



Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)

by William Hood

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Michelangelo's marble statue of David and his frescoes on the vault of the Sistine Chapel are among the most widely recognized examples of Italian Renaissance art, and their maker the most famous artist who ever lived.

By sixteenth-century standards Michelangelo lived to the exceptionally old age of almost eighty-nine, and he continued to work until only a few days before his death. From a working career that spanned more than seventy years, he left an enormous legacy in sculpture, painting, drawing, and architecture.

Furthermore, apart from occasional visits to north Italian cities such as Bologna and Venice, in all those years Michelangelo never left Florence, where he was born, or Rome, where he died.

Apprenticeship

At the customary age of thirteen, in 1488 Michelangelo became an apprentice of the distinguished painter Domenico Ghirlandaio, who was then at work on the choir frescoes for Santa Maria Novella in Florence, where Michelangelo likely learned to manage the demanding craft of fresco painting.

Before 1490, however, he was in the household of Lorenzo de' Medici, along with some other talented young artists, where he studied among the Greco-Roman sculptures that Lorenzo had collected and placed in a garden on the Piazza San Marco, under the care of Bertoldo di Giovanni, a prominent sculptor and former pupil of Donatello.

Thus, Michelangelo's entire formal education in painting did not exceed two years; and in sculpture we do not know exactly what techniques he and the other boys learned from Bertoldo.

Public Commissions

After Lorenzo's death in 1492 Michelangelo traveled north from Florence, making a brief stop in Venice in 1494 and a longer one in Bologna, where he found work. By 1496 he was in Rome where, with the help of the banker Jacopo Galli, he obtained commissions for his two earliest large-scale works, the *Bacchus* (Florence, Bargello) and the *Pietà* (Rome, St. Peter's).

By 1500 he was back in Florence, where he achieved immediate fame with the marble *David* (1501-1504, Florence, Accademia). A committee formed for the purpose decided to set up the statue beside the entrance to the Palazzo della Signoria, where it or the present copy has remained ever since 1504 as a



Top: A portrait engraving of Michelangelo by Jean Louis Potrelle.

Center: *David* by Michelangelo.

Above: *Pietà* by Michelangelo. Image of Michelangelo courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Images of *David* and *Pietà* appear under the GNU Free Documentation License.

symbol of Florentine republican ideals.

To answer a summons to Rome from Pope Julius II della Rovere, in 1505 Michelangelo abandoned a project for a huge fresco, *The Battle of Cascina*, to be painted in open competition with Leonardo da Vinci in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio of Florence's Palazzo della Signoria.

Portions of the finished cartoon (or preparatory drawing) survived, and Aristotele da Sangalli made a careful copy of the central portion of the composition. These are enough to show that *The Battle of Cascina* was Michelangelo's first large-scale essay in the compositional theme that was to preoccupy him for the rest of his life, namely, muscular male nudes in highly active and complex positions.

Indeed, this theme features prominently in Michelangelo's first project for the pope, which was the design and execution of a colossal tomb, not completed until forty years later, in 1545, in a much-reduced version.

Of the early sculptures intended for the *Julius Tomb*, only the *Moses* (Rome, San Pietro in Vincoli) forms part of the final composition. Other pieces, especially the two so-called *Slaves* (Paris, Louvre) and the group of four *Captives* (Florence, Accademia) remained in the artist's possession until his death.

The most immediate consequence of Julius's 1508 decision to abandon the tomb project was the frescoed vault of the Sistine Chapel, built by Julius's uncle, Pope Sixtus IV, in the late 1470s.

Julius died within a few months of the painting's completion in October 1512, and his successor Pope Leo X shifted Michelangelo's energies away from Rome and back to Florence.

Leo X had been born Giovanni de' Medici, son of Lorenzo de' Medici and therefore the artist's childhood friend. With the support of Leo and his first cousin, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, natural son of Lorenzo's brother Giuliano, Michelangelo undertook extensive work at San Lorenzo, the Florentine parish church that had been under Medici patronage since the early fifteenth century.

