

MICHELANGELO Robert Baldwin

Introduction

While a number of Italian Renaissance artists worked successfully in more than one medium including Brunelleschi, Alberti, Leonardo, ⁱ Michelangelo (1475-1564) was the first artist to dominate artistic production in multiple media and the only artist ever to achieve supreme importance in architecture, painting, and sculpture.

Born in republican Florence and trained as a painter in the workshop of Ghirlandaio, Michelangelo attracted the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici in the early 1490s when the artist was still in his teens. In the humanist circles of Lorenzo, the young Michelangelo met the leading Neoplatonic thinkers and poets of the day including Ficino (d. 1499) and Poliziano (d. 1494)

During the last quarter of the fifteenth century, Italian artists such as Verrocchio, Botticelli, Signorelli, Pollaiuolo, Mantegna, Bellini, and Leonardo were all developing a new imagery of the heroic, sensual nude based on classical sculpture and Renaissance humanism. Working in this shared humanist culture, the younger Michelangelo went much further, eventually creating an aesthetic centered on the heroic, dramatic, and erotic nude form. Though primarily a sculptural aesthetic, this was also the basis of his painting, as seen in the *Sistine Ceiling* and the *Last Judgment*.

Michelangelo's earliest sculptures show a striking interest in classical antiquities. The *Battle of Nude Men* (1492) recalls ancient Roman battle sarcophagi as well as more recent Renaissance variations on this pagan theme such as Pollaiuolo's engraving, *Battle of Ten Nude Men*. Following the same example of Pollaiuolo, who made paintings and sculptures of Hercules in the 1470s and 1480s, Michelangelo carved a marble *Hercules* (1492) for Lorenzo de' Medici. (The work is lost but known from drawings.) He later reworked the same figure type for his *David*. According to one contemporary account, the young Michelangelo went so far as to "forge" an antique marble of a *Cupid*, now lost, which he aged by burying in the dirt. An unscrupulous dealer in Rome sold the statue for a high price to Cardinal Riario who eventually demanded his money back when he discovered the work was modern. Even if this story is apocryphal, Michelangelo's earliest works showed a self-conscious attempt to work in an "authentic" antique style. It was the beginnings of a long interest in studying and transforming the sculptural aesthetic of classical antiquity.

Michelangelo's most "pagan" early work which survives is the life-size, nude *Bacchus* of 1496-8, sculpted for the garden of a Roman banker, Jacopo Galli. The *Bacchus* should be seen as another "classical antiquity" made by a Renaissance artist, or, rather, as the self-conscious display of an artistic virtuosity capable of absorbing and recreating the sculptural language of pagan antiquity. Michelangelo was also sensitive to his classical

subject matter. In classical mythology, the bi-sexual Bacchus presided over cosmic sexuality, fertility, rebirth, drunkenness, and sacred mysteries. In many ways, Michelangelo's drunken, naked Bacchus was an earthier, homoerotic counterpart to the cosmic Venus seen in Botticelli's *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus*. His sensual, heroic body gives off a powerful yet playful sexuality.

As a large, erotic, male nude, the *Bacchus* also served as artistic prelude to another "pagan" nude executed the following year within a Christian setting, the dead Christ in the *Roman Pieta*.

Michelangelo, Roman Pieta, St. Peters, 1498-99

The *Roman Pieta* was Michelangelo's first great success, finished at the age of twenty-four. Commissioned as a tomb sculpture and an altarpiece in old St. Peters for a wealthy French cardinal, the commission offered the ambitious but relatively unknown Michelangelo an opportunity to establish himself on the international stage of Rome, in one of the most important churches, and at the highest levels of church patronage. Here was a chance for Michelangelo to move his career to a new level by redefining the popular late medieval theme of the *Pieta*.

In Renaissance Italy, the most common theme for tomb monuments was the Madonna and Child. Here Mary as mother protected her child the way Mary as Ecclesia and Intercessor protected the Christian soul at the hour of death when prayers to the Virgin were particularly important. The *Pieta* makes the theme of intercession and the patron's hope for salvation – to rise up from the sleep of death like Christ - even more apparent. As such, the *Pieta* was not unknown on tombs in Renaissance Italy. Examples include Michelangelo's later Florentine *Pieta*, a tomb monument for himself, and Titian's late *Pieta*, now in the Accademia in Venice.

