

# The Art of War

## Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina*, Machiavelli, and the Florentine Militia Movement

Christopher Pastore

*University of Pennsylvania*

In 1504 Michelangelo received a commission for a companion piece to Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* for the Florentine *Sala dei Cinquecento*. Two studies remind us that it was intended to be a battle painting and that Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* refined what was a twisted tale from the day before the meeting and defeat of the Pisan army in 1364. At first glance, the incident would appear to have been an unusual choice for a republican government concerned with Florentine military prowess and self-reliance, because the scene recounted a day off before a confrontation with the Pisan army. Indeed, the moment Michelangelo was directed to paint reminded viewers that their troops had so little concern for their safety that they were in the midst of a leisurely, cooling bath in the Arno. Their respite was rudely interrupted by the arrival of a breathless lieutenant who startled the troops with shouts of "They are coming! They are coming!" The confused and wet army sprang into action and engaged in a furious struggle to arm themselves for the onslaught of Pisan troops. Of course the officer's cry was only a test of the readiness of the Florentine force. This amusing prologue to a great success appealed to the Florentine government and Machiavelli, secretary to the republican leadership at the time, as a symbol of the ability of a Florentine army to spring literally from daily ablutions into armed combat.<sup>1</sup> More to the point of this essay,

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<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli's agenda during the Second Florentine Republic has been studied by scholars such as Hulliung and Gilbert. The conventional wisdom developed by studies of Machiavelli's writings and supplemented by Gilbert's translation and commentary on the *Arte della Guerra* suggests that the author and secretary for the Great Council hoped to lessen Florentine reliance on mercenary or foreign troops (Allan Gilbert,

Michelangelo's representation of this group of men provided a golden opportunity to create an image of Machiavelli's recently proposed citizen militia. Men springing wet from the river Arno to serve and sacrifice for Florence and the Republic.

The exact date of Machiavelli's first proposal for a citizen militia remains open to debate; however, the appearance of a militia in the last years of the first decade of the Cinquecento indicates that the provision for a citizen force had been considered by the Signoria at the Secretary's behest at some point prior to the institution of a selection process. In general, Machiavelli's later writing on the nature of a republic and its military institutions has been taken as proof of his instrumental role in the aborted attempt to establish a loyal standing army.<sup>2</sup> According to Bayley, there existed a history of support in Florence for a local force dedicated to the service of the city-state in the Quattrocento. Moreover, Bayley identifies Machiavelli as the chief proponent of a militia that had already been spawned by Domenico Cecchi in the wake of Savonarola's charge of civic and moral reform.<sup>3</sup> In any event, contemporaries and colleagues of Machiavelli, such as army commissioner and member of the Dieci di Balìa, Antonio Giacomini, frequently made their disapproval of mercenary troops a matter of grave public concern. Giacomini, "an austere republican who had suffered exile during the Medici regime," made no bones about his "profoundest uneasiness over the insolence, ill-discipline, and ineffectiveness of the *condottieri* employed against Pisa."<sup>4</sup>

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*Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, Volume 2 (Durham: Duke, 1965) p. 563). This essay and my reconstruction follows the lead of earlier scholarship but focuses more attention on the valuable insight regarding mercenary and militia forces and the highly-regarded pike infantry discussed in the dialogue written by Machiavelli as a prototype for the new citizen militia. See Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Additional research into Signoria proceedings would be helpful in presenting a clear picture of the genesis of the militia and the possible contemporary commission of Michelangelo for an inspirational image of this type of Florentine army in action.

<sup>3</sup> "Projects of a systematic overhauling of the militia were, therefore, already in the air when Machiavelli...was elected as Second Chancellor on 19 June 1498." Charles Calvert Bayley, *War and Society in Renaissance Florence: The De Militia of Leonardo Bruni* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 239.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

The battle scenes commissioned for the new council hall of the Florentine Republic in 1504 have been the subject of much debate amongst art historians, including Cecil Gould and Claire Farago, perhaps because neither painting was ever completed.<sup>5</sup> Leonardo's experimental cavalry clash was handcuffed from the outset by his failure to follow traditional *bottega* practice for painting on walls, and his image was completely obliterated in the 1530s when Giorgio Vasari renovated and redecorated the Salone for his Medici masters. As a result, both da Vinci's *Battle of Anghiari* and Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* are known only from a few autograph drawings, copies, and studies made by the artists. Furthermore, the copies have further muddied the picture because in every case they reproduce figure groups rather than the entire composition. This paper wishes to resurrect Michelangelo's lost battle painting through an analysis of the surviving images of his figure studies, one in particular that is routinely called "the bathers," and, in the process, recast the heroic nudes as stalwart members of a Florentine citizen militia.<sup>6</sup>

I believe that scholars such as Howard Hibbard have erred in cataloguing Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* as another example of

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<sup>5</sup> Among the more prominent analyses of the Republican commissions are: Cecil Gould, "Leonardo's Great Battle-Piece A Conjectural Reconstruction," *The Art Bulletin* (36, 1954) pp. 117–129; Claire Farago, "Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari*: A Study in the Exchange between Theory and Practice," *The Art Bulletin* (76, 2, June 1994) pp. 301–330; Günther Neufeld, "Leonardo da Vinci's *Battle of Anghiari*: A Genetic Reconstruction," *The Art Bulletin* (31, September 1949) pp. 170–183.

