

*This brief essay is the result of many hours spent in front of a drawing sheet, beautifully presented in a 2015 exhibition in Nashville, Tennessee of drawings by Michelangelo from the Casa Buonarroti Archive.*

## **Michelangelo at the Gate of Righteousness: Praying with Icons**

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*The icon came about “as a means to knowledge...,  
toward benefit and mercy and salvation.”*

St. John of Damascus<sup>1</sup>

### **Background**

Around 1560, the civic-minded Pope Pius IV, having decided to straighten and widen Rome’s ancient Via Nomentana where it approached the massive Aurelian walls that encircled the city, also decided to solicit designs for the new gate-house an additional passageway through the walls would require; persons entering or leaving the city would pass through the gate in much the way we of today pass customs checkpoints. According to Vasari’s account, Michelangelo Buonarroti, then eighty-five years old, submitted three designs for the new gate, from which the Pope chose the one least expensive to build; since the design he chose is itself remarkably elaborate, we can only wonder what the other two would have been like if built.<sup>2</sup>

Michelangelo’s surviving drawings for the Porta Pia are discussed below, but before turning to them a few points regarding the gate’s design and its construction need to be mentioned.

While the actual construction of the Porta Pia was well underway at the time of the artist's death in 1564, he did not live to see it (his last original architectural project) completed. Nor is it clear today when construction of it was completed - or if, when it eventually was finished, it was exactly according to his plans; the surviving documentation is conflicted on both these questions. We do know that what today's visitors to the Porta Pia see is different in some noticeable ways from what was built in the sixteenth-century. For instance, the decorative upper story of the facade on the city side of the gate dates from the nineteenth century, when it was re-designed and rebuilt following a damaging lightning strike; the exterior facade we encounter when approaching from the country side of the gate dates from that period as well.<sup>3</sup>

The biggest difference between what we experience today and what Michelangelo conceived is this: rather than being connected to (and therefore a part of) the massive walls that surrounded the city when the Porta Pia was built, today the gate is surrounded on all sides by traffic; it may well be the world's most distinguished traffic island. While Michelangelo's gate's facade did extend forward of the walls attached to it, the massive height and thickness of those walls can be difficult to visualize now, especially from photographs.

But probably the most salient observation to be made about these two drawing sheets, on which he worked so intensely over such an extended period, is this: by the time he was finishing these most extensively worked of architectural drawings (if, indeed, he was ever actually finished with them), the construction of the Porta Pia was too advanced for them to have been of any practical usefulness.

### **The Porta Pia Drawings**

A number of what might be called conceptual sketches for the Porta Pia gate survive; most are fairly loose drawings that explore possible

designs for the gate's main arch on the city side of the structure; one shows the inner arch as well. Of these drawings, almost all - including the two I discuss below - are in the collection of the *Archivio Buonarroti* at Casa Buonarroti in Florence. These preliminary sketches (excluding the two discussed below) number around five or six; there is, as is often the case, discussion as to the authorship of some of the drawing sheets. (It should be pointed out that none of these drawings are architectural plans suitable for use by the builders of the Porta Pia edifice; they are, except for the two drawings discussed here, preliminary design sketches incorporating a greater or, in most cases, lesser degree of detail.)

The accurate dating of working sketches is notoriously difficult and often impossible, but since the Porta Pia project had known dates of inception, it is possible to assemble the surviving drawings for it in a fairly credible chronology based upon style, materials (media) employed, paper, watermarks, and the evolution of conceptual ideas. But the two late drawings are unlike any of the others and are, I would suggest, essentially without precedent - among the corpus of Michelangelo's surviving drawings, among drawings of his day by other artists and architects, and (if one ultimately comes to agree that these two sheets had a significance for Michelangelo far beyond that of the other drawings) among architectural studies from any other period. Based on their presumed chronology, I will refer to them as the earlier sheet (*CD618r*) and the later (*CD619r*), but I will also refer to them collectively, if metaphorically, as *icons*, because that is what I believe they were (or at least what they eventually became) for Michelangelo.

In the strictest sense, referring to depictions of an architectural structure as icons could be thought an inappropriate use of the term, since icons are understood to be representational images of persons of significance to the faith, especially in Eastern Orthodox Christianity: depictions of significant events in the life of Christ or in the lives of his followers; depictions of those known to the church

as the saints (especially the martyrs) with their particular attributes recognizable to the faithful; occasional depictions of sainted or faithful souls near a recognizable structure. But, drawings of a gate as *icons*, even if extraordinary drawings of a remarkable gate?

It is important, however, to consider as well the purpose and use of icons, particularly such smaller examples as one might find on the walls of homes. On the most basic level, such icons serve to recall the faithfulness, courage, and perhaps the sacrifice of the individual depicted. At times of personal discouragement or despair (perhaps even the loss of one's faith), a visual reminder of another faithful soul's life and actions can be both an inspiration and a comfort; it can serve as a reminder to the individual of his or her place in the Christian community, in the continuous living out and transmitting of the faith, of comforting and encouraging one another, of being a part of what has been known historically as the "communion of saints."

