

# MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI

The 500th anniversary of the birth of Michelangelo (he was born March 6, 1475) serves as a reminder that the majority of the works of this Renaissance genius were inspired by and glowingly reflected, a religious vision of reality.

Indeed, it is difficult to exaggerate the significance of Michelangelo's religious outlook on his art.

In the opinion of many scholars and critics this outlook was a blend of orthodox Roman Catholic belief as professed at the time and elements of Renaissance Neoplatonism, which, among other things, viewed finite forms of beauty as a reflection of God's beauty.

The art of the period, at first, was almost entirely devoted to religious subjects and the most popular subject was the "Madonna and Child."

In this respect Michelangelo was a child of his time. His very first stone carving, executed when he was only 16 years old, was the Madonna of the Stairs, a low relief showing the Virgin Mary in side view suckling the baby Jesus.

Fourteen and fifteen years later, still preoccupied by the theme, he produced two other low reliefs of Mother and Child. One of these, the Taddei Madonna, placed the Virgin on one side, with the Child moving away from the center, frightened by the fluttering goldfinch in the hands of another child (John the Baptist). The bird was a symbol, according to Renaissance piety, of Christ's passion.

These works, showing little, if any, Neoplatonic content, express simple Renaissance Christian faith.

Before Michelangelo chiseled these sculptures, however, he produced what is commonly accepted to be one of the supreme artistic creations of the Western world — The Pieta, today a guarded treasure of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.

The Pieta theme — the Virgin Mary grieving over the dead body of Jesus — reflected a late Medieval religious spirit preoccupied with pain and suffering.

Until the 15th Century, the theme belonged almost exclusively to the artists of northern Europe, whose gruesome figures of Jesus and Mary, mainly of wood, seemed designed to horrify and shock believers into awareness of Christ's passion and death.

Pursuing what he called "the heart's image," however, Michelangelo took the theme, stripped it of its horror, and transformed anguish to solemnity and heroic resignation to the will of God.

"If life pleases us," Michelangelo once wrote, "death, being made by the hands of the same creator, should not displease us."

Chiseled out of a single block of white marble, its surfaces gleaming with many rubbings, Michelangelo's Pieta is clearly a work of deep Christian piety, but, as some art critics have pointed out, it also embodies the youthful sculptor's Neoplatonic belief that physical beauty is a manifestation of a noble spirit.

Two years after completing the Pieta (1499), Michelangelo took up the Mother

and Child concept again and produced another of his acknowledged masterpieces of sculpture — the Bruges Madonna.

Here again, as Renaissance scholar Robert Coughlan observes, Michelangelo "sought to extract new and deeper meanings; from a familiar theme inward-staring, (Mary) sits ramrod straight on a pile of stones. She knows what is going to happen to her Son. And the Child, in turn, although at first glance appearing to be a playful cherub, reveals upon closer examination a seriousness that betrays the role He will play as a man. The Christ Child, with His foot dangling in space (appears) as though He were about to step down from his perch between Mary's knees, into a waiting world."

Michelangelo's next major work, completed in 1504, was his heroic statue of David, done for the city of Florence. Nearly 17 feet tall, it has been described as epitomizing "the Renaissance civic virtues of force and anger."

Despite its expressing the Old Testament confrontation of a youthful David with (an unseen) Goliath, the statue of a nude specimen of early manhood at the peak of physical power and grace is obviously more Greek than Hebraic, more Platonic than scriptural, more worldly than religious.

Michelangelo's equally heroic Moses, on the other hand, is transcendently scriptural. Completed in 1515, it sits today at the foot of the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome.

Moses, a figure of elemental force and grandeur, is seated, gazing intently into the future. Holding the tablets of the 10 Commandments under a muscled arm, his whole aspect proclaims him to be a man of authority, action, and potential wrath, yet withal, a man of contemplation who has just looked on the face of the living God.

Michelangelo's sublime Old Testament frescoes on the vaulted ceiling (132 feet by 44 feet) of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel are likewise profoundly religious and scriptural — but with some Neoplatonic elements.

Despite his insistence that he was "no painter" but bowing to the insistence of Pope Julius II, sculptor Michelangelo toiled for four years on scaffolding 68 feet above the chapel's mosaic floor and created a monumental masterwork that is unquestionably the most imposing single painting of the High Renaissance, if not of any period in Western history.

The ceiling painting, which is said to have changed the course of art in the West, was shown to the public for the first time on October 31, 1512.

The immense enterprise expressed the Christian doctrine of the creation and fall of man and his need of salvation.

Running down the middle of the ceiling in nine separate panels are episodes from Genesis: God separating light from darkness; the creation of sun, moon and planets; the gathering of the waters; the creation of Adam; the creation of Eve; the temptation of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden; the sacrifice of Noah; the deluge; and the drunkenness of Noah.

God's intervention to save man is illustrated in Old Testament scenes at the four corners of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, depicting episodes in which the Hebrews were delivered from disaster: David and Goliath; the hanging of Haman; the brazen serpent; and Judith and Holofernes.

This theme is carried on by the huge figures of the Hebrew Prophets and their classical counterparts, the sibyls, enthroned along the lower edge of the vault, who had announced the coming of a deliverer.

(The Messiah Himself does not appear in the ceiling painting. Scenes from the life of Christ had already been painted by other artists along the right wall of the Chapel.)

A Neoplatonic element injected into the decorations of the ceiling is present in the restless, ideal nude figures of youths seated on the pedestal projections of the illusionistic architectural framework for the Old Testament panels along the center.

"Renaissance Neoplatonism," explains the Catholic Encyclopedia, "saw in the beauty of the human form a reflection of God's beauty, from which the forms emanated. Their restlessness suggests their unhappiness in the human shell and their desire to be reabsorbed into God, the source from which they issued."

Twenty-three years later in 1535, Michelangelo returned to the Sistine Chapel to execute the Last Judgment for Pope Paul III.

In the intervening period, Rome had been sacked and the papacy humiliated. The continent was seething with Protestant reformation and Catholic counter-Reformation polemics. Michelangelo himself was convinced of his "sinfulness" and cried out, in a poem, "Oh, God, send the light, so long foretold for all."

His Last Judgment reflects the pessimism and darkling forebodings of the times.

Whereas the beneficent spirit of God the Creator pervades much of the ceiling frescoes, it is the terrible wrath of Christ the Judge that sweeps down through the wall painting.

As described by Robert Coughlan, "Heroic in size, arm raised in a gesture of damnation, the beardless Christ is the pivot of the composition, a great sun around which the action swirls. The Virgin sits at His side and saints and martyrs, many of them with the symbols of their martyrdoms, crowd about Him."

"Below them, souls drawn to a smaller scale ascend and descend, abetted by wingless angels and clawed demons, while at the very bottom, the dead emerge from their graves, the damned are ferried by Charon across the Styx and the mouth of hell gapes open."

When the enormous fresco, which took six years to complete, was unveiled in 1541, it struck its viewers with the impact of a storm, and all Europe, it is said, felt its reverberations.