<sup>6</sup> Bayley's *War and Society in Renaissance Florence* and Mallet and Hale's *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State: Venice c. 1400 to 1617* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) present two arguments about the failure of Italian city-states to balance their budgets and control military spending during the early modern period. The redirection of tax monies to the elite financiers of mercenary warfare in Renaissance Italy represents the entrenchment of personal fiscal matters in the management of any republican enterprise. Machiavelli's distrust of mercenary troops may, therefore, be in part a response to the failure of the Florentine leadership to assess their position in the peninsula correctly and pay more attention to the consolidation of a Tuscan state than to their own fortunes. Such fiscal manipulation is noted by Guicciardi, who indicates that Florence had to increase taxes to reimburse the Medici bank for a loan required by Lorenzo de' Medici's mismanagement of a Florentine campaign in 1478.

his monumental figure style and his obsession with the male nude.<sup>7</sup> This error was the result of the regular use of Michelangelo's early study (Figure 1) and later copies such as the well-known grisaille image produced by Bastiano da Sangallo of the lost cartoon (Figure 2) as historians attempted to piece together a fresco that never was.

To give credit where it is due, these images do focus attention solely on the extraordinary figure style of the master. However, it is apparent that Michelangelo was much more than a figure painter. In this essay, I will consider and develop a vision of the collaboration between two brilliant Florentines: Michelangelo and Machiavelli, which produced effective and seductive propaganda.<sup>8</sup> Following Machiavelli's lead, Michelangelo composed his *Battle of Cascina* as a monumental historical narrative that was always intended to be much more than the figure group known to posterity. This resurrected image shows Michelangelo's direct and admirable grasp of Alberti's concept of *istoria* and gives back to the artist something his admirers and students garbled and subsequently lost.

As the secretary for the Signoria during the commission and early days of the design process, Machiavelli had a perfect opportunity to draft Michelangelo for the public introduction of his ground-breaking concept of a citizen militia. Under the aegis of Signoria propaganda that was superficially aimed at a ruling class replete with ex-clients of the Medici, the *Battle of Cascina* came before a Republican audience as a powerful psychological narrative implicit with the anxiety of warfare yet infused with the siren song of patriotic citizen militia service. The composition of the *Battle of Cascina* benefited from the artist's close proximity to and appropriation from other artists and other images. First, the rival genius—Leonardo da Vinci—was working alongside Michelangelo in the new Council Hall. Second, Uccello's three-panel *Battle of San Romano* remained visible in the Palazzo Medici, home of Michelangelo's first major patrons. Third, Ghirlandajo's frescoes in

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> Johannes Wilde noted the potential propagandistic value of the pendant commissions during the tense years of the early 1500s. "The Hall of the Great Council of Florence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (7, 1944) reprinted in Creighton Gilbert, *Renaissance Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 127.

the *Sala degli Gigli* provided an eloquent summary and veritable catalogue of ancient Roman virtue right next door.

Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (Figure 3)—now distributed as separate panels in the Uffizzi, the Louvre, and the National Gallery but originally together in the Palazzo Medici—was acquired by Piero de Medici around 1450.<sup>9</sup> Just as Medici objects found their way into Republican hands after the tumultuous transfer of power in 1494, so were ideas contained in their most prized possessions suborned to serve new masters in their efforts to legitimize Republican institutions.<sup>10</sup> In the *Battle of San Romano*, Uccello had characterized the massing of the forces, the clash of arms, and the passing of the defeated and their standard.<sup>11</sup> Looking closer, he had also married an exposition of three-dimensional space with a catalogue of battlefield technology and activity. Lances thrust to the sky, reach across the battlefield, shatter against shields, force men out of the saddle, and litter the terrain.<sup>12</sup> The almost abstract perspectival checkerboard of dead

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<sup>9</sup> The location of Uccello's three large panels in the new Medici palace on the via Larga is not firmly established, but Gebhardt has identified a potential wall in the private apartments on the piano nobile that would have allowed Lorenzo to display them together as a triptych.

<sup>10</sup> The physical appropriation of Medici property in the service of the Republic was made more palatable, perhaps, by the failure of Piero de' Medici to appreciate the delicate balancing act performed by his father and grandfather in Florentine politics. Matthew Looper's study of the Medici Palace garden iconography explains the sensitive use of visual propaganda by the earlier Medici in their efforts to quell disquiet engendered by the increasing influence of the Medici patriarch (see Matthew G. Looper, "Political Messages in the Medici Palace Garden," *Journal of Garden History* [12: 14, 1992], pp. 255-268). The quite revealing history of Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* as a Medici and a Republican symbol discussed by Looper and Sarah Blake McHam offers a fascinating account of the process through which a commissioned work takes on new meanings (see Sarah Blake McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith* as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence," *Art Bulletin* [83:1, March 2001]).

<sup>11</sup> The events of 1 June 1432 recorded by Uccello are given crisply and with little contextual analysis by John Pope-Hennessy, *Paolo Uccello: The Rout of San Romano* (London: Percy, Lund, Humphries, 1944), p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> It has been brought to the author's attention that the orientation of this argument around the subtle redress of the lance and the pike made a reader connect with the *Alexander Mosaic* from the Pompeian House of the Faun. The forest of spears in the Roman account of the Macedonian

men and broken lances articulated a beautifully-defined, geometric landscape, creating for his viewer a coherent Quattrocento space sagging under the weight of armored mercenary cavalry.

