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# L'Art et les Révolutions

## Conférences plénières

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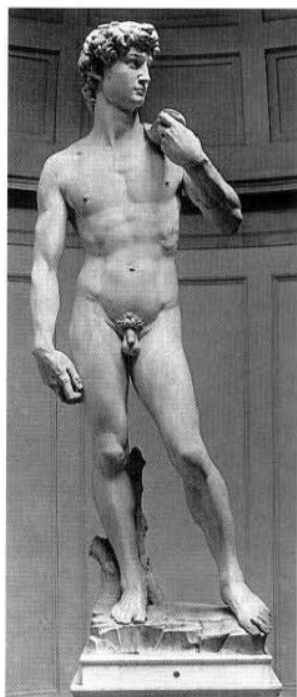
DAVID'S SLING AND MICHELANGELO'S BOW :  
A SIGN OF FREEDOM\*

IRVING LAVIN

It is no accident that the American cartoonist Mike Luckovich should have chosen Michelangelo's *David* as his vehicle to satirize the recent efforts by certain Federal officials to censor works of art created at government expense (Figs. 1, 2). Luckovich's lampoon is *prima facie* evidence of the unique status the *David* has attained in Western society, as a symbol of the defiant spirit of human freedom and independence in the face of extreme adversity. The cartoon also perfectly illustrates the fact that the emblematic preeminence of the *David* is due largely to Michelangelo's having incorporated in a single, revolutionary image two of the quintessential constituents of the idea of liberty, one creative, and therefore personal, the other political, and therefore communal. We can define this dual significance of the *David* with a good deal of confidence because of



1. Mike Luckovich, cartoon (from *Newsweek*, August 7, 1989)



2. Michelangelo, *David*,  
Accademia, Florence

a famous but still inadequately understood drawing, preserved in the Louvre, in which Michelangelo virtually says as much himself (Fig. 3). To my knowledge, the drawing is the first instance in which an artist actually articulates in words on a preliminary study the sense of the work he is preparing. My purpose in this paper to define and explore the two, complementary aspects of the *David* by offering some observations and suggestions concerning the Louvre sheet and its implications.

Let me emphasize at once that there is nothing new in suggesting that the *David* had personal meaning for Michelangelo: Vasari records that Michelangelo returned from Rome to Florence expressly in order to compete for the commission. Nor is there anything new about suggesting that the work had political significance in the context of contemporary events in Florence: according to Vasari, Piero Soderini, the city's anti-Medicean Governor (Gonfaloniere della Giustizia), recently elected by the parliament (Signoria), awarded the commission to Michelangelo,



3. Michelangelo, Studies for the bronze and marble *Davids*, Louvre, Paris

who executed it as an "insegna del Palazzo" (della Signoria). So far, I have found no precedent for the use of a term like *insegna*, meaning "sign" or "advertisement" to describe a work of art as a kind of *genius loci* in this topo-political sense. The vast literature on Michelangelo is filled with proposals of all sorts on David's private and public personas. I think it possible to establish certain of these ideas more firmly and define them more precisely than heretofore. Above all, it is possible to perceive in a new way the relationship between the two realms of meaning. I shall discuss the personal and political aspects separately, partly because, as we shall see, Michelangelo made this distinction himself. In the final analysis, however, it is the relationship between the two holds the key to an understanding of the essential unity of the *David* as a work of art.

The sheet in the Louvre, which dates from around 1501-2, includes two figural elements, a sketch for the lost bronze David that was sent to France, and the right arm of the marble David - shown upside down with respect to the figure study. Two inscriptions appear at the right of David's arm, toward the margin:

*Davicte cholla Fromba  
e io collarcho*

*Michelagnuolo*

and below :

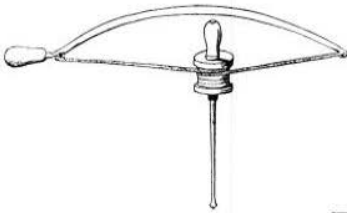
*Rocte lalta cholonna elverd*

(David with the sling and I with the bow. Michelangelo.

Broken the tall column and the green).

The basic sense of the upper inscription seems clear enough. Michelangelo identifies himself with the biblical giant killer, equating the instruments with which they succeeded in dispatching their respective, common adversary. The second inscription has a parallel, binary construction. The phrase is a quotation, omitting the last word, from the opening line of a famous sonnet of Petrarch, *Rotta è l'alta colonna e'l verde lauro*, in which the poet laments the almost simultaneous deaths in the spring of 1348 of his friend Giovanni Colonna and his beloved Laura. Although apparently unrelated, the inscriptions in fact have several layers of meaning that relate them to the figural drawings on the sheet.

Many explanations of Michelangelo's "arco" had been given though the centuries until an ingenious interpretation, first suggested by Marcel Brion in 1940 and then elaborated by Charles Seymour, seemed to resolve the problem. The arco must be the bowed drill, called a *trapano*, used by sculptors since antiquity to facilitate the work of carving marble (Fig. 4). In that case, the "alta colonna" of the second inscription could be taken as referring to the great pillar (or column) of marble originally intended for the "Gigante" to be mounted on a buttress of Florence Cathedral, which had defeated earlier sculptors for at least a century until Michelangelo succeeded in carving it into his marble David. In turn, the traditional association of the column, both whole and broken, with the virtue of Fortitude would reinforce the power of the imagery. The whole column appears as a commemorative trophy in a major Byzantine tradition of David as psalmist and the



4. Sculptor's drill



5. *David the psalmist*,  
Ms Gr. 139, f°1, B.N Paris

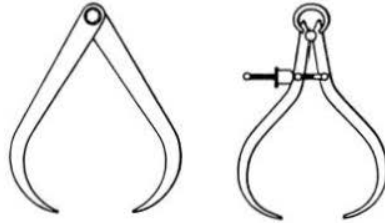


6. Hans Sebald Beham, *Hercules killing the Nemean Lion*, engraving

broken column appears in the closely related themes of Hercules and Samson slaying the lion (Figs. 5, 6). The elements of the Louvre sheet thus seem to interrelate on a strictly mechanical level : Michelangelo's self-identification with David the giant-killer is a metaphor for Michelangelo's feat in executing the colossal sculpture.