What was traditional in Michelangelo's Roman *Pieta* and what was new? Like many large *Pietas*, Michelangelo's sculpture was commissioned. Its overall purpose was to implore the help of the Virgin/Church (long conflated since the twelfth century) in assisting with the patron's salvation. *Pieta* is Italian for pity, and in this case, the pity of the Virgin for the dead Christ held on her lap. As noted in my general remarks on Late Gothic art, the *Pieta* was an entirely new, late medieval subject, not mentioned in the Bible, which developed out of twelfth-century Byzantine scenes of the Lamentation. It became widespread in the West only after the early fourteenth-century in line with the new emotional piety of the late middle ages, the rise of family imagery, and the cult of Mary as a personal and ecclesiastical intercessor.

As a personal intercessor, Mary displayed her close maternal bond with Christ, holding him on her lap like an older child. Her right hand holds him in the protection of her robes, recalling the interceding Madonna of Mercy who shelters the faithful under her robes in fourteenth and fifteenth-century art. In displaying Mary's compassion,

Michelangelo encouraged the sinner's hope that with Mary's help, Christ would be merciful. How could he turn down the pleas of his own mother?

As official intercessor, Mary also represented the Church mediating between mankind and God. Like the Church, visible here in the cardinal's private chapel, Mary presented the *Corpus Christi* (eucharistic Body of Christ) to the faithful on the altar – her hand liturgically shielded by cloth from direct contact - and reminded viewers that salvation came through the church and its sacraments. Thus the *Pieta* theme beautifully fused popular emotional piety and hopes for salvation from below with official piety church piety and the desire to monopolize and define grace and salvation from above. All this was traditional for church depictions of the *Pieta* in painting and sculpture and it continued in all of Michelangelo's *Pietas*.

For all the work's ties to traditional devotional and ecclesiastical values, Michelangelo's Roman *Pieta* was also strikingly original in anatomical handling, technique, composition, and its aesthetic of bodily beauty. First, it displayed a remarkable anatomical knowledge based on first-hand scientific study and dissection and the new artistic method of life drawing. We should also recognize Michelangelo's remarkable technical abilities in sculpture which allowed him to transform cold marble into soft flesh. Without this technical skill, none of this new anatomical knowledge could have been realized so successfully.

The Roman *Pieta* also showed Leonardo's new compositional method interweaving forms rhythmically to form larger, emotionally-charged groupings. Michelangelo enfolded the body of Christ beautifully around that of the Virgin while setting up a series of rhythmic parallels and counterpoints between one curving form and another. The result was a single, flowing whole where compositional choices and human expression heightened the emotion and spiritual bond between mother, son, and viewer.

Equally impressive was the remarkable physical beauty given to the two figures. While this drew on Italian traditions for the *Pieta* which downplayed physical suffering and anguish (in contrast to Northern representations), Michelangelo went further in making this *Pieta* define a new aesthetic of physical beauty. Here he extended a trend already very clear in the two *Pietas* from the 1490s, Botticelli's painting in Munich and Signorelli's altarpiece in Cortona. Botticelli developed the more delicate, elongated, feminine beauty found in Michelangelo's *Pieta* while Signorelli drew directly on the classical tradition of a heroic, muscular anatomy.

Seen in a liturgical context, the beauty of Christ's body invited the kind of visual adoration ritually lavished on the consecrated Eucharist in Renaissance churches. This drew, in turn, on a long medieval tradition of decorating the most sacred altar spaces with a splendid material beauty of precious gems, gilding, lavish costumes, and sumptuous painted or sculpted altarpieces. Along with the Madonna, the physical presence of Christ on the altar was the most important subject in late medieval and Renaissance worship. On one level, then, the striking bodily presence of Michelangelo's

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dead Christ reaffirmed the living presence of Christ in the Eucharist on the altar directly below.

The beauty of Michelangelo's Christ also suggested a resurrectional theme of triumph over pain and death. Here, perfect anatomical beauty made visible Christ's victory triumph over mortality and gave salvational hope to the patron and to all Christian viewers facing death and decay.

The combination of perfect beauty and death also allowed Michelangelo to set one against the other, heightening the sense of tragedy and beauty frozen in time. The theme of death striking in the full bloom of youth was a commonplace since classical poetry as seen here in Homer where the hero's beauty shines with a unique splendor after he is killed.

*Everything done
To a young man killed in war becomes his glory.
Once he is riven by the whetted bronze:
Dead though he be, it is all fair, whatever
Happens then. But when an old man falls,
And dogs disfigure his grey beard and cheek
And genitals, that is most harrowing
Of all that men in their hard lives endure. ⁱⁱ*

The classical idea that death only heightens the perfection of youth and beauty emerged out of the larger focus of classical culture on this world. In a society where there was no real afterlife, no heaven or hell, where philosophy was largely focused on politics and morality in this life, death was most tragic when conjoined with perfect beauty. Yet it was also, in some sense, banished by that beauty, or at least beaten back and screened off.

