

LIFE OF MICHELAGNOLO BUONARROTI PAINTER, SCULPTOR, AND ARCHITECT OF FLORENCE

excerpts

After discussing many things together, they [Pope Clement and Michelangelo] resolved to finish completely the library and new sacristy of S. Lorenzo in Florence. Michelagnolo therefore departed from Rome [for Florence in 1525], and raised the cupola [the dome of the new sacristy, Basilica San Lorenzo, designed by Brunelleschi] that is now to be seen, causing it to be wrought in various orders of composition; and he had a ball with seventy-two faces made by the goldsmith Piloto, which is very beautiful. It happened, while Michelagnolo was raising the cupola, that he was asked by some friends, "Should you not make your lantern very different from that of Filippo Brunelleschi?" And he answered them, "Different it can be made with ease, but better, no." He made four tombs in that sacristy, to adorn the walls and to contain the bodies of the fathers of the two Popes, the elder Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano, and those of Giuliano, the brother of Leo, and of [Pg 44] Duke Lorenzo, his nephew. And since he wished to execute the work in imitation of the old sacristy that Filippo Brunelleschi had built, but with another manner of ornamentation, he made in it an ornamentation in a composite order, in a more varied and more original manner than any other master at any time, whether ancient or modern, had been able to achieve, for in the novelty of the beautiful cornices, capitals, bases, doors, tabernacles, and tombs, he departed not a little from the work regulated by measure, order, and rule, which other men did according to a common use and after Vitruvius and the antiquities, to which he would not conform. That licence has done much to give courage to those who have seen his methods to set themselves to imitate him, and new fantasies have since been seen which have more of the grotesque than of reason or rule in their ornamentation. Wherefore the craftsmen owe him an infinite and everlasting obligation, he having broken the bonds and chains by reason of which they had always followed a beaten path in the execution of their works. And even more did he demonstrate and seek to make known such a method afterwards in the library of S. Lorenzo, at the same place; in the beautiful distribution of the windows, in the pattern of the ceiling, and in the marvellous entrance of the vestibule. Nor was there ever seen a more resolute grace, both in the whole and in the parts, as in the consoles, tabernacles, and cornices, nor any staircase more commodious; in which last he made such bizarre breaks in the outlines of the steps, and departed so much from the common use of others, that everyone was amazed.

At this same time he continued the work in the above-mentioned sacristy, in which were seven statues that were left partly finished and partly not. With these, and with the architectural inventions of the tombs, it must be confessed that he surpassed every man in these three professions; to which testimony is borne by the statues of marble, blocked out and finished by him, which are to be seen in that place. One is Our Lady, who is in a sitting attitude, with the right leg crossed over the left and one knee placed upon the other, and the Child, with the thighs astride the leg that is uppermost, turns in a most beautiful attitude towards His Mother, hungry for her milk, and she, while holding Him with one hand and supporting herself with the other, bends forward to give it to Him; and although the figure is not equal in every part, and it was left rough and showing the marks of the gradine, yet with all its imperfections there may be recognized in it the full perfection of the work. Even more did he cause everyone to marvel by the circumstance that in making the tombs of Duke

