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I, MICHAELANGELO, SCULPTOR

FLORENCE IN THE YEAR 1475 WAS THE INTELLECTUAL AND ARTISTIC CENTER OF THE FLOWERING ITALIAN RENAISSANCE. INTO THIS GEM-LIKE CITY STATE, RULED BY THE PATRON OF ARTS AND LETTERS, LORENZO DE' MEDICI, WAS BORN ONE OF THE GREATEST GENIUSES THE WORLD HAS PRODUCED - MICHAELANGELO BUONARROTI, SCULPTOR, PAINTER, POET, ARCHITECT AND ENGINEER. FEW ARTISTS HAVE MATCHED THE GRANDEUR OF HIS CONCEPTIONS, OR THE POWER OF HIS CREATIONS. TO KNOW HIS LIFE IS TO KNOW THE HISTORY OF ITALY'S GLORY.

MICHAELANGO WAS BORN ON MARCH 6, 1475 IN CAPRESE, A TINY VILLAGE OUTSIDE FLORENCE, WHERE HIS FATHER WAS SERVING A SHORT TERM AS MAYOR. HIS FATHER WAS A MEDIOCRE MAN - TOO PROUD TO WORK FOR A LIVING, TOO POOR TO LIVE WELL. THE FAMILY BUSINESS HAD BEEN SMALL-SCALE MONEY CHANGING - REALLY, DISGUISED LENDING AT INTEREST.

THE NEW BABY HAD A BROTHER ONLY SIXTEEN MONTHS OLDER, AND PERHAPS FOR THIS REASON MICHAELANGO WAS GIVEN A WET-NURSE LIVING ON THE SMALL FAMILY FARM NEAR FLORENCE. WT NURSES WERE COMMONLY EMPLOYED AMONG THE UPPER CLASSES, ALTHOUGH MICHAELANGO'S FATHER WAS POOR ENOUGH. MICHAELANGELO'S NURSE WAS THE DAUGHTER OF A STONEMASON, AND MARRIED TO ANOTHER. YEARS LATER THE GREAT SCULPTOR JOKINGLY SAID THAT HE HAD TAKEN IN THE HAMMER AND CHISEL ALONG WITH HER MILK. MICHAELANGO'S MOTHER BORE THREE MORE SONS BEFORE SHE DIED WHEN HE WAS SIX YEARS OLD.

PSYCHOANALYSTS HAVE TRIED TO EXPLAIN MICHAELANGO'S PERSONALITY AND ART BY CALLING ATTENTION TO HIS SUPPOSED REJECTION BY HIS MOTHER, BUT WE KNOW NOTHING ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP. PERHAPS THE FACT THAT ONLY ONE OF FIVE SONS EVER MARRIED TELLS ITS OWN STORY.

MICHALANGO' FATHER CLAIMED DISTANT KINSHIP WITH THE COUNTS OF CANOSSA AND MICHAEL ALWAYS PRIDED HIMSELF ON HAVING A LITER OR TWO OF NOBLE BLOOD BUT RUTHLESS RESEARCH HAS OROVED HIM MISTAKEN. HIS FAMILY MOVED TO FLORENCE AND HE RECEIVED SOME SCHOOLING THERE, ENOUGH TO ENABLE HIM, IN AFTER YEARS, TO WRITE GOOD ITALIAN VERSE. HE LEARNED NO LATIN AND NEVER FELL UNDER THE HYPNOSIS OF ANTIQUITY AS DID MANY ARTISTS OF THE TIME. HE PREFERRED DRAWING TO WRITING- WHICH IS A CORRUPTION OF DRAWING. HIS FATHER MOURNED THE PREFERENCE, BUT FINALLY YEILDED TO IT AND APPRENTICED MICHAEL TO GHIRLANDAIO, THEN THE MOST POPULAR PAINTER IN FLORENCE. THE CONTRACT BOUND THE YOUTH TO STAY WITH GHIRLANDAIO FOR THREE YEARS AND HIS FRIEND, CONDIVI, REPORTED " he used to frequent the fish market and study the shape and hues of fishes' fins, the color of their eyes, all of which details he reproduced with the utmost diligence in his painting."

