

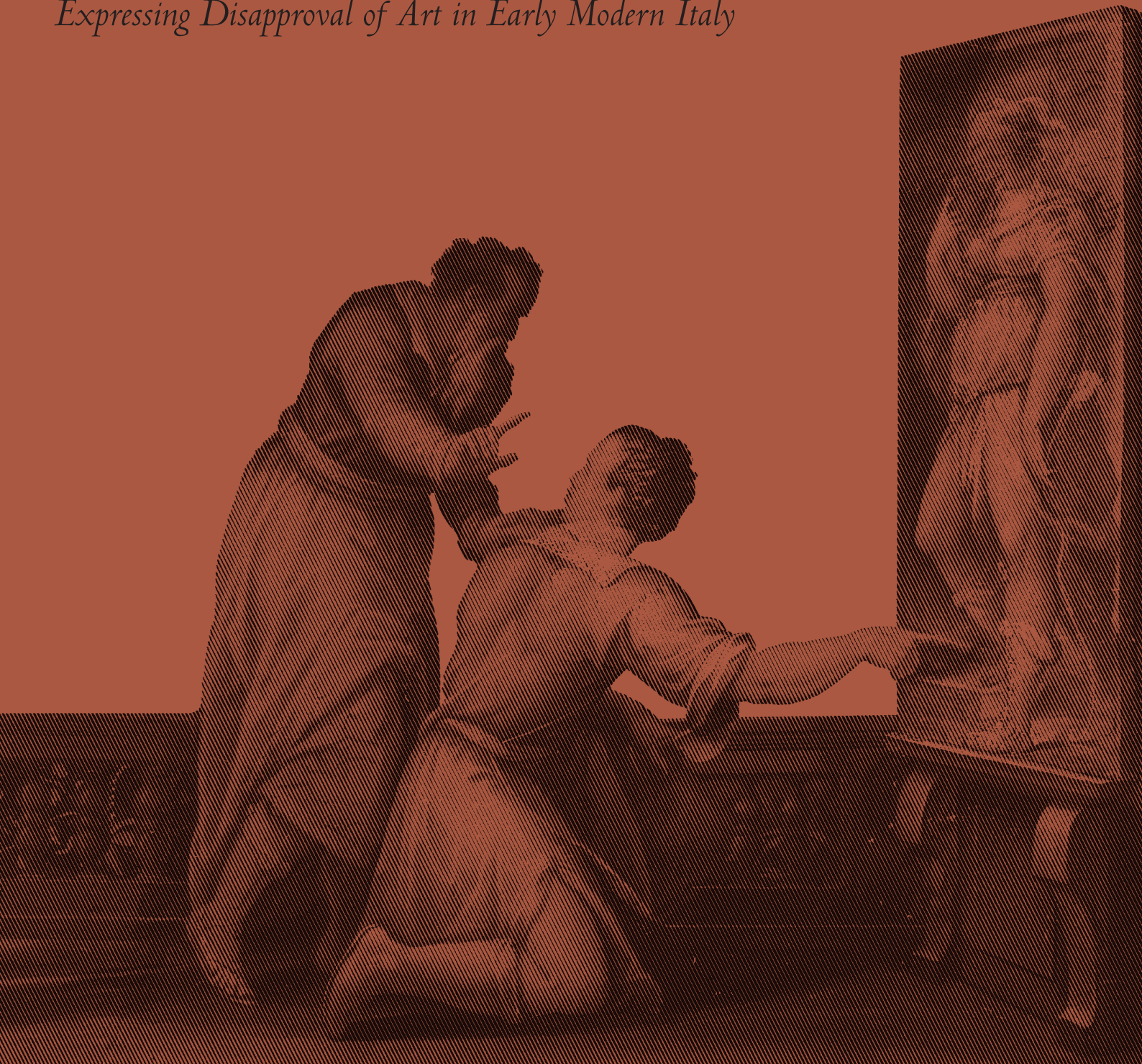
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Bad Reception

Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy



Bad Reception: Expressing Disapproval of Art in Early Modern Italy

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1 Bologna,
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“BROKEN INTO PIECES AND ITS HEAD THROWN INTO THE SQUARE” THE NUMEROUS FAILURES OF MICHELANGELO’S BRONZE STATUE OF POPE JULIUS II

Sefy Hendler

Measuring success is always risky; yet, as far as money and fame are concerned, Michelangelo qualifies as highly successful already during the Cinquecento. With no fewer than five biographies written about him during his lifetime or soon after his death, Michelangelo received an unusual amount of attention from contemporary historians. Michelangelo was also rather wealthy as compared with fellow artists.¹ Nevertheless, like many of his fellow painters, sculptors, and architects, he knew all too well resounding failures alongside fame and recognition. Michelangelo himself seemed singularly obsessed with the failure of his most ambitious project: the tomb for Pope Julius II, most

famous today for the monumental statue of Moses, which was eventually realized only in a reduced form in San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome.²

Although other failures by Michelangelo might have received less attention from the artist and scholars alike, they appear to have been no less painful for the master. This article will propose a new reading of one of these ‘lesser’ failures, the monumental bronze statue of Pope Julius II that the artist created between 1507 and 1508 for the façade of Bologna’s San Petronio basilica (Fig. I). Notably, this was not just another work by the young artist, but, as Victoria Avery observed, “probably the largest single figure in bronze to have

¹ On Michelangelo’s biographies, see Michael Hirst, “Michelangelo and his First Biographers”, in: *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 94 (1996), pp. 63–84, as well as, among others, Lisa Pon, “Michelangelo’s Lives: Sixteenth-Century Books by Vasari, Condivi, and Others”, in: *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXVII (1996), pp. 1015–1037; Carmen C. Bambach, “Vasari’s Michelangelo”, in: *Apollo*, 177 (2013), pp. 50–59. As for Michelangelo’s fortune, see Rab Hatfield, *The Wealth of Michelangelo*, Rome 2002.

