

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

Pope Julius II



MICHELANGELO

THE "PLASTIC SURGEON" OF ROME'S ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE

Pope Paul III



The more than 100 works of art on display until February 7 in "Michelangelo the Architect in Rome" illustrate how this multi-talented genius of the Renaissance transformed many of Rome's ancient monuments into "modern" ones. He executed some of his plans, while others were left on his drawing board to be completed by his disciples; yet all were destined to mark the face of the Eternal City forever. For Michelangelo looked on ancient art as an inexhaustible treasure to draw upon.



Michelangelo Buonarroti

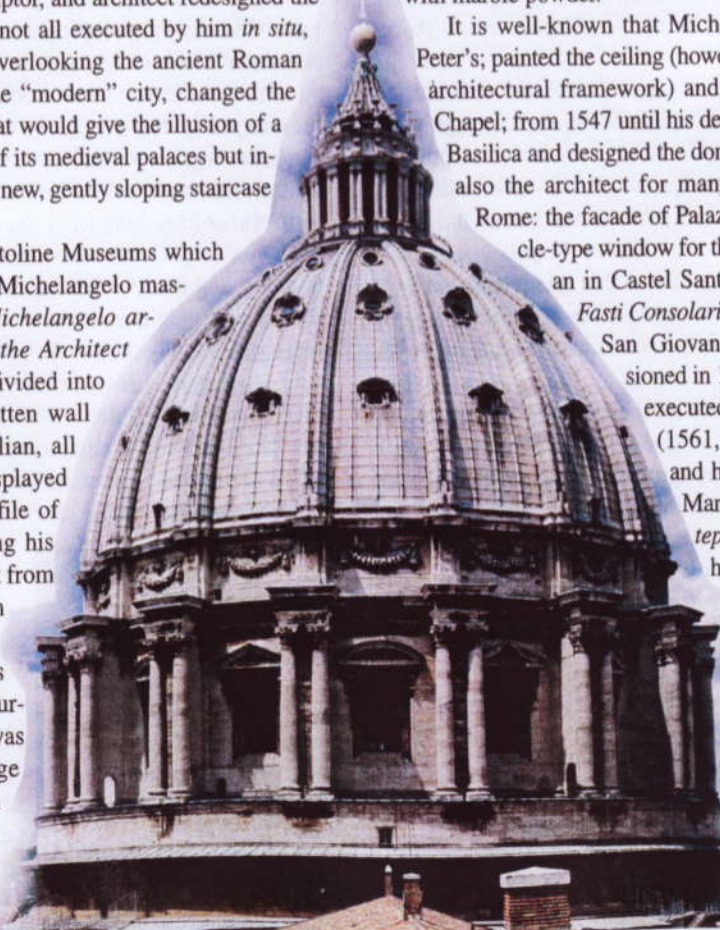
When in 1536 Emperor Charles V announced that he was coming to visit Rome, Pope Paul III Farnese (1468-1549) asked Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) to give the Capitoline Hill, the citadel of ancient Rome, a facelift. So the temperamental Tuscan poet, painter, sculptor, and architect redesigned the piazza. His three different projects, not all executed by him *in situ*, turned its axis 180 degrees from overlooking the ancient Roman Forum to facing the Vatican and the "modern" city, changed the paving to give it an elliptical look that would give the illusion of a larger space, renovated the facades of its medieval palaces but included ancient sculptures, and built a new, gently sloping staircase called the *Cordonata*.

On until February 7 in the Capitoline Museums which frame this world-famous piazza (a Michelangelo masterpiece), is a mega-exhibition, "Michelangelo architetto a Roma" ("Michelangelo the Architect in Rome"). Its 105 works of art, divided into 17 sections, each with clearly-written wall panels and exhibition cards in Italian, all well translated into English and displayed in chronological order, trace a profile of Michelangelo as an architect during his two long sojourns in Rome, the first from 1505-1516 and the second from 1534 until his death in 1564. (During the almost 20 intervening years Michelangelo lived in Florence. During these two decades, Florence was more the focus of papal patronage than Rome because of the election of two Popes from the Florentine Medici dynasty: Leo X in 1513 and his cousin Clement VII in 1523.)

First invited to the Eternal City in 1496 by art collector Cardinal Raffaele Riario, Michelangelo had lived in Rome before 1505, from 1496-1501, when he executed his first masterpieces, the statues of *Bacchus* (1496) (now in the Bargello in Florence) for His Eminence and his *Pietà* (1497-98) (now in St. Peter's Basilica), commissioned by the French Cardinal Jean de Bilhères, the Emperor Charles VIII's ambassador to Pope Alexander VI. However, these works do not figure into the present exhibition because they are sculptures (Michelangelo's favorite artistic medium), not architecture, the subject at hand. Indeed,

Michelangelo enjoyed attributing his preference for sculpture to the fact that his wet-nurse in Settignano near Florence had been the daughter and the wife of sculptors and that she had nursed him "on milk mixed with marble powder."

It is well-known that Michelangelo sculpted his *Pietà* in St. Peter's; painted the ceiling (however, don't miss its often overlooked architectural framework) and the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel; from 1547 until his death was chief architect of St. Peter's Basilica and designed the dome of St. Peter's; but not that he was also the architect for many other now-famous structures in Rome: the facade of Palazzo Farnese (1546-1550), a tabernacle-type window for the Chapel of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in Castel Sant'Angelo, the reconstruction of the *Fasti Consolari* in the Roman Forum, the Church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini (plans commissioned in 1559 by Lorenzo de' Medici, but not executed), the monumental Porta Pia Gate (1561, commissioned by Pope Paul IV), and his final works: the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli (a remodeling of the *tepidarium* of the Baths of Diocletian he designed in 1563 also for Pope Pius IV, but which was executed by his pupil Jacopo Lo Duca), and the Sforza Chapel in St. Mary Major (designed in 1564 but not executed until 1573 by Giacomo della Porta). Francesco Borromini (1599-1667), the great Baroque architect, considered this final masterpiece by Michelangelo to be one of his very finest works.



