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F. Carter Philips

distinguished friend and wise counsel

## ***Michelangelo's Signature Art***

A sequel to and concluding essay for

### ***What's in a Name?***

### ***Michelangelo and the Art of Signature***

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**Carl Smith**

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*In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.<sup>1</sup>*

(W. H. Auden)

## *Michelangelo's Signature Art*

The term *signature* is generally understood to refer to a name as inscribed on a document of some sort, while a *name* itself is understood as likely revelatory (to some degree or another) of an identity - usually a person's, but at times also an animal's, or even a spirit's.

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It's now been something like twelve years since I began investigating seriously - or at least more *intentionally* than the solitary pondering I'd been engaged in for easily twice that long - the question of why the legendary artist Michelangelo Buonarroti chose to sign his name in so many different ways. I was fairly certain there would be a good reason, or at least an explanation, that would account for such astonishing diversity in one person's signatures, even one very famous person's.

As it turned out, I'd been right; my intuitive sense of it had been correct, but it was to be a long time after my initial investigations and tentative first steps on what would be a remarkably twisted, winding road until I could recognize (and then identify with some confidence) patterns in his signature gestures and begin to discern possible motivations for them. The road was, even if interesting, also arduous at times, and more than once I blundered, took a wrong turn and lost my way. I had some considerable good luck - far more of it than bad - and I met a good many helpful, interesting, and interested people in visits to various archives.

Of course, not all the archivists and others in charge of collections were - initially - too pleased to discover that their guest hoping to discover more about Michelangelo's signatures was a musician, but such reticence most often gave way to animated (and frequently helpful) discussions - once an acceptable level of awareness and preparation had been demonstrated. While most of that is covered adequately in *WIAN*, one bit found there will need to be expanded here before some newer material can be presented. Additionally, I'll want to touch on some fairly telling reactions to the presentations I've given over the years dealing with Michelangelo's signature art; introducing those first will also be helpful with some of the newer material below.

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When I began to investigate the signatures in a more serious way, I was quite enthusiastic - as one would expect to be about such an interesting project. But I also had to learn (and rather quickly) that sharing such enthusiasm - even with some of my friends - was not such a good idea, as I was often met either with puzzled stares or with an assumption that I was attempting to do for Michelangelo what Dan Brown had done for Leonardo - NO, *definitely* not that! - or else was planning to reveal some sort of secret code I thought I'd discovered. No, not that either (not at all, in fact), but that one does deserve a brief word, since it figures below so significantly.

Something considered "secret" is understood either to be hidden from view - say, a physical object that has been "secreted away" out-of-sight - or else to be some kind of information that is being withheld, intentionally not shared. However, the signature art of Michelangelo - his astonishing and often revelatory wordplay with his name - is exactly that: it is play with words, *verbal* play - neither graphic-play nor design-play. (Even necessary as it was for me to make that point, it is not *invariably* the case, as a small example of what might be called 'design' or 'architectural' play was described in *WIAN* (p.124-6). The other example of his play with design, and one

that is both the most ingenious and, for me, the most moving of all his surviving signature gestures, is discussed below.)

But can his (or anyone else's) wordplay, if it can eventually come to be 'seen' (i.e. understood) by anyone who looks at it, be described as "secret"? Only, I would think, if the word "secret" were intended to mean "as yet unnoticed," or "not yet remarked upon," because such wordplay - once it has been 'seen' - becomes almost impossible to "un-see" or to ignore. That has been the most frequent reaction I've received in my public presentations: "How could we *not* have seen this before?" Hence - NO: it's not "secret." But then, is it a kind of code? In cryptography, a code involves some sort of substitution of one letter or number for another that creates a new document, one intended to be either unintelligible or else misleading - unless, of course, one has the *code* necessary to interpret it properly.

In recent years, I've come to believe that there's not very much art that *doesn't* depend, at least to some degree, upon 'code' to be fully intelligible. If, for instance, a playwright writes a play about the life of a person who had once actually existed, the actor portraying that character onstage might be said to be substituting (in the viewers' experiences) for a real-life individual; that would be 'code' of a sort. And if the actor's portrayal of his character were truly compelling, it might make little difference - at the time - to the audience whether the character being portrayed had been drawn from real life or was a fictional one, purely of the playwright's invention: the *code* would work in the same way. (Of course, it might well matter a great deal - later on - if the dramatic presentation had indeed been genuinely biographical.) But then, why would this matter to us? Because in the remarkable 'signature art' presented below, the artist does make use of a sort of *code* (i.e. a substitution), to allude to something (or in this case to someone) else. It's a wonderful thing to study, and a splendid artistic creation.

Having now disavowed any inclinations of a Dan Brown sort and introduced some thoughts on the matters of secrets and codes, let me now relate two other items of relevance to my long-term efforts with his signatures.

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On my first extended visit to the *Archivio Buonarroti* (housed at Casa Buonarroti in Florence), I had the remarkable good fortune to be met there, with the artist's letters lying in front of us on a table, by the eminent philologist Lucilla Bardeschi Ciulich, an authority on Michelangelo's hand and principal editor of his collected letters and contracts. It began simply as a respectful conversation, with her asking why I was so interested in the signatures and wondering what details of interest I'd noticed. As I began to point out some of the more interesting - and often puzzling - details and anomalies, she began to express surprise herself at some of them and was puzzled by others. (Of course, his signatures per se had never been her primary concern, and he was rarely consistent about details when writing.) But it was still a strange situation, because while I'd assembled a notebook of questions and puzzling bits, she was able to discern quickly which ones were likely to be of interest for more study and which were evidence of my own lack of exposure to some important topics and of my (frankly) rookie ignorance.

But in addition to being both intrigued by many of my observations and generous with her time and insights, she wasn't at all reluctant to castigate me and point out what kinds of things I didn't yet know enough about - and she was, of course, correct in those comments. She suggested topics, books she thought I needed to study, and she suggested some individuals she thought I should try to talk with. Throughout it all, I was thoroughly deferential to her thoughts, her opinions, and (of course) to her expertise.

But then, as she was beginning to gather up her things to go, we somehow moved into a more relaxed conversational mode, and she

inquired how (and why) I'd come to notice some of the interesting anomalies in the signatures. Our conversation turned to some of the similarities I'd noticed between calligraphy and the notation of music, especially if in hand-written manuscript. She was interested in hearing about my own experiences in playing from facsimiles of seventeenth-century keyboard manuscripts rather than published editions of the same music. Learning to notice anomalies in musical scores - the differences in inks used, change in a pen's speed, small variations with the size or beaming of similar notes - had given me 'unrelated' training that was suddenly proving useful. She smiled and wished me well with my work and said that she thought it a beautiful topic to study.

At that point, I very probably surprised us both when I pushed my notebook towards her across the table and suggested that she take it and write the study herself, since it was going to be some years before I'd be able to do it justice. She thought for a moment, thanked me for my offer, and then said once again how beautiful a topic she thought it was. But she then pushed the notebook back and said no, that I should do it - since anyway, she *couldn't*. When I asked why not, she replied that, since it was an artistic study and not really a scholarly one, it needed to be done by an artist. "And besides," she sighed, "only a musician would ever have noticed these things." That remark puzzled me for a long time, until I discovered - much later - that she was a good amateur pianist. So she seemed to feel (to *know*?) that my musical background would be something of value - perhaps even something necessary - for the project, and I pressed on for several more years. (I was unable to visit with her again on subsequent trips to Florence and the *Archivio*, so I don't know what she thought of *WIAN* once it was finally finished.)

However, before I can present and discuss this final example of Michelangelo's signature art and bring my lengthy involvement with

these splendid art-works-in-miniature to a conclusion, there remain some additional points in need of a mention.

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So far, none of the scholars or informed amateurs who read *WIAN* and offered me feedback on it have disagreed with either the study's basic premises or with my interpretations of the possible intentions behind Michelangelo's efforts. I feel an ever-increasing gratitude to those (as mentioned in *WIAN*) who offered me both assistance and valuable advice. But I've not emerged from work on the project itself or from the public presentations I've done on its findings entirely unscathed; quite the contrary! There seems to be - or rather, there IS - something of a tacit understanding in this present age as to just what both the *style* of delivery and (more importantly to me as a musician) the *tone* should be when presenting the results of any inquiry that hopes to be taken seriously. (It was *not* - thankfully! - ever thus.) What served as something nearly like templates for me in matters of style and tone were the essays of E. M. Forster, pieces that today seem almost timeless despite their age. Both his tone (in general) and his particular approaches to presenting questions (his own, but also those of others) about topics he had at hand seemed almost ideally suited to *WIAN* since - in the end - it is both a topical inquiry *and* a personal narrative.

In the question-and-answer session following one presentation, a young scholar - after first stating that he'd read most of the book, appreciated knowing about my discoveries, and (in general) agreed with my interpretations of them - insisted pretty forcefully that I'd "ruined the topic for any other scholars" by presenting it in far too casual and conversational a tone. After I'd thanked him for his interest in the topic and for sharing his opinions, I let it go at that and moved on. He was filled with what he thought was 'righteous' indignation and had no interest in considering a different opinion: he was certain he was right.

He wasn't right; he was wrong - but not because he disagreed with how I'd written *WIAN*. I can't know that my approach was the best one; someone else might have done it differently - and better. But once my research and all the sorting-out were done, my biggest challenge lay in finding a way to present it, such an unusual topic and study as it is. Perhaps the young scholar might have found a better approach than the one I eventually settled on, but I strongly suspect he'd have done it instead in the prevailing academic style, the one he'd been taught was the *right* one, a style that may serve some topics well (or at least well enough), but he was wrong about this one - and here's why.

First, in the around four-and-a-half centuries that had passed since Michelangelo's death, no-one - no scholar of *any* sort - had taken it up and written about it, not even in passing. The signatures simply hadn't been addressed, not even in the vast scholarship of the last hundred years (and most especially in the post-World War II years). What's more, as I began to accumulate more and more information, I tried on several occasions to interest scholars I knew in the project and offered to give everything I'd assembled to some I felt might do well with it. They all said no, that I should do it myself - and then began inching away as if I'd suddenly developed a terrible case of dandruff. (Eventually, I came to realize how lucky I'd been that no-one else wanted the project, as I'd come to see it as something like a gift of the Spirit, one I'd have been not merely foolish but *wrong* to have refused.)

But, even though I disagreed with him, I understood the young scholar's objections to *WIAN*'s style and tone, because they'd been brought home to me rather vividly by three different presses that had accepted the book (two fairly enthusiastically) - *pending some edits*, edits of a sort they'd demonstrated by sending along passages their copyeditors had 'improved' for me. I don't want to waste time here rehearsing those 'improvements,' as that might seem (and be) petty, but one of them was anything but a 'petty' difference; for me,

it was quite a major one. The edited pages had no rhythm at all left, and for a study concerned less with an artist's finished works than with his quiet musings and the subtle movements of his hand and pen, the results were simply deadly - and not merely in tone. When attempting to convey via the written word certain sorts of insights and elusive awarenesses, both the prose's general tone and its specific rhythmic qualities can, at least at times, matter very nearly as much as its cognitive content. What neither the publishers' efficient copyeditors nor the young scholar recognized when calling out my failure to adhere to accepted stylistic norms was that, rather than having merely failed to conform to them, something else, itself rather different from their norms, had been intended all along.

Nor had I "ruined the topic" for other scholars - something I could not have done, because I myself am not one: not a scholar of art, rather a maker of it (if, hopefully, not an uninformed one), and a follower as well of Aquinas' admonition that *art* is, in essence, a verb and not a noun. What I had most hoped to convey, while trying to be as factually accurate as possible, was a sense (insofar as they can be deduced) of what Michelangelo's associative thoughts might have been - perhaps even what some of his specific musings might have been - as he continued to re-discover and re-imagine himself through associative play with his name.

### *On Noticing...*

When I was a young piano student, I greatly admired my teacher (as one hopes to be fortunate enough to be able to do). He was a local musician, admired and respected in town, but also someone who'd "been away" for further training. Additionally, he was known to one and all as a generous, 'neighborly' sort, famous for giving to both his friends and complete strangers some of the good things he grew in his garden.

I remember going to a lesson once, hoping he'd give me some much-needed guidance on the Bach piece I was struggling with; I wasn't having much success with it on my own. What he gave me instead was two fresh tomatoes from his garden. While they might well have been real beauties, I do have to admit that at the time I was more miffed than grateful: my Bach, indeed! But then my lesson got even weirder...

He was famous in the area for his remarkable skill at sight-reading new music and scores he'd never played before. So, I decided I'd ask him what his secret was, how he'd learned to read musical scores with such facility. He waited a moment before responding and then said this: "Well, you know, when you're reading music, there are really only two possibilities: the next chord will either be the same one or a different one. That's all; you just have to notice what's the same and what's different."

I thought that quite possibly the silliest answer I'd ever heard to a serious question. So, between that answer and my two tomatoes-in-lieu-of-Bach, I went home one very unhappy camper; obviously, he didn't know as much as I'd assumed he did.

Some years later, by the time I was a senior at the conservatory, I was almost a regular fixture on the concert stage, as I'd become my then-celebrated piano teacher's favorite page-turner. While by that point she no longer played solo concerts, she was much sought-after both as an accompanist and as the best pianist around for chamber-music ensembles - especially if the program happened to include new or unfamiliar works. She was held in high regard for two reasons in particular: the warmth and expressiveness of her playing, and her almost unnerving ability to read and learn new scores quickly. (I would later learn that the particular warmth of her playing could, at least in part, be attributed to a small thermos she always had backstage: her "liquid courage," as she referred to it.) But when I asked her for any tips she had on score-reading, she

paused for a second before offering me this advice: “Always keep scanning the score for what’s coming next, and take note of what’s coming that’s somehow different. Understand?” (I replied that I was beginning to...)