He had been with Ghirlandaio hardly a year when a combination of nature and chance turned him to sculpture. Like many other art students he had free access to the gardens in which the Medici had disposed their collections of antique statuary and architecture. Michaelangelo must have copied some of these marbles with special skill for when lorenzo Medici, wishing to develope a school of sculpture in Florence, asked Ghirlandaio to send him some students of promise, Michael was included. Michaelangelo's father hesitated to let him change directions for fear that his son would be put to cutting stone. Indeed he was so used for a time, blocking out marble for the Laurentian Library. But soon the boy was carving out statues. All the world knows the story of Michael's

marble faun: how he chiseled a stray piece into the figure of an old faun; how Lorenzo, passing, remarked that so old a faun would hardly have so complete a set of teeth; and how Michael remedied the fault at one blow by knocking a tooth out of the upper jaw. Pleased with the boy's product and aptitude, Lorenzo took him into his home and treated him as his son. For two years the young artist lived in the Palazzo Medici and heard the most enlightened talk about politics, literature, philosophy and art.

In 1492 Lorenzo died and Michael returned to his father's house. He continued his sculpture and painting and now added a strange experience to his education. The prior of the hospital Santo Spirito allowed him, in a private room, to dissect corpses and it is recorded that he learned anatomy in this fashion. Shortly, thereafter, Michael was persuaded to return to the Casa Medici. But with all his versatile ability, Michael found it hard to earn a living by art in the City of Florence when so many citizens were artists.

In 1496, Michaelangelo moved to the capital City of Rome where he received various commissions from wealthy art patrons. The greatest product of this first stay in Rome was the Pieta that is now one of the glories of St. Peter's. The contract was signed the Cardinal and the fee was to be 450 ducats (About \$5,625) with the allotted time for completion of one year. There are some blemishes in this glorious portrayal of the Virgin Mother holding her dead Son in her lap: the drapery seems excessive, the Virgin's head is small for her body, her left hand is extended in an inappropriate gesture; her face is that of a young woman clearly younger than her Son. To



these complaints, Michaelangelo is reported to have said:

" Do you not know that chaste women maintain their freshness far longer than the unchaste...I would hazard the belief that this unsullied bloom of youth, besides being maintained in her by natural causes, may have been miraculously wrought to convince the world of the virginity and perpetual purity of the Mother."

It is a pleasant and forgivable fancy. The spectator is soon reconciled to the gentle face, untorn by agony, calm in her grief and love, resting in the lap of the woman that bore it, and beautiful even in death. Francis I was correct when he pronounced this the finest achievement of Michelangelo. In all the history of sculpture no man has ever surpassed it, except, perhaps, the unknown Greek who carved the Demeter of the British Museum.

The success of the Pieta brought Michaelangelo not only fame, which he humanly enjoyed, but money, which his relatives were ready to enjoy with him. His father had lost, with the fall of the Medici, the little sinecure that Lorenzo the Magnificent had given him; Michael's older brother had entered a monastery; the two younger brothers were improvident and Michael now became the main support for the family. He complained but gave generously, and returned to Florence when he received a unique assignment. Here the Board of Works at the cathedral owned a block of Carrara marble thirteen and one-half feet high, but so irregularly shaped that it had lain unused for a hundred years. The Board asked Michael could a statue be chiseled out of it. He agreed to try and a contract was signed. For 2½ years the sculpture toiled on the refractory material, and with heroic labor he drew from it, using every inch of its height, his David. The Board assembled a council of the leading artists of the day to consider where David would be placed. Agreement could



not be reached and finally, the decision was left to Michaelango, who selected the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence where it stood for 369 years., in the open and subject to weather, urchins and revolution. In an uprising to overthrow the Medici, a bench thrown from a window of the Palace broke the statue's left arm. The fragments were preserved and the statue was restored and moved in 1873 to the Accademia delle Belle Arti, where it presently occupies a place of honor as the most popular figure in Florence.

This artistic work can hardly be overpraised; the mechanical difficulties were brilliantly overcome. Esthetically one may pick a few flaws: the right hand is too large, the neck too long; the left leg overlong below the knee, the left buttock does not swell as any proper buttock should. Piero Soderini, head of the republic, thought the nose excessive. The story is told --perhaps a legend-- how Michaelango, hiding some marble dust in his hand, mounted a ladder, pretended to chisel off a bit of the nose while leaving it intact, and let the marble dust fall from his hand before the head of state, who then pronounced the statue much improved. The total effect silences criticism; the splendid frame, not yet swollen with the muscles of Michaelango's later heroes, the finished texture of the flesh, the strong yet refined features, the nostrils tense with excitement, the frown of anger and the look of resolution as the youth faces the fearsome Goliath and prepares to fill and cast his sling--these share in making the David the most famous statue in the world, with the possible exception of the Statue of Liberty in the harbor of New York.

