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## THE CAMPIDOGLIO AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY STAGE DESIGN\*

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One of the engravings traditionally ascribed to Bramante is an architectural design that must have enjoyed a considerable diffusion, since it exists in several versions (*fig. 1*).<sup>1</sup> Certain of these bear the master's name, but Von Geymüller, in an analysis that emphasized the unstructural, "decorative" character of the architecture, rejected the attribution to Bramante himself and ascribed it to a North Italian artist around 1510.<sup>2</sup> On the whole this conclusion has been accepted, though most recently the attribution to Bramante has been revived, with a date around 1490, prior to his removal to Rome.<sup>3</sup>

No less problematic than its date and authorship is the purpose of the design. It is usually regarded as a stage set, and indeed it shares many elements with the early sixteenth century scheme that we know chiefly from Peruzzi (*fig. 4*) and from Serlio's famous illustrations to his second book on architecture. Like them it consists of two parallel rows of buildings placed behind one another to form a street leading into the distance. In both cases the view down the street is punctuated in the middle ground by a triumphal arch, through which the vista continues until it reaches a church-like building with a cupola. In the background, above the main buildings, project various tall structures that create an irregular upper silhouette.

There are, however, certain obvious differences between the engraving and the Peruzzi design. And the differences are important when considered in the light of what must have been the leading formal problem for stage designers of the period: that of translating into illusionistic terms the convention, inherited from the middle ages and sanctioned by antiquity, of action taking place out of doors before "real" buildings. Peruzzi solved this problem by a subtle combination of seemingly contradictory effects. On the one hand the long perspective is allowed full rein; the transition from the actual stage to what was presumably a painted backdrop receives only token acknowledgement in a raised step, the cessation of squaring in

\* I have greatly benefited from the suggestions and comments of Professors John Coolidge, James Ackerman, and Howard Hibbard, and Mrs. Elizabeth MacDougall.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. H. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving*, London, 1938ff., V, pp. 104ff., VI, pls. 634ff.; we reproduce Hind's No. 2, II, pl. 634.

<sup>2</sup> L. Courajod and H. de Geymüller, *Les estampes attribuées à Bramante*, Paris, 1874, pp. 16f. It was ascribed to Cesariano by F. Malaguzzi-Valeri, *La corte di Lodovico il Moro*, Milan, 1913ff., II, p. 309; cf. R. Krautheimer, "The Tragic and Comic Scene of the Renaissance," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXXIII, 1948, p. 340.

<sup>3</sup> P. Murray, "'Bramante milanese': the Paintings and Engravings," *Arte Lombarda*, VII, 1962, pp. 38ff.

the pavement, an inset of the lateral buildings. The front buildings, those nearest the actors, are kept relatively small — a device that Serlio specifically prescribes for stage sets<sup>4</sup> — so that the discrepancy in scale is minimized. But then the buildings continue to get taller, counteracting the impression of depth produced by converging orthogonals and the diminishing height of a few individual structures. As a result, the space is progressively “compressed” until in the upper background the sense of recession all but disappears. At the same time, Peruzzi takes pains to differentiate the lateral rows of buildings, and to give a semblance of haphazardness in their placement. The over-all effect, despite the deep vista, is crowded and piled up, as if against an imaginary surface.

In the engraving, by contrast, the first two palaces overwhelmingly predominate and the triumphal arch is placed directly behind them. Only two elements, that tend to balance one another, project into the skyline. The facing palaces are very similar in design. Rather than a heterogeneous cityscape, the immediate impression is that of a clear and harmonious piazza. The underlying problem is thus solved directly and simply by creating an essentially self-contained spatial unit, limited in effect to what might really be contained on the stage.

If therefore the engraving is thought of as a stage design it suggests that a type of set existed which, though related to the Peruzzian, was conceived from a fundamentally different point of view. This hypothesis finds support in one of a pair of Ferrarese paintings in the Strozzi collection in Florence that have recently been introduced into the literature of theater history (*fig. 3*).<sup>5</sup> While the lateral palaces have closed ground floors rather than open loggias, and a realistic house rather than a triumphal arch at the rear, the analogies to the engraved design are patent. The painting is inscribed with the date 1520. The double stairway leading up to the raised platform, though not a *sine qua non*, is an unmistakable earmark of a stage design.