In the *Preface* to *WIAN* (p.xvii), I expressed particular appreciation to my long-ago teacher, the eminent Dutch harpsichordist, organist, and conductor Gustav Leonhardt for having shown me (by example) how someone with a distinctive name might indeed both *live* and *be* that name. As his family name is one of the older forms for “Lion-hearted,” if he told you during a lesson that something you’d played for him wasn’t bold enough or - far worse - that it “lacked *daring*,” the admonition was always considered authoritative. (His own very distinctive signature, which we’ll consider below, is both fascinating in and of itself and surprisingly relevant to this inquiry.)

Mr. Leonhardt, who as a player confined himself to the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (when musical notation was nowhere nearly as standardized as it is now), used to say this: “No-one likes to do more work than he has to do. So, when a composer notates a passage in some unusual way - in some way that requires him to do *more* work than the normal way would have required - it means something. We may never know for certain exactly what he meant in doing it as he did, but it needs to be noticed *because it means something*.”

The lessons relevant to the study of Michelangelo’s calligraphy I’ve taken from these musical examples are two:

1. Something that required of Michelangelo more care, more time and thought (i.e. more ‘work’) than would whatever was his ‘usual’ - anything that somehow “stands out” from its surroundings so that our eye notices it - means something. While initially we might not know what it means (and in some cases might never know), what we can be sure of is that *it means something*.

2. Just as my own father has done, many of my past teachers have, in recent years, become a good deal smarter than I'd once thought them to be.

### *Michelangelo and the Church*

Merely thinking about this section makes me nervous. On a nearby bookshelf, I have close to a dozen books that are related, one way or another, to Michelangelo's complicated (and sometimes bewildering) relationship with his Christian faith - many by individuals far better able than am I to address the topic. I hope only to make four points about it that are, in my view, often either overlooked or undervalued when considering the matter.

But then there's the further matter - an often unfortunate one - of what can be an enormous gulf between what's understood to be Christianity and what's known as "the Christian Church." Having been a churchman all my life and professionally employed by the church for much of that time, this is not an issue with which I'm unfamiliar, but neither is it one I intend to address here: it's far too complex. I raise it only to point out the inherent difficulties that can arise whenever we speak (or think) about Michelangelo's personal involvement with "the building of Christ's church." Was he, in his own mind, helping to nurture and further the growth of "the body of Christ," as the church is known - as the world-wide community of believers - or was he designing and overseeing the construction of a particular edifice, even if one that's particularly important, one that is often seen as the emblem of the Church? Or was he, perhaps, hoping (in his own mind) to do both? While it's admittedly a thorny question, it really *does* matter - and it's perhaps not impossible to answer, either. So, while keeping these issues in mind, let me try to raise to a more conscious awareness these four brief, but very important points.

1. *On individual clerics* (regardless of their prominence or position). Even as careful and discreet as he was - and he became more-and-more so as he grew older, and as both his personal fame and his prominence within the Church increased - there are 'digs' of one sort or another at individual clerics who insulted or condescended to him, or whom he found unduly pompous or arrogant. Whatever else it may or may not be, the Church is an organization (a highly structured and 'layered' one) of people, among whom there will inevitably be some who are commendable both as persons and as churchmen and others who are far less so - on both counts. It's also likely, too, that a high-strung and intensely intuitive artist who worked both around and *for* the Church would take occasional verbal swipes at clerics he found lacking in humility or seriousness of purpose. (It is to be hoped that the generations of artists who have worked earnestly and respectfully for the Church throughout their careers but have, upon occasion, found deferring to certain of the reverend clergy impossible, will not eventually find themselves shut out of the Kingdom because of it. If so, this writer, like a good many others, is going to be in a bad way...)

2. *On the institutional Church*. While expressing one's displeasure with some individual clerics and prelates may not be considered an especially grievous offense, expressing an open (or even a covert) challenge to any of the Church's official teachings unquestionably *is* - and of that more serious offense Michelangelo, once again, does not come out unblemished. To cite but two brief examples... Even while still fairly young, he was remarkably pointed in some of his criticisms of the Church, as was the case with his "anonymous" poem "*Qua si fa elmi...*" (discussed in *WIAN*, p.216-25). Later in life, he was closely associated (as we've learned far more about in recent decades) with a group often referred to as the *Spirituali* - a group of prominent church men and women who believed the Church to be in need of serious reform but sought to forestall it from outside the institution by facilitating it from within. But even if they seem to have considered themselves orthodox Roman Catholics with no

desire to leave the Church, one of their beliefs *has* to be understood as much closer to a chief tenet of the reformist movement than to traditional Catholic dogma - namely that the individual (rather than the Church) is responsible for the care of his or her own soul. This idea was, I feel strongly, of great appeal to and great consequence for Michelangelo. Personally, I doubt that its importance to him can be overstated.

3. On “*belonging*” (i.e. on inclusion and exclusion). Reading some of the more recent biographies of Michelangelo (recent enough that he can be portrayed as something less than utterly god-like in every way, even as he remains unquestionably positioned in the pantheon of pre-eminent geniuses of our race) or - and still better - reading the corpus of his surviving poetry, leaves a couple of clear (and probably appropriate) impressions. One is of what I’m going to call his sense of outsider-li-ness, which I’ll address briefly in a moment; the other is his own sense of unworthiness. His expressions of the latter sentiment - often voiced as near-confessions before Christ - can seem so profound as to over-whelm a reader encountering them for the first time. (I’ll return to this painful topic below.) Do please note, gentle reader, that I’m referring here only to those of his poems that are usually referred to as his “religious poems” (and, for myself, I believe calling them his “spiritual meditations” might be better), and then not to *all* of them. Still, for many of them, mine is an apt description of their intensity.

Why would he have thought of himself as an outsider - as someone without a place at the table - when even as a teenager, one with few accomplishments as yet, he’d had a place at the table of Lorenzo de’ Medici? The list of possible answers to that question is long, and each of them might well warrant a fulsome response, but we’ll instead merely mention and touch briefly on a few of them. That sense of his outsider-li-ness might have been a character trait, an aspect of his personality that was - at least to some degree (and in the current jargon) - “hard-wired,” an ineffable part of who he was.

We know that he was unduly concerned (and “obsessed” is not too strong a word) with his family’s somewhat reduced social standing and financial prowess. We know that he insisted on being called a sculptor rather than ‘merely’ an artist, and that later in his life (in preparing biographical information) he remarked pointedly that he’d never “kept a shop [studio]” like most artists. For almost his entire life he complained about money - losing money, being robbed, being cheated out of what was rightfully his, etc. - even when he was well-off financially. The list could easily go on...

But mention has to be made of at least one other significant aspect of who he was and (probably - at least in part) why he felt as he did. We must by now be at a point (or so it is to be hoped) when we can simply state - without any apology or fanfare - that the evidence clearly suggests that Michelangelo’s sexual and affective desires were oriented towards other males. And if that was indeed the case (as most now believe), it can only have served to intensify and exacerbate his feelings of other-li-ness, of outsider-li-ness - whether or not it may have served as a root cause for them.

*Status*: his social and professional standing. *Names*: his own (which he tinkered with relentlessly) and those of others. *Profession*: his was not that of artist, of course; it was sculptor. *Reputation*: often, for him, a source of both pride and occasional concern. All of these were important to him. But then, there was his title, the unique, unprecedented title - which he’d stipulated - conferred in 1546: he was to be the Supreme Architect of St. Peter’s Basilica. He was to be completely in charge, with near absolute control over both the design and the construction of the most important church in all of Christendom. The Pope was Supreme Pontiff, the Church’s *Pontifex Maximus*. Yet another of the Pope’s several appellations was, of course, that of “Christ’s Vicar on Earth.”

But, as Michelangelo knew as well as anyone (since he’d worked for several of them himself), Popes came and went; but his new church,

built over the bones of St. Peter... that would endure a good deal longer. The Pope of the day was the Church's Supreme Pontiff, the Holy Father to the faithful, and the shepherd of Christ's flock. And too, on earth Christ's Vicar.

But Michelangelo was Christ's architect - his Supreme Architect - charged with the building of his church.

4. *On the building of the Building.* While it seems that a good many languages - perhaps even most - offer an attentive "noticer" of such things possibilities for word-play of various sorts - puns and other base rhymes, and intentional *mis*-understanding of words due to irregularities in either spelling or pronunciation, it seems that no other language is thought quite as generous as is English, with its abundant opportunities for the use of words (and expressions) that have multiple meanings - *entendres doubles*, or double-entendres. (It has always amused me that, while we may be good at creating and using them, we still have to employ a borrowed French term for them, lacking one of our own.) But also, we should remember that Michelangelo himself, along with a few of his trusted friends, came up with some pretty good ones in Italian, too, where they're referred to as *doppio sensi*, literally "doubled senses" - although a few of his better ones seem closer to 'triples.'

So *why*, any patient reader might be forgiven for asking, do we need the previous paragraph? What is its purpose? Fair enough; let me try to explain. I hoped to use it as a way to - if you will - turn down the gas under the kettle for a moment or two, to reduce briefly the intensity and seriousness of our inquiry, to step back just a bit and "ponder," before a final push towards the conclusion of this study. In other words, I'd like for us consider - by using something closer to empathy than reasoning, something more like association than deduction, two aspects of the peculiar and - I genuinely believe - the unprecedented situation Michelangelo had found himself in as he confronted the tasks, first of designing, and then of trying to build

St. Peter's. I'd like for us to try to imagine briefly two (of the many) aspects of what it might have been like for the man himself - not for the Divine Michelangelo, the epitome of all things in art and in life (as Vasari referred to him), but instead for the tired old man, beset with physical ailments and fading eyesight - yet also, if anything, more *visionary* than ever. Some may want to dismiss this as simply speculation; I prefer instead to think of it as informed association, attempting to imagine (if only for this one bit) what it might have been like for him, and we need to do so before we can attempt to appreciate what he does when signing the mundane and (frankly) uninteresting letter to his generally uninteresting nephew.

What I propose to try to do (below) is no very easy thing, at least not for most of us living in this modern era, but it is nonetheless (and this I sincerely believe) important almost beyond describing for us at least to attempt it. By engaging in wordplay with a remarkably convenient double-entendre - I hope to explore and consider some of the differences between the actions involved in the building of a building and the ways we often think about such a building once built. To try to do that, I want to make use of the gerund "building," derived, of course, from the verb "to build" and retaining at least some of its association with the verb's sense of action (which I plan to emphasize), and the definite noun "the Building," referring to the physical structure of St. Peter's, as a manifestation of the designs and planning of Michelangelo - at least to the extent that it actually represent his wishes - and his supervision of its construction until his death in 1564. (When one turns, having walked alongside the River Tiber, onto the relatively more recent *Via della Conciliazione* and begins the considerably-longer-than-it-first-appears walk to the steps at the entrance to St. Peter's, essentially nothing - except for the looming dome - is anything Michelangelo would recognize OR, a great many would assert, care for at all. His intention was for the church itself to have the form of a Greek cross with four arms of equal lengths; it has to be seen from *behind* now to be understood and appreciated in that way - usually something of a challenge to

arrange.) Today it is in his monumental, church-and-city-defining dome that we find and recognize him and his vision; hence my own comments about “the Building” will largely be in reference to it: the massive pillars that define and support it and the cylindrical drum upon which it rests.

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It was my great good fortune to be able to attend, on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (June 29) in 1995, the first service in which a patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church (Patriarch Bartholomew) and his counterpart in the Roman Catholic Church (Pope John Paul II) had participated jointly since the time of the Great Schism - in 1054! The event was - for any number of reasons and on several levels - a memorable one for me. Since I was working in Rome that summer, it might seem predictable that I'd have been present at the service, but it was nothing of the kind. It was not due to my own initiative, but rather to sheer dumb luck that I'd been able to be in attendance, standing as I was towards the front of the packed-in-like-sardines nave - with a perfect view of the interior of the dome. Since we stood in our places for nearly three hours, I had plenty of time to look at and consider the dome. (I'd run into a priest friend on the street just two days before, and he was appalled that I'd not located the required ticket for admission to the service. He found one for me; I bought him a nice dinner later.)

One of the enduring memories of the service for me was staring up at the mosaic inscriptions along the dome's lower rim, in Greek on its left side and Latin on the right, even as far beneath them stood the eastern Patriarch and the western Pope. Standing there for so long also allowed me to consider what a dome actually is and what one does. In the most basic sense, a dome shields those beneath it (and inside) from the natural elements outside - wind and rain, for example. But more symbolically a dome, when atop such a house of worship, serves visibly to comfort and reassure the faithful gathered beneath it and to protect them from the doubt and wrong beliefs

that can confront them on the outside. (I suppose in that one sense, Mother Church may not be unlike a mother hen.)

And I thought, too, about the circular base of the dome that, even if so far above our heads, encircled and - hopefully - embraced us all. Wasn't that the intent, really, of that first collaboration of the two church leaders, with inscriptions in both their liturgical languages for us to take note of - even if so far above our heads? And what would then, in due course, rise up to the level of those mosaic inscriptions? The music, of course, sung by mere mortals so far below but directed to much loftier realms, and the prayers of the assembled faithful, accompanied as they ascended by the wafting upwards of incense. A dome can be seen as embodying a variety of symbols - some of them suggesting protection from forces without, others as collecting and conjoining the aspirations those within.