This "professional" implication of the sheet can be taken several further steps if one modifies slightly and expands the meaning of the term *arco* in the first inscription. There is, to begin with, another kind of *arco* that plays a crucial role in the life of any sculptor, whether in modelling, as for bronze, or in carving marble. I refer to the bowed caliper, or compass - the *seste ad arco* (Fig. 7) - which serves two main functions, for enlarging from a small scale model, or for transferring dimensions from the full scale model to the final work in stone. The compass is, after all, an instrument of measure and proportions, and, enshrined in his famous metaphorical dictum concerning the importance of artistic good judgment, *avere le seste negli occhi*, to have one's compasses in one's eyes, the device played a critical role in Michelangelo's conception of the creative process itself. In the case of the marble David we know that the challenge of executing such a grandiose

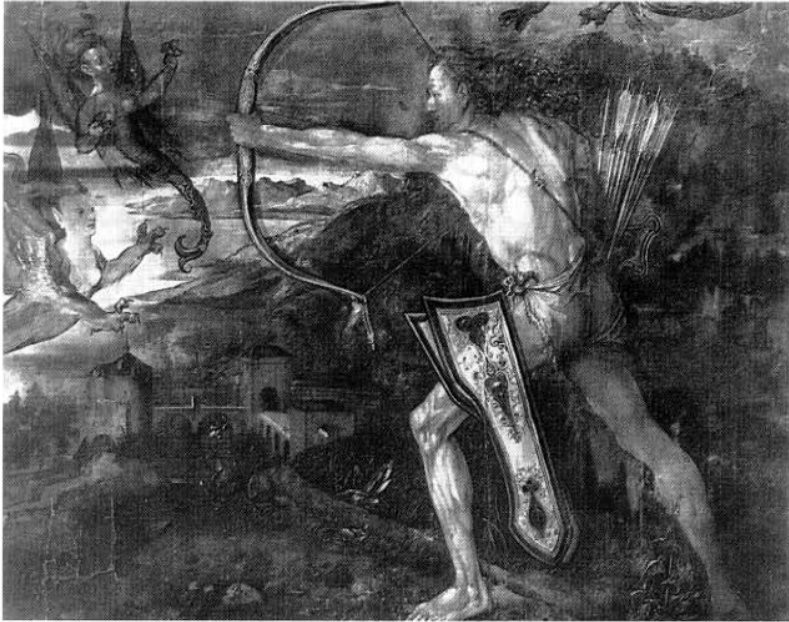
## 7. Bowed calipers



work from a small model - in which the accuracy of the artist's use of the compass corresponded to that of David's use of the sling - was considered no less a feat of intellectual than of physical prowess. The original commission, it will be recalled, had been assigned in 1464 to Agostino di Duccio, who was to construct the work from four separately carved pieces of marble. Two years later, the contract was renewed, with Agostino this time promising to execute the sculpture from a single monolith, and at a substantially higher fee. The agreement actually specified that the increased compensation was provided not only for the greater expense (*expensa*) but also for the greater effort and the greater intellect - *spendio* and *intelletto* - which the new project entailed. The gigantic block thereafter remained as Agostino left it, badly begun - *male abozzatum*, to quote the phrase used in the contract signed nearly forty years later with Michelangelo, who finally succeeded where Agostino had failed. The analogy with David is thus two-fold: both heroes overcame great differences in size and strength by sheer force of intellectual and physical virtuosity.

Viewed in this way, two further, metaphorical uses of the word *arco*, with which Michelangelo was certainly familiar, came into play. Both metaphors focus on the quality of tension suggested by the word, and actually express the complementary intellectual and physical aspects of extreme effort - much as one might speak in English alternatively of a mind - or a back-bending task. Boccaccio, for example, speaks of the *arco dell'intelletto* in reference to the mental effort required for a work deserving of eternal fame. At the opposite end of the conceptual scale, the term was also applied to various parts of the body, and in particular the phrase *con l'arco della schiena* is a common adage meaning to strain with all one's





8. Albrecht Dürer, *Hercules killing the Stymphalian Birds*,  
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg

might. Both these latter senses of *arco* seem to coalesce in an extraordinary work by Albrecht Dürer, his only mythological painting, in which the artist portrays himself as Hercules killing the Stymphalian birds (Fig. 8). Here the prowess of the painter in manipulating the brush is compared to that of Hercules, the classical archer *par excellence*, using his bow. Dürer's allegory is based on the commonly accepted equivalency of the Stymphalian birds with the Harpies, the main theme being the artist's victory over his envious critics. These creatures were invulnerable, so that to ward them off required great ingenuity as well as strength. Michelangelo's nude giant has often been related to the tradition of Hercules as a symbol of virtue and fortitude, but the allusion to Hercules the archer specifically singles out the hero's skill and ingenuity, in a word, his virtuosity. Based on this Herculean tradition, the bow actually became the primary attribute of Cesare Ripa's personification of *Ingegno* (Fig. 9).

The intellectual and physical senses of *arco* recur in another work by Michelangelo, which also includes an almost exact equivalent of Dürer's image, ironically inverted, to be sure. The



9. Personification of *Ingegno*  
(from C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, Rome  
1603, 221)

10. Michelangelo, sonnet and  
satirical sketch on the Sistine  
ceiling, Casa Buonarroti,  
Florence



archer metaphor is the turning point of a poem Michelangelo composed more than a decade after the *David* in reference specifically to the labor of mind and body he expended on another of his great achievements, the Sistine ceiling (1508-12) (Fig. 10). He inscribed the sonnet on a sheet, again accompanied by an illuminating sketch that shows the artist's body bent as he strives awkwardly to transfer his idea to the vault above. The poem complains bitterly of the agonizing strain and the resultant impairment of his *giudizio*, the noblest part of art :

I am bending like a Syrian bow,  
And judgment, hence, must grow,  
Borne in mind, peculiar and untrue ;  
You cannot shoot straight when the gun's askew.

Finally, he begs indulgence for his misplaced effort and inadequate results. Here *arco* thus serves to convey the intense labor, physical and intellectual, required by the heroic task the artist

An astonishing number of threads in the fabric of meaning we have been tracing seem to have been interwoven in what at first appears to be an improbable source of ideas for Michelangelo, but which may in fact also provide an important clue to certain salient visual features of the *David*. The traditional Hebrew midrashim, or commentaries on the Old Testament, and in the mystical Zohar, offered a rich body of legendary and interpretative material concerning the story of David and Goliath, some of which seems particularly relevant. In one text, for example, Moses is said to have prayed for his seed, and especially for David, as follows : "Hear, Lord, his voice, and Thou shalt be an help against his adversaries', 'bring him' then back 'to his people' in peace ; and when alone he shall set out into battle against Goliath, 'let his hands be sufficient for him, and Thou shalt be an help against his adversaries'. Moses at the same time prayed God to stand by the tribe of Judah, whose chief weapon in war was the bow, that their 'hands might be sufficient', that they might vigorously and with good aim speed the arrow". It has frequently been noted in connection with the conspicuously displayed and enlarged hands of Michelangelo's figure that at least from the time of St. Jerome David was referred to as "manu fortis". The midrash is particularly suggestive, however, because the Lord is specifically invoked to render David's hands "sufficient", and these, in turn, are related to the Hebrews' divinely inspired use of their favorite weapon, the bow. Similarly, the Zohar speaks of the "evil" eye that David cast upon his opponent, which rooted him to the ground, unable to move, an apt description of the effect of the glance of Michelangelo's hero. Michelangelo might well have been aware of these ancient texts, which were avidly studied by the learned men of his generation, such as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and especially Egidio da Viterbo, who has been credited with an important role in the conceptual design of the Sistine ceiling.

