



Michelangelo Buonarroti's sculptural masterpiece called the Pieta. In 1497, a young Michelangelo was commissioned by French Cardinal Jean de Bilheres Lagraulas to create "the most beautiful work of marble in Rome, one that no living artist could better", for the cardinal's future tomb in Old St. Peter's Basilica. Few will argue that Michelangelo not only rose to the Cardinal's challenge with the Pieta but also managed to surpass it.

Michelangelo sculpted the Pieta from a single block of Carrara marble, which he claimed was the most perfect block of marble he had ever worked with. He also claimed that he could "see" the sculpture within the marble itself and that it was his job to merely remove the excess in order to free the image inside. Michelangelo named his sculpture the Pieta. It depicts the dead body of Jesus after his crucifixion, draped across the Virgin Mary's lap as she looks down upon his body in grief. Michelangelo was deeply religious and the Pieta is an expressive piece that was clearly inspired by his deep and abiding faith.



The concept of the Pieta was, in itself, not unique as there were many pietas in both German and French art. However, Michelangelo's conceptualization of the Pieta was unique for a number of reasons. He mixed Renaissance ideologies of classical beauty with naturalism but what set Michelangelo's Pieta apart from all the others was that his was a multi-figured sculpture, considered a rarity in its day.

What makes Michelangelo's sculpture of the Pieta so arresting is the presentation of the voluminous folds in the Virgin Mary's clothing that envelope her from head to foot. The hood of her cloak is draped over the top of her head, just brushing her forehead. A portion of the cloak drapes over her right shoulder before the



lower half of the cloak becomes entangled in the voluminous layers of her dress which pools at her feet. There is flow to the sea of cloth draped from knee to foot in countless creases and folds and the overall effect has the appearance of actual fabric because of its numerous curves, folds and recesses. In fact, it is Michelangelo's painstaking attention to detail and the unique treatment of the hair, the skin and the fabric on each figure that give the Pieta texture and substance.



While it is said that Michelangelo's intricate treatment of the vestments worn by his subjects give the Pieta texture and substance, it is nevertheless his masterful ability to render emotion from the cold marble that give the sculpture its breath of life. There is such intimacy in the grief-stricken moment between the mother and her dead son. It is conveyed in the tenderness, profound sorrow and humility with which the Virgin Mary's stares down at the body of Jesus draped across her lap. However, despite the torture Jesus had endured, the devastation to his body is minimal.



The wounds on his hands and feet, after being nailed to the cross, are small and he looks to be lying in peaceful repose. The Virgin's right hand, as it supports Jesus' body, does not come into direct contact with his flesh. It's covered by the cloth from her cloak, signifying the sanctity of Christ's body. The Virgin Mary, although consumed by her sorrow, nevertheless appears at peace. The two figures appear idealized despite such sorrow, reflecting the Neo-Platonic ideals of beauty on earth reflecting God's beauty; that the

beautiful figures of the Virgin Mary and Jesus are echoing the beauty of the Divine.



Both young Michelangelo and his incredible sculpture became famous almost immediately after the Pieta's completion as word of his sculpture spread. Everyone flocked to see his masterpiece, especially other artists who wanted to examine his work up close, in search of the smallest of flaws. One of Michelangelo's biographers, Giorgio Vasari, summarized contemporary opinion of the Pieta stating, "It is certainly a miracle that a formless block of stone could ever have been reduced to a perfection that nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh." The Pieta came to be regarded as one of the world's greatest masterpieces of sculpture. Michelangelo is considered to be one of the greatest artists of all time whose work as a sculptor, painter as well as poet of the Renaissance has influenced the development of Western art. The Pieta remains a testament and lasting legacy to Michelangelo's masterful talents.

Sculpting the Pieta took less than two years. After its completion, the Pieta was displayed in the Chapel of Santa Petronilla, a Roman mausoleum, which Cardinal Lagraulas chose as his funerary chapel.



Shortly after the Pieta was displayed, it was thought to be the work of another sculptor, prompting Michelangelo to impulsively "sign" his work by carving "MICHAELA[N]GELUS BONAROTUS FLORENTIN[US] FACIEBA[T]" on the sash that runs diagonally across the Virgin Mary's chest. The Pieta is the only work ever signed by Michelangelo and it is said that Michelangelo later regretted his impulsiveness, swearing never again to put his name to another one of his works.

<https://www.michelangelo.net/pieta/> accessed 3/31/2022