

HUMANITIES

The ‘Ordinary Human Being’ Is in the Details

Art historian William Wallace looks beyond the mythic Michelangelo.

By Kathleen McGarvey

In his lifetime, artist Michelangelo Buonarroti was popularly known as “Il Divino”—“The Divine One.” The immensity of his talent seemed to put him beyond human categories.

But renowned Michelangelo expert William Wallace has spent his career trying to dispel that idea. Even artists of Michelangelo’s caliber “are ordinary human beings who are dealing with fundamentally day-to-day problems,” he says.


The Barbara Murphy Bryant Distinguished Professor of Art History at Washington University in St. Louis, Wallace was this year’s keynote speaker for the Ferrari Humanities Symposia. The series was established in 2012 by University Trustee Bernard Ferrari ’70, ’74M (MD) and his wife, Linda Gaddis Ferrari.

Wallace has been aided in his scholarly quest by the exceptional written record Michelangelo left. “We know more about Michelangelo than probably any artist before the 18th or 19th century,” he says. A tireless correspondent, Michelangelo also worked frequently in official capacities, enmeshed in the Italian Renaissance’s bureaucracy. “And bureaucracies keep records,” says Wallace.

In books such as *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man and His Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Wallace show readers the renowned artist as he was in daily life. His latest research, for a book not yet published, examines Michelangelo in his final decades.

While some other long-lived artists are known for distinct early- and late-career styles, Wallace says that’s not the case with Michelangelo. “It’s not so much his artistic style that changes—it’s the kind of projects that he wants to undertake and carry out. His early career is fundamentally concentrated on heroic, large single-figure works that make his reputation: the Pietà, the David, the Sistine Chapel ceiling. These are the things that astonished the world and that he could claim he made entirely by himself. But his late career has very little of that. Instead, he devotes himself to these huge architectural projects that he knows he’s never going to live to finish.”

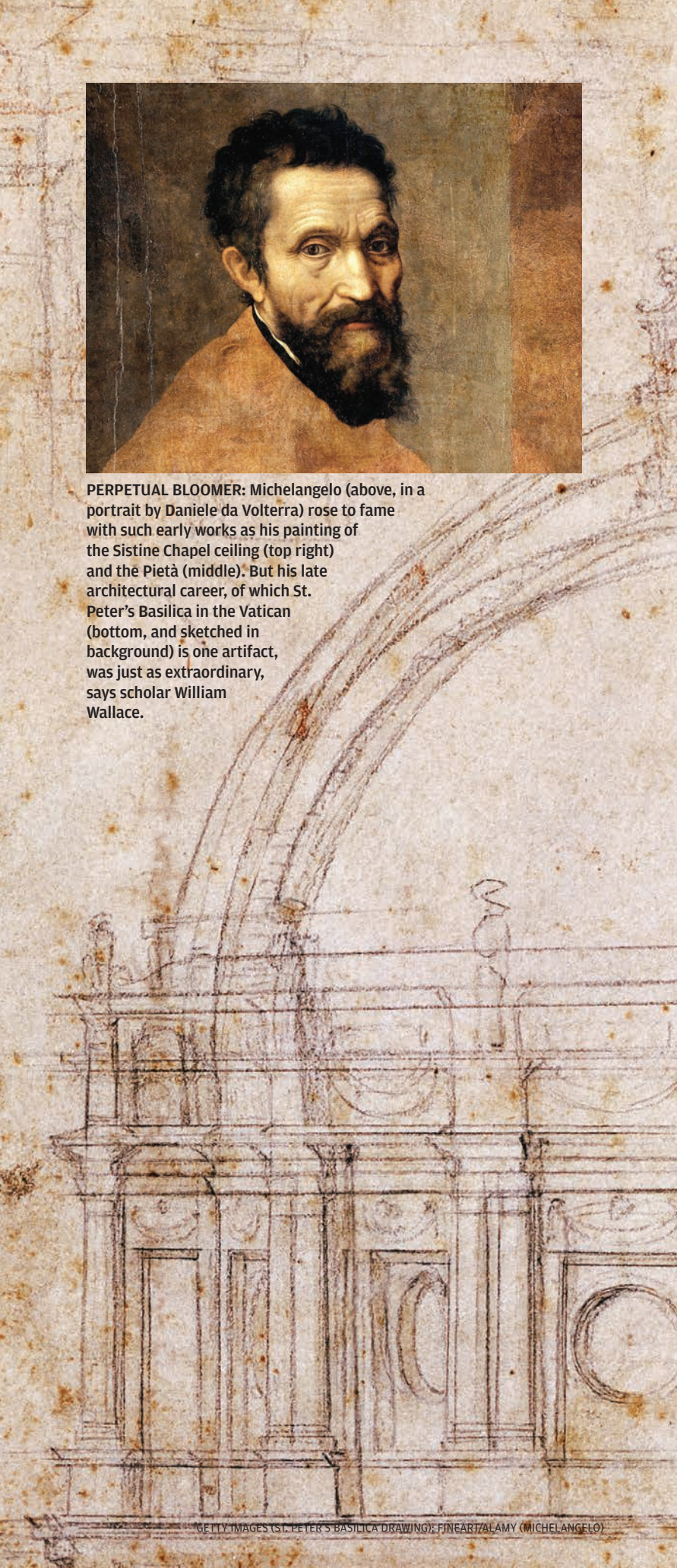
Researching the artist’s architectural work on St. Peter’s Basilica leads Wallace back, as ever, to the person behind the masterpiece: in this case, Michelangelo in his 80s.

“He was busier than ever, and more creative than ever,” he says. 

—KATHLEEN MCGARVEY



PERPETUAL BLOOMER: Michelangelo (above, in a portrait by Daniele da Volterra) rose to fame with such early works as his painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling (top right) and the Pietà (middle). But his late architectural career, of which St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican (bottom, and sketched in background) is one artifact, was just as extraordinary, says scholar William Wallace.





5 Things You Might Not Know about Michelangelo

1. He lived twice as long as most people did in the Renaissance.

Life expectancy in the Renaissance was between 35 and 40. Michelangelo lived 50 years beyond that.

2. He was as busy and successful in his 70s and 80s as at any time of his life.

Michelangelo became the official architect to the Papacy, taking over the building of St. Peter's Basilica when he was 72. Architecture, he said, wasn't his true profession. But St. Peter's was one of six major architectural projects he carried out in his last two decades. "He was helping to transform Rome into the city we know today," Wallace says.

3. He was a skilled and savvy businessman.

Widely seen as an isolated genius—thanks in part to Irving Stone's 1961 novel *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and the 1965 movie adaptation, starring Charlton Heston—Michelangelo actually worked in constant collaboration, overseeing hundreds of people. Wallace's first book, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), is subtitled *The Genius as Entrepreneur*.

4. He left a vast paper trail involving the most powerful people of his day.

"We know more about Michelangelo than probably any artist before the 18th or 19th centuries," says Wallace. There are more than 1,400 letters to and from him, some 900 of which have never been published in English. And about 1,100 people are named in the letters. "He kind of knew everybody"—and because he lived almost 90 years, his correspondence is a "cross-section of the entire 16th century."

5. He was very funny.

"You never think of Michelangelo laughing. But he had a wonderful sense of humor," Wallace says. "He liked to laugh. Records show him becoming friendly with a large number of people largely because he just liked to hang out with them."