In contrast, medieval monastic Christian values focused on the eternal world of the soul beyond the body and in sharp conflict with it. Beauty signified the shallow and false world of matter which death vanquished, as seen in the late medieval theme of the "triumph of death". Death swept down on noble beauty not to affirm its transcendent importance, as in classical art, but to repudiate and annihilate all such empty, worldly values with monastic "contempt for the world" (*contemptus mundi*).

Renaissance artists like Donatello, Botticelli, Signorelli, Antonello, Riccio, and Michelangelo restored to the theme of beauty in death a classical elegiac quality, allowing human beauty and the splendor of the world to transcend death even at the moment of defeat. ⁱⁱⁱ In one of his many sonnets on a death youth, Michelangelo invited the same kind of pity visualized in the *Pieta*.

*The beautiful eyes are closed here in the tomb,
Before their time, and only this can cheer:*

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*That pity, dead for them while living here,
Since they are dead, in many lives for them.* ^{iv}

Another sonnet came even closer to the Roman *Pieta* by describing the triumph of a divine bodily beauty, over death, in the resurrection.

*Though Nature here is overcome by death
In this fair face, it will be fairer even
When the body rises up divine to Heaven
Out of this tomb, and thus revenge the earth.* ^v

That some of these classical poems lamented the death of a male beloved in homoerotic terms would not have been lost on a homosexual artist like Michelangelo. In the following example from the ancient Greek poet, Nonnos, the bi-sexual god, Bacchus laments the death of his human lover, Ampelos.

One of the Satyrs caught sight of lovely Ampelos lying in the dust on the ground, and brought the bad news to Bacchos. The god on hearing it ran there swift as the wind. ... he groaned when he saw the boy lying in the dust as if alive. He clothed the breathless body ...

No pallor spread on the rosy skin of the charming body which lay there stretched on the ground. The charming curls of that head so lovely, of one who had died so young, strayed over his face as the gentle breezes blew. He was a ravishing sight even in the dust. Around the body the Seilenoi lamented, the Bacchoi mourned. His beauty left him not although he was dead. But like a Satyr the body lay, with a lifelike smile on his face, as if for ever he were pouring his honeysweet voice from those silent lips.

... [Bacchus himself laments] ...

"... Although you are dead, those cheeks are still bright with bloom, those eyes are laughing still, your arms and two hands are snow-white, your lovely curls move in the whistling wind; the hour of death has not blanched the roses of your limbs - all these are preserved untouched.

Woe's me for Love! ..."

... So he lamented his beloved dead... ^{vi}

Michelangelo himself wrote numerous sonnets lamenting the premature death of beautiful youths such as Tomasso Cavalieri and here, Francesco Bracci.

*If death has buried here the finest flower
Of the world and of beauty, not yet open,
Before its time had come, then I am certain
Who dies of old age will not be mourned for more.* ^{vii}

Many more poems of heterosexual lament helped circulate even more widely the beauty of youth captured and suspended in death.

By setting the dead Christ like a beautiful jewel amidst the ritual enclosure of an equally beautiful Mary-Ecclesia and transfiguring both figures with Mary's quiet grief, Michelangelo created an elegiac tenderness and loss. The preciousness of human life took on a heightened beauty amidst death and mourning. A similar grief appeared ten years later in Michelangelo's *Deluge* fresco on the Sistine chapel where an older man holds the drowned, perfect body of a youth in a kind of homoerotic *Pieta*. Michelangelo returned to this theme in the Medici Chapel where he heightened beauty amidst death in the portraits of the Medici dukes. Here, too, beauty was largely the artist's invention and worked to figure a resurrectional triumph over death and time (allegorized in the statues of the Four Times of Day). In all of these works, we see the classical theme of the dignity of the body and of worldly accomplishment revived by Renaissance humanism.

Whatever its classical sources, the beauty of Michelangelo's Christ in the Roman *Pieta* heightened the tragedy of death even as it softened the experience for the Christian viewer. By reducing death to a gentler sleep, Michelangelo played on a longstanding literary tradition comparing death to sleep. In his poems, Michelangelo himself called sleep the "shadow of our death" and used it here to figure Christ's resurrectional awakening.^{viii} By transcending violence and muting grief, the statue worked beautifully as a tomb monument keyed to the patron's hope for eternal life through the embrace of the Mother Church and the resurrection of the "sleeping" Christ. It was this interweaving of spiritual, emotional, and aesthetic values, with death working in counterpoint against beauty, which gave the Roman *Pieta* a deeper originality and artistic impact.