² The story of the monument commissioned in 1505 by Julius II and

completed only some four decades later was labeled by Michelangelo’s loyal biographer Condivi as “the tragedy of the tomb” (“tragedia della sepoltura”); see Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti* [...], Rome 1553, p. 26r. The most comprehensive study of the work remains Claudia Echinger-Maurach, *Studien zu Michelangelos Juliusgrabmal*, Hildesheim 1991. See also Carmen C. Bambach, *Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman and Designer*, exh. cat. New York 2017, ed. by *eadem*, New York 2017, pp. 15–265: 95–101, with further bibliography.

been made anywhere in Europe since antiquity”.³ Not only did the first casting of the bronze fail, threatening Michelangelo’s reputation, but the Bolognese public seemed to have had mixed feelings about the posture the sculptor gave the pontiff. The bad reception of the statue culminated in the destruction of the work shortly after it was inaugurated: the bronze statue was destroyed by Bentivoglio supporters when the family regained control of the city in 1511.

This disturbing and violent episode was nonetheless eloquently transformed into a critical success by Michelangelo, with the help of Condivi, Vasari and Varchi, who portrayed the lost statue as a genuine masterpiece and proof of the artist’s mastery in sculpting in bronze, an approach still echoed by Michelangelo scholars today.⁴ Taking into consideration the time and effort put into the work by the artist, the monumental bronze has received relatively little attention from Michelangelo scholars compared with other works by the artist, though some art historians turned their gaze towards other aspects of the affair, particularly the quick destruction of the statue in 1511.⁵

Yet the work merits a more detailed analysis of its complex reception, before and after its destruction. By investigating a series of hostile or favorable reactions to the work at different moments, I hope to obtain a subtler view of the various stages of bad reception to a work of art by different contemporary audiences and subsequent historiography. As a first step, it is

important to distinguish between artistic failure and bad reception.

While an artwork that is received negatively might indeed be labeled as a failure, the linkage between the two terms is not automatic nor linear. In this essay, artistic failure refers to an evident lack of success during a substantial period of time. The bad reception of an artwork can be more limited in its duration. Moreover, if a spectator has a negative response to a work of art, it can be said that the piece has had a bad reception, without immediately declaring it a failure. In other words, even if both failure and bad reception might reveal themselves by means of critical discourse, the term ‘failure’ implies a more persistent and durable lack of success with possibly more dangerous impact on the reputation of the work of art and its author. Another important distinction is the fact that bad reception necessarily implies the involvement of two sides, the artist or the artwork and the respondent, while failure can be personal and thus reside within the artist himself and his own reaction to his art.

Failures thus vary in quality and type. One failure might be material, another one technical; the patron and the public – or even different contemporary audiences – might be part of the picture. Then there is the most intriguing of failures, namely the above-mentioned autogenous one. In this case, the patron and/or public is satisfied with the artwork, but the artist is not.

³ Victoria Avery, “Michelangelo’s Bronze *Julius II* for Bologna”, in: *Michelangelo: Sculptor in Bronze. The Rothschild Bronzes*, ed. by *eadem*, London 2018, pp. 49–79.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 76, where the author claims that the second successful casting of the statue was a demonstration of Michelangelo’s “unrivalled bravura in the rarefied art of large-scale bronze sculpture”. A somewhat different view suggests that the affair “underlines how shifting priorities and politics, as well as the nature of material, could influence the fate of such monuments” (Peta Motture, “Introduction”, in: *Large Bronzes in the Renaissance*, conference proceedings Washington, D.C., 1999, ed. by *eadem*, New Haven, Conn., 2003, pp. 9–15: 11).

⁵ Avery (note 3) meticulously reconstructs and analyzes the affair of the monumental Bologna bronze, while Peta Motture, *The Culture of Bronze: Making and Meaning in Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, London 2019, pp. 13, 125–

127, examines the question on materiality in relation with the bronze statue. For earlier literature, see Bartolomeo Podestà, “Intorno alle due statue erette in Bologna a Giulio II distrutte nei tumulti del 1511”, in: *Atti e memorie della R. Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Provincie di Romagna*, VII (1868), pp. 105–130; Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, I: *The Youth of Michelangelo*, 2nd, rev. ed., Princeton 1947 (1943), pp. 38, 58f., 219–221; John Pope-Hennessy, *An Introduction to Italian Sculpture*, 4th, rev. ed., London 1996 (1955–1963), III, p. 47; Linda Murray, *Michelangelo: His Life, Work, and Times*, London 1984, pp. 53f.; William E. Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*, Cambridge 1994, p. 4; Michael Rohlmann, “Michelangelos Bronzestatue von Julius II.: Zu Geschichte und Bedeutung päpstlicher Ehrentore in Bologna und Ascoli”, in: *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana*, XXXI (1996), pp. 187–206; Paul Joannides, “Michelangelo bronzista: Reflections on His

Bad reception, then, can play a key role in identifying artistic failure. Such identification facilitates our understanding of the response to a work of art in a given time frame. Indeed, the question of temporality is also of particular importance to the discourse on failure: not infrequently, it is time that serves as a bridge between success and failure, transforming a good reception into a bad one, or, conversely, between failure and success. In this regard, Michelangelo's work on the bronze statue of the Della Rovere pope is emblematic: it merits careful examination of the various receptions it generated as it turned from a promise to a failure posing a challenge to the artist and his biographers.