Unless, of course, it's thought of as having been inverted - turned upside-down - when it becomes something more like a bowl (in this case a really, really *big* bowl). Or perhaps like a chalice - one large enough to commune all the world's faithful at once. It's a strange thought, isn't it, Michelangelo Buonarroti - a potter? Of course, on the one hand, why not - considering everything else he'd done in his life? But he was, after all, a *sculptor* (for heaven's sake!), and at the time by far the most revered master of that most enduring of artistic media, and in several senses the most solid: sculpture in marble. If I were asked for a single adjective that described his sculptures, it would be *definite*. With the obvious exception of the *Pietà Rondanini* they are all definitive in the statements they make. What's oddest for me, then, when trying to think about Michelangelo as a potter, is that domes and chalices and bowls and such, they're all empty... hollow; there's nothing in them (not as yet); they're all vessels that have to be used to hold or collect something to be given meaning or purpose, whether right-side-up as domes - or inverted as bowls.

Earth, receive an honored guest:  
William Yeats is laid to rest.  
Let the Irish vessel lie  
Empty of its poetry.<sup>2</sup>

When W. H. Auden provided the twentieth century with what would become one of its most beloved poems (“In Memory of W. B. Yeats”), he could have used any number of honorific titles or designations for his venerated mentor, but he chose to use, at the beginning the final section that amounts to a eulogy for Yeats, the term “vessel,” a somewhat vague, non-specific kind of noun - almost an inert one - that by itself conveys only a sense of ordinariness and of emptiness, its coming value dependent upon what it’s about to be used to contain and to convey. Statues are themselves statements, while vessels (of whatever sort) are mere statements of potential. And who would even attempt to count the passages from the *Testaments*, the *Old* and the *New*, that make significant mention of vessels - those for food and for drink, for washing, for the carrying of valuables; the list would have no end. And then, of course, while Jesus doesn’t specifically name the necessary vessels for that most imperative of his mandates, they are surely implied in his, “Feed my sheep!”

The brilliance and beauty and power of W. B. Yeats’ celebrated verse notwithstanding, it seems clear (at least to me) that in his choice of “vessel,” Auden makes known his veneration of Yeats as a conveyor of *wisdom* as well. Following, as it does, his famous (if unfortunate) assertion in the poem’s previous section, “For poetry makes nothing happen,” we’re surely meant to conclude that Auden did not think the assertion applicable to Yeats. But, if Yeats was a vessel for the conveying of wisdom, was Michelangelo? We know that a number of his contemporaries thought he was, but did *he* think so?

I tend to doubt it. While there is abundant evidence of his feeling of confidence in his own various abilities - and of similar assertions he

made to contemporaries on the subject - feeling oneself even wise enough, much less a font of wisdom, is another matter. Vision, skill, determination, ingenuity, cunning, etc., to all of them, Yes! - and in abundance. But some of his letters, and especially some of the poems, show him more unsure in some ways of his own worthiness, *not* at all unsure of his skills and abilities - that, Never! - but of his own personal and spiritual worthiness. While thinking of oneself as worthy might itself imply a certain lack of wisdom, feeling able to consider oneself even moderately “wise” would seem to imply some perception of worthiness. (The previous sentence is clearly reflective of traditional Christian thought, especially as put forth by Christ in a story commonly known as his parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.)

So, once again - and despite how others may have thought of him - did Michelangelo think of himself as eminently wise? And, did he ever come to think of himself as more worthy? Those two questions require a book to answer, and this is neither the place nor am I the author to address them, but I hope someone else is - and *will*. But I do need to assert that, when confronted with the enormous (and *daunting* - surely even for him) realities he faced as he undertook to build the Building, he must surely have changed somewhat (and probably consciously so) how he thought - both about himself and about his *art* (and there’s another book in *that* topic). Not to attempt to address them fully (or even partially) but instead simply to raise them up for consideration, I’m going to conclude by listing some of the important ways I believe his building of the Building (and most especially its dome) could have compelled him to change.

1. He really had no choice about agreeing to take over the St. Peter’s project - both in the extensive changes necessary in its design and in the agreements and authorizations in place at the time regarding its actual construction.

2. He knew there would be objections to the changes he'd make in the existing designs and probably violent objections to his assuming of oversight and managerial roles - and there were.

3. He would receive no salary for all his work, and while he wasn't actually "worried" about money by that point (he didn't really "need" it), neither was it of no interest or concern to him.

4. There was no possibility of his living long enough to see the work completed - nowhere near it.

5. It (or the dome, anyway) would be empty and hollow, a shell - not a solid like a sculpture would be. Whatever its orientation, however it was seen, it would always be a vessel that was to be filled by the hopes, fears, needs, and aspirations of others: rather than being, as are so many of his other works, an expression of his own vision and his personal aspirations, the Building would instead be for those of others - expressly so.

This would be an extraordinarily difficult position for *any* mortal artist to be in - even for a much younger Michelangelo. In thinking about how he could have managed a project so vast and protracted, how he might have re-oriented himself personally, altered his own artistic aspirations and usual *modus operandi*, I always come back to the same thought, expressed with a modest degree of confidence, even if in appallingly bad syntax:

he was building himself into the future.

Let me hasten to explain that what I specifically do *not* mean by my cryptic choice of words is that I think he was seeking to enlarge still further his own fame and reputation by his work on St. Peter's. Any benefits of that sort would accrue too far in the future to be of real concern (or much value) at that point in his life... i.e. in his *daily* life - his living and working life as he lived it *in tempore*.

Even though the explanation of what I actually *do* mean by it may seem a trifle convoluted, it's still necessary, since it must have been a challenging adjustment for him to his normal way of working. There's surely no need at this point to rehearse descriptions of his legendary *terribilità* or to comment further on his impulsiveness, his cherished independence in all matters conceptual, or his drive and determination when working. Those are all well-known, as is the topic of the *finito/non finito* qualities of several of his works - not to mention whether he might have decided (even if for reasons still unknown) simply to walk away from others, ones that remain unquestionably unfinished.

But this was different: he *couldn't* walk away from it, no matter how much he might have wanted to at times. When he took over, there was much already done that had to be undone and begun again, and - despite his control over construction going forward - some costly and time-consuming blunders could still occur (as we read about in the nearly epic rants to his friend Vasari about one such foul-up). He couldn't make the work go faster, but he also knew he wouldn't live long enough to supervise it until completed. Now, any decisions about *finito/non-finito* or whether he would continue with a frustrating project or abandon it unfinished were not his to make. So, in a very real sense - in a personal and spiritual one - he was no longer "in charge," even if in another sense - a far more mundane and temporal one - he unquestionably was.

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He was accustomed to being thought by most of his contemporaries unsurpassable - and he was scarcely inclined to disagree - but what about his being *immutable*? Many of his works have proven as close to eternal as physical objects can come, yet others had already been lost while he was alive. His fame has proven remarkably enduring and seems unlikely ever to diminish (something he'd sought for the greater part of his life). In his verse, he lauds art's ability to endure

and even goes so far as to speak of the *permanence* of stone (clearly in reference to his own sculptural works). And - so far - they have indeed endured... *so far as we know*.

Yet for all his fame, for all his works, and for all his countless other achievements, Michelangelo was not (at least for a good part of his life) really at peace with the rhythm of time - nor, perhaps, could (or should) he have been. He was, indeed, *all* of the following (and the reader is invited to choose from, add to, or replace any to taste): intense; passionate; aggressive; animated; impatient; stubborn. And yet he was also: loyal, when warranted; reverent, when warranted; helpful and generous... when warranted. We remember, of course, that he'd been named for (and always self-identified with) Michael, the "judging" angel. He could also fairly be said to have been, at least at times, *obsessed* with justice and righteousness, but the one thing he assuredly was *not* was patient: his was a restless spirit.

And then... there's the verse - often frustratingly enigmatic, at times extreme yet at others so deeply affective. But even (and an apology for my use of such jangly current jargon) as "all over the place" as his verse is, with so many of his poems unfinished and so many intriguing others scarcely begun, no-one who has spent significant time with them is likely to differ with this assertion: the poems are profoundly revealing of the *man* Michelangelo - in all his nearly infinite complexity. But then, since it seems I've just used the word "infinite," I want to offer another assertion about the verse that others may perhaps be less willing to accept and agree with: the single largest underlying concern, and the one that pervades most of the verse - *whether or not* it's topically explicit in a given poem - is time itself. While to a certain degree that may be true of any thinking artist's work, and while additionally (but importantly, I'd suggest) an underlying sense of the movement of time is nearly unavoidably present whenever rhyme and/or regular meter are employed - still: he wrote and thought a great deal about time - and he was not happy about it. He was not happy that it concerned him

as much as it did, but also... he was not, for much of his life, at peace with time as he moved through it, or - better - as it moved through him; and the whole idea of immutability got on his nerves.

But, he would (eventually) get some help with that...

The memorable lines that open “Burnt Norton,” the first of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, seem to need mentioning at this point. (I’ll add that I’ve always suspected that Mr. Eliot found inspiration on the matter - much as I always do - in Prudentius’ magnificent hymn “*Corde natus ex parentis.*”)

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.<sup>3</sup>

I strongly suspect that, in the building of the Building, Michelangelo finally came to accept that he was, in essence, building himself into the future... i.e. into *the fullness of time*. And also that (eventually) he came to realize that he was no longer alone in that task.

(The last bit is not just a suspicion of mine: he’ll tell us so himself.)

### *Where Are They?*

I’ve made it a practice, at my public presentations on Michelangelo’s signatures, to leave enough time afterwards for questions from the audience. There are always questions - some interesting, some not. A few have made me look for better ways of explaining something, if the questioner asks about something I’ve just covered in the talk. Others, and the ones I’ve especially appreciated, have prompted me to pay more attention to something. But there are two questions

that are almost always asked, and usually in the same order. They're good questions - ones that definitely *should* be asked - and I've always had my answers ready. But my answers, while indeed correct and appropriate, have often sounded (in that dialect spoken by many of my students) "lame" - if not "*totally lame.*" OR (more formally, but still worse), they've sounded "evasive" - as if I either didn't know the answers or else wasn't willing to share them. (Neither was the case, but trying to answer them was something I came to dread. Here's how such exchanges usually went:

**Q:** Why did he do these wonderful signatures?

**A:** Because he could.

(*pause...*)

**Q:** OK... then, who did he do them *for* - for whom was he willing to expend so much time, thought, and creative energy?

**A:** He did them for himself.

You can see the problem. The only times (and they were rare) when audience members found those answers satisfactory - when they smiled a little or nodded in agreement - were in cases where (as I'd discover later) they were creative persons themselves and thus able to understand and accept the suggestion that an artist - even such a famous one - might choose to do something when working that was not really necessary, and do it *just for himself*. It's only been recently that I've come to believe I'm finally able to offer fuller (and hopefully more satisfying) responses to those questions. Doing so is one of the main reasons for this final essay - along with being able to present the additional signature discussed below.

I'll answer the second question (or rather, a part of it) first, because that part has a direct answer - even if a rather surprising one. Can

it really be the case that he created these calligraphic jewels for no-one but himself, that he didn't have specific recipients in mind when doing them - whether friends or associates of some sort whom he thought likely to notice and appreciate them? Yes, that really does seem to be the case, that he did them for himself and not for others (something I'll have more to say about below). I've pored over his correspondence searching for some clue, however slight, that a recipient of one of his special, imaginative signatures noticed and understood it, but I've found nothing. Indeed, while any number of people recognized that he insisted, for some reason, on retaining that one particular old Tuscan spelling of his name - *Michelagnolo* - apparently no-one understood *why* he did.

Probably if anyone had noticed and understood, it would have been his trusted friend and confidant Luigi del Riccio, another of the *fuorusciti* - Florentine exiles living in Rome. They were good friends, fellow poets, and men with similar tastes and sensibilities, and their letters exhibit not only a high mutual regard but a shared love for puns and other aspects of language that could be put to use in their particular brand of convivial humor. Yet while their letters reveal both a fondness for humor and for each other - even to the point of having some surprising nicknames for each other - there are none of the amazing signatures from Michelangelo's hand that we find elsewhere (*WIAN*, p.121-24). While we can surely *suspect* that, had del Riccio not died unexpectedly (and left his friend so utterly bereft), he, too, might have been recipient of some of the splendid examples from his friend's hand - that remains only wishful thinking.

As I've written (both above and in *WIAN*), Michelangelo's calligraphy in his letters can, at times, be rather beautiful - especially when either the letter itself or its recipient is considered (by him) to be especially significant. Although many of his letters that are purely functional can be described (and justly so) as calligraphically rather 'casual' in appearance, sloppy or illegible they are not. (Part of that

surely needs to be understood as reflecting the intentionality and comprehensive effort required when writing a letter then.) And yet, the actual appearance of his letters does not itself convey a sense of pleasure having been derived through the act of inscribing them onto the page - even if their content might.