The Strozzi painting permits us to assume that an alternative type did in fact exist, at least at the beginning of the third decade of the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> It also leaves little doubt as to the scenographic character of the engraving, whether or not it actually represents a stage set.

When understood in this context, it is particularly startling to find that the engraving foreshadows in many respects Michelangelo's design for the Campidoglio (*fig. 2*), the initial planning of which is now thought to have begun ca. 1538–39.<sup>7</sup> In both cases the lateral palaces, which are raised on low platforms, have two stories, with open loggias on the ground level. In the loggia of the left-hand palace in the engraving columns support a horizontal entablature. Michelangelo used this motif in the Campidoglio perhaps for the first time in real architecture as the ground floor loggia of a long palace front; but it was an established formula in non-

<sup>4</sup> “... sopra tutte le altre cose si dee fare electione delle case piu piccole, & metterle davanti, acciò che sopra esse si scuoprano altri edificij ... onde per tal superiorità della casa piu adietro, viene a rappresentar grandezza, & riempie meglio la parte della scena, che non farebbe diminuendo se le sommità delle case diminuissero l'una dopo l'altra.” (Cited from the Venice 1566 edition, fol. 46 r.)

<sup>5</sup> L. Magagnato, *Teatri italiani del Cinquecento*, Venice, 1954, p. 38, fig. 13. See *Catalogo della esposizione della pittura ferrarese del rinascimento*, Ferrara, 1933, No. 106, p. 91. I am indebted to Prof. Ulrich Middeldorf for his help in tracking down these paintings.

<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, the two solutions might overlap, as seems to be the case in the Bramantesque engraving itself, and in the second of the two Strozzi paintings (Magagnato, *op. cit.*, fig. 12; *Catalogo espos. pitt. ferr. rin.*, No. 105).

<sup>7</sup> On the early dating, cf. J. S. Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, London, 1961, II, pp. 61 ff.

built, imaginary architecture.<sup>8</sup> Michelangelo's colossal order of pilasters also curiously recalls the "through-running" treatment of the orders in the left-hand palace of the engraving.<sup>9</sup>

More important than these details are the analogies of basic layout between the Campidoglio and the engraving as well as the Strozzi panel. The arrangement of three buildings to form a piazza had a monumental precedent in Bernardo Rossellino's piazza at Pienza where, as on the Campidoglio, a trapezoidal shape was imposed by pre-existing conditions. A basic difference, which the Campidoglio shares with our designs, is that both lateral facades stop short of the central structure leaving before it a narrow strip of space running transversely. As a result the flanking palaces function much more decisively as independent but balanced frames for the centerpiece.<sup>10</sup> Michelangelo also places a narrow strip in front of the whole composition, a feature that seems adapted from the actor's platform at the front of the stage. In the Campidoglio it imposes on the visitor who reaches the top of the stairway a certain interval before he enters the piazza. Hence it is a determining factor in what might be described as the "presentational" effect of the Campidoglio design—a closed enveloping space is suggested, that can be perceived as such most effectively from without.<sup>11</sup>

Michelangelo is not ordinarily thought of in connection with the great flowering of Italian stage design during the sixteenth century, partly of course because we have no documentary evidence of his having worked in this field.<sup>12</sup> But also he does not appear to have been interested in the kind of perspective phenomenon associated with the Peruzzi tradition; at least, the studies of urban views and groups of buildings seen in perspective, so characteristic of other architects of the period, have no parallel among his surviving drawings. Thus it is perhaps significant that we find a common ground between the Campidoglio and the space-defining, as opposed to the perspective-vista, type of set.

At any rate, we are confronted with the possibility that one of the things Michelangelo looked at when planning the Campidoglio was the stage. It may be relevant that the Capitoline idea had been expressed theatrically, so to speak, before Michelangelo—in the famous productions held there in 1513 to celebrate the conferral of the Roman patriciate on Giuliano

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the examples cited by Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 40 and n. 55; Piero della Francesca's *Meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* and his *Flagellation*, the Urbino architectural panel (regarded by Krautheimer, *op. cit.*, as a stage set), and a tarsia in the Ducal Palace of Urbino (P. Rotondi, *Il Palazzo Ducale di Urbino*, Urbino, 1951, II, fig. 413). In the latter two, incidentally, a palace with round-arched loggia is placed opposite, as in the engraving.

