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Working at Night. Remarks on the Vigilant Artist

> Lasciò di sé una figliuola che sapeva disegnare, e la moglie; la quale soleva dire che tutta la notte Paulo stava nello scrittoio per trovare i termini della prospettiva, e mentre ch'ella a dormire lo invitava, et egli le diceva: "O che dolce cosa è questa prospettiva!"
>
> Vasari, *Vita di Paolo Uccello* (1550)

Introduction

Giorgio Vasari and other writers from the early modern period report of the existence of many anecdotes, especially ironic ones such as the one above about Paolo Uccello, relating to artists working at night.[1] Such practices and the connected disturbance of the normal alternance of day and night in relation to work are well known from descriptions in letters and other ego-documents, as well as depictions in images and drawings. Among Federico Zuccari's sketches of his brother Taddeo's life, for example, there exists one of a young Taddeo, who, poor and employed as a servant during the day, is portrayed as drawing at night under the light of the moon (Fig. 1).[2] In this case, night time is the only possible time interval within which the artist can work, due to the specifically unfortunate circumstances of Taddeo's life. Among other examples stemming from letters and diaries, that of Pontormo is also pertinent. The self-observation obsessively registered in his famous diary normally observes the rhythm of day and night, respectively corresponding to working and sleeping; however, he sometimes exceptionally reports that he woke up earlier than the beginning of the day to paint a specific figure, or parts of a figure ("mi levai una hora inanzi dì e feci quell torso dal braccio in giù"; "martedì mi levai una hora inanzi dì e feci quell torso del putto che ha el calice").[3] Many other examples exist. They extend beyond the world of the Italian Renaissance to include witnesses such as Joachim von Sandrart, who describes the peculiar character and the nocturnal

1 Vasari, *Le Vite*, vol. 3, p. 72.

2 As described by Federico Zuccari himself in the following annotation to Vasari's *Vite:* "e quando stete col Calabrese, non possendo mai disegniare il giorno né la sera tampocho, e perché non gli lograse un poco di olio lo mandava a letto a lo scuro: onde egli per il desiderio che egli aveva, levavasi la notte al lume di luna a disegnare su le finestre, e 'l giorno su la pietra de' colori con un stecho; in luogo di riposo." Heikamp, Vicende, p. 207.

3 Pontormo, *Il libro mio*, pp. 72 and 78)

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habits he witnessed first-hand of the Northern German artist Johan Liss (1597–1629).[4]

Notwithstanding the richness of such visual and textual sources, these stories have often been dismissed as purely anecdotal and therefore the meanings, purposes and functions of such alleged nocturnal practices have not been the object of scholarly attention. Reconsidering such sources in their values of cultural constructs at the crossroads between theories and practices, this essay aims to provide a first exploration of the topic, by singling out three different descriptions of Michelangelo Buonarroti's nocturnal habits in particular. The main focus is on how many facets and functions such nocturnal practices had for Renaissance artists and whether and how this can relate (or not) to the notion of *Vigilanz* as developed at the CRC 1369 *Vigilanzkulturen* in Munich. Within the framework of the CRC, Florian Mehltretter and Maddalena Fingerle observed that an analysis of the semantic sphere of the verb *vigilare* in pre-modern Italian can offer much to a project relating to *Vigilanzkulturen*.[5] A specific focus on Renaissance visual culture and artistic practices further illuminates crucial aspects of vigilance cultures, not least because visuality is crucial for "vigilance".[6] Notwith-

4 Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie*, vol. 1, p. 315: "Er hatte im Gebrauch sich lang zu besinnen eh er seine Arbeit angefangen hernach wann er sich resolvirt ließe er sich nichts mehr irren; da wir zu Venedig beysammen wohneten blieb er oft zwey oder 3. Tag von Haus und kame dann bey Nacht ins Zimmer setzte sein Palet mit Farben geschwind auf temperirte sie nach Verlangen und verbrachte also die ganze Nacht in Arbeit: Gegen Tag ruhete er ein wenig und fuhre wieder 2. oder 3. Tag und Nacht mit der Arbeit fort so daß er fast nicht geruhet noch Speise zu sich genommen dawider nichts geholffen was ich ihme auch zusprache und remonstrirte daß er sich selbsten Schaden thäte Gesundheit und Leben verkürzte sondern er verharrte bey seiner angenommenen Weiß blibe etliche Tag und Nacht weiß nicht wo aus biß der Beutel leer worden; alsdann machte er wiederum seinem alten Brauch nach aus der Nacht Tag und aus Tag Nacht." English translation in Wittkower/Wittkower, *Born under Saturn*, p. 61: "Lys was in the habit of meditating for a long time before starting to work, but once he had made up his mind, he never wavered. When we were living together in Venice, he often stayed away from home for two or three days at a time. Then he would come to our room by night, and work away the whole night. Towards dawn he would rest a little and then continue to paint for two or three days and nights with hardly a break for sleep or food. [...] Then, as was his wont, he turned night into day and day into night."

5 Mehltretter/Fingerle, Vigilanz, pp. 18–25.

6 The CRC 1369 is developing interesting new studies on the centrality of other senses, such as smell or hearing, for vigilant practices, but sight cannot be dismissed in any way, given the primary meaning of the Latin verb *vigilō:* 'to watch' (Lewis/Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v.; Oxford Dictionary of English, s.v.:) or 'bin wach', 'being awake', which implies staying or remaining with open eyes: Alois Walde and J. B. Hofmann, *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, II, p. 788; *Langescheidts Großwörterbuch Latein*, I, p. 801, s.v. *vigilō:* intr. 'wachen', 'nicht schlafen',

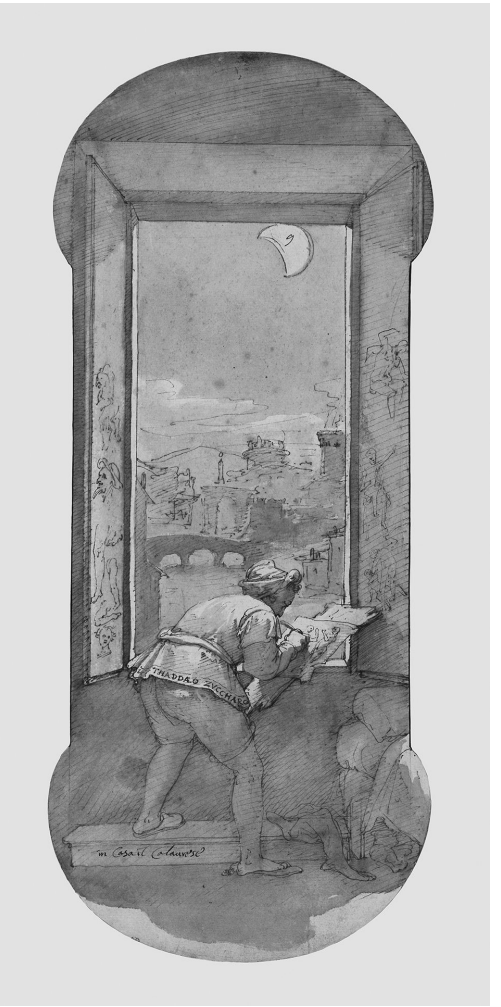

Fig. 1: Federico Zuccari: *Taddeo Zuccari drawing by moonlight in Calabrese's house*, about 1595, drawing, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

standing the richness of the available documentation, a consistent analysis of the conceptual constellation of 'vigilance' in relation to artistic practice, creation and the observation of the world and of society has not been attempted so far. In

and, in a translated sense, 'wachsam sein', that is 'die Augen offen haben'; see also ibid., s.v. *vigilāns, antis:* adj. 'wach' referring to the eyes (*oculi*, *lumina*).