While he was known in his time as “a man of letters” (in addition to being widely recognized as a poet of distinction), and while a good number of letters to and from him have survived, impressive as that *corpus* may be, it’s unquestionably misleading - since surely *most* of his written letters have *not* survived. Having served their intended purposes, there was no real reason to preserve them; we also have contemporaneous accounts of his burning most of the letters still in his possession late in life (which could lead to an interesting and valuable review of those he had on hand but chose *not* to destroy). Some among his surviving letters may fairly be said to be beautiful and perhaps revealing. A few truly are quite personal and express thoughts and feelings that more often found their expression - *if at all* - in his verse, rather than in letters. But the majority of those that survive simply do their jobs and communicate information. Whether from him or to him, most concern mundane matters; only a few contain much that could fairly be called personal. Nor is there much to suggest any investment by him of thoughtful or creative energy: they do the job he needed for them to do.

But then, of course, there are letters that seem almost to radiate the creative energy that was invested in them - that “called them into being” - rather than merely communicating information. Such ‘high-energy’ letters can concern almost anything. They can be rants, whether long ones or short. A couple of near-epic rants (over money, of course) to his brother Buonarroto make for some bracing reading; in one of them he seems (by its second page) almost to be screaming - and in *mercantesca*, too, rather than in the first page’s *corsiva* (*WIAN*, p.86-7). A short, brutish message to Buonarroto’s son (the hapless nephew Lionardo), written decades later, lands like

a guided missile (*AB IV/53*); his rage at both brother and nephew is palpable. Then there are the many exchanges with his friend Luigi del Riccio - a fellow Florentine, a fellow poet, and a fellow lover not only of words themselves but of the beautiful things they can be used to describe. Their letters typically begin with some bit of business to be taken care of (del Riccio was the artist's banker) but then turn personal, with a sharing of poems, of jokes, of banter, and of play with much older Florentine forms and spellings (*WIAN*, p.121-24). Their letters are never angry, nor are they coolly formal; they're convivial.

Not mere conviviality, but near-manic, absurdist humor abounds in a series of letters from Michelangelo to his friend Cardinal Fatucci concerning the utterly ridiculous suggestion of installing a statue - one to be carved by Michelangelo (of course) - in Florence's *Piazza San Lorenzo*, a seated statue... with smoke coming out its nose (per the sculptor's irreverent suggestion). What Michelangelo was - and was perhaps more than anything else - was a *noticer of possibilities*, and the possibilities this absurd proposal presented for flexing his comedic muscles were simply too wonderful to pass up - and he didn't. Then, there are his letters to young Tommaso de' Cavalieri, beautiful almost beyond description, so very carefully crafted and painstakingly revised are they. His skill as wordsmith and poet is plainly evident in these letters, in which he manages to combine his expressions of tender affection with those of loftiest admiration.

In these letters and some others of different sorts, we feel him fully present, his energy in the conceiving and inscribing of them nearly tangible. Whether or not he found the act of inscribing his carefully chosen words onto the page a pleasurable experience (or one that *fully* involved his mind and spirit), his composing of them obviously was. Such high-energy letters as these contain and express almost everything imaginable: rage and fury, grief and sorrow, wit, loss, longing, hope, near-despair... they have it all. Everything, that is, except for the signatures - the ones this study has been concerned

with: the beautiful, intriguing, puzzling-yet-revealing ones; the very ones that demonstrate his artistry in signing, his imagination, his *fantasia* - which is to say, of course, his *art*. The ones wherein we can see his art at work, his 'art-as-verb.' But those signatures are not on the high-energy letters, however much we'd like them to be. *Those* signatures are on more work-a-day, "let's-get-this-job-done" kinds of letters, letters he needs to write just to communicate information and solve problems. That's *not* where we'd like them to be - but it's where they are. We'd hope (and much prefer) to find them on letters to friends or other artists, letters perhaps of some depth - of profundity, even - letters that might then conclude with such calligraphic jewels as to remind their recipients of the 'real' identity of the writer. But they're not there.

How to explain this anomaly? Why would it be as it is? I believe I now can, finally, answer those questions - along with the inevitable two I mentioned earlier: *why* did he do such artistically imaginative and creative signatures, and *for whom* did he do them? But in order to answer fully (or even adequately), it's going to be necessary to approach the matter indirectly. The explanation, if offered in a more cursory way, would likely prove no more satisfying than did my usual "lame" answers. A story will help, I believe, and it may well succeed in getting us most of the way to our destination.

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On my first extended visit to Italy more than forty years ago (and a great deal has changed there since then), I happened to witness - on two different occasions - something that would initially puzzle me, as did a good many other things at that time. But then, on a subsequent visit, I saw the same thing happen again - only that time I was walking with an Italian gentleman who was a long-time resident of the city. When he noticed me watching and saw the puzzlement on my face, he explained to me what turned out to be something like a little ritual, almost a ceremony of sorts...

On these occasions, while walking down the sidewalk, I'd noticed other pedestrians slow their gait and stop walking, as they turned and faced the street to watch as a funeral *cortège* passed. When the hearse itself passed, I noticed the men on the sidewalks do this, almost in unison: with their left hands, they removed any hats they were wearing and held them down at their sides; with their right hands, they first blessed themselves with the sign of the cross, and then reached down and touched their testicles. *Tocca palle*, as the gesture is known: touch your balls. (My choosing to mention that particular ritual in this context probably could use a word or two of explanation.)

Among young Latin males, particularly when in a group of friends, the 'touching' gesture is hardly an uncommon one. "Just checking to be sure they're still there" is its humorous explanation (and more about that need not be said). But in the context of watching as a hearse passes, and having first blessed oneself with the sign of the cross using the same hand, the use of the *tocca palle* gesture has greater significance - with two particular meanings, as explained by my Italian friend. First, touching one's *palle* represents both a kind of reassurance that they are indeed still there and an expression of gratitude, that the one touching himself is still alive and still has his regenerative juices available. But second, and of surely greater significance, the gesture serves as a poignant reminder to anyone who happens to be an observer when a *cortège* passes that, in due course, he or she will instead become the one whose passing is observed. (And as I've since learned, some Italian women will, in that situation, bless themselves and then mutter the words *tocca palle* as the hearse passes.)

Life, as we know and live it, is perhaps less like a bequest than an extended loan. American cousins of Italian males might - instead of using the *tocca palle* gesture - say, "Better make hay while the sun shines!" The opening scene in what has become my favorite modern novel takes place during an oppressive silence in the home of a

woman only recently deceased. One of the principal characters, an Italian woman (who happens to be both a sculptor herself and an ardent admirer of Michelangelo) startles everyone else present by breaking the room's silence with the announcement, "Death makes us happy." After a minute of recovery time, someone else nods and affirms simply, "Yes, death is what makes us glad to be alive."<sup>4</sup>

An adage all my students have been subjected to countless times is Aquinas' explanation of what "art" is. "Art," he tells us, "is the craft or means by which things are created or called into being." "Called into being..." how I do love that! Yet even as familiar to me as it is, it always makes me think of Christ's calling forth of Lazarus. "Come out, Lazarus! Come out of your tomb! Come out, away from death, back into life." In a sense, it can be said that Christ is (in this biblical account) *creating* life - that he is, in effect, "calling it into being." Art comes into being in myriad ways, of course, yet for me, the modern-day loss (at least to a considerable extent) of the ancient idea of its having been summoned forth - of having been *called* into being - has left us more than a little impoverished, as it's both an enriching and a nourishing awareness for us to work from.

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When I was in my early twenties, I had two seemingly disparate but nonetheless closely related experiences that would wind up shaping my thinking about what art is for the rest of my life. I'd completed my years of undergraduate conservatory training and was living in Amsterdam, where I was fortunate to be able to study organ with Gustav Leonhardt; one of my lessons with him would provide the setting for the first of those two experiences. I had played for his comments J. S. Bach's five *Canonic Variations* (BWV 769), a work many hold to be the most dauntingly complex counterpoint written during what is generally called the "tonal practice period" (roughly 1625-1900); many would say written *ever* - and I'd agree with them.

We were discussing the remarkably strange harmonies in the last of the variations, the so-called “Canon by Augmentation,” when Mr. Leonhardt made a remark that stunned me. His remark was in two parts, and at the time I was so struck by the first part of what he said - which I would later realize had been the more obvious, less revelatory part - that I failed to appreciate the second part, the one that would come to be, well... life-changing for me (once I’d begun to appreciate and understand it more fully).

In discussing the very strange harmonies, he said, “Of course, the canons led him to harmonic places he’d normally not have gone.” Having spent years in harmony classes not long before in a detailed study of Bach’s codification (effectively) of the precepts and practice of music in the functional harmonic style, I was briefly stunned by the idea of anything leading Bach anywhere: after all, he was the unquestioned *leader*, not some kind of *follower* (or - in the usage of canonic composition - he was our *dux*, not our *comes*). But then, of course, having decided to write in adherence to the strictures and mandates of canonic technique, Bach had had little choice: he’d *had* to follow... to follow where the canons led him. I’d let myself be distracted.

It was the other part of my esteemed teacher’s comment that would come to matter far more to me, and I remember it today as clearly as if he’d said it yesterday. “But you know, Mr. Smith, we must not think of this score simply as a work for us to study and perform, we must also recognize that it is an account of the paths his mind took when working out what he could and could not do. It’s an account of his mind’s journey as it was being led by the canon; the finished score is the evidence of that journey.” The *evidence* of it... That’s an enormously important concept, obviously, but it’s a difficult one to grasp at all, much less to sustain in our consumerist age, plagued as it is by relentless emphasis upon product and producing.

It was probably not more than a year later (I was back in the United States by then) that I happened to find, buried on a bookstore's Sale Table (such things were common not so long ago!) and costing forty-five cents, my first-ever copy of Ananda Coomaraswamy's slender collection of essays entitled *Christian & Oriental Philosophy of Art*.<sup>5</sup> I still have it, of course, replete with carefully inscribed marginalia far smaller than I could hope to write or can even read today. (Later copies were purchased for my students.) In its first essay, "Why Exhibit Works of Art?" I was confronted for what I believe might have been the first time with his emphatic distinction between the words *artifact* (essentially a noun) and *art* (a capacity or an ability, and something closer to - even if it isn't quite - a verb). An object of visual representation hung on a museum's wall, as Coomaraswamy explains it, is not itself *art* but is instead evidence of the working of its creator's *art* - it's but a tangible demonstration of an artist's capacity: it's *evidence*. It doesn't start to become *art* once again - since the word implies a necessary animation of the intellect, of the mind and the spirit suggestive of a degree of aliveness and vitality - until it's being actively interacted with. (These perceptions, both Mr. Coomaraswamy's and my own, are, of course, clearly derived from the thoughts and teachings of Thomas Aquinas.)

But, since this is an investigation into 'play' with words, indulge me a moment for such play: rather than thinking of, say... a drawing as "art" (*noun*) - something 'factual' - or even as "a work of art" (a bit better, but still a *noun*), we need - and rather desperately so today - to recover the ability (and the willingness) to look at the drawing as "evidence of the work and workings of *art*." RIGHT: that's not very likely to happen, not in an age in which "art" is merely one more commodity that can be bought and sold! That would be much too esoteric an approach to...

BUT, WAIT A MINUTE! HOLD ON!! Didn't Mr. Leonhardt call the *score* to Bach's Canon by Augmentation "evidence" of his thought? And does anyone really want to suggest that the musical score, the

piece of paper bearing the variation's musical notation, is itself *the music*?<sup>6</sup> Wouldn't it require someone to engage with it, to perform it, before Bach's score became living music? (If there's someone able to follow and hear - completely - *that* score in his or her mind without hearing it played on an instrument - well, that's someone I'd like to meet! (Or, *maybe...* No, I think probably not, as I'd likely become unpleasantly envious.)

The understanding of *art* I mean to suggest here is this: for us to engage in a meaningful way with what we refer to as "art" requires, at least to some degree, the following: a modicum of understanding (knowledge) of the kind of work we're confronting; an openness to the possibility of surprise; enough time and energy to invest in our own investigations of it. But what's the most important, I've come to believe, is a quietly attuned, cultivated capacity for the perception of energy, the ability to sense a work's own inner animating energy, as well as the artist's *art* that called it into being out of nothingness - i.e., to perceive both the work's own and (to some extent, hopefully) its creator's animating vitality, in a sort of collective *spiritus vivendi*. It doesn't matter too much, really, whether the work is a drawing or a piece of music - or even an audaciously imaginative signature. Lines - as once inscribed on a page - when energy coursed through time and then through the artist's hand, when they are studied (or heard) and interacted with, can begin to yield back that same kind of energy when time is once again perceived to move through them, and as they then begin (hopefully) to move the viewer or the listener or student of them.

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I doubt that I was the first or only admirer of Michelangelo's *art* to have been surprised and - frankly, more than a little disappointed - to discover that in the course of his long career, the Master had sunk to the level of designing what seem - at least when compared with the *David* and the *Moses* and the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and altar wall - almost like, well... tchotchkes: candlesticks, salt-cellars,

dagger handles... and *bedposts*? What might he have sunk to next, I'll confess to having wondered - opening a souvenir shop, offering trinkets for the endless streams of religious pilgrims to Rome to carry home with them? (Although... I suppose that at least theirs could have been fairly labelled as "Made in Italy," rather than in China - as most of those on sale today are.)

But even a kind and patient reader who has been carefully following this discussion might by now have become a bit fatigued with it all, perhaps even impatient, wondering what *possible* relevance to our study of Michelangelo's signatures the previous paragraph could have. Beyond its having allowed me the opportunity to confess my earlier lamentable stupidity and lack of understanding, how could his acceptance of commissions for such disparate and surprising (if utilitarian) items possibly be relevant to our efforts to unravel and understand some of his calligraphic play? Actually, even as late an arrival to this party as I am, I've now come to realize that - not only are they *relevant* - they're all manifestations of the same drive and simply demonstrate new (for him and for us) and different ways for him to meet some of the same needs.