The personal and artistic associations of the sculptured David, in turn, help to clarify the role played by the victory of David over Goliath in the further development of Michelangelo's ideas on the nature of art and the creative process. The victory itself is portrayed in the southeast corner spandrel of the Sistine chapel, where David is shown astride his fallen adversary, winding up to decapitate him with the giant's own gigantic sword (Fig. 11). This



11. Michelangelo, *David Killing Goliath*, Sistine ceiling, Vatican



12. *David killing the lion*, silver plate, Metropolitan Museum, New York

composition, in which the two figures are interlocked, with David attacking and subduing the recumbent figure in a sort of Greco-Roman wrestling match, is unprecedented. There is an unmistakable allusion to the type of David slaying killing the lion, again as it appears in a Byzantine tradition that Michelangelo must have known (Fig. 12). In part, however, the composition is also based, as has recently been observed, on what must have been the prototype of the Byzantine formulation, the theme of Mithras killing the bull, of which a relief now in the Louvre was one of the most familiar antiques in Rome (Fig. 13). It is important to realize that in Michelangelo's time the work was identified as Hercules killing the bull, so that here, as in the marble figure, David is identified with the ancient hero. There are three fundamental differences from the relief, as well as from earlier depictions of the biblical subject : the figures are shown in depth, rather than parallel to the picture plane ; they are conjoined so as to create a coherent, pyramidal group ; and they are arranged so that the composition is dominated by David's action, his raised right arm and sword culminating the thrust of his powerful *arco della schiena*. David hacks at Goliath with superhuman fury, and his triumph is supernaturally overwhelming.



13. Mithras killing the bull, drawing, *Codex Coburgensis*,  
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg



14. Raphael, *David killing Goliath*, Logge, Vatican

We know that almost immediately after the completion of the Sistine ceiling Raphael paraphrased Michelangelo's composition in his Old Testament cycle in the Vatican Loggie (Fig. 14), and soon thereafter the image of David killing the giant was converted to Christianity, as it were, by Raphael's pupil, Giulio Romano, in the Sala di Costantino. The decoration of this great hall was commissioned by the Medici pope Clement VII (1523-34) as a kind of historical sequel to the Old Testament narratives, devoted to the establishment of Christianity as the state religion. The end of idolatry is an important aspect of the theme, and in one of the scenes Giulio adopted Michelangelo's composition for a portrayal of the sculptor converted to Christianity destroying the giants he had created in his pagan past (Fig. 15).

These considerations help somewhat to alleviate our astonishment that the same group was actually adapted to portray the sculptor himself at work on one of his most famous creations,



15. Giulio Romano,  
*The Christian sculptor  
destroying the idols*,  
Sala di Costantino, Vatican

the figure of Dawn from the tomb Lorenzo de'Medici (Fig. 16). The image occurs in an extraordinary book of astrological games published at Venice in 1527 by one Sigismondo Fanti, an otherwise little known itinerant humanist, who may actually have seen Michelangelo at work on the figure. Fanti was perspicacious enough to include the image under the sphere of Jupiter, which did in fact correspond to Michelangelo's constellation. The vehement action of Fanti's sculptor also seems to give form to the vivid description by the French traveler Blaise de Vigenère of the seemingly divine fury with which Michelangelo attacked the marble in his frenzy to free his idea from the block.

I have seen Michelangelo, although more than sixty years old, and no longer among the most robust, knock off more chips of a very hard marble in a quarter of an hour than three young stone carvers could have done in three or four, an almost incredible thing to one who had not seen it ; and he moved with such impetuosity and fury that I thought the





16. *The sign of Jupiter with Michelangelo the sculptor* (from S. Fanti, *Triumpho di Fortuna*, Venice 1527, carte XXXVIII)

whole work would fall to pieces, knocking to the floor with a single blow large chunks three or four fingers thick, so precisely aimed that if he had gone even minimally too far than necessary, he risked losing it all, because it cannot then be repaired, nor re-formed as with images of clay or stucco.

Although in a different mode and with different implications from the marble David, Fanti must have grasped Michelangelo's interpretation of David's victory over Goliath as the prototype for the artist's overcoming the difficulties of his art. Indeed, Fanti's whole conception shows such intimate knowledge of Michelangelo and his working method, that I suspect the artist himself may have supplied the information, and perhaps even suggested the appropriateness of the formula.

Both the David and Goliath motif and Fanti's paraphrase of it



as the sculptor creating divine form through superhuman effort, had complementary repercussions roughly twenty-five years later, and now specifically in art-theoretical contexts. The works to be discussed hereafter all date on quite independent grounds to around 1550, and they all seem to reflect more or less directly the preeminent art-theoretical theme of the period, the Paragone, or comparison of the arts. The subject was given wide currency by the famous opinion poll conducted among the leading artists of the day by Benedetto Varchi in 1548.

Fanti's image reappears in the background of Martin van Heemskerck's great panel of St. Luke painting the Virgin now in the museum at Rennes (Figs. 17-18). Although much discussed, the underlying theme of this complex allegory, an *interpretatio christiana* of the Paragone, has remained obscure. Luke is not presented as the simple recorder of superficial appearances, but as the knowing re-creator of the visible form of divine nature. Luke is a painter, but he is shown giving color to the underlying prototype, or *disegno*. This seminal concept of mid-sixteenth century aesthetics derived its potency from its dual, punning significance as both physical drawing and immaterial scheme, or concept. With subtle deliberation Vasari described *disegno* as Father (alluding to



17. Martin van Heemskerck, *St. Luke painting the Virgin*, detail, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes



18. Martin van Heemskerck, *St. Luke painting the Virgin*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes

god the Father) of the arts. Heemskerck realized that in the context of Saint Luke portraying the Virgin and Child - and only in this context - he could illustrate the crucial role of *disegno* as the interface, literal as well as figurative, between the artist's creativity and that of God. Luke is surrounded by the paraphernalia of the wisdom and learning required of the humanist artist in fulfilment of his divine mission. *Exempla* of the arts of architecture and sculpture are portrayed in the background, where Heemskerck transposed the drawings he had made during his visit in Rome a decade earlier of the courtyard of the Palazzo Sassi (Fig. 19). The Sassi palace must indeed have seemed to him a veritable paradise, reincarnating the classical world with its renowned collection of antiquities. The two most prominently displayed works are especially important for us. Shown on the pedestal is the seated porphyry figure, restored in the eighteenth century as Apollo Citharoedus, now preserved in the Naples museum (Fig. 20). Two points must be made concerning this motif. The first is that it was understood in Heemskerck's time as representing *Roma Trionfante*, no doubt because of its effeminate form and because it was made of the imperial stone, porphyry. Jacopo Sansovino had already transformed the figure into a Madonna and Child, which in turn must have inspired Heemskerck to do the same for his own image of the pair that Luke is portraying (Fig. 21). Heemskerck introduces a



19. Martin van Heemskerck, *Courtyard of the Palazzo Sassi in Rome*, drawing, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin



20. *Apollo Citharoedus*, Museo Nazionale, Naples

21. *Jacopo Sansovino, Madonna and Child*, Sant'Agostino, Rome



crucial change, however, by crossing the Virgin's legs. This motif, probably inspired by Michelangelo's figure of the prophet Isaiah in the Sistine ceiling, is an obvious allusion to the Crucifixion, of which the Mother of God has foreknowledge. In this way, the progression from the fragmentary classical to the perfect modern deity, illustrates the creative process whereby Christianity incorporated the good, while rejecting the bad in pagan antiquity. Rome triumphant is succeeded by the Church triumphant.

