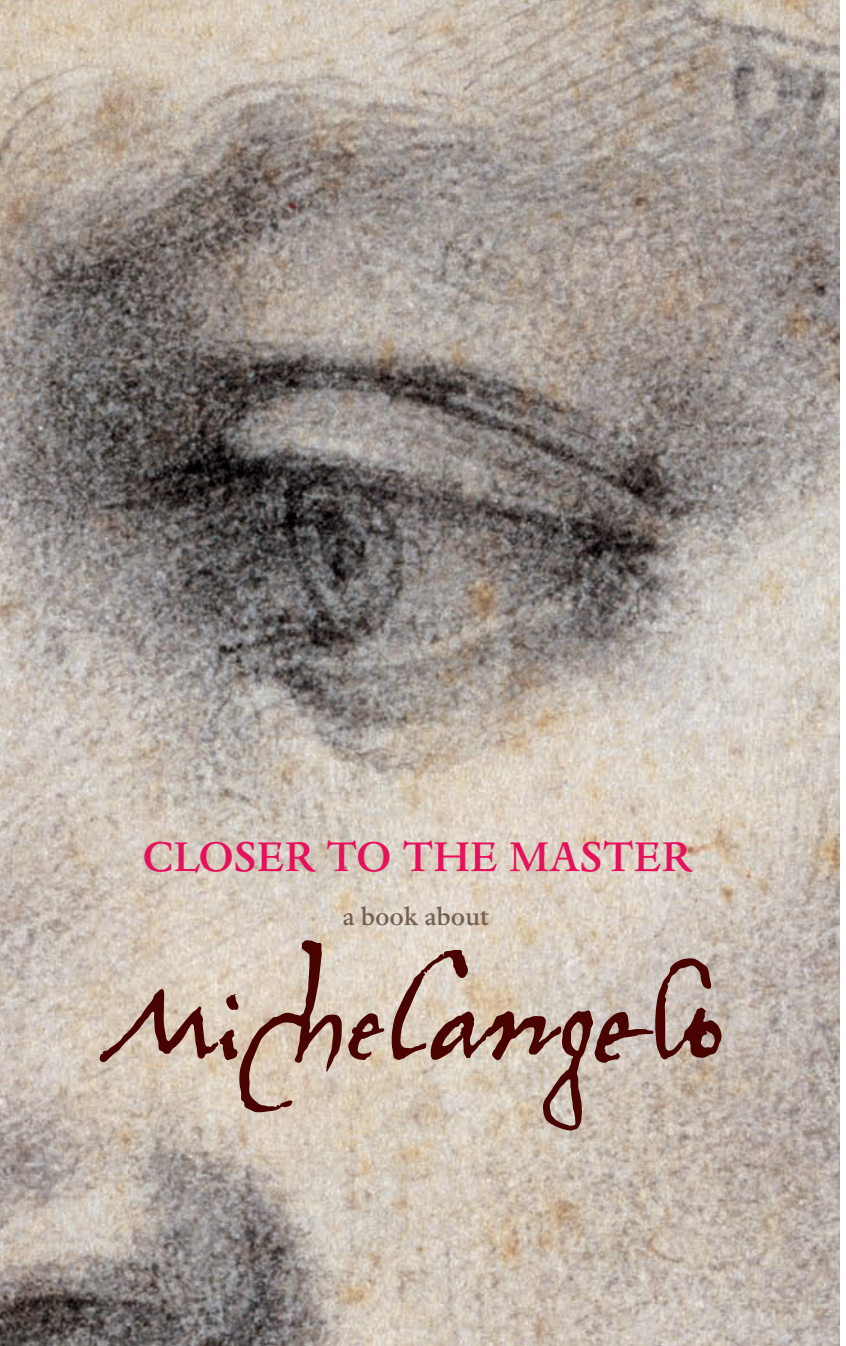

CLOSER TO THE MASTER

a book about

Michelangelo

Written and edited by Charlotte Mullins

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Why a small book about Michelangelo?

Michelangelo's unrivalled achievements as a sculptor, painter and architect set him a class apart from other artists of his time. After the death of his main rival Raphael in 1520, he was to reign supreme in the European artistic capital of Rome for more than four decades.

A measure of his extraordinary fame in his day is that other artists produced portraits of him. This is not the case for his contemporaries, even artists we think of as giants of the Renaissance, such as Leonardo da Vinci. Michelangelo was also the subject of three biographies during his own lifetime, and he was the only living artist included in Giorgio Vasari's groundbreaking *Lives of the Artists*, first published in 1550 and still in print today.

By the early 1530s, Michelangelo had been dubbed *il divino* (the divine one), and after his death he was given an elaborate memorial service in his native city, Florence, the only artist of his day to be so honoured. He left a rich legacy of poetry and letters, unique for any Italian Renaissance artist, and these add significantly to our understanding of his life and art.

This book aims to give you a taste of his extraordinary life – wherever possible in his own words and the words of those who knew him best – to help suggest why Michelangelo really was the master, *il divino*, the genius of the Renaissance.

Michelangelo and the British Museum

The Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum contains the national collection of Western prints and drawings, in the same way as the National Gallery and Tate hold the national collection of paintings. It is one of the top three collections of its kind in the world. The collection holds around 50,000 drawings and over two million prints dating from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the present day. It covers the history of drawing and printmaking as fine arts, and includes important works by artists such as Rembrandt, Picasso, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Goya and Michelangelo.

To celebrate the extraordinary achievements of Michelangelo, the British Museum is staging a major exhibition of his drawings, exhibiting work not only from its own outstanding collection, but also those of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the Teyler Museum in Haarlem.

Called *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*, this exhibition offers a genuinely once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to follow the evolution of some of the world's most celebrated artworks. Michelangelo's drawings offer a unique insight into how he worked and thought, bringing us closer to him as an artist and as a man. Given the scale of his work in paint and marble, they also provide the only possible means of charting his career in one place.

The exhibition at the British Museum reunites material not seen together since the dispersal of the artist's studio more than 400 years ago, offering a wholly different perspective on a defining personality of the Italian Renaissance. It traces sixty years of Michelangelo's stormy life, from intimate studies made when he was in his early twenties to the visionary *Crucifixion* scenes carried out shortly before his death.

So what better occasion to publish this small book? It's not often you can enjoy the company of a genius during the rush hour.

February 2006, The British Museum

The BP special exhibition *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*, British Museum, London WC1 (020 7323 8299, www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk) 23 March-25 June 2006

His body is sinewy and bony rather than fat and fleshy; it is healthy above all by nature and from physical exercise as well as his continence regarding sexual intercourse, as well as food; though in childhood he was very indisposed and sickly …

His face has always had a good complexion; and his stature is as follows: his body is of medium height, broad across the shoulders, the rest of the body in proportion and more slender than not. The shape of the front part of his skull is rounded so that over the ears it forms a half circle and a sixth. So his temples project somewhat beyond his ears, and his ears beyond his cheek-bones, and these beyond the rest….

The lips are thin, but the lower one is somewhat thicker, and seen in profile it juts out a little bit. His chin is well matched to the features already mentioned. In profile the forehead almost projects beyond the nose, which is almost completely flattened save for a little bump in the middle. The eyebrows are sparse, the eyes can rather be called small than otherwise, the colour of horn, but changeable and flecked with tiny sparks of yellow and blue; the ears are the right size; the hair is black, as is the beard, save that now that he is in his seventy-ninth year, the hair is copiously flecked with grey. And the beard is forked, between four and five fingers long, and not very thick, as can in part be seen in his portrait.

From Ascanio Condivi, *Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, 1553

Michelangelo Buonarroti
1475-1564

Michelangelo was one of the greatest artists of all time. He painted the incredible Sistine chapel in the Vatican palace almost single-handed, carved the colossal *David* from a block of marble others had deemed impossible to work with and designed the mighty St Peter's basilica in Rome. He was known as *il divino*, the divine one, and described as *terribile*, frightening and awesome. Several biographies were written about him during his lifetime, a first for an Italian artist, and his work was known internationally through the wide dissemination of prints. When he finally died, aged eighty-eight, he left behind an estate that today would be worth millions, as well as 300 poems, 1,400 letters (by him, and those sent to him), and hundreds of drawings.

