Michelangelo, Tomb Monument for Pope Julius II,
Robert Baldwin (2009)

(This essay was written in 2009.)

Michelangelo's first idea for the tomb of Julius II was a grand, free-standing monument with dozens of full-size figures including the Madonna and Child at the top. The middle register featured the dead pope supported by grieving angels and flanked by Old Testament patriarchs including Moses.

Moses as Papal Figure
Since the fresco cycle on the Life of Moses painted on the walls of the Sistine Chapel in 1481 for Pope Sixtus IV (the uncle of Julius II), Moses became a prominent subject in papal patronage, reappearing, among other places, in the Tomb of Julius II and the Aqua Felice commissioned by Sistus V in the 1580s. This was a large Roman fountain shaped like a triumphal arch with a sculpture of Moses striking water from the rocks for the Israelites on their long journey from Egyptian captivity. More than any other Old Testament figure save King David, Moses offered a wide array of narratives allegorizing papal power (whether benevolent or wrathful), salvational deliverance, doctrinal wisdom, and Catholic liturgical piety. He was the intermediary for divine laws (Ten Commandments), an agent of the wrath of God destroying false religions, images, and worshippers (Golden Calf), a patriarchal leader who freed God's chosen people from Egyptian slavery and worked miracles to save them in their long journey through the desert to the Promised Land. These included parting the Red Seas, drowning the Egyptian army, sand two miracles routinely interpreted in Eucharistic terms: striking water from the rocks in the desert and feeding his starving followers with manna from heaven.

The Classical Origins of Michelangelo's Captives
The lower section of the tomb features images of Christian triumph (virtues trampling on vices) and a dozen bound prisoners, an idea borrowed from ancient Roman triumphal entries and triumphal arches, relief sculptures, and coins. In the ancient Roman triumphal ceremony, the victorious general marched a long line of soldiers and shackled "barbarian" prisoners and captured weapons through special parade routes in Rome, passing under triumphal arches erected to celebrate the victorious reign of emperors like Trajan, Septimus Severus, and Constantine. All three triumphal arches stood in or near the Roman Forum. In Roman sculpture, the prisoner was invariably clothed, coarse in features, and bearded with long hair to represent his status as a "barbarian". This was the Roman term for all non-Romans, an idea taken the ancient Greeks.

The classical roots of Michelangelo's captives are clear enough, especially as there was no medieval Christian tradition for nudes of any kind. Beautiful or heroic in their nudity with ages ranging from early maturity to robust manhood, Michelangelo's captives are clearly derived from ancient statues of Apollo, Mercury, Bacchus, and Atlas. For example, the "Dying Slave" in the Louvre closely follows classical statues of Apollo and

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/)
Used by permission.

Bacchus who were both shown as young, beardless, androgynous youths stretching their arms upward over their heads in languorous abandon and if standing versions of the classical sleeping beauty theme. The older, bearded Captive who bends forward as if struggling with a heavy load recalls the classical figure of the bearded Atlas or Hercules who bends as he carries the universe on his shoulders.

By recasting the rude barbarian with the sacred beauty of gods and heroes, Michelangelo dramatically reinterpreted the ancient Roman triumphal theme of the captured prisoner or slave. The sacred beauty of Michelangelo's prisoners offered yet another example of the humanist aesthetic of anatomical beauty well developed for the same patron a few years earlier on the Sistine Ceiling as seen in the Creation of Adam and the Ignudi.

If ancient Roman triumphal imagery showed a more literal captive like the ones paraded through Roman streets and enslaved everywhere in Roman homes, Michelangelo's recasting of the Roman captive worked to invent a new allegorical captive suited for a Christian tomb, and especially the tomb of a humanist pope. Here it helps to remember Julius II was a trailblazing patron in the revival of grand classical imagery for Christian art as seen in Bramante and Michelangelo's designs for a new St. Peters, Michelangelo's frescoes on the Sistine Ceiling, and Raphael's frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura.