Bad Reception by the Artist

In the summer of 1507, it seemed that Michelangelo's tormented sojourn in Bologna could not have turned out worse for the artist. Pope Julius II obliged him to remain in the city until he placed his monumental bronze statue of the pontiff on the façade of San Petronio – but that was not all. As it turned out, the undesired mission was unexpectedly complicated and time-consuming. Writing on 6 July 1507 to his brother Buonarroto back in Florence, Michelangelo gave the following account of the severe setback that he had just experienced:

Buonaroto, just to let you know that we have cast my figure with which I did not have much good luck, be-

cause Maestro Bernardino – either through ignorance or by accident – did not melt the material properly. [...] and he has indeed failed to my loss and his own also, because he has so disgraced himself that he can no longer hold up his head in Bologna.⁶

Michelangelo goes on to inform Buonarroto that only the lower part of the statue of the pope was cast, thus requiring a second cast. Apart from providing precious testimony regarding the circumstances of the technical failure, the letter gives a glimpse of bad reception within an artistic duo, master sculptor and professional foundryman.⁷ It was Bernardino d'Antonio da Milano, the Florentine master of ordnance whom Michelangelo had engaged in the commission in spring 1507, who failed to cast the work properly, according to Buonarroto.⁸ Michelangelo offers two possible reasons for such a failure: lack of professional knowledge, which Michelangelo defines as “ignorance” (“ignoranza”) or “accident” (“disgratia”), in the sense of bad luck. In his mis- sive, Michelangelo puts the collaborative process in a distinctly negative light, attributing the blame to his partner. He is well aware, though, that this incident could be deleterious for *both* artists working on the statue. To describe the severe consequences of the failure on Maestro Bernardino and himself, Michelangelo employed a quasi-legal term, “vituperato”, meaning, “to be blamed or censured”. The ultimate

Mettle”, in: *Apollo*, CXLV (1997), 424, pp. 11–20; David J. Drogin, “Art, Patronage, and Civic Identities in Renaissance Bologna”, in: *The Court Cities of Northern Italy: Milan, Parma, Piacenza, Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Urbino, Pesaro, and Rimini*, ed. by Charles M. Rosenberg, Cambridge et al. 2010, pp. 244–324; Patrizio Aiello, “A Bologna per Giulio II: 1506–1508”, in: *Michelangelo: una vita*, ed. by *idem*, Milan 2014, pp. 99–112.

⁶ “Buonaroto, sappi chome noi abbiamo gictata la mia figura, nella quale non ò avuta troppa buona sorte; e questo è stato che maestro Bernardino, o per ignoranza o per disgratia, non à ben fonduto la materia. [...] e llui à ben fallito a mio danno e anche assuo, perché s'è vituperato i' modo, che e' non può più alzar gli ochi per Bologna” (*Il carteggio di Michelangelo*, ed. by Giovanni Poggi/Paola Barocchi/Renzo Ristori, Florence 1965–1983, I, p. 45). The translation is based upon *The Letters of Michelangelo*, ed. and trans. by Eric R.

Ramsden, London 1963, I, p. 36, as well as on Michelangelo, *Poems and Letters: Selections, with the 1550 Vasari Life*, ed. and trans. by Anthony Mortimer, London 2007, p. 81.

⁷ For more on the technical aspects of the failed first cast, probably due to “an issue with the furnace, rather than with the recipe of the alloy”, see Avery (note 3), p. 70.

⁸ Bernardino had to obtain a leave from the Florentine authorities in order to join Michelangelo in Bologna, a formality that proved somewhat complicated notwithstanding the caster's close association with Gonfaloniere Piero Soderini. See Aurelio Gotti, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroto*, Florence 1875, I, p. 63; Tommaso Mozzati, “Il fuoco e l'alchimista: Giovanfrancesco Rustici e la pratica del bronzo”, in: *Proporzioni*, n. s., VI (2005), pp. 142–175; Motture (note 5), p. 127.

consequence of failure in his eyes, in this case, is a public condemnation.

In this first example, we see that shared responsibility for a work of art could provoke a bad reception within the team working on the commission. Michelangelo returned to this point when he completed the second, successful cast. In November 1507, he wrote to his brother that “the whole of Bologna thought I would never finish it”, adding, moreover, that “nobody believed I could ever cast it.”⁹ It is worth mentioning that, at this juncture, Michelangelo stands alone: Maestro Bernardino has disappeared from the narrative.

This brings us to our second feature: anticipation of a bad reception. The fear of it appears to have played an important role in Michelangelo’s perception of the creative process and its outcome.

Foreseeing and Forestalling a Bad Reception

Is it possible to anticipate bad reception? If so, what can one do to forestall it? The case of Michelangelo’s bronze statue of Pope Julius II also provides some insight into this complicated question.

In a draft of a lost letter composed in December 1523 to his friend Giovan Francesco Fattucci, chaplain of Florence cathedral, Michelangelo recalled that he had hesitated before taking the commission for Julius’s statue, not considering himself an expert in this type of statuary:

[...] whereupon he [Pope Julius] gave me his figure to do in bronze, which was about seven *braccia* in height,

seated. When he asked me what it would cost, I replied that I believed it could cost about a thousand ducats; but that it was not my art and that I did not want to guarantee [for the cost]. He replied, “Set to work and cast it over and over again until it succeeds, and we will give you enough to content you.”¹⁰

This version is, however, a retrospective and partial reconstruction of the events: when he wrote the letter, Michelangelo had already cast the figure twice, because of the initial failure. Nonetheless, the account to Fattucci confirms that Buonarroti was well aware that a technical error could damage his reputation and lead to a bad reception of the work – first and foremost, by the pope. For this reason, he took proper precautions and made sure that Julius II knew he was not an expert in casting (“it was not my art”).¹¹

Moreover, Michelangelo asked the pontiff’s advice on the exact form the composition should take. This further attempt to stave off a bad reception by the patron is mentioned in Condivi’s life of Michelangelo. In this biography published in 1553, Buonarroti’s confidant presented the following spin on the artist’s exchange with Julius II:

Before he [the pope] left [Bologna], Michelangelo had already made a clay model of the statue. And, since he was in doubt as to what to do with the left hand, having made the right hand in the attitude of benediction, he inquired of the pope, who had come to see the statue, whether he would like it if he made a book in that other

⁹ *The Letters of Michelangelo* (note 6), I, p. 40; “[...] era chontra l’openione di tucta Bologna che io la conducessi mai; poi che la fu gictata, e prima ancora, non era chi credessi che io la gictassi mai” (*Il carteggio* [note 6], I, p. 55). Earlier in the letter, Michelangelo does express gratitude for the prayers said for him in Florence, helping him overcome the technical difficulties, introducing the religious aspect into the discourse of failure and success. As to the custom of saying special prayers while casting bells, see the interesting examples cited by Avery (note 3), p. 69.