<sup>9</sup> It may also be worth noting that in certain versions of the engraving (including that reproduced here, but see rather Hind, *op. cit.*, pl. 635) an allegorical figure crowns the triumphal arch; the motive provides a central accent in the skyline, reminiscent of the tower atop the Palazzo del Senatore.

<sup>10</sup> It should be borne in mind that one of the misleading effects of the Dupérac engraving of the Campidoglio is that it shows no plain surface in front of the Palazzo del Senatore; in fact, there would have been a fairly wide band. For a corrective, see the plan of Faletti, 1567, reproduced in Ackerman, *op. cit.*, pl. 36b.

<sup>11</sup> Other features of the Campidoglio that have precedent in theater tradition are the twelve-pointed star design in the pavement (*ibid.*, I, p. 72) and the double-ramped stairway of the Senatore, which appears in the Strozzi panel (fig. 3). Michelangelo repeated the latter motif in the Belvedere, partly perhaps because the Belvedere had itself been conceived in relation to stage design (cf. *idem*, *The Cortile del Belvedere*, Vatican, 1954, pp. 124 f.).

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes cited in this connection is a letter of 1523 from Felice di Sora to Francesco Maria I of Urbino (G. Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'artisti*, Florence, 1839 f., II, p. 154, No. C) in which Michelangelo is named as the designer of a model for a villa with garden and theater at Marmirolo for the Duke of Mantua. Ackerman (*Michelangelo*, II, p. 145) has pointed out, however, that di Sora mistook Michelangelo for Giulio Romano, who in fact was the designer (F. Hartt, *Giulio Romano*, New Haven, 1958, I, pp. 259 ff.).

and Lorenzo de' Medici.<sup>13</sup> A decoration with "prospettive" was again planned for the Campidoglio for the reception of Charles V in 1536.<sup>14</sup> And that Michelangelo's transformation of the hill was itself seen in these terms is suggested by the fact that it was echoed repeatedly in theatrical contexts almost from the time of its inception. In an engraved stage set ascribed to around 1550 the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius appears against a palace with an arched loggia that reflects the original form of the Palazzo dei Conservatori.<sup>15</sup> A fancifully "completed" view of the whole Campidoglio was painted on one of the walls flanking the stage of Scamozzi's theater at Sabbioneta (1588-1590); associated with it on the opposite wall is a view of the Castel Sant'Angelo, one of the most characteristic of all sixteenth century stage motives.<sup>16</sup> Early in the seventeenth century Aleotti almost literally transferred the design of the flanking palace of the Campidoglio to the stage of his Teatro degli Intrepidi at Ferrara.<sup>17</sup>

Such quotations, however, are less significant than the Campidoglio's relation to the formal development of Italian cinquecento stage design. The middle years of the century are still very obscure, but several tendencies are clear enough. The limited space solution as such practically disappears until toward the middle of the seventeenth century when it seems to reemerge in a new and very different form, namely the courtyard or interior set.<sup>18</sup> The Peruzzian type of multiple-building vista becomes standard; but it undergoes certain basic alterations, some of which may even reflect an influence from the opposite camp (cf. fig. 5).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cf. L. von Pastor, *The History of the Popes*, London, 1923 ff., VIII, pp. 167 ff.

<sup>14</sup> A reference brought to my attention by James Ackerman: December 10, 1535, "... il Popolo a sue spese faccia ornare la piazza de Campidoglio con prospettive et altre cose necessarie insieme con la sallita et scesa di essa piazza." (Cf. J. Hess, "Die päpstliche Villa bei Araceli," in *Miscellanea Bibliothecae Hertisianae*, Munich, 1961, p. 250, n. 48.) In the end, no reception took place on the hill; but Hess connects the whole Capitoline project with this event, and considers the derivation of the design from the realm of festival architecture "unmistakable." Cf. also Ackerman, *Michelangelo*, I, p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Uffizi, No. 9788; mentioned by Hind, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> Poor illustrations in G. Peccati, *Il Teatro Olimpico* (Collana storica sui monumenti gonzagheschi di Sabbioneta), Mantua, 1950, pp. 24, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Reproduced in *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, Rome, 1954 ff., V., pl. XXII top; cf. F. von Rapp, "Ein Theater-Bauplan des Giovanni Battista Aleotti," *Schriften der Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte*, 41 (Neues Archiv für Theatergeschichte, ed. Max Herrmann, Bd. 2), Berlin, 1930, pl. 10, p. 124.

