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**Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture** by Cammy Brothers

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*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 116-117

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Society of Architectural Historians](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jsah.2010.69.1.116>

Accessed: 28/09/2014 23:43

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Cammy Brothers

**Michelangelo, Drawing, and  
the Invention of Architecture**

New Haven and London: Yale University  
Press, 2008, 259 pp., 76 color and 199 b/w  
illus. \$65, ISBN 9780300124897

Michelangelo emphatically declared that architecture “non sia mia arte.” So when and how did Michelangelo become an architect? One might speculate that designing the monumental tomb of Julius II in 1505 prompted him to think like an architect. Some scholars would point to the painted architecture of the Sistine ceiling (1508–12). Or one may legitimately argue that Michelangelo’s career as an architect began only with the San Lorenzo façade in 1516, when the artist was forty years old. As Cammy Brothers clearly demonstrates in her stimulating new study, Michelangelo came to architecture slowly. And much of this early activity—the tomb of Julius II, the Sistine Chapel, and even the San Lorenzo façade—is, as Brothers ably describes, less architecture than a “means of constructing a frame around figures.” Michelangelo was still thinking primarily as a sculptor. Indeed, among its many contributions, the book describes the character and origins of Michelangelo’s architectural thinking and tracks its gradual emergence from his work as a figurative artist. For Michelangelo, the ties uniting bodies and buildings were natural and multiple.

The book considers the years 1505 to 1534 as critical in the formation of Michelangelo the architect. Brothers examines the interactions among different strands of the artist’s activity, particularly in the arena of drawings. Thus, long before he built, Michelangelo had a well-developed foundation for his architectural thinking and practice. Drawing is key, as is evident in the title of the book and the first chapter, “Drawing, Memory, and Invention.” Here Brothers focuses on drawings of the human body to describe Michelangelo’s habits of mind and hand. While his draftsmanship was well grounded in fifteenth-century practice (and specifically indebted to Leonardo), he quickly freed himself from two major imperatives of his time: the imitation of nature and the imitation

of antiquity. Many of Brothers’s richly illustrated examples could be discussed at greater length, yet her argument moves at a lively pace and toward one of the central tenets of her book, that drawing for Michelangelo was a mode of thinking that was forever generating new ideas.

She convincingly argues that the unique character of Michelangelo’s architecture is rooted in his drawing practice. Many characteristics of his figural drawing would be utilized in designing architecture, especially his propensity to draw a limited number of themes, and to draw isolated elements repeatedly, varying them by shifts of scale, rotation, inversion, and mirroring. The result is a body of work that paradoxically is “exceptionally inventive and remarkably consistent, if not repetitive” (42).

In chapter two Brothers demonstrates that Michelangelo’s originality is grounded in his profound relationship to ancient and modern sources, which he absorbed and transformed with agility. She illustrates a number of his methods and concerns by examining the undervalued copies from the Codex Coner, which reveal the artist’s characteristic tendency to focus on details, his efficiency and economy in copying, and his ability to glean, in an extremely compressed regimen of self-training, “exactly the lessons he needed” (48). Brothers rightly demonstrates the central importance of Giuliano da Sangallo in Michelangelo’s architectural formation. Far from turning his back on his more conservative predecessor, Michelangelo adopted two principal features of Giuliano’s antiquarian studies: attention to the fragment and knowledge of the range and variety of ancient architecture. Yet Michelangelo was fundamentally resistant to the academic nature of much contemporary antiquarianism. He avoided slavish imitation by thoroughly assimilating and internalizing the lessons of ancient architecture. His flexible attitude toward precedent permitted him to develop as an independent and original designer unconstrained by a stultifying set of rules. As the artist once remarked, “one must have compasses in the eyes.” For Michelangelo, antiquarian study was a “fundamentally creative enterprise” (83).

In chapter three Brothers considers the relation between figure and frame in such projects as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the tomb of Julius II, and the San Lorenzo façade. In these works architecture was still primarily a support for figures. Only with the Medici Chapel did Michelangelo give equal emphasis to figurative and architectural elements. By examining Michelangelo's design process, especially as it is manifested in drawings and informed by his simultaneous activities, Brothers demonstrates how radical ideas began modestly, developing through a series of variations. Thus Michelangelo challenges a central tenet of classical architecture, in which individual elements have a defined purpose and obey structural logic. Howard Hibbard once quipped that architecture was satisfying because every part has a name and a readily identifiable function. Such expectations are mostly subverted in the Medici Chapel, where moldings become capitals, architraves serve as tabernacle sills, and many forms reveal anthropomorphic tendencies. In Brothers's words, Michelangelo's inventions defy "linguistic definition" (106). Moreover, the continual flux of the artist's ideas suggests that meaning, whether in the parts or the whole ensemble, evolved fluidly with the design and belie simple interpretation.

In chapter four, "Architecture as Subject," Brothers argues that the Laurentian Library is the first major architectural project in which structure does not serve to enclose, encase, or frame figures, whether painted or sculpted. The frame becomes the figure and architecture is now the principal subject. And unlike many previous creations, this purely architectural project had a better chance of completion as it did not require Michelangelo's personal intervention and thus could be executed by others. Brothers again demonstrates how his design for the library emerged from a series of possibilities, with ideas being transferred from one scheme to another and from one function to another. As in his figural drawings, economy reigns. Michelangelo tended to draw individual parts, developing ideas in a series of variants, often scattered on different sheets. He devoted special energy to

windows and doors, often re-using elements in different contexts. The result is a certain disjunctive character in his built architecture as if it were an assemblage of discrete parts (161).

When Giorgio Vasari described the Laurentian Library, he referred to Michelangelo's "license," that is, his willful departure from rules. Modern scholars have called this Mannerism. Whereas Michelangelo's inventions appear arbitrary and seem to arise spontaneously, Brothers demonstrates otherwise. His architecture is grounded in his figurative practice with ideas emerging from a series of alternative inventions and a continuous process of variation, manipulation, and transfer. At the very moment when there was an increasing codification of architectural rules and a professionalization of practice, Michelangelo proved to be—as in much else—an exception. For Michelangelo, the classical past and contemporary practice did not prescribe a set of rules, but offered a wide range of possibilities that were starting points for his fecund imagination.

With the Laurentian Library, Michelangelo became an architect in matters of design and actual practice. The library is the focus of the book's last chapter, but constitutes the first chapter of Michelangelo's long career as an innovative architectural designer. Although nearly fifty years old, he was just beginning an enormously prolific career as an architect. This book sets the stage for more fully appreciating what Michelangelo would achieve in Rome. In tracing how the artist evolved slowly as an architect and emphasizing the importance and fundamentally figurative character of his drawing, Brothers permits us to understand why Michelangelo might legitimately have claimed, "architecture is not my profession."

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