¹⁰ “[...] onde lui mi decte a fare la figura sua di bronzo, che fu alta, asse dere, circha assecte braccia, e domandandomi che spesa la sarebbe, io gli risposi che credevo gictarla chon mille duchati, ma che e’ non era mia

arte e che io non mi volevo obrigare. Mi rispose ‘Va’, llavora, e’ggichtere(n)la tante volte che la venga, e dare(n)ti tanto che tu sarai contento” (*Il carteggio* [note 6], III, p. 8). The English translation is based on *The Letters of Michelangelo* (note 6), I, pp. 148f., except for the translation of “non mi volevo obrigare”, which is, in my view mistakenly, translated as “I did not want to be obliged to do it”; I want to thank Diletta Gamberini for drawing my attention to this detail. A second draft of the letter exists, where the passage is practically identical, apart from slightly different measurements of the work: six instead of seven *braccia*. See *Il carteggio*, III, pp. 10f.

¹¹ Avery (note 3), p. 56, reads the drafts as a demonstration of Pope Julius II’s faith in Michelangelo’s abilities.

hand. “What book”, was the pope’s response; “a sword: because I for my part know nothing of letters.”¹²

According to several contemporary accounts, the actual statue had neither sword nor book: the chronicler Andrea Bernardini described the figure of the enthroned pope as wearing the tiara and holding the keys of Saint Peter in his left hand while blessing the crowd with his right one.¹³ Yet, however inaccurate, the Condivi account is revealing in its rendering of a dialogue aimed at averting a bad reception by the patron, and therefore the ultimate failure of the task.

When Michelangelo was “in doubt” (“dubitando”) about the type of attributes he should include in the statue, he turned directly to the pope. Given Julius’s reputation as a demanding patron as well as the strained relationship he entertained with Michelangelo, this consultation proved prudent.¹⁴ It was also fruitful, as the pontiff was reportedly pleased with the final result.

Michelangelo’s understanding of the importance of appeasing his patron also echoes in his letters to his brother, written while he was working in Bologna on the monumental statue. In the following letter, he describes the visit of the pope to his workshop on 29 January 1507:

¹² “È vero che prima si partisse, già Michelagnolo l’haveva fatta di terra. Et dubitando quel ch’egli dovesse fare nella man sinistra, facendo la destra sembiante di dar la beneditione, ricercò il Papa, che a veder la statua venuto era, se gli piaceva che gli facesse un’libro. Che libro ripose egli allora? una spada. Ch’io per me non so lettere” (Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti* [...], ed. by Charles Davis, I, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2009/714/>, p. 27 [accessed on 25 April 2019]). The translation is based on Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, ed. by Hellmuth Wohl, trans. by Alice Sedgwick Wohl, Baton Rouge 1976, p. 38.

¹³ “[...] a seder in cadrega, come suove corone in testa, aparato in pontificalo, come so manto e chiave le quale tenea sopra al so zenochie stanco in mano stancha; come l’altra deva la benedictione” (Andrea Bernardini, *Cronache forlivesi dal 1476 al 1517*, ed. by Giuseppe Mazzatinti, Bologna 1897, II, p. 224). For a detailed discussion of the lost bronze and its iconography, see Avery (note 3), pp. 51f., 63f.

¹⁴ On Julius’s troubled papacy as well as his difficult character, see Ivan

On Friday at two o’clock the Pope came to my house where I am working [on the statue] and showed he was fond of the thing I was doing. So pray God it may go well; for if it does I hope to regain his good graces [...].¹⁵

As Michelangelo was well aware, the complex process of gaining and retaining a patron’s “good graces” (“buona gratia”) requires a continuous effort from an artist. Giving the patron access to the work in progress might thus prevent misunderstandings that could result in bad reception and cause the work to become a failure in the eyes of those who had commissioned it.

First Echoes of Public Bad Reception

Michelangelo’s resounding failure in the initial cast of the monumental bronze figure of Julius II is manifestly absent from both Vasari and Condivi. This omission cannot be explained as a lack of credible information, at least in Condivi’s account, as Michelangelo himself was dictating the narrative to his faithful disciple. The silence about this first cast by both of Michelangelo’s early biographers might at least partially explain why the episode of the pope’s monument has received so little attention from Buonarroti scholars.¹⁶ Yet even for a spin-doctor as

Cloulas, *Julius II: le pape terrible*, Paris 1990, and Christine Shaw, *Julius II: The Warrior Pope*, Oxford/Cambridge, Mass., 1993.

¹⁵ “El Papa fu venerdì a ventuna ora a chasa mia dov’io lavo[ro], e mostrò che’lla cosa gli piacesse; però pregate Dio che’lla venga bene, ché, se chosì fia, spero riauquitar buona gratia secho” (*Il carteggio* [note 6], I, p. 24); English translation based upon Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo* (note 6), I, p. 24. Another letter to his brother from the same day recounts the story in an almost identical version: “Sappi come venerdì sera a ventuna ora papa Iulio venne a chasa mia dov’io lavoro e stecte circha a una meza ora a vedere, parte che io lavoravo; poi mi dette la beneditione e andossene: e à dimostrato chontentarsi di quello che io fo” (*Il carteggio*, I, p. 22; cf. *The Letters of Michelangelo*, I, pp. 21f.).

¹⁶ The destruction of the work cannot, in itself, fully explain this historiographical lacuna, given that the nearly contemporary frescoes by Michelangelo himself and Leonardo da Vinci in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, are among the most studied works of art by both artists. For the few studies that have examined this affair in detail, see note 5.

gifted as Michelangelo, public failures are inevitably difficult to erase completely.