The intellectual Leonardo must have been aware of this Medici image after he accepted the Republican commission around 1503 or 1504. The decoration of the new council chamber focused attention on victories won by the Florentine people against both their traditional non-Florentine enemies as well as those who would dare to conspire against popular and legitimate governance. The *Battle of Anghiari* sent a message to any Florentines interested in an alliance with other powers or the favor of exiled Florentines. The message was not subtle: defeat at the hands of the people of Florence. Leonardo's composition exposes his efforts to replace Uccello's *San Romano* in the vanguard of warfare imagery.

Several copies of Leonardo's lost painting—among them Rubens' pen and ink *Battle for the Standard* (Figure 4)—have preserved the latest phase of Leonardo's swirling central passage. Leonardo guides us to his climax with a deliberate placement of diagonal lances and swords that at first break up the simple harmony of his triangular composition but that eventually draw our eyes toward the denouement. Leonardo's attempt to make the weapons of the combatants his tools in the organization of the picture plane recalls the elegant composition of Uccello's *San Romano* cycle. Claire Farago (1994) and Barbara Hochstetler Meyer (1984) restrict their analyses of da Vinci's image to a survey of his preparatory drawings and other images of conflict. This author believes, however, that these astute efforts to identify sources for the painting only in Leonardo's corpus of drawings unnecessarily restricts the field. Furthermore, the artist's decision to create an image that responded to a variety of images and accounts of cavalry warfare, including the *Battle of San Romano*, would have forced viewers of the painting to draw stylistic comparisons and, at the same time, inspire them to consider the history of the images themselves, a process that would underscore the vast difference between the current republican administration

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conquest of the Persian army certainly exhibits a sense of the availability of weaponry as a tool in the presentation of a more compelling narrative. However, the Pompeiian mosaics were not visible in the Sixteenth Century and, thus, Uccello's use of weapons to direct our eyes remains for this author an innovation that served him well in the creation of a convincing three-dimensional space for his historical narrative.

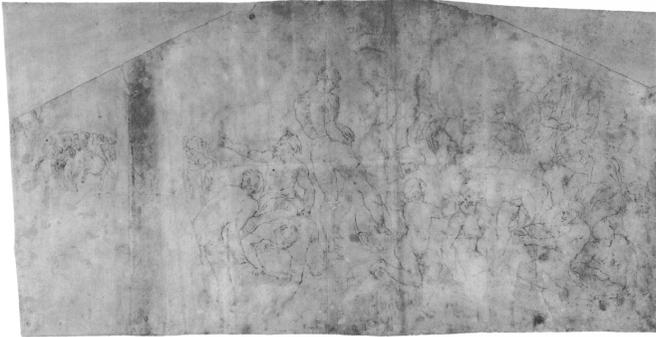


Figure 1. Anonymous study after Michelangelo *Battle of Cascina*, c. 1570, pen and ink over red chalk, British Museum, London, UK (1946,0713.593).

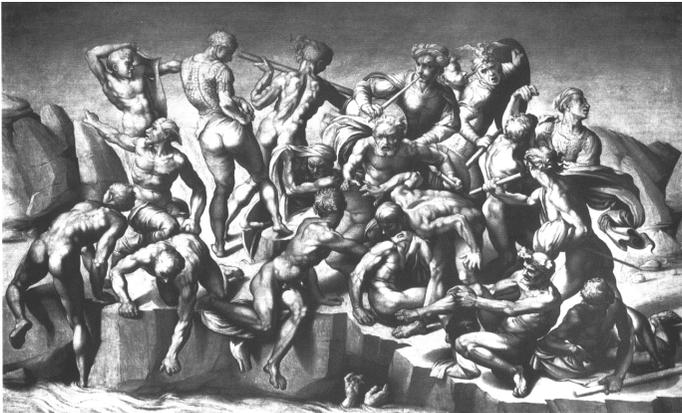


Figure 2. *Bastiano da Sangallo, Battle of Cascina*, c. 1540, grisaille on panel, Holkham Hall, Norfolk, UK.



Figure 3. Paolo Uccello, *Battle of San Romano*, c. 1450, tempera and oil on panel, National Gallery, UK (Acc. n 4577).



Figure 4. Peter Paul Rubens, Study after Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari*, c. 1603, Louvre Museum, Paris, France, Département des Arts Graphiques (NV 20271).



Figure 5. Michelangelo, *Two Studies: Detail of Horseman (after Leonardo?)* c. 1504, pen and brown ink, British Museum, London, UK (1895,0915.496).

and the de facto principate of the Medici. Thus, one must look at the composition devised by Leonardo as an answer to Uccello. In turn, viewers would likely agree that Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* easily outpaced Uccello's rather restrained representation of the meeting of the Florentine and Sienese armies. How does Leonardo meet the challenge of Uccello's grand vision of mounted warfare? By adopting Uccello's device, Leonardo declared his entry into the Florentine battle painting hierarchy. His extravagant use of these same weapons heightens the atmosphere of high drama that makes warfare and its historical retelling both titillating and satisfying. Leonardo has recognized Uccello's use of the cavalry lance as both the instrument for temporal and physical movement and the connective tissue of a serial engagement between two armies. In Leonardo's hands the lances of Uccello's cavalry become both the weapons of the Florentine combatants and the standard of the Florentine army holding the Bridge at Anghiari.<sup>13</sup> The *Battle of Anghiari* glorifies the crush of beasts and men, the twists and turns of mounted and unmounted struggles, and the harsh reality of cold steel and yielding flesh. The figures move us here and there, now to the left and back against the typical grain of left-to-right reading so essential in the temporal narrative; now to the right as the grimacing central figure at the top of this figure group singularly voices the hysteria and hatred of armed conflict; now to the left again as the writhing men on the ground take care of their grisly tasks, dispatching desperate foes.