Giuliano and Duke Lorenzo de' Medici he considered [Pg 46] that earth alone was not enough to give them honourable burial in their greatness, and desired that all the phases of the world should be there, and that their sepulchres should be surrounded and covered by four statues; wherefore he gave to one Night and Day, and to the other Dawn and Twilight; which statues, most beautifully wrought in form, in attitude, and in the masterly treatment of the muscles, would suffice, if that art were lost, to restore her to her pristine lustre. There, among the other statues, are the two Captains, armed; one the pensive Duke Lorenzo, the very presentment of wisdom, with legs so beautiful and so well wrought, that there is nothing better to be seen by mortal eye; and the other is Duke Giuliano, so proud a figure, with the head, the throat, the setting of the eyes, the profile of the nose, the opening of the mouth, and the hair all so divine, to say nothing of the hands, arms, knees, feet, and, in short, every other thing that he carved therein, that the eye can never be weary or have its fill of gazing at them; and, of a truth, whoever studies the beauty of the buskins and the cuirass, believes it to be celestial rather than mortal. But what shall I say of the Dawn, a nude woman, who is such as to awaken melancholy in the soul and to render impotent the style of sculpture? In her attitude may be seen her effort, as she rises, heavy with sleep, and raises herself from her downy bed; and it seems that in awakening she has found the eyes of that great Duke closed in death, so that she is agonized with bitter grief, weeping in her own unchangeable beauty in token of her great sorrow. And what can I say of the Night, a statue not rare only, but unique? Who is there who has ever seen in that art in any age, ancient or modern, statues of such a kind? For in her may be seen not only the stillness of one sleeping, but the grief and melancholy of one who has lost a great and honoured possession; and we must believe that this is that night of darkness that obscures all those who thought for some time, I will not say to surpass, but to equal Michelagnolo in sculpture and design. In that statue is infused all the somnolence that is seen in sleeping forms; wherefore many verses in Latin and rhymes in the vulgar tongue were written in her praise by persons of great learning, such as these, of which the author is not known—

La Notte che tu vedi in sì dolci atti
 Dormire, fu da un Angelo scolpita
 In questo sasso; e perche dorme, ha vita.
 Destala, se no 'l credi, e parleratti.

[The Night you see in such sweet repose,
 Was sculpted by an Angel in this stone;
 And because she sleeps, she has life.
 Wake her, if you don't believe it, and she will speak to you.]

To which Michelagnolo, speaking in the person of Night, answered thus—

Grato mi è il sonno, e più l'esser di sasso;
 Mentre che il danno e la vergogna dura,
 Non veder' non sentir' m'è gran ventura.
 Però non mi destar'; deh parla basso.

[Sleep is precious to me, and even more so being made of stone;
 While the suffering and shame endure,
 Not seeing and not hearing is a great blessing for me.
 Therefore, do not wake me; please speak softly.]

Truly, if the enmity that there is between Fortune and Genius, between the envy of the one and the excellence of the other, had not prevented such a work from being carried to completion, Art was like to prove to Nature that she surpassed her by a great measure in every conception.

...

It became necessary for Michelagnolo to go to Rome to see Pope Clement, who, although angry with him, yet, as the friend of every talent, forgave him everything, and gave him orders that he should return to Florence and have the library and sacristy of S. Lorenzo completely finished; and, in order to shorten that work, a vast number of statues that were to be included in it were distributed among other masters. Two he allotted to Tribolo, one to Raffaello da Montelupo, and one to Fra Giovanni Agnolo, the Servite friar, all sculptors; and he gave them assistance in these, making rough models in clay for each of them. Whereupon they all worked valiantly, and he, also, caused work to be pursued on the library, and thus the ceiling was finished in carved woodwork, which was executed after his models by the hands of the Florentines Carota and Tasso, excellent carvers and also masters of carpentry; and likewise the shelves for the books, which were executed at that time by Battista del Cinque and his friend Ciappino, good masters in that profession. And in order to give the work its final perfection there was summoned to Florence the divine Giovanni da Udine, who, together with others his assistants and also some Florentine masters, decorated the tribune with stucco; and they all sought with great solicitude to give completion to that vast undertaking.

