This wonderful, pioneering book is about the making of three of Michelangelo’s greatest works: the façade of S. Lorenzo, the Medici Chapel, and the Laurentian Library. In it we watch Michelangelo busily traveling back and forth between Florence and Carrara or Seravezza; supervising the quarrying and transportation of huge amounts of marble and sandstone; giving directions for the materials he needed; building himself a large “room” or studio in which to do much of his carving; hiring and directing his foremen, specialists, and laborers; making models and templates for them to follow; keeping track of their hours; keeping his own expenses—and occasionally even sculpting. We learn about the artist’s costs and the many things he needed to do in order to get things done. We witness his successes and frustrations. We see him grasping for power but also being loyal, generous, and even indulgent. We watch him making some of the most beautiful works in the world and also wasting a great deal of time in his perfectionist quest for greatness. In short, we glimpse an entrepreneurial Michelangelo.

All of these things are brought into sharp focus against the background of the normal practices of the time, which Wallace has mastered to a remarkable degree. We get a clear idea of the relative cohesiveness of the work teams that Michelangelo assembled, the extraordinary lengths to which he went to obtain the best materials, and his meticulous supervision of practically all of the aspects of a project. We come away with a very sharp picture of the highly integrated world of the stonemasons that worked for Michelangelo, to which world the artist himself in some respects belonged. We get to know a number of the stonemasons and learn much about their working conditions and the kinds of assignments they received. We learn an exceptional amount about what was involved in quarrying stone and getting it to the construction sites in Florence. All marginal to Michelangelo’s real achievement, some readers may feel. Perhaps so. But these activities, Wallace convincingly argues, contributed to firing Michelangelo’s imagination. It was, one might say, by being so greatly “into” his projects that Michelangelo was able to find solutions for them that no one else could have found.

The book is very well written and beautifully organized. Wallace’s infectious enthusiasm for his subject is communicated in clear and unpretentious prose. The book is symmetrically organized into a brief introduction, long chapters on each of the three major works, and a brief conclusion. The chapters are paced by means of sections, which in turn are broken into subsections of four to eight paragraphs with a brief heading. This breakdown into subsections is one of the book’s strongest features, making it possible for one to read selectively. Used in conjunction with the marvelous index, the subsections also make it easy to locate information. And information there is. The end-notes are especially full of it; many of them in effect constitute first-rate bibliographies on an amazingly broad range of subjects. The maps and tables are well done and greatly informative, with the exception of table 10, which I found baffling.

The book is nicely produced. The dust jacket is lovely, and the binding, paper, and page layout are all fine. As a rule the quality of the reproductions is good. The book, then, appears to have been generously budgeted. But the notes, alas, are set at the end of the book rather than as footnotes.

The stakes in Michelangelo studies evidently being what they are, it is unthinkable that two specialists should be in complete agreement over works as problematic as the façade of S. Lorenzo, the Medici Chapel, and the Laurentian Library. There follows a list of six points on which I was not fully convinced by or satisfied with Wallace’s assessment or the editorial choices that were made:

1. I believe Wallace should have paid greater attention to the numerous contracts between Michelangelo and Carrarese suppliers of marble from the end of 1516 until 1520. These contracts provide a great deal of information about the quantities and sizes of the pieces that Michelangelo ordered. Wallace apparently believes that most, if not all, of this marble, was intended for the tomb of Julius II, but that is unlikely. There was far too much marble for the tomb alone. Michelangelo’s main purpose in returning to Florence in 1516 was, after all, not to work on the tomb but to obtain—or grab—the commission for the façade of S. Lorenzo and get to work on it. In any case this marble, like all of the marble that Michelangelo received up to 1521, was his property. He was perfectly free to do with it as he pleased.

2. One of Wallace’s finest coups is to have discovered bank records which tell us a great deal indeed about the histories of the Medici Chapel and the Laurentian Library. This material should have been included in this book. Instead a reader has to go to the Rivista d’Arte (1993): 3–27.

3. In his introduction, which successfully establishes Michelangelo’s persona, Wallace takes issue with the commonly held belief that Michelangelo was unable to delegate responsibility. He states that five people worked with Michelangelo on the bronze statue of Julius II and no less than thirteen collaborated on the Sistine ceiling. But did any of these presumed assistants have any responsibility over design? One suspects that they worked under the strictest supervision, and Wallace even admits as much only a few pages later. It clearly was the same with the abortive façade project. In the later phases of the work on the Medici Chapel and on the Laurentian Library, Michelangelo in fact allowed others to perform important tasks, such as supervising the construction of the library and carving the two “Medici” saints for the chapel. But these men too worked to exact specifications. They made no design decisions of which we have knowledge. The point is important. The fact that none of his supervisors or head assistants was able to proceed in Michelangelo’s absence helps to explain why none of these projects was completed during the artist’s lifetime.

4. According to Wallace, having an employee work on a piece basis, or a cottimo, was a way of ensuring quality. But as the example he cites, involving Francesco da Sangallo, clearly demonstrates, it in fact was just the opposite. It was a way of getting results. Obviously a workman being paid by the piece will try to produce as many pieces in a given time as possible. The difficulty is that in trying to do so he will also be tempted to cut corners. This point, too, is important. Most of the work done for
Michelangelo at S. Lorenzo was done on a time basis. The pope was paying anyway, and Michelangelo therefore could easily afford to offer good wages and to pay by the day (a opere). That is why he had no trouble assembling a team of competent workmen and hanging onto the ones with whose work he was satisfied. The quality of their work, as Wallace shows, was extremely high. But the façade was never completed.