Michelangelo must have made thousands of drawings during his lifetime, rethinking and exploring various possibilities for every figure in each work. Only 600 remain, ninety of which are included in the British Museum's spring exhibition *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*. Michelangelo's friend and biographer Giorgio Vasari offers an explanation as to why comparatively few of them survived:

> *Michelangelo had such a distinctive and perfect imagination and the works he envisioned were of such a nature that he found it impossible to express such grandiose and awesome conceptions with his hands, and he often abandoned his works, or rather ruined many of them, as I myself know, because just before his death he burned a large number of his own drawings, sketches and cartoons to prevent anyone from seeing the labours he endured or the ways he tested his genius, for fear that he might seem less than perfect …*

Michelangelo strove for perfection throughout his lifetime, and obviously wanted to continue to appear 'divine' after death, destroying much of the evidence of how he considered and worked at designs for his greatest artworks. Giorgio Vasari – who included Michelangelo in his first volume of artists' lives published in 1550 (the only living artist to be included) and subsequently revised and reprinted his entry in the 1568 second edition – supported Michelangelo's claim to divine ability. He summed up the artist's talent in the following way:

> *He [God] decided, in order to rid us of so many errors, to send to earth a spirit who, working alone, was able to demonstrate in every art and every profession the meaning of perfection in the art of design, how to give relief to the details in paintings by means of proper drawing, tracing, shading, and casting light, how to work with good judgement in sculpture, and how to make buildings comfortable and secure, healthy, cheerful, well proportioned, and richly adorned with various decorations in architecture. Moreover, He wanted to join to this spirit true moral philosophy and the gift of sweet poetry, so that the world would admire and prefer him for the wholly singular example of his life, his work, the holiness of his habits, and all his human undertakings, and so that we would call him something divine rather than mortal.*

But Michelangelo, in reality, was far more earthy and complex than this extract suggests. For a start, he was a nit-picking perfectionist and a passionate workaholic. Vasari talks of him working all day and all night:

> *His sobriety made him very restless and he rarely slept, and very often during the night he would arise, being unable to sleep, and would work with his chisel, having fashioned a helmet made of paste-board holding a burning candle over the middle of his head which shed light where he was working without tying up his hands.*

The other main chronicler of Michelangelo's life, his 'official' biographer, was Ascanio Condivi. Condivi also emphasizes how hard-working and focussed Michelangelo was, describing how he often fell into bed fully clothed:

> *When he was more robust he often slept in his clothes and in the boots which he has always worn for reason of cramp, from which he has continually suffered, as much as for anything else. And sometimes he has been so long in taking them off that subsequently along with his boots he sloughed off his skin, like a snake's.*

Condivi's *Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* was published in 1553, three years after Vasari's first edition of his *Lives*. It was widely seen to be a ghosted autobiography by Michelangelo. While Michelangelo had on the whole been happy with Vasari's account when it was published, he subsequently wanted to commit to paper his own version. In places, events are even more embroidered in this biography, for example when Condivi claims Michelangelo was self-taught as an artist. Both biographies offer partial and biased accounts, but still provide an incredible insight into the life of Michelangelo.

Condivi paints the reader a picture of a committed artist who was a slave to his art:

> *Michelangelo has always been very frugal in his way of life, taking food more from necessity than for pleasure, especially when working; and at these times he has invariably been content with a piece of bread, even eating it while still at work.*

Vasari, while acknowledging that Michelangelo was a financially successful artist, said much the same:

> *Although he was wealthy, he lived like a poor man, and his friends rarely or never ate with him, nor did he accept presents from anyone, for he thought that when someone gave him something he would always be obliged to him.*

Michelangelo's desire to be on his own was seen by his biographers as something that his art demanded of him, as Condivi explains:

> *Now Michelangelo, when he was young, gave himself not only to sculpture and painting, but also to all those branches of study which either belong or are close to them; and he did this so zealously that for a while he came near to cutting himself off completely from the fellowship of men, except for the company of a very few. For this, he was held to be proud by some, and by others very touchy and temperamental, though he had neither one or the other of these faults. Rather (as has been the case with many men of excellence) it was the love of virtuosity, and the continuous practice of the fine arts, that made him solitary; he took so much delight and pleasure in them that the company of others not only did not bring him contentment but positively gave him displeasure, since it diverted him from his meditation, and he (as the great Scipio used to say himself) was never less alone than when alone.*

Vasari emphasized that an artist of Michelangelo's standing should be allowed to distance himself from everyday worries:

> *No one should think it strange that Michelangelo took pleasure in solitude, as a man deeply enamoured of his art, which wants a man to be alone and pensive for its own purposes, since anyone who desires to apply himself to the study of this art must avoid companions: it so happens that those who attend to the considerations of art are never alone or without thoughts, and people who attribute their desire for solitude to daydreams and eccentricity are wrong, for anyone who wishes to work well must rid himself of cares and worries, since talent requires thought, solitude, comfort, and concentration of mind.*

Michelangelo himself often complained in his letters to patrons and his family that unresolved issues kept him from concentrating on his work. In a letter from October 1525 to Giovan Francesco Fattucci (a chaplain of Florence cathedral, and Michelangelo's representative in negotiations for his ongoing commission to create Pope Julius II's tomb), Michelangelo writes:

> *... if I am given my salary, as I said, I shall never stop working for Pope Clement with all the strength I have, though it doesn't amount to much as I'm old [he was fifty]. And also I must not go on being taunted the way I am [concerning the financing of Pope Julius II's tomb], because this affects me deeply; and it has stopped me from doing what I want these many months, for one cannot work on something with one's hands and on something else with one's brain, especially when it comes to marble.*

Nearly twenty years later, in October 1542, in a letter (perhaps sent to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, grandson of Pope Paul III), he is still complaining that he can't work if he is worrying about events:

Monsignor. – Your Lordship sends me word that I should paint [the Pauline chapel frescoes] and not worry about anything else. I reply that one paints with the head and not with the hands; and if he can't keep a clear head a man is lost. So until this business of the tomb is settled, I shan't do any good work.

Michelangelo was hot-blooded and passionate, ambitious, hard-working and solitary. He was at times paranoid, snobbish, obsessive, secretive and proud, but always devout. His was a life of disruption, as he regularly fled cities as politics or Popes changed. And his art was born from an inherent tension as he tried to reconcile his sensual interest in the male nude with his fervent Catholicism.

Michelangelo's Childhood
1475-1496

Michelangelo was the second of five sons born to Lodovico di Leonardo Buonarroti Simoni and his wife Francesca. At the time of Michelanglo's birth, Lodovico was the governor of Caprese, a small town near Arezzo under Florentine rule. His family had once been of higher social standing, but their status and wealth had declined so much that Lodovico and his family existed on a small inheritance, the rent from a farm he owned with his brother and the salary he took from intermittent low-ranking jobs for the Florentine state.

Michelangelo was given to a wet-nurse when he was born (as was traditional at the time for children of rank) who was the

wife of one of the local stone-cutters. Vasari recounted how later in life Michelangelo said to him:

'Giorgio, if I have any intelligence at all, it has come from being born in the pure air of your native Arezzo, and also because I took the hammer and chisels with which I carve my figures from my wet-nurse's milk.'

He grew up in a male household, as his mother died when he was only six, and was sent to grammar school to study Latin. But, as his authorized biographer Condivi notes:

... whenever he was able to steal some time, he could not resist running off to draw in one place or another, and seeking out the company of painters ...

He befriended Francesco Granacci, a young disciple of the painter Domenico Ghirlandaio, and Granacci borrowed engravings from Ghirlandaio's workshop for Michelangelo to copy. But, as Condivi continues, Michelangelo's burgeoning interest in art didn't go down well at home:

This brought him the disapproval of his father and his father's brothers, who hated the art of design, and very often he was outrageously beaten: as they were ignorant of the excellence and nobility of the art, it seemed shameful to them that is should be practised in their family.