particular, there is no study discussing the conjunction between working at night and the spectrum of artist skills ranging from attention to accuracy to vigilance.

Never addressed *per se*, the overall question intersects some of the most debated topics within the field of art history. First of all, the relations between the legend, the character and the actual way of life of Renaissance artists arising from literary and art theoretical sources dating from that period, which, in turn, were often based on *topoi* originating from ancient sources, which are then intermingled with the contemporary discourse about artists at that time. A scholarly re-evaluation of "artist anecdotes" was first attempted by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz in 1934 and then by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower in 1963, followed by many further, as well as recent studies.[7] Secondly, the topic of this essay interweaves Ernst H. Gombrich's work on "the mystery of attention" and how it relates to doodling.[8] Along this line, psychologists have pointed out that doodles are produced during states of idleness or "affective tension", such as concentration and impatience, and one could argue that drawing, or better doodling, is also an activity which serves to those doodling to stay awake and fight boredom.[9] Thirdly, the many observations made by artists and poets directly about the relationship between the state of vigilance (as an alteration of the day/night rhythm) and artistic imagination, "invention" (to use an early modern term) and creation are also of importance here. An example is provided by Sandrart's above-quoted passage on Lys, who could start creating something only at night after days of idleness, or rather meditation.[10] Another significant example of the merging of nocturnal vigilance and imaginative skills is provided by a recommendation made by Leonardo da Vinci to "go" at night with the "faculty of imagination" ("andare co' la imaginativa") and repeat the lines and designs of the forms studied during the day, in order to impress them in memory.[11] Interest-

7 Kris/Kurz, *Die Legende* (here consulted in the English edition from 1979) first proceeded to a re-evaluation as *topoi* of "artist anecdotes", that they define as such in their book (Kris/Kurz, *Legend*, pp. 8 – 12). Wittkower/Wittkower, *Born under Saturn*, especially the paragraphs on "Obsession with work" (pp. 53 – 59) and the following one ("Creative Idleness", pp. 59 – 63), both important for the present essay (see above, note 4). Ways of revaluating Vasari's anecdotes are also discussed by Paul Barolsky, *Vasari's* Lives, pp. 49 – 52.

8 Gombrich, Pleasures, p. 224.

9 Schott, *The art of medicine*. New perspectives on doodling as an artistic activity are now offered by Alberti/Bodart, *Gribouillage/Scarabocchio*.

10 Above, note 4.

11 Leonardo, *Treatise*, vol. 2, f. 36: "Dello studiare in sino quando ti desti, o' inanzi tu te dormenti nel letto, allo scuro: Ancora òmi provato essere di non poca uttilità, quando ti trovi allo scuro nel letto, andare co' la imaginativa repettendo li lineamenti superfiziali delle forme per l'adietro studiate, o altre cose nottabili da sotile speculatione comprese, et è questo proprio

ingly enough, this recommendation by Leonardo comes to mind when orphan chess prodigy Beth Harmon, the main character in the recent American miniseries *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) studies her adversaries' moves in a series of visionary nocturnal vigils (Fig. 2) – a scene that, along with the reception of Leonardo's writings, would call into question the relationships between vigilance and the notion of intellectual prodigy or 'genius' as shaped by Romance cultures since the 19th century.

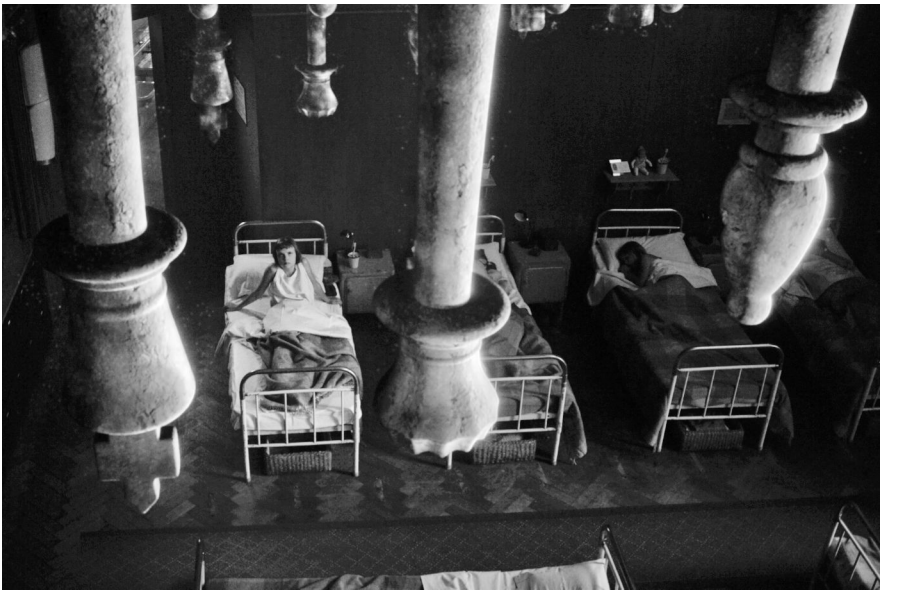

Fig. 2: Nocturnal vigils of Beth Harmon, screenshot from recurring scene in The Queen's Gambit (USA 2020).

un atto laudabile et uttile a confermarsi le cose nella memoria" (English translation ibid., vol. 1, p. 47: "Of studying when you awake or before you go to sleep in bed in the dark. I have also proved for myself it is of no little advantage, when you are in bed in the dark, to exercise the imagination, recalling the outlines of forms you have aready studied, or other noteworthy things comprehended by subtle reflection, and this is really an admirable thing to do, useful for fixing these things in the memory"). For a parallel with twentieth-century observations on the state of vigilance and poetic creation, concerning the English Poet Robert Nichols who was in contact with Henry Head, the first British neurologist using the word vigilance, see Jacyna, *Medicine*, p. 148f. I am grateful to Arndt Brendecke for this reference.