The Christian allegorical significance of Michelangelo's innovative *Captives* is simple and plays on one of the most common ideas in Western culture: the soul imprisoned in the body. Well developed in classical antiquity, especially in Platonic thought which stressed the higher, metaphysical reality of ideas, this soul imprisoned in the body idea was eagerly adopted by a medieval Christian culture which devalued the body and stressed the soul's brief, cruel imprisoning in the sinful fleshy world before its final release in death.

Neoplatonism and the Ambiguity of the Body in Renaissance Humanist Aesthetics
Born in 1475, Michelangelo spent his teenage years in the household of Lorenzo de' Medici which in the late fifteenth century was the center for Platonic humanism in Italy thanks to the influence of Marsilio Ficino. The leading Neo-Platonic humanist of the late fifteenth century, Ficino was closely attached to the Medici and helped shape the classical aesthetic of anatomical beauty which first surfaced in Florentine art in the 1470s and 180s, most notably in the Medici artists Pollaiuolo and Botticelli.

In Platonic and Neoplatonic writing, the status of the body was ambiguous. On the one hand, the bodily world of matter was devalued as a poor, unreliable imitation of a true, metaphysical world of ideas. This kind of Platonic distrust of the body was revived and extended in late antiquity when Roman culture largely abandoned the dominant classical beauty aesthetic with its heroic or sensual nudes.

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/)
Used by permission.

By seeing earthly matter as imperfect images of divine ideas, Platonism also allowed bodily beauty to represent the sacred, especially if artistic images idealized the body and raised it up more closely to the divine. Plato himself praised human beauty repeatedly in his dialogue, *Symposium*, even if he insisted that the body was at best a useful conduit for the mind to ascend to divine things and sacred love. Plato also developed the idea that the soul was imprisoned in the body and yearned continually to return to its celestial origins.

To sum up, the Platonic body was fundamentally ambiguous and could be interpreted in negative or positive terms, as a hindrance to the sacred or as an ascending ladder, as a mortal coil obscuring the soul's radiance or as a splendid image of divine beauty leading the soul back to its origins, as a dark, heavy prison or an uplifting, winged vision.

The Body as Prison in Florentine Humanism

Michelangelo knew the Platonic body as prison because it was a commonplace in religious, poetic, and philosophical writing and especially in Renaissance Florentine humanism. As a Neoplatonic poet, Michelangelo would have known the sonnets of the Florentine poet, Petrarch, who with Boccaccio, pioneered the beginnings of Renaissance humanism in the mid-fourteenth century and defined lyric poetry for the next two and a half centuries. In Petrarch, as in the later poems of Michelangelo, the narrator-lover laments the untimely death of the beloved and yearns to be liberated from his bodily prison to reunite with the beloved in Paradise. In a few poems, he also praises the beauty of the bodily prison. [i] Michelangelo also knew the philosophical writings of the leading Neoplatonic humanist in late fifteenth-century Florence, Marsilio Ficino. Indeed, the young Michelangelo knew Ficino directly since they both enjoyed the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici. It was Ficino's Platonic thinking which appeared in Lorenzo de' Medici's pastoral poem, *The Supreme Good* where a wise hermit named Marsilio gives Lorenzo the following advice.

> *But if true good has two essential parts,*
> *The one, our will, the other intellect,*
> *These two together cannot be fulfilled*
> *Because the mind, bound up inside the flesh,*
> *Can never comprehend the good – confined,*
> *It always yearns to soar to greater heights.*
> *It's always anxious, filled with ever more*
> *Impassioned longing for the good it lacks:*
> *. . .*
> *the good is not found here,*
> *For while the soul is bound in carnal bonds,*
> *Confined within this prison's gloom, it will*
> *Always be governed by desire and doubt.*
> *The soul is so wrapped up in error when*
> *It's body-bound, that it won't know itself*

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/)
Used by permission.