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It happened in the year 1546 that Antonio da San Gallo died; whereupon, there being now no one to direct the building of S. Pietro, many suggestions were made by the superintendents to the Pope as to who should have it. Finally his Holiness, inspired, I believe, by God, resolved to send for Michelagnolo. But he, when asked to take Antonio's place, refused it, saying, in order to avoid such a burden, that architecture was not his proper art; and in the end, entreaties not availing, the Pope commanded that he should accept it, whereupon, to his great displeasure and against his wish, he was forced to undertake that enterprise. And one day among others that he went to S. Pietro to see the wooden model that San Gallo had made, and to examine the building, he found there the whole San Gallo faction, who, crowding before Michelagnolo, said to him in the best terms at their command that they rejoiced that the charge of the building was to be his, and that the model was a field where there would never be any want of pasture. "You speak the truth," answered Michelagnolo, meaning to infer, as he declared to a friend, that it was good for sheep and oxen, who knew nothing of art. And afterwards he used to say publicly that San Gallo had made it wanting in lights, that it had on the exterior too many ranges of columns one above another, and that, with its innumerable projections, pinnacles, and subdivisions of members, it was more akin to the German manner than to the good method of the ancients or to the gladsome and beautiful modern manner; and, in addition to this, that it was possible to save fifty years of time and more than three hundred thousand crowns of money in finishing the building, and to execute it with more majesty, grandeur, and facility, greater beauty and convenience, and better ordered design. This he afterwards proved by a model that he made, in order to bring it to the form in which the work is now seen constructed; and thus he demonstrated that what he said was nothing but the truth. This model cost him twenty-five crowns, and was made in a fortnight; that of

San Gallo, as has been related, cost four thousand, and took [Pg 64] many years to finish. From this and other circumstances it became evident that that fabric was but a shop and a business for making money, and that it would be continually delayed, with the intention of never finishing it, by those who had undertaken it as a means of profit.

Such methods did not please our upright Michelagnolo, and in order to get rid of all these people, while the Pope was forcing him to accept the office of architect to the work, he said to them openly one day that they should use all the assistance of their friends and do all that they could to prevent him from entering on that office, because, if he were to undertake such a charge, he would not have one of them about the building. Which words, spoken in public, were taken very ill, as may be believed, and were the reason that they conceived a great hatred against him, which increased every day as they saw the whole design being changed, both within and without, so that they would scarcely let him live, seeking out daily new and various devices to harass him, as will be related in the proper place. Finally the Pope issued a Motu-proprio creating him head of that fabric, with full authority, and giving him power to do or undo whatever he chose, and to add, take away, or vary anything at his pleasure; and he decreed that all the officials employed in the work should be subservient to his will.

Whereupon Michelagnolo, seeing the great confidence and trust that the Pope placed in him, desired, in order to prove his generosity, that it should be declared in the Motu-proprio that he was serving in the fabric for the love of God and without any reward. It is true that the Pope had formerly granted to him the ferry over the river at Parma,[\[2\]](#) which yielded him about six hundred crowns; but he lost it at the death of Duke Pier Luigi Farnese, and in exchange for it he was given a Chancellery at Rimini, a post of less value. About that he showed no concern; and, although the Pope sent him money several times by way of salary, he would never accept it, to which witness is borne by Messer Alessandro Ruffini, Chamberlain to the Pope at that time, and by M. Pier Giovanni Aliotti, Bishop of Forlì. Finally the model that had been made by Michelagnolo was approved by the Pope; which model diminished S. Pietro in size, but gave it greater grandeur, [Pg 65] to the satisfaction of all those who have judgment, although some who profess to be good judges, which in fact they are not, do not approve of it. He found that the four principal piers built by Bramante, and left by Antonio da San Gallo, which had to support the weight of the tribune, were weak; and these he partly filled up, and beside them he made two winding or spiral staircases, in which is an ascent so easy that the beasts of burden can climb them, carrying all the materials to the very top, and men on horseback, likewise, can go up to the uppermost level of the arches. The first cornice above the arches he constructed of travertine, curving in a round, which is an admirable and graceful thing, and very different from any other; nor could anything better of that kind be done. He also made a beginning with the two great recesses of the transepts; and whereas formerly, under the direction of Bramante, Baldassarre, and Raffaello, as has been related, eight tabernacles were being made on the side towards the Camposanto, and that plan was afterwards followed by San Gallo, Michelagnolo reduced these to three, with three chapels in the interior, and above them a vaulting of travertine, and a range of windows giving a brilliant light, which are varied in form and of a sublime grandeur. But, since these things are in existence, and are also to be seen in engraving, not only those of Michelagnolo, but those of San Gallo as well, I will not set myself to describe them, for it is in no way necessary. Let it suffice to say that he set himself, with all possible diligence, to cause the work to be carried on in those parts where the fabric was to be changed in design, to the end that it might remain so solid and stable that it might never be changed by another; which was the wise provision of a shrewd and prudent intellect, because it is not enough to do good work, if further precautions be not taken, seeing that the boldness and presumption of those who might be

supposed to have knowledge if credit were placed rather in their words than in their deeds, and at times the favour of such as know nothing, may give rise to many misfortunes.