This article cannot address all the possible meanings and connections of artists and their works with vigilance.[12] I will limit myself to discussing some relevant instances of theoretical and historical literature on art from the early modern period, which make use of the word 'vigilance' or describe vigilant practices. In this way, I aim to offer some initial material for a discussion of the larger question of whether or not artists played a special role in the long-term history of vigilant cultures, and, if they did, in how many different ways, and why.

Vigilance as a Skill of the Artist

Let us start with some observations on the early modern virtue of vigilance and how it applied to Renaissance artists by first of all looking at the various meanings of the word *vigilanza* in Italian. Besides a crane, Cesare Ripa's image of *Vigilanza* (Fig. 3) holds a book and a lantern in her hands because "il libro et la contemplatione destano li spiriti sonnolenti".[13] The lantern and the book, together with a cock, also accompany the personification of *Studio* (Fig. 4),[14] as both are common attributes for scholars. The expression "summa vigilantia" was indeed commonplace in titles of scholarly books and editions of classical texts.[15] For Ripa, *Vigilanza* corresponds not only to the bodily skill of staying awake

12 In particular, I will not discuss here aspects that are extremely relevant for a history of the contribution of artist to the history of vigilance, that is the question of the artist as a testimony, eyewitness, spy or informant in the military field, for which see Boskamp, Kunst oder Spionage? and Eadem, *The Artist as Spy*.

13 Ripa, *Iconologia,* pp. 590 – 592 containing only one image but three different textual descriptions of *Vigilanza*, the first of which, referring to the image, reads: "Donna con un libro nella destra mano, e nell'altra con una verga, et una lucerna accesa; in terra vi sarà una Grue, che sostenga un sasso col piede. È tanto in uso che si dica vigilante e svegliato un uomo di spirito vivace, che se bene ha preso questo nome della vigilanza de gli occhi corporali, nondimeno il continuo uso se l'è quasi convertito in natura, et fatto uso. Però l'una e l'altra vigilanza, e del corpo, e dell'anima, vien dimostrata nella presente figura; quella dell'animo nel libro, del quale apprendendosi le scienze si fa l'uomo vigilante e desto a tutti gl'incontri della fortuna per la agitazione della mente contemplando, e la verga sveglia il corpo addormentato, come il libro, e la contemplazione destono li spiriti sonnolenti, però del corpo e dell'animo s'intende il detto della Cantica: 'Ego dormio, cor meum vigilat'."

14 Ripa, *Iconologia* (1613), p. 506.

15 Just to make two out of many examples, see Valerius Maximus, *Epigrammaton libri 14. Post omnes editiones summa denuò vigilantia recogniti*, Venetiis : apud Hieronymum Scotum, 1549 or the edition by Erasmus of the work of Augustin: *Omnium operum primus-decimus tomus, ad fidem vetustorum exemplarium summa vigilantia repurgatorum a mendis innumeris, notata in contextu et margine suis signis veterum exemplorum lectione*, Venetiis: Ad Signum Spei, 1550 – 1552.

at night, but also to a spiritual virtue: he writes that, even if she took her name "de gli occhi corporali", the physical skill of vigilance has been converted into the spiritual one. For this reason, bodily and spiritual vigilance are both represented by the figure: the first due to the presence of the rod, and the second thanks to the book (as learning a science makes a person vigilant and ready for all eventualities or for all that fortune throws at them). Thus, Ripa's female allegory represents both sides of vigilance at the same time: bodily alertness and spiritual awakeness. Also, due to etymological reasons, the two meanings are always intertwined in Italian sources. The Latin and the Italian *vigilare* literally mean staying awake at night, that is *vegliare*, as both forms stem from the Latin *vigilia*, a 'nocturnal vigil'. In Roman times this word was connected to military or security activities, only to assume, ever increasingly in Christian times, religious and liturgical meanings (the *veglie* before Christmas or Easter, for example, but also a funeral wake).[16] In the particular case of scholars, *vigiliae* are strictly connected with the activity of *lucubratio*, which literally means working at night by the light of a lantern.[17] Vigilance, however, was not only viewed as an individual virtue, belonging solely to individuals, but also a public virtue embodied by rulers and sovereigns: the personification of vigilance often deriving from Ripa's image or from one of Ripa's textual descriptions was, in fact, frequently inserted into political imagery.[18] In allegorical portrayals of vigilance, symbols representing the virtue can vary (crane, cock, lion, rod, book, lantern); however, the lantern, symbolising nighttime as the time *par excellence* for vigilance is nearly always present.[19]

How did these manifold aspects of *vigilanza* as an active virtue or skill, with different potential ends ranging from individual to collective ones, apply to artists as well? For a first testimony, we can turn once again to Federico Zuccari, this time as the writer of a *Memoriale* outlining a reform of the Accademia del Disegno of Florence. In his draft, written around 1575, Zuccari recommends

16 Lewis/Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. 'Vigilia'.

17 Lewis/Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. 'Lucubratio': "Working by lamp-light, night-work, nocturnal study, lucubration" (as used by Cicero, Pliny and Quintilian). I would like to thank Hans Aurenhammer for useful observations on this point. See Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica*, c, 342^{r}, s.v. 'Lucubratio'.

18 See the series of examples quoted by Sonia Maffei in her commentary to this entry in Ripa, *Iconologia*, p. 839.

19 As indeed is highlighted by Ripa, *Iconologia*, p. 591: "La Lucerna dimostra che la vigilanza propriamente s'intende in quel tempo che è più conveniente al riposo et al sonno, però si dimandavano da gli antichi Vigilie alcune ore della notte, nelle quali i soldati erano obligati a star vigilanti per sicurezza del'essercito, e tutta la notte si spartiva in quattro vigile, come dice Cesare nel primo de' suoi *Commentarii*" (see, for example, Caesar, *De bello civili*, 1, 22).

Fig. 3: *Vigilanza*, woodcut. In: Cesare Ripa: *Iconologia*. Padua 1611.

