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“In what ways did the influence of Classical Antiquity effect idealization in the styles of Michelangelo?”

One would not have expected the violent and politically unsettled Italy during the early sixteenth century to have produced arguably the greatest artist in the world, but it did just that. This artist was none other than Michelangelo Buonarroti or “Il Divino” who at the height of his prowess gave life to marble, created frescoes that could move, and designed buildings that would inspire millions. Born in 1475, Michelangelo was one of many artists that just happened to be at the right place at the right time, for he was born into an Italy that was experiencing an ‘artistic revival’, now known as the Renaissance. This movement was brought about by the discovery of many Greek and Roman artifacts, remnants of a lost time, which sparked a renewal of a way of life this forgotten age had represented. Renaissance Italy was slowly embracing new ideals and concepts, such as Humanism and Neo-Platonism, and these, along with the Classical Arts, influenced Michelangelo greatly, and helped him fashion his own unique style.

In 1488, Michelangelo began his art, in the workshop of Domenico Ghirlandaio, who was one of the most prominent artists in Florence. Along with having honed his skills, Michelangelo also took from his apprenticeship with Ghirlandaio, his first influences. For Michelangelo was a devout Christian, and learned to incorporate Christian themes and motifs into his work, perhaps taking this from his master, who produced works such as “Adoration of the Child”, which were deeply spiritual. Shortly after this, Michelangelo was taken to the Medici household, who were the rulers of Florence. It was here that he gained his first glimpse of the ancient world, one that would make a life long impression, influencing future sculptures such as, “Battle of the Centaurs”, which was a common feature of the friezes of the temple of Apollo in Greece. At the age of 14, Michelangelo finds himself, “at the heart of one of the greatest and richest centers of artistic and intellectual endeavor in Italy”, with many ideals that will no doubt influence him for the remainder of his life.

Among the visitors to the Medici household, was Marsilio Ficino, a Renaissance philosopher and Neo-Platonist, who attempted to combine the writings of Plato with Christian beliefs and thought. “Neo-Platonism saw intellectual discipline as the key to man’s redemption from original sin, art as an imperfect reflection of God’s original vision”, and it was essentially these ideals which became central to Michelangelo’s credo as an artist. A good example of the influence of Neo-Platonism in his work can be seen in ‘The Fall of Man and the Expulsion from Paradise’, which links the physical state of the body with the moral state of the mind. Michelangelo’s recently found Neo-Platonic philosophy tied in well with his strong Christian beliefs, “Good painting is nothing but a

copy of the perfection of God and a recollection of His painting". It is with this philosophy that Michelangelo set out to carve the 'David', perhaps one of the most famous sculptures in history. David represents all that Michelangelo has been influenced by to this date, he portrays a Christian symbol of great faith and virtue, a preexistent form in stone that awaited one with the gift from God, and most importantly, a figure of Classical repose, a Grecian portrayal of heroism, an idealization of the human form.

To this point, we have seen Michelangelo idealise with the Christian values taught to him by Ghirlandaio, the Grecian and Roman tradition brought out from Classical Antiquity, and the philosophies promoted by Ficino and Neo-Platonism. Essentially, this culmination of ideals is what formed the basis of idealization in the High Renaissance, for it was "beauty, or perfection in form and the physical environment." Michelangelo applied this to all aspects of his profession, from his depiction of the human body, to his architecture. By the end of his early years in Florence and Rome, Michelangelo had developed his own style, a style that would no doubt create some of the finest Renaissance works. From the time frame of 1505 to 1513, Michelangelo produced, arguably not only the finest work of the renaissance, but the greatest ensemble in the world, The Sistine Chapel ceiling. The ceiling consists of a fusion of powerful Christian imagery with traditional Grecian mythological figures, despite these styles being quite different in nature, "the overall impression it gives is of a single epic conception, the creation of a single triumphant genius."

After about 1513, Michelangelo was once again being influenced by Classical Antiquity, this time, by a philosophy of Plato's known as Humanism, which "placed humans, not God at the centre of the universe." This meant that Michelangelo now increasingly emphasized the portrayal and individuality of the human form. This is evident in 'Moses', which he did from 1513 to 1516. This monumental figure was the centerpiece of Pope Julius's tomb, representing a Neo-Platonic 'figura serpentina form', while further intensifying Michelangelo's fascination with the Classical male. The 'Rebellious Slave' and 'Dying Slave' are two examples of further development on this ideology, for they represent the Platonic quest to free the soul from the bodily prison, evident in the strong contrapposto of the figures, while portraying the romanticism and harmony of Classical art. Right up till his death in 1564, Michelangelo continued to produce art; in his later years this took the form of architecture, and in particular the redesigning of St. Peter's.

Michelangelo's life can be seen as a "culmination of a quest to reconcile fidelity to the natural world with the classical ideals of harmony and proportion." His strong Christian values seem to reverberate throughout his career, with a central theme of redemption, whether through the suffering of the Pietá, through the heroism displayed in David, or through the divine grace represented on the Sistine ceiling. Through Michelangelo's work one can see that he held the human form in great respect and idealized human beauty and from this I would say that he did indeed achieve perfection, which is perhaps why his contributions to the history of art are immeasurable.

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