

Michelangelo and the Italian Renaissance

Written by
Walter Sprague Hearn

In his nearly 89 years of life, Michelangelo Buonarroti painted, sculpted, and built some of the greatest works of art ever produced, and he worked for, and fought with, some of the most powerful political and religious leaders in Europe. Popes and noblemen competed among themselves to employ him to create works of art that would glorify themselves as well as their cathedrals and cities. By the time of his death on February 18, 1564, this solitary genius had proved himself to be one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, artist who ever lived. He was a giant in an age of artistic giants and, along with fellow artists Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, represented the peak of that explosion of sculpture, painting, and architecture we refer to today as the Italian Renaissance.

It might help us to better understand the life and art of Michelangelo if we looked at the times in which he lived and worked. All of Europe was in turmoil. Armies marched to and fro as kings and princes attempted to seize land and cities from one another, while the emerging middle classes, who had grown rich on trade, attempted to break free of their control. As if Europe's dynastic quarrels were not enough, the popes in Rome placed themselves squarely in the middle of these disputes in order to protect the wealth and power of the Catholic Church. And yet, Renaissance artists somehow managed to rise above the civic strife in their own cities, as well as the religious warfare between Catholics and Protestants, to create timeless works of beauty. Their creative output is even more impressive when we consider that during this most fertile period of Western art a seemingly endless stream of historic events and discoveries were calling into question the core religious and political beliefs that had held European society together for over a thousand years.

The first invention to revolutionize Western civilization during this period was something we take for granted today: printing. In 1450, just a quarter of a century before Michelangelo was born, a German goldsmith named Johann Gutenberg invented a new way of reproducing words with reusable movable type that would be one of the major turning-points in European intellectual history. During the Middle Ages, professional copyists called scribes had been employed to hand-copy all written materials. Gutenberg's new process allowed for mass production, and made the cost of producing a single page about 400 times cheaper than copying by hand. In the realm of religion, the ability to mass produce Bibles and sermons inexpensively enabled common people for the first time to read this material for themselves, and by doing so helped carry forward the opposition to the Church (known as the Reformation) sparked by Martin Luther two generations after Gutenberg's death in 1468. It also immensely enlarged the number of readers to whom a writer might address his political opinions, thus assisting the development of European democracy in coming generations. Gutenberg's invention would be a major factor in ushering in the modern world, and its effects were already being felt in Michelangelo's day.

In 1492, when Michelangelo was seventeen, Columbus made the first of his historic voyages that was destined to radically alter European man's view of the world. The discovery of previously unknown continents was perhaps the greatest single event in modern history. It set in motion voyages of exploration and conquest that brought the almost limitless resources of the New World flowing back to Europe, and shifted the center of power of that continent from the Mediterranean to the nations bordering the Atlantic. The voyages

of Columbus and Magellan not only launched one of the great commercial revolutions in history, they changed the way Europeans looked at the planet itself. One can only imagine the intellectual confusion in Europe during Michelangelo's youth when it was first learned that huge land masses had always existed on the other side of the earth, and no one in Europe, Asia, or Africa had a clue about their location, or what type of people, plants, and animals could be found there.

Adding to the intellectual confusion in Europe around 1500 was a growing dissatisfaction with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. About the time Ferdinand Magellan was preparing for his voyage around the world (1519-21), a German monk named Martin Luther was beginning a war of words with the Roman Church that was destined to shake Christianity to its foundations. Beginning in 1517, Luther's public protests against corruption and worldliness among the leadership of the Church split Europe into two warring camps. This conflict made Luther, a devout priest, the man most responsible for the Reformation (a period of religious and political upheaval in the 16th century in which new churches were formed separate from the control of Rome). Such power as the Roman Church had held for many centuries over the personal lives and purses of millions of Europe's Christians was not going to be given up without a terrible fight - and that struggle took the form of religious violence by Catholics and Protestants for generations after Luther's death. The fuse was lit on October 31st, 1517. Michelangelo was 42 years old when Luther nailed a list of his religious grievances to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. With that hammer, Luther permanently shattered, whether he intended to or not, the solidarity of Christianity itself.

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This period of religious and political turmoil was also a time of artistic experimentation unlike anything seen before it, and Michelangelo was destined to bring painting, sculpture and architecture to a peak of perfection in what we today refer to as the High Renaissance, the most remarkable period of change since the decline of the Roman Empire.