Other evidence for the general Campidoglio-scenography association in the sixteenth century: engravings in the *Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae* (T. Ashby, "Addenda and Corrigenda to *Sixteenth Century Drawings of Roman Buildings attributed to Andreas Coner*," *Papers of the British School at Rome*, VI, 1913, p. 196); a passage in A. Ingegneri, *Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche*, Ferrara, 1738, "La Scena deve assomigliarsi il più che sia possibile al luogo, dove si finge, che sia avvenuto il caso, di cui è composta la Favola. Per esempio, s'ella sia Tragedia accaduta in Roma, s'arrà a figurare il Campidoglio, il Palagio maggiore, i Tempj, e gli edificj più principali." (Quoted from ed. Florence, 1734, p. 88.)

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting that the Bramantesque engraving seems to have been reissued at least twice in the early seventeenth century (Hind, *op. cit.*, Nos. 2, a, II-III).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. H. Borchardt, *Das europäische Theater im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, Leipzig, 1935, pp. 113 f.; G. Kernodle, *From Art to Theater*, Chicago, 1944, pp. 180, 192. The difference is already striking in the 1560 set by Riccio for the Accademia degli Intronati in Siena (Magagnato, *op. cit.*, fig. 21); see also Palladio's perspective street behind the central proscenium arch in Daniele Barbaro's 1556 edition of Vitruvius (*ibid.*, fig. 29).

On our fig. 5, one of a pair of drawings in the British Museum ascribed to Salviati, see most recently *ibid.*, p. 46, with a dating 1565-70.