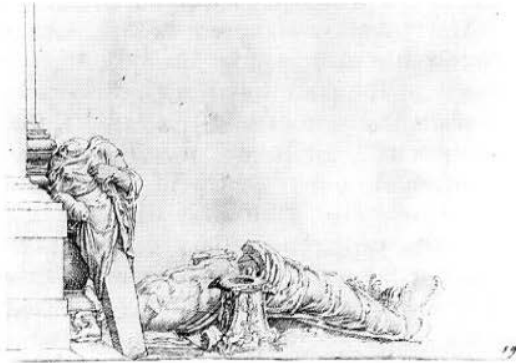
The other image that concerns us, the sculptor at work on his statue (Fig. 18), was conspicuously added by Heemskerk to the actual furnishings of the Sassi courtyard. The reference to Fanti's portrayal of Michelangelo at work - the paradigm of creative fervor - is unmistakable ; one scholar even saw a physiognomical resemblance to Michelangelo. Heemskerk again makes a significant change, however. The figure of Aurora is replaced by another famous antique then in the Villa Madama and now to be seen, radically transformed into a Herm, in the Louvre (Fig. 22). In Heemskerk's time it was in the garden of the Villa Madama in Rome, where he drew it in a reclining position (Fig. 23), just as it appears in the painting. Heemskerk, in fact, had already adapted Fanti's Michelangelo into a symbol of sculpture generally, and of the attainments of ancient sculpture in particular, by replacing the Aurora with the same ancient figure in his engraved composition of the children of Mercury, that is, the arts as products of man's ingenuity (Fig. 24). The significance of the substitution in the Rennes picture becomes evident when one realizes that the sculpture was recognized as Jupiter Capitolinus (Jupiter was Michelangelo's own planet, we recall), the father of the pagan gods and the maximum deity of Rome, and contemporaries singled it out as one of the largest and most beautiful statues ever to have been found in Rome. The sculptor is thus shown creating a gigantic idol of the most exalted imperial divinity, whose power would be broken and replaced by that of the divinity whose image is portrayed by Saint Luke. Taken together, the two pairs of figures, Rome and Jupiter in the background, Mary and Christ in the foreground, mark the succession from antiquity to the present --- in time, in belief, and in the self-conception of the artist. In all likelihood, Heemskerk's painting was made for a confraternity of Saint Luke, and was thus intended to incorporate north of the Alps the transformation then taking place in Italy of the old conception of



22. *Jupiter herm, Louvre, Paris*

23. *Martin van Heemskerck, Garden of the Villa Madama in Rome, drawing, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin*

24. *Martin van Heemskerck, Mercury and his Children, engraving*



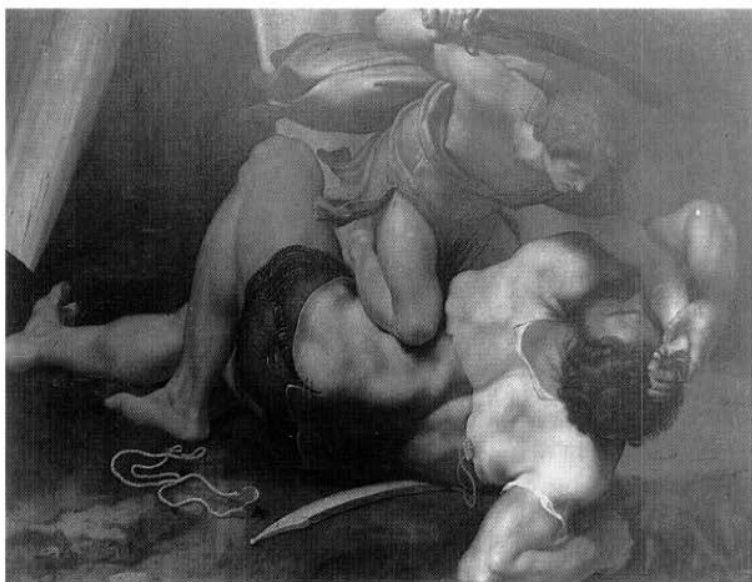
the craftsmen's guild into the new conception of the artist's academy. The exalted purpose of this transformation, and the ultimate point of Heemskerck's allegory, is incorporated in the parrot, which the Christ-child holds up to the viewer. The parrot was a standard symbol of rhetoric and the effect was to define the painting as the visual equivalent of the ideal sermon envisioned by Erasmus and the humanist advocates of a "Christian rhetoric" that would combine the learning of antiquity with the divinely inspired, expressive simplicity of the Bible.

Heemskerck's elaborate compilation of learned but clearly recognizable sources might be described as a modern, structured version of the traditional medieval use of *exempla* in didactic literature and sermons. In this respect, the painting sheds helpful retrospective light on the historical method implicit in Michelangelo's marble David. The inscriptions on the Louvre drawing are also, after all, a tissue of references - to the biblical hero as the prototype of the artist, and to the verse of Petrarch as a metaphor for a political statement. In this methodological sense, too, the inscriptions are paralleled visually in the statue itself, which refers to the earlier Florentine depictions of the Old Testament David, who incorporates the pagan paragon of fortitude and virtue, Hercules, and who is also, as we shall see, assimilated to the Early Christian warrior saints.

The second legacy of the David-beheading-Goliath tradition is a work by Daniele da Volterra now at Fontainebleau (Figs. 25-26) showing on the opposite sides (one cannot properly say front and back) of the same panel opposite views of the crucial moment of the story, in a composition clearly derived from the scene on the Sistine ceiling. Vasari records that the picture was made for the poet Giovanni della Casa, who wanted professional help in clarifying certain points for a treatise he was preparing on the art of painting. The panel is one of a number of works by various artists of the period in which the general theme of the relationship among the arts focused specifically on the respective merits of painting and sculpture. The painter answered the sculptor's claim to three-dimensionality by inventing devices that responded in kind, as it were: by introducing a mirror or other reflective surfaces in the scene, for example; or, as here, by exploiting both sides of the surface. These disputes came to be regarded by some critics, beginning with Michelangelo himself, as mere exercises in futility.



