

## Michelangelo and the High Renaissance

It was a bright, warm, October afternoon, yet the citizens of Florence were depressed and worried. They peered out of shuttered windows upon empty streets. All was silent as the city waited for the arrival of the French. Pietro de' Medici, the latest in that family to dominate Florence, had not inspired confidence like his father, Lorenzo. He also had bad luck. In 1494, the French king, Charles VIII, crossed the Alps with 30,000 armored knights, pikemen, archers, and a large train of artillery. When this huge force approached the boundaries of Florentine territory, Pietro de' Medici did not try to resist. He quickly surrendered the castles surrounding the city. On word of Pietro's betrayal, the Florentines rose up, drove the Medici from the city, and pillaged the priceless treasures in the Medici palace. Nevertheless, it was too late to do anything about the French. As the late afternoon sun lengthened the shadows on the narrow streets, the Florentines began to hear the clatter of thousands of horses' hooves on pavement.

The French invasion had a profound impact on the Renaissance in Italy. Florence ceased to dominate the artistic world as the artists fled to the rival cities of Venice and Rome. Meanwhile, the rest of Italy became a battle ground for the great European powers. Once the French began to lay claim to Italian territory, their rivals, the Spaniards, were forced to intervene against them. The dozens of separate Italian states desperately clung to their independence by siding with one group or the other.

Despite almost 40 years of war in Italy, artistically and culturally the early sixteenth century was not all bad. Europeans involved in the wars carried Renaissance ideas, styles, and techniques back with them to their home countries. Some of the world's greatest geniuses continued to produce masterpieces in this tense environment. One of the greatest was Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Michelangelo was born in 1475 and, like so many other talents of the Renaissance, began his training as an artist in the Medici household. After the fall of the Medici in 1494, he left Florence for Rome. Michelangelo shared Leonardo da Vinci's passion for human anatomy, but otherwise the two were very different. Where Leonardo was interested in many things and finished little, Michelangelo was interested in one thing, art, and left a huge amount of completed work. His capacity for production was staggering, and he did not stop until his death at the age of 89.

Michelangelo's particular passion was sculpture. He was also a deeply religious man and wanted to capture in stone the struggle of the human spirit as it grows toward God. He believed that life was like a block of uncarved marble, and the soul was trapped within it. Every human being, like a tireless artist, had to work at releasing the soul's potential perfection from the rock. The human body revealed all that there was to say about beauty



Michelangelo's *David*

and the growth of the soul. The best example of Michelangelo's fascination with human perfection is his sculpture of the biblical hero, David. This image of a more-than-perfect male nude towers 18 feet above the floor. Michelangelo exaggerated many of David's features, like his hands and bulging muscles, in order to convey the impression of power, energy, and skill. To the Florentines, David was a symbol of their independence and courage, but to Michelangelo, he also represented the potential beauty and grandeur of the human spirit.

One of Michelangelo's greatest works is the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The painting covers approximately 6,300 square feet and contains over 300 larger-than-life figures. He took on the job under protest, complaining that he was a sculptor, not a painter. Yet, this glorious chapel ceiling is one of the most admired paintings in the world. Michelangelo was offered assistants, but he refused them, preferring to paint the vast subject by himself. Most of it he painted while on his back in the midst of scaffolding, dozens of feet in the air. Despite sickness, exhaustion, and supreme discomfort, he completed the ceiling in four years. Michelangelo tells the story of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in eight huge panels. The painting, however, is to be read opposite to the book. Michelangelo wanted the viewer to begin with the drunkenness of Noah and end with Creation. Just as in his sculptures, Michelangelo was trying to convey the journey of the human spirit back to God. Along the sides, colossal figures of prophets and prophetesses foretell the coming of Christ. Each figure is a masterpiece, and people are often struck by how sculptural the figures are, even though they have been created in paint.

By the time Michelangelo finished the Sistine Chapel in 1512, the long years of warfare had dramatically altered the mood of Italy. The optimism about human potential for growth had given way to pessimism about the future. Michelangelo continued to create breathtaking works of art for another 52 years, but his images of human perfection seemed more and more remote from life as it was led in the sixteenth century.

## Activities

1. Look at Michelangelo's *David* in *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* by R. G. Tansey and F. S. Kleiner (other good art history books will do). Compare it to Donatello's *David*, which you looked at in the activities on page 16 of this book.
2. Look at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the above book. Write a brief description of what is occurring in each of the central panels. Also look at the before and after pictures of the recent restoration of the chapel on the following page.
3. Pretend you are a tourist in Rome at the time when Michelangelo is finishing the chapel. Write a letter home describing your response to the ceiling.
4. View *The Agony and the Ecstasy* starring Charlton Heston. The movie is about the painting of the Sistine Chapel and gives students a good feel for the Renaissance Rome.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Challenges

1. Why was Pietro de' Medici considered a traitor? \_\_\_\_\_

2. How did the Florentines respond to Pietro's treachery? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What two great European powers fought for control of Italy? \_\_\_\_\_

4. How did the Italian city-states try to survive these invasions? \_\_\_\_\_

5. How was Michelangelo similar to other Italian Renaissance artists? \_\_\_\_\_

6. What was Michelangelo's particular passion? \_\_\_\_\_

7. How did Michelangelo describe his life? \_\_\_\_\_

8. What work of art is the best example of Michelangelo's fascination with human perfection? \_\_\_\_\_

9. How large is Michelangelo's painting on the Sistine Chapel ceiling? \_\_\_\_\_

10. What is the subject of Michelangelo's painting on the Sistine Chapel ceiling? \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Points to Ponder

1. What does Michelangelo mean when he describes life like a block of marble with the soul trapped inside?

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2. Why did Renaissance artists paint and sculpt mainly religious subjects?

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3. If you were going to create an image of human perfection today, who would you use and how would you portray him or her?

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