(Ironically, despite his family's resistance to the career he wanted to pursue, it was Michelangelo's success as an artist that restored wealth and prestige back to the Buonarroti family.)

At the age of twelve, his father begrudgingly accepted Michelangelo's desire to be an artist, and apprenticed him to Domenico Ghirlandaio. As Michelangelo grew older, he emphatically denied Ghirlandaio's part in his training. In his official biography, he had Condivi denounce accounts of his time spent in Ghirlandaio's successful Florentine workshop:

I [Condivi] have been told that the son of Domenico used to attribute the divine excellence of Michelangelo in great part to the teaching of his father, who in reality gave him no assistance at all …

Michelangelo wanted the reader of his biography to believe that his talent was entirely heaven-sent, and that he was naturally gifted with no need for training. (This sense of divine ability is probably the reason he destroyed many of his working drawings.)

Vasari was having none of this, and retaliated in his second edition of the *Lives* with irrefutable evidence, claiming that Condivi's assertions Michelangelo learnt nothing from Ghirlandaio were:

… obviously false, as can be seen from a document written in the hand of Lodovico, Michelangelo's father, and inscribed in Domenico's record books now in the possession of his heirs, which states as follows: '1488. On this day, the first of April, I record that I, Lodovico di Lionardo di Buonarroti, place my son Michelangelo with Domenico and David di Tommaso di Currado [Bigordi Ghirlandaio] for the next three years …'

Michelangelo in fact spent little over a year in Ghirlandaio's workshop. He was offered the opportunity to attend an informal artistic academy set up by Lorenzo de'Medici in the Medici Garden, which was filled with antique sculpture and contemporary paintings in loggias. When Michelangelo first arrived, Vasari recalls that he saw a group of clay figures sculpted in the round by a pupil, Torrigiano Torrigiani. Michelangelo's competitive spirit was aroused:

After Michelangelo saw these figures, he made some himself to rival those of Torrigiani, so that Lorenzo, seeing his high spirit, always had great expectations for him, and, encouraged after only a few days, Michelangelo began copying with a piece of marble the antique head of an old

and wrinkled faun with a damaged nose and a laughing mouth, which he found there. Although Michelangelo had never before touched marble or chisels, the imitation turned out so well that Lorenzo was astonished, and when Lorenzo saw that Michelangelo, following his own fantasy rather than the antique head, had carved its mouth open to give it a tongue and to make all its teeth visible, this lord, laughing with pleasure as was his custom, said to him: 'But you should have known that old men never have all their teeth and that some of them are always missing.' In that simplicity of his, it seemed to Michelangelo, who loved and feared this lord, that Lorenzo was correct; and as soon as Lorenzo left, he immediately broke a tooth on the head and dug out the gum in such a way that it seemed the tooth had fallen out …

While Michelangelo couldn't say legitimately that he was self-taught as a painter, it seems that he was naturally gifted as a sculptor. The *Faun*, now lost, was the first sculpture Michelangelo ever carved. (The detail of the knocked-out tooth and hollowed gum points to Michelangelo's future interest in anatomical dissection, something he practiced from the mid-1490s onwards.)

Michelangelo had a precocious talent as a sculptor. Vasari describes his unfinished relief of the *Battle of the Centaurs*, made in 1492 when Michelangelo was seventeen:

Michelangelo created in a single piece of marble given to him by Lorenzo the Battle of Hercules with the Centaurs, which was so beautiful that those who examine it today sometimes cannot believe it is by the hand of a young man rather than by an esteemed master who has been steeped in the study and practice of this art.

Michelangelo studied hard at the Medici Palace, and was all but adopted by Lorenzo, who allowed him to live and eat with his

own family. Perhaps not surprisingly, envy set in among the other pupils, as Vasari recounts:

> *It is said that Torrigiani, who struck up a friendship with him, was fooling around when, prompted by envy at seeing Michelangelo more honoured and more talented as an artist, he struck Michelangelo upon the nose with such force that he broke and flattened it, unfortunately marking Michelangelo for life; and this was the reason why he was banished from Florence …*

In 1492, Lorenzo de'Medici died. Michelangelo stayed on at the palace and Lorenzo's son Piero became his new patron. But Piero's lack of leadership qualities meant he was soon expelled from Florence, and the first Florentine republic was established. Michelangelo was supportive of the republic, but had left the city shortly before Piero's departure, worried about his associations with his former patron. He ended up in Bologna, carving figures for the shrine of St Dominic.

Towards the end of 1495 Michelangelo returned home, but he was soon to move to Rome. While in Florence, he carved a sleeping *Cupid*. Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de'Medici suggested he sell it not as one of his own sculptures, but as an antique, as this way it would fetch 200 ducats, rather than thirty. Vasari recounts Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de'Medici's promise:

> *'If you were to prepare it, so that it should appear to have been buried, I shall send it to Rome and it would pass for an antique, and you would sell it much more profitably.'*

Vasari claims Michelangelo accepted this challenge because he was smart enough to work out how to trick the eye into believing it was antique. But it was not the first time he had forged an artwork, as Vasari had noted earlier in his book:

> *He [Michelangelo] also copied drawings done by various old masters so closely that they were not recognized as copies, for by staining and ageing them with smoke and various materials, he soiled them so that they seemed old and could not be distinguished from the originals; he did this for no other reason than to have the originals, giving away his copies, because he admired the originals for the excellence of their skill, which he sought to surpass in his copies, thereby acquiring a very great reputation.*

Michelangelo's belief in his abilities perhaps outshone any thoughts about what would happen, should he be found out.

Rome
1496-1501

The scam with the *Cupid* did in fact backfire, although a Roman cardinal did initially part with 200 ducats for it, believing it to be an antique. However, once the cardinal realized that the sculpture was by a contemporary artist he refused to keep it. Instead he requested Michelangelo join him in Rome.

And so Michelangelo moved to Rome, living for a year with Cardinal Riario, for whom he carved *Bacchus*. In the end Michelangelo's god of decadence turned out to be too modern for the cardinal and was bought instead by the banker Jacopo Gallo. However, his masterpiece of his five-year stay in Rome was the *Pietà* now in St Peter's. It is the only work that Michelangelo signed, claiming proud ownership after a misunderstanding, as Vasari recalls:

This came about because one day when Michelangelo was entering the church where the statue was placed, he found a large number of foreigners from Lombardy who were praising the statue very highly; one of them asked another who had sculpted it, and he replied: 'Our Gobbo from Milan'. Michelangelo stood there silently, and it seemed somewhat strange to him that his labours were being attributed to someone else; one night he locked himself inside the church with a little light, and, having brought his chisels, he carved his name upon the statue.

Michelangelo was proud of the skill he had demonstrated in the *Pietà*, but Vasari suggests that the artist was too much for some people:

While staying in Rome, Michelangelo acquired so much skill in his study of art that it was incredible to see his lofty concepts and his difficult style, which he put into practice with such great facility that it terrified people unaccustomed to seeing such works as well as those accustomed to good ones, for the works that others were showing seemed nothing in comparison with his.

Florence
1501-1505

Michelangelo was riding high after the success of his *Pietà*. He returned to Florence in order to respond to a challenge set by the cathedral for a sculptor to carve a figure from a narrow eighteen-foot block of marble in their possession. It had sat in the church's

grounds for fifty years, part carved by a previous artist who had been defeated by it. No one else had been able to suggest a way to carve a figure from it without the need to add extra pieces of marble. Michelangelo convinced the authorities that he could breathe life into the block as it was. And he offered to do it within two years. Vasari recounts how he went about it:

Michelangelo did a wax model depicting a young David with a sling in hand, as the symbol of the palace, for just as David had defended his people and governed them with justice, so, too, those who governed this city should courageously defend it and govern it with justice: he began the statue in the Works Department of Santa Maria del Fiore [the cathedral's workshop], where he erected a scaffolding between the wall and the tables surrounding the marble, and, working continuously without letting anyone see it, he brought the statue to perfect completion.

