

He is one of the greatest artists of all time, a man whose name has become synonymous with the word "masterpiece": Michelangelo Buonarroti.

As an artist he was unmatched, the creator of works of sublime beauty that express the full breadth of the human condition. Yet in a world where art flourished only with patronage, Michelangelo was caught between the conflicting powers and whims of the Medici family in Florence, and the Papacy in Rome. Unlike many artists of his time, his genius was recognized, but at what cost to his personal life?

His Birth

The second of five brothers, Michelangelo was born on March 6, 1475, at Caprese, in Tuscany, to Ludovico di Leonardo di Buonarrotto Simoni and Francesca Neri. The same day, his father noted down: "Today March 6, 1475, a child of the male sex has been born to me and I have named him Michelangelo. He was born on Monday between 4 and 5 in the morning, at Caprese, where I am the Podestà." Although born in the small village of Caprese, Michelangelo always considered himself a "son of Florence," as did his father, "a Citizen of Florence."

His Childhood and Youth

Buonarroti's mother, Francesca Neri, was too sick and frail to nurse Michelangelo, so he was placed with a wet nurse, in a family of stone cutters, where he, "sucked in the craft of hammer and chisel with my foster mother's milk. When I told my father that I wish to be an artist, he flew into a rage, 'artists are laborers, no better than shoemakers.'"

Buonarroti's mother died young, when the child was only six years old. But even before then, Michelangelo's childhood had been grim and lacking in affection, and he was always to retain a taciturn disposition. Touchy and quick to respond with fierce words, he tended to keep to himself, out of shyness according to some but also, according to others, a lack of trust in his fellows. His father soon recognized the boy's intelligence and "anxious for him to learn his letters, sent him to the school of a master, Francesco Galeota from Urbino, who in that time taught grammar." While he studied the principles of Latin, Michelangelo made friends with a student, Francesco Granacci six years older than him, who was learning the art of painting in Ghirlandaio's studio and who encouraged Michelangelo to follow his own artistic vocation.

Leg Study #2

Early Life in Florence

Michelangelo's father, now a minor Florentine official with connections to the ruling Medici family, was a man obsessed with preserving what little remained of the Buonarroti fortunes. With few properties and monies remaining Ludovico hoped that with his studies, Michelangelo could become a successful merchant or businessman, thereby preserving the Buonarroti position in society.

When Michelangelo turned 13-years old he shocked and enraged his father when told that he had agreed to apprentice in the workshop of the painter Domenico Ghirlandaio. After about one year of learning the art of fresco, Michelangelo went on to study at the sculpture school in the Medici gardens and shortly thereafter was invited into the household of Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent. There he had an opportunity to converse with the younger Medici, two of whom later became popes (Leo X and Clement VII). He also became acquainted with such humanists as Marsilio Ficino and the poet Angelo Poliziano, frequent visitors to the Medici court.

His Studies of Anatomy

During the years he spent in the Garden of San Marco, Michelangelo began to study human anatomy. In exchange for permission to study corpses (which was strictly forbidden by The Church), the prior of the church of Santo Spirito, Niccolò Bichiellini, received a wooden Crucifix from Michelangelo (detail of Christ's face). But his contact with the dead bodies caused problems with his health, obliging him to interrupt his activities periodically.

Michelangelo produced at least two relief sculptures by the time he was 16 years old, the Battle of the Centaurs and the Madonna of the Stairs (both 1489-92, Casa Buonarroti, Florence), which show that he had achieved a personal style at a precocious age. In Michelangelo's personal diary he recounts his first two works: "My first work was a small bas-relief, The Madonna of the Stairs. Mary, Mother of God, sits on the rock of the church. The child curls back into her body. She foresees his death, and his return on the stairway to heaven. "My second work, another small relief. My tutor read me the myth of the battle of the Lapiths against the Centaurs. The wild forces of Life, locked in heroic combat. "Already at 16, my mind was a battlefield: my love of pagan beauty, the male nude, at war with my religious faith. A polarity of themes and forms...one spiritual, the other earthly, I've kept these carvings on the walls of my studio to this very day."

Death of Lorenzo the Magnificent

The architect of the balance of power in Italy died in 1492. His death had grave repercussions on Italian politics, but he left a precious legacy in the city of Florence.

Lorenzo embodied the ideal of the Renaissance prince, thanks to the breadth of his cultural interests and his political skills. An enlightened and generous patron, he encouraged artists, poets, and scholars. He was a supporter of Marsilio Ficino and his Neoplatonic Academy which brought the philosophy of Plato back into favor. It was thanks to him that the Garden of San Marco was organized into a school for young artists. He enriched the Medicean library with precious manuscripts and assembled an important collection of ancient and modern works.

