Michelangelo's Piazza del Campidoglio

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The view at sunrise over central Rome from the Piazza del Campidoglio atop Capitoline Hill (Bruno/flickr).

The influence of Michelangelo, one of history's most famous artists, is celebrated in Rome and the Vatican where some of his most important artwork resides. Atop the smallest of The Eternal City's famed Seven Hills, his influence presents itself alongside evidence of ancient cultures and mythology. Religious and art historians document important archeological finds at the site predating the Etruscan Civilization.

According to ancient sources, Capitoline Hill, with the piazza redesigned by Michelangelo during the *Quattrocento* (the fifteenth century), derives its name from the builders of the fifth century BCE Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus who discovered an intact human head while building this temple. The term *caput* (Latin for "head" or "top") was assigned to the site, becoming Capitoline Hill, which remains a designation for governance and civic pride. Over the millennia, the site became an important repository of ancient mythological statues, as well as monuments to political figures, telling the history of changing regimes, civic opinions, and religion. The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius currently centered in the piazza is a replica that replaced the original, now housed in the Capitoline Museum. Originally in the Apostolic Palace of the Lateran, a former residence of popes, the statue was utilized by ancient Romans as a symbol of justice. The "Philosopher Emperor" Marcus Aurelius was a proponent of Stoicism. His collection of writings, *Meditations*, is considered one of the world's greatest philosophical works, with the emphasis on virtue as the essence of happiness. Originally placed on a marble

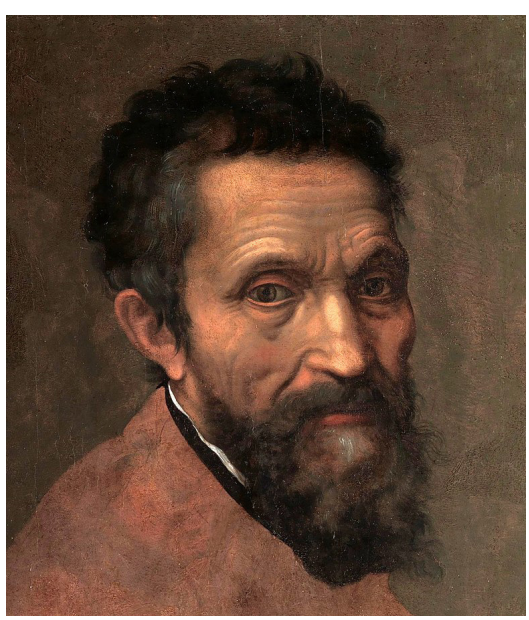
slab, subsequent work on the base of the statue was completed by Michelangelo, who created the graceful commemorative pedestal.

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni

Born into the High Renaissance and having lost his mother at age six, Michelangelo was taught and influenced by the luminaries of the day. As a child he was less interested in school, and while later ruing his ignorance of Latin, he would instead observe artists painting church frescos. He was apprenticed by his father for three years to a leading painter in Florence, but he left after two and joined the artists taking residence in the Medici Gardens. Lorenzo de' Medici, designated "The Magnificent" for his civic and artistic patronage, was so enamored by the work of the precocious thirteen-year-old that Michelangelo was invited into the family household. The Medici Gardens were a Renaissance center for art and Neoplatonic philosophy, but also the fiery preaching of the fanatical Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola whose puritanical views would set the stage for Michelangelo's later religious crises.

Marsilio Ficino, a Renaissance Man, was no stranger to either the Medici Gardens or Michelangelo. Over the decades, Ficino expounded his Neoplatonic philosophy, spiritual understanding, and medicinal concepts. Ficino's influence continued at the villa at Careggi given him by his patron Cosimo de' Medici, thereby establishing the Platonic Academy of Florence. Lesser known is Ficino's interpretation of the stars and planets, and that his villa was decorated with astrological symbols. At this location, Michelangelo was further influenced beyond traditional Christianity.

The clash between traditional, Church-enforced religiosity and his reflective nature was thematic of the existential, spiritual crises that enveloped Michelangelo's spirit throughout his lifetime. His deep religiosity was expressed in his famous paintings and statuary, many of which can be found in Rome. Less prominent are his architectural works such as the Piazza del Campidoglio, and least familiar would be his poetry. His poetry collection *Rime* (*Rhymes*) provides a view into the artist's soul for the interpretation of his work. Within the collection are found Michelangelo's most intimate thoughts, conflicts, and muses, contemporary with his works of art.



Michelangelo *by Daniele da Volterra (1544).*

Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara

Vittoria Colonna, herself a Renaissance Woman, deepened Michelangelo's conflicted religiosity through her close relationship with him and her embrace of Luther's *sola fide* (justification by faith alone). Highly unusual for the social order of her time, Colonna was a celebrated

poet who was able to circulate in the highest social circles due to her role as a pious and chaste widow. Her spirituality also necessitated balancing religious and spiritual trends, so that while living in convents and familiar with the popes, she was also deeply involved in the belief that faith was more central to salvation than Church doctrine. A great Platonic friendship and spiritual affinity grew with Michelangelo, so much so that they each dedicated entire books of sonnets and *rime* to each other.

