



“I Fly, Though Lacking Feathers, with Your Wings”: Why Are Michelangelo’s Angels Wingless?

Moshe Arkin

Abstract

This article addresses an idiosyncrasy in Michelangelo’s art: the consistent depiction of angels without wings. This iconographical feature is not adequately explained by Art Historical methodology. A psychological explanation is offered based on the fact that, during the short period of Michelangelo’s infatuation with a young man, Tommaso Cavalieri, imagery of winged angels, winged figures, and winged flight became prominent in Michelangelo’s art, while in his poetry he repeatedly addressed Tommaso as a winged angel. This article argues that Michelangelo drew upon the established metaphorical meaning of wings as symbolizing permissible Platonic love in order to convey passionate homoerotic feelings. It is proposed that the homoerotic significance of wings and winged nude figures led the deeply religious artist, who repeatedly denied his homosexual inclinations, to avoid them in his depictions of angels, so as not to desecrate his Christian art with his sinful feelings.

Keywords

Homosexuality, symbolic meaning, de-erotization, iconography, Renaissance, Neo-Platonism, Phaedrus, Saslow, Panofsky

To cite as

Arkin, M., 2016, “I Fly, Though Lacking Feathers, with Your Wings”: Why Are Michelangelo’s Angels Wingless?’, *PsyArt* 20, pp. 24–49.

This article addresses a quandary rarely discussed in Michelangelo scholarship: why does the artist, contrary to much of the Renaissance visual tradition, depict his angels without wings?

Such a major representational decision has presumably been influenced by many considerations: iconographical, theological, aesthetic, and others. This article suggests, however, that the purely art historical explanations are not entirely satisfactory and that psychological considerations may prove to be of considerable value.

In offering a psychological explanation that relates the missing wings to the artist's conflicted feelings about his own homosexuality, my study—while being akin to the Freudian genre of pathography¹—does not depend on any specific psychoanalytic theoretical constructs such as the conscious or unconscious nature of Michelangelo's hypothetical conflict. The only underlying theoretical assumption in this article may be formulated as follows: At times, the rendering of an image by the artist may be influenced by or may reflect the symbolic signification of this image for the artist.²

The first attempt to draw psychological and biographical conclusions from the analysis of a Renaissance work of art was made by Freud in his *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910). This study was followed by other psychoanalytical studies, such as Ernest Jones's "The Influence of Andrea del Sarto's Wife on his Art" (1913).³ These studies were criticized on methodological grounds by Meyer Schapiro in 1956 and by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower in 1963.⁴ Their methodological comments are, in fact, valid—not only with respect to a psychoanalytically oriented research but also with respect to any study that proposes to relate aspects of the artist's life to his work based on iconographical or stylistic analysis. Their main methodological warnings can be summarized as follows: 1) One may attempt to draw personal meaning from an image only if that image has been created or modified by the artist or if its presence is highly rare and unexpected in the context of the given work of art. In the words of Schapiro: "It is futile to credit to the peculiarities of a single mind what was already a common possession of artists."⁵ 2) Biographical theories should not be based on a single datum. 3) Each piece of artistic or biographical data should be analyzed in its historical and sociological context. 4) As the Wittkowers remind us, in religious works in the Renaissance, the iconography was determined not by the artist but by the commissioner of the work, such that only in exceptional cases—presumably only in the case of very prominent artists—can we assume that an original iconographical feature was indeed the product of the artist's mind. Applying these principles, Schapiro has shown, for example, that the rendition of Anne and Mary as young women of the same age in Leonardo's *Saint Anne, the Virgin and Child* was not the artist's invention but an image that was rather common at the end of the fifteenth century, with a long iconographical tradition. Thus, there are no grounds to assume that this painting was based on Leonardo's personal

¹ On pathography, see Ellen Handler Spitz, *Art and Psyche: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Aesthetics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 25-97.

² For the figures and images of this article, please see the additional document or visit journal.psyart.org.

³ Reprinted in *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis* (London and Vienna: The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1923), 226-44.

⁴ Meyer Schapiro, "Freud and Leonardo: An Art Historical Study" (1956), in his *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 153-92; Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 290-91.

⁵ Schapiro, 166.

experience (i.e., his childhood memories of two mothers—the natural mother and the stepmother) as proposed by Freud. Similarly, the Wittkowers have shown that Jones incorrectly assumed that Andrea del Sarto's *Madonna of the Harpies*—in which the Virgin is standing on a pedestal decorated with the pagan motif of harpies—reflects his complex and ambivalent relations with his wife, as this motif was rather common in the religious imagery of the period.

Carlo Ginzburg highlighted another general methodological pitfall of any iconographical study that is based on biographical or historical evidence external to the work of art. In his essay “From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method” he criticizes Saxl's analysis of Dürer's drawings and his attempt to draw conclusions regarding the development of Dürer's Lutheran ideas based on these drawings.⁶ Ginzburg regards Saxl's work as a typical case of methodological circularity, namely, that the interpreter of the work of art perceives what he has already learned about the artist by other means. Following from this methodological criticism, a work of art should first be analyzed on its own merits and only later consider and integrate additional external evidence into the full picture.⁷

In establishing all the methodological requirements for a valid attempt to provide a biographical explanation for an iconographical quandary—namely, the originality of imagery, robust documentation, and non-circularity—one would encounter great difficulty in finding an example of Renaissance art suitable for such an analysis. Nevertheless, I believe that the particular case at hand represents an exceptional, fortuitous case in which the nature and relative abundance of data and the lack of satisfactory art historical explanation may render a biographical explanation theoretically plausible and methodologically compliant with the prescriptions mentioned above.

I will now review the art historical context and scholarly commentaries on Michelangelo's wingless angels in order to highlight the idiosyncratic nature of this recurring artistic choice.

In creating wingless angels, Michelangelo was not entirely alone. Other exceptions to the rule of depicting angels with wings can be identified, although they are rare and sporadic. Angels are portrayed without wings when they function as candelabrum bearers—a role that harkens back to the classical

⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, “From Aby Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method,” in his *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1986), 17-59.

⁷ This requirement is more difficult than it may appear, not only in the case of Renaissance studies but also in modern attempts to link biographic information to works of art. For example, Debora L. Silverman, “Biography, Brush, and Tools: Historicizing Subjectivity; The Case of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin,” in *The Life and the Work: Art and Biography*, ed. Charles G. Salas (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 76-96, interprets the stylistic and thematic characteristics of Van Gogh and Gauguin as a reflection of their respective Dutch Calvinist and French Catholic upbringing.

tradition—or when they appear as heavenly musicians.⁸ The only instance in which wingless angels appear to be justified on iconographic grounds is when they appear as human beings during their interactions with humans as messengers of God. These depictions include the Old Testament scenes when angels visit Lot (Genesis 19), when Jacob wrestles with an angel (Genesis 32), and when an angel appears to the parents of Samson (Judges 13). Two other scenes, one from the New Testament and another from an apocryphal book, were painted by Raphael in the Stanza d'Eliodoro in the Vatican. In the *Expulsion of Heliodorus* (1511-12), the horseman and two airborne men pursuing Heliodorus are described (2 Maccabees 3) as strong youths sent by God and should therefore be identified as wingless angels. In the *Liberation of Saint Peter* (1514), the winged angel who liberates Peter from prison in the center of the composition reappears on the right but his wings are cut by the frame, perhaps a visual cue indicating that Peter did not recognize his savior as an angel (Acts 12).⁹ Apart of the above categories, however, wingless angels appear only rarely in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art. Some well-known cases include the two angels in Andrea del Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ*, c. 1476 (the angel on the left was painted by his pupil, Leonardo), and Sandro Botticelli's handsome, well-dressed male youths who are portrayed as angelic companions of the Madonna and Child in several of his *tondi*.¹⁰