A Divided Florence

After the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and under Savonarola's influence, the Florentines were divided into several rival factions. The "arribiati" (enraged) wanted to reestablish an oligarchic republic dominated by the powerful financial bourgeoisie and by the traditional aristocracy, but without the dictatorship of the Medici. The "piagnoni" (weepers), led by Savonarola and his followers, were recruited from all levels of society and fought fanatically for a purely religious state. They wanted an ascetic and puritanical government, free from the influence of the Vatican, of big money and of the nobility. Last, the Paleschi were the official defenders of the Medici, and as such they sought to perpetuate the status quo.

Ultimately, Piero Medici was not capable of governing Florence with the skill and diplomacy of his father, Lorenzo, and he was forced to flee the city. One week after Piero fled, The French King Charles VIII, with his 20,000 armed men, took Florence without firing a single shot. His occupation was short-lived and he soon left with his army.

But the wheels of the city-state had come to a grinding halt. The government machinery had been dominated for so long by the Medici that it could not function without a strong executive power. Around mid-December, Savonarola intervened in the crisis with a series of sermons. His ideas concerning the elected Council were the following: only real estate would be taxable, every Florentine citizen would have the right to vote, any man over the age of twenty-nine and who had paid his taxes would be eligible to seat on the Great Council. Savonarola became the political as well as religious leader of Florence. His victory over the Medici was complete.

The preacher led a direct assault on contemporary painting and its abuses. Carnival was now considered by Savonarola as a feast of penitence. Dressed in similar white habits, and bearing olive branches and little red crosses, Savonarola's sacred army of inquisitor children were responsible for watching over the purity of Florence. They would go from house to house and from palace to palace confiscating all works of art which were incompatible with the faith and which were to be burned. Savonarola was responsible for organizing several "Bonfire of the Vanities" in which he burnt many rare books, manuscripts and other works of art.

Michelangelo's Angel?

Q: Where can I find out about "Angel" by Michelangelo?

A: In the children's novel, "From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler." The children have to find out if a rare statue was created by Michelangelo. Michelangelo did create a statue called, Angel Holding A Candelabrum, San Domenico, Bologna, 1494-5. It's up to you to decide if this is the same statue!

First Roman Sojourn

Michelangelo then went to Rome, where he was able to examine many newly unearthed classical statues and ruins. He soon produced his first large-scale sculpture, the over-life-size Bacchus (1496-98, Bargello, Florence). One of the few works of pagan rather than Christian subject matter made by the master, it rivaled ancient statuary, the highest mark of admiration in Renaissance Rome.

Pietà

At about the same time, Michelangelo also did the marble Pietà (1498-1500), still in its original place in Saint Peter's Basilica. One of the most famous works of art, the Pietà was probably finished before Michelangelo was 25 years old. The youthful Mary is shown seated majestically, holding the dead Christ across her lap, a theme borrowed from northern European art. Instead of revealing extreme grief, Mary is restrained, and her expression is one of resignation.

Just days after it was placed in Saint Peter's, Michelangelo overheard a pilgrim remark that the work was done by Christoforo Solari, a compatriot from Lombard. That night in a fit of rage, Michelangelo took hammer and chisel and placed the following inscription on the sash running across Mary's breast in lapidary letters: MICHEL ANGELUS BONAROTUS FLORENT FACIBAT (Michelangelo Buonarroti,

Florentine, made this). This is the only work that Michelangelo ever signed. Michelangelo later regretted his passionate outburst of pride and determined to never again sign a work of his hands.

The Pietà, which many regard as the greatest work of sculpture ever created, inspired Giorgio Vasari to comment:

"It would be impossible for any craftsman or sculptor no matter how brilliant ever to surpass the grace or design of this work, or try to cut and polish the marble with the skill that Michelangelo displayed. For the Pietà was a revelation of all the potentialities and force of the art of sculpture. Among the many beautiful features (including the inspired draperies) this is notably demonstrated by the body of Christ itself. It would be impossible to find a body showing greater mastery of art and possessing more beautiful members, or a nude with more detail in the muscles, veins, and nerves stretched over their framework of bones, or a more deathly corpse. The lovely expression of the head, the harmony in the joints and attachments of the arms, legs, and trunk, and the fine tracery of the veins are all so wonderful that it is hard to believe that the hand of an artist could have executed this inspired and admirable work so perfectly and in so short a time. It is certainly a miracle that a formless block of stone could ever have been reduced to a perfection that nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh."

Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, first published 1550, 2nd edition 1558.

First Return to Florence

On August 4th, 1501, after several years of political confusion, a republic was once again proclaimed in Florence. The order established over the following four years received the unconditional support of Michelangelo. Also, during the same period, the artist clearly expressed his own political orientation, unlike in later work.

