painting, Bramante believed that should Michelangelo attempt to paint the ceiling, he would fail, thereby falling out of favor with the Pope. In turn Raphael would gain the Pope’s preference because he would paint it with the utmost skill.

Dante’s *Convivio IV* has been summarized with this remark: “The man filled with his mission to proclaim and defend a true conception of nobility is not only one who is suffering exile, but one who has been wounded to the quick, one who…looks around him and sees all his ideals scorned.”95 Playing the victim, in other words, is a performance of nobility. Evidence presented by Charles Robertson indicates that Condivi heavily modified the tale. Robertson argues that Bramante actually helped Michelangelo with the project by instructing him on how to

---

paint architecture *trompe l’œil* using his, Bramante’s, favorite technique. From his analysis of the ceiling’s architectural details, Robertson concludes that the artist used the technique Bramante developed. Still, Condivi presents Bramante as an evildoer. The question is why? If one reads Condivi’s biography less as a log of facts about the artist’s daily life, but instead as a tribute, designed to confirm that the artist deserved his place among the nobility, then the answer is clear. It should also be said then that the inaccuracy of this story must also cast doubt on many of the stories in Condivi’s biography.

Another aspect of Michelangelo’s life that is sometimes seen as peculiar because of Condivi’s account is his defense of the Florentine Republic against Medici influence. This story, however, is perhaps his strongest statement testifying to Michelangelo’s nobility. The members of the Florentine *uomini di stato* considered defending the Republic to be the greatest act of nobility that a Florentine patrician could perform. Cristoforo Landino explains:

> You also, men of Florence, have always venerated old families, and you honor as noble the children of those who formerly filled all public offices and carried out piously, justly and with great dignity the duties of the magistracy, acting for the public good faithfully and wisely. I grant much—indeed everything—to those who have labored mightily and faced frightful dangers to deserve the best from their republic. And as for their descendants, provided they do not depart from the footsteps of their parents, but try to imitate them in every way to the extent that their strength of mind and talent permit—who will hesitate to count them among the noble?97

According to Landino’s commentary, the Florentine *uomini di stato* accorded respect and privileges to a family based on the length of its service to the Republic. *Lignaggio* was integral to the concept of nobility during the aristocratic age in Europe; service to the Republic was the Florentine particulate’s measure of this.

---


97 Landino, 205.
The honor the *uomini di stato* accorded to a family for its service in government derives from the sense of the purpose the Florentine *cittadini* believed their state had, and the role they believed they had in it. According to Leonardo Bruni they saw their state as the bastion of freedom, and their role in it as its defenders. He states that the Florentines took on the role of defender with fervor: “fired by the desire for freedom, the Florentines adopted their penchant for fighting and their zeal for the republican side, and this attitude persisted down to the present day.”

This sense of purpose derived from the belief that they were descended from the people of the Roman Republic. Bruni expresses the pride the Florentine *cittadini* felt in this supposed lineage:

> Recognize, men of Florence, recognize your race and your forebears. Consider that you are, of all races, the most renowned. For other peoples have as forebears refugees or those banished from their fathers’ homes, peasants, obscure wonderers, or unknown founders. But your founder is the Roman people—the lord and conqueror of the entire world.

Bruni continues by extolling the Romans for conquering kings and warlike nations in the name of freedom for all people, and, for good measure, resoundingly condemns empire. Bruni conveys the pride the Florentines felt in upholding the legacy of the Roman Republic:

> The men of Florence especially enjoy perfect freedom and are the greatest enemies of tyrants. So I believe that from its very founding Florence conceived such a hatred for the destroyers of the Roman state and underminers of the Roman Republic that it has never forgotten to this very day. If any trace of or even the names of those corruptors of Rome have survived to the present, they are hated and scorned in Florence.

---

98 Leonardo Bruni, “Panegyric to the City of Florence,” 151–152.

99 Ibid., 149.

100 Ibid., 151.

101 Ibid., 151.
It is with this context that Buonaccorso da Montemagno (1391/1393–1428), a Pistoian humanist born into a prominent family and later wed into the noble Florentine Manelli family, asks: “Can there be anyone so completely lacking in reason as not to characterize as most noble those whose nobility has been honored because of their services to the Republic?” It seemed obvious to him that service to the Republic was the noblest performance of virtù.

Condivi portrays Michelangelo as a true defender of the Republic through his account of Michelangelo’s refusal to help Duke Alessandro de’ Medici build a fortress. Alessandro was the first duke of Florence, and when he usurped power, he definitively ended the Republic. Condivi explains:

Michelangelo lived in extreme fear, because he was deeply hated by Duke Alessandro, a fierce and vengeful young man, as everyone knows. And there is no doubt that, if it had not been for the respect shown by the pope, he would have gotten rid of Michelangelo. All the more so since, when the duke of Florence wanted to build that fortress and had Signor Alessandro Vitelli summon Michelangelo to ride out with him to see where it could conveniently be built, Michelangelo would not go, answering that he had no such orders from Pope Clement. This made the duke very angry; so that, both for this new reason and on account of the old ill will and the natural disposition of the duke, Michelangelo was justified in being afraid. And it was certainly through the help of the Lord God that he did not happen to be in Florence at the time of Clement’s death…

---


103 Condivi, Life of Michelangelo, 67–69. “Contuttociò Michelagnolo stava in grandissima paura, perciocché il duca Alessandro molto l’odiava; giovane, come ognun sa, feroce e vendicativo. Nè è dubbio che, se non fosse stato il rispetto del papa, che e’ non se lo fosse levato dinanzi; tanto più che, volendo il duca di Firenze far quella fortezza che fece, ed avendo fatto chiamar Michelagnolo per mezzo del signor Alessandro Vitelli, che cavalcasse seco a veder dove comodamente si potesse fare; egli non volle andare, rispondendo che non aveva tal commissione...
The clearest message this statement sends is that Michelangelo stood up to a powerful ruler, risking his life in order to assert his opposition to the duke’s rule. Machiavelli explains why this act would paint Michelangelo as a defender of the Republic: “A prince is also esteemed when he is a true friend and a true enemy, that is to say, when he comes out in favor of one against another without hesitation.”\textsuperscript{104} Although Machiavelli speaks about the ideal behavior of a prince, his statement applies to Michelangelo because the qualities he mentions derive from notions of true nobility. He implies that a nobleman will be respected if he asserts his stance on an issue in the face of friend or enemy. The Medici were, indeed, true enemies of the Republic, having usurped control of the state on numerous occasions.

Condivi’s comment, quoted above, also demonstrates Michelangelo’s nobility because it presents Michelangelo as Alessandro’s social equal; no ordinary artist would have been able to behave in this manner to his social superior. In the above context it appears that this story, and others, operate as symbols for the argument that Michelangelo was his patrons’ social equal. His patrons, like the duke, who held the position of ruler, would have ranked higher than Michelangelo within the nobility, but as mutual members of the exclusive group of the nobility, they were equals.

Condivi again presents Michelangelo as a defender of the Republic with the following statement:

dapa Clengm. Di che molto si scelgnò il duca; scchè e per questo nuovo rispetto, c per la vecchia malevolenza, e per la natura del duca, meritamente avea da stare in paura. E certamente fu dal signore Iddio aiutato, che alla morte di Clemente non si trovò in Firenze…” Condivi, \textit{Vita di Michelangiolo}, 104–105.

\textsuperscript{104} Niccolò Machiavelli, \textit{The Prince}, trans. and ed. Angelo M. Codevilla (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1997), 82.
In the meanwhile, the house of the Medici was banished from Florence for assuming greater authority than is tolerable to a free city and one which is ruled as a republic. And, as the Signoria…fully expected war, they turned their attention to fortifying the city; and they made Michelangelo commissioner general over this.  

To Condivi and the Florentines, the Medici were the tyrants and the enemies of freedom of whom Bruni spoke. Michelangelo, on the other hand, was a true defender of the Republic, and, therefore, a patriot.

When the Republic was in power and safe, Michelangelo took little interest in the public offices to which he was elected, either forfeiting his appointments or taking little part in their proceedings. However, his attitude and practices in this regard had changed by the 1520s, during which time the Republic was struggling against the Medici. On January 10, 1529, Michelangelo was elected to the Office of Nine of Ordinance and Militia and served his term, which began on February 13, 1529, and lasted eight months. Michelangelo’s decision to serve shows that when the Republic came under threat from the Medici, he came to its aid. The Nine of Ordinance and Militia was an institution that only existed in Florence during the Republic. Machiavelli founded it to strengthen the city’s defenses. It operated during two periods—from 1506 to 1513 and from 1527 to 1530. While holding this post, Michelangelo was elected Governor General of Fortifications on April 6, 1529, and he served this term as well. In addition to serving the

---


106 For information on Michelangelo’s term see Tratte, *Uffici Intrinseci*, bobina 7, 134; and Tratte, 796, 33r; and 800, 47r: Hatfield, 217.
Republic in these two posts, Michelangelo had to leave Florence on two separate occasions in order to escape from the wrath of the Medici after they came to power.

Bruni eloquently summarizes the deep respect the *uomini di stato* accorded patriots, like Michelangelo. There is little wonder why considering that the continued existence of the *uomini di stato* depended on the survival of the Republic:

> Whoever fails in these expectations to live up to the brilliance of their ancestors seems to be not noble but rather notorious on account of their descent. However, just as the grandeur of the ancestors scarcely aids those who are degenerate, so this same grandeur magnifies many times those descendants who possess high and noble spirits. Indeed, as their dignity and influence grows, these men are carried up to heaven, and they are placed together with their forebears in one and the same place on account of their own virtue and because of the nobility of their ancestors. Indeed, we have seen it happen in Florence that many men stand out as examples of excellence because of their great deeds, so that it becomes very easy to recognize in them their Roman virtue and the greatness of spirit.107

Serving the Republic was held in such high esteem by the Florentine *uomini di stato* because the Republic, which had given them their power and prestige, could only survive with their active support and, when it came under military attack, their defense of the state. It is with good reason that sloth among the members of the *uomini di stato* was despised, for a strong will to survive was the only thing that could protect their way of life from the incessant onslaught of invading foreign powers and the power-hungry Medici.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that Condivi was less concerned about presenting actual facts about the artist than he was about presenting Michelangelo as worthy of a place among the *uomini di stato*. That Condivi himself was not a Florentine suggests that this emphasis in the biography likely reflects Michelangelo’s interests. It follows that it appears that Michelangelo had a hand in shaping Condivi’s account. Likewise, Michelangelo’s letters make it clear that he was deeply concerned with asserting his nobility. What role then did Michelangelo play in shaping Condivi’s account? It appears that Michelangelo did participate in its production

107 Bruni, “Panegyric to the City of Florence,” 155–156.
because his comments are transcribed in a copy of the first printing of the biography, which was owned by Florentine art historian Ugo Procacci (1905–1991). Condivi also quotes Michelangelo in his text as if he had written the biography in collaboration with the artist himself. If Michelangelo did in fact participate in the production of the biography, then he may have used it as his ricordanze through which he left a record of how he wanted to be remembered and interpreted after he died.

It is worth noting that the period during which Condivi was writing the biography coincided with the last part of Michelangelo’s life. His letters from this period show that he was preoccupied by his own mortality. Beginning in 1545 interspersed among the letters in which Michelangelo complains to or criticizes his nephew, we find frequent complaints about his health; Michelangelo had kidney stones, and spoke of suffering from terrible pain. Barely able to urinate from the burning sensation associated with his condition, Michelangelo noted that he seemed to excrete only pus.\textsuperscript{108} His poor health made him turn his attention toward his mortality: “This

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{108} Buonarroti, \textit{Il carteggio di Michelangelo}, 4: 317. (Letter is dated March 23, 1549.) He writes: “Lionardo, io ti scissi per l’ultima mia del mio male della pietra, il quale è cosa crudelissima, come sa chi l’à provato. Dipoi, sendomi stato dato a bere una certa acqua, m’à facto gictar tanta materia grossa e bianca per orina, con qualche pezzo della scorza della pietra, che io son molto meglierato…” The following three quotations are examples of similar comments Michelangelo made about his illness: “Sono stato um poco di mala voglia per non potere orinare; pure, ora sto assai bene.” Ibid., 4:304. “Circa il male mio del non potere orinare, io ne sono stato poi molto male, mugg[hi]ato di e noche senza dormire e senza riposo nessuno…” Ibid., 4:315. (Letter is dated March 15, 1549.) “Arei a scriver più cose, come ti scissi, ma lo scrivere mi dà noia, perché non mi sento bene: pure, a rispecto a quello che sono stato, mi pare essere risucitato; e perché ò
illness has caused me to think more about putting my affairs, both temporal and spiritual, in better order than I would have done, and I’ve sketched out a will that I think suitable…”

The feelings expressed here are typical of him during this period. He conveyed to his nephew his deep concern with accomplishing all that he had wanted to regarding the family’s finances and property, namely building their wealth and equity before he died. With his illness and the general decline of his health he was unable to work as he used to, so he also expressed his concern over not having an income. His complaints continued as he gradually declined in health during these last years; his curmudgeonly behavior no doubt resulted from the discomfort that he was experiencing.

cominciato a·ggictare qualche poco della pietra, ò buona speranza.” Ibid., 4:318. (Letter is dated March 29, 1549).


110 Buonarroti, The Letters of Michelangelo, 2:96. On January 18, 1549, Michelangelo wrote to Lionardo about investing in property. He added: “I am an old man, as you know, and as each hour might be my last, and as I have a certain amount of capital here, although it is not a vast amount, I should not like it to be wasted, because I earned it with much exertion.”

111 Ibid., 2:55. In November 1545 Michelangelo referred to this concern with writing to Messer Luigi del Riccio: “In another letter I wrote and told you that if you were staying long, I thought of coming to see you, and this I repeat; because, having lost the ferry at Piacenza, and being unable to remain in Rome without an income, I am thinking of using up the little I have on hostelries, rather than staying cooped up like a beggar in Rome.”
Michelangelo had reason to want to leave a ricordanze. Towards the end of his life, there were many accusations, of which he was aware, that he was avaricious. Such accusations were not to be taken lightly as the uomini di stato counted avarice as a great sin. In his book della Famiglia, Leon Battista Alberti wrote through the voice of his kinsman Giannozzo: “Let our worst enemies be avarice. There is nothing like avarice to destroy a man’s reputation and public standing.” In it Giannozzo explains why avarice was frowned upon by the uomini di stato:

What virtue is so bright and noble but that, under the cloak of avarice, it is wholly obscured and passes unrecognized. A hateful anxiety perpetually troubles the spirit of a man who is too tightfisted and avaricious. Whether he be worriedly gathering or reluctantly spending his wealth, he has always a great gnawing and heavy burden. He lives in constant torment.