Before we consider what those "needs" were, let's take a moment to consider what they *weren't*. First - in at least one sense of the word "need" - he didn't *need* more work to do. Later in life, he was, after all, building that Building - the one for which he was Supreme Architect - itself a task that would have proven daunting to two or three men half his age. He had more than enough work to keep him busy and to occupy his mind, surely...? (Hmm: perhaps; but then, he was interested in, and involved in, a good many different things.) Money? While he'd chosen not to accept a salary for his work at St. Peter's and by late in life was (as has been amply demonstrated) rather well-off financially, he nonetheless remained ever-vigilant on *all* matters relating to money - his compensation, his investments, his properties - the very topics that so many of his surviving letters concern. The refusal of payment for his work at St. Peter's was -

undoubtedly - at least as much a political decision (and a shrewd one that might indeed have saved his life) as the act of devotion to Christ and his Church that he called it; it should not be seen as indicative of any lack of interest in accruing wealth or unconcern with being suitably compensated for his efforts.

The utilitarian articles he made designs for had not been requested by the owners of local *osterie* or *taverne* somewhere. They were for clients of distinction and esteem (not 'nobodies'), and it takes very little effort to imagine what degree of pleasure it would have given some distinguished host with guests at his table when he was able to offer them additional salt for their food - from the salt-cellar designed specifically for him by... well, by Michelangelo! And might a wound from a unique dagger, one whose handle was designed by the man who would eventually become Christ's own architect, have healed more quickly - or, might it instead have proven especially lethal? This is all, of course, silly even to consider, but I've indulged in it simply to point out how very far from our usual image of him and his work on St. Peter's and the Sistine Chapel some of these pursuits really are.

But, let's try subjecting them to those same questions, the ones I'm always asked about his signatures: why did he do them - and for whom did he do them? Well, first, he did them for the people who'd commissioned them from him; second (and unlike the sometimes-considerable efforts he expended on his signatures), he did them for a suitable fee *and* - I'd like to suggest - for a certain further degree of recognition. And why, later in life when he was hard at work on St. Peter's and was no longer interested in painting himself, did he continue doing fully realized-drawings for paintings - their *concetti* - only to then hand them off to colleagues to actually paint? I've come to feel almost certain by now that my "lame," glib-sounding answer that "he did them because he could," would rather quickly become a fuller and more helpful answer if I extended it a bit: "He did them because he could... *learn something more from doing them.*" Even as

he continued to investigate - at least in part with his own name - how much meaning he could manage to conceal in the most minute gestures, so, too, did he continue his explorations *outward*, into things he knew less well.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

(T. S. Eliot: "Little Gidding" - *Four Quartets*)

And *for whom* did he do them? He did them, of course, for whoever had commissioned them - but I'd guess that he also (perhaps even primarily) did them for himself. There is a kind of artist - and he was surely one (and if not he, who?) - that, in order to feel alive (if not just to *stay* alive), *has* to be creating. His own *spiritus vivendi*, along with the gifts of the *Creator Spiritus* flowed ceaselessly in his veins, an inseparable admixture, a sort of *creator/spiritus/vivendi*. The building of St. Peter's proceeded relentlessly, of course, but it was an almost infinitely slow task and one he knew he'd never live to see finished. (I've often suspected that one of the reasons he eventually agreed to the construction of the wooden model for the dome was to allow *himself* to see it - even if the model would be, for him, less a 'work' than a longed-for promise of one.) But he would still have needed, I'd imagine, a reminder (even if only an occasional one) of what still flowed in his veins:

Michelangelo! *tocca palle*: be alive!  
Make something... something *new*.  
Call something beautiful into being...  
Call something into life.

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Statistically, Nephew Lionardo wound up with a larger number (by far) of examples of his uncle's remarkable signature-play than did anyone else: he - perhaps the unlikeliest of recipients even to have *noticed* them, much less understood them. But - and greatly to his credit! - he saved them for us. And in what might be one of the stranger aspects of this study (one that has had, from its outset, no shortage of such), we need to recognize that the survival of so much of Michelangelo's correspondence with Lionardo is important for other reasons as well. Florence had been Michelangelo's home, and there is every reason to believe that, until the end of his long life, he remained a loyal son. Despite his fame throughout much of the world and despite being Rome's most famous resident (and an honorary citizen), when he died he was still, at heart, a Florentine.

One has to wonder how often Michelangelo would have bothered to write his nephew had the latter lived in some other city, one where he did not still have - despite his more than thirty-year absence from the city of his birth (OK, *almost...*) and that he still considered home - financial investments, properties, a studio, as well as some remaining friends and family. (One of those properties, which he'd purchased largely as an investment but planned to use as his residence when he finally returned from his long Roman exile, today houses on its top floor the *Archivio Buonarroti* and its collection of his letters, among them a number to his brother Buonarroto - and a great many more to Buonarroto's son, nephew Lionardo.)

### *The Lionardo Letter's Closing*

In examining the final signature of the study, this last but surely not least of his personal expressions in calligraphic art, a few things should be recalled (whether from earlier in this essay or from *WIAN* itself) and made use of. In the briefest and most concise of terms - and merely as review - I offer them here.

When Michelangelo was learning to write, he was taught using the old Florentine merchants' hand known today as *mercantesca* - or, more specifically (to distinguish it from other, similar styles of the period), as *mercantesca fiorentina* or *mercantesca antica*. The always ambitious young artist, eager to present himself as favorably as possible, realized while still in his twenties that continued use of the Florentine hand he'd been taught would be a quick give-away to his more-humble-than-he'd-have-liked-known background and education, so he began training himself to write using the superior script known as *cancelleresca* (chancery cursive), or more familiarly simply as *corsiva*, after Arrighi's celebrated instruction manual (of which he owned a copy). One of the principal tenets of the *corsiva* style was its avoidance of the many old *abbreviature*, abbreviations for individual letters (but sometimes combinations of letters as well) that were often florid and sometimes beautiful; but they were - once again - old-fashioned, and their use was a class marker of sorts. Avoiding altogether the use of his favorite *abbreviature* was more of a problem for him than was the actual change of script, and his insistent use of the one for the letters *che* in the middle of his name (*WIAN*, p.68-85) had become his recognized logo; he continued to use it in his signature long after it had disappeared from his written texts. But then by the end of the 1520s, when Florence's fortunes had declined so drastically and he'd was considering more seriously a move to Rome, its immediate identification of him as a Florentine had become more of an impediment than an advantage, and he reluctantly abandoned it.

Yet even after he'd stopped using the old *abbreviature* in the texts of his letters, they continued to appear (if *inconsistently*) in addresses and in closings and signatures on letters. Indeed, his use of them - by this point completely out of style and lacking context - can often seem like a catalyst to him for further experimentation, but it is still a mistake to try to identify *consistent* patterns in his calligraphic gestures and play - especially after he had abandoned his *che* logo.

There are, however, a few things that he does do often enough that departures from his 'norms' are worth noting and considering.

While he learned early on to be cautious in whatever he wrote (and said) and to avoid revealing more of himself than he wanted, he was still a remarkably self-revelatory *artist* - even if, as a general rule, in veiled and discreet ways. But one easy marker for his life-long pride in being a Florentine citizen, true even after he'd long been Rome's most celebrated resident, was his reluctance to write the latter city's name beginning with an upper-case "R." (While there are far more surviving examples of his writing of "*Roma*" than of "*Firenze*," there are enough for the general pattern to become clear: his devotion to Florence usually elicits from him an upper-case "F" as its initial letter, while Rome merits - until his latest years - only an "r." (And even once he has yielded to convention, rarely does the final result appear to have been as comfortable to him.)

But there's a further curiosity in this regard, something he did that *has* to have been intentional - since he did it so nearly consistently and even though (at times, anyway) it caused trouble and produced a clumsy result. Because I've endeavored to be honest in recounting all the fruits of my investigations and the many adventures I've had related to this project, I do have to confess that - at least as of now - I *still* don't know why he did it; I simply haven't been able to figure it out. But since he did it so deliberately, it must have meant something to him - I just don't know *what*. Maybe someone else will figure it out and let me know...? (*Please...?*)

While in today's Italian one uses the preposition *à* when speaking of a city ("*sono à Roma*" - "I am in Rome"), that usage was not yet the norm in his day, and he used "*in*" instead. But instead of writing (in cursive, without an abbreviation) *sono in roma*, what he wrote was "*sono inro ma[\_\_\_]*." (See also *WIAN*, p.62-3.) Writing with his quill pen, he could manage to connect three or four lower-case letters of similar height and shape, but what he did instead of the perfectly

obvious “*in roma*” was no easier - not in any way - yet it’s what he did for some reason. And as we’ll see below, it became far more (rather than less) involved and effortful when he chose to include the old “N”-*abbreviatura* instead of writing “*in*” in cursive. It was undoubtedly a gesture that meant something to him, but (*alas*) it still doesn’t to me.

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It would seem reasonable to assume that, since I’d not included a discussion of it in *WIAN*, this final signature is one I discovered later on, after the book was written. But not only is that not the case - it is, in fact, almost the direct opposite of it. I’ve written above about the uncertainty I felt about my ever being able to rise to the challenges this study was obviously going to present, and how I’d even offered to give away my copious notes (mostly because I hadn’t yet understood what they contained). But near the end of my first extended period of work in the Casa Buonarroti Archive, when I was looking through a small group of letters I’d not yet examined, I came across this letter to Lionardo, and while I may not have seen *everything* I present below on that day, I saw almost immediately what he’d done with his closing of it, and it was at that moment I became convinced that there *had* to be more to his signature-play - and that I’d need to press on with studying it. But all that seems amusingly ironic to me now, that it happened as it did, because his imaginative play in this case is so *unlike* it in any other examples. While this is indeed the one that convinced me to continue on, it initially caused me more confusion than anything else, because it is - apparently - unique, a one-of-a-kind example!

The examples presented and explored in *WIAN* were of verbal play, literally of *word-play*, involving the letters of his own name (or, on occasion, those of his family’s name as well). But in the closing of this nondescript letter to his nephew, he so very carefully fashions certain individual letters - and in a letter whose over-all calligraphic style is at best indifferent - as to suggest something (or, in this case,

someone) else as well - not instead of what the written word says, but in addition to it. While this may seem a peculiar thing for an architect to do (and at this point architecture *was* effectively his occupation), the need for clarity (of both design and intent) in that discipline is a different matter altogether from the subtlety - and indeed, the *ambiguity* - of intent we often encounter in his poems. But as it happens, I have a nice example of someone else doing something similar, i.e. of using the appearance of some carefully inscribed words (his name, in this case) in so particular and eye-catching a way as to cause an attentive reader to associate to something different as well.

### *Another Name...*

I've mentioned several times the eminent Dutch musician Gustav Leonhardt, with whom I was privileged to study for a while, and the vivid example he provided those who were around him of someone who "lived his name," in matters and manners both personal and musical (*WIAN*, p.xvii). But then, as it turns out, he left us still another example of name/identity awareness, and one that proves almost directly relevant to this study, and he provides it - whether surprisingly or not - via his *own* signature.

I've kept all my letters from him, spanning a good number of years. Some of them are quite matter-of-fact, having to do with repertoire or performing editions or scheduling. There is his treasured letter of recommendation for me; there are others in Dutch, French, and German - letters of introduction asking that I be allowed to play on certain historical instruments. Some are short, others are longer. Several are on the inexpensive aerograms that were much used at the time - their very thin, light-weight paper almost mandating the use of a ball-point pen. Others are on thicker, heavier paper that allowed him to use his own preferred wide-nib fountain pen, with (as he often pointed out) "real ink." In short, the letters could not

possibly be more diverse in appearance, in content, in paper and ink types, nor in pens utilized. Some were written in haste, while others are more elegant in style and thoughtful in content. Yet the signatures on them are *all* - in both concept and execution - the same. ALL of them are *exactly* the same. This must surely mean, then, that each of the signatures represents an additional iteration of a well-considered, meaningful, and almost infinitely rehearsed *conchetto* for him.



(author's collection)

Rather than leaning forward (to the right) as does the cursive script of its letter, his family name leans back, beyond perpendicular and well to the left. Its appearance is immediately arresting to the eye, seeming surely to have come from some different hand. But then, his first name inclines forward (to the right) so extremely that it has become a bit of a challenge to make out. Someone unfamiliar could be forgiven for thinking (at least initially) that there might even be *three* different hands represented on the page. (We should take a moment to recall that Michelangelo once tried to disguise his own signature - and in a remarkably similar way: *WIAN*, p.216-225).

What might the reason for a signature as arresting as this be? If it really was so carefully conceived that he could virtually reproduce it every time he signed his name - and he could - what was the reason for it? It doesn't catch the eye by reason either of its size or some sort of flourish; it stands out instead - almost jumps off the page - because of its utterly incongruous appearance in the context of its surroundings. It doesn't comport with anything else in the letter: indeed, it contrasts with everything.

