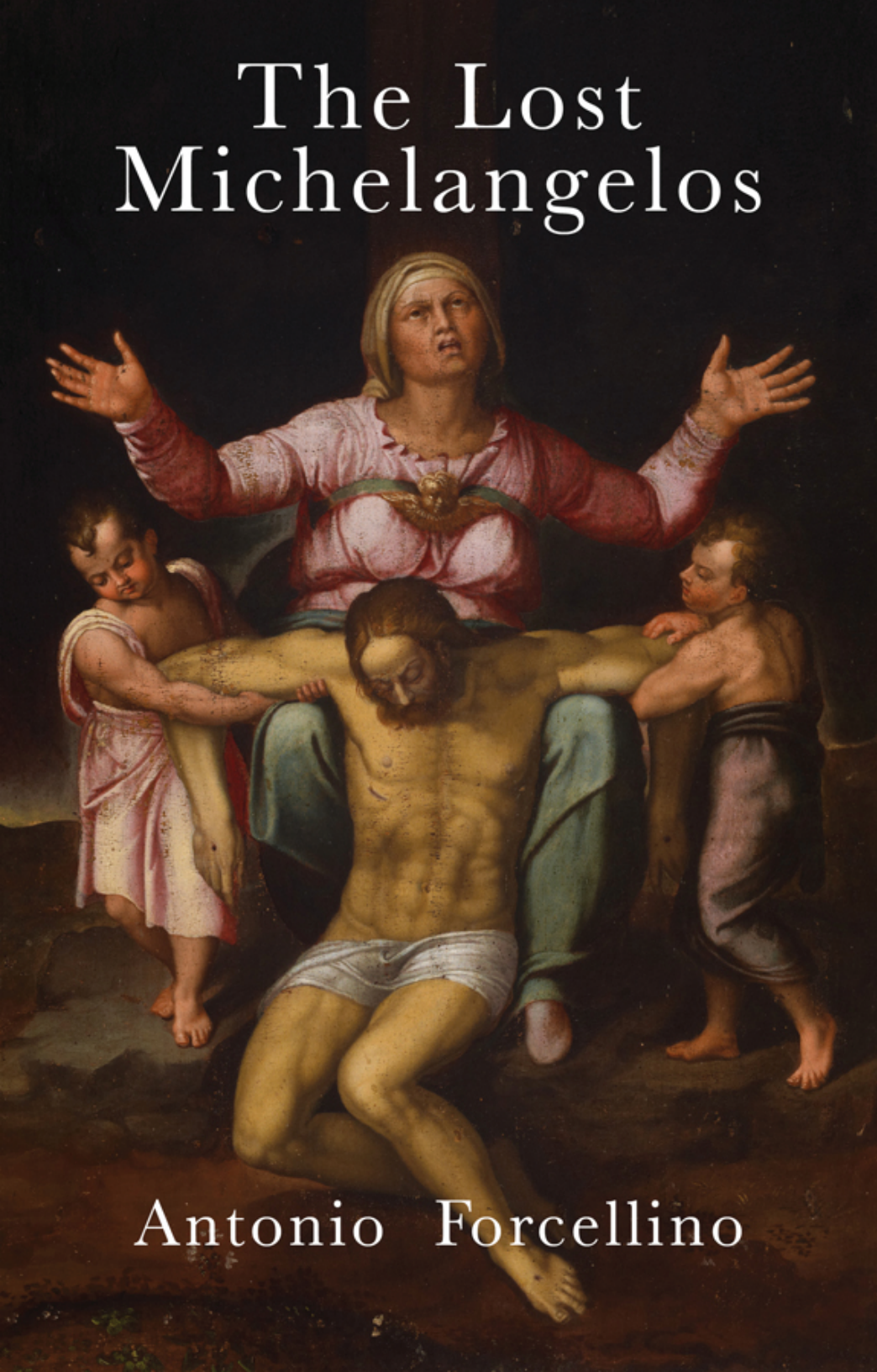
# The Lost Michelangelos



Antonio Forcellino

# THE LOST MICHELANGELOS

# THE LOST MICHELANGELOS

ANTONIO FORCELLINO

TRANSLATED BY LUCINDA BYATT

polity

First published in Italian as *La Pietà perduta* © RCS Libri S.p.A. 2010, Milano. This edition published by arrangement with Grandi & Associati.



Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA



ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5203-0

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.75 on 14 pt Janson Text
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Group Limited, Bodmin, Cornwall

*To all restorers who never tire*

# Contents

# INTRODUCTION

This book describes the events surrounding the search for, and perhaps the finding of, two major paintings by Michelangelo Buonarroti which, for over a century, were thought to have been two drawings. Like many other stories of vanished or lost paintings, this, too, started with the finding of some unpublished letters, read almost by chance in the Vatican Library among the papers of Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga – son of Isabella d'Este and a major figure in the Italian Renaissance. However, this finding then led to some more unusual settings for historical research, including the Niagara Falls, Oxford, Parma, the archives in Dubrovnik, and finally New York, where key parts of our European history now seem to have emigrated.

However, perhaps the most original aspect of the story is that it offers an insight into the lives of extraordinary figures like Michelangelo Buonarroti, Vittoria Colonna and Reginald Pole, and also brings us closer to a group of passionate

reforming intellectuals, who challenged the censure of the Roman Inquisition for the sake of their utopian beliefs. Furthermore, precisely the two paintings we were looking for represented the most tangible and emotional expression of these beliefs. As if this were not enough, the story then took a new twist, to reveal the romantic and ill-fated loves of a group of women caught up in the rapid political changes of late nineteenth-century Europe.

In short, the story of the paintings boasts a plot that no fictional tale could hope to equal. This was the reason why I decided not to report the events in formal academic terms and to go further than is normally acceptable in such detached, dispassionate reports. I decided to include the excitement, the passion and the pure luck that underlie historical research – especially in a case like this, which not only concerns paintings of extraordinary value by none other than Michelangelo, but also uncovers individual stories, feelings and destinies. Moreover, I wanted to describe how the researcher must cope with all this while still steering a strictly methodological course.

Furthermore, the results of this research overturn established academic theories, theories that have been accepted as unassailable scientific constructions precisely because of the detachment of the methods used. I decided to challenge this detachment, and its alleged claim to guarantee knowledge, through the sincerity of an account that does not omit doubts and uncertainties. Indeed this account unashamedly admits the role played by chance, good luck – that irrational and uncontrollable helping hand without which no endeavour, even the most strictly scientific, would ever be successfully concluded. The decision to make room for what is normally left out of scientific reports, including the researcher's own tentative viewpoint, is, on the one hand, beneficial in terms

of broadening the content – and certainly it improves the narrative – but, on the other, it risks undermining the value of the research itself.

There are good reasons why specialists do not like talking about themselves or describing the paths that have led to their achievements. Above all, this threatens to make their work, and even their own personalities, seem more normal, more ordinary. It was a risk I was willing to take for two motives. The first was the excitement I had been fortunate enough to experience first-hand, and therefore I wanted to share this thrill and the accompanying emotions with a public outside the narrow field of specialists in my own discipline. The second, much more presumptuous reason was to use this frank, at times blunt, testimonial to start a debate on the mechanisms of subject specialisation, which often undermine rather than foster an expansion of knowledge.

This story is also one of unbelievable prejudice, which developed in academic circles from a mistaken reading of some documents that emerged from the Italian archives in the mid-nineteenth century. These documents consist of a few letters in which Vittoria Colonna comments on two paintings by Michelangelo using terms which are perfectly appropriate, but which do not conform to the critical tradition based on Vasari's account. In consequence, according to this tradition, on this occasion Vittoria, an accomplished and eloquent poetess who carefully weighed every word, is thought to have confused 'painting' with 'drawing'. Incredible as it may seem, this art historical tradition became so obsessed with this distinction that it even went so far as to deny the existence of the paintings. However, new documents, which have emerged in a different but equally relevant context, have given renewed impetus to the hypothesis that these paintings did indeed exist. In the meantime, the stubbornness with which art

historians perpetrated this elementary mistake for nearly a century can only be explained by their excessive reliance on a self-referential approach.

This way of reinforcing prejudice through the ritualised use of academic writing and methods encouraged me – once I had reported these findings to a scientific meeting – to experiment with a new form of language and a new way of communicating, at least for a scholar. The approach is certainly not without pitfalls. Above all, it exposes the ordinariness of the author's personality: by stripping away terminology and tested procedures, you also remove all protection against criticism, running the risk that the scientific results are subject to attack and accusations of oversimplification, if not exhibitionism. But it is a risk I am willing to take, because at this stage in my life a genuine account of the journey is worth far more than the scientific results to which the journey has led.

