

THE *PIETÀ* BY THE ELDERLY MICHELANGELO

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Born in 1475, Michelangelo Buonarroti was more than 70 years old when he began sculpting the group of four figures that today is housed in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence: the masterpiece, normally called the '*Pietà*', was called the *Deposition of Christ* by early sources. Vasari speaks of the group as still *in progress* in the first edition of his *Life of Michelangelo*, published in 1550 but in preparation since 1546-47. Both he and Ascanio Condivi, the other contemporary biographer of Buonarroti, confirm that the sculpture was intended for the altar of the chapel in a Roman church where the artist **wanted** to be buried. It is a highly personal work, in which Michelangelo portrayed himself in the old man supporting the body of the Saviour. When he decided not to complete the group, not only did he abandon it but also tried to break it into pieces. The servant who prevented him from entirely destroying the **Pietà asked for** the fragments and then had them pieced back together by one of the master's collaborators, Tiberio Calcagni, selling the work to a Roman aristocrat, Francesco Bandini. The polishing of the body of Christ and completion of the figure of Mary Magdalene (on the left) are attributed to Calcagni, while the head of Christ and figures of Mary (on the right) and the old man (in the centre) bear witness to the state of incompleteness in which Michelangelo left the group.

The great artist summarized half a century of professional experience in this work. He had been called at age 30 to realize the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome, and at 40 those of the Medici in Florence. Between the ages of 70 and 80 he worked on his own tomb, and for this he rethought his first successful masterpiece, the *Pietà* in St. Peter's, sculpted when he was not yet 25 years old. And, where the youthful interpretation of the theme, despite its elegiac beauty, remains somewhat conceptual, this *Pietà* by the elderly Michelangelo is fraught with experience and suffering. From the artist's letters of the same period, we know about the ailments of old age that afflicted him, and from his sonnets we learn of his fear of divine judgment and of the 'second death'. "My life has already run its course," he wrote in this period, "through the stormy sea with a fragile boat...". In 1547 Michelangelo lost his aristocratic friend Vittoria Colonna, to whom the artist had dedicated a drawing, today in Boston, ideally a preparatory work for the *Pietà*: a Mary sitting beneath the cross, with the body of her dead Son in her lap.

Vasari, who speaks of this *Pietà* on several occasions, suggests its strong impact on contemporaries, saying: "It was this Christ, deposed from the cross, supported by Our Lady, Nicodemus coming and helping, standing up, with an act of strength, and by one of the Marys who helps him, seeing that the Mother, lacking strength and overcome by pain, cannot stand. Nor can we find another dead body like that of this Christ, who – his limbs falling with abandon -, assumes several different attitudes, unlike other ones of Michelangelo's, more varied than he had ever done: a laborious work, rare in a stone, and truly divine". The identification of the old man in whom Michelangelo portrayed himself as Nicodemus (not Joseph of Arimathea, as some have suggested) is convincing, both because in the Gospel Nicodemus appears as an old man who asks Christ for the secret of the promised rebirth, and because Tuscan tradition saw in Nicodemus the sculptor of the Holy Face of Lucca.

Beyond its human and devotional meaning, this *Pietà* also answers one of the doctrinal questions of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in progress at that time. In the years 1550-1551 - while Michelangelo was still sculpting the work -, the Council of Trent issued a decree confirming the Church's faith in the 'real presence' of the body and blood of the Redeemer in the bread and wine consecrated during Mass, and thus the *Pietà* - that was supposed to place Christ directly above the Eucharistic table - invited viewers to correlate the sculpted body with the sacramental '*Corpus Domini*'. The *Pietà*'s installation in the new

Museo dell'Opera takes its inspiration from this catechetical purpose, placing the sculptural group on a base as high as an altar and with the same form.

Why did Michelangelo leave this *Pietà* unfinished? Vasari recalls the defects in the marble block, saying: "that stone had many emeries, and it was hard, and often made the chisel spark". But he also recalls the artist's professional perfectionism, and how "the judgment of that man was so great that he was never happy with what he did". It should also be remembered that in the years 1547-1555 Michelangelo was primarily engaged with the dome of the Vatican Basilica, and could devote little time to his *Pietà*, working on it at night. Speaking in the third person of his visit to the master, the biographer says: "Vasari, sent to Michelangelo's house by [Pope] Julius III for a drawing at one o'clock at night, found the artist working on the *Pietà* in marble that was broken". Seeing the visitor's gaze drawn to "one leg of Christ, above which [Michelangelo] worked and tried to change it", the master "let the lamp drop from his hand and, remaining in the dark, called [his servant] Urbino to bring a light". On other occasions, according to Vasari, the old man "often got up at night, unable to sleep, to work with the chisel, having made a cardboard helmet, and on top of it he kept a burning candle, in this way casting a light where he was working, leaving his hands free".

This means that in the dark, the old master saw only a few centimetres of the surface in front of him and worked on the basis of an inner vision of the work to be created. At a certain point, however, he understood that he had made a mistake, and could not add the left leg of Christ without destroying the compositional harmony of the group. He must have tried: we can still see in Christ's left thigh the hole where the missing leg should go, and the inventory of Michelangelo's workshop compiled by Daniele da Volterra two years after the death of the master mentions "a marble knee of the *Pietà* by Michelangelo", today lost.

Thus, the elderly sculptor, who had always believed that in every block of marble he could glimpse the perfect statute to be made from it, at 80 years of age discovered that he no longer possessed that magic! The work he then made to replace our group, another sculpture of the same subject, today at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan - the so-called 'Rondanini Pietà', confirms Michelangelo's difficulties with design at this time. After having sculpted a muscular dead Christ in the arms of an angel, Michelangelo was so dissatisfied that he re-carved the entire block, producing a work that does not seem to be his, a slender Christ in the arms of his equally slight mother. At the root of the problem, along with old age, there may also been a loss of confidence in art as a sufficient reason for living. Michelangelo ends the above-mentioned sonnet with the words: "Let neither painting nor carving any longer calm/ My soul turned to that divine Love/ Who to embrace us opened His arms upon the cross". Looking to Christ and not to art, it was only natural that he could not complete his works. Or perhaps we should say it was 'supernatural'.

The *Pietà*, which arrived in Florence in 1674, in the Duomo in 1722 and at the Museo dell'Opera in 1981, is Michelangelo's last masterpiece. And while we speak of it today, as we do of other sculptures by Buonarroti, as a 'non-finished work', the more appropriate diction comes from the sixteenth century, when they still said such works were 'infinite'.