Michelangelo was undoubtedly aware of these precedents, yet two facts render his depiction of wingless angels original and bold. First, whereas the aforementioned examples present wingless angels standing or sitting firmly on

⁸ For example, the singing, lute-playing angels in Piero della Francesca's *Nativity*, 1470-75 (National Gallery, London); the angel-violinist in Giovanni Bellini's *Enthroned Madonna and Child with Saints*, 1505 (San Zaccaria, Venice); a seated wingless angel holding a lute in Francesco Zaganelli's *Baptism of Christ*, 1514 (National Gallery, London); and the concert of angels in Gaudenzio Ferrari's *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1534-38 (Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli, Saronno).

⁹ The angels in these two paintings by Raphael are discussed by Meredith J. Gill, *Angels and the Order of Heaven in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 200-1. In an exceptional case, the Archangel Raphael was disguised as human when he met Tobias, but his figure is usually depicted with wings. One exception is *Archangels Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel with Tobias* by Giovanni Francesco Caroto (Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona). See Joseph Hammond, "The Cult and Representation of the Archangel Raphael in Sixteenth-Century Venice," *St Andrews University Journal of Art History and Museum Studies* 15 (2011): 79-88.

¹⁰ Because Botticelli's angels were intended to portray family members of the patron (for instance, in his successful *Madonna del Magnificat*, 1480-81, the angels are portraits of Pietro di Medici's family), depicting living persons without wings may have been more appropriate. In any case, for his traditional religious subjects, such as *The Annunciation and The Coronation of the Virgin with Four Saints*, angels are strictly depicted with wings. Additional examples are: *Madonna and Child Attended by Angels* by a follower of Piero dell Francesca (Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown); some of the angels in Donatello's *Annunciation* (Santa Croce, Florence); Pontormo's *Altarpiece* (Santa Felicita, Florence), where the Christ-bearers are perhaps angels; Alessandro Allori, *Trinity* (Cappella di San Luca, Santissima Annunziata, Florence); and Piero di Cosimo's *Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist, Saint Cecilia, and Angels* (Art Institute of Chicago).

the ground, Michelangelo's angels, in a striking contrast, are flying in the air. Second, among the few Renaissance artists who also portrayed angels flying or hovering without wings, Michelangelo was the only artist who *consistently* rendered his angels without wings (the single exception will be discussed shortly).¹¹

The work that was notoriously subject to fierce censure for the lack of wings on Michelangelo's angels was the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel (1534-42; Fig. 9). In 1564, two decades after the fresco was completed, the Dominican theologian Giovanni Andrea Gilio criticized numerous iconographic idiosyncrasies in this fresco as grave errors, including the contorted poses, excessive nudity, personifications of the Cardinal Sins among the damned, and wingless angels.¹² The text, which was written shortly after the Council of Trent, was the first to echo the spirit of the council's decree on sacred imagery. The protagonists in Gilio's *Dialogue on the Errors of Painters* (*Dialogo degli errori de' pittori*) debate the issue of angels with no wings. One argues that it is a fact that angels do not have wings; the other asserts the necessity of depicting angels with wings as symbolic of their velocity and as a way to distinguish them from humans.¹³ As Charles Dempsey explains, Gilio distinguishes among three modes of painting: the "vero" (the truth) characterizing sacred paintings, the "finto" (the fictitious), and the "favoloso" (the fabulous). Because wingless angels belong to the "favoloso," they do not belong in sacred pictures.¹⁴ Gilio's criticism, therefore, refers only to the break with the artistic tradition of religious imagery and does not imply that Michelangelo challenged any Church doctrine regarding the true form of angels.

¹¹ Four wingless angels are seen holding the mandorla of Christ in the model of Cardinal Forteguerra's cenotaph, prepared by Verrocchio at the behest of the *Consiglio* of Pistoia (1478-83). Apparently, the *Consiglio* did not like the concept of wingless angels and Verrocchio had to add wings in the final work. Andrew Butterfield, *Verrocchio* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 140-41, fig. 181. The display of flying wingless angels by two of Michelangelo's great admirers—in two scenes of Saint John the Baptist by Pellegrino Tibaldi (San Giacomo Maggiore, Bologna, 1551-53) and in Giorgio Vasari's *Three Angels Appearing to Abraham* (Museo di S. Salvi, Florence)—clearly gained legitimacy from Michelangelo (the latter is also consistent with the biblical text). Wingless angels also appear in Correggio's *Assumption of the Virgin* in the dome of the Cathedral of Parma (1522-30).

¹² The criticism of the Last Judgment was analyzed by Melinda Schlitt, "Painting, Criticism, and Michelangelo's Last Judgment in the Age of the Counter-Reformation," in *Michelangelo's "Last Judgment"*, ed. Marcia B. Hall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 113-49.

¹³ Giovanni Andrea Gilio, *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie* (Camerino, 1564), in *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento fra manierismo e controriforma*, ed. Paola Barocchi (Bari: Laterza, 1961), 2:111-12.

¹⁴ Charles Dempsey, "Mythic Inventions in Counter-Reformation Painting," in *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth*, ed. P. A. Ramsey (Binghamton, N.Y.: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1982), 64-70. Gilio's censure of the contorted movements of the angels was explained by Michael Cole, "Discernment and Animation, Leonardo to Lomazzo," in *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Reindert Falkenburg et al. (Tournhout: Brepols, 2007), 154-58.

Scholars have been preoccupied with seeking an explanation for the lack of wings in Michelangelo's angels. A theological explanation offered by Rudolf Kuhn and Patricia Emison to the Sistine *ignudi* states that Michelangelo felt inclined to follow the Biblical tradition and to depict angels as they appear to humans—that is, disguised as mortals without wings.¹⁵ Angels in Christianity have been regarded as incorporeal entities or, in the words of Thomas Aquin¹⁶as, pure intellects. With the exception of the six-winged celestial creatures of the Seraphim (Isaiah 6:1-4) and the Cherubim (Exodus 26:18-20, Ezekiel 10), who do not possess a human form, all divine beings that are referred to as angels in the Bible are not winged and are presented in the guise of human beings.¹⁷ Nevertheless, although Michelangelo may have felt confident that his use of wingless angels is theologically sound, the idea of angels flying without wings cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of iconographic or cultural traditions that existed prior to Michelangelo. Hence, we are justified in regarding wingless angels as an idiosyncratic invention of the artist's imagery.

