Michelangelo Buonarroti 1475 - 1564

Michelangelo was an architect, painter and writer who thought himself primarily as a sculptor and considered sculpture a higher artform than painting. His father opposed his wish to become a sculptor but, when his son was thirteen, apprenticed him to Domenico Ghirlandaio. Before he was sixteen he was “adopted” by Lorenzo de’ Medici, under whose patronage he studied sculpture and was exposed to classical art and humanized thought. His life is documented in contemporary biographies, his own letters and sonnets.

Michaelangelo turned the traditional status of the artist from that of a craftsman subordinated to the wishes of his patron into that of the creator with the ultimate power to make aesthetic decisions, prepared to risk his career for the sake of individualism and freedom. Art, for him, was not only a display of skill and knowledge but also a way of giving formal expression to the spirit of his time. His art was a form of philosophy.

A tireless worker and perfectionist, he anxiously postponed the moment of starting work and not infrequently left it unfinished. He sought the forms trapped in their marble shells and strove to free them from their material bonds. He believed that art comes from inner inspiration. He was considered by his contemporaries to be the greatest artist since the days of classical antiquity and was admired throughout Europe. He once described himself as a poor, ignoble and mad wretch. He was a recluse, anxious and impetuous, a passionate but solitary lover, a man who lavished a fortune on his family. His career marked the beginnings of the modern artist who claims total freedom with no compromise. He left chisel marks in his later works, saying that true art was taking away just enough to see the forms in the stone.

Early sculpture

Michelangelo’s favorite material was marble and he spent much time in the quarries selecting the right stone for his sculptures. His first great work of sculpture is the marble Pietà (1498 -1500). Now in Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome, a youthful Mary mourns the dead Christ; both are contained within a pyramidal space on an oval base. One hardly notices Christ’s relatively small size compared with Mary’s massive form. Mary’s face, smaller than her body, is purposely out of proportion with the figure, which illustrates her role as the foundation of the Church but brought down to human level via her relationship with her son. The Pietà was his only signed work; he carved his signature on the band across Mary’s chest after another artist was given credit for his work.

The David

In 1501 the city of Florence commissioned a statue in marble of the biblical hero David, which became the symbol of Florentine republicanism. For three years Michelangelo worked secretly on a huge and difficult block of marble over 18 feet high. Originally destined for the exterior of the cathedral, the David was placed in front of the governmental seat of Florence (Palazzo Vecchio) in 1504 - a more suitable location for a political sculpture. In 1873 the original was removed to the Academia and a copy was put in its earlier place.

The little tree trunk supporting the David is a reminder of the ancient Roman copies of Greek statuary and evokes a classical past. Although it assumes a contrapposto pose, Michelangelo’s David is tense and watchful. He is represented in the moments before battle with the giant and does not stand on the head of Goliath as was usually portrayed in earlier
works. His creased forehead and strained neck and torso muscles betray apprehension as he sights his adversary. The David is the most monumental marble nude since antiquity; his proportions correspond more to Greek Hellenistic sculpture than to classical style. David's hands in particular are large in relation to his overall size, a reminder that he is still a youth, and his veins and muscles seem to bulge from beneath his skin as he prepares for battle.

The Sistine Chapel, built in the 1470's, is the Pope's personal chapel and the site of the conclave that elects new Popes. Its proportions are exactly the same as those of the temple of Solomon - twice as long as it is high and three times as long as it is wide. Vasari believed that giving Michelangelo this commission was a plot engineered by Bramante to divert him from sculpture. He created his paintings in buon fresco covering an area of 1000 square meters with over 300 figures illustrating the Old Testament Book of Genesis and figures from Roman history.

Michelangelo was initially reluctant to undertake the project. He finally agreed, however, and designed the scaffolding himself, working on the ceiling and window lunettes from 1508 to 1512. He described the physical discomfort of having to contort his body in order to paint the ceiling which he painted virtually alone for almost four years. The plaster dripping into his eyes impaired his sight and damaged his eyes. It is said that his friends almost did not recognize him because he looked years older than his 37 years.