Eroticized Bodies, Mystical Marriage, and Neoplatonism

Michelangelo's Roman *Pieta* also extended the nuptial piety of the late middle ages in ways which expressed new, Renaissance values. Nuptial metaphors for God's love for mankind appeared throughout the Bible and had always been an element in medieval theology and liturgy.

Before 1200, writers stressed the chaste nature of mystical marriage, in accordance with monastic chastity, while defining the bride as the Church or all mankind in accord with the impersonal, corporate terms of medieval spirituality. After 1200, nuptial piety took on a more sensual language, gradually moving away from the focus on chastity, while simultaneously adopting a more individualized rhetoric making the Virgin or the human soul the most commonly named brides of Christ. (The increasing use of nuptial metaphors was typical of the later Middle Ages and found parallels in the rise of other familiar, human imagery tied to love, family, and food.)

Conjugal sexual metaphor was particularly popular because it linked the bodily realm of human sexual experience with an equally bodily realm of late medieval piety, popular and official, with its focus on a carnal Christ offered up in the Eucharist. Writers and artists developing mystical marriage imagery also had the advantage of a rich source of

imagery in the Bible itself in the Old Testament *Song of Songs*. This was a frankly erotic poem long allegorized in Christian culture as a representation of God's mystical bodily union or "marriage" with mankind. Also important was the extensive nuptial language in the Apocalyptic narrative of *Revelations*, a text which allowed salvation to become allegorized in conjugal terms as the moment when the bridal soul was finally married to the mystical bridegroom in heaven.

The Virgin was singled out as a bride because she was both physically united to Christ's body as his mother and emotionally tied to him as the most important loving female in his life. This explains why the Incarnation and the Passion – the beginning and the end of Christ's life - were particularly susceptible to Christian nuptial language. By the later twelfth century, most subjects involving the Virgin and Christ were interpreted as examples of Christ's union with his mystical spouse. With its focus on emotional and physical unity and its ties to the salvational hopes of worshipper and patrons, the *Pieta* was quickly invested with erotic metaphor in fourteenth and fifteenth-century literary discussions.

Among other things, Michelangelo's Roman *Pieta* gave new visual form to this traditional religious thinking by inserting two young, desirable bodies into a theme rife with brutal death, tragedy, and old age. By radically extending the carnal metaphor central to the idea of Christ's "mystical marriage" with humanity, Michelangelo furthered the Renaissance sanctification of the human body, even the sexual body. In the Roman *Pieta*, a chaste metaphor describing the soul's devotional or liturgical union with God took on a new carnal presence and impact. Here Michelangelo capitalized on the potential within the traditional theme of mystical marriage to define new humanist values of the body. That is, he used the traditional metaphor of "mystical marriage" as a familiar and legitimizing framework within which he developed novel images giving new sanctity and value to human sexuality.

In this, Michelangelo was like any innovator in early modern Europe, where originality depended on the artist or writer's ability to reinterpret traditional imagery to express emerging values. This is exactly what Botticelli did in his *Primavera* when he carefully interwove sensual delight, seasonal cycles, and Christian matrimony to give new dignity to the body and to the natural world.

While the traditional theme of "mystical marriage" depended on a heterosexual conjugal relationship, there was always the possibility of homoerotic "mystical marriage". In the metaphoric world of mystical marriage, every Christian male was also the bride of Christ. Since Michelangelo was homosexual, it is not surprising that he infused his own desire for the lovely male nude into the hundreds of beautiful male bodies drawn, carved, and painted over a sixty-five year career. Since Leo Steinberg's important article of the 1970s, the Roman *Pieta* has been seen as a homoerotic sleeping beauty, its sensual body laid out like so many sleeping female nudes in sixteenth-century Italian art. ^{ix}

If the Christian theme of "mystical marriage" helped sanction Michelangelo's more positive image of human sexuality, the *Pieta's* heterosexual framework - the Madonna mourning her mystical Bridegroom - quietly helped sanction a new celebration of homoerotic beauty by coding it in traditional nuptial and theological terms. Though the loveliness of the dead Christ emerged from Michelangelo's own love for the male body, it was recast in heterosexual, maternal, and theological terms in the Roman *Pieta*. Crossing boundaries of gender and sexual orientation, homoerotic love was artistically refashioned into something female and sacred where it was experienced by viewers as Mary's love, Mary's lament, Mary's mystical marriage.

If we wish, we can continue to experience it that way, safe in a heterosexual social and spiritual world. Or we can recognize the homoerotic beauty of the Christ, and that of every male nude in Michelangelo's art. We can also choose to see the artistic achievement of Michelangelo and the spiritual quality of homoerotic love, as something equal and in some sense interchangeable with the heterosexual love of Mary. In any case, the heterosexual and theological imagery of *Pieta* as mystical marriage enabled Michelangelo to celebrate the divine loveliness of the male body for all viewers, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual. No sexual preference or prejudice can mar the beauty of those bodies.