These early printed accounts of the affair mention Buonarroti's irritation at what he perceived as local doubts regarding his ability to cast the colossal statue; this might be read as an implicit reference to the failed cast. In his 1550 vita of Michelangelo, Vasari wrote:

They say that when Michelangelo was working on it a painter and goldsmith called [Francesco] Francia turned up to see it because he had heard the fame and praises of Michelangelo and his works, but had never seen anything by him. So arrangements were made and finally he obtained permission. He was amazed at the artistry of the statue; but when Michelangelo asked what he thought of the figure, he answered that it was a beautiful cast. Michelangelo was indignant at the thought that he was praising the bronze rather than the workmanship and replied angrily: 'Get off to a whorehouse, you and Cossa; a fine pair of ignorant botchers!' Poor Francia felt he had been deeply disgraced at the presence of all those standing.¹⁷

Michelangelo's conversation with Francia was not mentioned by Condivi, and reappears in a somewhat different version in Vasari's second edition of the *Vite*, where he also integrates into his narrative other details

¹⁷ "Dicesi che, mentre Michele Agnolo la lavorava, vi capitò il Francia, orefice e pittore, per volerla vedere, avendo tanto sentito de le lodi e de la fama di lui e delle opere sue, e non avendone veduto alcuna. Furono adunque messi mez[z]ani perché vedesse questa, e n'ebbe grazia. Onde veggendo egli l'artificio di Michele Agnolo, stupì. Per il che fu da lui domandato che gli pareva di quella figura; rispose il Francia che era un bellissimo getto. Intese Michele Agnolo che e' lodasse più il bronzo che l'artificio; per che sdegnato e con collera gli rispose: 'Va' al bordello, tu e 'l Cossa, che siete due solennissimi goffi nell'arte'; talché il povero Francia si tenne vituperatissimo in presenza di quegli che erano quivi" (Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Pisa 1966–1997, VI, pp. 31f. [ed. 1550]). Translation based on Michelangelo (note 6), p. 162.

¹⁸ See Vasari (note 17), VI, pp. 31–33, for the 1568 version. It is difficult to ascertain whether Vasari's omission of the story of the failed cast was intentional or due to lack of credible information concerning the events of summer 1507. By "Cossa", Vasari probably meant Lorenzo Costa (1460–

brought by Condivi concerning the interaction between Michelangelo and the pope.¹⁸ It is clear that Vasari's narrative reflects tensions between Michelangelo and a prominent Bolognese artist whose judgment about the work seems to have appeared of importance to the Florentine sculptor.¹⁹ Michelangelo's suspicion clearly echoes the ancient topos that contrasts materiality and artistry of a work, as for instance in Pliny's remark on a colossal statue of Apollo questioning "whether it is more remarkable for the quality of the bronze or for the beauty of the work".²⁰

Destruction: The Ultimate Form of Bad Reception

The installation of Michelangelo's statue of Pope Julius II on the façade of San Petronio was reportedly accompanied by fanfare and celebration: "And for this thing there were made signs of joyfulness with bell rings and gun salutes", reported Fra Leandro Alberti.²¹

Even before its formal inauguration, the Bolognese flocked to watch the work, causing the complicated task of raising the statue to its place on the façade to be postponed until February 1508. A report sent from Bologna to Rome described the work as a "marvel", making sure to mention the "multitude of people coming to see the work".²²

1535), as Francesco del Cossa (ca. 1435/36–ca. 1477/78) was already dead for some thirty years; see Michelangelo (note 6), p. 230, no. 30.

¹⁹ Through his stay in Bologna, Vasari himself was all too acquainted with the hostility that Tuscan artists might experience in that city. See the insightful article by Fabian Jonietz, "Fuori e dentro Bologna: Vasari e gli artisti emiliani e romagnoli nelle *Vite*", in: *D'odio e d'amore: Giorgio Vasari e gli artisti a Bologna*, exh. cat., ed. by Marzia Faietti/Michele Grasso, Florence 2018, pp. 17–33.

²⁰ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, IX, trans. Harris Rackham, Cambridge, Mass., 1952, p. 159 (XXXIV, 18). Again, I want to thank Diletta Gamberini for bringing to my attention the link to Pliny's text.

²¹ "E per questa cosa furono fatti segni d'allegrezza con campane e bombarde" (quoted from Podestà [note 5], p. 111).

²² "a vederla è concorso [sic] tanta moltitudine che li maestri ne restavano impediti [...]. Mirabile veramente e [è] l'opera" (letter of 21 February 1508 from the Bolognese Senate to Carlo Grati and Francesco Fantuzzi in Rome; quoted from *ibidem*, p. 107).

This enthusiasm was short-lived. The Bentivoglio reconquest of Bologna in 1511 opened a new chapter in the history of the statue: the complex tale of its destruction. The removal of the statue took place on the last days of December 1511, seven months after Pope Julius II had lost Bologna. Certainly, this act was motivated primarily by the new geopolitical circumstances in the city and was to some extent almost predictable.²³ In fact, another imposing image of the despised Della Rovere pope, his stucco statue installed in 1506 on the façade of the city's Palazzo Comunale, was violently dismantled during the unrest in May of the same year.²⁴ The destruction of Michelangelo's colossal statue that followed a few months later was, however, somewhat different. This was due to the diverse material nature of these two works and the different status of their makers, but also to the complex destiny the remains of Michelangelo's work had.

Several concurring sources describe the destruction of the bronze statue of the pope, whose head according to Fileno dalle Tuete "was thrown to the ground by Zeronimo Zabino", a supporter of the Bentivoglio.²⁵ Chronicler Francesco Maria Guidotti wrote on December 1511 that "the bronze image of Pope Julius that was in San Petronio was broken into pieces and its head thrown into the square and then stored in the ammunition room in the palace".²⁶ Leandro Alberti's account describes a somewhat less spontaneous removal, with preventive measures taken by the demolishers "not to

harm the pavement of the church", given that the image of the pope was dismantled from inside San Petronio.²⁷ Of course, nothing was done to avoid damage to the statue itself; it was sent in pieces to Alfonso I d'Este, duke of Ferrara.