Renaissance is a French word meaning “rebirth” or “revival.” It was a transitional period between Middle Ages and modern times that ran from around 1350 to 1600. It was made possible by wealth that had come to northern Italy as a result of renewed trade between Europe and the East following the end of the Crusades. The Medici family of Florence had made great fortunes through this trade and from the lending of money at high rates of interest to popes and princes. They spent large sums of their great fortunes beautifying their palaces, as well as improving the city’s churches and public buildings. This, in turn, helped support hundreds of local artists and craftsmen whose religious and civic works continue to inspire artists today. This was the Florence into which Michelangelo grew to manhood.

Michelangelo Buonarroti was born in 1475 into a family of some social distinction. His father was the mayor of the town of Caprese, not far from Florence. Because of his mother’s delicate health, he was sent soon after his birth to be nursed by a family of stonemasons. The great artist would later joke that this experience destined him for the hammer and chisel. At six months of age the family moved to Florence. Although his father insisted that artists were no better than day-laborers, the young Michelangelo was determined to become a sculptor. Finally bowing to his son’s strong will, he apprenticed Michelangelo at age of thirteen to a local artist, but he left after a year saying there was nothing more to learn from the man. Soon after that, the young man’s talent was recognized

and he was asked to live in the palace of Florence’s leading citizen, Lorenzo Medici, also known as Lorenzo the Magnificent. For two years (1490-92) Michelangelo lived with the city’s most powerful family, ate at their table, and discussed art, politics, literature, and philosophy with the greatest literary and political figures of his day. These contacts would be critically important in getting him his first commissions.

Lorenzo the Magnificent was not the only influential figure in the young artist’s life. A famous religious leader also made a profound impression. During these early years, the fiery preacher Savonarola was calling for the men and women of Florence to repent their love of wealth and earthly pleasures before God punished them severely for their sins. As much as Michelangelo loved the richness of Renaissance Florence, the preacher’s words always remained in the back of his mind. Decades later, Savonarola’s warnings about punishment for sins came to life visually when Michelangelo painted *The Last Judgment* on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel. In that massive painting, we see Christ judging the sins of mankind and sending the wicked to their eternal punishment. Michelangelo seems never to have fallen under the spell of the ancient Greeks, as did many artists of his time; he was more Old Testament than New Testament in spirit.

Renaissance Florence was an art school in itself. The young sculptor wandered through the city’s churches, public buildings, and palaces and made careful drawings of some of the greatest works ever created by the hand of man. The paintings of Giotto (c1266-c1337) and Masaccio (1401-28), and the sculptures of Donatello (c1386-1466) were his guides to what was artistically possible. During the Renaissance, the human figure was once again shown in three dimensions, and another important element entered Western art: a sense of drama. Michelangelo posed his figures in ways that suggested action and

passion, something rarely seen in the quiet perfection of the statues and paintings of Greece and Rome, nor the doll-like painting and carvings produced for the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages.

Michelangelo was particularly impressed by the great Florentine sculptor Donatello, the first great sculptor of the Italian Renaissance. The statue of *David* that Donatello carved around 1440 for the Medici family was the first sculpture in a thousand years meant to be viewed in the round. Unlike the statues in medieval cathedrals, whose subjects were often symbolic, this work had an individuality not seen in religious art for many centuries. The young Michelangelo studied Donatello’s work closely and learned what a great artist might do with a hammer and chisel.

Michelangelo also spent many hours carefully copying the religious figures painted by Giotto, one of the founders of the central tradition of modern Western painting, and an artist who had made enough of an impression on his own time that the poet Dante (1265-1321) had mentioned him by name in his epic poem *The Divine Comedy*. Michelangelo studied Giotto’s paintings in order to learn how to better represent human figures in three-dimensional space. This use of perspective, the system for depicting a three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface by portraying objects getting smaller and less distinct as they fade into the distance, was one of the characteristics of Renaissance art. Still, Michelangelo’s first love was sculpture and Rome, rather than Florence, would be the city where his talent with the hammer and chisel would first be recognized.