One explanation for the wingless angels of Michelangelo has been proposed by Valerie Shrimplin. Linking wingless angels to other seemingly idiosyncratic features in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, such as the beardless Apollo-like Christ and the halo-less saints, Shrimplin describes them as the artist's deliberate attempts to connect his iconography to the early Christian artistic tradition.¹⁸ This interpretation is in turn explained in reference to Michelangelo's involvement with the Catholic Reform movement in the 1530s and 1540s. The Reform movement emphasized the need to return to the old religious values of early Christianity—spirituality, simplicity, and devotion—expressed by the artist in his usage early Christian iconography. Shrimplin notes the significance of the depiction of wingless angels in the nave mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore, the Christian basilica in which Michelangelo had expressed his desire to be buried.¹⁹ Shrimplin's explanation is difficult to accept because wingless angles were already the exception to the rule in the surviving fourth-century churches of Rome, which were a source of inspiration to Michelangelo, such as Sta. Constanza, Sta. Pudenziana and SS. Cosmas and

¹⁵ Rudolf Kuhn, *Michelangelo: Die Sixtinische Decke. Beiträge über ihre Quellen und zu ihrer Auslegung* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), 52-58, 164-65, esp. 54; and Patricia Emison, "The *Ignudo* as Proto-Capriccio," *Word and Image* 14 (1998): 281-95, who claims that Michelangelo formulated the *ignudi* without wings in order to generate an authentic visionary experience.

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), "Treatise on the Angels," Q. 50, a1, 2, 4.

¹⁷ On the guise of biblical angels, see Jeanne Villette, *L'Ange dans l'art d'Occident du XIIe au XVIIe siècle, France, Italie, Flandre, Allemagne* (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1940); and Gill (with additional bibliography).

¹⁸ Valerie Shrimplin, *Sun-Symbolism and Cosmology in Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment'* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2000), 157.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

Damian. Furthermore, Shrimplin chose to reproduce the scene of the three (wingless) angels visiting Abraham as an example but as already noted, this is an exceptional case of angels appearing as human beings. (In another nave mosaic the angel appearing to Joshua is disguised as a human warrior and is therefore wingless, as described in Joshua 5.) Apart from these scenes, which merely conform to the biblical text, the Triumphal Arch mosaics in Santa Maria Maggiore display numerous winged angels. The question thus remains: why would Michelangelo choose the one example of wingless angels from the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaics as a representation of early Christian iconography rather than the innumerable examples of winged angels in the same church?

Another explanation for Michelangelo's choice was proposed by Edgar Wind, who argued that the artist, who so admired the human figure, found the addition of wings distasteful because it spoiled the body's outward perfection.²⁰ This explanation is consistent with the centrality of the human figure in his art and his habit of dispensing with secondary iconographical features such as haloes. Nevertheless, this explanation is unconvincing because for a short time, when creating non-religious imagery drawn from mythology, Michelangelo actually found the winged male figure quite pleasing. Hence, we cannot assume that Michelangelo always considered the winged human figure to be aesthetically displeasing. Rather, we could surmise that Michelangelo found winged angels to be completely inappropriate only in his religious art. An examination of the artist's oeuvre, undertaken with an eye toward other references to angels and wings can yield an abundance of relevant information and suggest an alternative—and more generally valid—explanation for this idiosyncratic feature.

Let us begin with an example that initially appear to undermine the rule that Michelangelo's angels are wingless—namely, the candelabrum-bearing angel that the artist created in 1494 as a counterpart to Niccolò dell'Arca's angel in the shrine of St. Dominic in the Church of San Domenico, Bologna (Fig. 1). To consider this figure an exception to the rule, however, would be overly hasty. Niccolò died during the execution of this commission, and young Michelangelo was instructed to complete the work by adding a similar angel to the one already created. Understandably, at the very beginning of his career, at the age of nineteen and in the context of this particular mission in which the angel form had been pre-determined by its pendant winged piece (Fig. 2), Michelangelo did not have the option, even if he so desired, to render his angel without wings. Thus, one could argue that in contrast to his later work, when Michelangelo was already famous and was able to express his own creative

²⁰ Edgar Wind, *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling*, ed. Elizabeth Sears (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 145, argues that, in the *ignudi*, Michelangelo “recoiled from the idea of disfiguring a human body with the appurtenances of a fowl.”

ideas more freely, the presence of wings in the angel of San Domenico is not the product of his free choice but merely a form that was imposed on him. Furthermore, closer examination of the St. Dominic angel reveals a peculiarity that has rarely been noted by scholars, let alone explained: Michelangelo carved the wings only on the side that is readily visible to the beholder while polishing the rear-facing side (Fig. 3).²¹ All the attention given to the modification of this angel's pose in comparison to Niccolò's has tended to minimize this important alteration. Certainly, the change is not hidden from the spectator, who can discover the absence of feathers simply by walking around the piece; therefore, we cannot presume that Michelangelo spared himself the work of refining the wings because the rear-facing side of the wings occupies a blind spot. Furthermore, we cannot consider this statue to be one of Michelangelo's *non finito* works; indeed, the smoothness of the marble surface all but confirms our perception of the statue as a finished work. Given the lack of aesthetic explanation for the artist's decision to leave the wings of the angel in this stage of development, one may wonder whether the Bologna angel is a reflection of Michelangelo's disinclination to render wings on an angel.

If this interpretation of the St. Dominic angel is correct, then it represents an important biographical starting point that demonstrates that the artist's aversion to winged angel figures was already in place in 1494, when Michelangelo was nineteen years old.²² A similar, presumably reluctant treatment of wings can be found in an unfinished work commonly attributed to Michelangelo from roughly the same period: the so-called *Manchester Madonna* (Fig. 4). In this work, three of the four angels flanking the Virgin do not have wings at all, while the fourth angel on the right is obscured by the frame in such a way that shows only a few feathers on his wing. Here, we see Michelangelo acknowledging the tradition of the winged angel while also negating it, for all practical purposes.²³

²¹ Linda Murray, *Michelangelo* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 25, mentions the smooth wing of Michelangelo's Bolognese angel without explaining it further. Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo: Painter, Sculptor, Architect* (Secaucus, N.J.: Chartwell Books, 1978), 22, notices that this statue is "the only winged angel in his entire oeuvre." Cf. Robert Liebert, *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of his Life and Images* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 64. Three studies that look closely at the Bolognese angel neglect the issue: Alison Luchs, "Michelangelo's Bologna Angel: 'Counterfeiting' the Tuscan Duecento?," *Burlington Magazine* 120 (1976): 222-25; Ellen L. Longworth, "Michelangelo and the Eye of the Beholder: The Early Bologna Sculptures," *Artibus et Historiae* 23 (2002): 77-82; and Martha Dunkelman, "What Michelangelo Learned in Bologna," *Artibus et Historiae* 69 (2014): 107-36.

²² In an earlier work, the *Madonna della Scala* (c. 1491), the children playing on the celestial staircase were identified as wingless angels by Wind, 145.

²³ Interestingly, Michael Hirst supports his attribution of the *Manchester Madonna* to Michelangelo by noting that the few feathers of the angel on the right side are consistent with the artist's general refusal to paint wings; see Michael Hirst and Jill Dunkerton, *The Young Michelangelo: The Artist in Rome 1496-1501* (London: The National Gallery and Yale University Press, 1994), 44.