During the height of the mercenary period in Italy, Florentine representatives were positioned as supervisors and liaisons to the captain-general or *condottiero*. However, accounts of Florentine battles emphasize the rarity of the personal involvement of such figures in the combat itself. The republic's *popolo grosso* or leading

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<sup>13</sup> The author's presentation of the events of Anghiari is a composite of Leonardo's *Notes on the Battle of Anghiari* (p. 669) included in the writings on painting and the interpretive commentaries of Brucker and Bayley. See Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). In Leonardo's Notebook, the emphasis on the important role played by Michelotto Anelotto at Anghiari, apparently not in the artist's distinctive hand, relates this image with Uccello's cycle as Anelotto appeared in the cavalry defeat of Niccolo Piccinino as a member of the Florentine mercenary army. Anelotto's service in both campaigns may have influenced Leonardo's decision to make his battle painting respond to Uccello's earlier vision of a cavalry engagement.

lights served within the administration of the state in a continually evolving system of rotating appointments. This oligarchy did not generally arm itself in the defense of the city state, and the few notable exceptions to this rule feature Florentines functioning as *ad hoc* commanders of mercenary troops rather than commissioned officers in a Florentine army. A fine example of the different priorities of the Florentine ruling elite surfaces in Guicciardini's eulogy of Lorenzo de' Medici: "We shall not read in his case of the brilliant defense of a city, the memorable taking of a stronghold, a stratagem in battle or a victory over the enemy. The story of his deeds does not shine with the glitter of arms." Machiavelli and the new Republican government clearly disdained the example of the exiled Medici, and the development of a self-reliant Florentine military became an important part of Machiavelli's vision of a quite different Florence.

Machiavelli's *Art of War* presented the conditions for the successful implementation of republican rule and the inevitable extension from polity to empire when a republic paid close attention to the model of ancient Rome. Of course, the work was retrospective as written in the 1520s during Machiavelli's exile. Thus, the dialogue looks back on the failure of the Florentine Republic and its militia at Prato in 1509, so it is wise to be wary of a complete parallel between the text and the commissions of 1504. The "abortions" of Venice, Ferrara, and Florence do not themselves, however, deny that his Roman model provides a good recipe. Book 1 of the *Arte della Guerra* made full use of recent events to counter arguments against the cost and benefit of a standing, citizen army. Once this institution was firmly established as the physical arm of the legislature, the path became clear for the city-state to defend itself and slowly expand its sphere of influence over those states that failed to marshal their own loyal citizens. In his *Citizen Machiavelli*, Mark Hulliung responds to the recent trend to separate Machiavelli's actual politics from the more questionable ethical positions taken in *The Prince* and *The Art of War*. Hulliung's first chapter sets the reader straight regarding the differences between modern republics and the Roman version that so attracted the Florentine theorist. Furthermore, Hulliung's analysis of Macchiavelli's thought suggests that the pragmatic civil servant's later writings overstate theoretical positions that he had earlier channeled into the creation of a place for a citizen militia in the republican milieu of 1504.

Michelangelo received the commission for the companion piece on the other half of the wall bearing Leonardo's *Anghiari* triumph. His subject was a confrontation in the earlier war between Florence and Pisa that eventually resulted in the Florentine capture of the city. During the Second Republic, Cascina, according to Luca Landucci, was a base of operations and marshaling point for the decade-long Florentine effort to recapture the recalcitrant and redoubtable Pisa. According to Guicciardini, the Florentine preoccupation with Pisa was its necessary incorporation into a Tuscan state as a major port city at the mouth of the Arno. In fact, one Florentine diplomat rejected efforts to end the long campaign against Pisa, claiming that peace without Pisa was of no interest to the Florentines. As I noted in the introduction, the scene chosen from the history of the war with Pisa appears ill-suited for the exceedingly self-conscious Florentines to have selected for such an important statement. What is fascinating is the manner in which the anecdote became a key moment in the conflict and an opportunity for artist and patron. Unlike Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari*, Michelangelo's commission did not charge him with the painting of a heroic struggle for Florentine honor. Rather, he was given a chance to present Florentines, and other visitors to the new Council Hall, with an image of the transformation of men in the service of Florence into the military arm of the republic, a fighting force to be reckoned with by the city's innumerable enemies, such as the exiled Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici and his patron Pope Julius II.