The Roman people, with the sanction of that Pope, had a desire to give some useful, commodious, and beautiful form to the Campidoglio, and to furnish it with colonnades, ascents, and inclined approaches with [Pg 66] and without steps, and also with the further adornment of the ancient statues that were already there, in order to embellish that place. For this purpose they sought the advice of Michelagnolo, who made them a most beautiful and very rich design, in which, on the side where the Senatore stands, towards the east, he arranged a façade of travertine, and a flight of steps that ascends from two sides to meet on a level space, from which one enters into the centre of the hall of that Palace, with rich curving wings adorned with balusters that serve as supports and parapets. And there, to enrich that part, he caused to be placed on certain bases the two ancient figures in marble of recumbent River Gods, each of nine braccia, and of rare workmanship, one of which is the Tiber and the other the Nile; and between them, in a niche, is to go a Jove. On the southern side, where there is the Palace of the Conservatori, in order that it might be made rectangular, there followed a rich and well varied façade, with a loggia at the foot full of columns and niches, where many ancient statues are to go; and all around are various ornaments, doors, windows, and the like, of which some are already in place. On the other side from this, towards the north, below the Araceli, there is to follow another similar façade; and before it, towards the west, is to be an ascent of bastion-like steps, which will be almost level, with a border and parapet of balusters; here will be the principal entrance, with a colonnade, and bases on which will be placed all that wealth of noble statues in which the Campidoglio is now so rich. In the middle of the Piazza, on a base in the form of an oval, is placed the famous bronze horse on which is the statue of Marcus Aurelius, which the same Pope Paul caused to be removed from the Piazza di Laterano, where Sixtus IV had placed it. This edifice is now being made so beautiful that it is worthy to be numbered among the finest works that Michelagnolo has executed, and it is being carried to completion at the present day under the direction of M. Tommaso de' Cavalieri, a Roman gentleman who was, and still is, one of the greatest friends that Michelagnolo ever had, as will be related hereafter.

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Vasari had scarcely returned to Rome, when, before the beginning of the year 1551, the San Gallo faction arranged a conspiracy against Michelagnolo, whereby the Pope was to hold an assembly in S. Pietro, and to summon together the superintendents and all those who had the charge of the work, in order to show to the Pope, by means of false calumnies, that Michelagnolo had ruined that fabric, because, he having already built the apse [...] where there are the three chapels, and having executed these with the three windows above, they, not knowing what was to be done with the vaulting, with feeble judgment had given the elder Cardinal Salviati and Marcello Cervini, who afterwards became Pope, to understand that S. Pietro was being left with little light. Whereupon, all being assembled, the Pope said to Michelagnolo that the deputies declared that the apse would give little light, and he answered: "I would like to hear these deputies speak in person." Cardinal Marcello replied: "We are here." Then Michelagnolo said to him: "Monsignore, above these windows, in the vaulting, which is to be made of travertine, there are to be three others." "You have never told us that," said the Cardinal. And Michelagnolo answered: "I am not obliged, nor do I intend to be obliged, to say either to your Highness or to any other person what I am bound or desirous to

do. Your office is to obtain the money and to guard it from thieves, and the charge of the design for the building you must leave to me." And then, turning to the Pope, he said: "Holy Father, you see what my gains are, and that if these fatigues that I endure do not profit me in my mind, I am wasting my time and my work." The Pope, who loved him, laid his hands on his shoulders, and said: "You shall profit both in mind and in body; [Pg 75] do not doubt it." Michelagnolo having thus been able to get rid of those persons, the Pope came to love him even more. ; and he commanded him and Vasari that on the day following they should both present themselves at the Vigna Julia, in which place his Holiness had many discussions with him, and they carried that work almost to the condition of perfect beauty in which it now is; nor did the Pope discuss or do anything in the matter of design without Michelagnolo's advice and judgment. And, among other things, since Michelagnolo went often with Vasari to visit him, the Pope insisted, once when he was at the fountain of the Acqua Vergine with twelve Cardinals, after Buonarroto had come up; the Pope, I say, insisted very strongly that he should sit beside him, although he sought most humbly to excuse himself; thus always honouring his genius as much as lay in his power.