St. Peter's cupola



The facade of Palazzo Farnese

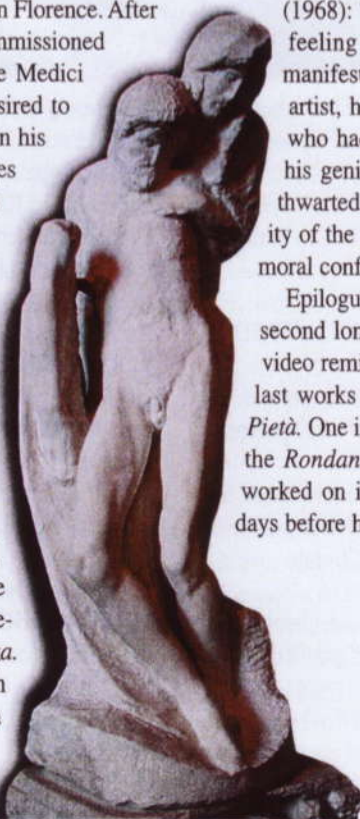
First Sojourn: In 1505 Michelangelo was called back to Rome to execute a sepulchral monument for Pope Julius II, but soon after the contract was awarded, Julius II changed his mind in favor of the frescoes for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which Michelangelo painted from 1508 until 1512, the year before Julius II died. "*Michelangelo l'architetto a Roma*" opens with three sections about the artist's 1505-1516 sojourn and his tumultuous relationship with his first papal patron, for, although Julius II's heirs recommissioned Michelangelo to finish the papal tomb, it was, in the artist's words, "the tragedy of the tomb," including 30 years of litigation, that forced him to abandon his plan for a vast temple-mausoleum within St. Peter's Basilica with forty statues to the much-reduced version in St. Peter in Chains.

The exhibition's fourth section concerns Michelangelo's lifelong love of ancient sculpture. It includes five of his red-chalk drawings (1516) on loan from the Casa Buonarroti Foundation in Florence. After his return to Florence that same year, Pope Leo X commissioned Michelangelo to help design a marble façade for the Medici dynasty's church, San Lorenzo. The artist deeply desired to be in charge of this project, but needed to brush up on his architectural skills. Therefore he'd copied these pages from a recently finished book of details from antique and contemporary Roman buildings. This voluminous album of sketches made by the little-known Florentine architect and carpenter Bernardo della Volpaia in 1514 and known as the Coner Codex, is now at the Sir John Sloane Museum in London.

Second Sojourn: Sections Five through Seventeen concern Michelangelo's second long sojourn from 1534-64, including Pope Paul III's important architectural commissions, in particular the *Piazza del Campidoglio* (Sections Eight and Nine) and St. Peter's Basilica (Sections Eleven and Twelve) as well as the artist's final works. A highlight of Section Nine is the ancient Roman statue of Jupiter that Michelangelo had intended to add as decoration to his new piazza. A highlight of Section Twelve is an unpublished sketch by Michelangelo of the drum of St. Peter's cupola with corrections by its architect Giacomo della Porta. It was only recently discovered in the archives of the *Fabbrica di San Pietro*.



The architectural plan of San Giovanni del Fiorentini



The Rondanini Pietà



The Piazza del Campidoglio

The other highlights of the exhibition are 30 autograph documents and drawings by Michelangelo for his Roman projects. They are on loan from the Casa Buonarroti in Florence.

Very moving are Four Epitaphs or funeral epigrams dating to 1544 (he wrote almost fifty at the uncle's behest with the promise of good food as compensation) for the tomb of Cecchino Bracci, the nephew of Luigi del Riccio, Michelangelo's secretary at the time. Bracci, very likely one of Michelangelo's lovers, had died at the age of fourteen in Rome on January 8, 1544. Michelangelo also designed his tomb, built in 1545 in the Church of Santa Maria Aracoeli. These autographs are interspersed with old prints, drawings, original documents and books from Michelangelo's times on loan from several important Italian collections, public as well as private.

Although this exhibition concerns the Renaissance genius's architecture, according to his entry in the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (1968): "Michelangelo thought of himself as a sculptor, and a feeling for the expressive potentialities of sculptural form manifests itself in all phases of his work. As a 16th century artist, he was forced to depend on the favor of great patrons who had means and power to award commissions worthy of his genius. Throughout his career his artistic ambitions were thwarted by the caprices of these patrons, by the social instability of the times, by the jealousy of other artists, and by the deep moral conflicts that arose within his own spirit."

Epilogue: Although Michelangelo's work in Rome during his second long sojourn was indeed mainly architecture, a splendid video reminds the visitor that he never abandoned sculpture. His last works in marble, both unfinished, are two versions of the *Pietà*. One is now in the Cathedral in Florence; the other, known as the *Rondanini Pietà*, is now in the Sforza Castle in Milan; he worked on it—specifically on Christ's legs—up until just a few days before his death on February 18, 1564.

"MICHELANGELO ARCHITETTO A ROMA"

Capitoline Museums

Hours Tuesdays-Sundays: 9 AM-8 PM.

Closed Mondays, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day.
Early closing at 2 PM on Christmas and New Year's Eves.

Entrance fee: 6 Euros.

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