In his idiosyncratic description of the worrisome situation in which his Florentines had found themselves some years earlier, Michelangelo looked to his right, to his past, and to his patron. The study dated to 1504 (Figure 5) has been described as a drawing "after Leonardo" because it recalls the plethora of crushing cavalry encounters drawn by Leonardo in preparation for his neighboring painting.<sup>14</sup> It is possible that this drawing was a study by Michelangelo of Leonardo's work in progress, a painting that focused on the old-fashioned warfare of armored mercenaries. Although this is a quite acceptable supposition, the failure in the visual record to offer us any examples of scenes from Leonardo's battle painting that approximate Michelangelo's study suggests that such arguments are made in error. Although the Sangallo copy

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<sup>14</sup> Hibbard, p. 79.

and other reproductions by Raimondi and Lucas van Leyden do not include mounted warriors, several other later works suggest that Michelangelo's cartoon included at least one group of mounted warriors.

Two studies for large-scale frescoes of a completely different nature than the Council Hall's battle paintings have recently come to my attention as works based, at least in part, on Michelangelo's dramatic cartoon. The images, by Perino del Vaga and Jacopo Pontormo (Figures 6 and 7), of the *Martyrdom of the 10,000* clearly hold very different ideological ground, but their incorporation of figures and figure groupings borrowed from Michelangelo require us to look more closely at these drawings. In both cases we can easily accept later claims that Perino and Pontormo had been exposed to the surviving cartoon of the *Battle of Cascina*. A number of the vigorous male nudes and their robust and dynamic forms are certainly responses to the powerful paradigm established by Michelangelo. Further in the middle ground of each composition, however, there is a passage that reveals the influence of Michelangelo and, more importantly, the likelihood that his completed cartoon flanked his complex knot of figures with rapidly closing troops of mounted Pisans. Indeed another copy after Michelangelo does just that in the upper left quadrant where we can clearly make out a gathering force of cavalymen who must shortly endanger the lives of the brave Florentine force.

Although a discussion of the presence of cavalry and their location in the larger composition seems to take us off track, it might be wise to remember that I am looking at this image as a propaganda piece and a statement about the future of the Florentine Republic. If we can see Michelangelo's central figure group as the kernel of a citizen militia trained to fight in a hybrid of Roman and Swiss infantry tactics, then the inclusion of a mounted enemy helps drive home the point that this home-grown army will be able to stand its ground and hand Florence victories in the future as they had in 1364. What we must also recognize is the fact that Michelangelo's intense and rapid sketch pays homage to the climax of the *Battle of San Romano*, Uccello's central scene, and reminds us that this cycle was known by and would interest Michelangelo as a Florentine and one-time Medici protégé.

As the primary polemical gestures of the ill-fated Second Republic, the battle scenes begun for the Council Hall promoted republican virtue, assaulted the Medici memory, and acknowledged the Florentine artistic heritage. In their work for the Signoria,



Figure 6. *Giorgio Vasari after Perino del Vaga Death of the 10,000 Martyrs*, c. 1525, pen and ink, Harvard Art Museum, Boston (1932.265).

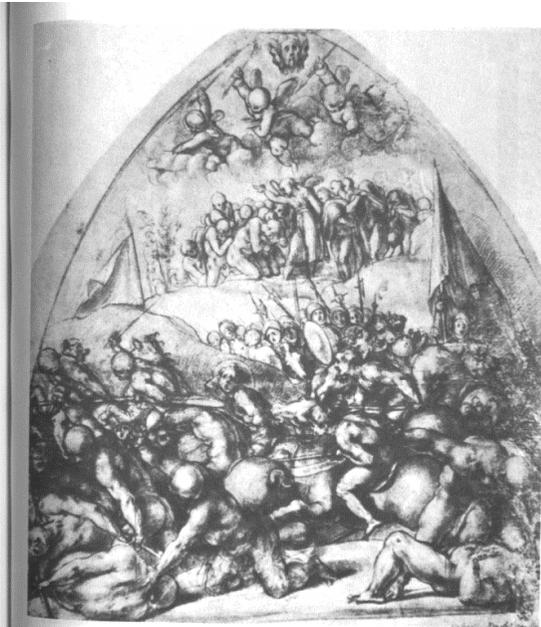


Figure 7. *Compositional Study for a lunette with Victory & Baptism of the 10,000 Martyrs*, c. 1529, red chalk, Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany (n. 21253).

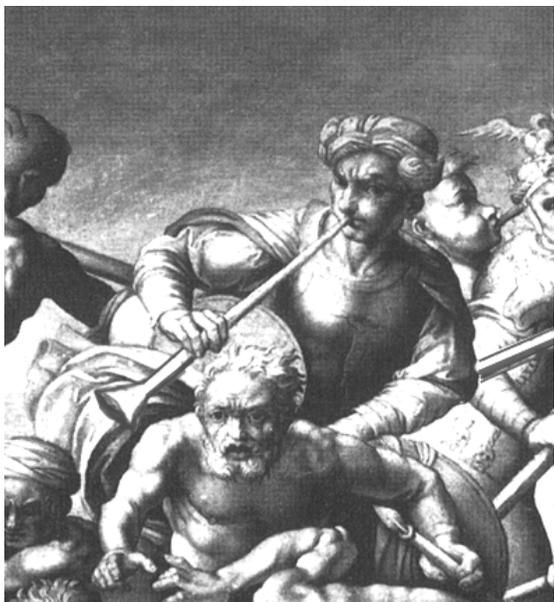


Figure 8. Horn blower, *Battle of Cascina*, detail from Sangallo edited by author to add horn.



Figure 9. Pikemen, *Battle of Cascina*, detail from Sangallo edited by author to add pike heads.