Thus an icon is not merely or even primarily a work of art, however beautiful; it is a spiritual aid, a means of spiritual access. An icon is not worshipped, certainly; it is not venerated like a shrine for the relic of a saint; an icon is *used*, much as one might use a book of devotional meditations. One's meditations on a particular icon, if recorded, might constitute a kind of testament or spiritual diary, and in the Orthodox tradition, one not only prays *with* or through an icon; the making of an icon is itself considered a form of prayer.<sup>4</sup> As Henri Nouwen writes of them, icons "are created for the sole purpose of offering access, through the gate of the visible, to the mystery of the invisible. Icons are painted to lead us into the inner room of prayer and bring us close to the heart of God."<sup>5</sup>

I would like to suggest that it was this stance, the spiritual posture of prayer in and through the making of icons, that the elderly and infirm Michelangelo adopted when working, extensively and over an

extended period, on these two unique drawing sheets, a stance not unlike that adopted in his continuing work on the *Pietà Rondanini*.

### **The Two Later Drawings**

If we were somehow able to confront these two iconic drawings side-by-side, we would quickly realize that, while the differences between them are numerous, perhaps three are of special significance. With the later drawing, both the artist and the viewer are, in effect, closer to the gate, nearer the structure and the passageway through it, and we see part of the second gate in the distance, while looking at the earlier drawing allows us to see the second and more distant gate in its entirety by looking directly *through the stones of the first*. Indeed, the second, distant gate is depicted as it would be seen by someone standing in front of it in the courtyard; it is nearly as large as the first gate.

The later drawing is more realistic in that we do not look through a solid stone structure and see what lies behind it but rather look through the opening in it. At the same time, the outer gate has now become both a more idealized and a less accurate representation of the gate's appearance; instead, it has become an almost dreamlike depiction of the experience of entering the gate. If, with the earlier drawing, the viewer seems to stand in front of the gate while contemplating its uniquely depicted reality, with the later sheet we have begun entering the gate, so powerfully are we drawn into its luminous image. The means by which Michelangelo accomplished this beggars description, but surely it is the irresistible light that so compellingly draws in our eye, increasing our sense of movement forward into the gate's space and reality, metaphorically so much like moving into Nouwen's "inner room of prayer." It might not be too much even to suggest that the later drawing (CD619r) - while ostensibly a depiction of a gate - is really something more like a depiction of movement into time.

## **Michelangelo at the Gate of Righteousness (CD618r)**

On first approaching this drawing, were he or she fortunate enough to encounter it displayed on a wall, a viewer might be forgiven for glancing around to locate the source of its additional lighting, so suffused is the area around the opening (the doorway itself) with an almost ethereal light. But in reality, this perceived light emanates from the sheet itself and results from the artist's careful application of several media to its surface, lead white among them.

Having already referred to this late drawing sheet (CD 618r) - along with its companion sheet (CD 619r) - as something like an icon for Michelangelo, we might pause to consider for a moment his reason for wanting to create this extraordinary luminous effect on what is conventionally referred to as an "architectural drawing." If my earlier suggestion is plausible, that he might have been thinking (even if unconsciously) of his painstaking efforts in depicting the Porta Pia in such a unique way as a kind of spiritual exercise in preparing for his own departure from Rome and from earthly life, two further observations could suggest themselves - apart from the almost too-obvious one of "moving towards the light" as one's life's end approaches.

The first observation, a general one, might be merely a mention of how often in his various writings Michelangelo uses the word "light" and mentions the eyes that perceive it. A number of his poems are primarily (or prominently) about eyes and light. In some cases eyes seem to represent longing, while in others, insight; in still other cases, perhaps both, as in the beginning of this love poem (no. 89):

*With your beautiful eyes I see a gentle light,  
My blind ones could never see. (CS)*

Once, in a letter detailing some of the deficiencies he had found in an earlier design for St. Peter's Basilica (of which he had been made

Supreme Architect), he listed the lack of sufficient light in places, predicting that the resulting shadows and darkness would lead to undesirable and inappropriate behavior.<sup>6</sup> And, if the obvious use of *chiaroscuro* techniques, so prominent in the works of his successors among Italian painters (perhaps especially those of his namesake Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio), is not one of the distinguishing characteristics of his own style, we would still look in vain for a painting or highly worked drawing by Michelangelo in which both the light's direction and its play on the figures depicted are not subtly evident.