In his most famous works, Michelangelo's angels were entirely devoid of wings. The first key work from which wings were completely removed is the monumental fresco cycle of the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508-12; Fig. 5). Perhaps the most prominent wingless angel is the sword-bearing figure who expels Adam and Eve from Paradise. In a scene that has been the subject of numerous interpretations, *The Creation of Adam*, God's entourage clearly includes a few puerile, wingless angels.²⁴ The *ignudi* and even the *putti* accompanying the prophets and sibyls are frequently identified as angels.²⁵ Here, I would prefer not to enter the debate regarding the identity of the Sistine *ignudi*; I offer only the following remarks relevant to our purpose. Preparatory studies of the Sistine ceiling indicate that the *ignudi* were originally conceived as winged creatures—the *ignudi* are preceded by winged caryatides in one study (Fig. 6) and by winged *putti* in another (Fig. 7). These studies underpin the iconographic derivation of the *ignudi* from the classical imagery of nude *putti* or angels holding medallions and escutcheons from both sides.²⁶ These studies also allow us to infer that in Michelangelo's mind, angels do have wings; however, when creating the frescoes, he replaced them with wingless *ignudi*. Regardless of our view of the identity of the *ignudi*, one fact regarding the Sistine ceiling, the one most pertinent to our inquiry, remains indisputable: no winged angel or any other figure are shown in the entire elaborated heavenly sphere as conceived by the artist, in striking contradiction to all precedents in Renaissance art. If, for the reason mentioned above, we do not accept the aesthetic explanation for such a strict avoidance of wings in the Sistine Chapel, we are again inclined to consider that Michelangelo found it inappropriate to paint wings in a religious setting.

Other projects reveal a similar pattern and provide further glimpses into the artist's mental image of the angel. Preliminary drawings and reconstructions of the tomb of Julius II in its earlier stages (1505-16), for example, show a pair

²⁴ As described, for example, by Hibbard, 74. For an attempt to identify some of these figures, see Leo Steinberg, "Who's Who in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*: A Chronology of the Picture's Reluctant Self-Revelation," *Art Bulletin* 74 (1992): 552-66.

²⁵ John Ruskin, "The Aesthetic and Mathematical Schools of Art in Florence" (1874), quoted in Charles Seymour, *Michelangelo, the Sistine Chapel Ceiling: Illustrations, Introductory Essay, Background and Sources, Critical Essays* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 159; and Esther Gordon Dotson, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, Part I," *Art Bulletin* 61 (1979): 230-31. The identification of the *ignudi* as angels tends to be highly specific: as "Angels of the Law" in the role of salvation, see Staale Sinding-Larsen, "A Re-reading of the Sistine Ceiling," *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 4 (1969): 153; as seraphs, see Wind, 145-47; as celestial images or "Victory angels," see Margaret Finch, "The Sistine Chapel as a Temenos: An Interpretation Suggested by the Restored Visibility of the Lunettes," *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 65 (1990): 64-65; as cherubs of the Temple of Solomon, see Kuhn, 52-58, and George L. Hersey, *High Renaissance Art in St. Peter's and the Vatican: An Interpretive Guide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 198; as Neoplatonic *genii*, specifically the *genii* of the *anima rationale*, see Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo: The Sistine Chapel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), 2:63, 64; and as angels disguised as mortals, see Emison, 281-95. On the *putti*, see Wind, 146.

²⁶ Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, vol. 2, figs. 230-31.

of winged angels supporting the effigy of the dead pope in the upper story of the monument (Fig. 8).²⁷ These studies clarify Michelangelo's awareness of the basic guise of winged angels and the way that he referenced his namesake, Archangel Michael, more than once in his oeuvre.²⁸ For example, in a letter dated February 1522 to Gerardo Perini, a young man with whom he was infatuated, Michelangelo signed off with a rebus of a winged head. Hence, once again, like others in the Renaissance period, Michelangelo visualized an angel as a winged figure.²⁹

In addition to the aforementioned works, wingless angels are also featured in drawings for Vittoria Colonna, *Crucifixion* and *Pietà* (c. 1539-46), as well as in the Pauline Chapel's *Conversion of St. Paul* (c. 1542-50; Fig. 10). Why did the artist omit the wings when drawing these figures? What compelled Michelangelo to avoid actualizing this image in his art?

I believe that the evidence for the answer to this question lies in a brief period in his life, in the early 1530s, when the artist was in love with the young Tommaso Cavalieri. During this period, wings and winged flight pervaded his presentation drawings and love poems. We recognize these verbal and visual works not only as aspects of Michelangelo's "art" but also as biographical documents; in these personal confessions of love, the boundaries among the work of art, the author of the work, and Michelangelo the individual are completely blurred. I believe that these documents provide us with an opportunity to understand the meaning of angels and wings in Michelangelo's work at both the artistic and psychological levels.

In several sonnets Michelangelo expresses his desire to unite with Tommaso using the image of the beloved as a winged angel, Amor, or Cupid, who provides the poet with wings for a mutual ecstatic ascension to heaven: "If one soul in two bodies is made eternal, raising both to heaven with similar wings / if Love with one blow and one gilded dart / can burn and rend the vitals in two breasts" and "I fly, though lacking feathers, with your wing / with your

²⁷ The angels feature in three stages of the project, as seen in drawings dated 1505, 1513 (a faithful copy by Jacomo Rocchetti), and 1516. As is evident from Antonio Slamanca's engraving of the monument from 1545, they were excluded in the final version. See Erwin Panofsky, "The First Two Projects of Michelangelo's Tomb of Julius II," *Art Bulletin* 19 (1937): 561-79.

²⁸ Leo Steinberg, "Who's Who," 565, identifies Saint Michael accompanying God in the *Creation of Adam*. In his only signature on a public piece, the Vatican Pieta, the artist divided his name into Michel and Angelus and inscribed it on the strap across the Virgin's chest. Irving Lavin argues that this division alludes to the Archangel Michael, who, in the Assumption of the Virgin, carries her soul aloft and serves as her guardian in Heaven. See Irving Lavin, "Divine Grace and the Remedy of the Imperfect: Michelangelo's Signature on the St. Peter's Pieta," *Artibus et Historiae* 68 (2013): 281, 299.

²⁹ For the letter, see Giovanni Poggi, Paola Barocchi, and Renzo Ristori, eds., *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1965-73), 2:343; and E. H. Ramsden, *Letters of Michelangelo* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 1:141.

mind I am constantly impelled toward heaven.”³⁰ It should be emphasized that Tommaso, the provider of the wings, is depicted as an angel rather than Amor or Cupid: “But why complain any more, now that I see / in the eyes of this unique and joyous angel / my peace, my repose and my salvation? / Perhaps to see or hear him earlier / would have been worse, since now, in flight with him / he gives me equal wings to follow his power”; and “Then I recognized my mistake and error / for one who, lacking wings, would pursue an angel.”³¹ This depiction supports the assertion that in Michelangelo’s mind, there is no separation whereby angels belong to the realm of religion and other winged creatures belong to the realm of mythological imagery; rather, with regard to the love of young men, the two realms are united: the lover is depicted as a Christian angel. In these sonnets, as in others written by Michelangelo, the angel Tommaso is revered as God, and the love of the artist is conflated with divine love: “I love you with my tongue, and then regret / that love doesn’t reach my heart; yet I don’t know where / I might open a door to grace, so it can spread / within my heart, and chase out all pitiless pride. / Rend that veil, you, O Lord, break down that wall / which with its hardness keeps delayed from us / the sun of your light, extinguished in this world.”³²

James Saslow and others have noted that the power of love to furnish the lover with wings in Michelangelo’s poetry and its associations with the permissibility of love between men are best understood in the context of late *quattrocento* humanism, specifically Neoplatonism, which influenced the artist deeply.³³ As exemplified in the work of the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino, Neoplatonism attempted to unite pagan philosophy with Christianity and to link beauty with Christian values. According to Neoplatonism, beautiful male nudity is a corporeal reflection of divine beauty. Human beauty and the observer’s profound apprehension of it may incite spiritual love; the soul metaphorically receives wings. These wings symbolize the anagogic flight through earthly love that completes itself in a transcendence of corporeality and in the complete assimilation of the soul with the Divine.