Christ and the Feminized Piety of the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance

It is often said that the delicate features of the figures in Michelangelo's Roman *Pieta* bespeak an early style still tied to the fine, linear details of the Early Renaissance style seen, for example, in Botticelli and Verrocchio in the 1480s. While there is some truth to this, the delicate handling of the Christ figure contrasts strikingly with the more robust "masculine" form of the earlier Bacchus or the struggling, muscular bodies of the even earlier relief, *Battle of Nude Men*. The contrast with the *David* executed four years later shows just how feminized the Christ figure is with his thin torso, his elongated legs, his graceful, slender proportions, and his delicate, oval face with its soft, curling hair and parted lips.

Beyond its homoerotic qualities, the feminized Christ also suggests the overpowering influence of Mary's feminine tenderness, love, and mercy as if Christ's humanity had been transfigured and softened by the feminine qualities emanating from the large mother cradling him so gently on her lap. As the first male deity known for humility, chastity, passive acceptance of suffering, compassion for the poor, the sick, and the very young, Christ embodied almost every traditional "feminine" virtue known to the Greco-Roman world. Largely ignored by the early Christian focus on Christ as supreme ruler, emperor, and lord, the feminized Christ emerged in late medieval spirituality after 1100 and was especially common among women writers who remade Christ in their own image of "feminine" emotion and sweetness as the loving bridegroom. The sweet, loving, feminized Christ was also explored by Italian Renaissance artists in the late fifteenth century, most notably in Verrocchio's *Baptism of Christ* and Leonardo's *Last*

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Supper. And in the later sixteenth-century, a few Italian artists took up the late medieval theme of Christ the good mother, nursing St. Catherine of Siena at his wounded breast.

Seen in this light, the feminized Christ in Michelangelo's *Pieta* suggests other, more Christian possibilities beyond the classical homoerotic tradition of elegiac lament over men taken by death in the full flower of their youth. Michelangelo's sweet, graceful Christ also gave voice to the feminized piety of the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance which looked to Mary as the supreme example of godliness. Set under the larger, grander form of Mary, Michelangelo's Christ is literally overshadowed and transformed into a sweeter being by Mary's "feminine" grace, maternal sorrow, and gentle, redeeming, intermediating love.

Neoplatonic Humanism and Earthly Beauty as Sacred

If Christ's extreme beauty was unusual for a *Pieta*, so, too, was the youthful beauty of Mary. In a subject about Mary's pity, the relative absence of grief on her face, though not unusual, seems driven by the beauty aesthetic which rules her and which banished the disfigurement of strong grief.

Since Christ was thirty-five at the time of his death, Mary was at least fifty. Her unprecedented youthfulness attracted at least one petty complaint from an overly-literal minded viewer. To justify the youthfulness of his Mary, Michelangelo offered a Neoplatonic argument that sheds much light on his mentality an artist. He insisted that Mary's body could not possibly have aged since she was inwardly so pure. Here was a beauty beyond sin and death, a body beyond the mortal decay inherited from Adam and Eve and vividly seen in the decrepit figures in Michelangelo's *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* (Sistine Ceiling, c. 1510). Going further into a Neoplatonic aesthetic of the physically beautiful, he also insisted that inner beauty and purity demanded outer beauty, that outer beauty would lead the viewer from worldly to sacred love, from terrestrial to divine beauty. While not without roots in medieval ideas of Mary's bodily purity,^x

This idea of inner beauty expressed in outer form also appeared frequently in Michelangelo's poems as in this passage from an amorous sonnet to the young nobleman, Tommaso Cavalieri.

*God in His grace, shows himself nowhere more
To me, than through some veil, mortal and lovely,
Which I will only love for being His mirror.*^{xi}

In most of Michelangelo's poems, the conventional beloved was female, as in this example where the lady's beauty resembles that of Mary in the *Pieta*.

O wellborn soul, who show, as in a glass

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*In your chaste body, beautiful and dear,
What Heaven and nature can accomplish here,
Yielding to none of their fair creatures else,*

*O lovely soul, in which, we hope and trust,
Within, as in the outward face appear,
There are love, pity, kindness, things so rare
No beauty ever had, with faithfulness,*

*Love seizes me, and beauty keeps me bound,
And with their gentle looks kindness and pity
Appear to give my heart firm hope it's so. ^{xii}*

In the 1470s and 1480s, the influential Medici humanist, Marsilio Ficino, revived a Platonic discussion of earthly beauty as the bodily expression of a higher, spiritual or intellectual beauty. ^{xiii} In his widely read treatise, *On Love* (1469), Ficino discussed sight as the intellectual sense through which the mind grasped divine beauty in the male body.