Leonardo and Michelangelo cited Uccello's work by the very nature of their subject and as a similar recounting of Florentine military history. Because Uccello's breathtaking image transferred the luxurious textures of panel portraits and the architectonic rendering of three-dimensional space into the landscape in vivid color, his panels in the Palazzo Medici defined the Florentine Quattrocento interest in a merger of pictorial and spatial illusionism. Uccello could not be disregarded as the direct ancestor of Florentine battle imagery in the next century. Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* involves itself with this paradigmatic study of Italian—and specifically Florentine—warfare as it attempts to recreate the tensions and visuals of heated engagements. Following closely on da Vinci's heels, Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* certainly trumpets the elevation of the human figure. However, if the most essential element of an infantry unit, the pike, is superimposed onto Sangallo's study and Michelangelo's preparatory drawings, Buonarroti's figure group can be better understood as a dramatic response to the cavalry captured by da Vinci and Uccello. In other words, taking a cue from the thrusting lances and tangled figures of Leonardo's horsemen, I believe the spear, the lance, and the pike play as important a role in an analysis of the *Battle of Cascina* as they could have played in actual combat.

For Michelangelo and Machiavelli, the militia reflected an ideal civic body and as such deserved to be characterized as a powerful fighting force. Furthermore, Machiavelli's *Art of War* spelled out the strengths of an infantry force:

Cavalry cannot, like infantry, go everywhere....  
 When disordered by some violent motion,  
 cavalry return to order only with difficulty...  
 [moreover, no one] should be astonished that a  
 knot of infantrymen can resist any charge of  
 cavalry, because the horse is a perceiving animal  
 which recognizes dangers and is unwilling to  
 enter them.... If you wish to experiment with  
 this, attempt to run a horse against a wall;  
 seldom will you find, no matter what his  
 impetus, that he will run against it. Caesar, when  
 he was to fight with the Swiss in France,  
 dismounted and made everybody dismount and

remove the horses from the troop, as more fit for flight than combat.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Michelangelo's nudes are not simply classicizing male types, but prototypes of a new Florentine body that would help protect and preserve her liberty.

How then did Michelangelo achieve the balance of tense engagement and cherished victory so much a part of Leonardo's neighboring image and Uccello's paradigmatic triptych? First, it seems probable that the egocentric Buonarroti looked upon the presence of Leonardo as a challenge. Thus, his completion of the Signoria commission would require not only a dramatic departure from Leonardo's more traditional narrative but also a more spectacular raid on the Medici paintings. Paying close attention to what Leonardo, Sangallo, and Michelangelo have left us, the imposition or insertion of gestures exploited by Uccello supports subtle changes to the surviving images that transform the *Battle of Cascina* from a day at the beach to an inspiring hymn to republican virtue. Furthermore, the indisputable resolve of Machiavelli as the single-minded proponent of a citizen militia suggests that Michelangelo's finished product would have been more than a group of wet male nudes "fighting to get their clothes on." By arming Michelangelo's figures with the steel pike of a militia infantryman capable of defending Florence from foreign mercenary cavalry, the *Battle of Cascina* becomes a poster for the abandonment of the Florentine and Medici reliance on paid ruffians. Even more importantly, Michelangelo's masterpiece took a page from Uccello, confronted da Vinci, challenged Florentine history, and paved the way for Machiavelli's ambitious agenda.

Using Sangallo's copy as a platform, I will now lay out an imposition or insertion of gestures pioneered by Uccello, refashioned by Leonardo, and adopted by Michelangelo to create a *Battle of Cascina* that answered Machiavelli's call for changes in the way Florence did business. With the indisputable resolve of Machiavelli as the single-minded proponent of a citizen militia behind him, Michelangelo's finished product emended history for a purpose more noble than the painting of powerful male nudes. By representing his figures with the steel pike of the proposed

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<sup>15</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of War* [in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others* (trans. Allan Gilbert)], (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 603–604.

militia rather than presenting a vision of mercenary cavalry, Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* provided a monumental exclamation point for Machiavelli's pronounced and judicious abandonment of mercenary employment by the Republic. In a magnificent triumph, the completed *Battle of Cascina* would take a page from Uccello and surpass Leonardo. Proud recipients of a true battle painting, the Signoria presented their Republic as the pinnacle of Florentine achievement. Coincidentally, their acceptance of Michelangelo's epic narrative paved the way for Machiavelli's dream to become reality.

In a detail from Sangallo, Matteo Donati, a lieutenant in the Florentine forces, has burst onto the scene at a bank of a surprisingly cliff-faced Arno River. A sounding instrument announces the urgency of the call-to-arms not only with its notes but with the frenzied blowing evident in the cheeks of the soldier directly behind the bearded Donati. As a musicologist for one brief moment, I propose that the truncated 'flute' was more likely a longer horn capable of sounding the blaring notes necessary for battlefield communication (Figure 8). Thus, one of the short wands held to the mouth of a figure in the upper right of the image lengthens and grows a wide bell. Turning to Machiavelli's *Art of War* for insight, we see that Fabrizio Colonna's claimed that the ideal army would use the trumpet for combat orders:

The general, then, indicates with the trumpets when the soldiers are to stop or to go forward or to go backward...and, with the variety of such music, he makes plain to the army all the movements that in ordinary course can be made plain.<sup>16</sup>

Although written more than twenty years after the Cascina project, Machiavelli's Captain-General himself would approve my alteration of the instrument shown in the engraving. Excited by this first success and now aware of what might have been Sangallo's selective copying, I have proceeded to explore the idea that Michelangelo's figure group, although only partially armored, is less well armed in the available images than perhaps it would have been in the painting as conceived by Michelangelo.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 647.