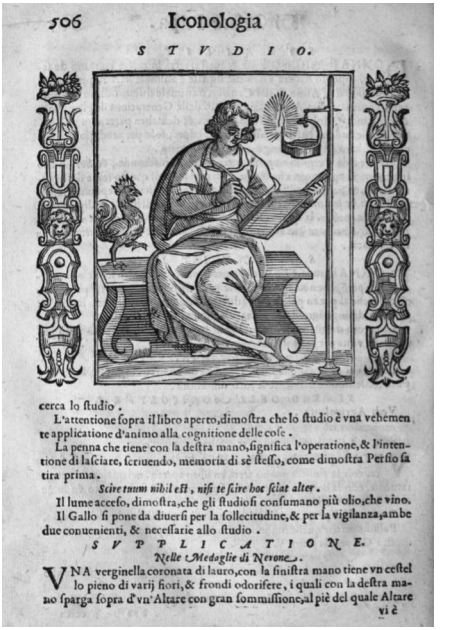

Fig. 4: *Studio*, woodcut. In: Cesare Ripa: *Iconologia*. Padua 1611.

young students to bring something of their hand and *fantasia* to the Academy, which would then provide an occasion of comparison among the students. This would give to them a special opportunity to make progress in the study, because the reciprocal emulation would make them "awake" and "vigilant" ("occasione d'affaticarsi, et studiare, più che forse non fanno per avventura, perché l'emulazione tra essi gli faria *desti*, et *vigilanti*, et si potrieno *svegliare* di bellissimi intelletti, che forse adesso stanno addormentati").[20] In an academic context, this functions as a claiming of the intellectual skills that artists possess: by referring to *studio* and *vigilance*, Zuccari equates them to scholars and *letterati*. It is not of course a coincidence that in another of Zuccari's drawings, *Studio* is shown alongside *Intelligence*, thus representing two main virtues of an artist, and is, once again, represented with attributes of *Vigilance*, that is the cock and a lantern (Fig. 5). This emphasis on such intellectual skills corresponded to a collective effort, and one that had been ongoing since at least the Trecento, to raise the status of artists to that of other intellectuals. Similar recommendations with re-

20 Heikamp, Vicende, p. 216. Italics are mine.

gards to vigilance were repeated by subsequent art theoreticians up until Gabriele Paleotti and Palomino, among others.[21] Although Zuccari, in his text, does not refer to specific nocturnal activities (but in his drawing "study" is indeed meant to be an incessant and also nocturnal activity, hence the cock),[22] the passage is of interest as 'vigilance' is mentioned not just as a generic virtue for a committed and successful artist. First, it is connected to work conducted within the realm of the young artist's own *fantasia*, work that can therefore be carried out at all possible times of day and night; second, it refers to an intensification of attention, which however is not directed only towards an individual goal of creating a good piece of art, but is linked to reciprocal emulation. This incentive to actively observe what fellow students create in a context of constant competition is intended to serve an educational purpose, resulting in artists who are more awake and 'vigilant' within a specific field of social interactions.

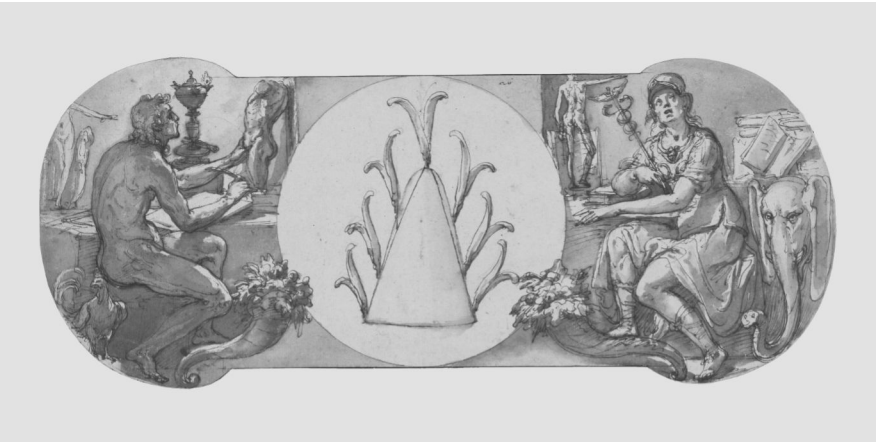

Fig. 5: Federico Zuccari: *Allegories of Study and Intelligence flanking the Zuccaro emblem*, about 1595, drawing, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Furthermore, attention itself (like vigilance) is an ambivalent notion for artists. Science historians have noted the ambivalences inherent to the attention of artists. Comments on attention in art, similar to those on attention in literature and science, "are torn between the admiration for self-discipline and the notion

21 Paleotti, *Discourse*, p. 272; Palomino, *Museo pictorico*, p. 157.

22 Indications about official diurnal working hours in relation with the activities of the Accademia del Disegno appears in their Statuti of the Accademia del Disegno only later in the 18th century (Adorno/Zangheri, *Gli statuti*, p. 82).

of antisocial oblivion".[23] To these two pillars – 'self-discipline' on the one hand, and 'antisocial oblivion' on the other, a notion which connects to several of the anecdotes mentioned at the beginning of this paper – one must add a third and more 'social' model of reciprocal 'attention', oriented to the work of others, as recommended by Zuccari. Artists typically developed different manners of paying attention to both their own work and the work produced by other artists (be they predecessors, colleagues or rivals), of self-attention and of observation of these different works. The common practice of continuously watching each other is revealed as a pervasive one, especially when one reads (as dealt with in the following pages) the many stories regarding artists' attempts at *not* being watched in order to invigilate their own work, preserve workshops' secrets, and protect work from imitations and other interferences within the creative process. This brings to mind the practice of inhibiting access to a space with *serrate* or *turate* during the painting of large frescoes (as in the cases of, again, Pontormo, Michelangelo and many others) or the legal attempts made by Albrecht Dürer to stop other engravers copying his work without acknowledging it.[24] In the Renaissance and the early modern period, sources become more and more eloquent with regards to vigilant activities surrounding original works and originality. Let us now take a closer look at the particular case of Michelangelo based on Vasari's writings, which enables both an isolation and analysis of at least three possible different meanings and practices of 'artist vigilance'.

Michelangelo *vigilantissimo*

In a passage from his *Vita di Michelangelo* (1568), Vasari describes the artist's character and habits as sober and "most vigilant": "la qual sobrietà lo faceva essere vigilantissimo e di pochissimo sonno".[25] Michelangelo often woke up in the night, not being able to sleep, to work with a chisel ("a lavorare con lo scarpello") "having made a helmet of thick paper (*una celata di cartoni*), and over the centre of his head he kept a lighted candle, which in this way threw light over

23 Daston, *Eine kurze Geschichte*, p. 45

24 Bloemacher, *Raffael und Raimondi*, p. 323; Koerner, *The Moment*, p. 213; Koerner, Albrecht Dürer, p. 25.

25 Vasari, *La vita di Michelangelo*, vol. 1, p. 121: "la qual sobrietà lo faceva essere vigilantissimo e di pochissimo sonno, e bene spesso la notte si levava, non potendo dormire, a lavorare con lo scarpello, avendo fatto una celata di cartoni, e sopra il mezzo del capo teneva accesa la candela, la quale con questo modo rendeva lume dove egli lavorava, senza impedimento delle mani."