25. Daniele da Volterra, *David killing Goliath*, Fontainebleau



26. Daniele da Volterra, *David killing Goliath*, Fontainebleau

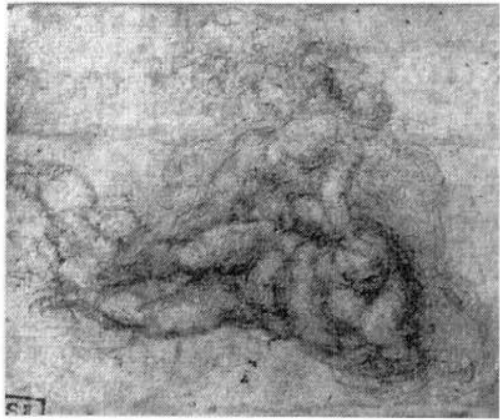
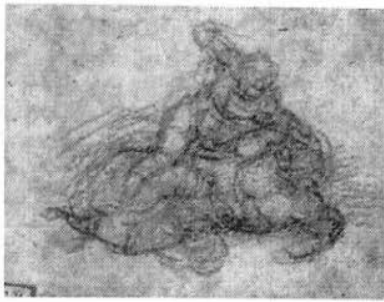
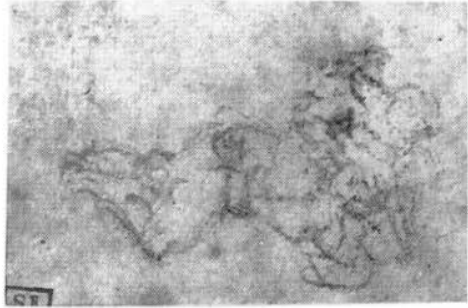


Yet, the debate also entailed a serious challenge to the artist - and to this extent Michelangelo did participate - : that of demonstrating his conceptual ingenuity and technical virtuosity, and thereby establishing his claim to the ambivalent title of *Deus Artifex*. Vasari's account of the commission includes a detail usually neglected that is crucially important in our context.

Giovanni della Casa... having begun to write a treatise on painting, and wishing clarification of certain details and particulars from men of the profession, he had Daniele make, with all possible diligence, a finished clay model of a David ; and he then had him paint, or rather portray in a picture the same David, which is most beautiful, on both sides, that is the front and the back, which was a capricious thing.

Daniele therefore made a terra cotta model first, and then the two-sided painting. It has long been known that the Fontainebleau panel is one of a number of works by Daniele that were based on designs supplied by Michelangelo. A series of sketches by Michelangelo in the Morgan Library represent essentially the same composition and must have served for the sculpture that Daniele then also translated into paint (Fig. 27). Surely, the real purpose of the lesson in sculpture and painting was to illustrate for Giovanni della Casa the view of the Paragone that Daniele had learned from Michelangelo - based, as we shall see presently, on three main principles : the primacy of sculpture, the reflectivity of painting, and the equal derivation of both ultimately from the same "intelligence".

This understanding helps to elucidate the truly awesome confluence of form and meaning in Michelangelo's interpretation of David killing Goliath. The key to the unprecedented conception, in the Sistine ceiling and in the composition recorded by Daniele, lies in Michelangelo's invention of an interlocking, double *contrapposto*: both figures show opposite sides, front and back, at the same time, but in opposite directions ; both sides of both figures, which together form a single, indissoluble knot, are always visible. David's victory over Goliath is indeed the prototype for the ingenuity and power of the artist to overcome the difficulty and



27. Michelangelo, Sketches for *David killing Goliath*, drawing, Morgan Library, New York

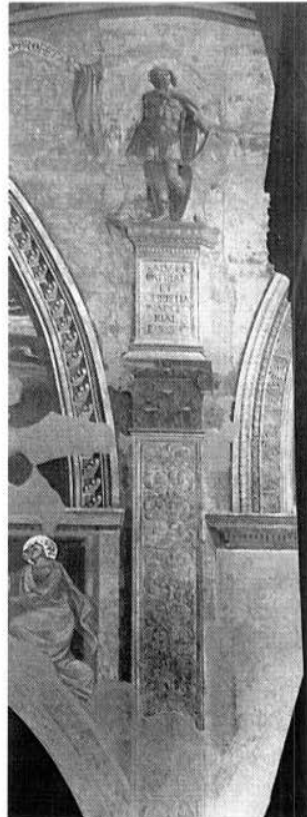
labor of his art - the *arco dell'intelletto* and the *arco della schiena*. There could be no better illustration of the one explicit statement by Michelangelo that has come down to us *verbatim* expressing his conception of his art, and therefore of himself. At the same time as the figural group, and in response to Varchi's inquiry concerning the Paragone, Michelangelo composed an ironic, lapidary, verbal conundrum no less interlocking and contrapuntal than the David and Goliath composition itself. The statement both describes and draws upon the same *arco - dell'intelletto* and *della schiena* - with which, for the early David, the *alta colonna* was broken to the artist's will.

I say that if greater judgement and difficulty, impediment and labor do not make for greater nobility, then painting and sculpture is the same thing. And if this be held so, no painter should make less of sculpture than of painting, and no sculptor less of painting than of sculpture. By sculpture I mean that which one does by taking away ; that which one does by adding is similar to painting. Enough, for the one and the other deriving from the same intelligence, that is, sculpture and painting, one can make a good peace between them and abandon so many disputes, because they take more time than making figures.

\* \* \* \*

The parallel Michelangelo draws in the first text of the Louvre sheet between David and himself inevitably does more than simply equate two remarkable victories over physically superior adversaries. David had long since become an emblem of Florentine republicanism, and it is clear that Michelangelo imputed to his own giant a sort of apotropaic efficacy with respect to Florence's contemporary enemies, equivalent to and infused with the same divine power as the Biblical hero with respect to the Philistine enemies of Israel. The first inscription itself therefore suggests that Michelangelo's personal power served a larger, communal purpose, through the image of David.

The nature of this public mission, in turn, is manifested in the text written below the artist's signature, for the associations evoked by the Pertrarchian verse extend the meaning of the defeat of the challenging giant far beyond the superiority of purely



28. Ghirlandaio, *David and Goliath*, Santa Trinita, Florence

intellectual and technical prowess. To begin with, David and the column had a particularly close, quasi-idolatrous, relationship in Florence. Donatello's bronze David, the first free-standing nude statue since antiquity, had been displayed on a column, in the classical manner, first in the courtyard of the Palazzo Medici, and again, after the expulsion of the Medici in 1495, when the sculpture was transferred to the courtyard of the Palazzo Vecchio. Similarly, the fictive monument painted by Ghirlandaio beside the entrance to the Sassetti chapel in Santa Trinita, David stands on a pedestal supported by a tall pilaster. Francesco Sassetti was a close ally of the Medici, and that the monument had a civic, no less than a religious import is proclaimed in the inscription on the pedestal: SALVTI PATRIAE ET CHRISTIANAE GLORIAE (Fig. 28).