We learn from the funeral oration for Michelangelo by Benedetto Varchi; the Florentine historian, poet, and friend of Michelangelo (1502/3–1565); that accusations of avarice against Michelangelo had indeed been rife, for he thought it important enough to deliver a detailed defense of Michelangelo against such accusations. Varchi defended the artist by claiming that he had left his nephew only d10000 (although this was a significant sum, it was less than half of what the artist could have given Lionardo). He adds that Michelangelo had given a gift of 2000 gold florins to a servant, which Varchi stated that the artist could have sold for hundreds of thousands of florins. Condivi characteristically offers a statement that presents Michelangelo as a person of

---

112 Alberti, The Family in Renaissance Florence, 158.

113 Ibid.

114 Benedetto Varchi, Orazione funerale di M. Benedetto Varchi fatta, e recitata da lui pubblicamente nell’essequie di Michelagnolo Buonarroti in Firenze, nella chiesa di San Lorenzo (Florence: Apresso i Giunti, 1564).

115 d is the abbreviation for ducats.
moderation: “He was never avaricious or concerned to accumulate money, being content with as much as he required to live decently.”

Alberti’s warning to his kinsmen to avoid avarice reflected the etiquette of the day. In *il Galateo*, a popular etiquette manual from the time, Giovanni della Casa wrote that it is uncouth for a man to “boast of his nobility, his titles, his riches…” He explains: “we should neither boast of our blessings nor despise them, for to boast of them is to deride their virtues. As far as possible, one should keep quiet about oneself, and if the situation forces us to speak of ourselves, then it is a pleasant habit to speak truthfully and modestly…” Avarice, in other words, was viewed as unbecoming behavior by the *uomini di stato*.

Perhaps even more important is the implication of Machiavelli’s advice in Chapter 15 of *The Prince*:

The previous suggestions [displaying a virtuous character], carefully observed, will enable a new prince to appear well established, and render him at once more secure and fixed in the state than if he had been long seated there. For the actions of a new prince are more narrowly observed than those of a hereditary one. Machiavelli implies that newcomers to the *uomini di stato* should expect to be judged more harshly than those who had long held places there. In addition, he implies that it is more important that a newcomer appear virtuous than that he actually be so. Although Michelangelo was not exactly a newcomer to the *uomini di stato*, his position was a compromised one, as


118 Ibid., 22.
already discussed. Therefore, Michelangelo would have taken accusations of avarice as serious threats to his claims of nobility for self and kin.

Michelangelo was not just concerned with asserting his nobility; he also wanted to reestablish his family’s position among the *uomini di stato*. He was concerned with this throughout his life, perhaps even before his first stroke of the chisel. In an early letter to his father, dated June 1509, when he was thirty-four years old, Michelangelo stated this ambition, declaring that any money he could earn from his artistic endeavors would go to fulfill this purpose:

> I want you to realize that all of the toil and sweat I have continually endured has been no less for your sake than for mine and that what I have bought, I have bought so that it might be yours as long as you live; because had it not been for you, I should not have bought it. Therefore, if you would like to let the house and lease the farm, do entirely as you choose; and with that income and with what I will give you, you can live like a gentleman….¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Buonarroti, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 1:51. “Io voglio che voi siate certo che tucte le fatiche che io ò sempre durate non sono state mancho per voi che per me medesimo, e quello che io ò chomperato l’ò chomperato perché e’ sia vostro i’ mentre che voi vivete; che se voi non fussi stato, non l’arei comperato. Però, quando a voi piace d’apigionare la chasa e d’afictare il podere, fatelo a vostra posta: e chon quella entrata e chon quello che io vi darò io, voi viverete com’un signiore...” Buonarroti, *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, 1:93–94. On November 23, 1516, Michelangelo again referred to how everything he did, he did for his father. He addressed this letter to Buonarroti in reference to his father being ill. Michelangelo adds that if his father should have a relapse and appear to be in danger of his life to “see that he lacks nothing for the welfare of his soul…And for the needs of the body, see that he wants for nothing; because I have never exerted myself but for him, in order to help him in his need, as long as he lives …” Buonarroti, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 1:104. “…fa’ che e’ non gli manchi niente delle cose dell’anima e de’ sacramenti della Chiesia, e facti lasciare da·llui se e’ vuole che noi facciáno cosa nessuna per
This is a powerful statement; Michelangelo implies that he strove for success in his profession in order to enrich himself, so that he could hand over the money to his family—whether in property or cash—so that his father could live like a gentleman, meaning a member of the _uomini di stato_. He saw his career as an artist as a part of his plan to reestablish his family.

There was sufficient social precedent for Michelangelo to take this task upon himself; in advising his own kinsmen on how to reestablish their _casa_, Leon Battista Alberti reminds them: “keep in mind that the first duty of the elders is to work for everyone of the house.”

Michelangelo became the patriarch of the Buonarroti _casa_, asserting greater influence over the family’s affairs as his wealth increased. Michelangelo’s 1,400 surviving letters almost always discuss family financial affairs; he was either doling out cash to his brothers or father, as he did in the previously mentioned letter, or orchestrating the family’s business ventures, whether in acquiring property, or in financing a wool business for his brothers. This role was a natural one for Michelangelo because he was the only one with wealth, and once his eldest brother took Orders, the artist became in effect the family’s eldest male child. Alberti’s comment implies that it was custom for the eldest son of the new generation of a family to assume control over the family affairs and choose the direction in which the family would go.

Michelangelo assumed the role of family patriarch early in his adulthood, and did so almost certainly because he was the only one with money. Acting in this role, he became paternalistic towards his family members, including his father. In a typical remark for the artist, Michelangelo wrote to his father on January 31, 1506: “[I will] be sending you money…for l’anima sua; e delle cose necessarie al chorpo, fate che e’ non gli manchi niente: perché io non mi sono afaticato mai se non per lui, per aiutarlo ne’ sua bisogni inanzi che lui muoia.” Buonarroti, _Il carteggio di Michelangelo_, 1:223.

---

120 Alberti _The Family in Renaissance Florence_, 39.
Michelangelo cared deeply for his family members, and, I would argue, treated his father particularly tenderly. This certainly contradicts the behavior expected of a supposed miser. This is conveyed yet again in a letter Michelangelo wrote to Buonarrotto in March of the same year: “I am very sorry to hear about it [how things are going at home], and still more so, seeing the need you are in, and particularly Lodovico, who, you write me, is in need of getting himself something to put on his back.” Michelangelo could not help them at this time, but lamented over this to Buonarrotto; he owed 140 on a shipment of marble that had recently arrived. “But,” he adds, “I hope to be rid of them [the debts] soon and to be able to help you.” Michelangelo worried much for his family members. On September 7, 1510, he wrote in great distress to his father; Buonarrotto was ill, and Michelangelo panicked: “as soon as you get this [letter], go to the spedalingo and get him to give you fifty or a hundred ducats, if you need them, and see that he is well provided with everything necessary, and that he does not lack for money.” He added that he would like to come home to be with his brother, but the Pope was out of town, and Michelangelo feared that if he were to leave without permission he would not get paid for the work he was doing at the time, that is, the Sistine Ceiling frescos. He told his father that he had written a letter to the Pontiff requesting a leave, but also stated that if Buonarrotto were to become

121 Buonarroti, The Letters of Michelangelo, 1:11, no. 6. “vi manderò danari…per voi..”

122 Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 1:12.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid., 1:57. “Però, subito visto la presente, andate allo spedalingo e fatevi dare cinquantà o ciento ducati, bixogniandovi, e fate che e’ sia provisto bene di tucte le chose necessarie e che e’ non manchi per danari.” Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 1:108.
worse, he would “ride post and will be home in two days; since men are worth more than money.”

Although Michelangelo’s personality evolved, naturally, over his eighty-nine years of life, becoming somewhat of a curmudgeon during his last decade and a half, he remained committed to providing for his family. He conveyed the same paternalistic attitude even during these last years. On January 9, 1546, for example, Michelangelo wrote to Lionardo that he had entrusted to Luigi del Riccio (d. 1546), his personal assistant, 600 gold scudi to be made payable to him, Lionardo, in Florence in order to “complete the sum of a thousand scudi I promised you.”

Michelangelo added:

Besides the above-mentioned money, I have decided to provide Giovansimone, Gismondo, and you with three thousand scudi in gold, that is a thousand to each of you, but jointly, with this proviso that the money is invested in property or in something else that will bring you in an income, and that it remains in the family. So go and see about putting it into some good sound property, and when you find something that you think suitable let me know, so that I may provide the money.

---


127 Buonarroti, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 2:56. “Io sono resoluto, oltre alli sopra detti danari, provvedere costi a Giovan Simone, Gismondo et a te scudi tre mila d’oro in oro, c[i]oè scudi mille per uno, ma a tutti insieme; con questo, che si investischino in beni stabili o in qualche altra cosa che vi porti utile e che resti alla casa. Però andate pensando di metterli in qualche cosa stabile et
These comments make it clear that Michelangelo carefully directed his family, and did so in fulfillment of his duty as patriarch.

Much has been made of the supposedly chastising tone Michelangelo took with his family, exemplified by comments like this one to Giovansimone:

… for twelve years now I have gone about all over Italy, leading a miserable life; I have borne every kind of humiliation, suffered every kind of hardship, worn myself to the bone with every kind of labor, risked my very life in a thousand dangers, solely to help my family; and now when I begin to raise it up a little, you alone must be the one to confound and destroy in one hour what I have accomplished during so many years and with such pains. By the Body of Christ, to prevent this I am ready to confound, if need be, ten thousand such as you.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Buonarroti, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 1:52. (Letter is dated June 1509.) “…e questo è che io son ito da dodici anni in qua tapinando per tucta Italia, sopportato ogni vergognia, patito ogni stento, lacerato il corpo mio in ongni faticha, messa la vita propia a mille pericoli solo per aiutar la chasa mia; e ora che io ò cominciato a·rrilevarla un poco, tu solo voglia esser quello che schompigli e·rrovini in una ora quel che i’ò facto in tanti anni e chon tanta faticha, al chorpo di Cristo, che non sarà vero! ché io sono per ischompigliare diecimila tua pari, quando e’ bisognierà.” Buonarroti, *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, 1:96. The following are additional examples: In a letter from around September/October 1521 Michelangelo writes to Lodovico: “I was amazed at your conduct the other day, when I did not find you at home; and now, when I hear that you are complaining about me and saying that I’ve turned you out…” Buonarroti, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 1:137–140. A few years earlier on September 8, 1515, Michelangelo wrote to Buonarroti: “You write me in a manner that suggests that you think that I care more for worldly things than one should. Oh come! I care for them more for your sakes than for my own, as I have always done. I do not go running after fictions and am not therefore quite crazy, as you
Removed from the context of Michelangelo as family patriarch, this comment appears to be yet another example of Michelangelo playing the victim, and of his resentful attitude toward his kin. Placed within that context, however, the statement reads differently. Alberti writes that the carefree, indulgent, and lazy attitudes, which commonly afflicted the heirs of the great fortunes in Florence had been the downfall of many families of the *uomini di stato*. Alberti credits this sinful behavior to growing up in the comfort of wealth and power. He explains: “Laziness and sloth corrupt and disgrace the family…Greedy, lascivious, wicked and proud men load the family with ill fame, misfortunes and troubles.”¹²⁹ This behavior will ruin the family, he adds.¹³⁰ He

---

concludes that it is the patriarch’s duty to correct these errors and instill in his kin industrious behavior.

Michelangelo wrote his letter to Giovansimone in reference to a report that the latter was not taking the wool business seriously. Michelangelo’s anger was not baseless. His comment is a clear statement of his goal to reestablish his family; he uses it to chastise Giovansimone because he realizes, as did Alberti, that this behavior ruins families. In writing this letter Michelangelo was not acting the part of the petulant sibling, but rather the patriarch of the House of Buonarroti.

Alberti explains that noblemen were taught to believe that the fate of their casa rested on their actions: “If anyone undertakes to investigate the nature of those things which exalt and increase the family, and to see how it is maintained at a high level of honor and happiness, he soon discovers that men are most inclined to view themselves as the cause of their own good or poor estate.” Alberti implies that the uomini di stato commonly believed that displaying virtù was the most important factor in maintaining nobility.

Alberti’s next comment seals the fate of the families who had lost status: “They will never attribute so much influence to anything as to deny, in the end, that praises, greatness, and fame are won more by character than by fortune.” Alberti implies that the uomini di stato commonly believed that displaying virtù was the most important factor in maintaining nobility.

130 “The good ones, however gentle, moderate, and humane they may be, ought to realize that if they are not also very concerned, diligent, foresightful, and active in correcting and restraining the young, when any part of the family falls, they too will be ruined.” Ibid.

131 Ibid., 26.

132 Ibid.
Lionardo of Chios affirms Alberti’s remark: “that person is said to be well-born who always follows virtue well.” Just as the lion, wolf, and fox, according to the aforementioned comment by Lauro Quirini, were given their rank in the animal kingdom for exhibiting particular character traits, so too were certain traits expected of noblemen, and these fell under the title of virtù. It was within this model of cultural attitudes that Michelangelo sought to recover his own family’s honor. It is little wonder then that he lived modestly.

And so we return to our initial point: describing Michelangelo as a miser is inaccurate. Hatfield is not alone in concluding that Michelangelo was one; this idea is common, if not to say entrenched. This impression generally derives from a reading of Michelangelo’s correspondence from the last eighteen years of his life, from 1545 to 1563. Most of Michelangelo’s letters from this period are to his nephew (his father and brother Buonarrotto had

133 Leonardo of Chios, 116.
134 Hatfield states: “A person who lives in misery because that person is very poor, is simply a miserable person. But a person who lives in misery when the person in question has the means to live very well, is by definition a miser. Michelangelo, even in 1500, had the means to live very well indeed.” Hatfield, 188.
died years earlier, and his brothers Giovansimone and Gismondo would die during this period). In these letters he often peevishly criticized his nephew for his poor handwriting, ordering him not to send him another letter until he had learned how to write. In one such example from a letter dated June 5, 1546, Michelangelo wrote testily:

And don’t write to me anymore; because every time I get a letter from you, I’m thrown into a fever, such a struggle do I have to read it. I don’t know where you learnt to write. If you had to write to the biggest ass in the world, I believe you’d write with more care.  