The imagery of wings appears not only in the sonnets but also in the presentation drawings that Michelangelo sent to Tommaso in the same period. All of these drawings revolve around the tension between spirituality and sensuality—a subject central to Neoplatonism—and include winged creatures, with the exception of *The Children’s Bacchanal*.³⁴ In the unprecedentedly

³⁰ Enzo Noe Girardi, ed., *Michelangelo Buonarroti, Rime* (Bari: Laterza, 1960), nos. 59 and 89 respectively. English translations are from James M. Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 152, 211.

³¹ Girardi nos. 61 and 80; Saslow, *Poetry*, 156, 192.

³² Girardi, no. 87; Saslow, *Poetry*, 208.

³³ James M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 26.

³⁴ On the five drawings, which are widely accepted as gifts for Tommaso, see Christoph Luitpold Frommel, *Michelangelo und Tommaso dei Cavalieri* (Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini Press, 1979); Saslow, *Ganymede*, 17-62; and Liebert, 270-311. Michelangelo’s *Leda and the*

sensual *Rape of Ganymede* (Fig. 11), a beautiful nude is embraced by an eagle from behind; the resulting juxtaposition suggests the image of a winged nude. It has been argued that Michelangelo, in this work, draws upon the dual meaning of the Ganymede myth, namely, that of spiritual ascent and salvation on one hand and overt homosexuality on the other.³⁵ Under the guise of classical mythology, Michelangelo expresses his love to Tommaso in Neoplatonic terms as a pure spiritual love, but the posture of the eagle and its powerful grip on Ganymede strongly suggest physical passion. In *The Punishment of Tityos*, which has been interpreted in terms of “the agonies of sensual passion, enslaving the soul and debasing it” since the time of Lucretius,³⁶ the vulture is transformed into an eagle that is identical to the eagle of Ganymede. The bird is poised to embrace rather than torment the nude Tityos, whose portrayal, unchained and receptive, closely parallels that of Ganymede. In *The Fall of Phaeton*, Apollo rides on an eagle, although the eagle is not mentioned in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* or any other account of the myth and is not depicted in any earlier image. In *The Archers Shooting a Herm*, in which several nude men shoot invisible arrows at a herm—clearly a homoerotic theme—a winged cupid is lying at the edge of the scene.³⁷ Most importantly, in *The Dream*, which belongs chronologically, thematically, and stylistically to the same period as the presentation drawings, an angel with aquiline wings symbolizes spiritual love or divine inspiration.³⁸

These observations permit several conclusions regarding the period in which Michelangelo was infatuated with Tommaso. First, as discussed previously, the evidence clearly demonstrates that Michelangelo’s mental image of an angel was that of a winged creature. This view in turn supports the notion that Michelangelo intentionally omitted wings in his religious works

Swan, known from an engraved copy by Cornelius Bos and a painting by Rosso Fiorentino, involves wings in a sensual scene. The dominant role of the wings in this painting is even more noticeable when compared to Leonardo’s version of the myth. See Liebert, 248–61.

³⁵ On Michelangelo’s *Ganymede*, see Liebert, 277–78; Saslow, *Ganymede*, 17–62; and Leonard Barkan, *Transuming Passion: Ganymede and the Erotics of Humanism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 74–98.

³⁶ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 3:982–84; quoted in Saslow, *Ganymede*, 34.

³⁷ Judith Anne Testa, “The Iconography of the *Archers*: A Study of Self-Concealment and Self-Revelation in Michelangelo’s Presentation Drawings,” *Studies in Iconography* 5 (1979): 45–72.

³⁸ For the drawing as representation of the Seven Deadly Sins, see Frederick Hartt, *Michelangelo Drawings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975), no. 359; and Matthias Winner, “Michelangelo’s *Il Sogno* as an Example of an Artist’s Visual Reflection in His Drawings,” in *Michelangelo Drawings*, ed. Craig Hugh Smyth, *Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 33 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 227–42. Preceding Winner, Panofsky identified the winged creature in the *Dream* as an angel: Erwin Panofsky, “The Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo,” in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 224. The winged trumpeter was interpreted as either an angel or a generic “genius” by Maria Ruvoldt, *The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration: Metaphors of Sex, Sleep, and Dreams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 148–49.

because he found them inappropriate. The preoccupation with wings and winged forms manifested most strongly in the winged angel, Amor or the Eagle, would seem to betoken his erotic state of mind. More specifically, the Christian winged angel was conflated in his mind with the pagan Cupid or Eros, both of whom represent the homoerotic object of desire. Wing imagery—and more specifically the image of the union with a nude winged youth that ostensibly symbolizes spiritual union—implicitly conveys the dual nature of Michelangelo’s yearning for love that was simultaneously sexual and spiritual. By conceptualizing his love for young men as spiritual flight, Michelangelo could give expression to his homoerotic feelings in a manner compatible with his Christian beliefs while simultaneously denying them. However, as we observed, this mental solution was never entirely successful. What is evident to the contemporary audience of his drawings and love sonnets was presumably evident to the artist himself—that his love for young men was charged with intense homoerotic feelings.

This awareness points to the very reason that Michelangelo eschewed wings in his religious imagery, in contrast to the presentation drawings and love poems that have been discussed. I assume that that artist, being conscious of the fact that the winged nudes were charged with sinful homoerotic connotations, felt that it would be sinful to project these undertones in his religious art.

At this stage, a critic who is aware of the methodological precautions discussed in the preface of this article may raise the following issue: the entire argument thus far is based on the idea that winged imagery has a specific erotic meaning to Michelangelo. However, if such imagery was a well-known Neoplatonic metaphor used in art and poetry to reflect Platonic love, then Michelangelo’s usage of the wings can be satisfactorily explained by the prominence of wing imagery in the vocabulary of Neoplatonic writers. If this is the case, then their prominence in Michelangelo’s work during the period of his infatuation with Tommaso need not have a distinct psychological meaning. My answer to such an objection would be that the usage of the wing imagery by the artist far surpasses what was customary in his time and that wings in his poetry embody a very specific meaning that was more or less opposed to the contemporary understanding of what wings signify.