A contemporary Florentine, thinking in terms of an adversary to the republican spirit championed by David, would immediately have recognized the broken laurel as a patent reference to the Medici, in particular to Lorenzo il Magnifico, Michelangelo's own early patron. Punning on the Latin form of his name, Lorenzo had adopted the laurel as one of his personal emblematic devices, and the evergreen thereupon became one of the major themes of Medicean heraldic imagery. To be sure, the laurel was an ancient and multivalent symbol of virtue, but Lorenzo transformed the simple heraldic device into a distinct political message. In a medal of about 1480 (Fig. 29), an allegorical figure labelled FIORENTIA is seated under a laurel tree holding flowers to symbolize the City of Flowers that flourishes under Lorenzo's tutelage (TVTELA PATRIE). Lorenzo also adopted the device in a particular form and with a particular meaning that its reach across time, referring to the past and rife with implications for the future. One of the primary associations of the laurel in antiquity was with the custom followed by each of the Roman emperors to plant in a grove the branch of laurel he had carried in triumph, and the continuous sequence of trees that grew from the branches came to symbolize the continuity of the empire itself. This association, and the evergreen's virtue to renew itself led Lorenzo to take as his emblem a branch, or stump - "broncone" in Italian - of laurel, and to combine it with a chivalric version of an equally venerable conceit concerning temporal renewal derived from a famous passage in Virgil's fourth Eclogue. The *broncone* of laurel with the motto *le temps revient* (Fig. 30) thereupon became a striking visuo-verbal evocation, under the benign auspices of Lorenzo de' Medici, of the Virgilian celebration of the return of the Golden Age under the Emperor Augustus. The ever-flourishing laurel served as the image of the Medici's protective tutelage of the city. Michelangelo's cooptation of the Petrarchian broken tall column and laurel thus uniquely and conspicuously refers to the death of Lorenzo, the eclipse of the Medici domination in Florence, and the triumph of republican government - the future stability of which Michelangelo would help to assure by the ever-vigilant menace of his gigantic giant-killer.

Michelangelo was by no means opposed to the Medici family as such - they were among his greatest patrons. He was a passionately committed Florentine republican, however, and this



29. Medal of Lorenzo de Medici,  
Bargello, Florence

30. Impresa of Lorenzo de Medici,  
Ms Plut. 82.10, f° 3 r, detail,  
Bibliotheca Laurenziana, Florence



understanding of Michelangelo's written message on the David sheet helps in the first instance to illuminate the coherent significance of the drawing itself. In the republican sense the sentiment applies to both figures in the study. The French, for whom Piero Soderini commissioned the bronze David expressly in emulation of Donatello's famous figure, were the chief allies of the Florentine republic against the political aspirations of the Medici. The anti-Medicean implication of the inscription also clarifies a number of otherwise puzzling aspects of the marble sculpture's history and imagery. Apart from its physical character - its extraordinary size, physique and complete nudity - Michelangelo's *David* is above all distinguished by its unprecedented isolation of the moment *before* the epic battle with the Philistine. Normally, and quite rightly, this abrogation of the traditional rule of showing David triumphant over the decapitated giant, is taken as serving to heighten the dramatic intensity of the event. Given the inscription on the drawing, however, the shift of emphasis from victory to vigilance must also be understood in the light of the potential future menace inherent in the Medicean theme of verdant laurel and *le temps revient*. Michelangelo's narrative innovation thus imbues the figure with a vital, contemporary meaning analogous to the physical power and psychological immediacy of the sculpture itself. The prototypical victor over brute physical strength devoid of moral support, has become the modern image of the spiritual force with which moral right is endowed. In this sense, especially, the *David* shows its debt to that great tradition of warrior saints, propugnators of the faith, which includes the St. George of Donatello, and Michelangelo's own earlier portrayal of St. Proculus.

This radical new interpretation of the theme may even have been one of the reasons why Michelangelo was given the commission in the first place. At least, good sense can thus be made of Vasari's famous account of the way in which the earlier work on the marble had been botched : Agostino di duccio had cut a large hole between the legs, which rendered the block useless for the figure as intended. Normally, Agostino's error is assumed to have created a purely technical problem, which Michelangelo succeeded in overcoming. I suspect, however, that the situation entailed another, more substantive difficulty that affected the essential meaning the work was to convey. Agostino's gaping hole would evidently have precluded the one, indispensable element of the



subject as traditionally conceived, the decapitated head of the defeated Goliath. It may have been this very problem that later prompted Andrea Sansovino to propose adding certain pieces of marble in order to create a figure. We have seen that an important aspect of Michelangelo's achievement certainly lay in the purely artistic feat of extracting the giant from the immense and disfigured block. An equally important aspect, however, lay in what can only be described as the political feat of devising a conception of David that would obviate the need for the giant's head while retaining - indeed augmenting, as it turned out - the affective power of the basic theme of David as the youthful protector of his people.

Instead of Goliath's head between or beneath David's feet, Michelangelo placed behind his leg the stump of a tree, a conventional method of adding support commonly used by ancient sculptors. In the case of Michelangelo's *David*, however, the device may also serve as an attribute of David, equivalent to Goliath's head, though different in form as well as meaning.

The stump was in fact called "broncone", the same word used for Lorenzo's *impresa*, in a remarkable but often neglected document describing certain embellishments, now disappeared, that were added to Michelangelo's statue shortly after it was installed in front of the Plazzo Vecchio. The broncone was gilded, as was the strap of David's sling, a gilt bronze laurel wreath was added (recalling, as does the nudity of the figure, Donatello's bronze David), and a leafy vine of copper (presumably ivy) was placed about the groin (cf. Fig. 34). A letter written later by Pietro Aretino complaining about the statue's nudity suggests that the vine may have been an act of public prudery, prefiguring our cartoonist's Jockey shorts. Perhaps not without reference to the *David* thus adorned, Cesare Ripa later applied the laurel crown and the ivy cinch to the personification of Poetic Fury, as symbols of eternal fame (Fig. 31). In my case, Michelangelo's statue actually did acquire the laurel as an attribute - the Medicean broncone was pruned, as it were, to serve as David's trophy.

To my mind, however, there are still more compelling, and historically more significant, witnesses to the Medicean reference in Michelangelo's inscription, and by implication in the statue itself. The witnesses testify, as well, to the fact that the message was heard and understood by his contemporaries. The evidence is to be found in what happened to the Medici *impresa* after the



republic was defeated and the Medici returned to even greater power than before. Under Duke Cosimo I the pun on Lorenzo's name was replaced, as on an early medal portraying the young Duke (Fig. 32), by a new, explicitly retrospective pun on the name of Cosimo Pater Patriae, the founding father of the family's power. At the same time, the theme of recurrence that had provided the political overtone of Lorenzo's laurel impresa now became the resounding keynote of a new Medicean proclamation of true dynastic hegemony. The broncone remained, but the motto was changed from the chivalric *le temps revient* to one directly inspired by the phrase Virgil had used in reference to the Golden Bough, *primo avulso non deficit alter*. Simply by substituting *vno* for *primo*, Virgil's limited sequence was transformed into a generic notion of perennial regeneration from the broken laurel of Petrarch. Significantly, the prime image of this principle of "augural historicism", including the laurel branch and revised motto, is Pontormo's famous portrait of Cosimo Pater Patriae, which pointedly revives the profile format characteristic of the earlier period (Fig. 33). As far as I can discover, however - and this is the crucial point - Michelangelo on his drawing for the *David* was the first to apply the Petrarchian phrase to the Medici in specific reference to the eclipse of the family's power following the death of Lorenzo. It is well known that Michelangelo's statue, which he secretly executed behind a specially constructed enclosure, immediately became a matter of civic pride: after a public consultation with no less than thirty citizens of Florence, including the leading artists of the day, the statue was accorded the most conspicuous civic location, flanking the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio. I have no doubt that Michelangelo's subtle and ironic subversion of the Medici laurel device also entered, subversively, into the public domain. The later version of the impresa was obviously promulgated as a triumphant rejoinder, and can only have been intended to parry Michelangelo's ingenious thrust at the heart of tyranny.