In other letters Michelangelo threatened to cut off his nephew financially, accusing him of only caring about him because of his money. In one such example, from a letter dated July 11, 1544, Michelangelo chastised him: “I have been ill and you have come in place of Ser Giovan Francesco, to kill me off and to see if I’ve left anything. Isn’t all that you’ve had from me in Florence enough for you?” Michelangelo certainly appears curmudgeonly in his later letters, but he was no miser, since he displayed tremendous generosity with his family.

---


137 Buonarroti, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 2:37. “…io sono stato male: e tu, a stanza di ser Giovan Francesco, se’ venuto a darmi la morte e a vedere s’i’ lasc[i]o niente. Che non à’ tanto del mio a Firenze, che ti basti?” Buonarroti, *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, 4:183. “Circa all’esser venuto a–rRoma con tanta furia, io non so se tu venissi così presto, quand’io fusi in miseria e che e’ mi mancessi il pane: basta, che tu–ggietsi via e’ danari che tu non ài guadagnati. Tanta gelosia ài di non perdere questa redità! e di’ che gli era l’obrigo tuo venirci per l’amore che mi porti: l’amore del tarlo! Se mi portassi amore, m’aresti scritto adesso: ‘Michelagnio[lo], spendete i tre mila scudi costà per voi, perché voi ci avete dato tanto, che ci basta; noi abbiam più cara la vostra
This later Michelangelo was sickly, and preoccupied with his imminent death. Perhaps Hatfield concludes that Michelangelo was a miser because it is in the letters from the last eighteen years of his life that he complains most strongly and consistently of living in misery. These comments, however, have nothing to do with money as Hatfield theorizes; they have to do with his health. (Nor do Michelangelo’s comments from the earlier period in his life support Hatfield’s theory, since his complaints from these years amount to a mere smattering, and appear in the broader context of anxiety and frustration over family financial matters.)\(^{138}\) Michelangelo’s outlook on life during this later period could hardly have been the same one he held as a robust younger man, and it is not unlike the concerns of many elderly persons then and now.

Caution must be exercised in using the letters he wrote during this period to define his character as a younger man; he had not always been a curmudgeon. This Michelangelo must be differentiated from the stronger and more active figure of the previous sixty years. It was during vita che la vostra roba’. Voi siate vissuti del mio già quaranta anni, né mai ò avuto da voi, non c[h]’altro, una buona parola.” Ibid., 4:227.

\(^{138}\) See Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 1; for one specific example see 1:52. (The letter is dated June 1509.) In this letter Michelangelo writes viciously to Giovansimone, but does so because the artist had learned that Giovansimone was mistreating their father: “…you are a brute, and as a brute I shall treat you. For your information, he who thinks fit to threaten or to strike his father is held to hazard his life. But enough—I tell you you possess nothing in this world. And if I hear the least little thing about you, I will ride post to Florence and show you the error of your ways and teach you to destroy your own belongings and to set fire to houses and farms you have earned for yourself. You are not in the position you think. If I do come home, I will give you cause to weep scalding tears, and you will learn what grounds you have for your presumption.”
the later period that Michelangelo advised his nephew: “Try to find someone [a wife] who wouldn’t be ashamed, if need be, to wash the dishes and do other things about the house, so that you do not waste money on airs and graces.”¹³⁹ The comment reveals a patriarchal concern on Michelangelo’s behalf that his family members continued to conduct themselves moderately. On its superficial level, the comment appears to be tinged with miserliness, but in the context of Michelangelo’s general behavior, it is more accurate to characterize it as curmudgeonly. This comment differs from one Michelangelo made just a few years earlier from February 21, 1549. He wrote to his nephew to oppose a match proposed for the young man on the grounds that the potential bride was of low birth: “Bartolomeo [Bartolomeo Betti, the young woman’s father] is a man of honor, able and obliging, but he is not our social equal and your sister has married into the Guicciardini family.”¹⁴⁰ The difference in tone between his letters from these two periods is distinct. In the earlier period Michelangelo revealed himself to be a gentle soul, a son completely devoted to his father. It is on this Michelangelo that our discussion will now focus.

¹³⁹ See footnote 61. (Letter dated April, 23, 1552).

Chapter 3

Biography as Performance

In the margins of Ugo Procacci’s copy of the first printing of Condivi’s widely read *Vita di Michelagnolo* are notes written by an unknown *cinquecento* hand recording Michelangelo’s comments and corrections to Condivi’s account. In one set of notes, Michelangelo makes a comment on his marble relief *Battle of the Centaurs* (1492) (fig. 3-1): “This work in my house appears to me perfect.” The statement seems peculiar; the *Battle of the Centaurs* is an early and unfinished work by the artist. At the time he produced it, Michelangelo was still working out his problems depicting human anatomy and organizing composition. Certainly, the relief exhibits the charged energy that would eventually characterize his oeuvre. It lacks, however, the refined compositional style that would become characteristic of his oeuvre in which elements are kept to a minimum. In addition, it is merely one of a handful of sculptures that Michelangelo produced in relief, all of which he executed early in his career during the period that could justifiably be labeled as his student years. This last bit of information makes his late regard for the work even more surprising.

By the time Michelangelo made this comment (at the end of his career) he had already produced the sculptures that became his most famous during his lifetime, including the *Vatican Pietà* (1497–1499) and the *David* (1501–1504). Might we not reasonably expect then that if Michelangelo were to have claimed perfection for any of his sculptures that he would have done so for one of these? Why would Michelangelo have declared *Battle of the Centaurs* perfect? Perhaps he was not referring to the physical appearance of the relief when he called it perfect, but

rather to what it conveyed about his patrician identity. The answer to this question may be found by exploring his reasons for participating in the production of Condivi’s biography.

Condivi wrote his version of Michelangelo’s life in direct response to Vasari’s biography of 1550. Vasari had written that work with a specific agenda: he hoped to attract and secure the patronage of Cosimo I, Duke of Florence (and later Grand Duke of Tuscany). Vasari even dedicated the book to the duke. With grand plans even early in his reign, Cosimo I made it the mission of his magistracy to consolidate power under the duke’s control, to strengthen the Tuscan state, and to increase the state’s influence abroad. In bringing his plan to fruition, Cosimo I had initiated a complex cultural program through which he sought to turn Florence into an elite artistic center. His initiatives included creating the position of ducal printer; establishing a program to promote vernacular Tuscan over Latin; and institutionalizing the applied arts of

---

142 Although Michelangelo authorized Condivi’s biography in order to correct the errors he perceived to be in Vasari’s account, this did not mean that the artist had a difficult relationship with Vasari. In fact, they were casual friends. Surviving correspondence between the two is courteous. A letter dated August 1, 1550, written by Michelangelo, reveals that Vasari consulted him on a project to create a tomb for Cardinal Antonio del Monte. In the same letter Michelangelo thanks Vasari for the last three letters he received from Vasari, stating that he knows not how to reply to such praises. “Circa le vostre 3 ricevute, io non ò penna da rispondere a tante altezze…” Buonarroti, *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, 4:346. On June 24, 1552, in a letter addressed to Lionardo, Michelangelo refers to a social visit he received from Vasari. “A questi dì fu qui il vescovo de’ Minerbecti, e riscontrandolo io con messer Giorgio pictore, mi domandò di te e circa al darti donna, di che ragionamo. Mi disse che avea una cosa buona da darti e che anche non s’avea a torla per l’amor di Dio…” Ibid., 4:376.
painting, sculpture, and architecture for the first time in history.\textsuperscript{143} Cosimo I achieved this last goal in 1563 through Vasari when the latter, under Cosimo I’s patronage, formed the \textit{Accademia di Disegno} by combining the \textit{Compagnia di San Luca} (Confraternity for Painters) with a never-before-seen school of design.\textsuperscript{144} Cosimo I only admitted into these groups the painters, sculptors, and architects whom he patronized. Hoping to earn Cosimo I’s favor and gain entrance into this select group of artists, Vasari carefully crafted his text to promote Cosimo I’s artistic program. And he succeeded in his goal. In 1555 Cosimo I appointed him architect of the Palazzo Vecchio, and he became one of the duke’s favorite artists. Condivi and Michelangelo may have been motivated to write an opposing version of Vasari’s \textit{Vita di Michelagnolo} because the pro-Medici script threatened Michelangelo’s social status. Cosimo I’s ducal ambitions, in other words, threatened Michelangelo’s status.

Cosimo I had tried on numerous occasions to recruit Michelangelo into his new artistic league, but Michelangelo had always refused.\textsuperscript{145} One reason for his resistance may have been


\textsuperscript{144} For more information about the history of the Florentine Academy see Karen-edis Barzman, “The Accademia del Disegno.”

\textsuperscript{145} Michelangelo sent his regrets to Cosimo I: “Signior Duca, circa tre mesi sono, o poco meno, ch’i’ feci intendere a Vostra Signoria che io non potevo ancora lasciare la fabrica di Santo Pietro senza gran danno suo e senza grandissima mia vergogna; e che a volerla lasciare nel termine
Michelangelo’s commitment to Florentine republicanism. I shall argue that Michelangelo refused
for another reason as well; membership in a professional group would have compromised his
existing social prestige. By joining Cosimo I’s system of rank as an artist, Michelangelo’s social
prestige as a member of the uomini di stato would have been compromised, and his professional
identity promoted. With his natural rank as a nobleman diminished, Michelangelo would have
appeared to be a self-made man—a man who had gained his social prestige through his artistic
accomplishments. For a man born into the nobility, who would have believed, as Lauro Quirini
explains, that he was naturally superior to other men, to be presented as a self-made man would
have been an affront to what he believed to be his God-given status.

Michelangelo’s commitment to Florentine republicanism. I shall argue that Michelangelo refused
for another reason as well; membership in a professional group would have compromised his
existing social prestige. By joining Cosimo I’s system of rank as an artist, Michelangelo’s social
prestige as a member of the uomini di stato would have been compromised, and his professional
identity promoted. With his natural rank as a nobleman diminished, Michelangelo would have
appeared to be a self-made man—a man who had gained his social prestige through his artistic
accomplishments. For a man born into the nobility, who would have believed, as Lauro Quirini
explains, that he was naturally superior to other men, to be presented as a self-made man would
have been an affront to what he believed to be his God-given status.

Michelangelo refers to a letter he received from Vasari on Cosimo I’s behalf encouraging the
artist to return to Florence. Michelangelo reiterates again that he needed to stay in Rome and
continue to work on Saint Peter’s Basilica. Michelangelo then precedes to list three reasons why
he feels that he cannot return to Florence. He then asks Vasari to send him his regards, but also
his regrets. Ibid., 5:106–106. Michelangelo again sends his regards and regrets to Cosimo I in a
letter to Vasari dated August 17, 1557. “Ringriatio quanto so e posso il Duca della sua carità, e
Dio mi dia gratia ch’i’ possa servirlo di questa povera persona, c[h]’altro non c’è.” Ibid., 118.

Michelangelo’s commitment to Florentine republicanism. I shall argue that Michelangelo refused
for another reason as well; membership in a professional group would have compromised his
existing social prestige. By joining Cosimo I’s system of rank as an artist, Michelangelo’s social
prestige as a member of the uomini di stato would have been compromised, and his professional
identity promoted. With his natural rank as a nobleman diminished, Michelangelo would have
appeared to be a self-made man—a man who had gained his social prestige through his artistic
accomplishments. For a man born into the nobility, who would have believed, as Lauro Quirini
explains, that he was naturally superior to other men, to be presented as a self-made man would
have been an affront to what he believed to be his God-given status.

Michelangelo’s commitment to Florentine republicanism. I shall argue that Michelangelo refused
for another reason as well; membership in a professional group would have compromised his
existing social prestige. By joining Cosimo I’s system of rank as an artist, Michelangelo’s social
prestige as a member of the uomini di stato would have been compromised, and his professional
identity promoted. With his natural rank as a nobleman diminished, Michelangelo would have
appeared to be a self-made man—a man who had gained his social prestige through his artistic
accomplishments. For a man born into the nobility, who would have believed, as Lauro Quirini
explains, that he was naturally superior to other men, to be presented as a self-made man would
have been an affront to what he believed to be his God-given status.

Michelangelo’s commitment to Florentine republicanism. I shall argue that Michelangelo refused
for another reason as well; membership in a professional group would have compromised his
existing social prestige. By joining Cosimo I’s system of rank as an artist, Michelangelo’s social
prestige as a member of the uomini di stato would have been compromised, and his professional
identity promoted. With his natural rank as a nobleman diminished, Michelangelo would have
appeared to be a self-made man—a man who had gained his social prestige through his artistic
accomplishments. For a man born into the nobility, who would have believed, as Lauro Quirini
explains, that he was naturally superior to other men, to be presented as a self-made man would
have been an affront to what he believed to be his God-given status.
The members of the *uomini di stato* had a distaste for these newcomers into the elite, the *gente nuova*. They criticized the *gente nuova* for their tendency to flamboyantly affect aristocratic airs and for their failure to live according to the codes of *virtù* by which the *uomini di stato* governed themselves. Giovanni Cavalcanti (1444–1509), a Florentine poet born into the patrician Cavalcanti family, complained: “these newcomers were too coarse for the great questions of state.” For Filippo Villani (1325–1407), a Florentine chronicler of the city’s history, “the impertinence of rustics, intensified by wealth, has always been contrary to worthy pursuits…born humbly, they never praise nor cultivate fine customs, to which, at any rate, they can never adapt themselves. Instead, they heap up lucre, believing that they are ennobled by it.” While the *gente nuova* could play at being a part of the *uomini di stato*, they could never actually gain full membership in it. As a member of Cosimo I’s circle, Michelangelo risked being interpreted as a *gente nuova*.

---

146 Filippo Villani, *Philippi Villani Liber de civitatis Florentiae famosis civibus ex codice Mediceo Laurentiano nunc primum editus et de Florentinorum litteratura principes fere synchroni scriptores denuo in lucem prodeunt*, ed. Gustav Camillo Galletti (Florence: J. Mazzoni, 1847), 43. “Questi novelli erano uomini rozzi a’ gran fatti; uomini avari; mercatanti de’ crediti de’ soldati; compratori de’ debiti del Comune.”