where he was working without encumbering his hands."[26] This Vasarian image of the artist working at night with a *celata* carrying a candle (literally *celata* means 'helmet' and is etymologically connected to 'hiding', *celare*) had a strong impact on subsequent imaginings of the working practices of artists, especially from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards until the release of Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1961) cinematic rendering by Carol Reed in 1965 (Fig. 6).[27] Often dismissing such alleged myths, art historians have rarely taken the description of this particular working practice seriously. Unfortunately, no contemporary material trace of such a cap has survived. However, some confirmation of his working at night can be found in Michelangelo's letters, as is the case, for example, for one written on the 10th of November 1507, in which the artist describes working on the difficult bronze statue of Julius II without interruption day and night.[28]

Unfortunately, the available English translations of Vasari's passage seldom render the pregnancy of the coupling of "sobriety" and "vigilance": the superlative *vigilantissimo* is, in fact, often obliterated or not fully rendered. The "hellwach" of the most recent German translation is perhaps the most faithful translation; the words "active" or "restless" from two commonly used English translations do not convey the meaning of *vigilantissimo* to the reader.[29]

As I have already mentioned, in Italian, "vigilance" is always strongly linked to *vegliare*, that is an alteration of the physiological day-night rhythm and the state of being "vigilant" in its spiritual (more than bodily) implications. "To vigil" is never a mere physical absence of sleep – it is always an activity of the spirit, and often conveys a spiritual, if not even penitential sense of mean-

26 My translation.

27 On 18th and 19th century rewritings of this passage see the commentary by Paola Barocchi in Vasari, *La vita di Michelangiolo*, vol. 4, p. 205 (quoting, among others authors who expand on the anecdote, Francesco Milizia and Stendhal). For the literal meaning of *celata*, that Vasari uses here in a translated, perhaps ironical, sense, see Battaglia, *Grande dizionario*, s.v. 'celata'.

28 "Perché sto qua chon grandissimo disagio e chon fatiche istreme e non actendo a altro che a llavorare el dì e lla notte, e ò durata tanta faticha e duro, che, se io n'avessi a rrifare un'altra, non chrederrei che lla vita mi bastassi" (Michelangelo to his brother Buonarroto from Bologna, 10.11. 1507 (Buonarroti, *Carteggio*, I, p. 55). Additional sources concerning the nocturnal work of Michelangelo are discussed in Chiara Franceschini, Le ore di Michelangelo.

29 "Diese Nüchternheit ließ ihn hellwach sein und mit sehr wenig Schlaf auskommen, und da er nachts oft nicht schlafen konnte, stand er auf, um mit dem Meißel zu arbeiten" (Vasari, *Leben*, pp. 202–204); "his sobriety made him very restless and he rarely slept, and very often during the night he would arise, being unable to sleep, and would work with his chisel, having fashioned a helmet made of pasteboard holding a burning candle over the middle of his head which shed light where he was working without tying up his hands" (Vasari, *The Lives* (1998), p. 475); "This sober life kept him very active and in want of very little sleep" (Vasari, *Lives*, vol. 2, p. 740).

Fig. 6: Michelangelo working at night in the Sistine Chapel, screenshot from Carol Reed, The Agony and the Ecstasy (USA, 1965).

ing.[30] Michelangelo's quality of being "most vigilant", on the one hand, is the result of a physiological "sobriety" (literally, according to Vasari, a sober diet consisting in eating and drinking very little); on the other, this hyper-vigilance cannot be reduced to (mere) physiological insomnia. To be "most vigilant and of very little sleep" is instead an active status that revolves around a type of absorption (or, as the Wittkowers would have put it, obsession) with work, but is also a spiritual condition. It is, in fact, no coincidence that in Vasari's text this description of Michelangelo's character immediately follows the mention of both his relationship with his lady-friend Vittoria Colonna and his profound knowledge of the Bible ("dilettossi molto della Scrittura Sacra").

Indeed, the *New Testament* offers several crucial references to "vigilare", relating to death, the Resurrection, and the second coming of Christ.[31] Most signifi-

30 The first meaning of "vigilare" (originally, an intransitive verb) in Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario* is "to keep watch, to stay awake, to perform an activity, as a penitential practice etc." (the first citation in this sense comes from a 15th century vulgarization of the Bible). My translation.
31 For example, Marcus, 13,33: "Videte, vigilate, et orate: nescítis enim quando tempus sit", which, in the Malermi Bible known to Michelangelo reads: "Vedete, & vigilate, & orate: imperho

cantly, in two instances the same two terms – "sobriety" and "vigilance" – are connected. In 1 Petrus 58, exactly like in Vasari's text, 'sobrietas' and 'vigilantia' are mentioned together: "sobrii estote, vigilate quia adversarius vester diabolus tamquam leo rugiens circuit quaerens quem devoret." In 1 Thessalonicenses, 5,5 – 8 Paul exhorts Christians to moral *vigilance* and *sobriety* (again together), reminding them that they are "children of light and day" and so should not fall prey to "night and darkness". Vasari's coupling when describing Michelangelo's state of hyper-vigilance was therefore not casual, but might have retained a distant reminiscence of these Evangelical passages.

Similar stark oppositions between light and darkness or sun and moon recurrently resonate at multiple levels with Michelangelo's art and poetry.[32] For example, in *Rime* 104 (one of the so-called *Sonetti della notte*), he starts by describing God's creation of time in day and night only to ascribe himself to the "tempo bruno" ("dark time"), according to a "drama" in which human and divine love intersects before the powerless subject, the artist.[33] The night therefore also emerged as a privileged time relating to an artist's poetical persona.

At the end of this section, it is important to remember that, according to Vasari, vigilance is seen as one of the most important aspects of Michelangelo's character and working habits. Furthermore, the Evangelical association between sobriety and vigilance resonates in Vasari's passage, which points to an overlapping between bodily and spiritual vigilance in the case of Michelangelo. However, as we will see in the next paragraph, artist vigilance related not only to the habit of being self-absorbed in his or her own work: the term also indicates an active skill to use in a social field of confrontation and competition with other artists.

Vigilance as a Weapon in a Competitive Field

The next anecdote, which leads us into a different realm of artist vigilance, is an aetiology, present in the second edition of Vasari's *Vite* (1568), concerning the alleged genesis of Michelangelo's signature on the *Vatican Pietà* (Fig. 7 – 8): "Michelangelo put into this work so much love and effort that (something he never

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che non sapete quando sarà il tempo" (with reference to the second coming of Christ): *Biblia vulgare istoriata*, f. Ciiiir. All Latin quotations from the Bible are from the Vulgata (Weber/Gryson, *Biblia Sacra*).

32 In Franceschini, Le ore di Michelangelo, I have explored these oppositions as relating to vigilance in the particular case of the Medici Chapel.