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Already, in the time of Paul III, Duke Cosimo had sent Tribolo to Rome to see if he might be able to persuade Michelagnolo to return to [Pg 78] Florence, in order to give completion to the Sacristy of S. Lorenzo. But Michelagnolo excused himself because, having grown old, he could not support the burden of such fatigues, and demonstrated to him with many reasons that he could not leave Rome. Whereupon Tribolo finally asked him about the staircase of the library of S. Lorenzo, for which Michelagnolo had caused many stones to be prepared, but there was no model of it nor any certainty as to the exact form, and, although there were some marks on a pavement and some other sketches in clay, the true and final design could not be found. However, no matter how much Tribolo might beseech him and invoke the name of the Duke, Michelagnolo would never answer a word save that he remembered nothing of it. Orders were given to Vasari by Duke Cosimo that he should write to Michelagnolo, requesting him to write saying what final form that staircase was to have; in the hope that through the friendship and love that he bore to Vasari, he would say something that might lead to some solution and to the completion of the work. Vasari wrote to Michelagnolo the mind of the Duke, saying that the execution of all that was to be done would fall to him; which he would do with that fidelity and care with which, as Michelagnolo knew, he was wont to treat such of his works as he had in charge. Wherefore Michelagnolo sent the directions for making the above-named staircase in a letter by his own hand on the 28th of September, 1555.

"Messer Giorgio, Dear Friend,

"Concerning the staircase for the library, of which so much has been said to me, you may believe that if I could remember how I had designed it, I would not need to be entreated. There does, indeed, come back to my mind, like a dream, a certain staircase; but I do not believe that it is exactly the one which I conceived at that time, because it comes out so stupid. However, I will describe it here. Take a quantity of oval boxes, each one palm in depth, but not of equal length and breadth. The first and largest place on the pavement at such a distance from the wall of the door as may make the staircase easy or steep, according to [Pg 79] your pleasure. Upon this place another, which must be so much smaller in every direction as to leave on the first one below as much space as the foot requires in ascending; diminishing and drawing back the steps one after another towards the door, in accord with the

ascent. And the diminution of the last step must reduce it to the proportion of the space of the door. The said part of the staircase with the oval steps must have two wings, one on one side and one on the other, with corresponding steps but not oval. Of these the central flight shall serve as the principal staircase, and from the centre of the staircase to the top the curves of the said wings shall meet the wall; but from the centre down to the pavement they shall stand, together with the whole staircase, at a distance of about three palms from the wall, in such a manner that the basement of the vestibule shall not be obstructed in any part, and every face shall be left free. I am writing nonsense; but I know well that you will find something to your purpose."

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Michelagnolo by this time was reduced to a feeble condition, and it was evident that little was being done in S. Pietro, now that he had carried on a great part of the frieze of the windows within, and of the double columns without, which curve above the great round cornice^[4] where the cupola is to be placed, as will be related; and he was exhorted and urged by his greatest friends, such as the Cardinal of Carpi, Messer Donato Giannotti, Francesco Bandini, Tommaso de' Cavalieri, and Lottino that, since he saw the delay in the raising of the cupola, he should at least make a model of it. He stayed many months without making up his mind to this, but in the end he made a beginning, and then little by little constructed a small model in clay, from which, as an exemplar, and from the plans and profiles that he had drawn, it might be possible afterwards [Pg 88] to make a larger one of wood. This, having made a beginning with it, he caused to be constructed in little more than a year by Maestro Giovanni Franzese, with much study and pains; and he made it on such a scale that the smaller proportions of the model, measured by the old Roman palm, corresponded with complete exactness to those of the large work, he having fashioned with diligence in that model all the members of columns, bases, capitals, doors, windows, cornices, projections, and likewise every least thing, knowing that in such a work no less should be done, for in all Christendom, nay, in all the world, there is not to be found or seen any fabric more ornate or more grand. And I cannot but think that, if we have given up time to noting smaller things, it is even more useful, and also our duty, to describe this manner of design for building the structure of this tribune with the form, order, and method that Michelagnolo thought to give it; wherefore with such brevity as we may we will give a simple description of it, to the end that, if it should ever be the fate of this work, which God forbid, to be disturbed by the envy and malice of presumptuous persons after the death of Michelagnolo, even as we have seen it disturbed up to the present during his lifetime, these my writings, such as they may be, may be able to assist the faithful who are to be the executors of the mind of that rare man, and also to restrain the malignant desires of those who may seek to alter it, and so at one and the same time assist, delight, and open the minds of those beautiful intellects that are the friends of this profession and regard it as their joy.