Most of the writers emphasize the statue's material value and the violent act of its destruction. Jacopo Zili, for example, reported in his *Cronica di Bologna* that "they threw to the ground the colossus or bronze statue that Pope Julius had commissioned for himself and which was sent in pieces to Ferrara in exchange for a large quantity of large-caliber guns".²⁸ The one early source that did praise the statue was Fileno dalle Tuete, who calls it "the most beautiful figure in Italy" while also mentioning its impressive weight, 17,000 *libbre* (almost eight tons).²⁹

The various accounts reveal how the nature of the public's interest in the work shifted over time. From the statue's celebrated maker, the focus turned to the identity of the once-almighty patron it represented, henceforth publicly disgraced in Bologna. Additional emphasis was placed on the material composition of the ruined statue, now valued mainly for the immense quantity of metal it contained, enabling Bologna to purchase much-needed arms. The imposing portrait is no longer a chef d'oeuvre by Michelangelo but rather a mass of precious bronze depicting a loathed ruler.

The fate that Alfonso d'Este reserved for the work provides a partial confirmation of this reading.

²³ Public ire directed against statues of contested pontiffs following their death became recurrent in early modern Rome. For a detailed description of the well-documented assault on the marble statue of Pope Paul IV upon the Capitoline Hill after his death in 1559, see John M. Hunt, *The Vacant See in Early Modern Rome: A Social History of the Papal Interregnum*, Leiden/Boston [2016], pp. 182–189, with other important examples on pp. 189–202. The difference with Julius's statues resides of course in the fact that the demolition of his monuments took place during his lifetime, outside of Rome.

²⁴ For a contemporary account, see Podestà (note 5), pp. 114f. For a discussion of the lost work and its dismantlement, see Avery (note 3), pp. 50f., 76.

²⁵ "[...] e Zeronimo Zabino butò a terra la testa del papa che era in san petronio" (quoted from Podestà [note 5], p. 116).

²⁶ "L'immagine di papa Iulio di bronzo ch'era in S. Petronio fu disfatta in pezzi e la testa fu gittata per piazza, poi messa nella monition di palazzo" (*ibidem*, p. 119).

²⁷ "[...] et fu data la cura a Maestro Arduino ingegnere di gettarla giuso che non guastasse el pavimento della Chiesa" (*ibidem*, p. 121). Avery (note 3), p. 76, cautiously accepts the reports of a more orderly removal of the work.

²⁸ "[...] fecero gittare a terra lo colos o vogliam dire la statua de brongio la quale fece fare per lui papa Iulio, la quale in pezzi se mandò a ferrara in cambio de tanta artiglieria grossa" (quoted from Podestà [note 5], p. 119).

²⁹ "[...] era la pu bela figura d'italia" (*ibidem*, p. 121). Avery (note 3), p. 60, justly reminds that "it is very hard to calculate the amount of metal that would have been needed to cast the figure, as we do not know its exact weight as installed", and gives an estimate of 6000 kg.



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2 Copy after Titian,
Portrait of Alfonso d'Este,
duke of Ferrara. New York,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Munsey Fund, 1927

According to the account by Girolamo Camanarini, agent of Cardinal Ippolito d'Este in Rome, the statue was triumphantly melted in Ferrara, in a public act of *lèse papauté* by the Este: as Camanarini writes, the pope “was informed that his bronze statue that had

been in San Petronio in Bologna was dragged through Ferrara by two very slim bulls, with garlands of herbs, and then conducted to the furnace and melted, with disgrace to His Holiness [...]”.³⁰

This report was subsequently denied, because it would have aroused the pontiff’s ire and further damaged the already tense relationship between Alfonso d’Este and Julius II; nevertheless, it does confirm the earlier accounts that the statue was acquired by Alfonso chiefly in order to be destroyed.³¹ The bronze was mostly used to fabricate an imposing cannon ironically named “La Giulia”, familiar from its depiction in the duke’s portrait by Titian (Fig. 2).³² According to Vasari, the head of the statue remained in the duke’s “guardaroba”.³³ After this date, there is no further mention of the head, which was presumably melted down too, like the rest of the statue.

The laborious dismantlement of the statue was first and foremost politically motivated, and in line with the desire to quickly erase the public images of a hated ruler from outside Bologna. The complex story of its removal also reveals that despite Michelangelo’s growing fame, his talent and art failed to protect the work from its miserable destiny once the pope lost control of the city. One could argue that the political situation was so charged that the bronze’s fate was doomed from the moment the papal forces lost their grip on Bologna. Yet in the opinion of the Bolognese, the repeated casting of the statue may have also damaged Michelangelo’s reputation. As a matter of fact, the fate of Buonarroti’s *David* in Florence presents a strikingly different story. This work was celebrated,