A survey of Neoplatonic literature at the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century reveals that wings are not a central or especially prominent image in the works of Ficino and Pico della Mirandola or in the poems of Girolamo Benivieni or Lorenzo de’ Medici. When wings were used, the intent was primarily to indicate the ascent of the soul toward God rather than a union between men.³⁹ To determine the personal meaning that

³⁹ Lorenzo de’ Medici, for example, writes: “Our chaste and lovely soul, then, has two wings, desire and intellect, by which it rises, soaring to sovereign God, beyond the stars”; in *Lorenzo de’ Medici: Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Jon Thiem (University Park: Pennsylvania State

wing metaphors had for Michelangelo, we must identify the ways in which the conceit of winged flight in Michelangelo's poetry and presentation drawings differed from their customary expression in the Renaissance. As we have observed, the particular twist in Michelangelo's imagery consists of transforming the beloved into an angel, or Amor, who furnishes him with wings and takes him to heaven. Thus, Michelangelo uses wings not as a means of transcending earthly beauty in favor of solitary ascent and contemplation of God but rather as a symbol for an eternal, yet ecstatic attachment to the beloved. Michelangelo's symbolic thinking therefore encompasses and connects three motifs: the beloved as the incarnation of a heavenly creature who is worshipped like God, the lover's receipt of wings from the beloved, and the tandem ascension of the lovers to heaven. Given that these elements are absent from Renaissance literature, we must regard them as an original image of Michelangelo's invention that has a personal meaning unrelated to any literary clichés of the period.

Returning to our main argument, I would like to note that visually clipping the wings of the angel/Eros—as a symbolic de-eroticization of the figure—is not a modern idea projected onto the mind of a Renaissance man but rather an idiom that was very much entrenched in Renaissance iconography. Two types of Eros were recognized in the Renaissance: *Amor Divinis*, referring to pure celestial love, and *Amor Vulgaris*, tempting earthly love. The latter type, which is often visually represented by a winged, athletic young man rather than a childish Cupid, is featured in Petrarch's *Trionfi* (1354-74), in which the punished Cupid symbolizes the “triumph of chastity.”⁴⁰ In a *psychomachia* between Chastity and Lust, Eros is presented as the sexual desire that one must overcome. Chaste women break the arrows and quiver of Cupid, pluck feathers from his wings, and sometimes actually sever the wings. This Petrarchan theme, depicted in various artifacts including *cassoni*, *deschi da parto* (birth trays), and engravings, was intended as a warning against carnal temptation.⁴¹

University Press, 1991), 80. Pico della Mirandola writes in his celebrated commentary on the poem of love by Benivieni: “The Poet indicates this by telling us that the same wings on which love descends are those with which he himself is to be elevated to the sublime contemplation of the mysteries of love”; Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Commentary on a Poem of Platonic Love*, trans. Douglas Carmichael (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), 76.

⁴⁰ “Trionfo della Pudicizia,” lines 133-35: “queste gli strali, avean spezzato e la faretra a lato a quel protervo, e spennachiato l’ali”; Francesco Petrarca, *I Trionfi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1956), 48.

⁴¹ On the Petrarchan “Triumph of Chastity” in art, see Anne Jacobson-Schutte, “‘Trionfo delle donne’: Tematiche di rovesciamento dei ruoli nella Firenze Rinascimentale,” *Quaderni storici* 44 (1980): 474-96; Alexandra Ortner, *Petrarcas Trionfi in Malerei, Dichtung und Festkultur: Untersuchung zur Entstehung und Verbreitung eines florentinischen Bildmotivs auf cassoni und deschi da parto des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 1998); Charles Dempsey, “Portraits and Masks in the Art of Lorenzo de’ Medici, Botticelli, and Poliziano’s *Stanze per la Giostra*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 3-16; Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 163-69; Adrian W. B. Randolph, *Engaging Symbols: Gender, Politics, and Public Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven and London: Yale

One example is Luca Signorelli's contemporary fresco *Cupid Chastised* (c. 1509) in the Palazzo Magnifico, Siena, painted for the wedding of the city ruler Pandolfo Petrucci (Fig. 12). The beginning and end of the narrative are relegated to the background: on the left, Love is captured, and on the right, Chastity sits on a triumphal chariot. The foreground is dedicated to the violent climax: Lucretia and Penelope, two female exemplars of Chastity, break Eros's bow and pull out his feathers.

A different theme—in which the wings of Amor are cut—that is more closely affiliated with Michelangelo's Neoplatonism is the so-called allegory of Two Loves, which was popular in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. This allegory is found in several distinct contexts: on a medal in Berlin attributed to Bertoldo di Giovanni, dated 1491; in the vestibule of the sacristy of the Church of Santo Spirito; and, in its most complete form, on a panel currently in London at the Wallace Collection (Fig. 13).⁴² In the latter image, Venus, who is seated on a brown urn decorated with a faun's head, holds Cupid's bow in her left hand. On an altar before her kneels a wingless Cupid, represented as an athletic male youth with his hands bound, burning in fire. Another Cupid is blowing on the fire. On the right side of the panel, we see a chariot with two horses driven by winged *putti*. André Chastel has interpreted the subject as earthly love (represented by the wingless Cupid) in the process of being purified by divine love (represented by Venus in her form of *Venus coelestis*): Cupid blows on the fire at her command, while the chariot, horses, and winged *putti* represent the human soul.⁴³ We again observe that the purification of the soul through the de-eroticization of Eros is symbolized by cutting the wings of Amor.

The de-eroticized, wingless Cupid is not only a visual symbol but also a motif that appears often in Renaissance poetry—for example, in Poliziano's unfinished second book of the *Stanze*. In Julio's dream, conferred upon him at the order of Venus before the ordination of the joust, a lady dressed as Pallas appears to him; “she seems to pluck all the feathers from his [Cupid's] wings, and she breaks the bow and arrows of the wretch.”⁴⁴ A similar de-eroticizing move informs the motif of clipped wings in a poem by Benivieni, a

University Press, 2002), 229-41, 272-73; and Andrea Bayer, ed., *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, exhib. cat. (New York, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 158-59.

⁴² John Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection Catalogue of Pictures I: British, German, Italian, Spanish* (London: Trustees of the Wallace Collection, 1985), 314-16, cat. no. P556.

⁴³ André Chastel, *Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique: Études sur la Renaissance et l'humanisme platonicien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 269-72.

⁴⁴ In a letter to Bernardo Bembo from 1475, Giovanni Aurelio Augurelli describes Giuliano Medici's banner as knightly allegory in displaying Cupid with hands tied behind his back, a broken bow, and “no feathers hang from his shoulders”; Randolph, 193. In describing Giuliano's standard, Poliziano might have been the inventor of Giuliano's knightly allegory. Dempsey, *Inventing*, 169-74.

Neoplatonist poet who joined the Savonarola party and became a *piagnone*.⁴⁵ In his *Abhominazione delo amore carnale* (Abomination of Carnal Love), Benivieni writes that following: “I see you with your wings cut / No more will you be able to fly in a gentle heart.”⁴⁶ Here, clipped wings again symbolize the overcoming of sexual desire and the purification of the soul.