Michelangelo's *David*, nicknamed *il gigante*, the giant, was the first colossus to be carved in Italy since Roman times. Vasari recounts a tale of the *Gonfaloniere* (republican leader) of Florence, Piero Soderini, supposedly visiting the sculpture as Michelangelo was finishing it:

Around this time it happened that Piero Soderini saw the statue, and it pleased him greatly, but while Michelangelo was giving it the finishing touches, he told Michelangelo that he thought the nose of the figure was too large. Michelangelo, realizing that the Gonfaloniere was standing under the giant and that his viewpoint did not allow him to see it properly, climbed up the scaffolding to satisfy Soderini (who was behind him nearby), and having quickly grabbed his chisel in his left hand along with a little marble dust that he found on the planks in the scaffolding, Michelangelo began to tap

lightly with the chisel, allowing the dust to fall little by little without retouching the nose from the way it was. Then, looking down at the Gonfaloniere who stood there watching, he ordered:

'Look at it now.'

'I like it better', replied the Gonfaloniere, 'you've made it come alive.'

Rome
1505-1506

In 1505 Michelangelo was summoned to Rome again, this time by the new pope, Julius II. After months of waiting for a commission, Julius II asked Michelangelo to design his own tomb. Michelangelo created an ambitious design, a vast freestanding marble structure decorated with over 40 sculptures. Julius II approved the design, and Michelangelo, being a perfectionist, camped out at Carrara – home of Italy's chief marble quarry – for eight months to oversee the extraction of flawless blocks from which to carve the tomb. The stones were then shipped from Carrara to Ripa, and brought to Rome, where Michelangelo paid for the shipping and unloading in full. He then went to see the pope, to be reimbursed. He was told to return the next day. And the next. Until finally, as Michelangelo's authorized biographer Condivi tells us,

Another morning, he [Michelangelo] returned and entered the ante-chamber to seek an audience [with the pope],

only to be accosted by a footman who said: 'Begging your pardon, I have instructions not to let you enter.'

There was a bishop present, and when he heard the words of the footman he rebuked him, saying: 'You cannot know who this man is.'

'Indeed I do known him,' answered the footman, 'but I am bound to do what I am instructed by my masters, without enquiring further.'

Michelangelo (against whom till then no curtain had ever been drawn nor door bolted), when he saw how he was being goaded, became indignant over all this and answered him: 'And you tell the Pope that from now on if he wants me, he can seek me elsewhere.'

So having returned home, he ordered two servants that he had, once they had sold all the household furniture and received the money, to follow him to Florence. He rode with the post and at the second hour of the night he reached Poggibonsi, a little town in the countryside of Florence, eighteen or twenty miles from the city. Here, feeling he was in a safe place, he rested.

Pope Julius II's couriers tracked him down in Poggibonsi, but, as Condivi continues,

... he had arrived at a place where they could not do him any violence, and with Michelangelo threatening that if they tried anything he would have them murdered, they turned to entreaties.

Michelangelo's pride at being refused an audience seems to have been dented more than his bank balance, which had taken a hefty blow. He was certainly still raging when the couriers caught up with him, threatening to kill them. But Michelangelo may have had other reasons as to why he so dramatically quit Rome. Just the day before he left, the foundations for the new

basilica of St Peter's were started – something that would have upset the artist because he rightly predicted that the funds for his grand tomb for Julius II may well dry up as the papal purse emptied into the building programme.

Florence then Bologna
1506-1508

Michelangelo refused to go back to Rome, despite the pope's repeated entreaties. The *Signoria* (the ruling council) of Florence wanted to keep the peace with the pope, so they negotiated that Michelangelo would meet him in Bologna, to where the pope was travelling with an army to restore papal rule. When Michelangelo arrived, Vasari writes,

> *His Holiness looked at him askance and, as if he were angry, he said: 'Rather than coming to meet Us, you have waited for Us to come to meet you?', meaning to infer that Bologna was closer to Florence than to Rome. With courteous gestures and a loud voice, Michelangelo humbly begged the pope's pardon, excusing himself, since he had acted in anger, having been unable to bear being chased away in such a fashion, and he begged the pope once again to forgive him for having done wrong.*

Michelangelo was right to ingratiate himself with the notoriously fiery Pope. The bishop who had presented Michelangelo to the Pope had tried to make excuses for Michelangelo, Vasari continues,

> *... declaring to His Holiness that such men were ignorant and worthless in anything outside of their art, and that he should willingly forgive him. This enraged the pope, who thrashed the bishop with a mace he was holding, telling him: 'You are the ignorant one, speaking insults We would never utter!' And so the bishop was driven out by the footmen with sticks and left, and after the pope vented his anger on him he blessed Michelangelo ...*

The pope asked Michelangelo to remain in Bologna to cast a giant bronze sculpture of him to go above the door of San Petronio church, which he did. (The sculpture was melted down just three years after it was completed, when Bologna changed hands again). During this time, Michelangelo had another run-in with a fellow artist, who inadvertently angered him. Vasari tells the tale:

> *It is said that while Michelangelo was working on the statue, Il Francia, a goldsmith and most excellent painter, came to see it, since he knew Michelangelo's reputation and the praise given his works but had never seen any of them. He sent messages asking to see the statue, and gained permission to do so. Upon seeing Michelangelo's skill, he was amazed and when he was asked what he thought of the figure, Il Francia replied that it was a very fine casting and beautiful material. Since Michelangelo felt he had praised the bronze more than the craftsmanship, he said: 'I have the same obligation to Pope Julius who gave me the bronze as you have to the apothecaries who give you the colours for your paint', and in the presence of some gentlemen he angrily declared that Il Francia was a fool.*

Rome
1508-1516

Money had always been important to Michelangelo, and by the time he returned to Rome he was earning a significant amount. As a young man, Michelangelo had been ashamed by his father's resigned attitude to the family's current standing, and it fired in him an incredible drive and sense of ambition. His first income was as an apprentice to Ghirlandaio aged twelve at a rate of six florins a year (roughly £600 in today's money). When he was commissioned to paint the Sistine chapel twenty years later, he received 3,200 ducats or florins, that translates to a hefty £320,000 today. (In an additional exhibition at the British Museum, *Michelangelo: money and medals*, this subject is studied in more depth. Another conversion method is suggested that would make the 3,200 ducats closer to £1.6m by today's comparable standards of living.)

But while Michelangelo did start to buy properties in and around Florence with his increased earnings, he invested much of his income into improving his family's lot. However, they didn't always seem grateful for all his efforts on their behalf. In a letter from June 1509 to his brother Giovansimone, he wrote,

> *Let me be brief and just tell you that for sure you have nothing of your own in this world, and your spending money and home expenses are what I give you and have given you for some time, for the love of God....*
>
> *For twelve years now I've been traipsing around Italy, borne all kinds of disgrace, suffered every calamity, lacerated my body with cruel toil, put my own life in danger a thousand times, only to help my family; and now that I've started to raise our house up again a little, just you alone wish to be the one to confound it and ruin in an hour what I've achieved after so many years and through such great toil. And by the body of Christ, that's the truth!*

He bailed out his brother Buonarroto from creditors when his business foundered; he established a substantial fund for his father to live on. But it seems sometimes his family repaid him by taking even more than he had allocated. In a letter to Buonarroto in September 1512, he wrote,

> *As for the forty ducats that Lodovico [Michelangelo's father] drew from Santa Maria Nuova, I wrote you the other day in my letter that if your life were in danger you should spend not just forty ducats, but all of them; but apart from that, I have not given you leave to touch them. Let me tell you that I don't have a penny and that I'm practically barefoot and naked, and I cannot have the balance due to me till I have finished the work; and I still have to endure great toil and hardship. So when you too have to bear some hardship, don't feel sorry for yourself; and while you can help yourself from your own money, don't take mine ...*

Michelangelo's melodramatic tone in both letters, from 1509 and 1512, could have been provoked by the enormous pressure he was under. He was in the middle of painting the entire Sistine chapel ceiling – over forty metres long – by himself, standing on a scaffold with no natural light, for an impatient pope.