The second observation is both a more specific and a more powerful one, and it is another example of the kind of associative thought so characteristic of his works when considered in their larger context. Michelangelo wrote often and with sometimes surprising frankness about his approaching death, and as someone who lived to more than twice the expected age for a man of his time, he had attended a great many funeral liturgies: those for his father and some of his brothers; those for a great many friends, and for the various popes, bishops, and lesser clerics he knew and worked with and for; and, perhaps most powerfully for him, those for his early patron Lorenzo the Magnificent and his beloved friend Vittoria Colonna. Depending on which specific prayers are said and which antiphons sung (or said), there can be more than twenty appearances in the *Requiem* (the Mass for the Dead) and the ensuing Burial Office of the word "light," perhaps most prominently in the final antiphon, often sung as the closing of a grave begins:

*Lux aeterna luceat eis...*  
*et lux perpetua luceat eis.*

"Let light eternal shine upon them...  
may perpetual light shine on them."\*

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\*The reader can note the use of this antiphon and the following one (in English) in the service booklet for the funeral liturgy of Pope John Paul II at this online site; the *Lux aeterna* was sung

But why might Michelangelo have associated the Porta Pia project, a secular structure with no sacred function, with his own death? The answer is, I believe, in this case as in so many others, in his fondness for wordplay, for *doppio senso* - double-entendre - and for the kind of multi-dimensional associative thought that was almost second nature to him.

The noun *porta* in modern Italian denotes a door, such as one passes through when entering a house or moving within it from one room to another; a gate, on the other hand (whether made of iron or of wood), is a *cancello*. But when what is being referred to is the opening through an ancient city's defensive walls, the older Latin use of *porta* is retained, hence Porta Pia, or Pope Pius's Gate. But, if we allow our minds to drift back-and-forth between the Latin and Italian understandings of *porta*, another meaning, an associative one, can arise, because the adjective *pio* (*pia* when used with a feminine noun like *porta*) can then be understood in Italian as "pious," or "righteous," and Porta Pia can be understood as "the righteous gate" or "the gate of righteousness" (in addition to, of course, "Pope Pius's Gate").

It is at this point that some of these associations might have become especially relevant for Michelangelo, because when we turn once again to the Burial Office, we find that another antiphon, often sung or said as a coffin is being lowered into the earth, begins with these unforgettable words:

*Aperite mihi portas justitiae*

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earlier than usual in the presence of the assembled congregation, since the papal entombment itself was not a public ceremony:

[https://www.ewtn.com/JohnPaul2/\\_mourning/ritessummary1.asp](https://www.ewtn.com/JohnPaul2/_mourning/ritessummary1.asp)

“Open unto me the gate of righteousness  
that I may enter and sing the Lord’s praise.”\*  
(Psalm 118:19)

As we have seen, the presumed earlier of the two late drawings for the Porta Pia (CD 618r) compresses for us into one extravagant two-dimensional image both a representation of the arch through which one would leave the walled confines of the city of Rome (*Urbs Roma*) and a sense of movement towards the second arch, Porta Pia’s enclosed interior arch, through which one would then pass (in a temporal sense) into the countryside, the countryside in which the artist took his customary afternoon horseback rides *fuori le mura*, outside the city’s fortified walls. But, if we were to adopt a more symbolic and metaphorical understanding of passage through the gate’s interior space, we might see it as moving on our way towards the *Urbs Beata Jerusalem*, the Heavenly Salem that lies beyond, awaiting our eventual arrival.

Thus, in this perhaps most remarkable of “architectural” drawings, Michelangelo manages not merely to depict the Pia gate’s unique structure and appearance - while implying the depth of space it occupies - he also suggests, largely through the remarkable use of light (achieved by his application to the sheet of whitening media), the experience one would have when passing through the first portal, then of approaching and passing through the second. While using only a single sheet of paper, Michelangelo in effect offers the viewer the possibility of moving visually forward into time (yet another frequent theme in his verse).

This unique drawing sheet might fairly (if unconventionally) be seen not only in two or three dimensions, but in four, making it a work of not only transcendent artistic quality, but one with luminously spiritual - indeed *iconic* - qualities as well.

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In referring to the drawing sheets, I have followed the numbering of Charles de Tolnay's *Corpus dei Disegni di Michelangelo*.

The translation of the lines from Michelangelo's poem is my own; the numbering is according to the English edition by James Saslow.

The three attached images are from Wikipedia Commons.

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Porta Pia



CD618r



CD619r

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- <sup>1</sup> Holy Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, *What Do You Know About Icons?* (Kareas, Attiki, Greece: Holy Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, 2001), 9.
- <sup>2</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, translated by G. de Vere (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 2:729.
- <sup>3</sup> Elisabeth B. Mac Dougall, "Michelangelo and the Porta Pia," in *Michelangelo: Selected Readings*, edited by William E. Wallace (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 493-504.
- <sup>4</sup> Jim Forest, *Praying with Icons* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 17-23.
- <sup>5</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1987), 14.
- <sup>6</sup> Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Michelangelo Buonarroti to Bartolomeo Ferratini, January, 1547*, Letter in E.H. Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), 2:69.