Having established the meaning of cut wings, we should confront a more basic question: Can we legitimately attribute to Michelangelo the notion that the presence of nude winged angels, which the artist associated with his own carnal desires, would have somehow desecrated his religious imagery? Would such an assertion amount to an anachronistic projection of a post-Freudian concept onto a Renaissance man, for whom the concept would have been entirely alien? A solution to this quandary appears in a statement attributed to Michelangelo by Gabriele Paleotti (1594), testifying to the artist’s perception of the importance of the need to maintain Christian piety within the artistic soul. For him, according to this statement, Fra Angelico was the ideal religious artist because he painted with a pure heart and gave “outward expression to his inner devotion and piety.”⁴⁷ For Michelangelo, art is invested with the content of the artist’s soul; conversely, we may infer that if the soul is touched by impure feelings, those would also be reflected in his art. According to the testimony of Paleotti, Michelangelo felt that his heart could not be as pure as Fra Angelico’s heart. In contrast to Fra Angelico, the perfect religious work of art eluded Michelangelo, “since I do not feel myself to have so well disposed a heart.”

Having established that Michelangelo recognized a close connection between his image-concepts and his inner state, we must return to the following iconographically specific question: How did wings become so erotically charged in Michelangelo’s mind?

I submit Plato’s *Phaedrus* as providing insight into this question. In the *Phaedrus* we find that the wing metaphor is prominent and frequently invoked. More importantly, the deployment of wing metaphors in this text articulates three key aspects of love that would subsequently characterize Michelangelo’s poetry and art during the Cavaliere infatuation: attraction to the physical beauty

⁴⁵ Lorenzo Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494-1545* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 141-64.

⁴⁶ Girolamo Benivieni, *Opere* (Florence: Filippo di Giunta, 1519), fol. 123v : “*en veggio amore tarpate haile tue ale/ Ne puoi certo volare piu in cor gentile*” (my translation).

⁴⁷ Gabriele Paleotti, *Archiepiscopale Bononiense* (Rome, 1594), 81; quoted in Barocchi, *Trattati*, 2:616, n. 5; and Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 78. In this regard, Michelangelo, according to Francisco de Hollanda, also contends: “In order to imitate in some degree the venerable image of Our Lord, it is not enough to be a painter, a great and skillful master; I believe that one must further be of blameless life, even if possible a saint, that the Holy Spirit may inspire one’s understanding”; Francisco de Hollanda, *Diálogos em Roma* (1538): *Conversations on Art with Michelangelo Buonarroti*, ed. Grazia Dolores Folliero-Metz (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1998), 111.

of young men, worship of the beloved as a God, and the mutual ascension of both lover and beloved. Several quotations from *Phaedrus* will suffice to demonstrate its affinity to Michelangelo's wing motifs and related poetical conceits:

*But he who is newly initiated . . . when he sees a god-like face or form which is a good image of beauty, shudders at first, and something of the old awe comes over him, then, as he gazes he reveres the beautiful one as God and he did not fear to be thought stark mad, he would offer sacrifice to his beloved as to an idol or a god. And as he looks upon him, a reaction from his shuddering comes over him, with sweat and unwonted heat; for as the effluence of beauty enters him through the eyes, he is warmed; the effluence moistens the germ of the feathers, and as he grows warm, the parts from which the feathers grow, which were before hard and choked, and prevented the feathers from sprouting, become soft, and as the nourishment streams upon him, the quills of the feathers swell and begin to grow from the roots over all the form of the soul; for it was once all feathered.*⁴⁸

*Now this condition, fair boy, about which I am speaking, is called Love by men, but when you hear what the gods call it, perhaps because of your youth you will laugh. But some of the Homeridae, I believe, repeat two verses on Love from the spurious poems of Homer, one of which is very outrageous and not perfectly metrical. They sing them as follows: 'Mortals call him winged Love, but the immortals call him The Winged One, because he must need grow wings.'*⁴⁹

Subsequently, Socrates refers to a chaste love between enlightened friends as winged love:

*If now the better elements of the mind, which lead to a well ordered life and to philosophy, prevail, they live a life of happiness and harmony here on hearth... and when this life is ended they are light and winged . . . neither human wisdom nor divine inspiration can confer upon man any greater blessing than this.*⁵⁰

However, love between men is not devoid of tension and physical temptation:

If however they live a life less noble, and without philosophy, but yet ruled by the love of honor, probably, when they have been drinking, or in some other moment of carelessness, the two unruly horses, taking the souls of their guard,

⁴⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1999), 487.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 489-91.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 501-3.

will bring them together and seize upon an accomplished that which is by the many accounted blissful; and when this has once been done, they continue the practice, but infrequently, since what they are doing is not approved by the whole mind, so these two pass through life as friends . . . believing that they have exchanged the most binding pledges of love, and that they can never break them and fall them into enmity. And at last, when they depart from the body, they are not winged, to be sure, but their wings have begun to grow, so that the madness of love brings them no small reward; for it is the law that those who have once begun their upward progress shall never again pass into darkness and the journey under the earth, but shall live a happy life in the light as they journey together, and because of their love shall be alike in their plumage when they receive their wings.⁵¹

As these lines show, the *Phaedrus* contains all the elements of Michelangelo's winged love imagery. In the *Phaedrus*, winged love is so powerful and all-encompassing that it may also involve homosexual relations; hence, this example suggests the most compelling explanation for the strong hold of the wing imagery on Michelangelo's psyche. Such a text, in other words, would have provided Michelangelo with affirmation and consolation for his complex and tormented attraction to young men.

We can now attempt to reconstruct the inception and evolution of the wingless angel image in young Michelangelo's mind and trace it back to the beginning of the 1490s, when the artist was brought into the circle of the Neoplatonists in the Florentine Medicean court. The group of scholars and poets who surrounded Lorenzo de Medici was characterized by affectionate and intense male friendships such as that between Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Cavalcanti or that observed in Pico della Mirandola's relationship with Benivieni.⁵² Such relationships surely helped Michelangelo conceptualize his own attraction to men as a time-honored parallel of the philosophical life, a Platonic love that was compatible with Christian values.⁵³ Furthermore, as we know from Ascanio Condivi (whose *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti* was written in 1553 in collaboration with the artist) the poet and humanist Poliziano, who served as Michelangelo's mentor in Lorenzo's household, was known by his contemporaries as a homosexual, a figure who, as Saslow

⁵¹ Ibid., 503.

⁵² Saslow, *Ganymede*, 29. On some unusual forms of spiritual friendship in Medicean Florence, see Stephen Bowd, "Swarming with Hermits: Religious Friendship in Renaissance Italy, 1490-1540," in *Forms of Faith in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, ed. Abigail Brundin and Matthew Treherne (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 15-16.

⁵³ The relations with the cultivated homosexually inclined men may not have stayed only in the spiritual level. As William Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and his Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 43, gently suggests: "Michelangelo was probably not the initiator of relations but rather the passive recipient of their attentions. He would have been precisely the age when it was extremely common for a young man to become the object of attention and affection from a group of older men."

describes, “wrote frequently of Ganymede and other homoerotic classical figures, in language quite as lyrically physical as it was romantically spiritual.”⁵⁴ Condivi describes the relationship between Poliziano and young Michelangelo as follows: “Recognizing in Michelangelo a superior spirit, he loved him very much and, although there was no need, he continually urged him on in his studies, always explaining things to him and providing him with subjects.”⁵⁵ I think we can assume that the *Phaedrus* was one of the subjects that Poliziano introduced to his young student, who was then taking his initial lessons in Latin. It was probably at this time that the book’s wing imagery captured Michelangelo’s imagination because it legitimized, to a large extent, his homoerotic feelings.⁵⁶ It was therefore in this period that the images of the Christian angel and the pagan Eros became assimilated in his mind as one figure representing love in all of its aspects.