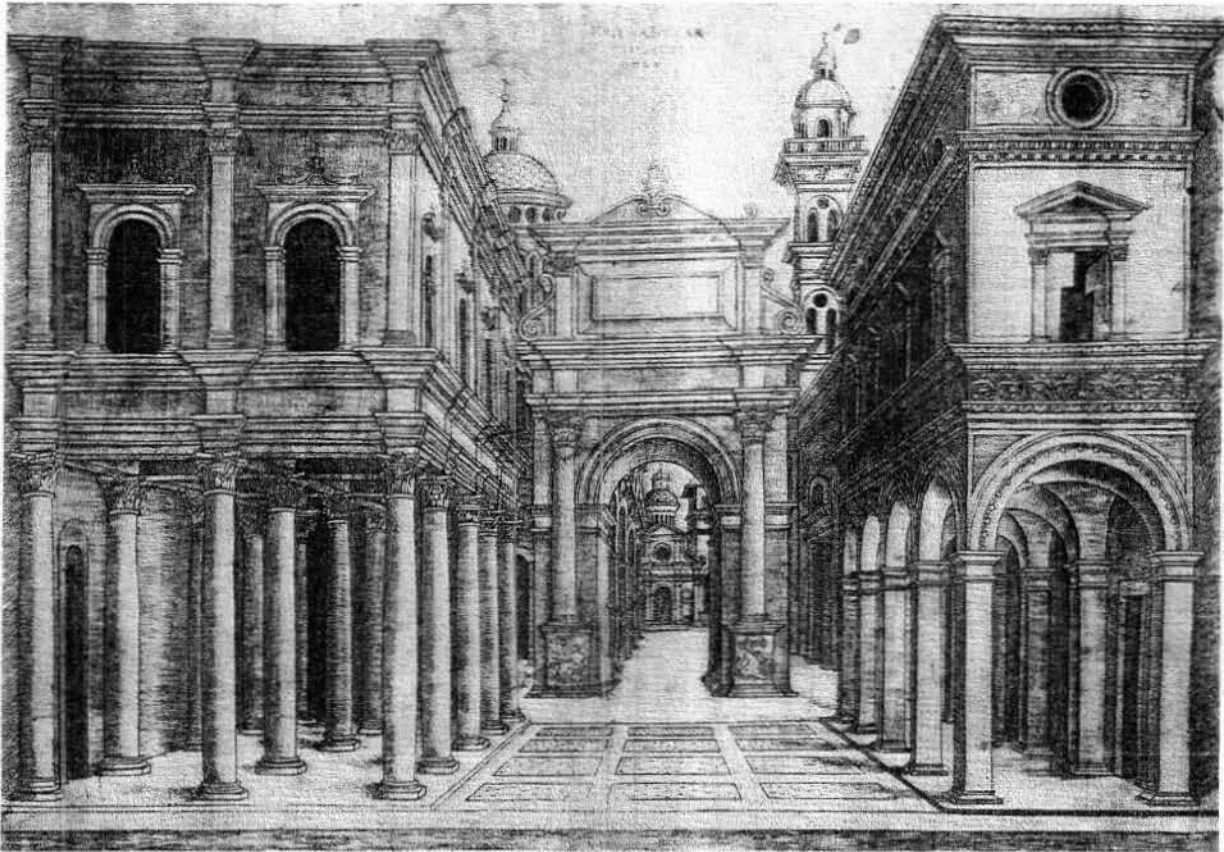


No heed is paid to the principle of keeping the foremost buildings low. The first two palaces dominate, and the scale diminishes more or less regularly into the distance. The tall structures at the rear are eliminated. Instead of projecting unpredictably into the street, the lateral rows of buildings are placed along a straight base line. Instead of being differentiated, buildings facing one another are similar in design. In sum, the features of the Peruzzian set that tended to mitigate the effect of recession are eliminated, so that a more unified composition and a more consistent movement into depth is achieved. Even in a case such as the Salviatesque drawing reproduced here, a building that blocks the center of the vista is so designed that space flows easily past on either side.

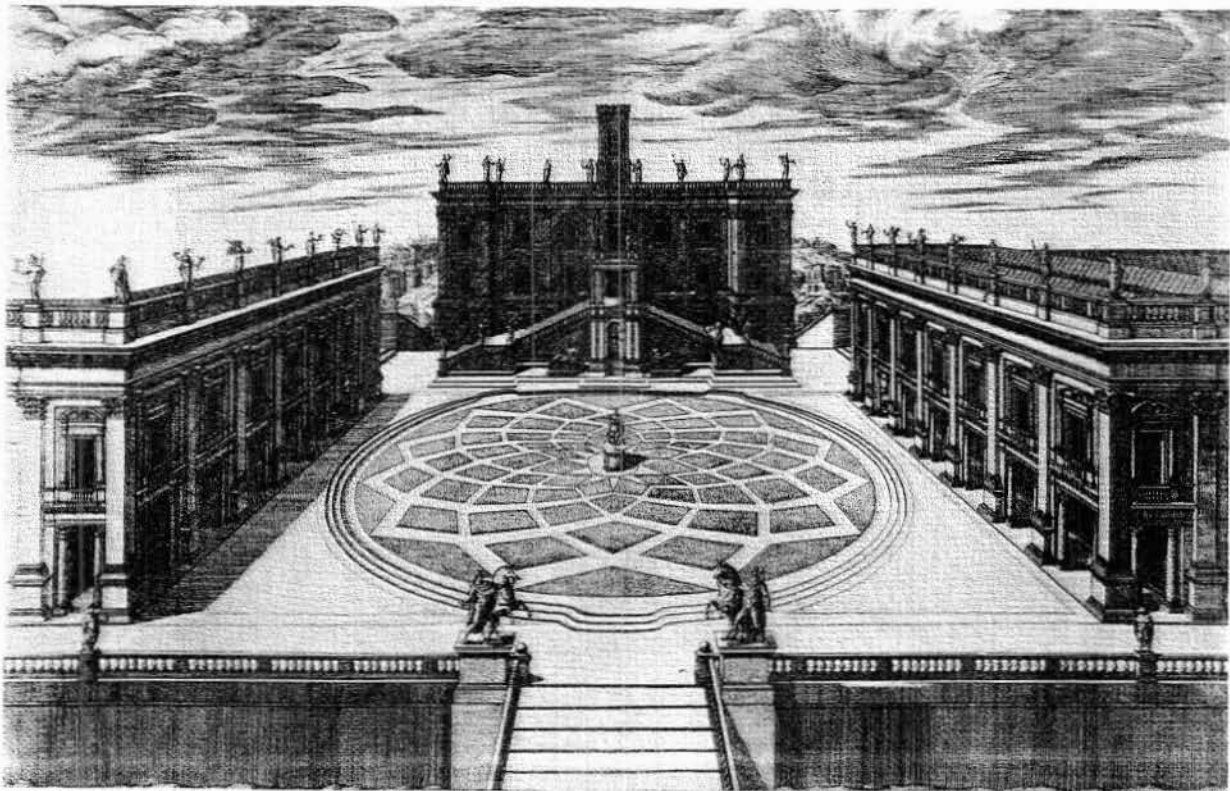
It will have become evident that Michelangelo's Campidoglio already contains some of these new elements. Most apparent are the strict symmetry along the central axis, and the increased length of his lateral palaces. The impression of movement into depth is greater than in either the Strozzi painting or the Bramantesque engraving. On the other hand, Michelangelo would probably have abhorred the Madison Avenue effect of the later Salviatesque drawing. Likewise the openings at the back corners of the piazza, barely articulated in the painting and engraving, provide in the Campidoglio a sharp release from the enclosed space; but they hardly suggest a continuous flow as do the analogous openings in the drawing.

