

## High Renaissance

### **Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)**

#### **Early Life and Influences**

With his huge skills in painting, sculpture, architecture, writing and engineering, Michelangelo rivalled Leonardo for the title of the true Renaissance man. He was born in Caprese in Tuscany. When Michelangelo was 6 he received his first drawing lesson from Florentine painter Francesco Granacci. In 1488 Michelangelo moved to Florence and became an assistant to the artist Domenico Ghirlandaio. He depended on wealthy patrons. The most prestigious being the Medici family and Pope Julius II. Michelangelo has a fiery character and had different relationships with these patrons. He formed a great friendship with the Medici's but often fought with the Pope over control of his work. After the death of Pope Julius II, Michelangelo was employed by Pope Leo X. Michelangelo taught himself to sculpt by drawing classical sculptures and also by studying anatomy of dead. He was influenced by Donatello and Leonardo studying their works when he was in Florence. There were many changes in the world during Michelangelo's lifetime – the reformation – scientific discoveries of the earth's position in the universe - freedom of thought and independence – more respect for artists.

#### **Important Works**

- o 'The Pieta' 1498-99
- o 'Dome of St. Peter's Basilica' (he took over architect Bramante but died before he completed it so another man did so)
- o 'David' 1501-04
- o 'Sistine Chapel Ceilings' 1508-12
- o 'The Creation of Adam' 1508-12
- o 'The Fall of Man and the Expulsion from Paradise' 1508-12
- o 'The Dying Slave' 1513-16
- o 'The awakening Slave' 1520-30
- o 'Tomb of Lorenzo de'Medici' 1526-31
- o 'Tomb of Giuliano de'Medici, Duke of Nemours' 1520-34
- o 'The Last Judgement' c. 1535

#### **Key Dates**

- 1475: Born in Caprese. Family moves to Florence.
- 1488: Apprenticed to Domenico Ghirlandaio
- 1489: Joins Lorenzo de Medici's sculpture school
- 1494: Italy was invaded. He leaves for Venice
- 1496: First visit to Rome
- 1501: Returns to Florence and carves David
- 1505: Returns to Rome, builds tomb for Pope Julius II
- 1508: Begins Sistine Chapel Ceiling
- 1536: Begins Last Judgement
- 1547: Made architect in chief of St. Peter's basilica
- 1564: Dies in Rome

## **Michelangelo the Sculptor**

Michelangelo saw himself as a sculptor first and foremost and his sculptural thinking can be seen in his drawings and paintings. Michelangelo celebrated the body as a mirror of God's perfection. He sculpted mainly heroic figures. Michelangelo believed that it was his role as a sculptor to free the figure which was already imprisoned in the block of stone. This was a metaphor for the soul freeing itself from the material world of the body.

He drew the shape of the sculpture on the block and chiselled inwards around the form. He had great command of marble. He carved quickly with great accuracy. Michelangelo often altered designs if his ideas changed while he was carving.

