

## Michelangelo

Britannica Student Encyclopedia



*David*, a marble statue (5.5 meters high) carved by Michelangelo in 1501-04, is ...  
Peter Poulides—  
Stone/Getty Images



*The Creation of Adam*, detail of the ceiling fresco by Michelangelo,

...

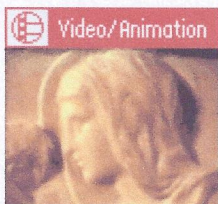
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(1475-1564). Sculptor, painter, architect, and poet Michelangelo was the greatest artist in a time of greatness. He lived during the Italian Renaissance, a period known for its creative activity. Civilization made huge strides in science and invention, in literature, and in politics. In art, the age's great achievement, Michelangelo led all others. A short, wide-shouldered man with a face made homely by a broken nose, Michelangelo had a remarkable ability to concentrate his thoughts and energy on the task in hand. Often while working he would eat only a little bread, would sleep on the floor or on a cot beside his unfinished painting or statue, and would continue to wear the same clothes until his work was finished.

He was devoted to his father, brothers, and nephews. However, they rarely thanked him for all he did for them. He had a few close friends, who almost worshiped him, but most people thought him cold and unfriendly. He never married.

## Beginnings in Art

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni was born on March 6, 1475. His birthplace, Caprese, Italy, was a tiny village that belonged to the nearby city-state of Florence. His father was the mayor of the village. The boy was the second of five brothers. He went to school in Florence, but his mind was on art, not on his studies. Even as a young child he was fascinated by painters and sculptors at work.



Michelangelo's early work was done under the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici.

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Finally, when Michelangelo was 13, his father reluctantly agreed to apprentice him to the Ghirlandajo brothers, well-known Florentine painters. Yet the boy remained unsatisfied because the brothers refused to teach him their art secrets. He played hooky and discovered the gardens of the Monastery of San Marco. Lorenzo the Magnificent, head of the house of Medici, had brought many ancient Greek and Roman statues to these gardens. As curator and teacher he installed a talented sculptor, Bertoldo di Giovanni.

Without his father's knowledge or permission, Michelangelo went to work under Bertoldo. One day Lorenzo himself saw the boy carving a marble faun's head. Lorenzo liked it so much that he took Michelangelo to live with him in his palace. He treated the boy like a son. Another young sculptor in the Lorenzo gardens was Pietro Torrigiano. He was older, bigger, and stronger than Michelangelo, and in a fight he broke Michelangelo's nose. Because of this Torrigiano



had to leave Florence.

Lorenzo died in 1492, and Michelangelo grieved for him. He continued to work hard. Then Florence changed almost overnight. Fra Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican monk, rose to power and held all the people under the spell of his sermons. Michelangelo feared Savonarola's influence and decided to leave Florence.

## Brilliant Sculptor

In 1496 Michelangelo was in Rome for the first time. There he was commissioned to carve a Pietà. This was a marble group showing the Virgin Mary supporting the dead Christ on her knees. This superb sculpture, known as the *Madonna della Pietà*, won him wide fame. One of the few works signed by Michelangelo, it now stands in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

When he was 26 Michelangelo returned to Florence. He was given an 18-foot (5.5-meter) marble block that another sculptor had already started to carve. The block was nearly ruined. Michelangelo worked on it for more than two years. Out of its huge mass, and in spite of the difficulties caused by the first sculptor's work, he carved his youthful, courageous *David*. This is one of the world's greatest statues.

In 1505 Michelangelo was again in Rome. He was to work on a tomb for Pope Julius II. It was to be a giant structure, with some 40 statues arranged in three tiers. He spent months at Carrara selecting the marble. But shifting orders from the pope, political changes, jealousies, and new plans after the pope's death interfered with his work. Forty years later he had finished only a few figures. Among them were the majestic *Moses*, one of his most powerful works, which is now in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli, and the *Bound Slave*, now in the Louvre.

## The Sistine Chapel Frescoes



*Delphic Sibyl*, fresco by Michelangelo, 1508-12; in the Sistine ...  
*Scala/Art Resource, New York*

Between 1508 and 1512 Michelangelo painted the vaulted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome with hundreds of giant figures that made up his vision of the world's creation. He worked on a scaffold 60 feet (18 meters) above the floor and covered 10,000 square feet (930 square meters) of surface. Most of the time he painted while he lay on his back in a tight, cramped position. Each day fresh plaster was laid over a part of the ceiling. Michelangelo then had to complete that portion while the plaster was still wet. He could not repaint mistakes. Except for a man who laid the plaster and another who ground and mixed the paints, Michelangelo completed the whole fresco painting by himself.

The nine main scenes depict the story of Genesis from the Creation to the Flood. Other scenes show the ancestry of Christ, stirring moments in Bible history, and the Hebrew prophets and pagan gods dreaming of the good that was coming to the world. The painting is huge and majestic in every detail. (For picture see [Painting](#).)

More than 20 years after he completed his ceiling frescoes for the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo began his enormous fresco *The Last Judgment*. This is a vast painting that covers the entire wall of the chapel behind the altar. Its size, technical excellence, and the daring of its conception make it a worthy partner for the ceiling paintings.



## Work in Other Fields

Painting and sculpture did not absorb all Michelangelo's genius. He had great talent in many fields. When his beloved Florence was in danger of attack, he superintended its fortification. He also wrote many sonnets that in their vigor and beauty recall his work in marble. Many were written in his old age to Vittoria Colonna, a lady of great beauty and intelligence.

In his last years he designed the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. This has been called the finest architectural achievement of the Italian Renaissance. He died on Feb. 18, 1564, at the age of 89 and was buried in the church of Santa Croce in Florence.

Michelangelo worked with many of the leaders of his time, the popes and the rulers of the Italian city-states. He knew and competed with Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, two other creative geniuses who were his contemporaries. He had many conflicts with Pietro Aretino, the most notorious scoundrel and blackmailer of his day. Except for Titian, Michelangelo was the last great man of Italy's golden age of art. He typified the vigor of mind and body, the energy, the spirit, and the combination of worldliness and religious zeal that marked that great period. (See also *Painting*; *Sculpture*.)

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