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It remains for us to make mention of the surface and adornment of the arch on that side of the vault where the roofing is to go, which begins to rise from a base twenty-five palms and a half high, which has at the foot a basement that has a projection of two palms, as have the crowning mouldings at the top. The covering or roofing with which he proposed to cover it is of lead, such as covers the roof of the old S. Pietro at the present day, and is divided into sixteen sections from one solid base to another, each base beginning where the two columns end, which are one on either side of it. In each of these sections, in the centre, he made two

windows to give light to the inner space where the ascent of the stairs is, between the two shells, so that in all they are thirty-two. These, by means of brackets that support a quarter-round, he made projecting from the roof in such a manner as to protect the lofty and novel view-point from the rain. In a line with the centre of the solid base between each two columns, above which was the crowning cornice, [Pg 94] sprang a rib, one to each, wider at the foot and narrowing at the top; in all sixteen ribs, five palms broad, in the centre of each of which was a quadrangular channel one palm and a half wide, within which is formed an ascent of steps about one palm high, by which to ascend or descend between the platform at the foot and the summit where the lantern begins. These are to be built of travertine and constructed with mortisings, to the end that the joins may be protected against water and ice during times of rain.

The design for the lantern is reduced in the same proportion as all the rest of the work, so that, taking lines round the circumference, everything comes to diminish in exact accord, and with proportionate measurements it rises as a simple temple with round columns two by two, like those on the solid bases below. These have pilasters to correspond to them, and one can walk all the way round and see from the central spaces between the pilasters, where the windows are, the interior of the tribune and the church. Above this, architrave, frieze, and cornice curve in a round, projecting over each pair of columns; and over these columns, in a line with them, spring some caulicoles [curlicues; leafy stems rolled in volutes between acanthus leaves in Corinthian capitals], which, together with some niches that divide them, rise to find the end of the lantern, which, beginning to draw together, grows gradually narrower for a third of its height, in the manner of a round pyramid, until it reaches the ball, upon which, as the final crown of the structure, goes the cross. Many particulars and minute details I might have mentioned, such as air-holes for protection against earthquakes, water-conduits, the various lights, and other conveniences, but I omit them because the work is not yet come to completion, being content to have touched on the principal parts as well as I have been able. For, since every part is in existence and can be seen, it is enough to have made this brief sketch, which is a great light to him who has no knowledge of the structure.

The completion of this model caused the greatest satisfaction not only to all his friends, but to all Rome, the form of the fabric having been thus settled and established. It then came to pass that Paul IV died, and after him was elected Pius IV, who, while causing the building of the little palace in the wood of the Belvedere to be continued by Pirro Ligorio, [Pg 95] who remained architect to the Palace, made many gracious offers and advances to Michelagnolo. The *motu proprio* ["of his own accord," i.e. a Papal directive] originally received by Michelagnolo from Paul III, and then from Julius III and Paul IV, in respect of the fabric of S. Pietro, he confirmed in his favour, and he restored to him a part of the revenues and allowances taken away by Paul IV, employing him in many of his works of building; and in his time he caused the fabric of S. Pietro to be carried on vigorously.