Between 1496 and 1501, Michelangelo worked in Rome, where at twenty-three he established himself as the leading sculptor of his time by carving a magnificent *Pietà* for a cardinal’s tomb in Saint Peter’s Cathedral. The word *Pietà* is Italian for “pity” and, in art, it means a

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painting or sculpture representing the Virgin Mary holding the crucified Jesus on her lap. This statue is among the most celebrated pieces of art ever created in stone, and it made his reputation as an artist of genius. In this piece, we can see the quiet influence of the classical Greeks in the oval-shaped perfection of the Madonna's face. Those who saw this marble miracle agreed that it rivaled the finest works of ancient Greece and imperial Rome. And anyone with the slightest familiarity with carving stone understands that a finished product such as the *Pietà* requires tens of thousands of careful strokes of hammer upon chisel, and a single mistake has the potential to ruin the entire enterprise. Unlike a painter, who can repaint a section of a canvas, the sculptor cannot restore anything he has removed from the block of stone.

Following the completion of this *Pietà* and other commissions, Michelangelo returned to his native city of Florence with a reputation as the greatest sculptor of his day. He was twenty-five, with decades of artistic creation left to him, and would work to within a week of his death sixty-four years later.

At the age of twenty-six, the young sculptor accepted an assignment from the officials of Florence's cathedral to carve a large, flawed, and irregularly shaped piece of marble into a human figure. The finished statue was the world-famous *David* and, at over sixteen feet in height, it was the largest freestanding male nude carved in marble since the Roman Empire. It was instantly recognized as a wonder of art and installed in front of the town hall as an emblem for the city itself. Five centuries later it remains, with the possible exception of the Statue of Liberty, the most famous statue in Western art.

With the delicate perfection of the *Pietà* and the heroic *David* to his credit, Michelangelo could have died before he was thirty and still be considered one of the greatest

sculptors of all time. Instead, pope Julius II summoned the young genius back to Rome to carve for him one of the largest and most elaborate tombs ever conceived. Its 40 marble statues alone would have taken decades to complete.

Michelangelo arrived in Rome in 1505 and began work on the pope's tomb. However, between 1508 and 1512 he was taken off that twenty-year project and ordered to paint several thousand square feet of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which was a physical as well as an artistic challenge because it was in the shape of a barrel and the surface was broken up by eight windows. He tried to avoid the assignment by claiming to be a sculptor who had only once in the past attempted to paint a mural, but pope Julius II insisted that he do the job.

Working in fresco is very difficult, even for an experienced painter. *Fresco* is a wall-painting technique in which pigment, mixed with water, is applied directly to walls covered with wet plaster. When the wall dries, the painting is permanent and becomes part of the wall. The artist, therefore, must work quickly as well as carefully.

Michelangelo took as his subject matter the Old Testament from Creation to Noah, and he did the work standing erect on a scaffold seventy feet in the air, not lying on his back, as legend says. He spent four years on the project, working in a building that was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. His neck and head were sometimes in danger of becoming dislocated due to the fact that he remained in such an uncomfortable stance while painting many hours each day. Paint dripped onto his face, he slept in his clothes to save time, and the pope constantly urged him to finish the project before he was satisfied with the way it looked. Finally, in October of 1512 the vaulted ceiling was revealed to the public. It was most grandiose and ambitious pictorial decoration anyone had yet attempted - and it was done by a man who did not consider himself to be a

painter. The ceiling contained 343 figures in thirty-three panels and was later called "a masterpiece of truly epochal proportions" by art historian H. W. Janson. Twenty-two years after completing that famous ceiling, the great man returned to paint the *Last Judgment* on the wall behind the altar. Today, the College of Cardinals gathers in that great chapel when they meet in Rome to elect a new pope.

Michelangelo ended his career at the Vatican as the pope's top architect, spending years rebuilding Saint Peter's basilica. He was able to work up to eight days before his death in 1564 at the advanced age of eighty-nine. It was because of Michelangelo and the other great man of that period, Leonardo da Vinci, that we began to associate artists with the word *genius*, instead of the word *craftsman*. Never again would such men be regarded as no more than talented manual laborers.

Michelangelo was revered in his own time as *Il Divino* (the divine one). Historian Will Durant thought he was the greatest artist who ever lived, and the English painter, Sir Joshua Reynolds, believed him to be the greatest genius that ever was employed in the arts.

He remains the only artist ever to reach the highest peaks of achievement in three separate fields of human endeavor: painting, sculpture, and architecture. The ceiling and the wall behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel alone place Michelangelo among the greatest artists to ever wield a brush. His Roman *Pietà* and Florence's *David* lead many critics to consider him the greatest sculptor who ever lived. And, if that were not enough for one lifetime, his work as chief architect of St. Peter's in Rome showed him to be to be a highly talented building designer. The hundreds of sonnets he penned over his long life can only make us admire his soul as well as the works of his brush and chisel.