For love is the desire of enjoying beauty. But beauty is a certain splendor attracting the human soul to it. Certainly beauty of the body is nothing other than splendor itself in the ornament of colors and lines. Beauty of the soul also is a splendor in the harmony of doctrine and customs. Not the ears, not smell, not taste, not touch, but the eye perceives that light of the body. ... the eye alone enjoys the beauty of the body ... that light and beauty of the soul we comprehend with the Intellect alone. Therefore he who loves the beauty of the soul is content with the perceiving of the Intellect alone. Finally, among lovers beauty is exchanged for beauty. A man enjoys the beauty of the man with his Intellect. And he who is beautiful in body only, by this association becomes beautiful also in soul. He who is only beautiful in soul fills the eyes of the body with the beauty of the body. Truly this is a wonderful exchange. ... The pleasure is greater in the older man, who is pleased in both sight and intellect. ... ^{xiv}

Though Michelangelo's sonnets distinguished between bodily and spiritual beauty, especially in his later years where poems and works of art turned away from bodily beauty, ^{xv} his earlier writing frequently used bodily beauty to image spiritual and moral perfection. In one sonnet, Christ's beauty signals his bodily ascension and triumph, infusing sweetness into death itself. Though written later, the language sheds light on the Roman *Pieta*, the *Christ in Victory*, and the beautiful Christ of the *Last Judgment*.

*I see within your beautiful face, my Lord,
What in this life we hardly can attest;
Your soul already, still clothed in its flesh,
Repeatedly has risen with it to God.*

...

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*All beauty that we see here must be likened
To the merciful Fountain whence we all derive,
More than anything else, by men with insight.
We have no other fruit, no other token
Of Heaven on earth; one true to you in love
May rise above to God, and make death sweet.^{xvi}*

Though broadly indebted to Ficino, Michelangelo's art also studied classical sculpture to develop a more carnal sense of beauty distinct from the ethereal, metaphysical loveliness extolled in Ficino and seen in the art of Botticelli. Like somewhat later sixteenth-century writers and artists such as Bembo, Castiglione, Giorgione and Titian, Michelangelo helped fashion a new humanist celebration of love, sexuality, and physical beauty which sanctified and heroicized the body.

The Neoplatonic connection between physical and metaphysical beauty and between earthly and spiritual love appeared frequently in sixteenth-century discussions of the new nudity seen in sixteenth-century art. Needless to say, the talk about spiritual beauty helped legitimize the increasingly carnal aesthetic of High Renaissance art by intellectualizing and sanctifying it. In this way, artists and writers defended the proliferation of nudes in mythological and religious art and even portraiture against traditional monastic hostility.

While much of this art retained a serious moral or spiritual tone, the sixteenth-century saw the creation of countless religious and mythological images offering what can only be described as a soft-core, pornography pleasure geared primarily to male viewers. By the middle of the century, the Catholic church instituted reforms aimed at curbing the spread of gratuitous and indecorous nudity in religious art. While achieving some success for church art, the crackdown on nudity had little effect on secular themes and private patronage. Even high church officials continued to patronage erotic mythologies, as seen in the early seventeenth century works of Carracci and Bernini.

Mary's Beauty and the Renaissance Perfect Wife / Woman

To extend the theme of mystical marriage, we might see the girlish innocence of Mary not just in the Platonic terms discussed below but also in humanist nuptial terms as the perfect wife. In classical and Renaissance humanist manuals on marriage, the ideal wife was said to be 15 or 16, a child bride sequestered at home, completely innocent of the larger world, and easily transferred from the authority of the father to that of the older, paternal husband. Girlish innocence and chastity, mildness, pliancy, submission, and obedience were all sacred virtues of Mary, herself married to an older man. In humanist writing on marriage and family life from Alberti (1430s) to Vives (1520s) and Tasso (1580s), these qualities marked the well-bred girl or wife whose youth allowed her to be

easily controlled and moulded by her husband. Here is Alberti's *On the Family* (ca. 1434).

a young girl has a more adaptable mind. Young girls are pure by virtue of their age and have not developed any spitefulness. They are by nature modest and free of vice. They quickly learn to accept affectionately and unresistingly the habits and wishes of their husbands.^{xvii}

With Renaissance marriage values in mind, the youthfulness of Michelangelo's Mary made her the perfect wife, mystical and earthly, and the chief example for pious Christian women of all ages. In the 1540s, Bronzino paid homage to the Virgin as the ideal wife and woman when he painted the face of Eleonora da Toledo, child bride of Cosimo I de' Medici, Duke of Tuscany, on the face of the Virgin in an Annunciation decorating Eleonora's private chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio.