33 Michelangelo, *Rime*, p. 121.

did again) he left his name written across the sash over Our Lady's breast. The reason for this was that one day he went along to where the statue was and found a crowd of strangers from Lombardy singing its praises; then one of them asked another who had made it, only to be told: 'Our Gobbo from Milan'. Michelangelo stood there not saying a word (*stette cheto*), but thinking it very odd to have all his efforts attributed to someone else. Then one night, taking his chisels, he shut himself in with a light and carved his name on the statue" *(una notte vi si serrò drento e con un lumicino, avendo portato gli scarpegli, vi intagliò il suo nome)*.[34] Full of classical resonances (namely, Pliny's anecdote about Apelles "quietly" standing "out of sight" behind his painting to listen to public commentaries),[35] Vasari's story of the genesis of Michelangelo's signature points to the vigilance required with regards to one's own authorship. In this entertaining tale (interestingly based on contemporary gossip),[36] the artist's signing of the statue at night (while his competitors or adversaries are all asleep) aims to restore artistic truth and justice.

Comparable secretive activities connected with nocturnal incursions are reported by Vasari about other artists and contexts, too. An example of this can be found Vasari's texts about the Ferrarese artist Ercole de' Roberti, who "nel lavoro era molto fantastico, perché quando e' lavorava aveva cura che nessuno pittore né altri lo vedesse".[37] The story refers to one of the most important pictorial enterprises finished by de' Roberti in Bologna, the frescoes for the Garganelli chap-

34 Vasari, *La vita*, vol. 1, p. 17; Vasari, *Lives* (1987), p. 336.

35 Pestilli, Michelangelo's Pietà?, pp. 21–30.

36 Frey, *Nachlass*, pp. 64–66: "E così dico: che avendo lui fatta la pietà della Febbre, et essendoci gran concorso di gente a vederla, trovandovisi un giorno ancor lui, uno disse: 'Chi ha fatta questa opera?' Et un altro rispose: 'L'ha fatta un nostro Gobetto da Parina.' E lui stette cheto; ma la notte seguente si nascose drento in chiesa con un lumicino e certi ferri e vi scrisse quelle lettere. E standovi in una stanzia là d'incontro una Murata e credendo, che fosse alcuno che volesse guastare quella figura, volse gridar; ma cogniosciuta la verità, lo ringraziò assai, che l'avesse fatta una sì bella compaggnia, e lo pregò che gli desse un poca di quella piaga del costato di Nostro Signore. E lui, mosso da tal divozione, ne tolse certe scaglioline con un poca di polvere e gliele diede; e lei per rimunerarlo gli fece una frittata, e lui se la mangió proprio in quel luogo quella notte. Et questa fu la causa del scrivere di quelle lettere, quale veramente si cognoscono esser state fatte di notte e quasi che al buio, perché non sono finite" (Michele degli Alberti and Antonio del Francese da Casteldurante in Rome to Giorgio Vasari (?) in Florence, BNCF, Classe XXV, 551, ex Strozziano 828, c. 249). For a material analysis of this unique signature by Michelangelo and a historical assessment of its genesis, with a discussion of previous literature and positions, see Wang, *Michelangelo's Signature*, p. 452, for whom "the physical evidence of the sculpture supports the notion that Michelangelo's inscription was planned from the beginning".

37 Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 3, pp. 422–23 (1550).

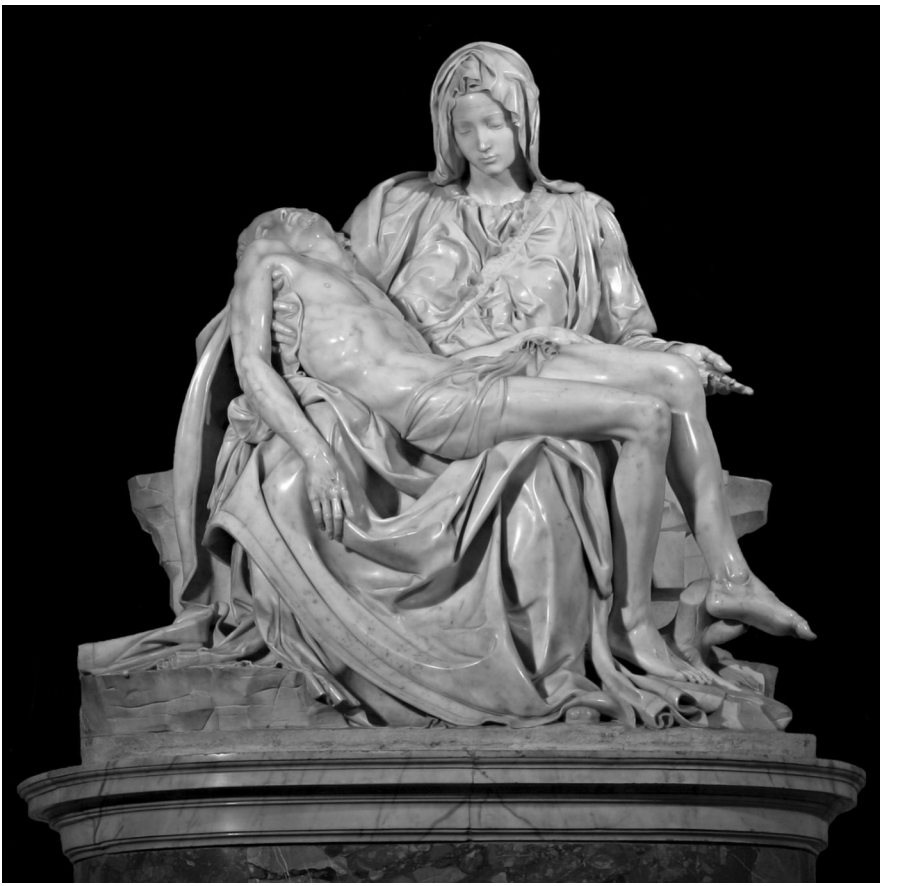

Fig. 7: Michelangelo Buonarroti: *Vatican Pietà*, 1497–1499, marble, San Pietro, Rome.

el.[38] The Bolognese artists, envious of the success of their Ferrarese rival (and of foreign artists in general), "s'accordarono con un legnaiuolo [...], et in chiesa si rinchiusero vicino alla cappella che egli faceva; e la notte in quella entrarono per forza, onde gli videro l'opera e gli rubarono tutti i cartoni, gli schizzi et i disegni."[39] In this case, as Ercole de' Roberti had concealed his work, rival painters broke into the chapel in the middle of the night to steal his ideas, cartoons, sketches and drawings. A further example is that of Andrea del Sarto and his

38 On this chapel see Ciammitti (ed.), *Ercole Roberti* and Molteni, *Ercole de' Roberti*, pp. 57–83.
39 Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 3, pp. 422–23 (1550).