Forced to paint the ceiling against his will by Pope Julius II, Michelangelo upset conventional styles and created a radically new iconography, quite the opposite of Raphael, whom he considered his rival. He used the human figure as his building block and a radically new theological architecture that left no one indifferent, liberally transgressing the rules established in the previous century. Michelangelo rendered his muscular figures in exaggerated contrapposto and are among the most monumental images in western art.

Michelangelo combined figures of sibyls from Roman myths with Old Testament biblical stories and prophets. None of the figures or scenes on the Sistine ceiling are from the New Testament although everything refers in some way to the Christian future. The Old Testament prophets and the sibyls of Roman antiquity, who are portrayed between the windows' spandrels, were viewed as having foretold the coming of Christ. The inclusion of Christ's ancestors in the spandrels and lunettes above the windows alludes to the divine plan in which Christ and Mary redeem the sins of Adam and Eve.

The main narrative scenes, in three sets of three, occupy the center of the vaults. He painted the scenes in reverse chronological order, ending with the creation scenes in which God designs the universe over the altar. The Adam and Eve scenes depict the creation of man, while the Noah scenes show both God's destructive power and His willingness to save humanity from total annihilation. When viewers stand at the entrance opposite the altar wall the ceiling scenes appear right side up and are read beginning with the earliest creation scene at the greatest distance.

In The Creation of Adam, a monumental, patriarchal God extends dramatically across the picture plane. He is framed by a billowy dark red cloak containing a crowd of nude figures, including a woman identified by some scholars as Eve, who looks expectantly over his shoulder. In contrast to the vibrant energy of God, Adam reclines languidly on the newly
created earth, for he has not yet received the divine spark of spirituality from God's touch. The landscape is minimal compared to the emphasis on the power inherent in the human body, especially the torso.

When Michelangelo had completed the Sistine ceiling, he went back to Florence and worked for the Medici family. In 1534, more than 20 years later on the order of Pope Paul III, he returned to Rome and began the Last Judgment on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel; he worked on this painting until 1541. Some scholars consider that this painting, an example of his later style, marks the close of the Renaissance while others prefer to see it as part of the new Mannerist developments.

The picture is divided horizontally into three levels, which correspond roughly to the three planes of existence. At the top is heaven where angels carry the instruments of Christ's passion - the crown of thorns, the column of the flagellation and the cross. In the center, below the lunettes, Christ is surrounded by a glow of light. He raises his hand and turns toward the damned. Mary crouches beneath his upraised right arm as crowds of saints and mortals twist and turn in space exhibiting the instruments of their martyrdom. In the middle level, at the sound of the last trumpet, saved souls ascend toward heaven on Christ's right, our left, while the damned descend into hell on Christ's left. At the lowest level, the saved climb from their graves and are separated from the scene of hell on the lower right by a rocky river bank.

Michelangelo's hell is a new concept in Christian art, a combination of biblical and mythological themes. We see the Boatman of Greek mythology, Charon, who ferries the damned across the River Styx into Hades. At the far right corner, a monstrous figure of Minos has replaced Satan and is entwined by a giant serpent. Michelangelo's hell is filled with overlapping figures whose twisted poses, radical contrapposto and sharp foreshortening energizes the surface of the wall. A torturous movement pervades the work. This mood reflects the artist himself as well as the troubled times, evident in the detail of Saint Bartholomew, the Christian martyr who was flayed alive. He brandishes a knife and displays a flayed skin containing Michelangelo's self-portrait.

**Michaelangelo's Death**

Michaelangelo lived to be 89 years old. When he died, a solemn official funeral was held for him in Rome. Two days before his death, however, the great artist once more declared his fond desire to be buried in Florence; his nephew Leonardo stole his body and smuggled it out of Rome in a packing case. Michelangelo was buried a second time, on July 14, 1564, in the church of Santa Croce in Florence. His sepulcher, designed by the famous art historian Giorgio Vasari, is next to that of Dante the poet whom Michelangelo so greatly admired.