

# Michelangelo: money and medals

12 January – 25 June 2006

Room 69a

Admission free

This exhibition examines Michelangelo's Italy through the medium of coins and medals. The cities of Florence, Michelangelo's birthplace, and Rome, where he lived most of his adult life, dominate, but a wider perspective is provided by the Italian cities he visited, the payments he received, the patrons who tried to obtain his services, and his increasing fame throughout Europe. It concludes with a glimpse at the reputation 'the divine Michelangelo' has enjoyed since his death.

Michelangelo's career stands at the climax of the development of the Renaissance artist in status, reputation and, of course, wealth. Money played a hugely important part in his life and artistic work and he himself had an intense interest in enhancing his personal and family fortune, sometimes to the point of sharp practice. His income and wealth were staggering for the standards of his day, and no contemporary artist could approach him in this: for example, his salary from Pope Paul III in the 1530s was twelve times as much as the Emperor Charles V was paying Titian. Famously, however, he was himself extremely frugal in the manner of his life, so his expenses were generally very low. His wealth would have been even greater had he invested his money, but he usually preferred to hoard much of it in cash.

Medals of the time bear portraits of many of the famous contemporaries who played an important role in Michelangelo's life, beginning with his early patron Lorenzo de' Medici and the fiery preacher Girolamo Savonarola, whom he greatly admired, and continuing with the various popes, for whom he produced some of his greatest works, including the Sistine Chapel ceiling and *Last Judgment*. Friends whose portraits appear on medals include the poet Vittoria Colonna – Michelangelo's muse – and the sculptor Leone Leoni, whose medal of Michelangelo bears the only contemporary portrait of the great artist. Also shown in the exhibition is Alessandro Cesati's portrayal of Alexander the Great and the High Priest of Jerusalem, pronounced by Michelangelo the best medal ever.

The exhibition complements the forthcoming exhibition *Michelangelo's Drawings: closer to the master* by illuminating the difficult and dramatic political circumstances which accompanied the artist's life, and the important and influential network of patrons, friends and artists who surrounded him. It also gives insights into the monetary systems of Michelangelo's world and the economy of a great artist's life, in acknowledgement of this crucial if neglected aspect of his career.

Michelangelo's Drawings: closer to the master opens on 23 March 2006 in Room 5.

**For further information and images please contact Hannah Boulton in the Press Office on 020 7323 8522 or [hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](mailto:hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk)**