Michelangelo: Sculptor, Painter, Architect and Poet

Michelangelo was known as “il divino,” (in English, “the divine one”) and it is easy for us to see why. So much of what he created seems to us to be super-human.

When Michelangelo was in his late 20s, he sculpted the 17-foot tall David. This colossus seemed to his contemporaries to rival or even surpass ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. David, and his later sculptures such as Moses and the Slaves, demonstrated Michelangelo’s astounding ability to make marble seem like living flesh and blood. So much so, it is difficult to imagine that these were created with a hammer and chisel.

In painting, if we look at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, with its elegant nudes and powerful seated figures, and the now-iconic image of the Creation of Adam, Michelangelo set a new standard for painting the human figure, one in which the body was not just an actor in a narrative, but emotionally and spiritually expressive on its own.

And then there is his architecture, where Michelangelo reordered ancient forms in an entirely new and dramatic ways.

It is no wonder then too, that Vasari, who knew Michelangelo, would write about how Michelangelo excelled in all three arts: painting, sculpture and architecture:

the great Ruler of Heaven looked down and...resolved...to send to earth a genius universal in each art...He further endowed him with true moral philosophy and a sweet poetic spirit, so that the world should marvel at the singular eminence of his life and works and all his actions, seeming rather divine than earthy.
Michelangelo was also poet. In the poem below, Michelangelo gives us a sense of the co-existence in his art of a love of both the human (particularly male) body and God.

Sculpture, the first of arts, delights a taste
Still strong and sound: each act, each limb, each bone
Are given life and, lo, man's body is raised,
Breathing alive, in wax or clay or stone.
But oh, if time's inclement rage should waste,
Or maim, the statue that man builds alone,
Its beauty still remains, and can be traced Back to the source that claims it as its own.