When Michelangelo returned to Rome from Bologna in 1508, he hadn't painted a fresco for twenty years. And yet he found himself being asked to paint the Sistine chapel, a gigantic undertaking that required him to be a proficient fresco painter. Michelangelo argued that he was the wrong man for the job, but the die had been cast while he was in Bologna, as Vasari recounts:

While the pope had returned to Rome and Michelangelo completed the statue in Bologna, Bramante, the friend and relative of Raphael of Urbino, and therefore no real friend of Michelangelo, realized, in Michelangelo's absence, that the pope favoured and encouraged Michelangelo's works in sculpture, and, along with Raphael, began thinking of a way to change his mind, so that upon Michelangelo's return His Holiness would not try to complete his tomb, by telling him that this would seem to hasten his death and that it was bad luck to build one's tomb while alive; and Bramante and Raphael persuaded the pope that upon Michelangelo's return, in memory of his uncle Sixtus, the pope should have Michelangelo paint the vault of the chapel that Sixtus had built in the [Vatican] palace, and in this way Bramante and other rivals of Michelangelo hoped to take Michelangelo away from sculpture, in which they saw he had reached perfection, and to drive him to desperation, assuming that by having him paint he would produce a less praiseworthy work and would be less likely to succeed than Raphael, since he had no experience in doing frescoes in colour; and even if the work turned out well, doing it would make him angry with the pope at any rate, so that in one way or another their intention of getting rid of him would succeed.

And so Michelangelo returned to Rome, and the pope decided not to complete his tomb for the time being and asked him to paint the vault of the chapel. Michelangelo, who wished to finish the tomb and saw that painting the vault would be an enormous and difficult task, considering his lack of experience with colours, tried in every way possible to remove this burden from his shoulders, allegedly recommending Raphael for the job. But the more he refused, the more persistent he made the

pope, who was an impetuous man in his undertakings and was once again urged on by Michelangelo's rivals, especially Bramante, so that the pope, who was quick to anger, almost flew into a rage with Michelangelo ...

Both Michelangelo's biographers Vasari and Condivi are quick to point the finger at Bramante for plotting against him, and Michelangelo was certainly paranoid that this was the case, discussing Bramante's scheming in letters long after his death in 1514. But Michelangelo also resented Bramante for having more influence over Pope Julius II than he did, and was angry that the basilica, being built to Bramante's design, was diverting money from his own schemes, notably Julius II's tomb.

Bramante had been asked by the pope to make a scaffold for Michelangelo to work on in the Sistine chapel, but on seeing it, Michelangelo spotted a flaw in the design. The scaffold hung from the ceiling on thick ropes. Vasari recounts:

Michelangelo asked Bramante how, once the painting had been completed, he would be able to fill the holes [left by the ropes]; and Bramante replied, 'We'll worry about that later', and added that there was no other way to do it. Michelangelo then realized that either Bramante knew little about it or he was not much of a friend, and he went to the pope and told him that this scaffolding was unsatisfactory and that Bramante had not understood how to build it; in Bramante's presence, the pope replied that he [Michelangelo] should build one in his own way.

Michelangelo set about designing his own scaffold that rested on side beams. No daylight could penetrate it from the windows below, and consequently the whole ceiling had to be painted entirely by lamp light, but it could now be painted in its entirety.

The theme chosen for the ceiling was the creation, from God illuminating the world to the story of Noah. Michelangelo made

drawings of every figure to be painted, which were then enlarged as cartoons [giant drawings to scale] and their outlines transferred to the ceiling as each area of fresh wet plaster was applied. The scale of the project meant that Michelangelo had to employ a team of artists to help him. Vasari recalls how he sent to Florence for men,

> *... and having decided to demonstrate in this project that those who had painted there before him were unequal to his labours, he also wished to show modern artisans how to design and paint. Thus, the theme of the work compelled Michelangelo to aim high for the sake of both his reputation and the well-being of the art of painting, and he began and completed the cartoons; then wishing to colour them in fresco but lacking the necessary experience, he brought some painters who were friends of his to Rome from Florence to assist him in the project and also to see their method of working in fresco, in which some were skilled; these included Granacci, Giuliano Bugiardini, Jacopo di Sandro, the elder Indaco, Angelo di Domenico, and Aristotle; and after starting the project, he had them begin a few things as a sample of their work.*

Unfortunately, Michelangelo was not impressed with their level of skill. Vasari continues,

> *... when he saw that their labours were far from what he wished to achieve and failed to satisfy him, he decided one morning to pull down everything they had done. And closing himself inside the chapel, he would not open it to them or even see them at his home. And when they thought this joke had been carried far enough, they made up their minds and returned to Florence in disgrace. Then Michelangelo made arrangements to do the whole work by himself ...*

Michelangelo had never been much good at employing assistants. Either he saw them as lacklustre and lazy or as not

having the mind or capacity to produce good work. They never lasted long, and it seems he was happier without them. He had never wanted to run a workshop, as it implied he was a tradesman of sorts, as he wrote in a letter to his nephew Lionardo, in May 1548:

> *... I never was the sort of painter or sculptor who kept shop. Always, I have guarded against doing that, for the honour of my father and my brothers, though indeed I have served three Popes, as needs must.*

So instead Michelangelo started to paint the ceiling on his own. He had absorbed the skills of fresco painting from his assistants while they had briefly worked on site, but his lack of direct experience in working in the medium was revealed when the painting began to grow mould. Condivi explains what happened next:

> *... after he [Michelangelo] had started the work, and had finished the picture of the Flood, it began to grow a mould in such a manner that the figures were scarcely discernible. And then thinking that this excuse should be enough to let him escape being burdened with this task, he went to the Pope and said to him: 'I have indeed told your Holiness that this is not my art: what I have done is spoilt: and if you won't believe it, send to see.'*
>
> *The Pope sent [Giuliano da] Sangallo, and when he saw it he realized that Michelangelo had put the lime on too wet, and because of this when the moisture ran down it had this effect; and after Michelangelo was told of this, the Pope made him proceed and no excuse helped.*

The mould was scraped off, the plaster's composition altered, and Michelangelo continued painting.

Michelangelo moaned in letters about his workload throughout the four-year period he was painting the Sistine chapel. He even wrote a poem about his plight while at work on

the ceiling, alongside a caricature of a man arched backwards, hand in the air, painting. The poem begins,

This comes of dangling from the ceiling –
I'm goitered like a Lombard cat
(Or wherever else their throats grow fat) –
It's my belly that's beyond concealing,
It hangs beneath my chin like peeling.
My beard points skyward, I seem a bat
Upon its back, I've breasts and splat!
On my face the paint's congealing….

The first half of the ceiling was revealed to an impatient pope and eager public in 1510, and the whole ceiling was complete by October 1512. Michelangelo was thirty-seven years old, and had created a masterpiece. In typical down-beat style, he wrote to his father, Lodovico, in October 1512,

I have finished the chapel I have been painting; the pope is very well satisfied. But other things have not turned out for me as I'd hoped. For this I blame the times, which are very unfavourable to our art….

Florence
1516-1532

Michelangelo returned to Florence in 1516 to build a façade for San Lorenzo, the Medici family's church. However, the project was shelved, and in 1522 the new pope, Adrian VI, requested Michelangelo return to Rome. But Cardinal Giulio de'Medici – who was to become Pope Clement VII a year later – wished Michelangelo to remain in Florence. Condivi explains how the cardinal kept him in the city:

And to keep him occupied, and provide an excuse, he commissioned him to make the fabric of the Medici Library in San Lorenzo, together with the sacristy for the tombs of his ancestors, promising to arrange matters and to satisfy the Pope on his behalf.