For it, Michelangelo designed a never-built facade, a library, and an independent burial chapel for his patrons' fathers, brothers, and cousins. The work occupied Michelangelo from 1516 until he abandoned the whole project on returning to Rome in 1534.

The reasons for Michelangelo's precipitous departure from Florence have never become entirely clear. We know that he was disappointed with his patrons' support of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who eradicated the ancient Florentine constitution by creating Alessandro de' Medici Duke of Florence and giving his natural daughter, Margaret of Austria, as the new duke's bride.

Once back in Rome, Michelangelo painted the *Last Judgment* on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel and a pair of enormous frescoes, showing the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* and the *Conversion of St. Paul* for the new Pope, Paul III Farnese.

After 1534, in fact, Michelangelo never accepted another commission for sculpture; and once he had completed the second set of frescoes for Paul III in 1545, he never took another commission for a painting. All of that is to say that, after 1534, Michelangelo turned his attention almost exclusively to architecture.

Among the most important projects of his last years are the design for the Campidoglio, the ceremonial civic center of Rome on the Capitoline Hill, and the ongoing work on St. Peter's, begun by Bramante more than forty years before Michelangelo became its architect.

Private and Personal Works

Michelangelo's figural work in sculpture and drawing from the final three decades of his life is almost

entirely private and personal in character. In this group one finds the *Pietà* in Florence (before 1555, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo) and the so-called *Rondanini Pietà* (1554-1564, Milan, Castello Sforzesco), both projects for the artist's own tomb.

The enigmatic bust of *Brutus* (Florence, Bargello) may also be dated to this period, along with an important group of highly finished drawings, called "gift" or "presentation" drawings, that Michelangelo made for his most intimate friends. Far more than the works made for public display, these latter give us the insight into the artist's affective and erotic life that otherwise evades any but the most speculative commentary.

Even so, no Renaissance artist is better documented than Michelangelo. In addition to figuring in numerous contemporary records, he was the subject of two biographies published in his lifetime, by Giorgio Vasari (1550) and Ascanio Condivi (1555), as well as the protagonist of a fictional dialogue on the nature of painting by his Portuguese admirer Francisco de Hollanda (1538).

The scores of letters to and from Michelangelo show that he was a prodigious correspondent; and he was also the author of more than three hundred surviving poems. All of this has made it possible to draw a portrait of Michelangelo's complex psyche in greater detail than that of any of his contemporaries, with the possible exception of Queen Elizabeth I.

Michelangelo's Sexuality

Speculation about Michelangelo's sexuality first appeared in modern scholarship in the well-documented biography by John Addington Symonds (London, 1893). Despite all subsequent attempts by archival researchers, however, no written evidence has ever come to light that documents Michelangelo's erotic life.

This lacuna in the bounty of evidence cannot have been the result of an oversight, as Renaissance documents of all sorts recount the sexual proclivities of various artists in some detail.

Raphael (1483-1520), for example, seems to have been a great womanizer; and the flamboyant behavior of the Lombard painter Giovanni Andrea Bazzi (1477?-1549) earned him the nickname "Il Sodoma," "The Sodomite." Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography records without scruple his sexual escapades with both boys and women; and the second, 1568, edition of Vasari's biographies of artists frequently mentions details of their domestic arrangements.

By contrast, contemporary records tell us next to nothing about the sexual behavior of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) or Michelangelo. We do know that neither ever married and that, while still a youth in Florence, Leonardo was once arrested on suspicion of sodomy, the term commonly used to include all homosexual genital behavior.

Of Michelangelo the sources convey only rumors of sodomy. Condivi, whose biography Michelangelo virtually dictated, not only denied the rumors but insisted that the artist observed lifelong chastity. No surviving evidence contradicts that assertion.

However, it is important to remember that Michelangelo was eighty at the time that Condivi wrote, and that the religious climate then dominating Rome and the Papal Curia valorized chastity over marriage itself, even for laymen.