The "battle of the imprese" was not the only reply to the *David*. When the huge monument was transported to its destination in the middle of the night, it was attacked and stoned by vandals, who can only have been supporters of the Medici faction. The statue appears in two public depictions of important political events that took place in the Piazza della Signoria following the Medici restoration: an oration made by Giovan Battista Ridolfi,

ICONOLOGIA  
FUROR POETICO.



31. Personification of  
*Furor poeticus* (from  
Ripa, 1603, 178)

32. Medal of Cosimo I  
de' Medici, Bargello,  
Florence

33. Pontorno,  
*Cosimo Pater Patriae*,  
Uffizi, Florence



the Medici-supported Gonfaloniere della Giustizia who replaced Piero Soderini, shown in the border of one of the tapestries for the Sistine Chapel designed by Raphael for the Medici Pope Leo X (Fig. 34); and in a depiction, in the Palazzo Vecchio itself, of the reception of the insignia of command given to the city by the same pope. It has been suggested - and I doubt it can be coincidental - that in both cases the *David* is deliberately shown "decapitated", as if in ironic response to the threatened beheading of the Medici-Goliath. These episodes of anti-Republican, symbolic image-vandalism in turn anticipate the actual decapitation of the portrait reliefs on that great symbol of ancient imperialism, the arch of Constantine in Rome, perpetrated in 1536 by one of the leading partisans of Florentine Republicanism, Lorenzino de' Medici. Lorenzino's act of physical violence served to propagate the Republican cause, against his hated and potentially tyrannical cousin, Alessandro de' Medici. The same mania for image decapitation was also evident in Giulio Romano's depiction of the inspired Christian sculptor surrounded by headless idols (cf. Fig. 15). It should be recalled in this context, finally, that the *David* was not the only work by Michelangelo whose political associations, whether intended or acquired, the Medici rulers of Florence considered intolerable and in need of "neutralization". The mutilations of the arch of Constantine were a kind of prelude to the real assassination of Alessandro, which Lorenzino perpetrated a year later, in 1537. Michelangelo's over life-size, apparently unfinished sculpture of Brutus (Fig. 35) - the first independent, heroic commemorative bust *all'antica* carved in the Renaissance - must have been made in celebration of this act of politically justified homicide. Of critical importance for our theme is that when the Brutus was acquired later in the century by Grand Duke Francesco, a wonderfully fatuous inscription was added explaining that while working on the marble Michelangelo had a change of heart!

Under the Medici granddukedom works of art became weapons of statecraft as never before, and from the Medici court this form of political art-propaganda passed forever, and for better or worse, into the bloodstream of European culture. I hope it is clear from the spectacle of art-political vicissitudes we have witnessed that this new awareness of the rhetorical value of affective imagery was deeply indebted to the power of Michelangelo interpretation, both verbal and visual, of David. If

35. Michelangelo,  
*Brutus*, Bargello,  
Florence

34. *Oration of Giovan Battista  
Ridolfi in Florence*,  
engraving after  
the border of a  
tapestry designed  
by Raphael, detail  
(from P.S. Bartoli,  
*Leonis X  
admiranda  
virtutis imagines*,  
ca 1690)



*Postquam Urbanus in urbem curia descendit aeneas, et clamore populi ad ordinandum R.P. statum.*  
De Incubi de Rubens fecit Rome.

this view of its meaning and effect is correct, then the sculpture played a no less significant role in Florentine, indeed in European political history than it did in the history of art - the first colossal, free-standing nude figure carved in marble since antiquity, was also the first colossal, free-standing public monument conceived in the name of liberty.

\* A brief, preliminary version of this paper was presented at a colloquium on *Der Künstler über sich in seinem Werk*, organized by Matthias Winner at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, in February 1989. In the discussion that followed the lecture I had many helpful comments, especially from Horst Bredekamp, Phillip Fehl, Kristina Herrmann Fiore, Christoph Frommel, Justus Müller-Hofstede, and Matthias Winner. I am grateful for their suggestions, several of which I have incorporated here. An expanded version of the essay will appear, with full documentation, in a forthcoming volume by the author entitled *History as a Visual Figure of Speech. Uses of the Past in Art from Donatello to Picasso*.

Since the fascinating story of the *David* as told by Vasari will be referred to repeatedly, it is quoted in full in the Appendix.

## APPENDIX

## VASARI ON THE DAVID OF MICHELANGELO

"Gli fu scritto di Fiorenza d'alcuni amici suoi che venisse, perché non era fuor di proposito che di quel marmo che era nell'Opera guasto egli, come già n'ebbe volontà, ne cavasse una figura ; il quale Pier Soderini, fatto gonfaloniere a vita allora di quella città, aveva avuto ragionamento molte volte di farlo condurre a Lionardo da Vinci et era allora in pratica di darlo a Maestro Andrea Contucci dal Monte San Savino, eccellente scultore, che cercava di averlo ; e Michelagnolo, quantunque fussi difficile a cavarne una figura intera senza pezzi - al che fare non bastava a quegli altri l'animo di non finirlo senza pezzi, salvo che a lui, e ne aveva avuto desiderio molti anni innanzi -, venuto in Fiorenza tento di averlo. Era questo marmo di braccia nove, nel quale per mala sorte un Maestro Simone da Fiesole aveva cominciato un gigante, e si mal concia era quella opera, che lo aveva bucato fra le gambe e tutto mal condotto e storpiato : di modo che gli Operai di Santa Maria del Fiore, che sopra tal cosa erano, senza curar di finirlo l'avevano posto in abbandono, e già molti anni era così stato et era tuttavia per istare. Squadrolo Michelagnolo di nuovo, et esaminando potersi una ragionevole figura di quel sasso cavare, et accomodandosi con l'attitudine al sasso ch'era rimasto storpiato da Maestro Simone, si risolse di chiederlo agli Operai et al Soderini, dai quali per cosa inutile gli fu concesso, pensando che ogni cosa che se ne facesse fusse migliore che lo essere nel quale allora si ritrovava, perché né spezzato, né in quel modo concio, utile alcuno alla Fabbrica non faceva. Laonde Michelagnolo, fatto un modello di cera, finse in quello, per la insegna del Palazzo, un Davit giovane con una frombola in mano, accio che, si come egli aveva difeso il suo popolo e governatolo con giustizia, così chi governava quella città dovesse animosamente difenderla e giustamente governarla. E lo comincio nell'Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, nella quale fece una turata fra muro e tavole et il marmo circondato ; e quello di continuo lavorando senza che nessuno il vedesse, a ultima perfezzione lo condusse. Era il marmo già da Maestro Simone storpiato e guasto, e non era in alcuni luoghi tanto che alla volontà di Michelagnolo bastasse per

quel che averebbe voluto fare ; egli fece che rimasero in esso delle prime scarpellate di Maestro Simone nella estremità del marmo, delle quali ancora se ne vede alcuna. E certo fu miracolo quello di Michelagnolo, far risuscitare uno che era morto.