In the *Art of War*, Machiavelli's mouthpiece, Fabrizio Colonna, pressed for an attention to the successful strategy and tactics of the armies of the Roman Republic. He does not, however, limit his ideal citizen army to a shallow imitation of the fearsome legions. Instead,

I should choose from the Roman arms and from the German (i.e., the Swiss pike infantry)...because I should put the pikes either in the front...or where I most feared cavalry. And those with the shield and the sword I should use to support the pikes and to win the combat.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at Sangallo's copy left we see a number of little sticks clutched by the dripping, partly dressed Florentines racing to meet their unscheduled date with destiny. Can we honestly say that the Florentine army, whether cavalry or infantry, would have been successful in their efforts by eschewing meters-long, sharpened steel for batons? I suggest, with Machiavelli's dialogue from the *Art of War* and his acknowledged personal mission to create a citizen militia always in mind, that the soldiers to the right planned to confront their enemy with the legitimate tools of their trade (Figure 9). Following the same process discussed with the trumpet, the short sticks grow in length and now receive metal heads. As a result, many of the figures in the composition now wield pikes, a weapon again discussed at length by Colonna in *The Art of War*. In turn, Michelangelo's Florentines now appear more militia than mob.

In addition to the pertinent dialogue composed by Machiavelli some time after the Second Republic collapsed, the conditions in which Michelangelo worked in 1504 justify the circumspect alteration of the copy. The competitive air surrounding not only Michelangelo and Leonardo's side-by-side preparation for their Palazzo Vecchio installation surely inspired Michelangelo to design an image that showcased his considerable talents. Moreover, the heady atmosphere of the campaign was not restricted to things happening in the Palazzo della Signoria or the two workshops. The nagging presence of Medici commissions, as well as their frequent appropriation by the Republic, drew most things Medici and, thus, the Uccello cycle into their orbit. If

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 601.



Figure 10. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Lunette with Decius Mus, Scipio Africanus and Cicero*, c. 1482, fresco, Sala degli Gigli, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy.



Figure 11. Michelangelo, *Doni Tondo*, c. 1505, tempera on panel, Uffizi, Florence, Italy.



Figure 12. Michelangelo, *Sistine Chapel Ceiling*, 1508-12, fresco, Vatican, Rome, Italy.



Figure 13. *Battle of Cascina*, colorized by the author

Uccello's grid of lances provided propulsion to Leonardo's narrative and dramatic tension to his climactic scene, could it not provide in much the same way a springboard for Michelangelo's *Cascina* revision?

The figure group at the right also echoes another Medici commission pertinent to the new Signorial occupation of the Palazzo Vecchio. Ghirlandaio's decoration of the Lily Room in the 1480s featured two lunettes that honored exemplary predecessors of the Florentine Republic (Figure 10). Of course, as the commission of Lorenzo il Magnifico, these figures really helped allay suspicions of his arrogation of political control. However, the nature of the figures and the eloquence of Ghirlandaio's design provided a touchstone for his apprentice as he created a new icon for the self-conscious Second Republic. In his Republican *Battle of Cascina* Michelangelo appears to have not been interested in historical accuracy. Instead, we see an image surprisingly mindful of Medici propaganda from twenty years earlier. Representing his militia in splendid but anachronistic Roman armor that would have reminded viewers of Ghirlandaio's Brutus, Scipio Africanus, and Furius Camillus rather than Quattrocento *condottieri*, Michelangelo subverts the subtle message prescribed by Lorenzo and absorbs the positive ideal Romans of the Lily Room in a paean to Republican virtue.

The black and white versions of the *Battle of Cascina* that survive have misled art historians in a way that the long-observed and murky frescoes of the Sistine Chapel allowed scholars to characterize Michelangelo as a painter of relief sculpture more interested in anatomy and plastic dynamic forms. The restoration of the Sistine ceiling has brought to light a better understanding of Michelangelo's innovations as a painter in his idiosyncratic use of color. Although neither he nor many other artists further developed his experimental use of contrasting colors, his lush and eccentric approach to the modeling of surfaces opened eyes to alternatives to the tried and true use of tonal modulation in the representation of the human figure. We would be wise to heed Pontormo's claim that Michelangelo's paintings were a superior example of his genius in foreshortening and illusionism than his more famous sculptural projects. In his answer to Benedetto Varchi written in 1548, Pontormo indicated that sculpture had limited Michelangelo to the true imitation of three-dimensional forms and that his paintings, as the two dimensional art was wont to do, required him to stretch his abilities to the limit. As John Shearman

has argued in his essay on the Sistine restoration,<sup>18</sup> Pontormo and later visitors to the Sistine Chapel have let Michelangelo down when they failed to acknowledge his sublime sense of color as an important part of his arsenal. Indeed, I believe that Michelangelo intended to employ color in a quite remarkable way in his Florentine battle painting.