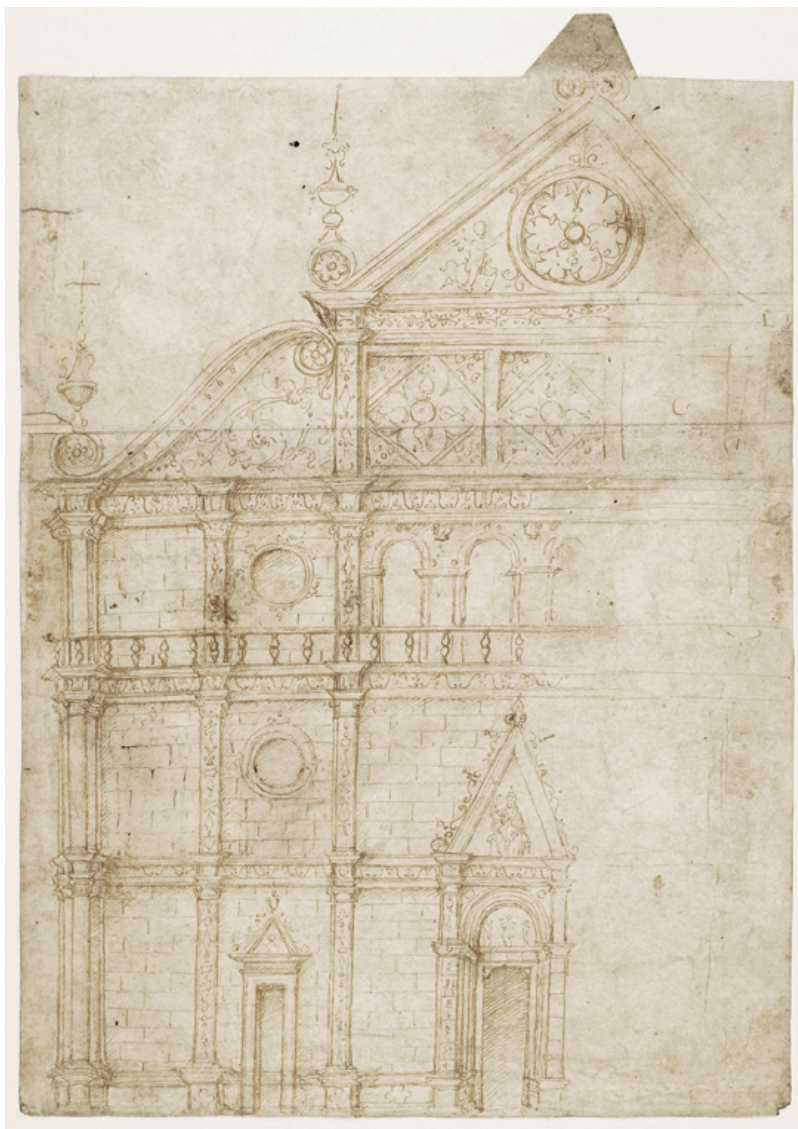
³⁰ “[...] era informato che la sua statua de bronzo che era in San petronio in Bologna era stata strasinacta per Ferrara con doi bovj magrissimi; con ghirelande de erbe et dipoi conducta alla fornace a fondere con disonore de Sua Santità” (quoted from Giuseppe Campori, “Michelangelo Buonarroti e Alfonso I d’Este”, in: *Atti e memorie delle R. Deputazioni di storia patria per le provincie dell’Emilia*, n. s., VI [1881], I, pp. 127–140: 129f.).

³¹ In front of the denial, which he found difficult to believe, the pope reportedly “burst into loud laughter” (“entrò in gran risata”); see *ibidem*, p. 131.

³² For the reuse of the metal in order to fabricate a cannon, see Avery

(note 3), pp. 78f., as well as Motture (note 5), p. 13, who reminds the reader that the bronze for the statue came originally “from a bell captured by papal invaders”. For the history of this unique piece of artillery, see *Documenti inediti per la storia delle armi da fuoco italiane*, ed. by Angelo Angelucci, Graz 1972 (facsimile of the ed. Turin 1869), pp. 294–296, no. 178. The description given there seems to fit the cannon portrayed by Titian. See as well Avery, pp. 77–79.

³³ See Vasari (note 17), VI, p. 33. For further reading on the head kept in Ferrara, see Vincenzo Farinella, *Alfonso I d’Este: le immagini e il potere. Da Ercole de’ Roberti a Michelangelo*, Milan 2014, p. 691.



3 Drawing of the façade of San Petronio in Bologna. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des arts graphiques, inv. 1466 DR r (Rothschild Album, I, p. 12)

in part, for the sculptor's technical skill. When the Medici regained control of the city in 1512, less than a decade after the marble colossus was installed by their foes in front of the Palazzo della Signoria, they decided to reappropriate the hero long associated with the family and did not harm the statue.³⁴ Moreover,

Alfonso d'Este's decision to keep the massive head of the bronze statue might indicate that its artistic qualities and the fame of its maker prevented, at least for a while, the total destruction of the work. Nevertheless, the final outcome was dire, leaving to historians the task of reconstructing the story of this lost work.

³⁴ In the case of Michelangelo's *David*, clearly "the Giant and its maker were protected by their fame", as Rona Goffen puts it while assessing the early

fame Michelangelo's statue acquired; see *eadem*, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian*, New Haven, Conn., et al. 2002, p. 130.

Historiographical Framing of Bad Reception

In his life of Michelangelo, Vasari told the story of the destruction of I511. It is interesting to note, however, that in the I550 edition, he included an additional episode where the artist, the government, and the people of Bologna appeared at odds as to which message the pope's statue should convey to the city:

It is said the government of Bologna went to see the statue and, finding it very stern and awesome, they turned to Michelangelo, saying that the posture was so threatening that the pope seemed to be giving them a curse rather than a blessing. To which Michelangelo replied with a laugh: 'That curse [the excommunication of Bologna in I506] has already been pronounced.' Those gentlemen took it badly, but the pope, who understood Michelangelo's witticism, gave him an extra three hundred *scudi*.³⁵

These details, absent from the I568 vita, are intriguing. By including this episode in the sequence of events leading to the destruction of the statue, which is mentioned immediately afterwards in Buonarroti's biography, Vasari might be implying that the Bolognese had detested the statue from the beginning for its portrayal of a despot. The somewhat different retelling in the I568 vita leads to a similar conclusion: a painful reception of the work by the Bolognese, hostile both to Michelangelo and his patron, the Della Rovere pope.

In framing the story in such a manner, the biographer avoids explaining why Michelangelo's art did not triumph over the political turmoil and the subsequent *damnatio memoriae* that took place in Bologna. Should Michelangelo's bronze statue of the pope have resisted

the regime change as his *David* would a year later? The question is not directly posed, because it seems obvious that its relative splendor was not enough to protect it from this miserable end.