Twelve days after the proclamation of the republic, the Arte della Lana or Wool Guild, the wealthy corporation responsible for the maintenance and ornamentation of the Cathedral, commissioned him to sculpt a statue of David.

David

The high point of Michelangelo's early style is the gigantic (4.34 m/ 14.24 ft) marble David (Accademia, Florence), which he produced between 1501 and 1504, after returning to Florence. The character of David and what he symbolizes, was perfectly in tune with Michelangelo's patriotic feelings. At the time, Florence was going through a difficult period, and its citizens had to be alert and mobilized to confront permanent threats. He used David as a model of heroic courage, in the hope that the Florentines would understand his message. This young Biblical hero demonstrated that inner spiritual strength can prove to be more effective than arms. His faith in God ("The Lord is my strength and my shield.") enabled this young shepherd to overcome Israel's enemies, using a mere sling, which is the only element in the composition enabling us to identify the figure of David.

Michelangelo chose to represent David as an athletic, manly character, very concentrated and ready to fight. The extreme tension is evident in his worried look and in his right hand, holding a stone. The meaning of this David becomes fully clear if we take into consideration the historical circumstances of its creation. Michelangelo was devoted to the Republic, and wanted each citizen to become aware of his responsibilities and commit himself to accomplishing his duty.

Michelangelo wrote in his diaries: "When I returned to Florence, I found myself famous. The City Council asked me to carve a colossal David from a nineteen-foot block of marble -- and damaged to boot! I locked myself away in a workshop behind the cathedral, hammered and chiseled at the towering block for three

long years. In spite of the opposition of a committee of fellow artists, I insisted that the figure should stand before the Palazzo Vecchio, as a symbol of our Republic. I had my way. Archways were torn down, narrow streets widened...it took forty men five days to move it. Once in place, all Florence was astounded. A civic hero, he was a warning...whoever governed Florence should govern justly and defend it bravely. Eyes watchful...the neck of a bull...hands of a killer...the body, a reservoir of energy. He stands poised to strike."

With this statue Michelangelo proved to his contemporaries that he not only surpassed all modern artists, but also the Greeks and Romans, by infusing formal beauty with powerful expressiveness and meaning.

The terrible Julius II

When Giuliano della Rovere was elected to the papal seat in 1503, he was already an old man. Consequently, everyone expected a pontificate of passage. But Julius II (this was the name he chose) nursed an ambitious plan and did everything he could to realize it, demonstrating an extraordinary vitality in this. He understood the role of the pope in extremely authoritative terms, and conducted himself according to this ideal, trying to restore the papal state to greatness. His papacy saw not only intense political, social, and military activity, but also some major artistic commissions, which directly affected the urban fabric of Rome. In his role as a patron, Julius II showed an extraordinary audacity and assurance in the choice of the artistic talents to whom he turned: Bramante and Michelangelo, Raphael and the Sangallos, Peruzzi and Bramantino, Sodoma and Lorenzo Lotto were among the many artists who worked for him.

The terrible Michelangelo

Michelangelo's temper was proverbial. It seems that Pope Julius II had told Sebastiano del Piombo that he "is Terrible, as you see, you can do nothing with him." In fact all the sources refer to his brusque and rude manners, his difficult character, his touchiness and intransigence, and the difficulties that he often had in his relations with others. He had no pupils, nor constant collaborators, and always used boys from the workshop as his assistants.

The enmity between him and Leonardo da Vinci is famous. There were over twenty years of difference in age between them and Leonardo, on his return to Florence at the age of fifty, was confident of regaining the position due to him in the artistic world of the city. And he was in fact received with great honors, but had to reckon with the fame of Michelangelo, the rising star whose name was on everyone's lips and who had already received the commission for the David from the Republic.

The friction between the two is related by the Anonymous Magliabechian Author, who tells of an amusing episode that took place in Florence. One day, Michelangelo ran into Leonardo on the Santa Trinità bridge. The latter, accompanied by a group of friends, refused a request to recite a passage from Dante. Leonardo then turned to Michelangelo, asking him to recite the passage, but Buonarroti scornfully replied that he should do it, seeing that when he was unable to do something he was in the habit of running away, as he had done in Milan with the equestrian monument for Ludovico il Moro.

Michelangelo, The Painter

While still occupied with the David, Michelangelo was given an opportunity to demonstrate his ability as a painter with the commission of a mural, the Battle of Cascina, destined for the Sala dei Cinquecento of the Palazzo Vecchio, opposite Leonardo's Battle of Anghiari. Neither artist carried his assignment beyond the stage of a cartoon, a full-scale preparatory drawing. Michelangelo created a series of nude and clothed figures in a wide variety of poses and positions that are a prelude to his next major project, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. From these years date the Bruges Madonna (Notre Dame, Bruges) and the painted tondo of the Holy Family (Uffizi).