

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Wallace, William E. Michelangelo, God's Architect: The Story of His Final Years and Greatest Masterpiece

Sally Hickson

Volume 43, Number 2, Spring 2020

Transformative Translations in Early Modern Britain and France
Traductions transformatives dans la première modernité française et britannique

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072231ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i2.34870>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

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Cite this review

Hickson, S. (2020). Review of [Wallace, William E. Michelangelo, God's Architect: The Story of His Final Years and Greatest Masterpiece]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(2), 419–420.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i2.34870>

Wallace, William E.

Michelangelo, God's Architect: The Story of His Final Years and Greatest Masterpiece.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xi, 277 + 57 colour plates, 31 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-691-19549-0 (hardcover) US\$29.95.

It is a well-known fact that architects continue to practise well after most people are compelled to retire: Frank Gehry is still designing buildings at 91; Oscar Niemeyer won the Pritzker Prize at 81; I. M. Pei died at 102. Architects are principally thinkers, and thinking benefits from time and experience. It is appropriate, then, that William Wallace wrote this book after nearly forty years of thinking and writing about Michelangelo. The subtitle, *God's Architect*, refers to the last great project of Michelangelo's life, from 1547 (when he was 71) to his death in 1564, the completion of the church of St. Peter's in Rome.

When Pope Paul III asked Michelangelo to take over the project, the artist demurred on the basis that he was not an architect. He had made the same kind of argument forty years before when Julius II had asked him to paint the Sistine ceiling; he insisted he wasn't a painter. For Michelangelo, though, architecture and sculpture were kindred arts. Nor was it entirely true that he wasn't an architect; he had already designed the wonderful, undulating waterfall staircase in the vestibule of the Laurentian Library in Florence, and even though he struggled with and never completed his design for the façade of the adjacent church of San Lorenzo, his drawings demonstrate that his proposed pairing of classical columns was a total reinvention of the use of classical ornament. (Wallace wrote an important book about this project: *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, 1994.) This paired column articulation was the idea that he brought to the exterior and dome of St Peter's. As Wallace points out, it was an innovation for which Michelangelo has received relatively little recognition (206–12).

In his final decades, he kept busy with an astonishing array of other projects. He completed the powerful, glowering Moses for the tomb of Julius II and saw it installed in San Pietro in Vincoli; he carved two other Pietà statues and painted the Pauline Chapel in the Vatican. His work on St. Peter's, however, was the constant provocation and preoccupation of his old age. The church was already forty years in the making when Michelangelo took over, so there was enough of the fabric completed to speak to earlier mistakes and future

possibilities. For example, he discovered that the huge crossing, designed and built decades before by the architect Donato Bramante, would never support the planned dome, so the piers had to be substantially enlarged. Other supporting walls, also too insubstantial, had to be torn down and built again. He wrangled with engineers who could not understand his vision; he exhausted himself with on-site visits.

All of this comes dramatically alive in Wallace's telling. Using a writing style Orlofsky dubbed "historiografiction" (5), Wallace recreates the daily routines, thoughts, and activities of the artist's life in Rome. Some might argue against this kind of narrated history: After all, how do we know it rained? How do we know Michelangelo ate so many herring? But the events and the details of Michelangelo's thoughts are drawn from his extensive letters, poems, and correspondences, the jottings on his drawings, his grocery lists, and the letters and eye-witness reports of his contemporaries, from his nephew Lionardo in Florence to the ubiquitous Giorgio Vasari. Wallace's mastery of the Michelangelo archive fuels the literary approach to history here. There are occasional lacunae for the reader: in 1556, Michelangelo enjoyed a five-week visit to the monastery of Montelucio, with plans to travel to Loreto, but after his trip is cut short by a summons back to Rome, we never learn why he was recalled (168).

"Michelangelo lived with Moses," Wallace writes; "the two grew old together" (9). There is something captivating and poignant about such a simple and yet profound observation. The narrative thrust, and the ease and clarity of Wallace's writing, make this rich, insightful analysis of Michelangelo's old age accessible to a broad audience of readers, as do the generous illustrations. Other specialists will understand that Wallace's insights could only be gained by living with Michelangelo, as Michelangelo lived with Moses, for many years.

When death came, it found Michelangelo still working. In February of 1564, he died in Rome in the small house in which he had lived frugally, cared for by servants. He outlived many popes: thirteen in his lifetime, nine of whom he worked for. And while St. Peter's remained unfinished at the time of his death, he had impressed upon the fabric enough of his vision that it would be completed largely to his design.

SALLY HICKSON

University of Guelph