The Duomo Board paid Michaelangelo a total of 400 florins for the David. Allowing for the depreciation of currency , we may equate this roughly to \$20,000.00 in the money of 1982. During the 2½ years spent on carving David he did have other commissions including the sculpturing of the twelve Apostles, six and one-half feet tall, to be placed in the cathedral. Of these statues the sole survivor is St. Matthew, only half emerged from the block of stone, like some figure by Rodin. Looking at it in the Florence Academy, we understand better what Michaelangelo meant when he defined sculpture as the art "that works by force of taking away;" and again, in one of his poems: " In hard and craggy stone the mere removal of the surface gives being to a figure, which ever grows the more the stone is hewn away." He often spoke of himself as searching to find the figure concealed in the stone, knocking the surface away as if seeking a miner buried in fallen rock.

About 1505 he carved for a Flemish merchant the Madonna that sits in the church of Notre Dame at Bruges. It has been highly praised, but it is one of the artist's poorer works --the drapery simple and dignified, the head of the Child quite out of proportion to the body, the facing of the Virgin pouting and mournful as if she felt that it was all a mistake. In truth, Michael did not care much for beauty; he was interested in bodies, preferably male, and represented them sometimes with all the defects of their seen forms, sometimes in a way to convey some sermon or idea, but seldom with a view to catching beauty and imprisoning it in lasting stone.

In one of his works, he offends good taste by placing a row of naked youths behind the Virgin. Not that he is paganizing; he was

apparently a sincere, even a puritan, Christian; but here, as in the Last Judgment, his fascination with the human body triumphed over his piety. He was deeply interested, too, in the anatomy of position, in what happens to limbs, extremities, frame, and muscle when the body changes its pose. Michaelangelo was to protest, time and again, that painting was not his forte.

Therefore he must have felt no great pleasure when Soderini invited him to paint a mural in the Hall of the Great Council of the Palazzo Vecchio, while Leonardo da Vinci, was to paint the opposite wall. Michaelangelo disliked Leonardo for a hundred reasons, for his aristocratic manners, his pretentious dress, and perhaps for his greater success, until then, as a painter. He had only made some progress on this sketch when Julius II summoned him to Rome. The Cardinal wanted for his bones a mausoleum whose size and splendor should proclaim his greatness even to distant and forgetful posterity. Michael proposed a colossal monument with forty statues to adorn it. All of this was to stand in the tribune of St. Peter's. When the marble arrived, people marveled at its quantity and cost. The drama became tragedy. Bramante, one of the leading sculptors, fearful that Michaelangelo would replace him as the Pope's favorite artist, used his influence to scuttle the project and Michael returned to Florence.

Almost at once the Pope again sent for him. Michaelangelo went back to Rome and was irritated to discover that Julius wanted him to paint the ceiling of the Pope's Chapel. He hesitated to face the problems of perspective in painting/a ceiling <sup>10,000 square feet on</sup> 68 feet above the floor.



Michael protested again that he was a sculptor, not a painter; in vain he recommended Raphael as a better man for the work. Julius commanded and Michael, fearing the Pope and needing the money, consented. He sent to Florence for five assistants, tore down the clumsy scaffolding, erected his own and set to work measuring and charting the ceiling for 343 figures. Many preliminary studies and charts were made, some with living models. When the final form of the cartoon was finished, it was applied face outward, to the freshly plastered ceiling; the lines of the composition were then pricked through the drawing into the plaster and the cartoon was removed and the sculptor began to paint.

For over four years, Michaelangelo worked lying on his back, with a miner-like lamp strapped to his forehead, with a candle holder he designed for this purpose. He had helpers to grind the colors, prepare the plaster, draw minor features, but Angelo's style of conception, design and coloring was so different, and his temperament was such that he could not get along with the Florentine artists assistants whom he discharged. It was one of his consolations, up there on the scaffold, that he was alone; there he could think, in pain but in peace; there he could exemplify Leonardo's saying: "If you are alone you will be wholly your own." To the great technical difficulties Julius added his impatience asking when the great work would be completed and displayed. Michael's reply was a lesson in integrity: "When I shall have done all that I believe required to satisfy art." When for the last time Michaelangelo

descended from the scaffold, he was exhausted, emaciated, prematurely old. A story says that his eyes, long accustomed to the subdued illumination of the chapel, could hardly bear the light of the sun; it was also said that he found it now easier to read by looking upward than by holding the page beneath his eyes.