Admittedly one cannot be too cautious about venturing beyond superficial similarities of detail between stage design and monumental architecture, so vastly different are they with regard to both the means and the problems involved. Yet it is precisely in the special case of the Campidoglio that Michelangelo may have felt a deeper analogy, since he was using pure facades to create real space—a rare situation for the monumental architect, but one that stage designers had been dealing with for years. Oddly enough, one of the ways in which the palace fronts of the Campidoglio most differ from contemporary stage sets is in their screen-like quality. Michelangelo achieves this effect in a variety of ways—for example, by eliminating much of the wall surface and by adding the balustrades with statuary that provide a transparent upper fringe. It seems as if he sought to create the very impression the stage designer wished to avoid, that his buildings are indeed mere facades.

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*Fig. 1.* Bramantesque engraving, presumably of a stage set. London, British Museum  
(Photo: Courtesy British Museum)



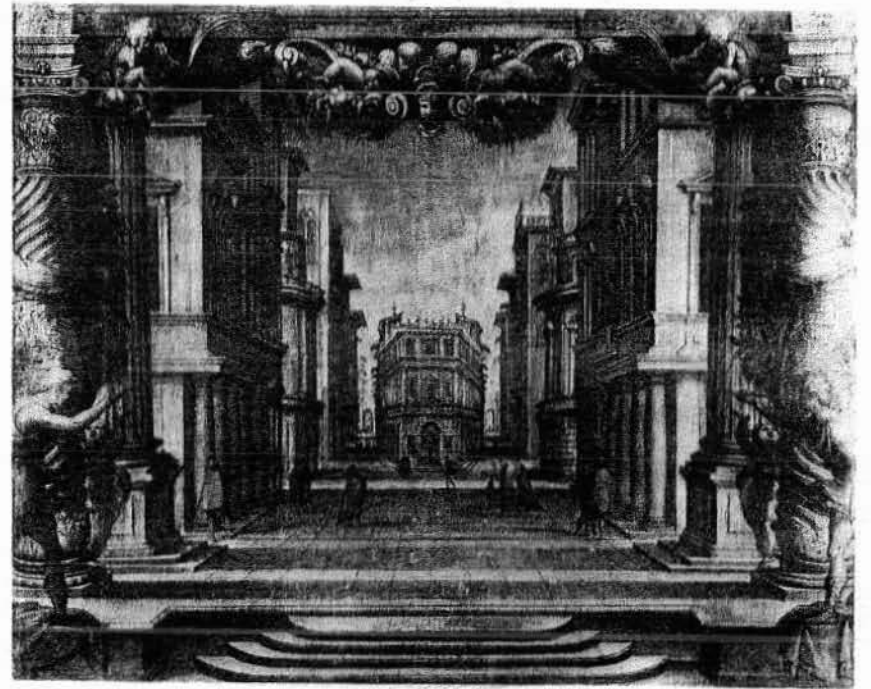
*Fig. 2.* E. Dupérac, engraving of Michelangelo's Campidoglio, 1569. Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana



*Fig. 3.* Ferrarese painting of a stage set, 1520. Florence, Strozzi Collection



*Fig. 4.* Peruzzi, drawing of a stage set. Florence, Uffizi, No. 291 A  
(Photo: Soprintendenza alle Gallerie, Florence)



*Fig. 5.* Drawing of a stage set, ascribed to Francesco Salviati. London, British Museum (Photo: Courtesy British Museum)