Fig. 8: Michelangelo's signature, Detail of Michelangelo Buonarroti: *Vatican Pietà*, 1497–1499, marble, San Pietro, Rome.

turata grande in front of the Palazzo del Podestà. The artist would only enter the palace at night, so as not to be seen painting the images of the Florentine bandits.[40]

These examples highlight different contexts and motifs in which a specific use of night as a temporal unit is made on the part of artists operating in competitive fields or in situations in which the reputation of an artist needs to be carefully preserved: night as a time for the execution of secretive work (so as to avoid giving anything away to one's competitors), a time to develop one's own authorship and originality, to create unusual works, or, indeed, as a time during which to steal secrets and ideas.

40 Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. 4, p. (1550): "E così fatta una turata grande, v'entrava di notte et usciva similmente, ché non fussi veduto, e li condusse di maniera che quelli vivi e naturali parevano." In this instance the nocturnal work was necessary in order not to be labelled with the infamous name of Andrea deli Impiccati, like his predecessor Andrea del Castagno.

Vigilance and *non finito*

The final story concerns the later so-called *Florentine Pietà*, or *Pietà Bandini*, one of the largest and most ambitious of Michelangelo's sculptures, on which he worked without an external commission and which was reportedly intended for his own tomb (Fig. 9).[41] As William Wallace wrote: "here lay a dilemma. To finish the sculpture was to bring the marble to life, but also resign oneself to death."[42] For several technical and, probably, psychological reasons, the sculpture, which includes a depiction of Christ with only one leg (the other was broken) and a self-portrait of Michelangelo, probably in the guise of Nicodemus (a nocturnal Evangelic figure), was destined to remain unfinished.[43] The anecdote further stresses the crucial role of the night as a time for Michelangelo's work and vigilance: "Once Vasari was sent by Julius III at the first hour of the night to Michelangelo's house to fetch a drawing, and he found him working on the marble Pietà that he subsequently broke. Recognizing who it was by the knock, Michelangelo left his work and met him with a lamp (*lucerna*) in his hand. After Vasari had explained what he was after, he sent Urbino upstairs for the drawing and they started to discuss other things. Meanwhile Vasari turned his eyes to look at a leg of the Christ, on which Michelangelo was working and making some alterations. To stop Vasari seeing it (*per ovviare che 'l Vasari non la vedessi*), Michelangelo let the lamp fall from his hand, and they were left in darkness (*al buio*). Then he called Urbino to fetch a light, and meanwhile [...] he said: 'I am so old that death often drags at my cloak to take me. One day my body will fall just like that lantern, and so the light of my life will be extinguished'."[44]

41 Frey, *Nachlass*, pp. 59 – 60: "È venutomi considerazione, che Michelagniolo, d'udita io, e che lo sa anche Daniello e messer Tomao Cavalieri e molti altri suoi amici, che la pietà delle cinque figure, ch'egli roppe, la faceva per la sepoltura sua; e vorrei ritrovare, come suo erede, in che modo l'aveva il Bandino. Perché se la ricercherete per servirvene per detta sepoltura, oltre che ella è disegniata per lui, evvi un vechio che egli ritrasse sé, non sendo stata poi tolta da Tiberio, procurerei di averla e me ne vorrei servire per ciò" (Vasari a Leonardo Buonarroti in Rome, 18.03.1564).

42 Wallace, *Michelangelo*, p. 263.

43 On the group, which has been recently cleaned, the missing leg and the identification of the supposed portrait see Stechow, Joseph; Steinberg, Michelangelo's Florentine *Pietà*; Wallace, Michelangelo, Tiberio Calcagni; Kristof, Michelangelo.

44 Vasari, *La vita di Michelangelo*, vol. 1, p. 748; vol. 4, pp. 2119 – 2120 (I have slightly modified the English translation in Vasari, *Lives* (1987), pp. 428 – 429).

Fig. 9: Michelangelo Buonarroti: *Pietà Bandini*, ca. 1547–1555, marble, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.

The two previously discussed senses of 'vigilance' are combined in this dark anecdote: firstly, the working practice of working at night with an artificial light which relates to strict self-discipline; secondly, working at night, while nobody can watch as a process with which to "invigilate" one's own working methods and errors, so as not to be 'copied' or 'robbed' (as in the previous anecdote), nor allow these errors to be seen in the case of failure. With this story, Vasari describes Michelangelo's embarrassment about letting even a friend and colleague know about the fault of the group.[45]

In addition, the final *dictum* by the artist ("questa mia persona cascherà un dì come questa lucerna, e sarà spento il lume della vita") underlines the metaphoric parallel between the *lucerna* (a common attribute for allegories of *Vigilanza*) and the *lume della vita*, pointing to a notion of "vigilance" as a necessary virtue for any Christian who does not know when death will come. As Michelangelo wrote to his nephew as early as 1549: "ogni ora potrebbe esser l'ultima mia" – which acquires an even more pregnant meaning in relation to this broken and unfinished sculpture, meant for his own tomb.[46]

The two anecdotes about the signature of the *Vatican Pietà*, made by a young Michelangelo, and the nocturnal work at the *Pietà Bandini* undertaken by the old artist, are also inscribed with an understanding of the biological course of the life of an artist and the development that takes place over the years until one reaches old age.[47] Interestingly, in the case of the *Vatican Pietà*, nocturnal work is linked to the maximum finiteness of a work (the inscription of the signature on a polished statue), while in the second example vigilance is connected to a piece of work that can never be finished. Indeed, in the last anecdote, nocturnal work becomes a crucial activity which, at least in the version of the story told by Vasari, overlaps with a vigilant expectation (in a religious sense) of the hour of death. In this sense, the Christian notion of 'vigilance' also becomes an important concept for the construction of the literary conceptualizations of the particular working method, later known as Michelangelo's *non finito*.[48]

45 Clements, Michelangelo on effort, p. 304.

46 Buonarroti, *Il carteggio*, vol. 4, pp. 307–308.

47 Recent works on artists and old age (including Sohm, *The artist*) do not discuss the theme of vigilance.

48 It would be impossible to sum up the existing scholarship on the topic of *non finito* here. However, in the many essays on this notion the connection between nocturnal vigilance and *non finito* is usually not taken into consideration.