Mr. Leonhardt, although accomplished and widely recognized as a harpsichordist, an organist, and a conductor - as well as a sought-after teacher - confined his efforts to the music of the Baroque era (perhaps 1625-1775, or so) in a deliberate effort to go as deeply as possible into the period and into its regional styles of composition and performance. With composition in the style of the Baroque, there is no principle more important than that known as “contrary motion,” which holds that between the voices - but most especially between the *outer* voices - there should be as much movement as possible in opposite directions, or “in contrary motion.” If they were still to be at all legible, it’s hard to imagine any more opposition of inclination between his first and last names than is evident in this signature. But further, I doubt that there was ever a lesson with him in which I did not hear him say, “No, no... Mr. Smith, I think not; not yet! There is still not yet enough *contrast*. Baroque music *is* contrast, it is *about* contrast; that’s what it is!” (Our name for both the period and its style is said to have been derived from the Portuguese adjective *barroco*, which means “rough” or “uneven.”) “Contrasted” is also what his own signature surely is; how could it possibly be any *more* contrasted - or any more relevant to him?

If Mr. Leonhardt had signed letters using the unremarkable, gently forward-sloping cursive script he employed in the texts of his letters themselves, he’d have concluded them by telling us merely what his name was. In choosing to sign them as he did - with his infinitely intriguing yet never-varying signature - he concluded them instead by telling us who *he* was.

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What *is* in a name, really - in anyone’s name? The name “given” to a child (most often by its parents) soon after birth will - unless it is intentionally changed later on - serve as *legal* identification for life. But of course, a person’s identification before the law may well have next-to-nothing to do that person’s own perceptions of his or her

*real* identity - or whatever ‘identity’ any others may ascribe based on acquaintance and awareness. A young man, when introduced by his mother to someone unfamiliar as “Billy,” may quickly interject instead “Bill,” as he offers his hand to shake. When he’s a few years older and has just been introduced by a friend as “Bill,” he may abruptly correct his friend, asking the new acquaintance to call him “William” instead. What can be concluded from these situations is - at a minimum - that “William” has considered his identity and that, while it may indeed still be a work-in-progress, it’s not something of no consequence to him. His identifier may not have undergone any change, but his perceived *identity* has.

In *WIAN*, I wrote at some length about the artist whom we know as Michelangelo and his relationship to his name - and what a name it is! Michael, the “judging angel,” the escort for just-departed souls. But, while some Christians are pleased they were given a “Biblical” name, by that they usually mean theirs is the name of a character from the New Testament. His name, that of the Archangel Michael, figures significantly in both testaments - having been introduced to us in the Old as commander of God’s army, defender of the faith. So when thought of in a certain way, his namesake can be said to be a nearly all-encompassing figure, an Alpha-*and*-Omega unto himself. For someone inclined to think about his name, that’s a lot of name to think about - even before attempting to live up to it! How could anyone - any mere mortal - feel he deserved to have *that* name? IF they can be said, for certain, to mean nothing else, surely the artist’s many examples of wordplay with his name demonstrate - and without doubt - that he thought about it, about what he was called, about whom he was named for, and about his own sense of his identity. But then, of course, there are the further revelations provided us when he takes pen in hand.

## *He Was Distracted...*

He was distracted, surely, and probably a bit disgruntled too, I'd guess, but I doubt that he was genuinely dismayed. For one thing, he tried to avoid yielding to dismay and, for another, this was just one more foul-up, one more thing that didn't work out as planned; he was used to that by now, of course. Still, we can easily imagine his deep sighs when wondering - yet again - why everything with his nephew Lionardo had to be such a hassle...

The content of the letter whose signature we're about to consider is so very slight that it can easily be summarized. There had been on-going exchanges (in letters) between Michelangelo in Rome and his nephew Lionardo in Florence concerning the timing of a proposed visit by the latter to his uncle in Rome. But their letters appear to have crossed in the mail, and instead of coming on to Rome as part of his trip to Loreto, Lionardo had returned home to Florence. He seems to have proposed (in a letter no longer extant) that he come to Rome straight away, but his uncle tells him that no, it would be better if he waited. "Don't come now, wait until September." That's about it - the content of the letter that bears what, for me, may be Michelangelo's most uniquely beautiful signature gesture. (That simple message, and then the concluding line we'll consider below.) But even if the world's most famous living artist was, yet again, annoyed with his irksome nephew, it probably didn't amount to all that much. Still, he was distracted (unfocussed) for sure and - I would guess - irritated too, and, well... why wouldn't he have been? But as I think about it, that's not really a reasonable question to ask - not yet, anyway. Better to ask at this point, "Why might he have been so irritated and/or distracted (unfocussed) at needing to write this very simple letter to his nephew?" It was, after all, no big deal - right?

Well, it was probably a bigger deal for him than it might seem. Here are *some* reasons for that, some thoughts about how he might have

thought about the task. And while they're not suggested here in any particular order (certainly not in an order of perceived importance), awareness of the larger context can sometimes turn out to be the most meaningful element of all.

- He was writing a short, purely functional letter to his oftentimes tiresome nephew; there was nothing about it that required much focus of mental energy - and anyway, he was tired (as he tells us in the last line of this letter and in countless others). But then, in an effort to be fair to Lionardo, letter-writing (which had never been his favorite pastime) was becoming a chore for him. (He would, before too long, write - once again to Lionardo - that writing had become so tiring that he was going to have someone else write any letters for him and he'd just sign them - although it's not clear that he ever did so to any great extent.)

- So, even understanding as we do that he was rarely enthusiastic about writing to Lionardo, why had letter-writing itself become so fatiguing to him - especially since he was well-known as "a man of letters"? There are several reasons, I believe, and all are important to this inquiry.

He was an old man when he wrote this letter in the spring of 1560. He'd turned 85 not long before; some fatigue was understandable. And then there was his eyesight, which had been known for some time to be fading (although describing it as "failing" would, at this point, probably still be premature). That issue brought along with it several others. For one, we notice that at about this time, he starts using (in his personal letters) wider pen nibs, presumably so he can see better what he's writing. That is no minor matter when writing with a quill; it can require considerable adjustment on the scribe's part, and more so when writing in *corsiva* (cursive) script than when printing 'block' letters. (For instance, making even the basic circular patterns such as a lower-case "C" will require a bit more openness

in the center to be clear - i.e. more open space - than is the case with a narrower nib.)

A general observation on the topic would be this: as he grew older (especially into his later seventies) and his visual acuity dimmed, Michelangelo began to write using both wider nibs and darker inks, mixing his soluble ink ever more strongly until he eventually had to switch to the types of black ink used by many others at the time in both personal letters and (almost universally) in official documents.

- Michelangelo's change of ink types in letter-writing was neither a comfortable nor an easy transition for him. Between the wider nibs and the switch to denser, far blacker ink that flowed differently from his previous type, we can find (at least earlier on in his adjustment) occasional coverage issues (resulting from too little ink on the quill) and some minor pooling (from too much). And it is with his change to those blacker, costlier inks, made (presumably) from the ancient formula involving use of oak galls, that we first begin to find (many centuries later, of course) something until then absent from his personal letters: the erosion of text due to the acid content of oak galls - quite a common phenomenon in written correspondence both earlier and later than his.

- And then there's the matter of papers he'd have used. Because his pen-strokes were now both broader and darker, he'd have had to use papers a bit thicker (and therefore more expensive) than those he'd often used previously, papers that would have required careful sizing (coating) as well. And then of course, he'd have had to write while seated at an angled writing desk - presumably on his work-table at home. So for him to write even a cursory, perfunctory letter to someone like his nephew was a not-inconsiderable task for him at age 85.

- Then too, we should recall that writing letters in a cursive script (one such as Arrighi's *corsiva*) was unlikely to have felt especially

comfortable or ‘natural’ for him. (While most of these observations are covered in detail in *WIAN* a quick review of some of them is necessary here.)

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Although by nature left-handed (something he saw no real reason to deny, since it was a ‘weakness’ he had overcome), Michelangelo was forced by his teachers to write using his *right* hand, the “correct” one. By so doing, his teachers were disciplining him into writing “correctly” but also helping him avoid the opprobrium associated with being known as a *mancino* - a “leftie” (*WIAN*, p.105-115). For him, then, the experience of letter-writing would likely have been one of disciplined restraint and conformity. But further, when we compare the many surviving letters in his *corsiva* with the few we have in his *mercantesca*, the contrast is rather remarkable. When compared to the regular, evenly spaced, pen-strokes that characterize Arrighi’s *corsiva*, *mercantesca* can appear wildly and exuberantly florid, since its emphasis was on the continuous, fluid movement of the pen. (Such was indeed the primary goal of the various types of what are usually referred to as the “humanist” scripts.) Unlike the frequent and precisely prescribed lifting and re-taking (i.e. re-positioning) of the pen that characterized traditional scribal calligraphy, keeping the pen in contact with the page in the most continuous, curvilinear movement possible was the priority. Thus, needing to write letters in *corsiva*, after having first learned to write in *mercantesca*, could easily result in a feeling like constraint - to say nothing of being forced to write with one’s ‘wrong’ hand!

But we now have to go one step further in our consideration of how Michelangelo’s lines move themselves around on the page. Having already mentioned above and in *WIAN* how, purely on the basis of visual appearance, the lines of calligraphy in his letters can seem less comfortable or ‘easy’ in their movement than those of others of his day - including some of his friends - it’s worth taking a moment to consider just how his *drawn* lines might compare with his *written*

ones. Unusual (perhaps even pointless) as such a comparison might seem at the moment, I hope by the end of this essay to have shown they are indeed related and that making such a comparison is anything but pointless, since both do come, after all, from the same hand and eye and spring from the same mind. To consider only briefly a matter that is itself wonderfully complex will have to suffice for now.

First, with drawing, the cognitive content of a written verbal text is eliminated. Michelangelo learned early on to be careful about what he chose to put in writing, but the care and restraint that are part of written verbal communications are absent from drawing - as are considerations of factors like handedness, the style of a script, etc. With writing, the physical aspect of the task involves our making what are generally small, regular, recognizable pen movements from which we fashion letters (i.e. the letters of the alphabet), which we then group into words, words that we then arrange into sentences that will (we hope) express and convey our ideas - our cognitive thoughts. Such ideas (as expressed via words) will have to be seen, identified, and understood. They will then have to be interpreted cognitively by someone's brain before they actually communicate meaning. (While all this may seem automatic to us, it's quite an astonishing series of rapid-fire events: tiny symbols are drawn, then grouped into what are still rather small symbols but which are then organized into larger ones - that will eventually become symbols representing ideas and conveying meaning.)

Second, leaving aside his architectural drawings and the relatively few finished figurative drawings he made as gifts, and considering instead what are referred to as "working" sheets - drawings of ideas being considered, explored, and developed - perhaps nearly worked-out, perhaps only scarcely begun. There is usually (and despite any incompleteness) an energy about the drawn lines themselves (and whatever they are describing) that is the antithesis of restraint: ideas that present instead as *expansion* - the expanding of ideas

from the artist's mind, through his hand, and onto the page - the inscribing and combining of individual lines into perceptible wholes and ideas.

Late in life, when he experimented with drawings of both Christ's crucifixion and his resurrection, it is not only individual lines that possess and convey a strong sense of energy and movement, the figures they comprise also seem - not only to move, but to radiate outwards (towards the viewer) some sort of living energy, a kind of *spiritus vivendi* of their own. There is no restraint in or about them - only expansion.

My purpose in spending time considering these issues is simply this: the distinction between calligraphy and drawing is at times not so clear. We understand the communication of ideas via the written word (in calligraphy) and via visual representation (in drawing), but then as we'll see below, the two can come close to merging at times - to a surprising degree.

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- What Michelangelo has - and *hasn't* - written in the gestures that conclude this letter offer us a further indication of his somewhat distracted, unfocussed state of mind at the time. What he hasn't written, specifically, is the letter's date - or rather, part of it; he started to write it, but then... Well, something must have happened, because the date itself is missing. But what's most interesting is that he didn't notice the omission and correct it. Errors do occur occasionally in his letters; usually, he corrects them. Even his own painstakingly inscribed fair copies of completed poems contain small errors; he simply inserts an omitted letter or strikes through an unnecessary one. But in this case, the telling detail is that he didn't notice the error. Why, I wonder?

# A di L'imaggio

(IV/164)

We can't be certain of the letter's exact date, but the editors of his correspondence (*Il Carteggio di Michelangelo*)<sup>8</sup> suggest that it should probably be 18 March, 1560, in which case he would normally have written it as

*"A di diciotto di maggio..."*

In an earlier letter to Lionardo, one that also concerns the proposed visit to Rome, Michelangelo dates his letter

*"A di undici d'aprile mille cinque cento sessanta."*

[11 April, 1560]

We can't know why he first made and then overlooked his error (and therefore failed to correct it - *if* that's indeed what happened), but I think it might be worth taking a moment to consider a few possible explanations for it.

First, maybe he had to... um... *step away* briefly, and then forgot where he was and exactly what he'd been doing once he returned. (He's been telling us for some years now of his persistent problems with urination.) But even allowing for a brief absence, he overlooked his error and left no space for including the date. Second, maybe he'd forgotten what the date actually was and had to stop to look it up, although it seems fairly unlikely that, having done so, he'd then fail to include it. There's a third possibility as well, and it's quite an intriguing one. I wonder if he might have noticed that - if the correct date was indeed April 18 as the editors suggest - and he'd written it in his usual way (just as I've done above), he'd have wound up with something Italians usually like to avoid via contraction: he'd have

had two instances of “*dī*” in succession (producing something like a stuttering effect), with still a third “*di*” soon thereafter:

“A ***di diciotto di*** maggio...”

If that was the case, then he - Michelangelo Buonarroti - surely one of the world’s great minds at problem-solving, chose to simply “walk away” from this one and leave it unresolved. He could have chosen instead to write what would not have been his consistent usage but one that would have sounded well,

“A *diciotto di* maggio...”