In any case, Renaissance culture did not consider involuntary erotic object-choices to be constituents of personal identity. In this they were no different from the biblical writers who provided the proof-texts for theological condemnations of sodomy.

All alike assumed that sexual behavior was entirely voluntary and that an adult male's object-choice would fall naturally on desirable women, whereas the frequent and commonly acknowledged desire for adolescent

boys was held to be the mischievous temptation of pesky demons.

Thus, a Christian was responsible only for his or her behavior, not for the motives that lay behind it. On those grounds moralists insisted that, while homosexual attractions were simple temptations, homosexual acts themselves were, literally, unnatural and therefore deliberate perversions of God's will. In this light it would be anachronistic to claim that Michelangelo or anyone else in the period was "homosexual," "heterosexual," or even "bisexual" in the modern sense of those words.

Whatever the descriptive term one chooses as appropriate for the culture in which he lived, three separate bodies of evidence demonstrate that Michelangelo experienced powerful erotic and emotional attachments. With one possible exception, moreover, these psycho-sexual attachments were limited to other men.

For that reason it seems historically legitimate to discuss Michelangelo's personality as that of a man whose erotic imagination was strongly oriented towards male object-choices. As such, it hardly matters whether Michelangelo ever engaged in a genital relationship with another person.

Letters and Poems

The first two bodies of evidence are Michelangelo's letters and poems. Although he was prickly and argumentative in his professional life, his personal correspondence shows him to have been loving, solicitous, and compassionate towards those with whom he enjoyed close relations. Quite naturally, these qualities feature in his letters to his father and brothers; and on occasion he wrote just as touchingly to his servants.

But, beginning in the 1530s and continuing to the end of his life, one also encounters a higher intensity of the same feelings in his letters to the Roman nobleman Tomaso de' Cavalieri, who outlived him; and, until her death in 1557, to Vittoria Colonna, daughter of a great Roman family and widow of Alfonso d'Avalos, Marchese of Pescara.

As early as the 1520s Michelangelo wrote some poems indicating that he was enamored of a young Florentine, Gherardo Perini; and the many poems addressed to Tomaso de' Cavalieri, in combination with surviving letters and graphic evidence, leave no doubt that Michelangelo profoundly loved the younger Roman from the time of their introduction in 1533 until the artist's death more than thirty years later.

Typically for the period, Michelangelo cast his poems in highly conventional Petrarchan language and forms. Scholars have argued that the style itself beggars claims that Michelangelo's poetic expressions of love may be read as autobiographical.

Against that assertion, however, it must be noted that Michelangelo's first editor bowdlerized several of the love poems, first published in 1623, by changing masculine pronouns and endings to feminine ones.

Inasmuch as the editor was the artist's own great-nephew, Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, one can surmise that the emendations disguised what must have been at the least a family tradition that the poems in question were addressed not to an anonymous woman but to Tomaso de' Cavalieri and, more important, that they were erotic.

It was also in the early 1530s that Michelangelo began his passionate friendship with Vittoria Colonna, an older widow of the highest social rank whom Michelangelo can hardly have courted as a lover.

Their friendship instead grew out of their shared piety, which focused on the image of the suffering Christ as a stimulus to meditation on the expiation of sin through His death and resurrection. In this way Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna were part of a large group of intellectuals, artists, and aristocrats in the

vanguard of sincerely pious lay-people who supported the conciliar movement in the 1530s and 1540s.

They gathered around Ignatius of Loyola and the other early Jesuits; they followed the preaching of the renegade Capuchin friar Bernardino Ochino; and their sense of religion, inspired as it was with fervor but tempered with Humanist skepticism, was simultaneously at one with the spirit of reform then sweeping the Church and an object of suspicious interest on the part of Curial theologians.

Michelangelo's Nudes

To many people, Michelangelo's lifelong allegiance to the heroic male nude as the central and indeed sole integer of his visual imagination has often seemed the surest sign of his homosexual orientation. But this is probably not so.