147 *Liber de civitatis florentiae famosis civibus*, ed. Gustav Camillo Galletti (Florence: J. Marzzen, 1847), 1:31–32. “Sed parum profuerunt boni viri studia, quibus agrestis insolentia, opulentiiis fatigata, semper fuit adversa…cum obscure nati nunquam laudent colantque mores bonos, cum quibus ullo unquam tempore convenire non possunt; sed auri cumulum, quo se aestimant nobilitari.”
There is a third reason Michelangelo refused: he could not belong to Cosimo I’s artists’ league and at the same time maintain the status conferred by his birth; Cosimo I had made the *uomini di stato* of the Republic politically irrelevant. In his effort to consolidate and solidify his power in the state, Cosimo I had removed rival clans from power, and sidelined the *uomini di stato* by “elevating” them to the rank of courtiers—a move that essentially removed the *uomini di stato* from active involvement in government. The members of the *uomini di stato* had been elite in Florence because they had participated in governing the Republic, but Cosimo I eliminated this oligarchic governing structure and replaced it with a dynastic system.

Cosimo I gained this power in 1537 after defeating an army of Florentine exiles who sought to reestablish the Republic upon the assassination of Alessandro de’ Medici. His power was solidified when Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, officially recognized Cosimo I as head of the Florentine state in exchange for his militaristic help in his war with the French, the Italian Wars. As Cosimo I’s reign progressed, he increasingly consolidated his power. As noted earlier, the *uomini di stato* perceived their proper role as defenders of freedom and of their state, which they, in turn, believed was the bastion of the ideals of the ancient Roman Republic. No longer in control of governmental affairs under Cosimo I, their former status within the city was officially negated and they lost their *raison d’être*.

Cosimo I was an astute interpreter of history. An indirect descendant of the famed Medici clan, he only became duke after Alessandro de’ Medici was assassinated in a *coup d’état*. Cosimo I recognized that over the course of the previous one hundred years when the Medici repeatedly rose to power only to lose it each time, the Medici had been unable to maintain their power because they had retained the oligarchic system of government; that is, the Medici allowed their potential rivals to retain their positions and influence. These rival families possessed enough
power and wealth to command a sufficient amount of loyalty from others, which permitted them to stage successful assassinations and *coup d'état*.¹⁴⁸

The Medici were considered newcomers to the *uomini di stato*, having only recently gained wealth, and through it influence, with Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici (1360–1429), Cosimo il Vecchio’s father. Giovanni was the founding member of the famous Medici line. Coming from a modest banking family, he went on to expand the bank and in 1410 secure the papal account. From this point for generations the Medici were the official papal bankers, and possessed immense financial and political power. As a *gente nuova* in the eyes of the Florentine *uomini di stato*, who could boast of lineages dating back many hundreds of years, Cosimo I realized that in order to eliminate the threat these families posed to his rule, he had to transform the Florentine socio-political system from an oligarchy to a court system, in which the members of the *uomini di stato* would be stripped of their power. By removing the *uomini di stato* from the top ranks, Cosimo I had created a void; he, therefore, needed to fill it with a new elite comprising individuals he could be sure would be loyal to him.¹⁴⁹ Michelangelo was not a part of a rival clan, but he did become entangled in this restructuring because Cosimo I included artists among his new elite.¹⁵⁰

It is in this light that Vasari wrote the *Vita di Michelagnolo*. While Cosimo I sought to turn Florence into an elite institutionalized artistic center, Vasari provided him with a pre-fabricated artistic heritage. Michelangelo would have been the proverbial cherry on top of

---


¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 132–33.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.
Cosimo I’s artistic school: A Florentine, internationally famous, and already called *il divino*,151 a retuned and officially integrated Michelangelo would have represented a triumph for Cosimo I’s artistic program. His presence would have elevated its prestige, and brought it international attention; yet Michelangelo refused all entreaties to join Cosimo I’s circle.152

151 Michelangelo was first called *divino* by Lodovico Ariosto in *Orlando furioso* (1516): “Michel più che mortal Angel divino.” Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* (Milan: R. Ricciardi, 1954). In the following statement, Condivi acknowledges that Michelangelo was commonly considered divine by his contemporaries: “I wanted to mention this because I am told that Domenico’s son [Domenico Ghirlandaio, son of Michelangelo’s first art instructor] attributes the excellence and *divinità* of Michelangelo to a great extent to his father’s teaching…” Condivi, *Life of Michelangelo*, 10. “Del che ho voluto far menzione, perchè m’è detto che ’l figliuolo di Domenico suole l’eccellenza e divinità di Michelagnolo attribuire in gran parte alla disciplina del padre, non avendo egli portogli aiuto alcuno.” Condivi, *Vita di Michelangiolo*, 33. The comment implies that Domenico wanted to share in Michelangelo’s fame by crediting the artist’s skill to his father’s instruction. The comment defines Michelangelo’s *divinità* as proceeding from his artistic achievements. *Divinità* describes one who had achieved *gloria*. Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, 125–26, note no. 14. Jacopo Giunti also referred to Michelangelo as *il divino* in his dedicatory address *Esequie del divino Michelagnolo Buonarroti, Florence 1564*. For this see Jacopo Giunti, *The Divine Michelangelo: The Florentine Academy’s Homage on His Death in 1564 (A Facsimile Edition of Esequie del divino Michelagnolo Buonarroti, Florence 1564)*, trans. Rudolf and Margot Wittkower (London: Phaidon, 1964), 50.

152 In his biography Vasari refers to Cosimo I’s request that Michelangelo return to Florence, but softens the reference by claiming that Michelangelo had politely refused citing prior engagements: “Fu assoluto dal duca Cosimo Michelagnolo, vedendo questi inconvenienti, del suo
Vasari’s biography on Michelangelo must be read as part of Cosimo I’s overall propagandistic enterprise, and his anecdotes as tools to promote Cosimo I’s political agenda. One such example is Vasari’s story in his first edition that il Magnifico “discovered” Michelangelo. He writes that one day the director of il Magnifico’s garden school for sculpture, Bertoldo, visited the painter Domenico Ghirlandaio, and asked him if he had students whom he would recommend to continue their studies in the garden. Ghirlandaio sent him Francesco Fanaccio and Michelangelo. Vasari adds that Bertoldo gave Michelangelo a marble tondo to emulate, and that venire più a Fiorenza, dicendogli che aveva più caro il suo contento e che seguitasse San Piero, che cosa che potessi avere al mondo, e che si quietassi.” Vasari, Le vite, 95. For letters in which Vasari urges Michelangelo to return to Florence on Cosimo I’s behalf, see footnote 145. Despite refusing to return to Florence, Michelangelo continued to accept and complete commissions for Cosimo I. On September 28, 1555, Michelangelo writes to Vasari in reply to the latter’s request on Cosimo I’s behalf to get from Michelangelo the sculptor’s design ideas from years earlier for the staircase in the Laurentian Library. “Mi ritorna bene nella mente come un sognio una certa iscala, ma non credo che sia a punto quella che io pensai allora, perché mi torna cosa ghoffa; pure la scriverò qui…” See Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 5:47–49.

153 Vasari writes: “…e per questo chiese a Domenico Ghirlandai che, se in bottega sua avesse de’ suoi giovani che inclinati fossero a ciò, li inviasse al giardino, dove egli desiderava di esercitargli e creargli in una maniera che onorasse e lui e la città sua. Laonde da Domenico gli furono per ottimi giovani dati, fra gli altri, Michele Agnolo e Francesco Granaccio…Michele Agnolo, vedendo questo, per emulazione alcune ne fece; dove Lorenzo, vedendo si bello spirito, lo tenne sempre in molta aspettazione…Onde Lorenzo, molto contento, ne fece gran festa e gli ordinò provisione, per aiutar suo padre e per crescergli animo, di cinque ducati il mese; e per rallegrarlo gli diede un mantello paonazzo et al padre uno officio in dogana.” Vasari, Le vite, 9–11.
the young artist did it so well that il Magnifico rewarded him with five ducats and gave his father, Lodovico, a post in the Customs. This story promotes Cosimo I’s agenda to align himself with the great Medici rulers of the Republic, particularly with il Magnifico, whose memory was held in special esteem. Michelangelo provided a rare and prestigious living connection to the times and legacy of il Magnifico. Vasari cultivates the idea that there is a likeness between the two by showing that just as il Magnifico supposedly discovered Michelangelo, Cosimo I will continue this legacy as Michelangelo’s patron-protector.

While Vasari wrote the first edition of Michelangelo’s biography to flatter Cosimo I, he also attempted to flatter the artist. I shall argue that the biography was a part of the broader effort to entice Michelangelo to return to Florence from his self-imposed exile, and enter Cosimo I’s artists’ circle. The ploy failed, however, at least in part because Vasari downplayed Michelangelo’s noble birth, and instead portrayed him as a self-made man. Although Vasari does mention Michelangelo’s noble birth, he does so only briefly. But, the impact of even this one brief reference is lost, because in the very next line Vasari adds that the artist grew up impoverished. To make matters worse, Vasari attributes this poverty to the large number of children in his family. He completes this catalogue of dishonor by noting that Michelangelo’s

---


155 See preceding footnote.
brothers were all placed in jobs as craftsmen, like the artist himself, who was apprenticed to Ghirlandaio.156

Vasari’s readers would have known that Michelangelo was a nobleman, for numerous tributes made to him during his lifetime accorded him this honor. Giulio Bonasone does so in his portrait of Michelangelo from 1546 by inscribing it MICHAEL ANGELVS BONAROTVS PATRITIVS (fig. 3-2).157 Vasari’s readers might have been unaware, however, that Michelangelo was born into the nobility. Vasari presents Michelangelo as a self-made man because to praise him by extolling the virtues of his ancestors would have been to promote the virtues of the uomini di stato and, therefore, the group itself. To play any role in fostering public sympathy for this now out-of-favor group, and so potentially threatening Cosimo I’s new socio-political order, would have been the exact opposite of Vasari’s agenda with this book. Vasari’s job after all was to promote Cosimo I’s system of rank, which valued artists, as well as other groups, but that expressly did not embrace republicans. Being a famous artist would have brought Michelangelo distinction within Cosimo I’s court. Outside the duke’s court, however, the comments by Cavalcanti and Villani demonstrate, Michelangelo would have fared better socially if it were recognized that he acquired his nobility at birth. This might not have been the case for a high-ranking political official in Cosimo I’s court, but surely it was the case for someone in

156 Vasari, Le vite, 5–6. Vasari writes: “Aveva Lodovico molti figiuoli: per che, essendo povero e grave di famiglia con assai poca entrata, pose gli altri suoi figliuoli ad alcune arti, e solo si ritenne Michele Agnolo, il quale molto da sé stesso nella sua fanciullezza attendeva a disegnare per le carte e pei muri. Onde Lodovico, avendo amistà con Domenico Ghirlandai pittore, andatosene a la sua bottega, gli ragionò lungo di Michele Agnolo; per che Domenico, visto alcuni suoi fogli imbrattati, giudicò essere in lui ingegno da farsi in questa arte mirabile e valente.”

157 Buonarroti, The Letters of Michelangelo, 2:42.
Michelangelo’s situation, who was an artist. Belonging to Cosimo I’s court, and being forever promoted by it as an artist, rather than a nobleman, would have also meant that Michelangelo risked the memory of his noble birth being lost to posterity. *Lignaggio* was of great importance to a nobleman—that the prestige of one’s line should be lost would have been unbearable. It is within this context that Condivi’s biography reveals itself to be Michelangelo’s *ricordanze*.

The most important difference between the biographies by Condivi and Vasari is that Condivi introduces his version with an extensive account of Michelangelo’s noble *lignaggio*. He even boasts that Michelangelo was descended from one of the most illustrious families in all of Italy, the Counts of Canossa (the medieval rulers of Tuscany).158 Their most famous ancestor is Matilda da Canossa (1046–1114), *la gran contessa*, as she was called. She ruled Tuscany and was one of the most powerful feudal leaders in all of Italy.159 Michelangelo could legitimately boast of this ancestry because in 1520 Count Alessandro da Canossa, the current patriarch of the House of Canossa, formally recognized him as a blood relation. That same year, the Count wrote to Michelangelo to inform the artist that they shared an ancestor by the name of Simone da Canossa, who had been *podesà* (mayor) of Florence during the *duecento*.160

---

158 See footnote 72.

159 Francesco Maria Fiorentini, *Memorie di Matilda, la gran contessa: propvngacolo della chiesa con le particolari notitie della sva vita e con l'antica serie degli antenati da Francesco Maria Fiorentini restitvita all'origine della patria Lvcchese*, (Lucca: Appresso Pellegrino Bidelli, 1642).

It is improbable that Michelangelo was actually related to the Canossa, for during this period alliances of convenience between noble families were common.\textsuperscript{161} In this letter the Count refers to a visit made to him on Michelangelo’s behalf by the painter Zoane da Regio. Although it cannot be confirmed, this comment may indicate that Michelangelo had initiated the alliance. It was common for noblemen to seek alliances with higher-ranked nobles in order to increase their family’s social prestige. It is possible, however, that a nobleman from a historically higher-ranked family would seek such an alliance with a nobleman from a historically lower-ranked family. This is provided that a member of this latter family had recently engaged in an act that had elevated its already existing nobility, and that this feat could bring renewed glory to the higher-ranked family. An affiliation with a nobleman as celebrated as Michelangelo could achieve precisely this effect.

\textsuperscript{161} In August 1499, Michelangelo wrote to his father referring to an impoverished nun from the Monastery of San Giuliano. She had written to him requesting alms on the account that she was their relative. Michelangelo agreed to help, telling his father that he would send him five broad ducats, four and a half of which were for the nun. However, he also asks his father to first investigate as to whether the nun was actually related to them. Buonarroti, \textit{The Letters of Michelangelo}, 1:6.
Although the Canossa were among Italy’s preeminent families—ranking far above the likes of such Florentine dynasties of the Medici or the Strozzi—by this time it had been many generations since it had achieved the feats of glory that had made it famous. As Alberti and the various Italian humanists noted, it was central to the concept of nobility that members of noble families continually renewed their family’s nobility through their own acts of virtù and glory. Michelangelo’s contemporaries recognized that he had achieved this, as Bonasone’s portrait, the two biographies, and his nickname il divino, testify. The Count’s official recognition of Michelangelo as a blood relation not only demonstrates that the artist had succeeded in reestablishing his family among the uomini di stato but also that he had catapulted himself and his kin into the most elite ranks of the Italian aristocracy.