If he knowingly did that - saw the problem and then simply left it - he was likely irritated as well as distracted.

But of course, there’s a fourth possibility as well, one that offers the simplest of explanations: perhaps he’d been daydreaming; he forgot where he was and lost his place. If that is the correct explanation, I’d like to suggest that as he daydreamed, he looked up (whether he actually raised his head or eyes doesn’t matter) into the space he was thinking about all the time, the one for which he was - and in precisely this period - finally (and however reluctantly) supervising the construction of a wooden model, *the dome*: the iconic emblem of both the city of Rome and the mother church of Christendom - for which he was, of course, the Supreme Architect.

As he wrote this insignificant letter to Lionardo, he was distracted, he was unfocussed, and maybe he was irritated as well. This would seem an especially unlikely place for him to choose to create one of the most remarkable of his miniature masterpieces in calligraphy, but that’s exactly what he’s about to do.

## *And At Long Last...*

It seems that, as it became clearer that Michelangelo's remarkably long and productive life was nearing its end, everybody wanted something from him, something from his hand: a drawing of some sort was what most seemed to hope for - of course, it didn't have to be a large one, but... *something* from his hand; or, a letter - maybe just a short letter, but a signed one - one signed with his real name - his *actual* name, the name that people referred to him by - so that someone who saw the letter would know who'd written it...

Had I been alive at the time, I think I'd have hoped for a few more of his spiritual meditations, his religious poems - if only a couple of unfinished ones - to see if, because of the nearly all-consuming work he'd been occupied with for so long (i.e. the building of the Building), there might perhaps have been some amelioration in the crushing sense of his own unworthiness we find in so many of his meditations - poems that often begin as reflections on passages from Paul but then darken of their own accord. (While an accurate dating of his poems of whatever sort is only sometimes possible, it does seem that we have none from his last four years.) Perhaps by then he'd already said everything he had to say; perhaps his poetic sensibilities were sufficiently fulfilled by the drawings he needed to keep supplying to those involved in the actual construction of the Building; but then, perhaps he provides us an important clue about that in the way he concludes this otherwise uninteresting letter to his nephew.

As discussed in *WIAN* (p.77-82), I believe there are good reasons to suggest that Michelangelo identified (at least in certain periods of his life) rather strongly with Moses, with the heroic biblical figure's courage and bravery - indeed, his seeming fearlessness in leading his people forward - his faithfulness and his righteousness, but yet (and more personally) with Moses the man as well, the man who - despite it all - would remain unworthy and be denied entrance into

the Promised Land. (So many of his religious meditations remind us of his sense of his own likely denial of admission.) It has only been in modern times that the Western Church has drawn openly on the vast wealth of spiritual meditations left by the ancient fathers of the Eastern Church, so Michelangelo would probably not have known of the *Hymns on Paradise* by St. Ephraim (or Ephrem) the Syrian, whose beautiful Hymn V:15 begins with these memorable lines:

Have pity on me,  
O Lord of Paradise,  
and if it is not possible for me  
to enter Your Paradise,  
grant that I may graze  
outside, by its enclosure...<sup>9</sup>

And he (obviously) would not have known a much later poem, but one I cannot even start to recall without immediately thinking of Michelangelo's famous *Moses* - and then almost as quickly of its creator himself. The poet A. E. Housman left it unpublished (along with a good many others) in his notebooks, which he bequeathed to his brother Lawrence Housman, himself a poet (and a fine hymn-writer, in my view), with A. E.'s permission to publish, as he chose, anything he found worthwhile in them - before then burning the notebooks themselves. Lawrence Housman published the poem in a slender volume of his brother's poems he called simply *More Poems* after his older brother's death. Some years later, after Lawrence's own death, when compiling *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman*, the editors stupidly mangled the poem, unwittingly altering its tone and - I believe - obscuring its intent, its *raison d'être*. Here are three of its stanzas; although *Moses's* name does not itself appear in the poem, the reference to him could not be more direct - nor can the poet's *indirect* reference to Michelangelo be ruled out:

## II

When Israel out of Egypt came,  
Safe in the sea they trod;  
By day in cloud, by night in flame,  
Went on before them God. [...]

I never over Horeb heard  
The blast of advent blow;  
No fire-faced prophet brought me word  
Which way behoved me go. [...]

I see the country far away  
Where I will never stand;  
The heart goes where no footstep may  
Into the promised land. [...] <sup>10</sup>

Housman had, of course, travelled widely on the Continent - but most especially in Italy; he'd seen the *Moses* in Rome, and John Addington Symonds' landmark biography of Michelangelo and his English translations of some of the artist's poems (mostly sonnets) would have been known to him as well. One could be inclined, then, to pause briefly to consider whether - much as did Michelangelo before him - Housman might himself have identified with Moses' standing before the entrance to the promised land, daring to hope for admission - yet knowing he'd be turned away.

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To his perfunctory and generally uninteresting letter to his nephew Lionardo in Florence, Michelangelo adds what might well be (for us) a 'telling' sentence, one not unlike any number of sentences in letters to friends and other acquaintances that can be read as merely casual, off-hand comments on his age and infirmities. This

might be yet another of those, but given the unusual (and rather specific) context, I suspect we'll be justified in our thinking of it as something... *more*. For, following his mundane and almost trivial-sounding suggestion as to when Lionardo's re-scheduled visit to him in Rome might take place, Michelangelo adds this sentence:

“I go on bearing with old age as best I can, with all the ills and the impediments it brings with it. I commend me to Him, in Whom is my help.” (*trans.* E. H. Ramsden)<sup>11</sup>

While I've chosen to present the sentence for our consideration in the most widely-used English translation of his letters - and it is indeed a *single* sentence in the letter - I want, respectfully of course, to challenge her translation in the (as presented) short concluding sentence - and for several reasons. She translates the Italian verb *raccomandare* - a verb Michelangelo uses often (but in more than one sense) - as “commend,” which is, in a literal sense, correct - but is also misleading, as it's too ambiguous. (There's ambiguity here - as there so often can be with him - and in this particular case it's an important ambiguity, but not with that verb.) *Raccomandare* can be translated directly and appropriately as it looks: to recommend. But if in English “recommend” is different from “commend” in both meaning *and* in spelling - “I recommend him; he will do a good job,” but then, “I commend him for a job well done” - the same is not quite true in Italian. But beyond those usages, *raccomandare* can be used to send greetings, as when one person says to another who is going to see a third, one who is a mutual friend; today we might say (if casually), “Tell him I send my best.” But the verb also means (and rather importantly so) “to commit” - in both languages - in a sense having to do with the soul or the spirit. At a graveside, the priest says what is often referred to as “the committal” as the body of the deceased is being lowered into the ground: “Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our *brother/sister* departed, and we commit *his/her* body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto

eternal life...”<sup>12</sup> And so forth and so on - for a good deal longer, if we choose. But although this might have seemed merely a linguistic or semantic exercise up to this point - analyzing in detail the artist’s words up to this point, that is about to change as we consider them in juxtaposition with his gestures, gestures that are both unusual (even for him) and, I believe, deeply meaningful ones. And, I hope, gestures that we, too, will find not only meaningful (as he surely did when making them), but truly *beautiful* ones to see and consider.

When E. H. Ramsden offers us these words (as Michelangelo’s), “I commend me to Him, in Whom is my help,” she’s missing (or so I believe) the point. Her translation makes his words sound merely like those of a theist affirming his belief and trust in God (especially with her use of interpolated upper-case letters - or perhaps like the Psalmist’s famous,

“God is our hope and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.”  
(Psalm 46:1)

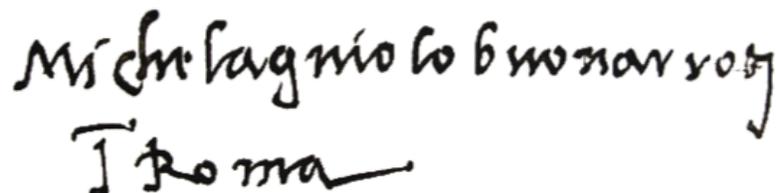
What Michelangelo writes is “*e rachomando a chi mi può aiutare,*” which I believe we should read and understand as “and I *entrust* myself to the one who can help me.” Who is *the one* whom he means - is he referring to God the father, or is he perhaps referring here to Jesus, God’s son? He doesn’t say, doesn’t tell us which he means - but he’s about to. And if does mean the latter, it would be a fairly remarkable thing, considering how often his religious poems have dwelt so painfully on his own unworthiness, his being undeserving of Christ’s suffering and sacrifice.

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I’ve written at length (both in this essay and elsewhere) about the skill - and the urgent need for it - to be able to take note of that which is somehow different in written texts - or even in printed

ones. Perhaps different from what a writer or a composer *usually* does - what he or she does elsewhere, in other texts or works. Or, in a given text, perhaps something that is different enough in meaning (i.e. in *cognitive* meaning) to “stand out” conceptually. Or perhaps, even within the same text, something that “stands out” or that “catches the eye” simply by virtue of its appearance, and that may - or may not - come to be understood as conceptually or cognitively unique, as “standing out” by reason of its meaning. I can think of nothing else I’ve found in the course of my investigations into Michelangelo’s calligraphy that was more eye-catching for me than this example - or that ‘stood out’ more from its context by virtue of its likely meaning - once I’d grasped it. But, I will also be quick to agree that, however significant the implications of his gesture’s meaning for him, the details of its visual uniqueness are indeed subtle ones and are easily overlooked. It is nothing at all if not an exercise in attentive *noticing*.

I’ve already spoken of his weakening eyesight and his need for both darker inks and wider nibs (quills). When he’s writing this short, casual letter to Lionardo, his hand is not ‘shaky,’ not tremulous, yet it is obviously the hand of an older person - whose hand had never been especially fluid or exhibited great ease of movement. I would describe the letter’s visual calligraphic appearance as legible, clear, and perhaps rather ‘determined.’ I would *not* describe it as elegant, meticulous, or beautiful - and certainly not as “precise.” (The letter itself has the same appearance as do its date and his name.)



Michelagnolo Buonarroti  
T Roma

(IV/164)

We've already discussed the matter of his oversight with the date. The signature, his name itself, is about what we'd expect to find from him in this period of his life - if he were not "up to something," doing something original and creative with it (and, indeed, he is not in this case). Then - and just as is his habit - he tells us where he's writing from, i.e. where he is geographically. But then his "habitual" practice, the usual, drops away and the unusual begins to happen, followed by the extraordinary and unique. He not only tells us that he's in Rome, but he goes on to tell us something about where he is emotionally, or (using today's vernacular) "in his head space." And then, he reveals to us that there's someone else there with him, in that particular universe that is his mind. Let's look closely (as we'll need to do) and notice what's there.

Michelangelo's normal cursive script has a forward slant, a gentle inclination to the right - unless, of course, he decides he wants it to do something else. (Remember - and this is quite important - there's nothing careful or especially precise or elegant, and there's certainly nothing 'forced' or otherwise unusual about his written cursive in this letter.) But then, we notice what looks like an upper-case J; we deduce fairly quickly that it's really the "I" of "*in Roma*" - but in this case a decidedly upper-case "I" - in combination with some unusual sort of "N"-*abbreviatura*. And then, to its right, there's another "J," one that's identical in concept but just a bit smaller in scale - and both of them are "straightened-up" beyond merely vertical and are slightly backwards-leaning.

Wow! Two parallel "J's" - that's exceedingly weird. My musician's mind jumped immediately to the composer J.S. Bach, whose "play" with his name - albeit accomplished more through numerology than spelling - was discussed in *WIAN* (p.8-12). Music lovers may recall that Bach was in the habit of inscribing at the ends of his scores (especially those of larger works) the letters "S. D. G." standing for "*Soli Deo gloria*" - "to God alone be the glory (or praise)." What is generally less well known is that on the first pages of works such as

larger church cantatas, for example, he would often inscribe (in the upper right, above the uppermost staff of music), “J. J.” standing for “*Jesu juva!*” - “Jesus, help!” (Part of Bach’s “day job” for many years included the teaching of Latin.) So, could Michelangelo have been doing something similar on this late letter to his nephew?

I consulted several teachers of Latin, classicists, and linguists as to that possibility. They *all* - independently - gave me exactly the same answer: “Yes..., that is... a *possibility*,” - but then none of them had ever come across its use in Renaissance Rome - which essentially eliminated it for me from consideration. Whenever Michelangelo made use of idioms or bits of regional slang, they were part of the *norma loquendi* of the region and not what would amount to esoteric usages. My noticing of two parallel “J’s” and then associating them with Bach’s use of “*Jesu juva!*” amounts, I suppose, to a pair of red herrings... a mere interesting co-incidence. (While use of the letter “J” in modern Italian is normally only for foreign words or Italian words of foreign origin, and in Latin a “J” is the equivalent of an “I,” we do also need to note the enlongated “I” [essentially a “J”] serving as the final letter of his family name in his signature itself. There, it’s a carry-over from his fond - and often amusing - wordplay with older Tuscan spellings in the many letters he exchanged with his friend and fellow Florentine exile, Luigi del Riccio (*WIAN*, p.121-26.)

