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Art Appreciation lecture series 2026

Artists and their signature style

Michelangelo sculptor

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Lecture summary

Michelangelo (1475-1564) always saw himself first and foremost as a sculptor, lamenting while painting the Sistine ceiling that 'I am not in the right place—I am not a painter' and joking with Vasari that he had 'sucked in the chisels and mallet' of the sculptor's trade with the milk of his wet-nurse, the wife of a stone carver. Though we might disagree, this lecture takes its cue from the master to focus on Michelangelo as sculptor. Examining his most famous creations in stone, from pagan God (Bacchus) to Christian hero (David) and from loving mother and child to the tragic moment of the Virgin Mary cradling her dead son in her lap, we will investigate Michelangelo's twin sources of inspiration: his native Florentine artistic tradition and his sense of the human body as the supreme vehicle of artistic expression, at once made in the mirror of God and earthly prison of the immortal soul.

Slide list; *all works by Michelangelo unless otherwise identified*

1. *Madonna of the stairs*, c. 1490-92, Casa Buonarroti, Florence
2. Cf Donatello, Pazzi Madonna (Berlin)
3. *Battle of the Centaurs*, c. 1492, Casa Buonarroti, Florence
4. Cf Antonio Pollaiuolo, *Battle of the nude men*, engraving, c. 1470-90; Roman battle sarcophagus; Bertoldo di Giovanni, *Battle*, c. 1480-85, bronze
5. *Bacchus*, 1496, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. Commissioned by Cardinal Raffaele Riario, but for reasons unknown by 1497 in the collection of art dealer Jacopo Galli
6. Vatican *Pieta*, 1497-99 St Peter's, Vatican. Signed on Virgin's strap, only sculpture M ever signed. Commissioned by French cardinal Jean Villiers de La Grolais for funerary chapel in a later demolished oratory adjoining Old St Peter's
7. Bruges *Madonna*, 1501-4, church of our Lady/Onze Lieve Vrouw, Bruges. Made for Flemish merchant trading in Florence.
8. *David*, 1501-4, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence. Commissioned by the new republican government of Florence, originally for a buttress of Florence Cathedral, but once completed placed outside Florence town hall (Palazzo Vecchio)
9. Cf Donatello, marble *David*, 1408, made for the buttress of Florence cathedral but appropriated by the Florentine government for the Palazzo Vecchio; Donatello, bronze *David*, c. 1435, made

- for Cosimo de' Medici & displayed in Medici palace; Verrocchio, bronze *David*, c. 1470, made for Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici but soon after given to Florentine government; Donatello, *St George*, c. 1416, made for the niche of the armourer's guild on outside of Orsanmichele
10. Pitti tondo, c. 1504-7, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, for Bartolomeo Pitti
 11. Taddei tondo, c. 1504-7, Royal Academy of Arts, London, for Taddeo Taddei, wealthy Florentine cloth merchant
 12. Cf earlier examples of sculpted and painted tondi (= works in round frame, from *rotondo*, round) by shop of Luca della Robbia (stucco), Andrea della Robbia (glazed terracotta), Botticelli & Michelangelo himself (Doni tondo, c. 1506)
 13. Moses, c. 1513-15, S. Pietro in Vincoli, Rome. For the tomb of Pope Julius II, originally planned for Old St Peter's, much reduced version finally installed in S. Pietro in Vincoli in 1545
 14. Medici chapel/ New Sacristy, S. Lorenzo, 1524-34: sculpture & architecture by Michelangelo. Architecture riffs on Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy in the same church. Tombs of Lorenzo di Piero, Duke of Urbino & Giuliano di Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Nemours, w Night & Day, Dusk & Dawn; Medici Madonna. Commissioned 1519 by Medici popes Leo X, continued under 2nd Medici pope, Clement VII.
 15. Florentine *Pietà*, c. 1547-53, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. Probably made for his own tomb, with self portrait as Joseph of Arimathea; attacked and partly destroyed by M in 1555, later given away to his servant
 16. Cf Giovanni da Milano, *Man of Sorrows with Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and St John Evangelist*, 1360s
 17. Rondanini *Pietà*, c. 1554-64, Museo del Castello Sforzesco, Milan

References

William Wallace, *Michelangelo: the artist, the man, and his times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), paperback, best biography, full of vivid detail drawn from careful readings of surviving documents

William Wallace, *Michelangelo: the complete sculpture, painting, architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009). Best recent book on Michelangelo's entire output, with careful attention to documents and thoughtful discussion of works

Leo Steinberg, *Michelangelo's sculpture: selected essays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 2018, collected essays, published posthumously; includes series of famous & influential essays, including 'Metaphors of love and birth in Michelangelo's *Pietàs*' (a longer version of famous/infamous article on 'The slung leg') & the author's return to the subject 20 years later, 'The Florentine *Pietà*: the missing leg twenty years after'; highly recommended.

David Boffa, 'The legend of Michelangelo's first (and last) signature', 1hr excellent informal talk by Renaissance art historian on separating out fact from fiction in stories told about Michelangelo's one and only signature, on the Virgin's strap in the Roman *Pietà*
<https://davidb193282.substack.com/p/the-legend-of-michelangelos-first>

The Frame Blog, 'The tondo frame in Renaissance Florence: a round up'
<https://theframeblog.com/2021/02/25/the-tondo-frame-in-renaissance-florence-a-round-up/>

Alison Cole, short lecture on Taddei tondo in Smarthistory (HENI talk, 2021)
<https://smarthistory.org/michelangelo-taddei-tondo/>