Condivi’s decision to introduce his biography with a detailed account of the artist’s lineage works on two key levels; first, it implies that Michelangelo’s nobility is the subject of the biography, and second that the subsequent information will support this claim. While some of the stories Condivi tells are original, others are extracted from Vasari’s biography. Although their mutual stories are nearly identical, Condivi’s opposing framework shifts the meaning of them from examples of feats of glory that ennobled a lowly commoner to those that renewed the nobility of a nobleman’s family.

It seems counterintuitive to the concept of nobility that Michelangelo’s activities as a craftsman—let alone as a working man—could contribute to his nobility. Pursuing a career while claiming the status of a nobleman, however, did not present a conflict in Florence, since Florence’s elite was a merchant one. Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), a humanist born in Arezzo and working in Florence, put it this way: “We Florentines seem to have the right idea about nobility. Those born to an old family, whose ancestors held public office, are considered noble. Some of those devote themselves to business; others, enjoying the title of noble, eschewing
business, spend their time hunting and fowling.” Poggio explains that for a family to be considered noble in Florence, its ancestors had to have served in public offices, but they could choose to live as merchants or as landed gentlemen. While a Florentine nobleman could have a career, Poggio adds that he could not work as a laborer or craftsman: “All workmen and craftsmen are devoid of nobility, since no virtue is associated with the exercise of their crafts. Indeed, this whole group is thought of as having low status.”

How did Michelangelo get around this? There are two answers: The first is that throughout his career he cultivated the impression that he did not make any money from his work (this may partly explain why he cultivated the idea that he lived moderately). The second is that he never operated a bottega, which would have cast him as a craftsman working for money. Artists traditionally operated a bottega where they conducted business, much like a shopkeeper, and took on students for money. In other words, acutely aware of what was expected of a nobleman and focused on achieving an assailable place for his family among the patriciate, Michelangelo cast himself as a nobleman who created and presented his art solely to fulfill the obligation of genius to share his talent with the world. Michelangelo expressed a concern with presenting himself in this way on May 2, 1548, when he wrote to Lionardo to ask him to inform a priest by the name of Fattucci to stop referring to him as “Michelagnolo scultore [sculptor]”, and refer to him instead as “Michelangelo Buonarroti,” his given name. A surname was one


163 Ibid., 72.

164 Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 4: 299.
indicator of prestigious birth because during the Renaissance few individuals outside of the nobility possessed family names, for they were aristocratic in origin. By the *cinquecento* only 19% of Italians possessed last names.\textsuperscript{165} In all of his letters Michelangelo addressed his father and brothers by their full names, by adding “di Lionardo di Buonarroti Simoni” for his father and “di Lodovico Simoni” for his brothers.\textsuperscript{166} Until 1507 Michelangelo signed his name either “Michelangelo in Rome,” “Michelangelo scultore,” or “Michelangelo scultore in Rome.” It was not until that year that he added his family name, signing his letters “Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Scultore”; however, he signed his name this way only occasionally.

Some members of the *popolani* possessed surnames, but they were always patronymic (names derived from that of one’s father or other paternal ancestor).\textsuperscript{167} Condivi excuses why Michelangelo has a patronymic last name by stating that his family name was originally Canossa, but that Michelangelo’s direct ancestors went by Buonarroti because it was custom among

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{165} Cohn., 45.
\textsuperscript{166} See footnote 31 and 160.
\textsuperscript{167} For a further discussion, see Hatfield, L. Some commoners were given aristocratic family names, but did not actually belong to that family. This includes the artist Michelozzo Michelozzi (1396–1472), who was originally Michelozzo di Bartolomeo. It was his son who adopted the last name of the well-known Michelozzi family in Florence while he was the personal secretary of Lorenzo, il Magnífico. Artist Filippo Brunelleschi was not a part of the Brunelleschi clan. He referred to himself in records as “Filippus Ser Brunelleschi Lippi.” It is unknown who first referred to him as Brunelleschi and when. Among Florentines, it is unlikely that the Buonarroti would have been interpreted as *popolani* because so few commoners possessed last names, and the name Buonarroti derived from a distinguished ancestor, Buonarrotta, who served as Prior in the *Signoria*.
\end{footnote}
Florentine *cittadini* to adopt the first name of their father, grandfather, or earlier male ancestor as their last name.\(^{168}\) This is within two years of when Michelangelo first became well-to-do financially and when he began to purchase property in Settignano, which he did in order to increase the family estate. In a letter dated September 25, 1540, addressed to his nephew Lionardo, Michelangelo tells him to inform his uncle Gismondo: “he [Gismondo] does us little credit in making a peasant of himself.”\(^ {169}\) Clearly, Michelangelo was attuned to the impression that he and his family members made. He refers to a letter from Gismondo in which he had requested from Michelangelo nine bushels of grain from the latter’s farms. In a letter to Lionardo from August 20, 1541, Michelangelo orders his nephew, “You must wait until next Lent, when I’ll send for you and will send you money to equip yourself, that you may not come here [Rome] like a nobody.”\(^ {170}\) It was not until 1540, a few years after Michelangelo moved permanently to

\(^{168}\) La cagione perchè la famiglia in Firenze mutasse il nome, e di quegli da Canossa fosse poi chiamata de’ Buonarroti, fu questa: che essendo questo nome di Buonarroto stato in casa loro d’età in età quasi sempre, fin al tempo di Michelagnolo, il quale ebbe un fratello pur chiamato Buonarroto, ed essendo molti di questi Buonarroti stati dei Signori, cioè del supremo magistero di quella Repubblica; e il detto suo fratello specialmente, che si trovò di quel numero, nel tempo che fu papa Leone a Fiorenza, come negli Annali di essa città si può vedere; questo nome continuato in molti di loro, passò in cognome di tutta la famiglia; e tanto più facilmente, quanto il costume di Fiorenza nelli squittini e nell’altre nominazioni, è, dopo il nome proprio de’ cittadini, aggiunger quello del padre, dell’avolo, del bisavolo e talvolta di quegli più oltre.” Condivi, *Vita di Michelangiolo*, 27.


Rome, that his letters began to express a concern that his family members present themselves as patricians.\footnote{He expressed concern that he, himself, presents himself like a proper patrician. In a letter from July 1540 Michelangelo complains to his nephew that the shirts the latter sent him were so course that not even a peasant would wear them. “Lionardo, i’ò ricievuto con la tuo lectera tre camice, e son(n)mi molto maravigliato me l’abbiate mandate, perché son sì grosse che qua non è contadino nessuno che non si vergogniassì a portarle…” Buonarroti, \textit{Il carteggio di Michelangelo}, 4:108.} Perhaps this is because he was courting some of the most elite society in Rome, indeed, in Europe, such as, Vittoria Colonna of the great Roman baronial dynasty.

By demanding that others refer to him by his last name, Michelangelo cultivated the idea that rather than being a craftsman, he was a nobleman-artist, whose works of art were performances of nobility. Michelangelo explains this to his nephew in a letter dated May 2, 1548:

…here \[Rome\] I am only known as Michelangelo Buonarroti; and that if a Florentine citizen wants to have an altar-piece painted, he must find a painter—and that I was never a painter or a sculptor like those who set up shop for that purpose. I have always refrained from doing so out of respect for my father and brothers; although I have served three Popes, it has been under compulsion.\footnote{Buonarroti, \textit{The Letters of Michelangelo}, 2:92. “io non ci son conosciuto se non per Michelagniolo Buonarroti, e che se un cictadino fiorentino vuol fare dipigniere una tavola da altare, che bisogna che e’ truovi un dipintore: ché io non fu’ mai pictore né scultore come chi ne fa boctega. Sempre me ne son guardato per l’onore di mie padre e de’ mia frategli, ben io abbi servito tre papi, che è stato forza.” Buonarroti, \textit{Il carteggio di Michelangelo}, 4:299.}

By saying that although he has served three Popes, he has only done so out of compulsion, Michelangelo implies that he is an artist out of orders from higher powers, not out of necessity like a craftsman. The purpose of Condivi’s biography is to publicly make this point.

Let us now return to \textit{Battle of the Centaurs} and Michelangelo’s comment that the work is “perfect.” It appears that Michelangelo’s comment does not refer to its craftsmanship, but rather
to its ability to express his nobility. The story is just one piece in a larger narrative that composes the biography, which argues that Michelangelo’s origins as an artist began with il Magnifico compelling him to share his talent.

Like Condivi, Vasari cites Michelangelo’s relationship with il Magnifico as instrumental to Michelangelo’s success, but Vasari’s story in both editions is really about reinforcing il Magnifico’s nobility. Vasari states in both editions that il Magnifico gifted Michelangelo five ducats and gave a post in the Customs to his father as a reward for the artist’s work on a tondo or a bust of a faun, depending on the edition.\footnote{In the first edition, Vasari writes: “Onde Lorenzo, molto contento, ne fece gran festa e gli ordinò provisione, per aiutar suo padre e per crescergli animo, di cinque ducati il mese; e per rallegrarlo gli diede un mantello paonazzo et al padre uno officio in dogana. Vero è che tutti quei giovani erano salariati, chi assai e chi poco, de la liberalità di quel magnifico e nobilissimo cittadino, e da lui, mentre che visse, furono premiati.” He tells an almost identical account in his second edition: “Imperò in quel tempo ebbe da quel signore Michelagnolo provisione, per aiutare suo padre, di v ducati il mese; e per rallegrarlo gli diede un mantello pagonazzo et al padre uno officio in dogana. Vero è che tutti quei giovani del giardino erano salariati, chi assai e chi poco, dalla liberalità di quel magnifico e nobilissimo cittadino, e da lui, mentre che visse, furono premiati.” For both versions, see Vasari, \textit{Le vite}, 10–11. The story that Michelangelo carved a faun originates with Condivi. In his first edition, Vasari states that Michelangelo worked on a tondo. “Per il che, andando egli al giardino, vi trovarono che il Torrigiano, giovane de’ Torrigiani, lavorava di terra certe figure tonde che da Bertoldo gli erano state date. Michele Agnolo, vedendo questo, per emulazione alcune ne fece; dove Lorenzo, vedendo si bello spirito, lo tenne sempre in molta aspettazione; et egli, inanimito, dopo alcuni giorni si mise a contrafare con un pezzo di marmo una testa antica che v’era.” Ibid., 10.}
act as an example of il Magnifico’s generosity. It serves to demonstrate that he was a magnificent and very noble citizen “magnifico e noblissimo cittadino.” In the process of praising il Magnifico thus, Vasari refers to Michelangelo as a salariato (wage earner); in other words, Vasari casts Michelangelo as a common craftsman.175

Condivi rewrites this narrative by casting Michelangelo as a nobleman whose talents were recognized and nurtured by a fellow nobleman with means. Instead of writing that Michelangelo entered il Magnifico’s sculpture garden as a salariato, Condivi portrays il Magnifico’s supposed discovery of Michelangelo as the product of a chance encounter.176 In Condivi’s account Michelangelo happens to be in il Magnifico’s sculpture garden one day and comes across the bust of a faun. Becoming fascinated by it, he picks up a chisel for the first time and begins to carve a copy. As Michelangelo is finishing the work, il Magnifico walks by and is so impressed with the copy, especially once the artist had broken one of the faun’s teeth in order to make the sculpture look older, that he takes Michelangelo under his wing.


174 See previous footnote.
175 Ibid.
176 Condivi writes: “…dico, tai marmi, Michelagnolo se ne fece dare da quei maestri un pezzo, ed accomodato da quei medesimi de’ ferri, con tanta attenzione e studio si pose a ritrarre il Fauno, che in pochi giorni lo condusse a perfezione, di sua fantasia supplendo tutto quello che nell’antico mancava, cioè la bocca aperta a guisa d’uomo che rida, sicchè si vedea il cavo d’essa con tutti i denti. In questo mezzo venendo il Magnifico, per vedere a che termine fosse l’opera sua, trovò il fanciullo che era intorno a ripulir la sua testa; ed accostatosegli alquanto, considerate primieramente l’eccellenza dell’opera, ed avuto riguardo all’età di lui, molto si maravigliò; ed avvengachè lodasse l’opera, nondimeno motteggiando con lui, come un fanciullo…” Condivi, Vita di Michelangiolo, 35–36.
It is at this point that Condivi tells the story of the *Battle of the Centaurs*. He writes that il Magnifico took Michelangelo into his household as a son, and educated him:

In the same house lived Poliziano, a most learned and clever man, as everyone knows and his writings fully testify. Recognizing in Michelangelo a superior spirit, he loved him very much and, although there was no need, he continually urged him on in his studies, always explaining things to him and providing him with subjects. Among these, one day he proposed to him the Rape of Deianira and the Battle of the Centaurs, telling him the whole story one part at a time.177

Condivi implies that the *Battle of the Centaurs* was a physical exercise in Michelangelo’s humanist education—under the guidance of the esteemed Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494) no less. Poliziano, also known as Angelo Ambrogini, was a respected Aristotelian thinker throughout Europe, and the leading humanist scholar in il Magnifico’s circle. He acted as the personal tutor to il Magnifico’s three sons Piero de’ Medici (1472–1503); Giovanni de’ Medici (1475–1521), the future Pope Leo X; and Giulio de’ Medici (1479–1516), the future Pope Clement VII. Humanist education was exclusive to the wealthy and expected of a nobleman. With this story Condivi presents Michelangelo as a nobleman nurtured by his social equals, the Medici.

It may be true that Poliziano tutored Michelangelo and gave him the idea of executing the *Battle of the Centaurs*. Regardless of whether this story is true, Condivi used it to manufacture

Michelangelo’s origins as an artist. Putting the faun aside, *Battle* is the only student work by Michelangelo that Condivi mentions, and he frames it as the artist’s first sculpture after the *Faun*. He makes no mention of the *Madonna of the Stairs* (c. 1490), Michelangelo’s only other surviving student work, and currently believed to predate the *Battle of the Centaurs* by two years.\(^\text{178}\) It is true that Michelangelo lived in the Medici household. After the artist left, Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de’ Medici used his connections to secure Michelangelo patronage in Rome with Michelangelo’s distant relative Pagolo Rucellai.\(^\text{179}\) In addition, we also know that after his election to the papacy, Leo X referred to Michelangelo as a dear friend.\(^\text{180}\)

\(^\text{178}\) The date of the *Madonna of the Stairs* is commonly given as c. 1490, two years before the date commonly given to the *Battle of the Centaurs*. This is largely because the former shows flaws in the execution of rudimentary skills, such as the foreshortening of both Christ’s hand and the Virgin’s foot. Michelangelo executed these skills well in the *Battle of the Centaurs*.