The group of figures in the center of the *Battle of Cascina* is not, and was never meant to be, only a complex assemblage of glorious male nudes. In fact, the nudes are simply a 'merely human' before that proceeds an 'armored' after that would defeat the Florentines' foe. Neither Sangallo's *grisaille* image nor Michelangelo's drawings nor Perino's and Pontormo's quotations give us a chance to think about Michelangelo's color. I propose to inject color into my reconstruction and, in the process, bring into clearer focus my argument that the Cascina bathers can be seen as the raw material that Michelangelo and Machiavelli hoped to change into a glittering symbol of Florentine might.

My palette is based on Michelangelo's *Doni tondo* (Figure 11), a panel painting completed just prior to his work on the Council Hall commission, and his Sistine ceiling (Figure 12), the fresco for which he abandoned the *Battle of Cascina* in 1505 or 1506. The earlier small tempera painting of the Holy Family gives us a good opportunity to see how Michelangelo's palette owed a great deal to the colors favored by his teacher Ghirlandaio. The similarity is reinforced, to my mind, by a look at Ghirlandaio's nearby fresco portraits of famous Roman republican heroes in the *Sala dei Gigli* finished a few years previously. The more acidic colors introduced in the Sistine Chapel ceiling help us understand that Michelangelo was familiar with the different properties of colors applied to wet plaster and the need for a flexible approach to color by an artist working in different media. The Sistine ceiling also affords us a chance to see Michelangelo break free of the pure tones of the Ghirlandaio *bottega* and introduce the intense hot colors used by Luca Signorelli in the Cappella Brixiana in Orvieto, a city located on the road from Florence to Rome. Michelangelo's earlier visits to Rome suggest that he may have been familiar with the Orvieto scenes of the Anti-Christ painted by Signorelli between 1499 and 1504. Signorelli's color-changes compare quite favorably to the use

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<sup>18</sup> John Shearman, "The Functions of Michelangelo's Color" in Carlo Pietrangeli, *The Sistine Chapel: A Glorious Restoration*, (Abradale Press, 1999) pp. 80-89.

of this technique by Michelangelo on the Sistine ceiling, and suggest that the younger artist would eventually become comfortable with a variety of approaches to color.

In a rather straightforward, paint-by-numbers approach to colorization, I would like to draw our attention to the dramatic impact of color on the central figure group of the *Battle of Cascina* (Figure 13). Where the studies and copies provide us an image of an untidy knot of figures, a knot that I have begun to unravel with the introduction of a few objects Sangallo left out of his copy, the vision of Michelangelo can be fairly said to be startlingly different. As we can see, the nude bathers begin to garb themselves for war, and their powerful bodies are swiftly plated with metals that demand our attention by the very nature of their gleaming silvered surfaces. Michelangelo's anachronistic armor and helmets supports my contention that he had looked at Ghirlandaio and that Machiavelli's interest in the revival of Roman tactics and weapons is encoded in this image. Where Michelangelo's great rival tried to conjure up a vision of the heat, dust, and drama of battle firmly situated in the historic Florentine past, Michelangelo chose to reveal a vision of Florence in which the republican military machine defended Florentine liberty and guaranteed her a future.

Michelangelo grounded his efforts in Florentine art history and injected his high profile painting with a logical reference to Uccello and the mercenary failures of the past century by using the device so central to Uccello's painting cycle. Similarly, his armored classical Florentines recall the ancient Roman heroes paid for with Medici gold recently inherited by the Signoria. As propaganda for the successful creation of a Florentine standing infantry, Michelangelo's new classical heroes rushing to battle wield not batons but pikes. These extensions and anachronisms result in a more effective composition and tell a more compelling story. Indeed, Michelangelo did not ignore the commission and replace a narrative with a display of fascinating *figure serpentine*. Instead, thanks to the fortuitous gift of the perfect anecdote, he introduced a play between hard armor and soft flesh, a contrast between sharp, linear pikes and rounded, tensing muscles. Whereas Leonardo's thrusting of tips and points strengthens his message of battlefield disarray, Michelangelo's pikes emphasize the transformation of bathers into fighting men. Radiating out of the swirl of nude heroic figures, the lines of the pikes in fact draw attention to the steel sinews of the fighting man. Michelangelo's militiamen—until recently never permitted to do so—wield the tools of destruction.

*Confluence*

In turn, his bathers become and can now be understood as the ideal citizen army.

Facing the unpleasant task of matching wits with Leonardo, Michelangelo, who had been provided with an amusing anecdote rather than a terrible or noble clash of ancient foes for his subject, eventually made good use of Uccello's lesson as he designed his mural for the Florentine Council Hall. The thicket of spears, used to such elegant effect by Uccello, becomes instead the pikes of a Florentine militia massing for battle. In retelling the events at Cascina, the Second Republic became proud sponsors and gratified recipients of an answer to Uccello's Medici icon. By adopting and reinterpreting the key to one of the Medici's major commissions, Michelangelo made yet another Medici gesture serve his Republican patrons. Similarly, Michelangelo performed an almost miraculous metamorphosis of bathers into the militiamen that were Machiavelli's first choice for the strong right hand of Republican policy. In his *Battle of Cascina* Michelangelo cast the Florentine militia, born on the banks of and, in this image, springing wet from the Arno, in a glorious role. As heroic nudes, his soldiers rush toward battle, but arm themselves with the militiaman's pike and don Roman armor, transforming themselves from men to a powerful military machine firm in the inevitable Republican triumph.