The original plan of Julius was for the ceiling to contain a series of Apostles. Michaelangelo prevailed upon the Cardinal to allow him to embark upon a more ambitious scheme. He divided the vault ceiling into panels with lusty youthful figures upholding the cornices or seated on capitals. The major panels were painted with episodes from Genesis with light coming into being from darkness. The sun, moon and planets come into being at the command of the Creator-a majestic figure stern of face, powerful of body, with beard and robes flying in the air. These were followed by panels of the creation of Adam and Eve, Noah and his sons and other episodes from the Old Testament. Michaelangelo belongs to the prophets pronouncing doom, not the evangelists expounding the gospel<sup>of</sup> love.

No one of the pictures quite equals Raphael's School of Athens in conception, drawing, color and technique; but taken all together, they constitute the greatest achievement of any man in the history of painting. Here we not only perceive technical accomplishment- the perspective of unrivaled variety of attitudes, we also feel the sweep and breath of genius. almost as creative as in the wind-swept figure of the Almighty raising Adam out of the earth.

Here again, Michaelangelo has given his ruling passion free rein; and though the place was the chapel of the Popes, the theme and the object of his art was the human body. Like the Greeks,

he cared less for the face and its expression than for the whole physical frame. On the Sistine ceiling are half a hundred male, a few female, nudes. There are no landscapes, no vegetation except the picturing of the creation of plants. The body of man becomes the sole means of decoration as well as of representation. The human body becomes the highest embodiment of energy, vitality, life. Some timid souls have protested the profusion of nudity in the house of God, Julius made no recorded objection. He recognized great art when he saw it. Perhaps he understood that he had immortalized himself not by the wars that he had won, but by giving Michaelangelo free reign on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Julius died four months after the completion of the ceiling. Michaelangelo was then nearing his thirty eighth birthday. He had placed himself at the head of all Italian sculptors by his David and Pieta; by this ceiling he had surpassed Raphael in painting; there seemed to be no other world left to conquer. Surely even he hardly dreamed that he had over a half century yet to live, that his most famous painting, his most mature sculpture, were yet to be done.

Michaelangelo was obsessed with energy, a wild, consuming force that tortured his body, but sustained it, for 89 years plus a will power that kept that energy harnessed and directed to one purpose--art--ignoring almost everything else. This energetic genius looked upon formless stone as a challenge and clawed and hammered and chiseled it until it took on a revealing significance. This same force swept away the distracting trivialities of life, took no thought of personal health, clothing or cleanliness or superficial courtesies leaving the body and mind shattered, but the work done-- the greatest painting, the greatest



sculpture and some of the greatest architecture of the time. " if God assist me," he said, " I shall produce the finest thing that Italy has ever seen."

He was the least imposing figure-- middle height, slim frame, protruding ears, somber face with a crushed nose he obtained in a fight with another artist when he was fifteen, sharp eyes, large head with a grizzly beard--this was Michaelangelo in his prime. He wore old clothing which he slept in, along with his boots.

While he prided himself on his noble lineage, he preferred the poor to the rich, the simple to the intelligent, the toil of a worker to the leisure of wealth. He gave his earnings to his shiftless relatives. He liked solitude; he found it intolerable to make small talk with third rate minds. When a priest expressed regret that Michael had not married and begotten children, he replied: I have only too much of a wife in my art, and she has given me trouble enough. As to my children, they are the works that I shall leave; and if they are not worth much, they will at least live for some time."

Will Durrant, in his monumental work, The Story of Civilization SAID THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT HE WAS HOMOSEXUAL: APPARENTLY, ALL THE ENERGY THAT MIGHT HAVE GONE INTO SEX WAS IN HIS CASE USED UP IN WORK.

Absorbed in his work, he gave himself little time for friendship. Rarely, did any friend or other person eat at his table. His bitter temper and somber mood were his lifelong tragedy.

We honor Michaelangelo because through a long and tortured life he continued to create, and produced in each main field a masterpiece. We see these works torn, so to speak, out of his flesh and blood, out of his mind and heart, leaving him weakened with birth. We see them taking form through a 100,000 strokes of hammer and chisel, pencil and brush, one after another, like an immortal population, they take their place among the lasting shapes of beauty or significance.

We cannot know what God is, nor understand a universe so mingled of apparent evil and good, of suffering and loveliness or destruction; but in the presence of a mother tending her child, or of a genius giving order to chaos, meaning to matter, nobility to form or thought, we feel as close as we shall ever be to the life and mind and law that constitute the unintelligible intelligence of the world.

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