5. Wallace identifies a large clay model now in the Casa Buonarroti as one of the river gods planned for the Medici Chapel and attributes it to Michelangelo. He also says, as do many others, that a drawing now in the Louvre (Figure 50) shows Michelangelo’s intentions for one of the side-wall tombs in the chapel; Wallace thinks that it is a presentation drawing. But the model and the figures of river gods in the drawing are incompatible. It may be that the model is not for a river god (and not by Michelangelo) and also that the drawing in the Louvre does not show the Medici Chapel as Michelangelo planned it. The drawing is probably not by Michelangelo.

6. The conclusion is the weakest part of the book. Quite subjective, it contains many debatable statements and even a few demonstrably—and gratuitously—inaccurate ones. I can sympathize with Wallace’s wish to provide his readers with a lively and sensitive coda at the end. But Wallace’s book offers above all a body of verifiable—and in many cases verified—information, some of it even susceptible to statistical analysis. At least this once we have architectural history practiced with methodological rigor, as its founders meant it to be in the first place. Surely such a book should have ended with a sober assessment of what is demonstrably true, what is statistically probable, and what is at least possible about Michelangelo’s work at S. Lorenzo.

In comparison to the book’s great strength, these shortcomings are minor. I have already been influenced by this book and trust that others will be also. Together with other systematic studies on Michelangelo and S. Lorenzo, it will pave the way for reliable monographs on the façade project (the façade was, let us not forget, to have been Michelangelo’s greatest work outside St. Peter’s) and the Medici Chapel. One hopes that there will one day be a comparable book on Michelangelo’s work on St. Peter’s and that Wallace, or one of his students, will write it.

—Rab Hatfield
Syracuse University in Italy

Michael Kiene
BARTOLOMEO AMMANATI
Milan: Electa, 1995, 260 pp., 338 illus., 42 in color. £180,000 (cloth).

Poor Ammanati. Until recently, the prominent Florentine sculptor-turned-architect (1511–1592) has been the Rodney Dangerfield of cinquecento art: he don’t get no respect. His entry in Who’s Who in Architecture says merely “See Vignola” (his collaborator at Rome’s Villa Giulia), where his name is spelled “Ammanata.” His works shape our image of Florence: the severely elegant bridge of Santa Trinita, lovingly rebuilt after Nazi bombing; the rusticated courtyard of the Pitti Palace, setting for Medici festivals; and the Neptune Fountain beside the Palazzo Vecchio (as well as that Florentine outpost in Rome, the Villa Medici). This prolific career notwithstanding, his reputation has long suffered from the assumption that he played perpetual second fiddle to more creative superiors: the court architects Vasari and Buontalenti, and the divine Michelangelo, whose design for the Laurentian Library Ammanati executed. And admittedly in projects that were indisputably his own, his style tended toward excesses of Florentine planarity and increases of scale without a correspondingly enlarged concept.

Scholarly attention to Ammanati’s life and work has been commensurate with his accepted reputation as a minor star in the major leagues. No full-length study exists in English, and a generation has passed since the standard Italian publications by Fossi and others, who added little biographical data beyond seventeenth-century accounts. Since that time much new information has raised questions about old chestnuts. Michael Kiene has been active in this reevaluation, notably at the 1994 Tuscany conference dedicated to Ammanati; see the published proceedings in Niccolò Rossi di Turio and Federica Salvi, editors, Bartolomeo Ammanati, Scultore e architetto (Florence, 1995). The culmination of recent work is his handsome and judicious monograph, which will no doubt provide a benchmark and indispensable departure point for the next generation of Ammanati studies.

Kiene’s volume, translated from the German by Massimo Tirotti, has the virtues associated with German scholarship: it is orderly, exhaustive, and scrupulously documentary. In addition to a complete general bibliography, the book includes a catalogue of buildings and projects with detailed citations for each work. Photographs are copious and splendid, including old reconstructions, details of Ammanati’s inventive (if limited) repertory of decorative motifs, and many new color images that highlight the sometimes ludicrous contrasts of his buttery Roman brick with crisp white articulation and omnipresent greenery. Oddly, however, none of the photographs are credited; nor are the illustrations numbered, and their relation to the text, which seldom refers to them directly, can be frustratingly unclear.

The book’s structure is largely chronological. The concise biographical outline is supplemented by a useful chapter on “sources, colleagues, and rivals” charting the complex interrelations among his contemporaries. Sections follow on his early Paduan work; on Rome, 1550–1555 (chiefly Villa Giulia); on his principal career in Florence; and on late works such as the mammoth Palazzo Pubblico in Lucca. (Ammanati always kept a second house in Rome, although as age advanced he directed the Villa Medici and other commissions outside Florence mostly through letters and models, a method he had learned when on the receiving end of Michelangelo’s communications.) Of special value is the final chapter on his architectural theory, amplified by reproductions of a short treatise, Ratio strumi, which he published with the Jesuit Giuseppe Valeriano, and of all the eighty-odd drawings that remain from a projected compendium of building designs.

Kiene’s goals are avowedly modest: an incremental rather than revolutionary shift in our perception of Ammanati’s oeuvre, derived from a diligent sifting through archival sources and conflicting bibliographies. And he succeeds admirably in clarifying dates, sequences, and problems of attribution—or, failing that, notifies us clearly that documentation is lacking to substantiate old assumptions, reasonable or not.