\(^\text{179}\) On July 2, 1496, after Michelangelo had arrived in Rome, he wrote to Lorenzo: “Magnifico Lorenzo etc., solo per avvisarvi chome sabato passato g[i]ugnemo a·ssalvamento, e·ssubito andamo a visitare el chardinale di San G[i]org[i]o e·lli presentai la vostra lettera. Parmi mi vedessi volentieri e volle inchintinente ch’io andasse a vedere certe figure, dove i’ ochupai tutto quello g[i]orno, e però quello g[i]orno non detti l’altrre vostre lettere…Dipoi el Chardinal mi domandò se mi bastava l’animo di fare qualchosa di bello…Dipoi lunedi passato presentai l’altrre vostre lettere a·pPagolo Rucellai, el quale mi proferse que’ danari mi bisogniassi, e ‘l simile que’ de’ Chavalchanti.” Buonarroti, *Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, 1:1–2.

\(^\text{180}\) Sebastiano del Piombo wrote to Michelangelo on October 27, 1520, that Leo X spoke of Michelangelo with tenderness, as one might speak of a brother: “… et quando parla de vui par rasoni de un suo fratello, quassi con le lacrime alghi ochii; perché m’à dexto a me vui sette nutriti insiemi, et dimostra conosceri et amarsi…” Ibid., 2:253. Piero Polo Marzo wrote to
Condivi misses no opportunities to present Michelangelo as a nobleman-guest in il Magnifico’s home, even including this comment supposedly made by Lodovico to il Magnifico: “I have never practiced any profession; but I have always up to now lived on my slender income, attending to those few possessions left to me by my forebears,” adding, “I don’t know how to do anything but read and write [the activities of a gentleman].” To affirm this point regarding Michelangelo’s origins, Condivi offers the following information regarding il Magnifico’s invitation to Michelangelo to join his household: Il Magnifico sent a messenger to Lodovico with a note containing this request. Lodovico would not accept, saying he would never suffer his son to be a stonemason. Condivi adds that il Magnifico treated Michelangelo as his social equal, Michelangelo on July 9, 1521, that Leo X sends him his love and regards: “…Nostro Signore ha visto et lecto con molta sua satisfactione et contento la vostra de’ 26, laudando et approvando le opere et virtù vostre, vedendo con effecto in tucto procedete et vi governate con quella affectione, amore et bona voluntà che è la fede ha in voi; et mi ha commesso vi responda da sua parte, che andiate procedendo in ciò et seguitando in la virtuosa opera vostra come havete fino mo’ facto et spera in futurum doviate fare…” Ibid., 2:303. Sebastiano wrote to Michelangelo again on April 29, 1531. He wrote of Clement VII’s brotherly affection for the artist: “Et parla de vui tanto honorevolmente et con tanta afectione et amore, che un pardre [sic] non diria de un figiolo quello dice lui.” Ibid., 3:305. For other related comments, see ibid., 3:308, 346, and 403.


182 Condivi, *Vita di Michelangiolo*, 39. “Lorenzo, io non so far altro che leggere e scrivere.”

183 Ibid., 37. “…anzi di lui si lamentava ch’e’ gli sviava il figliuolo, stando pure in su questo: che non patirebbe mai che ’l figliuolo fosse scarpellino…”

giving him a good room and anything that he desired, as if he were his own son.\textsuperscript{184} Michelangelo even claims that he sat above il Magnifico’s sons at the dinner table.\textsuperscript{185} This is almost certainly an exaggeration, but the claim itself emphasizes Condivi’s point that Michelangelo was anything but a \textit{salariato}: he was a gentleman-artist.

This last story may serve, however, to inform readers that Michelangelo ranked higher than even il Magnifico himself, since guests were positioned at a host’s dinner table according to their social rank in relation to the other guests attending the gathering. Though the story may be untrue in a literal sense, it is factual in that it conveys the truth about his noble birth. It works effectively in both metaphorical and narrative terms. Although the Buonarroti ranked far below the Medici in terms of political power, having practically none, the Buonarroti ranked higher than the Medici in terms of nobility; the Buonarroti could boast of a long lineage and centuries of holding office in the Republic, whereas the Medici could boast of none of this; they were a relatively new \textit{casa}.

At the same time, the story of il Magnifico treating Michelangelo like a son may refer to the fact that Michelangelo was related to the Medici through marriage. In 1466 Michelangelo’s distant relative Bernardo Rucellai (1448–1514)—himself of an elite Florentine \textit{casa}—married

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 38. “E licenziato il vecchio, fece dare a Michelagnolo una buona camera in casa, dandogli tutte quelle comodità ch’egli desiderava, nè altrimenti trattandolo sì in altro, sì nella sua mensa, che da figliuolo…”

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 38–39. “…alla quale, come d’un tal uomo, sedeano ogni giorno personaggi nobilissimi, e di grande affare. Ed essendovi questa usanza, che quei che da principio si trovavano presenti, ciascheduno appresso il Magnifico secondo il suo grado sedesse, non si movendo di luogo, per qualunque dipoi sopraggiunto fosse; avvenne bene spesso che Michelagnolo sedette sopra i figliuoli di Lorenzo ed altre persone pregiate, di che tal casa di continuo fioriva ed abbondava…”
Lucrezia (Nannina) de’ Medici (1447–1493), daughter of Piero de’ Medici (1416–1469) and Lucrezia Tornabuoni (1425–1482), granddaughter of Cosimo de’ Medici (1389–1464), and sister of il Magnifico Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449–1492). Although Michelangelo was only distantly related to il Magnifico, the Medici would have still viewed (and treated) him as a relative; family units were more expansive in Italy during the Renaissance. It was common for parenti (relatives) with means and advantageous connections to come to the aid of their needy parenti. This role could take on numerous forms, such as Michelangelo and Alessandro da Canossa forming an alliance to mutually enhance the glory of their lignaggi, Il Magnifico taking in

186 See Wallace, “Michael Angelvs Bonarotvs patritivs Florentinvs,” 60.


188 Ibid. In a letter dated March 22, 1464, Alessandra Strozzi refers to herself coming to the aid of a needy parente. She wrote to Filippo Strozzi about the arrival of Francesco di Sandro Strozzi in Naples. He came from an impoverished branch of the House of Strozzi. She writes: “I’ve told him [Francesco] he has me to thank for his position with you and that if he does well, I will get the credit because I asked you to take him on… I do ask you to look after him, because his father has entrusted him to me; I said if he does well his deeds will speak for themselves.” Alessandra Strozzi, Selected Letters of Alessandra Strozzi, trans. Heather Gregory (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 3. “Sarà di poi arrivato costì el delto Francesco, e vedrai la vista sua, se somiglia Nofri; che a me non pare. Hogli detto che io sono quell ache te l’ho pregato lo tolga: e così l’opposto; che non si portando bene, l’ n’arò il carico da voi; e lui n’arà danno e vergogna, e che in qua sarà rimandato. Risposemi che aveva pensieno di farmi onore, e simile a tutti gli alti. Così mi piacerà che faccia.” Ibid., 102.
Michelangelo to educate him, or Michelangelo himself giving alms to the nun who wrote to him claiming to be a distant relative.\textsuperscript{189}

Il Magnifico did not “discover” Michelangelo in either of the ways that Vasari or Condivi recount; he took in Michelangelo into his household after receiving a letter from Lodovico in which he informed il Magnifico of their common relative, then requested that il Magnifico take in his son.\textsuperscript{190} Although Michelangelo defected from the Medici later in his life when they became a threat to the Republic, he continued to express his devotion to il Magnifico and his sons with whom he had grown up. The purpose of proclaiming his close relationship with il Magnifico is two-fold: it connects him to a respected leader of the Republic, and it elevates the prestige of his family \textit{lignaggio}.

Michelangelo indicated on numerous occasions that he saw himself as a member of the \textit{uomini di stato}. A typical example is the earlier mentioned letter from February 21, 1549, in which Michelangelo advised Lionardo to reject the daughter of Bartolomeo Betti because “he is not our social equal and your sister has married into the Guicciardini family.”\textsuperscript{191} The Guicciardini were an old and distinguished \textit{consorto}. They counted among their members the still-famous historian Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540), who wrote the much-admired \textit{History of Italy} (1532).\textsuperscript{192} Michelangelo’s reputation as a patrician was clearly very important to him and his legacy; Condivi’s biography combats Vasari’s literary threat to his birth rank.

\textsuperscript{189} See footnote 161.

\textsuperscript{190} William Wallace, “Writing a Biography of Michelangelo: Artist or Aristocrat.” Lecture at the Pennsylvania State University, University Park, January 31, 2008.

\textsuperscript{191} See footnote 140.

Chapter 4

Art as Gloria

William Wallace asked: What role did Michelangelo’s noble origins play in his career? This question marks a shift in scholarship to explore the significance of Michelangelo’s birth rank on his artistic career. Wallace concludes that Michelangelo’s nobility affected his career by providing him with connections to patrons. I believe that Wallace does not find more significant implications of Michelangelo’s nobility on the latter’s career because he does not approach the topic by looking at how nobility affected the raison d’être of those Florentines born into it. I shall argue that this influence was far more extensive by asking: How did Michelangelo’s art figure into his scheme for restoring his family’s former status among the Uomini di Stato? This investigation reveals that the endeavor is reflected in the subject matter of some of his works, such as the Battle of the Centaurs and the Vatican Pietà, the latter of which will be discussed in this chapter. More significantly, it reveals that Michelangelo’s art figures into this endeavor as more of a means to an end; he saw his career as a way to enrich his family and to fulfill the last necessary requirement for the mark of nobility: gloria.

Gloria is often translated into English as “glory”; however, there is no true English equivalent for this term. The term goes beyond “glory.” It was a core component of the definition of nobility for the Italians—the achievement of the supposedly impossible that brought with it fame and honor. In advising his family members regarding how to reestablish their casa among the Uomini di Stato, Alberti emphasizes the importance of gloria: “Let fame stand first in your minds…In the attainment of honor and reputation nothing, no matter how arduous or laborious,

will seem too much for you to attempt and to carry through.”194 He adds: “Fame and man’s favor help us more than all the riches in the world.”195 And further, “You will be satisfied with the sole reward of public appreciation and high reputation.”196 He reiterates the importance of gloria again when he speaks of honor: “With the help of honor we shall grow if not wealthy in goods at least abundantly rich in fame, in public esteem, grace, favor, and repute.”197 Gloria is the reason it was considered essential that each nobleman endeavored to renew the nobility of his family. Poggio confirms this: “Certainly, a person who has been ennobled by his own nature, work and, cultivation of virtue is superior to one who has received it in any other way.”198 Alberti reiterates Poggio’s comment:

No one will have greater, firmer, or more solid honor than he who dedicates himself to the renown and lasting fame of his country, his fellow citizens and his family. He alone deserves to have his name praised and famous and immortal among his descendants who, rightly despising every transient and perishable thing loves virtue alone, seeks wisdom, desires only pure and righteous glory.199

In two letters he wrote to his father dated October 4, 1511, and October 1512, while he was painting the Sistine Ceiling, Michelangelo implies that he saw his career as an artist as the means by which he could attain gloria. In the earlier letter he states: “Pray God that I may be honored here [when he reveals the finished Sistine Ceiling], and that I may satisfy the Pope,

194 Alberti, The Family in Renaissance Florence, 43–44.
195 Ibid., 150.
196 Ibid., 44.
197 Ibid., 150.
198 Bracciolini, 89.
199 Alberti, The Family in Renaissance Florence, 44.
because I hope, if I satisfy him, that we shall receive some benefit at his hands.” If Michelangelo had been referring to money, he surely would have said so, rather than stating “benefit,” or rather, bene, as many of his letters are quite explicit on this subject of money. Instead, Michelangelo’s hope was that the Pope would reward him, and, therefore, his family, in some way that would elevate his status, perhaps through the granting of a non-hereditary title, such as Count Palatine.

Michelangelo refused all invitations he received to join orders of knights, but helped engineer, as we shall see, Pope Leo X’s bestowal onto his brother Buonarroti the title of Count Palatine, a great distinction. By accepting an invitation to join an order of knights, Michelangelo may have run the risk of appearing that he was a commoner who had been ennobled, rather than a man born into the nobility, because titles of nobility were conferred through knighthoods. Receiving a non-hereditary title of knighthood was a mark of honor bestowed upon an individual in recognition of his deeds. It provided the bearer with political appointments. Lauro Quirini explains how this worked: “it is the grace deriving from fame that ennobles some above others.” It is likely, in other words, that Michelangelo sought a reward that would have brought him and his family notoriety.


201 Quirini, 159. Cristoforo Landino reiterates that fame is a central factor in determining if a person deserves to be ennobled. In his laudatory address to Lorenzo de’ Medici in his introduction to his treatise On True Nobility, Landino extols the nobility of Lorenzo’s ancestors by telling the stories of the fame they achieved. See Landino, 190–191. Landino makes this comment through the voice of Pacuvius.
In the letter from October 1512, Michelangelo informs his father that he has finished the Sistine Ceiling, and that the Pope is satisfied,” but,” the artist laments, “other things have not turned out for me as I’d hoped. For this I blame the times [the Pope was seeking vengeance on Florence], which are very unfavorable to our art.” Given the context of Michelangelo’s comment in the letter from October 4, 1511, though the term “art,” or rather *arte*, Michelangelo refers here not to his creative works, but rather to the art of increasing their social prestige. Michelangelo implies that the Pope was preoccupied with other matters, and that this is why he had not received a social reward for his work. Michelangelo clearly tried to achieve fame through artistic innovation. He certainly did so with the Sistine Ceiling, which immediately became famous. The achievement of *gloria* was central to Michelangelo’s thinking in regard to his art, as well as to his efforts to reestablish his family.