However, this period did not last long, as Michelangelo and other members of the Platonic circle soon came under the influence of the zealous religious reformer Savonarola.⁵⁷ Savonarola, who did not believe in the Ficinian synthesis between paganism and Christianity, was particularly severe in denouncing sodomy. He observed in the male nude an expression of reprobate paganism and condemned any form of homoerotic desire—“the love of beardless youth,” as he called it in one of his fiery sermons of 1494—as a sin punishable by eternal damnation.⁵⁸ As far as artists were concerned, Savonarola condemned any form of indecent subject matter or style in religious art and demanded that artists paint only pure religious images.⁵⁹ Although deeply moved by Savonarola, Michelangelo could not abandon his Neoplatonism as did other members of the circle, such as Benivieni and Botticelli. For him, as Panofsky profoundly realized, Neoplatonism was not

⁵⁴ Saslow, *Ganymede*, 29. On Poliziano’s homosexuality, see also Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendship: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 198.

⁵⁵ Ascanio Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 15.

⁵⁶ Poliziano’s frequent quotations of the *Phaedrus* in his writings confirm that he was well versed with this dialogue: Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 62; and “A Letter to Bartolomeo Scala in Defence of the Stoic Philosopher Epictetus” (1479), in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1:195.

⁵⁷ Most scholars agree that Michelangelo was influenced by Savonarola. See especially Charles de Tolnay, *The Art and Thought of Michelangelo* (New York: Pantheon, 1964), 59; Saslow, *Ganymede*, 47-48; and Rab Hatfield, “Trust in God: The Sources of Michelangelo’s Frescos on the Sistine Ceiling,” *Occasional Papers Published by Syracuse University, Florence, Italy* 1 (1991): 1-23. For rejections of this argument, see Ronald M. Steinberg, *Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Florentine Art, and Renaissance Historiography* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), 42; and Liebert, 63, n. 6.

⁵⁸ Rocke, 204-23.

⁵⁹ Gustave Gruyer, *Les illustrations des écrits de Jérôme Savonarole publiés en Italie au XVI^e siècle, et les paroles de Savonarole sur l’art* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1879), 207.

only a “convincing philosophical system” but a “metaphysical justification of his own self.”⁶⁰ Rather than abandon his Platonism, Michelangelo endeavored to reconcile his erotic attraction to the male nude with admonitions of Savonarolan criticism—to de-eroticize the nude and purify his soul. Notably, Michelangelo’s effort to address his homosexuality in the midst of this internal conflict of Platonism and Savonarola is not merely a hypothetical reconstruction but is attested by Condivi. In a passage that appears to comment on this very conflict, Condivi writes as follows: “He has likewise read the Holy Scriptures with great application and study, both the Old Testament and the New, as well as the writings of those who have studied them, such as Savonarola, for whom he has always had great affection and whose voice still lives in his memory.”⁶¹ The passage that immediately follows reads almost as a direct response to the admonitions of Savonarola and to the artist’s own guilt: “He has also loved the beauty of the human body as one who knows it extremely well, and loved it in such a way as to inspire certain carnal men, who are incapable of understanding the love of beauty except as lascivious and indecent, to think and speak ill of him. . . . I have often heard Michelangelo converse and discourse on the subject of love and have later heard from those who were present that what he said about love was no different than what we read in the writings of Plato.”⁶²

In participating in this process of de-eroticization and ensuring that his own sinful feelings would not be projected into his religious imagery, the artist needed to dispose of the winged nude that, for him, signified homoerotic desire. Torn by Savonarola on the one side and his homoerotic tendencies on the other, Michelangelo had to abandon the Ficinian ideal of uniting *Amor and Religio*: to create religious art based on the beauty of the male figure, Amor needed to be displaced. Hence, the Michelangelesque wingless angel may be interpreted as the symbolic confession of an artist who had likely led an abstinent or near-abstinent life.⁶³ Expressing divine beauty by means of the nude male body required renouncing sexuality. The sublime beauty of Michelangelo’s art could be built only upon the ruins of Eros.

As we have observed, the de-erotized wingless angel appears throughout Michelangelo’s oeuvre—with the exception of the outburst of eroticism in the 1530s, when the artist met Tommaso Cavalieri. For a brief period of time, the repressed desire to openly love another man surfaced and was expressed in the form of the winged male nude and other winged creatures formed in the artist’s

⁶⁰ Panofsky, “The Neoplatonic Movement,” 180.

⁶¹ Condivi, 105. Vasari-Milanesi, 7:275, probably draws on Condivi and reiterates the influence of Savonarola on the artist.

⁶² Condivi, 105.

⁶³ Ibid. The artist’s last assistant, Tiberio Calcagni, added a comment to Condivi’s biography: “About [refraining from] sexual intercourse: this I have always done, and if you want to prolong your life, do not indulge in it or at least as little as you can.” See Caroline Elam, “‘Ché ultima mano!’: Tiberio Calcagni’s Marginal Annotations to Condivi’s *Life of Michelangelo*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 494-95.

mind. However, this expression did not last long: after this emotional outburst prompted by his desire, Michelangelo, while working on *The Last Judgment*, experienced a change of mood that he expressed in his art and poetry. His love for Tommaso gave way to a preoccupation with sin and anxiety regarding his own salvation. Overcome by guilt and a fear of damnation, he intensified his efforts to purify his soul in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation.

This understanding of Michelangelo's state of mind in this period and the new interpretation proposed here regarding the motif of the wing may be critical to deciphering one final iconographic riddle from this phase in the artist's career: the enormous wing attached to Charon's boat in his Dante-inspired hell in *The Last Judgment* (Fig. 14). This wing is, significantly, the only one that appears in this fresco, although such a wing does not exist in the *Divine Comedy* or in pictorial representations of hell created by artists before Michelangelo. I would conjecture that this wing appended to Charon's boat symbolizes the artist's abandonment of any hope of finding a place for his homoerotic feelings.⁶⁴ Platonic love was no longer redemptive: the eternal place of homoerotic Eros is hell.

If we accept that Michelangelo's art is the product of a mental conflict caused by the cultural and religious tensions of the last decade of the *quattrocento*, according to Panofsky, we may conclude that the beautiful wingless angels of Michelangelo encode the collapse of the Florentine Medicean Platonic discourse in favor of a more restrictive Christianity that was exemplified in Savonarola's preaching and expressed again subsequently in the rising tide of the Counter-Reformation.

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⁶⁴ Bernadine Barnes connects the wing to a metaphor in Dante's third *canto* that compares the sinners to "a bird at its call." The boat replaces both the bird and the sinners within the boat. See her "Metaphorical Painting: Michelangelo, Dante, and the *Last Judgment*," *Art Bulletin* 77 (1995): 72, and *Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment': The Renaissance Response* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 113. The possibility that the wing is attached not to the boat but to the devil next to the boat does not weaken my argument but rather enforces it.

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