Michelangelo deserves to stand among the supremely great figures in history such as Shakespeare, Newton, Napoleon, and Beethoven. Genius is

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not the same as inspiration; nearly everyone has good ideas now and then. Genius is having the ruthless determination to act on ideas and force them, at all costs, to completion. The men and women who reach the peaks of human achievement arrive there because they have hitched single-minded determination to succeed to a unique sense of unhabitual perception, and that combination has been responsible for much of that we call greatness in literature, science, politics, music and the visual arts.

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TEST: Michelangelo

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Home Room: _____

American History & Literature

1.

Michelangelo, one of the greatest artists who ever lived, was a true Renaissance man of many talents. He was a sculptor, painter, architect, and _____ **poet** _____.

.....

2.

According to Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia, this artist was "one of the greatest and most influential artists of all time...and responsible for the direction taken by art for _____ **two** _____ centuries after his death."

.....

3.

This artist was born in 1475, not far from the great Renaissance city of _____ **Florence** _____.

.....

4.

Michelangelo did some of his greatest work in stone and paint when he worked for the pope in the city of _____ **Rome** _____.

.....

5.

At twenty-three, he carved his magnificent _____ **Pietà** _____, the Virgin Mary holding the dead Christ on her lap.

.....

6.

For the city officials of Florence, Michelangelo produced the largest freestanding male nude carved in marble since the Roman Empire. The statue was of king _____ **David** _____.

.....

7.

The city officials of Florence paid Michelangelo about _____ **\$6,000** _____ in today's money for the statue mentioned in the previous question.

TEST: Michelangelo

8.

Pope Julius II summoned the artist to Rome to carve for him an elaborate _____ **tomb** _____.

.....

9.

Between 1508 and 1512 he was taken off the twenty-year project for the pope mentioned in the previous question and ordered to paint the enormous ceiling of the _____ **Sistine** _____ Chapel. It would be one of the largest and greatest works of art in all of history.

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10.

The ceiling of the chapel mentioned in the previous question covers _____ **6,000** _____ square feet.

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11.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, One of the greatest English painters and writers on art, Sir Joshua Reynolds, described Michelangelo as "the greatest _____ **genius** _____ that ever was employed in the arts."

.....

12.

Twenty-two years after completing the ceiling mentioned in question #9, Michelangelo returned to paint the _____ ***Last Judgment*** _____ on the wall behind the altar.

.....

13.

Michelangelo ended his career as the pope's top architect, rebuilding Saint Paul's basilica in the Vatican.
(a) True (b) **False**

.....

14.

Michelangelo died young, but was able to work up to eight days before his death in 1564.
(a) True (b) **False**

.....

15.

It was because of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci that we began to associate artists with the word _____ ***genius*** _____ instead of the word *craftsman*.

TEST: Michelangelo

16.

_____ **Fresco** _____ is the technique of painting directly on walls covered with wet plaster so that the paint permanently becomes part of the wall.

.....

17.

The ceiling paintings of the Sistine Chapel contain _____ **343** _____ figures in thirty-three panels.

.....

18.

Historian _____ **Will Durant** _____ said the ceiling frescoes of the Sistine Chapel are "the supreme painting of the Renaissance."

.....

19.

The term _____ **Renaissance** _____ means "*rebirth*." This was the great transition period between the Middle Ages and modern times and some of history's greatest artists, such as Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci lived and worked during this time.

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20.

Some 250 of Michelangelo's sonnets (poems) have survived.

(a) True

(b) False

.....

Art Appreciation 101

Written by
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Hearnes

Eb Waters and Bobby Joe Langdon hurried to get their boat off the trailer and into the lake as the sun began to rise.

"Hurry, Eb. Let's get this thing into the water before the city boys get here with their radios and their cell phones."

Ebenezer Waters laughed as he pulled with all his might to move Bobby's boat into the water.

"You know, Bob, when I was a kid this lake was the most quiet place in this county. The first time I heard a cellular phone ring out here I thought I had lost my mind. Why would you come all the way out here to get away from your troubles and then tie yourself to those troubles with a cell phone?"