The act of a nobleman successfully elevating his status within the *uomini di stato* was itself a feat of *gloria*, and Michelangelo’s contemporaries acknowledged that he achieved this. Machiavelli praises Ferdinand of Aragon, King of Spain, in chapter 21 of *The Prince*. This comment testifies to the honor accorded to noblemen who had raised their status within the *uomini di stato*. Machiavelli spoke so favorably about Ferdinand because he elevated himself from an insignificant king to the foremost king in Christendom, and was believed to have achieved fame and glory. For this, Machiavelli states that Ferdinand deserved his praises sung. Machiavelli’s comment implies that it was believed among the *uomini di stato* that noblemen

---

202 Buonarroti, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 1:75. “Io ò finita la chapella che io dipignievo: el Papa resta assai ben sodisfato, e·ll’altre cose non mi riescono a me chome stimavo; incholpone e’ tempi, che sono molto chontrari all’arte nostra.”

203 Machiavelli, 81.
should not live off of the feats of gloria achieved by their ancestors, but achieve such feats for
themselves, for the nobility of a family would decline if not renewed. He adds:

…these princes of ours, who had been in their principality many years, let them
not accuse fortune of having lost them, but rather their own indolence: because,
ever having thought in calm times that times might change (which is the
common defect of men, discounting the storm during the calm), then when
adverse times came, they thought to flee rather than to defend themselves…no
one should ever choose to fall, believing that others might pick [him] up, which
either does not happen or, if it happens, it is not your security, because that
stratagem was vile and not dependant on you. And the only defenses that are
good, are certain, are durable, [are the ones] that depend on you yourself and on
your virtue.204

For Machiavelli, it is the duty of each patriarch of a noble family to renew his family’s social
estate: such dedication cannot be left to future generations, for they may be equally passive, and
so the family’s relevance within the nobility could eventually wither away. Although Machiavelli
speaks of princes, the philosophy of which he speaks guided all ranks within the nobility, for
others spoke of this philosophy when defining nobility, including Landino and Poggio.205 The
latter states: “If we follow them supported by the wealth of our parents, than we shall necessarily
be thought of less value than those who have no support from their ancestors but stand out on the
journey as the authors of their own virtue and fame.”206 These comments make it clear that a
nobleman who renewed his family’s nobility would be highly esteemed, and one who elevated it
would be extolled, as was Michelangelo. It is possible that Michelangelo’s contemporaries
acknowledged that he had achieved gloria, not so much because of his artistic achievements, but
rather because through them, they believed that he had restored and even elevated his family’s
status.

204 Ibid., 90.

205 Landino, 205–206.

206 Bracciolini, 84.
Alessandro da Canossa alludes to this in the letter he wrote to Michelangelo in which he acknowledges the artist as his relative. In his postscript he writes: “my much loved and honored relation messer Michelle Angelo Buonarroti da [Cano]ssa,” he adds, “very great sculptor, in Rome.”207 By including the phrase “very great sculptor” to a laudatory address that called Michelangelo a much loved and honored man, the Count implies that Michelangelo had achieved gloria through his sculptural feats, and that it was through his sculpture that Michelangelo had become much loved and honored. Nobles, in other words, did not view Michelangelo as a salariato, but rather, as a nobleman performing acts worthy of his nobility.

Michelangelo’s contemporaries recognized him as an honored nobleman. The advantages he and his family were accorded by the Florentine state and by political leaders testify to this. The Buonarroti went from being completely ignored to greatly honored due to Michelangelo’s success as an artist. Their fortunes began to change in the year 1512 (the year during which Michelangelo finished the Sistine Ceiling) when Michelangelo’s brother Buonarroto was elected to state office for the first time. He became Proveditore dei Consoli del mare.208 The Medici had reassumed power by this point, and it is likely that the Buonarroti were being rewarded for Michelangelo’s close relationship with the family. Buonarroto was elected to the Twelve in the years 1513, when Michelangelo was working on Julius II’s tomb, and 1525, the year when he placed the Victory in the Palazzo Vecchio, and a year before he began work on the tombs for Lorenzo and Giuliano de’ Medici in the Medici Chapel (1526–1531).209 Buonarroto was elected Prior in November and

208 Barocchi et al. eds., 1:XXIX–XXX.
209 Ibid., 1:XXX; Tratte, 793 and 794, passim.
December 1515 while Michelangelo was still working on Julius II tomb’s tomb.\textsuperscript{210} During this time Buonarroti helped officiate the triumphant entry of Pope Leo X into Florence.\textsuperscript{211} Michelangelo’s influence by this time was such that he was able to secure this position for his brother: He wrote to Filippo Strozzi the Younger asking him to use his influence in the matter;\textsuperscript{212} Strozzi obliged, and Buonarroti received the position. During this time, Leo X rewarded the Buonarroti for Michelangelo’s friendship: he bestowed upon Buonarroti the prestigious title of Count Palatine,\textsuperscript{213} and granted the family permission to add the famous Medici \textit{palle} (balls) and

\textsuperscript{210} Tratte, 608 (Tre Maggiori, 1512–32), 37$r$; and Priorista Mariani, bobina 4, 255 (627$r$); Tratte 608, 101$v$ and 139$v$: Hatfield, 209.

\textsuperscript{211} Buonarroti writes of the privilege to his brother Gismondo on October 31, 1515: “E cierto ò havuto grandisimo honore, più che io non meritavo, e spezialmente in questo tenpo de la venuta del Ponteficie.” Barocchi et al. eds., 1:42–43. He does so again a few weeks later on November 6, 1515: “Io chredevo che il Turchetto di Botte venisi a vederti, chome e’ m’aveva detto, ma dipoi che io sono qua su non l’ò visto, né anche so se egli s’è venuto; e non esendo venuto e non avendo avuta per aventura la lett(e)ra, per questa ti sia aviso, e chosì de la festa, c[i]oè del parato e chonvito bello che faciemo. E benché sia stato chon buona spesa, pocho m’è doluto, perché sono chose honoevole, e spezialmente esendo stato tanto tenpo che in chassa non era stato simile chosa: ma solo mi duole non ci esere tu stato.” Ibid., 1:43. Also see Buonarroti’s letter to Michelangelo from the end of December 1515. Buonarroti, \textit{Il carteggio di Michelangelo}, 1:184–185.

\textsuperscript{212} On June 16, 1515, Michelangelo writes to Buonarroti that he has written a letter to Strozzi requesting the latter to use his influence in the matter. “Buonarroti, io ô scricto la lectera a Filippo Strozzi; guarda se·cti piace e dagniene.” Buonarroti, \textit{Il carteggio di Michelangelo}, 1:166.

\textsuperscript{213} Barocchi et al. eds., 1:XXX.
the letter combination “LX” (for Leo X) to their coat of arms. Buonarroto went on to serve on the Sixteen from 1521 to 1522, and on the Twelve in 1525. Buonarroto indeed enjoyed a successful political career due to the honor Michelangelo had brought to their casa.

After a lackluster career in public service, fortunes also changed for Michelangelo’s father, Lodovico. In 1528, while Michelangelo was still working on the Medici Chapel, Lodovico was elected to two important posts: Cittadini alle Porte (Citizens at the Gate) and Cinque del Centado (Five of the Countryside). He declined these posts, however, in all likelihood for health reasons; he had just two years to live. In 1529 he was elected to serve as podestà at the Castelfranco di Sotto, a position he served from July 17, 1529, to January 16, 1530. He died later that year at the age of eighty-seven.

Less acknowledged, perhaps, is that Michelangelo also benefitted politically due to his artistic accomplishments: he was elected to office for the first time in 1516 as podestà of

---

214 Buonarroto writes to Gismondo of this latter honor in a letter dated July 21, 1517: “Tu vedrai come la sta: tuto il cha(n)po è azuro e le listre g[i]ale e ’ gigli g[i]ali e tuto il cha(n)po di sopra è g[i]alo, la pala azura e ’ gigli 3 g[i]ali, le lett(er)e nere, come vedrai, c[i]oè L. X. E anche Antonio Braci ti potrebbe dire dove fecie la sua, perché sta anche bene. Vedi di pigliare un pocho questa briga per mio amore, e quello si spenderà ti farò buono. Usa un poco di diligenzia.” Barocchi, et al., eds., I: 136–137.

215 Tratte, 608, 101v and 139v: Hatfield, 209. For the latter, see footnote 209.

216 For information on all three posts see Tratte, 800 (Uffici Intrinseci e Estrinseci, 1527–32), 7r: Hatfield, 206; and Barocchi, et al., eds., I:xxvii. For Lodovico’s comments about these posts see two letters that he wrote to his son Giovansimone on August 7, 1528 and July 12, 1529. ibid., 311 and 314.
Buggiano. He declined this position, however, because business kept him in Rome.\textsuperscript{217} In general, he took little interest in political office. It was not until the 1520s, when he was conveniently back in Florence working on the Medici Chapel and the Laurentian Library (1524–1559), that he accepted an office. He served on the Council of the People (1521), on the Council of the Commune (December 1521 and April 1524), in the Office of Nine of Ordinance and Militia (1529), and as Governor General of Fortifications (1529).\textsuperscript{218} However, he participated little in these positions, serving in name only.

For the remainder of his life—and even thirty years after his death—Michelangelo was drawn for numerous offices in the Florentine government.\textsuperscript{219} That his name continued to be drawn for office even after his death, affirms that nomination to political office in Florence was at least in part a customary gesture of honor. On April 24, 1554, Cosimo I honored Michelangelo by

\textsuperscript{217} Tratte, 836, 242\textsuperscript{r} and 248\textsuperscript{r}: Hatfield, 214.

\textsuperscript{218} Tratte, 714 (Consigli del Popolo e del Comune, 1513–25, 186\textsuperscript{v}, 202\textsuperscript{v}, and 258\textsuperscript{v}: Hatfield, 215; Tratte, Uffici Intrinseci, bobina 7, 134; and Tratte, 796, 33\textsuperscript{r}; and 800, 47\textsuperscript{r}: Hatfield, 217.

\textsuperscript{219} Tratte, 840, 136\textsuperscript{v}, 180\textsuperscript{r}, 202\textsuperscript{v}, Tratte, 840, 227\textsuperscript{v}: Hatfield, 216; Tratte, 841, 7\textsuperscript{r}; and 796 (Nomine, 1528–30, 21\textsuperscript{r}; Tratte, 800 (Uffici Intrinseci e Estrinseci, 1527–30), 43\textsuperscript{v}; 841, 18\textsuperscript{v} and 58\textsuperscript{v}–59\textsuperscript{r}; Tratte, Uffici Intrinseci, bobina 7, 236; Tratte, 800, 43\textsuperscript{v}, 45\textsuperscript{r}; Tratte, 841, 21\textsuperscript{v}; Tratte, Uffici Intrinseci, bobina 7, 134; and Tratte, 796, 33\textsuperscript{r}; and 800, 47\textsuperscript{r}: Hatfield, 217; Tratte, 841, 71\textsuperscript{r}, 95\textsuperscript{r}, 120\textsuperscript{r}; Tratte, 841, 161\textsuperscript{v}; Tratte, 800, 213\textsuperscript{r} (\textit{a Specchio}); 842 (Uffici Intrinseci e Estrinseci, 1531–33), 47\textsuperscript{r} and 48\textsuperscript{v} (elected but refused); and 1047 (Rettori, 1531–38), 7\textsuperscript{v} (\textit{a Specchio}): Hatfield, 218; Tratte, 842, 56\textsuperscript{v}; Tratte, 844 (Uffici Intrinseci e Estrinseci, 1537–39), 53\textsuperscript{v}; 845 (1539–42), 45\textsuperscript{r}; 846 (1542–45), 28\textsuperscript{r}; 847 (1545–48–49), 195\textsuperscript{r}; 848 (1548/49–52), 215\textsuperscript{v}; 850 (1557–61), 245\textsuperscript{r} and 374\textsuperscript{r}; and 851 (1561–63), 46\textsuperscript{v}; Tratte, 240 (Specchio, 1540–41), 69\textsuperscript{v}; 847, 9\textsuperscript{r} and 234\textsuperscript{v}; and 848, 71\textsuperscript{r}, 95\textsuperscript{r}, 237\textsuperscript{v}: Hatfield, 219.
appointing him to the Council of the Two Hundred.\textsuperscript{220} Michelangelo did not actually serve on the Council, however. By this time, it had been twenty years since he had abandoned the city, never to return. This appointment was such an honor, however, that it cemented Michelangelo and his descendants among the elite of Florentine nobility. From this point on, the Buonarroti enjoyed prominent status among Florence’s \textit{cittadini}: Michelangelo’s nephew, Lionardo, began to be drawn for office at least once every year. In 1564 just after Michelangelo died, he was honored with the appointment of his nephew to the Council of the Two Hundred. In 1610, Lionardo’s son, Michelangelo the Younger, was also elected to the Council.\textsuperscript{221}

Michelangelo rejected the offices to which he was elected not because he thought that participating in Florentine politics was unimportant, but rather because he believed he could help his family’s status more by focusing on his career. He recognized, of course, that holding public office was imperative to reestablishing his family among the \textit{uomini di stato}: In addition to taking the trouble to use his influence to ensure that Buonarrotto was elected as Prior in 1515, Michelangelo made it the first goal of his career to earn enough money to clear his family members of their debts, and ensure that they would never again be declared a \textit{Specchio}. In a letter dated August 19, 1497, a twenty-two-year-old Michelangelo wrote to his father (the year during which he finished \textit{Bacchus} and began the \textit{Vatican Pietà}) conveying this goal. He expresses his great concern with keeping his family out of debt. He writes that he had heard from Buonarrotto that Consiglio d’Antonio Cisti, the brother of their recently deceased step-mother, had approached Lodovico for a debt their father owed to him. Michelangelo had learned that Consiglio was threatening Lodovico with arrest if he did not make payment soon. Michelangelo

\textsuperscript{220} Tratte, Uffici Intrinseci, bobina 8, 23; and Tratte, 725 (Dugento a famiglie), 50v: Hatfield, 220.