Michelangelo worked on the Laurentian library and Medici tombs for the next eighteen years, despite the Medici family being forced out of Florence again, in 1527. Condivi describes the course of events:

The Medici were driven from Florence by the opposing party, because they had seized more authority than a free city ruling itself as a republic will tolerate. Not doubting that the Pope [Clement VII, a Medici] must do everything he could to restore his family, and in the expectation of certain war, the Signoria [Florentine government] turned its thoughts to fortifying the city; and it put Michelangelo in charge of this as commissioner general.

For two years Michelangelo worked on strengthening the city against the army who sided with his former patrons. But by August 1530 the city had surrendered, and the Medici were restored to power. Michelangelo, fearing for his life, went into hiding, as Condivi recounts,

… many citizens were seized and killed, the court sent to Michelangelo's house to have him seized as well; and all the rooms and chests were searched, including even the chimney and the privy. However, fearing what was to happen, Michelangelo had fled to the house of a great friend of his where he stayed hidden for many days, without anyone

except his friend knowing he was there. So he saved himself; for when the fury passed Pope Clement wrote to Florence that Michelangelo should be sought for, and he commanded that, when he was found, if he wished to pursue the work on the tombs which had already been started, he should be left at liberty and treated courteously.

But although Pope Clement VII had granted him immunity, he still feared for his life. Condivi writes,

Michelangelo remained in the greatest fear, because Duke Alessandro [de'Medici, Duke of Florence] hated him deeply and was, as everyone knows, a wild and vindictive youth. And there is no doubt that he would have got rid of him, were it not from consideration of the Pope.

Michelangelo was at pains to hide his republican sympathies, both after the first Florentine republic foundered and when the Medici regained power following the fall of the second republic in 1530. As late as October 1547, he was still worrying about being exposed, as he writes in a letter to his nephew Lionardo,

I'm glad that you have informed me about the decree [that Florentines should have nothing to do with anti-Medici exiles], because if up till now I've been on my guard about talking to the exiles and associating with them, I'll be much more on my guard in future ... I go about very little and talk to no-one, least of all to Florentines; but if I'm greeted in the street I cannot but respond with a civil word and pass on – though, if I were informed as to which are the exiles, I would make no response at all. But, as I've said, from now on I'll be very much on my guard, particularly as I have so many other anxieties that life is a burden.

This letter was a smokescreen. Most of Michelangelo's friends were anti-Medici exiles, but he was worried because he owned property in and around Florence, which he feared could be seized.

Rome
1534-1564

In 1534 Pope Clement VII died, to be replaced by Paul III. Vasari writes,

... after the elevation of Pope Paul III, the latter sent for Michelangelo to ask him to stay in his service. Fearful of being impeded in what he was doing, Michelangelo replied that he could not do so, for the reason that he was bound under contract to the Duke of Urbino until he had finished the work that he had in hand [Julius II's tomb]. Disturbed and angry the Pope said: 'Already thirty years I have had this wish, and now that I'm Pope cannot I satisfy it? Where is this contract? I will tear it up.'

Michelangelo had just moved to Rome again when Clement VII died. Clement VII had commissioned him to paint the *Last Judgement* on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine chapel the previous year, and they had reached an agreement that ensured Michelangelo could continue to work on Julius II's tomb. Michelangelo may have worried that Paul III wouldn't grant him time to finish the tomb (it was finally finished in 1545 in a much reduced state), but he can't have had any worries financially – by the mid-1530s, his salary from Pope Paul III was

twelve times greater than his contemporary Titian was receiving from Emperor Charles V.

By this point, Michelangelo was nearly sixty, and in love. Michelangelo met Tommaso de'Cavalieri, a young Roman aristocrat, in 1532 during one of Michelangelo's long visits to the city from Florence, and Tommaso may have been the spur for Michelangelo to move back to Rome. He certainly became the recipient of many of his poems and drawings.

S'un casto amor, s'una pietà superna
To Tommaso de'Cavalieri, 1532

If one chaste love, if one God-given piety,
If one same fortune by two lovers dared,
If one the grief but two the pain it shared,
If one will rules two hearts whose souls agree,
If bodies doubled set one spirit free
And both to heaven rise on quick wings paired;
If love's fire in two self-same souls has flared
From one thrust of one dart's trajectory;
If loving one another they spurn self
By mutual pleasure, zest and certain aim
Which speeds them both to where they want to go:
If this were true a thousand fold, its wealth
Would be a hundredth of the love I claim
Is ours, which disdain only could bring low.

Michelangelo was a prolific poet. 300 of his poems survive and are still widely read today. He had a deep knowledge of Florentine poetry, including the works of Petrarch and Dante, and Dante's vision of hell heavily influenced his *Last Judgement*. He sent his poems only to his closest friends, and they weren't widely known until they were published sixty years after his death.

Non vider gli occhi miei cosa mortale
To Tommaso Cavalieri (?), c. 1535-41

No mortal being would my eyes behold
When in your eyes my utter peace I found,
But my own likeness proved on pure ground,
The one whose arms my heart by love enfold;
And were not God Himself my soul's own mould,
The handsome looks which all our eyes astound
Would satisfy; but no such charms are sound;
The soul with abstract beauty is enrolled.
No man can gratify through what must die
All his desires; nor can there be achieved
Eternal form in time, since flesh decays.
For here our senses must our love belie
And kill the soul; but if on earth perceived
As friends, we're perfect when to heaven we're raised.

In other poems, Michelangelo repeatedly called Tommaso his 'phoenix love', implying that his aging self was reborn through his love. (Tommaso was perhaps only twelve years old when they first met.) However, whether or not there was a physical dimension to their relationship, it was reported by his biographers as chaste and virtuous.

Michelangelo was homosexual, but that didn't prevent him forming a close bond with Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara. They met just before he began the *Last Judgement*. She was a devout widow, who, despite being wealthy, lived frugally. They were fellow poets, and regularly exchanged sonnets.

A l'alta tuo lucente diadema
To Vittoria Colonna, c. 1541

To your resplendent beauty's diadem
No one may hope to rise, O Lady,

Except by long and steep ascent – the way
On high is by your gentle courtesy.
My strength is failing me, I spend
My breath half-way – I fall, I stray,
And yet your beauty makes me happy
And nothing else can please my heart
In love with everything sublime
But that, descending here to me
On earth, you are not set apart.
It comforts me meantime,
Forseeing your disdain, that this my crime
Pardons in you the bringing of such light
Down so closely from your hated height.

Michelangelo's sentiment in his poems for Vittoria implies an altogether more pure and spiritual love than the suggestive coupling that ripples through poems to Tommaso. His feelings for them both are also reflected in the drawings he sent them. He created *The Fall of Phaeton* for Tommaso, showing a lithe and naked young mortal tumbling head first out of the skies, a metaphor for Michelangelo's soaring yet uncontrollable love. For Vittoria, he sent several devotional drawings. She praised them highly, as a letter she wrote in 1541 makes clear:

> *I have received your letter and seen the Crucifix which has certainly crucified itself in my memory more than any other picture that I have ever seen. No image better made, more alive, or finished could be seen.*

Vittoria Colonna died in 1547, and Michelangelo mourned her deeply. However, his true love had always been his art. He was in thrall to beauty, as Condivi defensively explains:

> *He has loved, too, the beauty of the human body, as one who knows it thoroughly and well. And he has loved it in such a fashion that among certain lewd men, who do not know how to understand the love of Beauty unless it is lascivious and impure, there has been occasion to think and talk evil of him: as if Alcibiades, a most handsome young man, had not been loved most chastely by Socrates; from whose side, when he lay with him, it used to be said that he did not get up otherwise than as from the side of his father.*

Michelangelo's favourite subject was the male nude, and he repeatedly drew the same figure again and again, from different angles, in action and repose. He would sketch sculptures, such as the newly unearthed classical sculpture *Apollo Belvedere*, and would animate their limbs to try and work out how their muscles would contract and stretch.