Neoplatonism and Art as Idea

As already seen in Leonardo and Raphael, the High Renaissance artist works as much from the head as from the hand. Michelangelo was famous for disdaining the sculptor's manual labor. Thus he claimed sculpture was primarily intellectual, that he conceived his figures entirely in his head, and that carving was necessary only to get rid of the excess marble. This emphasis on the higher, more eternal realm of ideas was also typically Neoplatonic and made art both the material embodiment of ideas and the mirror leading viewers back to those ideas. In turn, this led to the modern idea, already found in antiquity and stated in Michelangelo's poetry, that the material nature of art always fell short of the artist's conception.

Renaissance "Originality" and the Artist's Signature

The self-conscious originality of Michelangelo's *Pieta* is explicit in the unprecedented signature chiseled in large Latin letters across the Virgin's breast: "Michelangelo the Florentine made this". Relatively few sculptors before Michelangelo had signed their works and never on the body of the central sacred figure. Prominent signatures were more common in late fifteenth century painting, especially in the work of Perugino, Mantegna, Bellini, and Antonello.^{xviii} Perugino was particularly eager to attach large signatures to his religious works though none appeared across the body of the Virgin. Most signatures in Renaissance art appeared in more humble locations: at the feet of sacred figures, on decorative elements in the margins, or on small, trompe l'oeil pieces of paper underscoring the artist's skill. Clearly Michelangelo wanted this work to be known not as the tomb of a particular cardinal but as the *Pieta* of Michelangelo.

The novelty of the Roman *Pieta* shows the typical Italian High Renaissance artist's tendency to rethink traditional forms and themes. Unlike modern aesthetic thinking

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which usually sees originality in more radical terms as a creative process severed from tradition, Renaissance originality lay not in the invention of something completely new and potentially incomprehensible. Like all artists from the Renaissance to the late eighteenth century, Michelangelo's originality worked within existing cultural and artistic traditions where it could stand out, in sharper relief, against the traditional image.

ⁱ 17th century examples include Bernini and Cortona.

ⁱⁱ Homer, *Iliad*, XXII; Fitzgerald translation, New York: Doubleday, 1974, pp. 517-518. Not longer after this passage (p. 527), Homer returns to the theme when Achilles kills the Trojan prince, Hector, and strips the

*bloodstained shield and cuirass from his shoulders.
Other Akhaians hastened round to see
Hektor's fine body and his comely face,
And no one came who did not stab the body.
Glancing at one another they would say:
'Now Hektor has turned vulnerable, softer ...'*

ⁱⁱⁱ Examples include the numerous young lovers taken by death in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), the many maidens ambushed by death in 16th century Northern art, images of the Dance of Death and Triumph of Death, Holbein's *French Ambassadors*, and the sensual images of the Pieta and Man of Sorrows by Bellini, Antonello, and other Northern Italian Renaissance artists.

^{iv} Gilbert, no. 177. Gilbert no. 39 reads,

*What rule and custom of the world demand,
What early or what later cruelty,
That such a beautiful face death not let go.*

Gilbert, no. 181 reads,

*The beauty lying here did so transcend
In all the world every most lovely creature,
That Death, being at enmity with Nature,
Killed and destroyed it, so to make a friend.*

Gilbert, No. 180 reads,

*Death did not wish to destroy without
Years as its weapons, and superfluous time,
The beauty lying here, but let it climb
To Heaven now, not having lost a trait*

Other examples include Gilbert, no. 184, 191. While these poems were all written much later than the Roman *Pieta*, they use conventional laments on death and beauty which go back to classical antiquity and were equally common in medieval laments on premature death including Dante's verses on Beatrice in *La vita nuova* and *Paradiso*. The idea of the body's resurrection triumph, of course, is Christian and conventional long before Michelangelo.

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^v Gilbert No. 186.

^{vi} Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, XI.224-290, Loeb, vol. I, pp. 375-381. Another example is Bion's *Lament for Adonis* (Loeb, p. 387).

I cry woe for Adonis and say '*The beauteous Adonis is dead*': and the Loves cry me woe again and say '*The beauteous Adonis is dead*'. ... The beauteous Adonis lies low in the hills, his thigh pierced with the tusk, the white with the white, and Cypris is sore vexed at the gentle passing of his breath; for the red blood drips down his snow-white flesh, and the eyes beneath his brow wax dim; the rose departs from his lip, and the kiss the Cypris shall never have so again, that kiss dies upon it and is gone. Cypris is fain enough now of the kiss of the dead; but Adonis, he knows not that she hath kissed him. '*Woe I cry for Adonis and the Loves cry woe again*'. Cruel, O cruel the wound in the thigh of him, but greater the wound in the heart of her. ...