\textsuperscript{221} Barocchi, et al., eds., 1:1I; Tratte, Uffici Intrinseci, bobina 10 (Tratte, 909), 315; and Tratte, 725, 50v: Hatfield, 221.
advised his father on the matter in clear terms: “I advise you to see to it that you do come to an
agreement and pay him a few ducats on the account; and let me know what you agree to give him
and I’ll send it to you, if you haven’t got it.” 222 He added:

Although I have very little money, as I’ve told you, I’ll contrive to borrow it, so
that you don’t have to withdraw it from the Funds [the Monte (Public Debt)], as
Buonarroti said... you must realize that I, too, have expenses and troubles.
However, what you ask of me I’ll send you, even if I should have to sell myself
as a slave.223

Michelangelo’s comments reveal that his family’s financial security was of great concern to him.
In addition, the directive stance he took toward his father reveals that Michelangelo had taken on
the role of family patriarch early in his career. This attitude implies that he saw securing the
family’s finances as an important—if not his primary—responsibility. Michelangelo stated this
more clearly in a letter to his father dated June 5, 1512:

I thank God I am quit of this business [purchasing the farm called la Loggia from
Santa Maria Nuova in the parish of Santo Stefano-in-Pare]. Now only one thing
more remains for me to do and that is to set up those brothers of mine in a shop,
for I think of nothing else day or night. Then it seems to me I shall have
discharged my obligation; and if more of life remains to me, I want to live it in
peace.224

222 Buonarroti, The Letters of Michelangelo, 1:5. “Io vi dico che voi vegiate d’acordalla e di dagli
qualche ducato inanzi; e quello che voi rimanete d’achordo di dagli, mandatemelo a dire, e io ve
gli manderò, se voi no’ gli avete.” Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 1:4.

m’ingiegnierò d’acattergli, acciò che non s’abbi a pigliare danari del Monte, come mi dicie
Bonarroti... si che voi dovete credere che anch’io spendo e ò delle fatiche. Pure, quello mi
chiedereete io ve lo manderò, s’io dovessi vendermi per istiavo.” Buonarroti, Il carteggio di
Michelangelo, 1:4.

faccienda. Ora me ne resta sola un’altra, e questa è di fare fare una boctega a chostestoro, che non
Michelangelo implies that he believed his “obligations” to be building a family estate, which he created through the purchase of numerous farms, and setting up a family business. Florence’s leading families maintained their wealth through family businesses handed down through the generations. Michelangelo refers here to the wool business he had been working to establish for his brothers since 1509 when he was still painting the Sistine Ceiling. The wool trade was one of Florence’s biggest and most secure markets, and would have been a reliable way for the Buonarroti to protect their wealth. In the last line of Michelangelo’s comment, he implies that he had worked hard in his artistic career in order to have the money to achieve these goals. It follows that he worked as an artist more out of necessity than out the love of art.

This being the case, despite his protests to the contrary, money was undoubtedly one of the major factors in his business decisions, particularly regarding the commissions he chose and the fees he demanded from his patrons. Throughout his career, Michelangelo gave his patrons quotes for the overhead on the project he was doing for them, but he would not use all of the money that was intended for his overhead for this purpose. He would take the majority of it and deposit it into his personal account, and then either work with the remaining amount, or request additional funding from the patron. He clearly saw his career as a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself. Most famously, Michelangelo received d1000 from Pope Julius II via Iacopo penso a altro el di e·lla nocte. Dipoi mi parrà avere sodisfacto a quello che sono ubrigato, e·sse mi resterà più da vivere, mi vorrò vivere in pace.” Buonarotti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, 1:132.

Buonarroti, The Letters of Michelangelo, 1:48–49. (Letter is dated June 1509.) Michelangelo refers to this business in the letter. He tells his father of his disappointment at hearing that Giovansimone was taking little care in the venture. He explains to his father that he is disappointed in his brother because he, Michelangelo, works so hard in order to better the family, and was trying to set up his brothers in a business for their own benefit, not his.
Salviati in 1506 to begin work on Julius’s tomb. Of the d1000, which the artist was supposed to use to obtain marble, Michelangelo deposited f600 into his personal account in Florence.\textsuperscript{226} The tomb of Julius II turned into something of a scandal for Michelangelo because after decades of accepting large amounts of money for the project, Michelangelo had produced little, and was justifiably accused by Julius’s heirs of stealing the money. For the Sistine Ceiling project Michelangelo received d3000. He sent d2041 to Florence for his own personal investment.\textsuperscript{227} Michelangelo intentionally kept production costs down on this project in order to increase his profit margin. This is perhaps the reason Michelangelo used an unconventionally small amount of gold leaf in the décor.\textsuperscript{228} Michelangelo also left many of his commissions unfinished. If Michelangelo saw his artistic career as the end itself, he would have been more concerned with

\textsuperscript{226} Hatfield, 19. For two letters in which Michelangelo speaks of the affair concerning this money, see Buonarotti, \textit{Il carteggio di Michelangelo}, 3:7–9, and 10–11. (Letters are from the end of December 1523. They are addressed to Giovan Francesco Fattucci.)


\textsuperscript{228} Condivi argues that Michelangelo did not want to use gold leaf because the individuals depicted were poor, and as such would not have worn gold: “Mancava il ritoccarla coll’azzurro oltramarino a secco, e con oro in qualche luogo, perchè paresse più ricca. Giulio, passato quel fervore, voleva pur che Michelagnolo la fornisse; ma egli considerando l’impaccio che avrebbe avuto in rimettere in ordine il palco, rispose che quel che le mancava non era cosa che importasse. ‘Bisognerebbe pur ritoccarla d’oro,’ rispose il papa; a cui Michelagnolo familiarmemente, come soleva con Sua Santità: ‘Io non veggio che gli uomini portino oro.’ E’l papa: “La sarà povera.—Quei che sono qui dipinti,’ rispose elgi, ‘furon poveri ancor essi.’ Così si buttò in burla, ed è così rimasta.” Condivi, \textit{Vita di Michelangiolo}, 88–89.
finishing commissions and using all the money that was intended to go toward materials for that purpose. He would not have consistently pocketed the funds.

With the money Michelangelo skimmed off of his overhead costs, he not only cleared his family’s debts, but also invested in property. He purchased his first property in 1505, the year after he finished the *David*, and continued to purchase property throughout the remainder of his life, creating a farming estate of approximately 0.75km x 1.50km in Settignano that was larger, as stated earlier, than the Medici estate at Careggi, and worth just \( \$212.5 \) less.\(^{229}\) Michelangelo understood the importance of acquiring property. In a letter already mentioned, Michelangelo gave his still-living brothers, Gismondo and Giovansimone, and his nephew, Lionardo 1000 gold *scudi* each with the proviso that they invest it together in a way that would remain in the family and that would bring them an income.\(^{230}\) He suggests they invest in property (meaning farmland).\(^{231}\) Michelangelo implies that farmland was a secure way to protect the family from poverty because farming generates an income. He also implies that he was concerned that his descendants be able to maintain their wealth, and thus the social status of the family.

Michelangelo built a large enough farming estate in Settignano to provide a comfortable income

\(^{229}\) See footnote 66.

\(^{230}\) Michelangelo writes: “Io sono resoluto, oltre alli sopra detti danari, povedere costì a Giovan Simone, Gismondo et a te scudi tre mila d’oro in oro, c[i]oè scudi mille per uno, ma a tutti insieme; con questo, che si investischino in beni stabili o in qualche altra cosa che vi porti utile et che resti alla casa. Però andate pensando di metterli in qualche cosa stabile et buona, et quando havete qualcosa che vi paia a propositio, avisatemelo, che vi farò la provisione de’ denari.” *Buonarroti, Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, 4:225.

\(^{231}\) Michelangelo often discussed acquiring property in his letters. Except for when he refers specifically to a townhouse, he means farmland.
for his family. In a letter dated October 15, 1547, he writes to Lionardo: “It is my experience that it is only in virtue of landed property that families establish themselves in Florence.”\(^{232}\) In writing about nobility, Buonaccorso da Montemagno implies that this was a commonly held belief among the *uomini di stato*: “You laud this nobility of yours, embellished with the grandest palaces, the most beautiful suburban estates and the richest farms…”\(^{233}\) Property, in other words, was an outward, and accepted, sign of nobility.

For Michelangelo art served multiple functions: to provide him with funds sufficient to free his family members of debt, to secure their financial stability, to acquire property in order to live at a level expected of the *uomini di stato*; and as a means to achieve *gloria*. His art, in other words, functioned as a means through which he could achieve and perform nobility.

He perhaps made his most celebrated statement on the matter when he signed the *Vatican Pietà*. On the Virgin’s sash, he carved the words, MICHAEL•AGELVS•BONAROTVS•FLORENT•FACIEBA (fig. 4-1).\(^{234}\) The signature is significant on two accounts: the *Pietà* is the only work Michelangelo signed and it is the first work since antiquity that its creator signed using the imperfect verb tense of the Latin word *faciebat* (“was making”).\(^{235}\) By including his last name in his signature, he declares that a nobleman made the work. By altering the word from *faciebat* to *facieba*, his declares that his work as an artist is


\(^{233}\) Da Montemagno, 50.

\(^{234}\) Michelangelo signed the *Pietà* on a sash across the Madonna’s chest.

\(^{235}\) See Aileen June Wang, “Michelangelo’s Signature,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 35, no. 2 (2004): 447. We know of the practice in antiquity of artists signing their works with *facieba* from Pliny the Elder.
unfinished. This latter conclusion derives from Wang, who argues that by including the word *faciebat* Michelangelo evokes Pliny the Elder’s comment in the preface to *Natural History* that when Apelles and Polyclitus signed their names to their works with the word *faciebat* they implied that art is always in process and never completed. The work does appear to be complete, however (fig. 4-2). Perhaps Michelangelo means to suggest not only his competition with ancient sculptors, but also, that his work as an artist was at the time unfinished: by adding his own touch to the term *faciebat* by leaving of its final letter, he amends its meaning. I argue that the amended term, combined with the inclusion of his noble name in the inscription, suggests that not only is his art a performance of nobility, but also that his work in this regard was at the time unfinished; he proclaims his intention to achieve aristocratic *gloria* through his artistic accomplishments.

236 See Wang 459. Pliny writes, “…I should like to be accepted on the lines of those founders of painting and sculpture who, as you will find in these volumes, used to inscribe their finished works, even the masterpieces which we can never be tired of admiring, with a provisional title such as ‘Worked on by Apelles’ or ‘Polyclitus,’ as though art was always a thing in process and not completed…” Pliny, *Preface, Book One, and Book Two*, vol. 1, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham, ed. T.E. Page, E. Capps and W.H.D. Rouse (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1938), 17. “ex illis nos velim intellegi pingendi fingendique conditoribus quos in libellis his invenies absoluta opera, et illa quoque quae mirando non satiamur, pendentii titulo inscripsisse, ut ‘Apelles faciebat’ aut ‘Polyclitus,’ tamquam inchoata semper arte et imperfecta…” Ibid., 16.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I demonstrate that Michelangelo’s nobility is relevant to understanding his art because his status as a nobleman was not simply a fact of his origins, but rather the determinative factor shaping his raison d’être. In Chapters 2 through 4, I argue that Michelangelo’s primary concern throughout his life was to raise his family from the ranks of the poveri vergognosi to that of the functioning members of the uomini di stato. Each of these chapters presents a strategy that Michelangelo used to perform nobility: Chapter 2 discusses how Michelangelo’s performance of poverty was actually a performance of modesty and is just one of many ways he presented himself live by the codes of etiquette demanded of and by members of the uomini di stato. Chapter 3 discusses how Condivi’s biography combats Vasari’s version in order to emphasize the fact that the artist was born into the nobility. It also argues that Michelangelo used the biography as his ricordanze through which he not only testified to his claims of noble birth, but also that he fulfilled his duty as a nobleman to renew the gloria his ancestors had achieved. Chapter 4 argues that Michelangelo saw his career as an artist as a means to an end—that of achieving the wealth and gloria necessary to restore his family to its former status.

The discussion presented in these chapters indicates that Michelangelo’s nobility played a foundational role in his life and his sense of himself. Many of the behaviors Vasari and Condivi present of Michelangelo have perplexed scholars since art historians began studying the artist. These behaviors have received much attention from scholars, but no scholar has reached a coherent explanation until now. The theories proposed in the past succeeded in explaining one behavior at the expense of a logical explanation for another. However, as the evidence presented in this thesis suggests, we reach a coherent explanation for much of the artist’s behavior when it
is analyzed within the context of noble birth, claims of family, and the drive to restore family place and reputation. This thesis reveals that Michelangelo’s behavior was normal—and even expected of—noblemen. These findings call into question the entrenched interpretation of Michelangelo, which posits him as an eccentric who functioned beyond the bounds of normal society. These findings have ramifications on our interpretations of his art because the above interpretation of his personality has sculpted the mainstream theories on his works of art. It follows that although Michelangelo is the most written about artist in the field of art history, we may be just on the cusp of understanding his art and career in a context of historical accuracy. My hope is that my work provides a model for both a new series of investigations into the meta-messages inhering in Michelangelo’s work as well as for interpreting the reception they received from his contemporaries.

The implications of this study, however, reach beyond the work of Michelangelo to the exploration of the relevance of class identity in our conceptions of other Italian Renaissance artists. Other artists appear to have been similarly preoccupied with the concept of nobility and their own claims to it: Leon Battista Alberti wrote three books (della Famiglia) for his family on how to reestablish their casa within the uomini di stato. Leonardo da Vinci, who like Alberti was an illegitimate son of a nobleman, wrote a treatise arguing that painting should be considered a noble pursuit. Could all of Leonardo’s inventions and innovations have been a part of his own plan to achieve gloria? Could his treatise, like Condivi’s biography for Michelangelo, have been his way of trying to establish himself among the nobility? Quite possibly. Other artists appear to have tried to use their art as a way to ennoble themselves: Baccio Bandinelli used the favor he gained through his art with Cosimo I to have an audience with Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor,

whom he convinced to make him a knight in the Imperial Order of Santiago, one of the most exclusive orders of knights in Christendom.\textsuperscript{238} In addition, Bandinelli, born Baccio Brandini, created for himself a false noble \textit{lignaggio} by that the Bandinelli family recognize him as a blood relation.\textsuperscript{239} And, Raphael used his now famous charisma and charm to ingratiate himself with Rome’s elite, and fashioned himself into an artist-courtier.

In conclusion, I hope that my readers will see that my arguments in these chapters are strong enough to support a new methodology for studying Italian Renaissance artists. A vigorous theoretical application of class relationships to the production of art may introduce a new era in not only Michelangelo scholarship, but in Italian Renaissance art history at large.


Bibliography


———. *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State: The Discipline of Disegno*. 


Dronke, Peter. *Dante’s Second Love: The Originality and the Contexts of the Convivio*. Exeter,


Pliny. Preface, Book One, and Book Two. Vol. 1, Natural History. Translated by H. Rackham.


Varchi, Benedetto. Orazione funerale di M. Benedetto Varchi fatta, e recitata da lui pubblicamente nell'essequie di Michelagnolo Buonarroti in Firenze, nella chiesa di San


Appendix