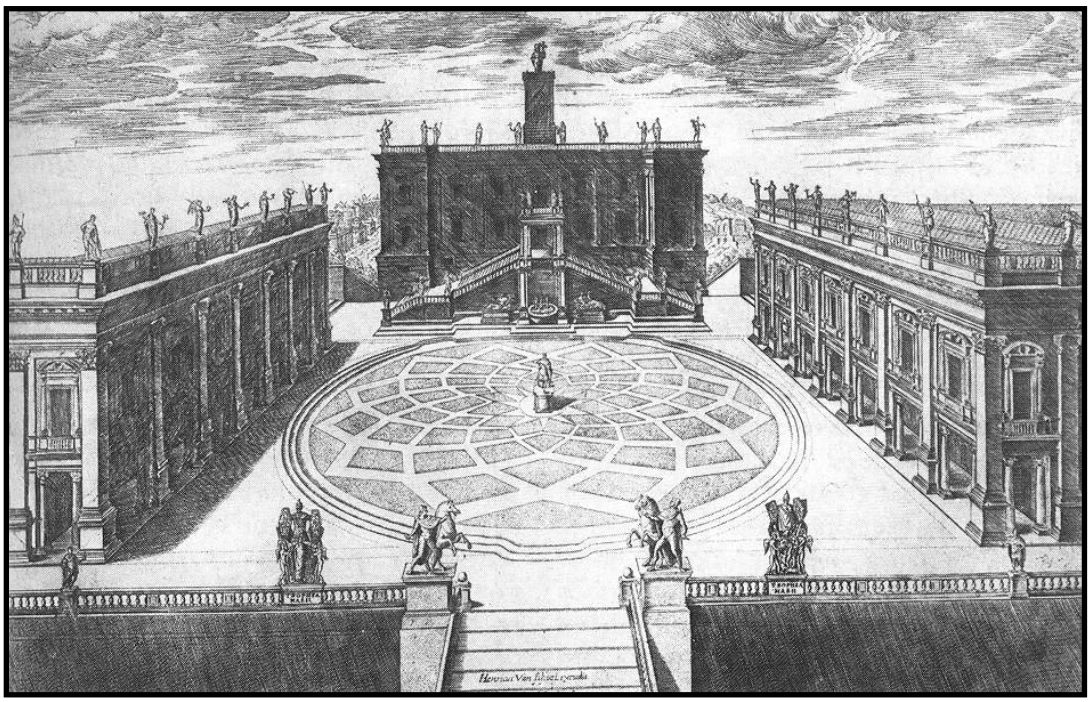
Vittoria Colonna *by Sebastiano del Piombo (1525).*

Torn in spiritual allegiance, persevering in the quest for salvation, some biographers describe Michelangelo as a tortured soul, searching for divine perfection. His art so closely mirrors human expression that his statuary has been described as superior to the human body itself. His renowned *David* and the Vatican *Pieta* evoke sensuality, ardent emotion, and inspired spirituality. Such work can be viewed as the expression of true imagination, of spiritual yearning, and also, at least at times, the felt distance from Divine Unity. His own poignant analogy was that the work of the sculptor frees the object from its stone entombment, just as the soul struggles to free itself from the material world.

Michelangelo's Awakening Slave.

The Piazza and Michelangelo's Original Design

Modern tourists flock to Capitoline Hill marveling at the grandeur of the ancient statuary and Michelangelo's architecture, perhaps learning something of ancient Roman mythology at this anointed site. Central in the piazza is Michelangelo's pavement design, with its twelve points and the curvilinear lines resulting in the center circle, which can indeed be interpreted as astrological or zodiacal signs as taught by Ficino. The design was not placed there until the 1940s because the popes viewed it as a non-Christian symbol. Religiously however, the number twelve also signifies the Christian apostles, the Buddhist Twelve Links of Dependent Arising, the twelve successors



A 1568 engraving by Étienne Dupérac shows Michelangelo's design for the Capitoline Hill in Rome.

to Muhammad the Prophet, and the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Symbolically, and similar in design, is the Flower of Life, as seen in the rose windows in Chartres Cathedral, with twelve signifying completion, especially when surrounded by the sanctifying aureole, mandorla, or vesica.

At age fifty-seven, having experienced trials related to spiritual attainment, Michelangelo wrote: "My death is what I live on; seems to me I thrive, and happily, on unhappiness, on death and anguish—if you live on less come join me in fire's mortal ecstasy." And again, with Stoic sentiment: "Just as a flame, by wind and weather flailed, flares up, so every virtue prized by heaven is more resplendent, being more assailed…"

The significance of Michelangelo's art can be illuminated by the perspective of a mystical initiate. From above,[1] the piazza design becomes that of rose petals, the symbol of the unfolding Soul, a concept dear to Michelangelo's art, and indeed, his life's work. Meditating on the symbol, one can imagine a fountain of peace and contentment, of virtuous love as portrayed in Michelangelo's *Rime*. Such interpretations are made not only through artistic intention, but also by the individual mystic and from the wellspring of their own divine subconscious.

Endnote

[1]https://tinyurl.com/y8zxyay5 (Google Earth view, retrieved 08/23/18).

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