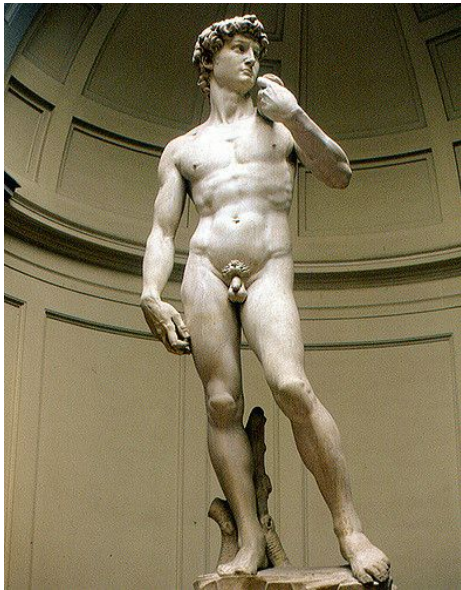
### **'The Pieta' (1498-99)**

- The Pieta is made from marble and is 1.74m x 1.95m
- The word pieta comes from the Italian word meaning 'pity'.
- It is a sculpture of Mary with the body of Christ after he is taken down from the cross.
- The most famous of Michelangelo's Pietas is the one in Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, Rome.
- Mary is portrayed with a beautiful and sorrowful appearance of a young woman reflecting on the tragedy.
- She shows restrained grief. Her eyes are lowered not looking at her son's face.
- Her left hand held upturned in a gesture of calm entreaty to god.
- Michelangelo resolved the difficulty in balancing a fully grown man across the lap of a woman by making Mary's robes fall in full, heavy folds to support the body of Christ.
- Christ's reclining, limp figure is classically perfect, demonstrating Michelangelo's complete understanding of human anatomy.
- The complex sculpture has a triangular composition.
- The sculpture is generally smooth and has little rough surface texture apart from the rock and tree stump at the base.
- The linear movements in the drapery contrast with Christ's still body.
- The sash placed across Mary's chest reads: 'Michelangelo Buonarrotti, Florentine, made this' indicating the pride he had in this particular piece. (it was the only work he ever signed).



### 'David' (1501-04)

- David is made from one large piece of marble and stands at 5.17m high.
- It was commissioned by the Republican government of Florence as a symbol of strength and courage in the face of adversity (David being the young boy that killed Goliath).
- The size and material used shows Michelangelo's confidence and ambition.
- The statue shows Michelangelo's knowledge of anatomy but there is one flaw in the sculpture. The head and hands of the figure are disproportionately large, indicating that he used an adolescent boy as his model.
- However Michelangelo still gives David strength through his muscular frame.
- The tendons on his hands and neck show the tension of the figure as he waits for Goliath to appear.
- The classically beautiful features are set in an expectant and alert expression which shows in the anxious furrows of his brow.
- This contrasts with the relaxed pose of the body, his weight is on the right leg while the left leg is slightly raised. This contrapposto pose suggests David is on guard.
- He has a slingshot hanging casually over his shoulder.
- His hair has curly texture.
- This sculpture was originally meant for a niche on a buttress of a Florence Cathedral (which might explain the imperfect proportions) but the Governors thought it so beautiful that they put it on a pedestal in the square outside the city for all to see.



## Michelangelo the Painter

Many artists have decorated the Sistine Chapel with Frescoes including Botticelli and Ghirlandaio but it is most renowned for the spectacular ceiling frescoes of Michelangelo. He did not originally want to accept the commission given by Pope Julius II, but did so when he was given full control of the subject matter and design of the project. Years later, another Pope, Clement VII, commissioned Michelangelo to paint another fresco for the Sistine Chapel- this time on the altar wall (Last Judgement).

### **'Sistine Chapel Ceilings' (1508-12) / 'The Creation of Adam' (1508-12)**

- The main narrative of the ceiling paintings is the story of Noah and the Creation.
- It consists of nine pictures set in a strip down the middle of the ceiling, divided by painted pilasters. These pictures are not all of equal size- the smaller ones are framed in a painted marble effect.
- In the four cornices in the corners, four biblical stories narrate the liberation of God's people.
- At the base of the pillars 20 nude figures in a statuesque modelling, support garlands of oak leaves and ribbons.
- Among the pillars of the imaginary architecture which seem to support the vault are 12 colossal figures seated on marble thrones, they are the ancestors of Christ.
- The 12 panels situated between the spandrels and under the main narrative panels are based on the prophets and sibyls (wise women) from the Old Testament.
- The sibyls are depicted as muscular and powerful, indicating that Michelangelo probably used a male life model for his female figures.
- In order to connect the ceiling with the rest of the chapel, he painted the illusion of architectural marble details rising up from the walls.
- **The Creation of Adam** is the most famous and striking of all the main panels in the chapel. The reason for this is because Michelangelo let the figures dominate the picture space, and painted minimal details in the background to draw attention to the subject.
- It is a moment filled with majesty and power.
- The fingers of God and Adam almost, but not quite touching, create an apprehensive atmosphere before God gives life to Adam.
- God has already created him, but now he passes the spark of divine grace onto Adam.
- The green scarf on God's side of the scene and the green land under Adam suggest the promise of the union. This is further suggested by the woman and child next to God: the woman under his arm is probably the woman who will be Eve while the child is probably Christ; the symbolic suggestion here is that Christ and Adam are the same, a suggestion also made in the creation of Eve.
- The nude figure of Adam is classically perfect sitting in the Garden of Eden.