Era questa statua, quando finita fu, ridotta in tal termine che varie furono le dispute che si fecero per condurla in Piazza de' Signori. Per che Giuliano da San Gallo et Antonio suo fratello fecero un castello di legname fortissimo e quella figura con i canapi sospesero a quello, accio che scotendosi non si troncasse, anzi venisse crollandosi sempre ; e con le travi per terra piane con argani la tirarono e la missero in opera. Fece un cappio al canapo che teneva sospesa la figura, facilissimo a scorrere, e stringeva quanto il peso l'agravava, che è cosa bellissima et ingegnosa, che l'ho nel nostro libro disegnato di man sua, che è mirabile, sicuro e forte per legar pesi.

Nacque in questo mentre che, vistolo su Pier Soderini, il quale, piaciutogli assai et in quel mentre che lo ritoccava in certi luoghi, disse a Michelagnolo che gli pareva che il naso di quella figura fussi grosso. Michelagnolo, accortosi che era sotto al gigante il Gonfalonieri e che la vista non lo lasciava scorgere il vero, per satisfarlo sali in sul ponte che era accanto alle spalle, e preso Michelagnolo con prestezza uno scarpello nella man manca con un poco di polvere di marmo che era sopra le tavole del ponte e cominciato a gettare leggieri con gli scarpegli, lasciava cadere a poco a poco la polvere, né tocco il naso da quel che era. Poi guardato a basso al Gonfalonieri, che stava a vedere, disse : "Guardatelo ora". "A me mi piace più", disse il Gonfalonieri ; "gli avete dato la vita". Così scese Michelagnolo, e lo avere contento quel signore che se ne rise da sé Michelagnolo, avendo compassione a coloro che, per parere d'intendersi, non sanno quel che si dicano ; et egli, quando ella fu murata e finita, la discoperse. E veramente che questa opera ha tolto il grido a tutte le statue moderne et antiche, o greche o latine che elle si fussero ; e si può dire che né l' Marforio di Roma, né il Tevere o il Nilo di Belvedere o i giganti di Monte Cavallo le sian simili in conto alcuno, con tanta misura e bellezze e con tanta bontà la fini Michelagnolo. Perché in essa sono contorni di gambe bellissime et appicature e sveltezza di fianchi divine, né ma' più s'è veduto un posamento sì dolce, né grazia che tal cosa pareggi, né piedi né mani né testa che a ogni suo membro di bontà, d'artificio e di parità né di disegno s'accordi tanto. E certo chi vede questa non dee curarsi di vedere altra opera



di scultura fatta nei nostri tempi o negli altri da qual si voglia artefice.

N'ebbe Michelagnolo da Pier Soderini per sua mercede scudi 400, e fu rizzata l'anno 1504. E per la fama che per questo acquisto nella scultura fece al sopradetto gonfalonieri un Davit di bronzo bellissimo, il quale egli mando in Francia".

(P. Barocchi, ed., *Giorgio Vasari. La vita di Michelagnolo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, 5 vols., Milan and Naples, 1962-72, I, 19-23).

"Some of Michelagnolo's friends wrote from Florence urging him to return, as they did not want that block of marble on the opera to be spoiled which Piero Soderini, then gonfaloniere for life in the city, had frequently proposed to give to Lionardo da Vinci, and then to Andrea Contucci, an excellent sculptor, who wanted it. Michelagnolo on returning tried to obtain it, although it was difficult to get an entire figure without pieces, and no other man except himself would have had the courage to make the attempt, but he had wanted it for many years, and on reaching Florence he made efforts to get it. It was nine braccia high, and unluckily one Simone da Fiesole had begun a giant, cutting between the legs and mauling it so badly that the wardens of S. Maria del Fiore had abandoned it without wishing to have it finished, and it had rested so for many years. Michelagnolo examined it afresh, and decided that it could be hewn into something new while following the attitude sketched by Simone, and he decided to ask the wardens and Soderini for it. They gave it to him as worthless, thinking that anything he might do would be better than its present useless condition. Accordingly Michelagnolo made a wax model of a youthful David holding the sling to show that the city should be boldly defended and righteously governed, following David's example. He began it in the opera, making a screen between the wall and the tables, and finished it without anyone having seen him at work. The marble had been hacked and spoiled by Simone so that he could not do all that he wished with it, though he left some of Simone's work at the end of the marble, which may still be seen. This revival of a dead thing was a veritable miracle. When it was finished various disputes arose as to who should take it to the piazza of the signori, so Giuliano da Sangallo and his brother Antonio made a strong wooden frame and hoisted the figure on to



it with ropes ; they then moved it forward by beams and windlasses and placed it in position. The knot of the rope which held the statue was made to slip so that it tightened as the weight increased, an ingenious device, the design for which is in our book, showing a very strong and safe method of suspending heavy weights. Piero Soderini came to see it, and expressed great pleasure to Michelagnolo who was retouching it, though he said he thought the nose large. Michelagnolo seeing the gonfaloniere below and knowing that he could not see properly, mounted the scaffolding and taking his chisel dexterously let a little marble dust fall on to the gonfaloniere, without, however, actually altering his work. Looking down he said, "Look now". "I like it better", said the gonfaloniere, "you have given it life". Michelagnolo therefore came down with feelings of pity for those who wish to seem to understand matters of which they know nothing. When the statue was finished and set up Michelagnolo uncovered it. It certainly bears the palm among all modern and ancient works; whether Greek or Roman, and the Marforio of Rome, the tiber and Nile of Belvedere, and the colossal statues of Montecavallo do not compare with it in proportion and beauty. The legs are finely turned, the slender flanks divine, and the graceful pose unequalled, while such feet, hands and head have never been excelled. After seeing this no one need wish to look at any other sculpture or the work of any other artist. Michelagnolo received four hundred crowns from Piero Soderini, and it was set upon in 1504. Owing to his reputation thus acquired, Michelagnolo did a beautiful bronze David for the gonfaloniere, which he sent to France..."

(A. B. Hinds, *Giorgio Vasari. The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 4 vols., London and New York, 1963, IV, 115-17).