# 1

## NIAGARA

A dense milky white mist rose behind the trees. As the sunset faded into darkness, the coloured neon lights grew brighter with every passing minute, especially on the other bank, the Canadian side. From the window on the twentieth floor of the hotel the enormous, flat horizon vanished into nothingness, conjuring up a vision of the endless forest stretching thousands of kilometres as far as the glaciers of Alaska. Inside the Seneca Casino, the atrium has twenty-metre-high walls of coloured marble, some with water flowing down them to create a discreet yet audible ripple, a foretaste of the thundering roar of the world's largest and most famous waterfall. The hotel's design is reminiscent of the Empire State Building in New York, but only in that 'nouveau' way that combines the European taste for gold and precious marble with that uniquely American penchant for massive intersecting straight lines, curves and superfluous embellishment. People were wandering across this space, which was as wide as an Italian

piazza, without even glancing at the tomahawks and spears, or at the huge feathers hanging from the ceiling, in tribute to the Native Americans who inhabited this area until two hundred years ago. Seneca: it took me two days to understand why a casino beside the Niagara Falls, on the border between Canada and the United States, should be named after such a stern philosopher. In the end I discovered it was nothing to do with him; the name came rather from the Seneca tribe who used to live in this area around the Falls. The enormous hotel is built around a hangar as large as Piazza del Popolo and filled with bright lights, gaming tables and flashing slot machines. It is a world of childish wonder, designed to attract unhappy, probably lonely adults and inveigle them into procuring plastic tokens and glittering fiches to buy back the dreams they have lost along the way.

Unaccustomed to the scale of this spectacle, I found myself being lulled into a daze, but not without a niggling sense of unease. It was eleven at night local time, but for me it was five in the morning and I had not slept a wink. After leaving Rome at nine the previous morning, I had changed planes in New York for Buffalo and from there took a taxi to this astonishing world. For the first time, but also for the last, I was overwhelmed by doubt: had this all been an enormously expensive waste of time? Why had I come here, of all places, looking for Michelangelo? What could possibly link the Seneca Casino to that genius, Michelangelo Buonarroti? This name, which for twenty years has been part of my daily life, is linked to other, less neon-illuminated buildings, like the Basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome, where the scaffolding I used to work on was lit by clip-on spotlights; or to the Vatican Archives, where the light is always dim; or to the fragile paper sheets with their furious pencil scorings in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence. Or even to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where the vastness of

the scaffolding and the violent beauty of the iridescent colours seemed far removed from this unreal setting. On the stage of this brightly flashing theatre I could not even conjure up the artist who has become part of my every waking moment, as well as of my memories. Tiredness made me feel stupid and guilty. If I had not been so exhausted, I would have left immediately and caught the next flight back to Rome; but, as luck would have it, I only went upstairs to my room and fell asleep.

I woke before dawn. Outside the window, the faint light in the sky was almost absorbed by the enormous cloud of white mist hanging over the Falls. It was a beautiful sight, perhaps coloured by my love for artists like Edward Hopper and Winslow Homer; but the landscape could not have been more American and more sublime. Low, painted brick buildings lined the streets, which looked too wide because there was not yet much traffic this early in the morning. The road signs painted on the tarmac in clear colours had all the precision of an electric circuit.

This was my impression of Niagara Falls, together with the rather snobbish sensation that the Falls themselves were a typically 'American' attraction, whose fame owes more to size than to beauty, to a taste for what engenders awe rather than wonder. Standing in front of the window and looking at the distant orange sun rising above the forests and the Atlantic Ocean, I was happy that Niagara had unexpectedly become part of my destiny, part of the search for fragments of a story that could never be wholly reassembled because it is too big and too important; a story that is rewarding merely for the fact that it has come to light at all.