Until its liberation is complete.
We see, therefore, that once it's severed from
the flesh, the happy soul experiences
the consummate attainment of this good. [ii]

While classical aesthetics as a whole were important for Michelangelo, his art and thinking were particularly grounded in the Platonic tradition. This is very clear in his poetry which offers a profoundly Platonic outlook. In his early years, Michelangelo's Platonism embraced a more youthful confidence in the outward beauty found in classical art. In this more worldly Neoplatonism, bodily beauty represented the sacred.

Yet even on the Sistine Ceiling, there are many signs of Christian anxieties about the body as a place of sin, suffering and death. When Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise, their beautiful faces wither with age, as does the face of the *Cumaean Sibyl*. In the Deluge, an old man holds his drowned son upright in a vertical Pieta, with the brevity of life contrasted against the father's older body. Most importantly, the *Drunken Noah* offers a deeply tragic image of the anguish, shame, struggle, and suffering of human existence. The robust maturity and sexual vigor of the Roman river god is here transformed into a Christian image of exhaustion and impending death.

To be sure, these examples remain momentary episodes scattered among the hundreds of lively, dancing, sensual nudes found on the Sistine Ceiling. Yet even here, we can glimpse a Platonic and Christian separation of the body and the soul, especially in the Creation of Adam where the grand body waits, helplessly, to receive the divine spark. And we should also see in the struggling, restless, twisting forms of many Ignudi an early expression of the soul captured in the body. It was this restless twisting and turning of the nude body – something not yet present in the *Roman Pieta* but very clear in the later *Florentine Pieta -* which Michelangelo largely introduced to Renaissance art and made central to the later understanding of the classical tradition.

The tense, painfully twisting, struggling nude was present in classical art since the fourth century B.C. but it was largely confined to images of defeated and dying barbarians and to figures punished by the gods such as Laocoon whose Hellenistic depiction unearthed in Rome made such an impact on the mature Michelangelo in 1506. One of Michelangelo's greatest contributions to Renaissance art was to make restlessness, struggle and tension a central and increasingly important element in his classicizing aesthetic after 1512. And all of this takes us back to the Platonic idea of the soul imprisoned in the body, an idea embraced by medieval Christianity, reinterpreted in more positive terms by Renaissance Platonism, and given a new Neo-Platonic expression by Michelangelo in the *Captives* made for the tomb of Julius II.

Except for the *Dying Slave*, an early work still tied to the sensual nudity of the Sistine Ceiling, all of the *Captives* display an inner restlessness, unease, and struggle. Some bend down, burdened by the oppressive weight of the body. The pain of human existence is etched in their faces. Others look upward, yearning for the release of death

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/)
Used by permission.

which Julius II has already found above them on the grand monument. The rhetoric of agony and struggle increases measurably from the early Captives, executed in 1512-015 and the later round of sculptures which date from the early 1520s.

Here are five poems by Michelangelo which shed light on the Christian Platonism which informs Michelangelo's *Captives* and his more mature art executed after the Sistine Ceiling. The first two express Christian ideas of earthly life as agony and struggle. The last three play on the theme of the body as the soul's prison. All of them suggest the yearning for release in death. Three additional poems are found in the footnotes to these texts.

Sonnet

. . .
O flesh, O blood, O wood, O agony,
By you be justice made of my sin
That I was born in, and my father too

You are the only good; may your high pity
Give help to my foretold sinful condition,
With death so near and God so far away [iii]

Madrigal to Vittoria Colonna

What kind of biting file
Makes your tired carcass shrivel and decrease,
Sick soul, forever? When will time release
You from it, back to where you were in Heaven,
Earlier bright and joyful,
Your dangerous and mortal veil thrown down?
Although I change my skin
For short years toward the end,
I cannot change old ways to which I'm used,
That with more age push and compel me more.
To you, Love, I must own
My envy of the dead.
I am frightened and confused,
Such, for myself, my soul's convulsive fear.
Lord, in the final hour,
Stretch out thy pitying arms to me, take me
Out of me, and make me one that pleases Thee. [iv]

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/)
Used by permission.