And then there’s the “R,” that beautiful, eloquent, upper-case “R” with which he starts his “Roma.” While I cannot actually assert that he never made a more beautiful, perfect “R” than this one, I’m quite confident it’s the most beautifully fluid one I’ve found anywhere in his calligraphy. And while the letter “R” itself might later come to be understood as meaning something further as well, it assuredly means this much: in a document whose calligraphic appearance is rather indifferent, he took very great care in the planning and inscribing of it. And then, of course, it’s conjoined to that tiny, amazing little lower-case “O,” nearly as round as Giotto’s was said to have been. How nice! How attractive! How very pleasing - and

how *unlike* almost all of his other small “O’s.” They are ovoids, as are the several examples just above it - although the one that ends *maggio* in the messed-up date is a strong second-place contender: some practice, perhaps? The very beautiful fluid “R,” touching the exquisite little “O,” followed by the expected empty space... and then the indifferent “*ma[ ]*” - that always feels to me like something of an afterthought.

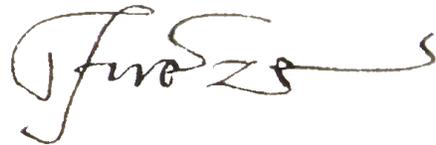
It is always important to notice that which is somehow different - especially when extra work or thought is required to make it so.

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Of the several *abbreviature* in *mercantesca* Michelangelo made use of, probably none (after his identifying *che* logo) was more difficult for him to stop using than was the common one for “N,” and surely none had saved him more time than it did. I wrote in *WIAN* (p.223) of his annoyance at having to be sure he had the right number of little humps - and several times he *didn't* have - with lower-case “M’s” and “N’s.” When he could use it in the texts of his letters, it saved him a good bit of time. But even after he’d stopped using in texts, he often couldn’t resist using or employing it (but really, often just *playing* with it) in closings and other aspects of letters - but especially for the word “*in.*” In form, his “N”-*abbreviatura* is usually nothing but a slightly curved dash above the letter “I,” made by touching the page, pulling the pen over the top of the “I,” and then (usually) lifting the pen while it’s still moving, producing a pleasing feathering-out effect of the stroke. However, there’s a small - but for us important - aspect to his execution of this simple *abbreviatura* - and one I’ve practiced dozens of times myself: he never moves (repositions) his hand to make it; he turns his hand slightly, but he *does not lift and re-position it.*

Sometimes, his creative efforts with it produce surprising results. In this example from *Firenze*, taken from what is probably his most

fluidly fluent surviving signature, the least attractive part of the curvaceous gesture is the plain, descending vertical stroke that constitutes the “I,” which quickly morphs into a sweeping upward curve overtop it (the “N”), which soon becomes top of the “F,” before quickly descending as the vertical shaft of his “F” - an upper-case “F” (naturally).



(V/46)

An almost equally fluid and attractive, if less eloquent example from Rome (in lower-case) brings the “N”-*abbreviatura* to a more definite stop, resulting in something like an awning or a hat over the “I.”



(IV/120)

But when he tries to incorporate an upper-case “R” using the same approach, the result is really remarkably clumsy.



(IV/119)

But then when we consider the example from Lionardo’s letter, we see immediately that he’s doing something altogether different.



Now that the looseness, the casualness, of those last two letters has become more obvious, let's remove them.

Handwritten letters 'I' and 'R' in a cursive style. The 'I' has a horizontal bar at the top that curves slightly to the right, resembling a tilde or a flourish. The 'R' is written with a short, rounded terminal.

Clearly, this careful structure results from far greater intentionality than any of the others; the two exacting parallel "J's" (or whatever they are); the beautiful "R," as it touches the precise little "O." But the most unique feature here is, of course, the *abbreviatura*. First, he could only have executed it by moving and re-positioning his hand. Second, I see its form as tripartite: touching the paper, then moving slightly up before crossing over the "I," but then stopping the pen before appending the short ascending arm. This is, for him, an unprecedented design, and it's also unique its combination of these elements. When I first saw it, I associated the "N's" shape to that of a *tilde* - but I quickly realized that that - of course - made no sense! (And anyway... why would Michelangelo be using one?) An *abbreviatura* takes the place of a missing letter, while the *tilde* is a phonetic diacritical placed over one that's not missing at all - yet another red herring, I guess. (At this rate, we'll soon have enough for dinner!)

Or... perhaps it instead resembles (or... recalls, or... associatively suggests) something else, something whose shape might resemble that of a *tilde* - but isn't one. Maybe that's what I saw in those first electrifying seconds as I stared at it... maybe something so common in Rome as to usually go unnoticed. Something like, say, the gently furling banner on many crucifixes - which is there because of the inscription it bears. Yes... yes, in fact it does have a similar shape. So... those two "J's" could instead be atypically (for him) decorative "I's," and the unique, eye-catching "N" could be... itself, and when combined with our unusually beautiful "R," then... we'd probably see that banner's inscription, wouldn't we? Wouldn't we be likely to see ***INRI*** -

*Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum -*

the very one to whom our scribe says he has entrusted himself, the only one he believes can help him now...?

Yes... I think that's what we would probably see.

—

In presenting the examples of Michelangelo's verbal word-play with his signatures in *WIAN*, I tried to show the reader what I saw him doing. In this essay, I've tried instead (in perhaps too-lengthy a way) to explore what it seems to me Michelangelo's unique predicament might have been, so late in his long life, and to explain some of the many reasons I've come to feel about it as I do. Given his frequent expressions in religious poems of his own unworthiness, this tiny gesture - barely noticeable when compared with the ceiling and the dome - may tell us a little something about what was in his head at the time... something we're glad, for him, to know about.

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But, however improbable it may seem, I do feel a need (for the sake of completeness) to suggest that, in my opinion, there's still more to notice in this example of his art. I, at least, cannot now *not* see it, but the reader will have to decide whether to follow along a bit further and (perhaps) notice a bit more.

A handwritten symbol consisting of a capital Greek letter chi (X) and a capital Greek letter rho (P) joined together. The chi is on the left, with a horizontal bar extending to the right, and the rho is on the right, with a vertical stem extending downwards. The symbol is drawn in a simple, sketchy style.

Apparently the oldest of the many early symbols for Christ was that formed by superimposing the first two letters of his name in Greek (*Christos*) - the *chi* (X) and the *rho* (P) - to create the ubiquitous symbol known as the *Chi Rho*. Originally one of the 'secret' symbols employed by Christians to identify themselves and their meeting-

places to each other, since the time of the early church it has been carved onto countless altars, embroidered onto vestments and altar hangings, etc. - and it is still used today by both liturgical and non-liturgical churches.

While Michelangelo must surely have known the laity's appropriate Latin responses in the Mass and other liturgies (if only by rote), and while as a literate Italian (as well as a renowned lover and reciter of Dante) he could probably read *some* Latin, we know from his letters that he was often self-conscious about never having studied Latin and his inability to write or speak it. But with that said, he does seem to have known no Greek at all. While he would have seen the *Chi Rho* symbol often and would have known what it was and was called, I have to wonder whether he would have known - not having actually studied Latin and knowing no Greek - that the symbol's usual transliteration from the Greek into Latin was - as it's been presented here - *Chi Rho*. But as an Italian for whom the "H" (in *rho*) would have been silent, learning the symbol's name by hearing it spoken rather than by reading it might well have left him thinking of it as *Chi Ro* instead. After taking a number of long, quiet looks at the "Ro" above, while recalling (as they are described in *WIAN*) his regular use of the *abbreviature* for *che* and for *chi*, by now I'm unable *not* to see clearly in it "*Chi Ro*" - with the *chi*'s three letters imbedded in (or at least suggested by) his unusually elaborate "R."

*Chi Rho*: once again, a symbol for the one to whom he'd entrusted himself.

In any event, it occurs to me now that my initially having seen Bach's "J. J." in this inscription, even if not 'correct,' might also not have been really 'wrong.' Could Michelangelo have somehow known the expression, or is it (as I tend to suspect) merely an interesting co-incidence? I'm afraid I have no idea.

Perhaps someday someone can ask him about it...

## *On My Leave-taking...*

Ah, I see that our Michelangelo - or, rather, our *Michelagnuolo* (as we've come to know his name in the course of this study) - has now finished writing to nephew Lionardo. He's closed his eyes again and is sitting quietly, so this will be a good time for me to slip out. He seems never to have noticed me standing over in this dark corner, watching him work, even (upon occasion) peering over his shoulder. But it's time now for me to go, since my work here is done. His, of course, is not: he'll continue on, working (if ever more slowly) for almost four more years. There won't be more poems, and there will be fewer letters. And his signature gifts have, as far as I know, all been given...

Part of me would like to stop and say a brief word of thanks to him for having allowed me to watch, to study and learn from him about his signature art - that much for sure, of course - but also, and I think more importantly, about how he came to do it (or rather, how he *might* have come to do it). But then, I guess that's not a good idea, since I was never supposed to have been here at all, to have seen the things I've watched him do or learned a bit about how his mind worked...

*Gosh, maybe I'd better not say anything to anyone about it...?*

Because as we've finally come to understand about his signatures and their *art*, he really did do them just because he could, and... well, you know... *for himself*.

## *A Postscript*

Not being a stranger myself to the occasional bit of creative *fantasia* (or even, at times, to completely untethered flights of imagination), I'll close with a favorite *fantasia* of mine...

We observe Michelangelo after he's passed over, no longer a dweller among us in these earthly climes, standing patiently in line before the Gates of Pearl until it's his turn to plead his case to St. Peter. *WHAT?* Michelangelo is... *standing patiently?* Yes: nobody's in much of a hurry here. After all, eternity goes on for, well... *forever*. But as he's waiting, we notice him staring intently at the famous gates.

When the Supreme Architect of the Basilica of St. Peter approaches the Basilica's namesake, the architect (somewhat predictably, alas) interrupts the saint as he's beginning to address his recent arrival: "Now then, let's see: your life down on earth..." "Yes, yes... but we can get to all that in a minute. While I was waiting, I noticed some issues with these gates - poor maintenance, of course, and a few small design flaws as well. But I've looked at the situation carefully, and I've figured out how to make it all right. It really shouldn't take too long..."

Understandably, the sainted gatekeeper is appalled at being spoken to thus by a newcomer. He starts to get angry. He's had a long day - it's felt to him like an eternity - and he's tired. But then, in glancing down at the new guy's lengthy CV, he happens to notice a name he recognizes:

*Supreme Architect of the Basilica of **St. P...***

As the gates swing open to admit Michelangelo, they make their usual grinding clatter, but this time their noise brings a wry smile to St. Peter's face; he knows that, before too long, everything with them will have been put right...

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*Something I've always wondered:* when we die, what happens to our spirit of inquiry? Does it just stop with us, or does it continue on... somehow? And where does it come from, anyway? Are we born with it; is it already there? Or do we sort of... develop it as we go along? I don't know...

Maybe someday I'll have a chance to ask him; I suspect he'll know.

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Oh, and the annoying “*inro ma*” bit - what was that about?

*Laus Deo.*

Carl Smith  
Nashville/September 2021.

## NOTES

### *Abbreviations*

**WIAN:** *What's in a Name? Michelangelo and the Art of Signature.*  
Carl Smith; The K Press (Nashville), 2014.

**AB:** *Archivio Buonarroti*, Florence. Roman numerals refer to the large, hardbound volumes into which Michelangelo's letters, poems and aphorisms have been collected. Arabic numerals refer to the documents' positions in those volumes.

### *Letters Cited*

AB IV/164: 18(?) May 1560 - letter from Michelangelo in Rome to his nephew Lionardo in Florence; the principal letter and signature discussed in this essay.

AB IV/119: 22 July 1553 - letter from Michelangelo in Rome to his nephew Lionardo in Florence, concerning a pair of rings.

AB IV/120: 24 October 1553 - letter from Michelangelo in Rome to his nephew Lionardo in Florence, concerning the news of his (Lionardo's) wife's pregnancy. (Although not apparent here, this fluid example is written in *brown* ink.)

AB IV/53: 11 July 1544 - letter from Michelangelo in Rome to his nephew Lionardo in Florence, concerning his will.

AB V/46: 19 April 1525 - letter from Michelangelo (in Florence) to Giovanni della Spina in Florence, concerning Michelangelo's legal obligations for his work on the tomb of Pope Julius II.

## *Sources cited*

1. *Poems*. W. H. Auden (selected E. Mendelson); Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," p.79
2. *Ibid.* p.78
3. *Four Quartets*. T. S. Eliot; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1943. "Burnt Norton," p.13
4. *The Figures of Beauty*. David MacFarlane; HarperCollins, 2013. p.4 & p.8
5. *Christian & Oriental Philosophy of Art*. Ananda Coomaraswamy; Dover Publications, 1956. "Why Exhibit Works of Art?" p.7-22
6. *The Notation Is Not the Music*. Barthold Kuijken; Indiana University Press, 2013. While I have not quoted directly from this book, it has seemed almost essential that its *perfect* (and perfectly relevant) title be mentioned. Mr. Kuijken is among the most respected players (and conductors) of baroque music; he was a frequent musical collaborator of Mr. Leonhardt's and is a treasured friend, and one who has taken a lively interest in this topic.
7. *Four Quartets*. T. S. Eliot; "Little Gidding," p.59
8. *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo*. S. P. E. S. Editore, 1983. Vol.V; p.226
9. *Hymns on Paradise*. St. Ephrem the Syrian; St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990. Hymn IV/15; p.107-8
10. *More Poems*. A. E. Housman; Alfred A. Knopf, 1936. p.5-7

11. *The Letters of Michelangelo*. E. H. Ramsden; Stanford University Press, 1963. Vol. II; p.196
12. *The Book of Common Prayer*. The Church Pension Fund, 1945. p.333

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