The man who had urged me to make this journey had been thoughtful enough to arrange a meeting at six in the morning. He of all people was well aware of the problems caused by jet lag, given that he had been a fighter jet pilot who had later

transferred to civil aviation. He had written to me months earlier, not directly – at least to start with – but through a German professor he had met. After my books on Michelangelo had been published and translated into several foreign languages, I had become something of an authority in the field of Michelangelo studies, also because, apart from the fact that I was an art historian, my work as a restorer placed me in that special category of experts once called 'connoisseurs'. By this, I mean those who not only study art as a theoretical subject, but also acquire practical knowledge, derived not from photos but from dealing intimately with the objects, every day. This was why the former pilot and the German professor had sent me an email with an attached photo. Indeed, they had gone further: the photo was not of a painting; it showed a detail of the underdrawing revealed by infrared reflectography – an imaging technique that penetrates the top layers of paint to reveal what is beneath, which may be an underdrawing or details covered by later painting. They were relying on the fact that a restorer, a specialist in artistic techniques, would have seen in that drawing things that would normally escape an art historian, given the latter's lack of familiarity with painting methods. And they were right.

Anyone whose name becomes reasonably well known in a particular field is swamped by unsolicited requests for expert advice, judgements or comments on works of art. These are almost always works of no consequence because, generally speaking, the usual channels – namely an estimate, or an opinion from a reputable auction house when a work of art first emerges – operate quite well. Moreover, these requests are frustrating and often demanding, because internet makes access so easy. It is astonishing how many people convince themselves they own a Michelangelo or a Raphael, inherited from some old aunt or picked up from a dealer in the ill-

founded belief that some dealers, even antiques dealers, have less of an eye than they do. I once visited a bank director who was convinced he owned a *Crucifixion* by Michelangelo. The illusion had even been encouraged by a well-known Roman curator whose insight I had no reason to doubt, but whose opinion was, in retrospect, perhaps intentionally misleading. Having accepted to see the *Crucifixion* and finding myself looking at a small late nineteenth-century painting in a blatantly pre-Raphaelite style, I felt so embarrassed that I had to fake sudden illness and make for the door without further explanation.

Since then, I had even stopped opening any emails that laid claim to miraculous finds. But this one from America was different, not least because it is not every day you get a chance to see an underdrawing using sophisticated imaging apparatus. The photo had me glued to the screen. It showed the bust of a Madonna fastened with a band on which there was a pin decorated with the head of an angel or cherubim with little wings sprouting from its shoulders, as is usual in the iconography of the Virgin Mary.

I immediately noticed the contrast between the head and the folds of the tunic. The folds had been copied from the dusty outlines of a preparatory drawing. In other words, when the contours of a drawing are pricked and then pounced with a bag full of charcoal dust, the dust passes through the holes, to form a row of tiny dots on the surface of the panel, which has been prepared with a layer of gesso and a protein binder. The artist then joins the dots by using a brush dipped in a watery paint solution and re-creates a copy of the drawing he intends to paint on the panel, as it was on paper. Of course, the strokes used to reinstate the drawing on the panel are more or less decisive and more or less confident depending on the artist's talent. But, equally, the information transferred

from a drawing onto the panel can tell us a lot about the artist's skill. A confident artist will only reproduce the essential information, leaving the composition to be completed during the next phase. In the photo I was looking at, the underdrawing of Mary's tunic seemed confident and essential, but what astounded me was the fluency of the cherubim's portrait. The brushstrokes varied with such smoothness that it was evident the head had been drawn freehand, without an underdrawing. Even at this preparatory stage, it was extremely beautiful and particularly expressive. This alone was enough to justify answering the enquiry and asking the sender to send me a photo of the painting and any information about its history.

As I wrote, I tried to maintain a polite but disinterested tone; and I certainly never imagined that behind the computer screen, on the other side of the world, there was a former air force pilot who had dedicated the last ten years of his life to researching this painting, continuing a painstakingly documented family tradition that had lasted, without a break, for over a century. On the other hand, the pilot could certainly not have imagined that two years before, while sitting in the Vatican Library and leafing through a bundle of manuscript letters that I had already consulted four years earlier, I came across a brief but illuminating letter, which had initially escaped my attention. As I ran my eye across the ink characters, written as they had been – with a quill cut and scored with a razor-sharp blade four hundred years earlier – on the morning of 11 June 1546, my heart began to pound.

As always at moments of great excitement, I pushed back my chair and stood up. The Vatican Library gives all readers a wooden ruler with smoothly rounded edges to use as a marker on the precious manuscripts, so as not to damage the delicate rag paper manufactured laboriously in the paper mills of Fabriano or Bologna. That morning, I rested the ruler