"I don't know. I swear, if you care that much about your work or what the Stock Market's doin' you shoulda stayed home. Say, did I tell you about the time I heard one go off during a funeral?"

"You're kidding."

"I wish I was."

"Bobby, the only man who ought to be carryin' one of those things in church is a medical doctor."

"You're right. Hey, grab that extra paddle and let's get started over to our favorite spot before the sunshine boys get here."

"Who are you talking about?"

"You know. I call the city boys 'sunshine boys' because they always arrive well after dawn. They've slept in and had breakfast, and that means they're not serious fisherman. If you want bass you gotta be here just as the sun comes up. Let's go."

The two men pushed off from the boat dock and headed toward an area with half-submerged logs where they had had good luck in the past. As they moved across the lake Eb asked Bobby about his family.

"Well, most everybody is doin' pretty good, except my brother's kid. He got fired from that art museum job in the city."

"What happened?"

"The poor kid went off on a two week vacation while they closed the place for renovation. When he got back he grabbed his mop and went about his usual job. He's a janitor, ya know."

"Yeah, you told me."

"Anyway, he went into this area where he knew they'd been renovatin' and

hauled off a load of junk that was in one of the corners. He'd been at it about half an hour when the museum director walked in and fainted dead away."

"Why?"

"It seems that what he thought was a bunch of stuff left over by the workmen was some sort of modern art creation and he'd thrown the entire thing out."

"I'd laugh, but I don't want to hurt your feelings."

"I know. The director called the police, but they couldn't charge him with anything because they realized he was an uneducated man who didn't know the difference between a stack of bricks and some chicken wire and broken glass and an art masterpiece. He was fired, of course. Big scandal. He had to leave town."

"Bobby Joe, it's just possible that your nephew was the only man in that museum who did know the difference between a true work of art and a piece of you-know-what."

"He didn't finish high school, Eb."

"Yep, but would he have thrown out a Rembrandt painting?"

"Of course not."

"Would he have pitched a Greek statue into the dumpster?"

"No, anyone with a pair of eyeballs would know not to toss out something like that."

"Then maybe your nephew had a better feel for what's truly valuable than the Fancy Dans who paid all that money for that thing he threw out."

"Maybe."

"Well, think about it, Bobby. We've read stories in the newspaper about modern art masterpieces hangin' upside down for months and nobody noticing. If we put a Rembrandt upside down would someone notice right away?"

"Of course."

"Then it's the artist's signature that sells this stuff, not the work itself. If that's true we ought to collect their autographs and forget about their paintings and sculptures. This all started about a hundred years ago when the middle class hot shots began buying paintings—not because they appreciated art, but because their accountants told them art was a good investment. The art dealers saw 'em coming and unloaded all sorts of trash. They still are."

"Yes, Ebenezer, but that nephew of mine still felt real bad about what happened. He would've been in big trouble if the museum hadn't been insured."

"Then I wouldn't worry too much about that chicken wire and building brick piece of foolishness he threw out. If the world needs another creation like that I can run out to my barn and whip up something they'll love at that museum. I'll throw the first six things I come across onto a pile and give it a fancy title and we're in business. I'll call it 'Folly of the 21st Century,' charge a million for it, and the fancy guys will fall all over themselves to buy it. I'll put on a beret and smoke a cigarette out of one of those little holders and the sissy boys from the newspaper will come and write rave reviews about me and the primitive power of my creations. I'll call my new style 'Barnyard Primitive'"

As Eb fantasized about his new role as king of the modern art world the two men paddled up to their favorite fishing spot. Sadly, before the first lure could be cast into the water, the sound of a cellular phone rang across the lake in the clear morning air.

Eb shook his head and said, "And my first masterpiece will be a stuffed city boy with a bass in one hand, a rod in his other hand, and a cell phone stuffed down his throat."

"Eb, I look forward to seeing it."

Questions for discussion

Comment on the statement regarding Bobby Joe's nephew: *"He was an uneducated man who didn't know the difference between a stack of bricks and some chicken wire and broken glass and an art masterpiece."*

Comment on the statement: *"This all started about a hundred years ago when the middle class hot shots began buying paintings—not because they appreciated art, but because their accountants told them art was a good investment. The art dealers saw 'em coming and unloaded all sorts of trash. They still are."*

What, if anything, was your favorite part of the column? Why?

What, if anything, did you object to in the column? Why?