The Body as Prison

Sonnet
In order to return from whence it came,
The immortal form down to your prison house
Of earth came like an angel, with such grace
It honors earth by healing every brain.

This makes me love, this only lights my flame,
And not simply your tranquil outward face,
For love that houses virtue does not place
Its firm hope in a thing that will decline. [v]

Sonnet
As I so long have carried in my breast,
Lady, the stamped impression of your face.
Now that my death is close
Let love so stamp my soul, with copyright,
Seeing that it is blest
To drop the earthly prison's heavy weight.
Whether in storm or quiet,
With that mark be it safe,
As if the cross against all its opponents;
And whence in Heaven nature snatched you off
Let it return, model to high bright spirits
To learn its reappearance,
And leave on earth a spirit wrapped in clay,
So after you your beautiful face will stay. [vi]

Sonnet
Oh make me so I'll see you everywhere!
If ever I feel by mortal beauty burnt,
Set beside yours I'll think it fire that's spent,
And as I was I'll be, in yours on fire.

No one but you I call on and implore,
Dear Lord, against my blind and useless torment,
You only can renew, within and without,
My will, my mind, my slow and little power.

You gave this sacred soul to time, O Love,
Imprisoned it within this frail and tired

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/)
Used by permission.

Body besides, and with a savage fate. [vii]

---

[i] The body as earthly prison appears in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* nos. 264 ("for seeing every day the end come closer, / a thousand times I've begged God for those wings / with which our intellect / can soar to Heaven from this mortal jail"); 306; 325 ("Not long has she been in that lovely prison / from which she now is free, that gracious soul . . . So bright her face shines with celestial light / that your eyes cannot look for long at it, / and for her earthly prison of such beauty / your heart rages with flame … a body lovelier he [Death] could not kill"); 349 ("Happy the day that I shall from my earthly / prison escape, leaving broken and scattered / this heavy, frail garment of my own life, / that I may see my Lord and my Lady"); 364 ("repentant, sorry, for my years spent thus [in love], / years that I should have put to better use, / in search of peace, in flight from worldly troubles. / Lord, you who have enclosed me in this prison, / now take me, save me from eternal harm"). See Petrarch*, Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa, Bloomington: Indiana University, 1996.

[ii] Lorenzo de' Medici, "The Supreme Good," from Selected Poems and Prose, ed. Jon Thiem, Penn State University Press, 1991, pp. 78-79

[iii] Michelangelo, Poems, (Gilbert no. 64, p. 42)

[iv] Michelangelo, Madrigal to Vittoria Colonna, / Poems, (Gilbert no.159, p. 106)

[v] Michelangelo, Sonnet to Tommaso Cavalieri, (Gilbert no. 104, p. 76)

Also see Michelangelo, Poems, (Gilbert no. 150, p. 101)

Just as we put, O Lady, by subtraction,
Into the rough, hard stone
A living figure, grown
Largest wherever rock has grown most small,
Just so, sometimes, good actions
For the still trembling soul
Are hidden by its own body's surplus,
And the husk that is raw and hard and coarse,
Which you alone can pull
From off my outer surface;
In me there is for me no will or force.

Michelangelo, Poems, (Gilbert no.164, pp. 108-109)

My eyes, nearby or far away, can truly
See your fair face wherever it may appear
But feet are not allowed to carry there
My arms and either of my hands, O Lady.

The soul, the mind when it is sound and steady,
Rises up through your eyes wider and freer
To your high beauty: yet so great afire

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/)
Used by permission.

Gives no privilege to the mortal, heavy

Body of man, wingless as well, which thus
Can scarcely follow if an angel fly,
And boasts and praises only are for sight.

Ah, if you can in Heaven as with us,
Then make my body all one single eye,
No part of me not having your delight.

[vi] Michelangelo, Poems, (Gilbert no. 262, pp. 147-148)

[vii] Michelangelo, Poems, (Gilbert no. 272, p. 154)

© Robert Baldwin/Connecticut College (http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/)
Used by permission.