- He is given an idealised body as a mirror of divine perfection.
- God is flying wrapped in a cape and enclosing in one arm figures of angels.
- There is a contrast between Adam's reclining figure and God's powerful arrival.
- The energy of the picture comes from the diagonal movement of God and his flowing robe.
- The colour scheme is pale and the background colour is made to harmonise with the tones of the flesh.





*Sistine Chapel*

### **'The Last Judgement' (c. 1535)**

- This fresco takes up the entire wall behind the altar of the Sistine Chapel and was the first work of this size to be undertaken by a single artist.
- The scale is very impressive to any viewer.
- It shows Michelangelo's more pessimistic view of the corruption of mankind than in his earlier frescoes.
- At first it seems a great confusion of bodies but it is actually arranged in a logical order of grouped figures which are skilfully composed in close proximity.
- The composition is balanced with something happening in every section.
- Above Christ are the martyrs who display the instruments of their martyrdom.
- In the centre of the whole fresco are the angels, who by blowing their trumpets, awake the dead, they arise from their graves, and helped by creatures, ascend towards the throne of the Most High.
- On the opposite side the damned are dragged into hell by fierce demons.
- The immense fresco covers an area of 66ft in width and 33ft in height and contains 391 figures.
- Jesus is depicted here, not as a gentle and forgiving saviour, but a ruthless and determined young man, with a powerfully built, muscular frame. He is shown as being angry waving the damned away.
- The virgin Mary is depicted by his side as a very sweet figure
- Christ is surrounded by his apostles.
- The fresco's theme appears to be that it is not easy for everyone to enter heaven.

- Each figure is beautiful in anatomical perfection. The foreshortenings show Michelangelo's immense skill.
- Behind the figures is a stormy sky and lightning reflects fiery light on the lower part.
- In this fresco Michelangelo abandoned High Renaissance perspective. He made no attempt to create a realistic landscape at the bottom of the mural his representation of the background space is almost featureless.
- This fresco is described as mannerist in style because of its elongated human figures and vague perspective in the background spaces.



{Controversy surrounded the nudity of the figures, it was considered unsuitable for this religious context. Soon after Michelangelo's death it was decided to give all the figures loin cloths or drapery. A small group of artist's undertook the task, they were nicknamed the 'breeches-makers'}

Key points in paintings:



- Treatment of the human figure
- Illusion of architectural elements
- Unifying layout of ceiling
- Stories from the bible
- Influence of classical sculpture on painting style
- Change of style from Creation of Adam to Last Judgement

### Later Life

Michelangelo increased the expressive potential of the human figure in art. His influence on artists who portray the human figure continues to this present day.

### Key Points

#### Sculptures

- Monumental heroic male nudes
- Emphasis on the volume of his figures
- Careful attention to anatomical detail
- Use of movement and gesture for expression
- Emotional expression more important than a technically perfect finish
- Finished sculptures are rough and 'unfinished' in places
- Use of contrapposto
- Influence of Roman and Greek sculpture
- Idealisation of the human figure

#### Paintings

- Use of vivid colour
- Use of the human body to express emotions
- Figures imitate ancient roman sculptural forms
- Frequent use of foreshortening in his figures
- Figures modelled with both colour and tone
- Disregard for perspective when it suited his aims
- Simplified background landscape without the illusion of depth
- Energetic and lively painting technique
- Frescoes painted quickly on damp plaster (buon fresco)
- Preparatory drawings transferred by picking through them onto fresh plaster

*\*Mannerism: to*

*represent an ideal of beauty rather than natural images of it, using characteristic distortion and exaggeration of human proportions\**