In other words, Vasari uses the bad reception by the city's government in order to explain the second, violent, and final hostile reaction which ultimately results in the destruction of the statue. Vasari provides clear political, rather than artistic, motivations for the loss of the statue; in fact, in both editions he explicitly praises the work as having been outstanding in every other way, emphasizing that Michelangelo "employed the most beautiful artistry in the pose of the statue, for it reflected majesty and grandeur in every detail, its garments displayed wealth and magnificence, and its face embodied courage, strength, quickness and magnificence".³⁶

Erasing Bad Reception

Vasari's accounts attest to the continuous setbacks in the reception of the Florentine artist's work within the Bolognese context. Yet not surprisingly, given his glorification of Michelangelo, Vasari refrains from mentioning the resounding technical failure of the first cast, an authorial decision which certainly contributed to future generations' perception of Michelangelo as the greatest sculptor of his time, a master of technique unmatched by any of his contemporaries.

In his I564 funeral oration in honor of Buonarroti, for example, Benedetto Varchi praised the deceased artist's talents not only in marble but also in bronze. Varchi declared that Michelangelo "had cast in bronze an infinite number of figures, among them [...] a statue that resembled Pope Julius II, more than three times bigger than life".³⁷

³⁵ "Dicesi che la Signoria di Bologna andò a vedere tale statua, la quale parve loro molto terribile e brava; per il che, volti a Michele Agnolo, gli dissero che l'aveva fatta in attitudine sì minacciosa che pareva che desse loro la maledizione, e non la benedizione. Onde Michele Agnolo ridendo rispose: 'Per la maledizione è fatta'. L'ebbero a male quei Signori, ma il Papa, intendendo il tratto di Michele Agnolo, gli donò di più trecento scudi" (Vasari [note I7], VI, p. 32 [ed. I550]); translation based upon Michelangelo (note 6), p. 162.

³⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. by Julia Conway Bondanella/Peter Bondanella, Oxford 1998, p. 437; "[...] nella quale usò arte bellissima nella attitudine, perché nel tutto aveva maestà e grandezza, e ne' panni mostrava ricchezza e magnificenza, e nel viso animo, forza, prontezza e terribilità" (Vasari [note I7], VI, p. 31).

³⁷ "Gittò di bronzo un'infinità di Figure; e tra l'altre [...] Una statua, la quale rassembrava Papa Giulio secondo per piu che tre volte il naturale"

The only surviving visual evidence of the work is a drawing in the Louvre, by an anonymous artist, which depicts the façade of San Petronio (Fig. 3). While this drawing is far from accurate, it remains pivotal, as it shows Michelangelo's bronze above the main portal.³⁸ It does so, however, without according much importance to the statue, which appears as a minor detail of the façade. Yet this tiny image of the pontiff serves as a reminder of the ambivalence with which the work was received from its inception. The various reactions by different spectators and actors form an intricate framework defining the acceptance of a work, its various readings, and its complex historiographical afterlife. The destruction of the bronze can certainly be understood first and foremost as a political act, and this remains a crucial point when examining the statue. Yet the political reading served Michelangelo and his historiographers, as it helped them sidestep other critical questions the episode clearly raised. The work displayed Michelangelo's unique talent but also his evident lack of experience in casting. In the end, the episode represents his short-lived triumph in the genre of bronze portraits, which the artist carefully avoided for the rest of his long and illustrious career.

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(Benedetto Varchi, *Orazione funebre [...] fatta, e recitata da lui pubblicamente nell'essequie di Michelagnolo Buonarroti in Firenze nella chiesa di San Lorenzo*, Florence 1564, p. 29).

³⁸ On this sheet, see Catherine Loisel, in: *Il Rinascimento Italiano nella collezione Rothschild del Louvre*, exh. cat., ed. by eadem, Florence 2009, pp. 122f., nos. 51–66. Loisel suggests that the drawing was made between “November 1510 and December 1511”. Despite the inaccuracies in the rendering of the façade, the image of the statue does match the information given by the Bolognese chroniclers reported by Podestà (note 5). For a comprehensive study of the Rothschild Album, which contains the sheet, see Cristina Fumarco, *Un'espressione della cultura antiquaria del primo Cinquecento bolognese: l'album Rothschild 1367–1476 D. R. del Louvre*, PhD diss. Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, 2004/05.

Few failures were more dramatic and painful in Michelangelo's long career than his monumental bronze statue of Pope Julius II for the façade of Bologna's San Petronio basilica (1507/08). Not only did the casting of the bronze initially fail, threatening Michelangelo's reputation (as recorded in his letters to his brother back in Florence), but also the Bolognese public seemed to have had mixed feelings about how the pontiff was represented. The culmination of the bad reception of this statue was its destruction. Shortly after the work was inaugurated, it was violently dismantled and destroyed by the Bentivoglio supporters once they regained control of the city in 1511. The bronze figure was then cast again into a celebrated cannon (called ironically “La Giulia”, after the pope) adding insult to injury upon both the pope and the artist. Nevertheless, this painful and violent episode was eloquently transformed into a critical success by Michelangelo with the help of Condivi, Vasari, and Varchi. This paper reconsiders Michelangelo's Bologna affair as a contribution to understanding early modern artistic failures, their *modi operandi*, and their influence on artistic historiography. The examination of a series of hostile reactions to the work in different moments offers a more nuanced picture of the different stages of its bad reception by the contemporary public.

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© Photographic Archive of the Basilica of San Petronio, Bologna: Fig. 1. — The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Fig. 2. — © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Angèle Dequier, Paris: Fig. 3.

Umschlagbild | Copertina:

Giorgio Vasari und Mitarbeiter, *Apelle und der Schuster* | Giorgio Vasari e collaboratori, *Apelle e il ciabattino*
Firenze | Firenze, Casa Vasari, sala grande
(S. 46, Abb. I | p. 46, fig. I)

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