Michelangelo wrote a sonnet on sculpture, which he sent to Vittoria Colonna when they first met:

Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto
To Vittoria Colonna, 1538-41

No block of marble but it does not hide
The concept living in the artist's mind –
Pursuing it inside that form, he'll guide
His hand to shape what reason has defined.
The ill I flee, the good I hope to find
In you, exalted lady of true pride,
Are also circumscribed; and yet I'm lied
To by my art which to my will is blind.
Love's not to blame, nor your severity,
Disdainful beauty, nor what fortune shows,
Or destiny: I fixed my own ill course.
Though death and mercy side by side I see
Lodged in your heart, my passion only knows
How to carve death: this is my skill's poor force.

However, it is in an anecdote Vasari recollects in his *Lives* that we most clearly see Michelangelo's true love:

> *A priest, a friend of his [Michelangelo's], said: 'It's a pity you haven't taken a wife, for you would have had many children and bequeathed to them many honourable works.'*
>
> *Michelangelo answered: 'I have too much of a wife in this art that has always afflicted me, and the works I shall leave behind will be my children, and even if they are nothing, they will live for a long while. And woe to Lorenzo di Bartoluccio Ghiberti if he had not created the doors of San Giovanni [the baptistry doors for Florence's cathedral], for his sons and nephews sold and spoiled everything he left them, while the doors are still standing.'*

Michelangelo began the *Last Judgement* in 1536. Condivi described how, in this painting,

> *Michelangelo expressed all that the art of painting can make of the human body, leaving out not one single attitude or movement.*

He was sixty-one when he started it, but still as hot-headed as he had been in his youth, as Vasari recounts when a visitor started commenting on the *Last Judgement* before it was finished:

> *Michelangelo had already completed more than three-quarters of the work when Pope Paul came to see it, and when Messer Biagio da Cesena, master of ceremonies and a scrupulous man who was in the chapel with the pope, was asked what he thought of the painting, he declared that it was a most unseemly thing in such a venerable place to have painted so many nudes that so indecently display their shame and that it was not a work for a pope's chapel but rather one for baths or taverns. This comment displeased Michelangelo and, wishing to avenge himself, as soon as Messer Biagio had left, he drew his actual portrait without his being present, placing him in Hell in the person of Minos with a large serpent wrapped around his legs in a heap of devils. Nor did Messer Biagio's entreaties to the pope and to Michelangelo that it be removed do any good, for Michelangelo left it there in memory of the event, where it can still be seen today.*

When the *Last Judgement* was unveiled, Vasari writes,

> *Michelangelo proved not only that he had triumphed over the first artisans who had worked in the chapel but that he also wished to triumph over himself in the vault he had made so famous, and since the Last Judgement was by far superior to that, Michelangelo surpassed even himself, having imagined the terror of those days, in which he depicted, for the greater punishment of those who have not lived good lives, all of Christ's Passion; he has various naked figures in the air carrying the cross, the column, the lance, the sponge, the nails, and the crown in different and varied poses with a grace that can be executed only with great difficulty.*

Michelangelo had intentionally tried to divest the body of its sexuality for this painting, endeavouring to paint nudes who were tormented rather than sensuous, unlike many of the lithe bodies depicted on the ceiling. In the *Last Judgement* there is a constant tension between his obvious passion for the male body, and his unwavering commitment to Catholicism – his utter belief in heaven and hell – that animates all the figures. (In the end, the painting was deemed too risqué for papal eyes,

and after Michelangelo's death his friend, the painter Daniele da Volterra, was asked to cover up much of the genitalia on display.)

As Michelangelo grew older, he increasingly meditated on death and redemption. This can be seen in the *Last Judgement*, but also in his private *Crucifixion* drawings, his last unfinished *Pietà* and in his letters to friends and his nephew Lionardo. He completed two frescoes in the Pauline chapel at the Vatican Palace in 1550, which he had started eight years earlier, but on the whole his professional life was dominated by his appointment as supreme architect of St Peter's in 1546, following the death of Antonio da Sangallo (who had replaced Raphael upon his death in 1520, who in turn had replaced Bramante).

As always, Michelangelo fought his appointment. Vasari writes,

> *His Holiness decided to send for Michelangelo, and when the pope sought to put him in Sangallo's place, Michelangelo refused, declaring, in order to escape this burden, that architecture was not his true profession. Finally, after his entreaties were to no avail, the pope ordered Michelangelo to accept the job, and to his greatest displeasure and very much against his will he was forced to join in this enterprise.*

Michelangelo, the hard-working perfectionist, found corruption rife on the project, as Vasari recounts:

> *... it became obvious that the building project was a shop and a business making a profit which was extended for the benefit of those who had cornered the market rather than for the purpose of finishing the church. These methods did not satisfy this righteous man, and to rid himself of these men while the pope was pressing him to accept the position of architect on the project, he told them one day openly that they should gain the assistance of their friends and do everything they could to prevent him from taking the post, for if he were given the office, he did not want any of them involved in this building project; they took these words spoken in public very badly, as one might imagine, and this was the reason why they hated Michelangelo so deeply, a hatred which grew every day as they saw him changing the entire plan inside and out; why they could not allow him to go on living; and why every day they devised new and different stratagems to torment him ...*

Finally, Pope Paul issued a *motu proprio* [a letter setting out his wishes] to Michelangelo, making him the head of the building project with full authority so that he could do and undo what was there, increase, decrease, or vary anything to his liking, and he decided that all the officials there should be under Michelangelo's authority.

He worked on the basilica up until his death, habitually moaning about it to the painter Giorgio Vasari, whose biographical *Lives* was published in 1550. In May 1555 Michelangelo wrote to Vasari,

> *I was forced to work on the fabric of St Peter's, and my service for about eight years has not only been a free gift but done me great harm and caused me unhappiness; but now that it is well advanced and there is money to spend, and I am shortly to vault the dome, it would be the ruin of the building if I were to quit. It would bring me enormous disgrace throughout Christendom, and be a terrible sin and stain my soul.*

Increasingly Michelangelo was writing of redemption and sin, and his faith deepened. He had experienced an acute illness several years earlier, and in March 1549 wrote to his nephew Lionardo complaining of being unable to urinate:

> *I've been very ill with it since then, groaning day and night, unable to sleep or to get any rest whatever. As far as they*

can make out, the doctors say I'm suffering from the stone. They're still not certain. However, they continue to treat me for the said malady and are very hopeful. Nevertheless, as I'm an old man suffering from such a cruel malady, they're not making me any promises.

It was at that time, when he was seventy-four, that he decided to write a will, writing to Lionardo in April 1549,

Regarding putting my affairs in order … I shall just say that, if only because I'm old and ill, I decided to make a will. And the will is as follows. That what I have is to be left to Gismondo and you, Lionardo, in this manner: that Gismondo my brother is to have the same amount as you my nephew, and neither one of you can take any of his share of my things without the consent of the other; and if you wish to have this done through a notary, I shall ratify it at any time.

Although Michelangelo lived for a further fifteen years, death was never far from his mind, as is clear from a letter from June 1555 to Giorgio Vasari:

I know that you understand in what I write that I am at the eleventh hour and not a thought arises in me that does not have Death carved within it: but God grant that I keep him waiting in suspense for a few years yet.

Michelangelo worked right up until his death on 18 February 1564. His sight was poor, and he had others write his letters as he could no longer hold a pen. Daniele da Volterra wrote to Michelangelo's nephew Lionardo, shortly after his death, to say that he had seen Michelangelo carving a *Pietà* all Saturday the week before he died. The sculptor Tiberio Calcagni, a pupil of Michelangelo's, recounted his last days also in a letter to Lionardo, sent to Florence from Rome on 14 February 1564:

… I found him [Michelangelo] walking outside – and this despite the fact it was raining! And when I saw him and said that it hardly seemed appropriate for him to be outside in this weather, he replied, 'And what would you rather have me doing? I am ill and can find peace nowhere.' And never before as much as then, what with his appearance and wavering words, had he caused me to fear so much for his life.

