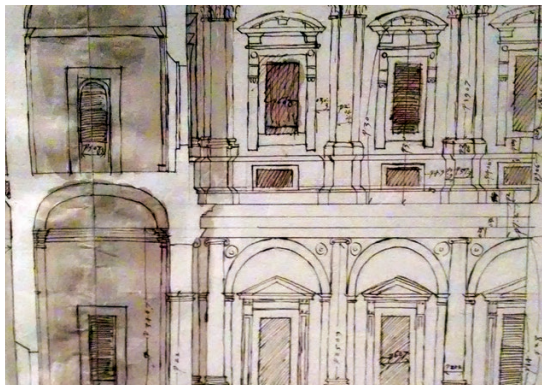


BY MARK LUZIO



Above left is Michelangelo's sketch for the facade of Palazzo Farnese in Rome. At right is a detail for a gate in the Aurelian walls; according to Vasari, Michelangelo provided five drawings for the job, and the client, Pope Pius IV, chose the least expensive option.

II Divino General Contractor

Most know Michelangelo as a master of the sculptor's chisel and mallet and as an incredible painter. But as a recent show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City, confirmed, he was also a brilliant draftsman. Working out architectural details—including doorway columns, entablatures, window trim, stairways, balustrades, and even whole structures—was essential to his work. These elements were the backdrop for his sculptures and ground for his paintings. The Met show revealed how much time and energy he spent on the design of structures, and for this, he is often remembered as an architect, too. But the show revealed to me that he was more than this; he was also the general contractor.

Sculptors and painters in Michelangelo's day received a lump-sum deposit and progress payments from their wealthy patrons. In surviving letters, we hear the artist pleading with one of his most important clients, Pope Julius II, for long overdue payments. The needed cash was not just for himself; he also had commitments to his subs.

The contract for the painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling included language that made him responsible for the design of an elaborate suspended scaffold, which would allow Mass to be held during the years 1508 to 1512. And in the daily work of painting one of the most famous frescoes in the history of art, he was responsible for defining each day's work, or "giornata"—the amount of painting a master (GC) thought he could complete in one day. Total dry time for the plaster would be about 12 hours. The plasterers would take roughly three hours to skim coat an area, leaving him just eight hours to paint before the plaster cured and would no longer absorb pigment. If he and his assistants could not complete the entire area that had been set out for the day, the remaining plaster had to be scraped off and reapplied the next day. It's amazing to think there

was a day when Michelangelo had just eight hours to complete one entire figure from the central scene, "The Creation of Adam!"

I heard about the exhibition from a GC with whom I'd worked for some 25 years, and so he was top of mind as I walked the show. Many of the drawings were sketches of moldings, and I imagined they were probably made to help other tradesmen understand his vision of the finished work. It reminded me of the hours I have spent sketching ideas and possible solutions to trim details. I do this frequently with my neighbor, Jed Dixon, who many *JLC* readers know as a stair builder and contributor to *JLC* and *JLC Live*. None of our drawings ever included a muscular Christ-figure in a classical door opening; that part is way beyond our artistic abilities. But there were many sketches in the show that reminded me of jobs I've worked on.

Many of the drawings at the Met can be seen in *Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture*, by Cammy Brothers. And if you like to read, I highly recommend Ross King's *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*. Two other books by Ross King, one on Brunelleschi's dome and the other on Leonardo da Vinci, are also great reads for building contractors. You'll appreciate how far and not so far we've all come.

Walking out of the show, I couldn't help but imagine Michelangelo rolling up to a jobsite in a 1972 short-bed Chevy C-10, on his cell-phone pleading with a sub who is making a lame excuse for not showing up. For Brunelleschi? Probably a 1949 Ford F3 with a flat-head V-8. And for Leonardo, I am thinking 1970 El Camino SS. Why not? Frank Lloyd Wright, who owned 85 cars and trucks from 1900 to 1959, said "an idea is salvation through imagination." The idea becomes a drawing that we build.

Mark Luzio owns Post Pattern Woodworking, in Brooklyn, Conn.

Photos: Clayton DeKorne, with permission of Metropolitan Museum of Art