Written evidence of same-sex attraction in the Renaissance suggests that most adult men were sexually attracted to the soft, curving physiques of adolescent boys rather than to the muscular, physically mature male body. As examples of the former category in works of art, one could cite epicene figures by Benvenuto Cellini, such as the *Apollo and Hyacinth* group, or *Ganymede*, whereas nude statues by Michelangelo, such as the marble *David* or the *Christ* in Rome's Santa Maria sopra Minerva belong to the latter type.

Even so, the flurry of puritanical criticism that broke out on the completion of the *Last Judgment* in 1541 might betray the detection of homoerotic content, but no explicit statement to that effect has come to light. As the objections focused on female as well as male figures, moreover, there can be little doubt that the cries for censorship of the nudes was a generalized matter of decorum.

Presentation Drawings

No inference of erotically-charged romantic love is necessary when one turns to a group of drawings that Michelangelo made for Tomaso de' Cavalieri. Usually called "presentation drawings," these and related sheets belong to an entirely new form of graphic art, in which the artist makes a drawing as a finished expression of private thoughts to a specific individual.

Leonardo may have invented the genre, but Michelangelo used it to celebrate his relationships with Vittoria Colonna and Tomaso de' Cavalieri, the only two people for whom he is documented as having created a unique work of art as a token of personal esteem.

The work for Vittoria Colonna is strictly religious in subject matter. For Tomaso de' Cavalieri, however, Michelangelo depicted subjects not from Christian piety, but from pagan myths (*Ganymede*, *Tityus*) and private allegories of a Humanist type (*The Dream of Human Life*).

The homoerotic character of Michelangelo's presentation drawings, confessional letters, and love poetry is unmistakable. It is also resistant of definition in modern terms. At the same time, it would be malicious cant to deny the presence of homoerotic content simply because it does not fit with contemporary, mostly North American, discourses of sexuality.

Michelangelo's Erotic Longings and His Love of God

Above all else, Michelangelo struggled to reconcile his unavoidable erotic longings with his indelible love of God. Nowhere did that struggle leave a deeper trace than in the religious poetry of his late years, where he addresses Jesus with the same passionate affection that he had earlier lavished on Tomaso de' Cavalieri.

In these poems one can detect Michelangelo's painful wrestling with his conclusion that the means of earthly love open to him could not provide the immanent metaphor of heavenly love that the comforts of marriage bring to most men and women.

Far more than his works in painting and sculpture, Michelangelo's poems show him to have been among the very first Europeans to problematize homosexual experience as an intractable constituent of the self.

Influence

While it is true that the scholarly literature is silent on the matter of Michelangelo's affections until Symonds's biography of the 1890s, there is plenty of reason to believe that artists in immediately succeeding generations who are known to have entertained same-sex attractions mined the treasure of Michelangelo's male nudes for uses that cannot be interpreted as other than homoerotic.

Of these, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio is most obvious; and others, such as Michelangelo's contemporary Cellini, make it clear that there has always been a current of opinion that Michelangelo's sexual nature was oriented towards other men. However, it is only in very recent times, since the 1970s, that famous works by Michelangelo have become icons of contemporary gay culture.

Especially in the United States, the critical fortunes both of the *David* and the male nudes (*ignudi*) on the Sistine Ceiling have risen with the emergence of a thoroughly masculine, indeed *hypermasculine*, popular image for gay men.

However unlikely it may seem in this connection, the only historical evidence for the possible perception of the *David's* erotic attraction for Florentines of Michelangelo's generation is the fact that, soon after the statue came to rest at the Palazzo della Signoria, a gilded circlet of bronze leaves was made to cover his nudity both front and rear.

While it is of course true that the statue may have elicited highly sexual responses from both male and female viewers ever since 1504, no recorded evidence of any kind would support a historical interpretation based on the *David's* supposed homoerotic content.

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