Michelangelo's funeral was held in Rome before his nephew Lionardo arrived from Florence. Vasari described it as,

… a very dignified funeral attended by the entire artistic profession, as well as all his friends and the Florentine community, Michelangelo was buried in a tomb in the church of the Santi Apostoli in the presence of all of Rome, while His Holiness planned to erect a special memorial and a tomb in Saint Peter's itself.

Lionardo was keen to have his body removed to Florence, and Cosimo de'Medici, Duke of Florence, wanted to honour Michelangelo in death, as he felt he had been unable to do in life. Vasari recounts Lionardo's situation:

Lionardo Buonarroti, nephew of Michelangelo, who, having heard of his uncle's illness, had gone to Rome by coach but had not found him alive, learned from Daniele

da Volterra, a very close friend of Michelangelo, and from still others who had been close to that saintly old man, that Michelangelo had asked and begged for his body to be taken to Florence, his most noble native city which he had always tenderly loved; and so, with great determination, Lionardo had cautiously and quickly smuggled the body out of Rome and, as if it were merchandise, sent it to Florence in a bale.

Four artists of the newly founded Florentine Art Academy – Giorgio Vasari, Agnolo Bronzino, Benvenuto Cellini and Bartolomeo Ammannati – organized the memorial service at San Lorenzo, the Medici family's church (Michelangelo's body now lies in San Croce, his family's parish church in Florence). The ceremony was much like a high-profile service today, with a famous orator (the writer and historian Benedetto Varchi) giving the funeral address, celebrities of the day in attendance, the church decorated for the occasion, and the tomb quickly becoming covered in poetic condolences written by visitors who had come from far and wide to see it. The poems were left covering the tomb for weeks after the ceremony to allow everyone who wanted to visit to pay their respects.

Michelangelo, who died aged eighty-eight, lived through thirteen popes, and served many of them. Vasari explains his extraordinary standing at the time of his death:

Michelangelo's talent was recognized during his lifetime and not, as happens to so many, only after his death, for as we have seen, Julius II, Leo X, Clement VII, Paul III, Julius III, Paul IV, and Pius IV, all supreme pontiffs, wished to have him nearby at all times, and, as is well known, Suleiman, Emperor of the Turks, Francis Valois, King of France, Emperor Charles V, the Signoria of Venice, and finally Duke Cosimo de'Medici, as was mentioned, all

provided him with generous salaries for no other reason than to avail themselves of his great talent; this happens only to men of great worth, as he was, for it was recognized and understood that all three of these arts had reached a true state of perfection in his works, and that God had not granted such genius either to the artists of antiquity or to those of the modern period as He had to Michelangelo, in all the many years the sun had been revolving.

Both Michelangelo's chief biographers, Vasari and Condivi, paid him the ultimate compliment in their works, by saying that he had not only created works that matched those of the ancients, whose sculptures were still seen as the pinnacle of art, but that he had surpassed them. As Vasari concludes,

He executed his works, which are inimitable, just as well with a brush as with a chisel, and he has given, as has already been said, so much skill, grace, and a certain vitality to his works that – and this may be said without disagreement – he surpassed and triumphed over the ancients, for he knew how to resolve the problems in his works so easily that they appear to be executed without effort even though, when others later try to sketch his works, they discover the difficulties in imitating them.

❦

The extracts from Vasari, Condivi and Michelangelo's own letters and poems are reprinted from two Oxford University Press translations. For full details of both titles please see page 48.

Michelangelo: a brief chronology

1475
6 March, born in Caprese near Arezzo, the second of five sons born to the Florentine Lodovico di Leonardo Buonarroti Simoni and his wife, Francesca.

1481
Death of Francesca, Michelangelo's mother.

1487
Joins the workshop of Florentine painter Domenico Ghirlandaio.

c. 1488
Joins the Medici household and studies sculpture in the Medici Garden.

1494
Piero de'Medici is expelled from Florence and the first Florentine republic is founded. Michelangelo works in Bologna on figures for the shrine of St Dominic.

1496
Aged twenty-one, he moves to Rome, and completes *Bacchus* and his acclaimed *Pietà*.

1501
Back in Florence, he starts to sculpt the colossal *David*, completed in 1504.

1505
Summoned to Rome by Pope Julius II, he is commissioned to design his tomb. It takes forty years to complete.

1506
Michelangelo storms back to Florence after Pope Julius II upsets him, then he travels to Bologna to make peace. He stays there for two years.

1508
He is called to Rome to paint the Sistine chapel ceiling for Julius II.

1512
The Sistine chapel ceiling is unveiled.

1516
Returns to Florence to create the façade of San Lorenzo, the Medici family's church. The project is abandoned in 1520. He is commissioned instead to create a Medici library and four tombs.

1527
The Medici are expelled from Florence again, and the city becomes a republic once more. Michelangelo oversees the fortifications of Florence in his role as commissioner general as the city prepares to be attacked.

1530
Florence surrenders to the Imperial army and the Medici are restored to power. Michelangelo goes into hiding, but is pardoned by the Medici pope, Clement VII.

1532
On a long visit to Rome, he meets the young Roman aristocrat Tommaso de'Cavalieri with whom he falls in love.

1534
He returns to live in Rome, and never goes back to Florence.

1536
He begins the *Last Judgement*, which takes five years to complete.

1542
Michelangelo starts two frescoes in the Pauline chapel. Completed in 1550, they are his last paintings.

1545
The Julius II tomb is finally erected in San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome.

1546
He becomes the supreme architect overseeing the construction of St Peter's.

1550
Giorgio Vasari's first edition of *Lives of the Artists* is published in Florence. The biography of Michelangelo is the only one included of a living artist.

1552/3
He begins his last sculpture, the *Rondanini Pietà*, which he continues to work on until the week before his death.

1553
Ascanio Condivi publishes his biography, *Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, in Rome.

1564
Michelangelo dies aged eighty-eight on 18 February. Following a funeral in Rome, his body is taken back to Florence and finally buried in San Croce.

Closer to the master: a book about Michelangelo is published to coincide with The BP special exhibition *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*, at the British Museum, London, 23 March-25 June 2006

Other books and films related to the exhibition

Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master
The exhibition catalogue, written by Hugo Chapman (British Museum curator of Italian drawings before 1800) is available in hardback, price £40, or paperback, price £25, published by The British Museum Press.

Michelangelo
An illustrated gift book on the life and work of Michelangelo, price £9.99, is also published by The British Museum Press.

Michelangelo: A Life
A film tracing the evolution of some of Michelangelo's most celebrated artworks, presented by British Museum director Neil MacGregor, can be purchased online, www.britishmuseum.co.uk, or in British Museum shops, price £17.99.

The Lives of the Artists
A translation by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella of Giorgio Vasari's classic book of biographies, first published in 1550, that includes the life of Michelangelo. Published by Oxford University Press, price £8.99.

Michelangelo: Life, Letters and Poetry
A volume that includes Ascanio Condivi's *Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, translated by George Bull, as well as a selection of Michelangelo's letters and poems, translated by George Bull and Peter Porter. Published by Oxford University Press, price £6.99.

All the above titles are available in British Museum shops.

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Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DG
020 7323 8299
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Michelangelo, **A male nude seen fom behind** (detail), c. 1539–41
Cover: Michelangelo, **Ideal head of a woman** (detail), c. 1525–8

MICHELANGELO WAS PASSIONATE, SECRETIVE, OBSESSIVE, PARANOID, DEVOUT, AMBITIOUS.

An artistic genius known as *il divino*, Michelangelo lived through thirteen popes and worked up to a week of his death, aged eighty-eight. He was a man of extremes, painting the Sistine chapel ceiling virtually single handed, sculpting *David* from a block of marble others had tried and failed to master. Envied and plotted against, at times he had to flee for his life, but he created some of the most breathtaking works of all time. In this introduction to the fiery master, Michelangelo is brought to life through the words of his first biographers and the artist's own letters and poems.

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Published to coincide with The BP special exhibition *Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master*, at the British Museum, London, 23 March-25 June 2006