Towards a Notion of the Vigilant Artist

Michelangelo's nocturnal practices, as filtered through the pen of Vasari in the three stories considered above, must, at the same time, be viewed as extremely peculiar and unique to Michelangelo's *persona* as constructed by Vasari and other writers, but also as part of a larger context and discourse, in which we have seen other artists using the night to different aims. Michelangelo's vigilance should be considered in a larger context of nocturnal practices of different types pertaining to other artists of this and other times, upon which I cannot expand here. A further crucial side of this exploration should also consider the dangers of the night for artists – dangers, which seem to be explicitly referred to in a letter by Leonardo del Sellaio to Michelangelo from 14 December 1521: "Altro nonn ò da dire, salvo richordarvi nonne a[n]dare di notte e lasc[i]are le pratiche nocive all'animo e al chorpo."[49] These suggestions deserve further investigation.

In this essay, I just scratched the surface of the many possible facets of artist vigilance by collecting some narration of nocturnal practices in art historical sources of the Cinquecento. So far, at least three possible ways in which Michelangelo's vigilance as described by Vasari can be understood have emerged. First of all, *vigilanza* is an element of the habits and character of the artist. However, it cannot be dismissed just as a physiological lack of sleep. On the contrary, vigilance works as, firstly, an intensification of the artist's activity, that is an alteration of the normal day-night rhythm that makes him "vigilantissimo", a state which is instrumental to achieving a higher scope (such as the achievement of perfection, victory in a competition and mastery over an extremely competitive field). Secondly, in a horizontal sense, it is also necessary to "keep vigil" over one's own work, artistic property, and working methods – in other words to defend both authorship and secretiveness, which, in the case of Michelangelo, became proverbial; in the anecdote recounting the episode relating to the young Michelangelo's signature, vigilance becomes a necessary weapon in an extremely competitive field. Thirdly, in a vertical sense, nocturnal vigilance boasts a deeper religious and existential meaning, one which Vasari's text constructs to explain the penitential work ethic of the old artist and his peculiar way of sculpting incessantly without ever finishing his work, not least because this would correspond not only to the end of his career as an artist, but his physical life, too.

In this last sense, *vigilantia* is also the Evangelical virtue of any individual who lives in expectation, not only of the last hour, but also of God's reckoning, which must have some further meaning for an artist who produced such a pow-

49 Michelangelo, *Il carteggio*, vol. 2, pp. 336–337.

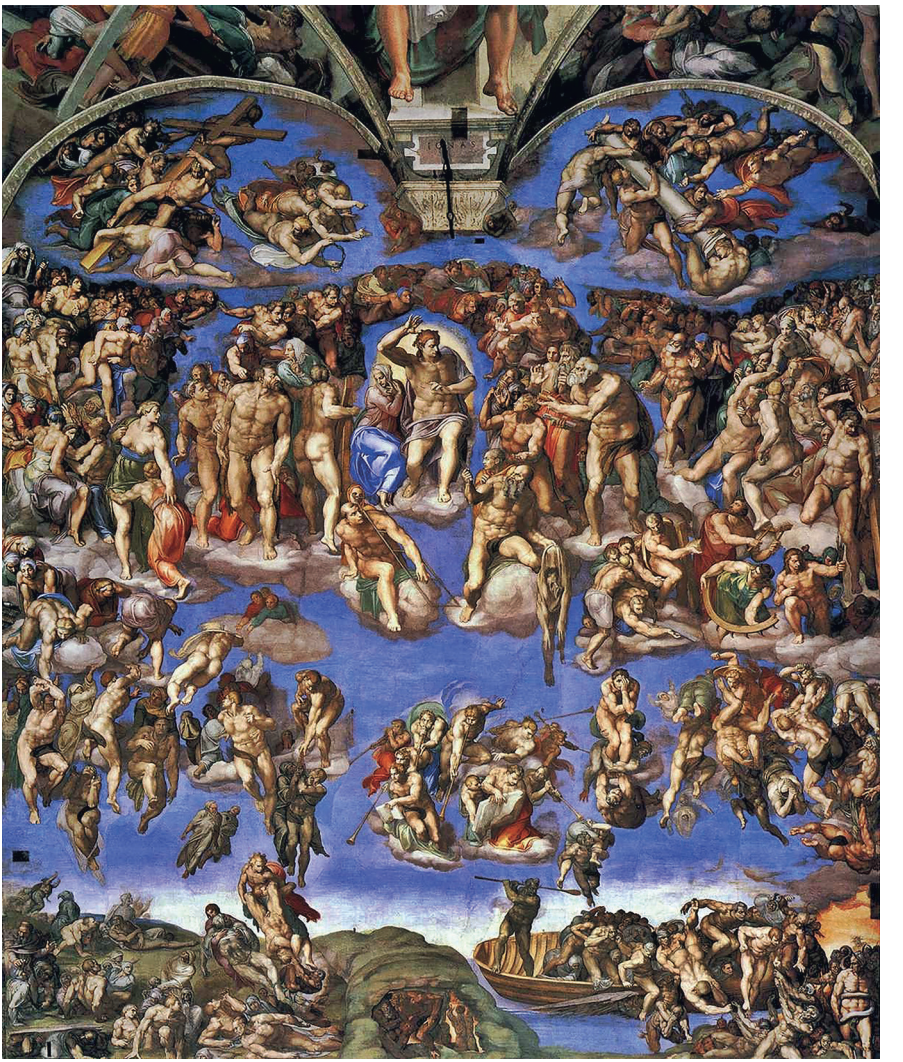

Fig. 10: Michelangelo Buonarroti: *Last Judgment*, 1536 – 1541, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

erful representation of the *Last Judgment* (Fig. 10). Among the sources relating to this fresco, there exists also a description of the final day in the Gospel of Matthew, in which the following line also appears: "Vigilate ergo, quia nescitis qua

hora Dominus vester venturus sit".[50] This image exhorts Christians to incessantly expect that the day of reckoning will be upon them. At the same time, it offers in itself an example of a further and more important role for artists in cultures of vigilance: a specific responsibility (changing from place to place and from time to time) to 'see better', to create forms, and, in doing so, to alert society to dangers or invisible things. According to this hypothesis, to be further investigated and tested with other case studies from different periods and places, artists assume a role which recalls that of special sentinels: thanks to their incessant practice and their imaginative skills that never sleep, they assume a responsibility to make contemporary onlookers aware of, and ready for, things that they would otherwise not be able to see, nor imagine.

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50 Matthew, 24,29–42: "Statim autem post tribulationem dierum illorum sol obscurabitur, et luna non dabit lumen suum, et stellae cadent de caelo, et virtutes caelorum commovebuntur: et tunc parebit signum Filii hominis in caelo: et tunc plangent omnes tribus terrae: et videbunt Filium hominis venientem in nubibus caeli cum virtute multa et majestate. Et mittet angelos suos cum tuba, et voce magna: et congregabunt electos ejus a quatuor ventis, a summis caelorum usque ad terminos eorum. [...] Vigilate ergo, quia nescitis qua hora Dominus vester venturus sit."

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