^{vii} Gilbert, no. 203. No. 205, also written for Bracci, reads,

*To death forever, I was given first
To you one hour only; with such gladness
I wore my beauty, leaving with such sadness
Never to have been born had been the best*

^{viii} See Gilbert, no. 100.

O night, O gentle time, however black,
Always at last plunges each work in rest;
He who exalts sees and discerns you best,
Who honors you is sound of intellect.

Each weary thought you cancel, or cut short,
Absorbed into damp shadow and all peace,
And often in dreams carry me from the lowest
To where I hope to go, the highest point.

O shadow of our death, by which the soul
Can erase the heart's enemies, distress,
The last of our afflictions, a good healer,

Our bodies that were weak you can make whole,
You dry our tears, put down all weariness,
And wrest from who lives well all vexing anger.

^{ix} Leo Steinberg's article on Michelangelo's *Pietas* is crucial here, and to my comments on "mystical marriage". The comparison to sleeping women in Italian art is mine.

^x In Jacobus da Voragine's *Golden Legend*, the immaculate body of Mary appears prominently in the account of her bodily Assumption. This medieval thinking focuses on Mary's freedom from bodily decay in death. Michelangelo's Renaissance Platonism explores her bodily perfection in life. In one section, Voragine quotes Augustine,

"The third reason is the perfect integrity of her virginal flesh. Whence he says: 'Rejoice, O Mary, with inenarable gladness of body and soul, in Christ thine own Son, with thine own son, through thine own Son.' Nor should the ill of corruption pursue her, who suffered no corruption of her integrity in bearing so great a Son; that she may ever be incorrupt (Da Capo edition, p. 456)

Voragine returns to the theme, quoting Demascene.

But she who lent her ear to God, who was filled with the Holy Ghost, who bore the Mercy of the Father in her womb, who conceived without the knowledge of man and gave birth without pain - how shall death swallow her up? How shall corruption dare to sully the body that carried Life itself?' Thus speaks Damascenus.

...
We well know that all these things could not be preserved in the order of nature, but we doubt not that in behalf of Mary's integrity, grace was more powerful than nature. Christ therefore made Mary to rejoice in her own Son, in soul and body, nor allowed any blemish of corruption to come upon her who had suffered no impairment of her integrity in bringing forth so great a Son, (Da Capo ed., pp. 464-465)

^{xi} Gilbert, no. 104. In another poem, (Gilbert, no. 76), Michelangelo wrote, "*There is, though, nothing mortal in your beauty, / Divine for us and made above in Heaven*". In Gilbert no. 40, we read,

*Love, do my eyes, O tell me as a favor,
See the actual beauty I desire,
Or is it in me, so that as I stare
At every point I see her face in sculpture?*

...
*The beauty that you see comes from her truly,
But, in a better place, grows by its climb;
Through mortal eyes into the soul it flies.*

*There it becomes beautiful, chaste, and holy,
As the immortal wills a thing like Him;
It's this, not that, that leaps into your eyes.*

^{xii} Gilbert, no. 39.

^{xiii} In the same years, Medici artists such as Verrocchio and Botticelli created a Platonic beauty aesthetic in mythological works such as the *Birth of Venus* and the *Primavera*. Working in the Medici household, the young Michelangelo developed his own version of this Platonic aesthetic in early works such as the *Battle of the Naked Men* (1492). Ficino died in 1499, the year Michelangelo finished the Roman *Pieta*.

xiv

^{xv} Gilbert, no. 162. No. 265 catalogues the ruin of the aging body as it awaits death.

^{xvi} Gilbert, no. 81, p. 57-58.

^{xvii} Alberti, *On the Family*, II, ca. 1434, Watkins translation, p. 116. On p. 211, one character boasts about the modesty, chastity, and obedience of his young wife.

Giannozzo: She replied by saying that her father and mother had taught her to obey them and had ordered her always to obey me, and so she was prepared to do anything I told her to. "My dear wife," said I, "a girl who knows how to obey her father and mother soon learns to please her husband...."

^{xviii} With the exception of Venetian painting where signatures and even dates on religious paintings were common – see the paintings in the Accademia – signatures were rare in fourteenth-century art. One interesting late medieval altarpiece with a large signature and date (1423) on the frame is Gentile da Fabriano's Adoration of the Magi in the Uffizi. Lorenzetti signed his secular Allegory of Good and Bad Government in the Sienna town hall (c. 1348)