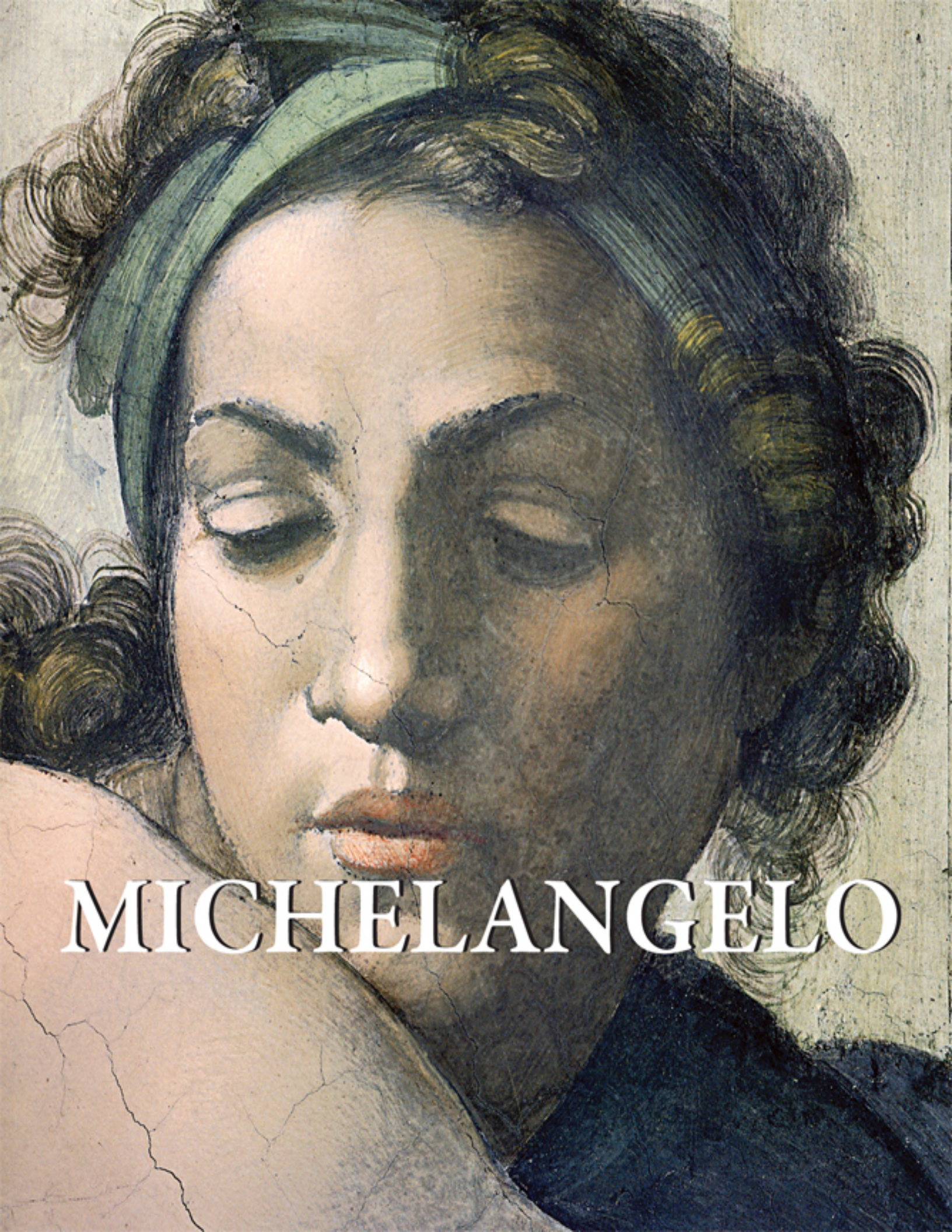
MICHELANGELO

Author: Eugene Müntz
Translator: Arthur Borges

Layout:
Baseline Co. Ltd
61A-63A Vo Van Tan Street
4th Floor
District 3, Ho Chi Minh City
Vietnam

Image-Bar www.image-bar.com

ISBN: 978-1-78310-023-1

Eugene Müntz

MICHELANGELO

PARKSTONE®
INTERNATIONAL

Contents

Daniele Ricciarelli da Volterra,
Portrait of Michelangelo, c. 1533.
Black chalk.
Teylers Museum, Haarlem.

INTRODUCTION

Raphael, *Portrait of Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi,* c. 1517.
Oil on wood, 154 x 119 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

The Brancacci Chapel and Uffizi Gallery in Florence amply illustrate the powerful influence on Michelangelo of his fellow masters. Cimabue's *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Eight Angels and Four Prophets* and Giotto's *Ognissanti*

Madonna, both at the Uffizi, as well as Masaccio's *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* at the Brancacci, all feed directly into one of the most talented and famous artists of Italy's 16th century.

Up until the 14th century, artists ranked among the lower-class manual labour workers. After many years of neglect, Florence began importing Greek painters to reinvigorate painting, which had become stuck in a Byzantine style that was stiff, repetitious, and top-heavy with gold.

Born in Arezzo, Margaritone was one little-known 14th-century painter who broke away from the 'Greek style' that permeated painting and mosaics. Though a true pioneer, he is less remembered than Cimabue and Giotto. Also greatly influenced by Greek painting, Cimabue was a Florentine sculptor and painter who quickly injected brighter, more natural, and vivacious colours into his paintings. We are still a long way from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, but painting was now moving in its direction.

No later than the early 14th century, Giotto di Bondone had fully emancipated Florentine painting from the Byzantine tradition. A student of Cimabue, he redefined the painting of his era. Between the aforementioned works of Cimabue and Giotto, a new trend stands out in the rendering of the Virgin's face and clothing. Cimabue was breaking out of the Byzantine mould. In a later work, he would find himself influenced by one of his own students: Giotto's *Holy Virgin* has a very lifelike gaze and cradles her infant in her arms like any normal caring young mother. The other figures in the composition appear less Byzantine and wear gold more sparingly. The pleating on her garb outlines the curves of her body. These features define his contribution to a 14th-century revolution in Florentine art. His skills as a portrait and landscape artist served him well when he later became chief architect of the Opera del Duomo in Florence, the bell tower of which he started in the Florentine Gothic style. Like Michelangelo after him, he was a man of many talents. The

14th century proved most dynamic and Giotto's style spread wide and far thanks to Bernardo Daddi, Taddeo Gaddi, Andrea di Cione (known as Orcagna), and other heirs.

Cimabue, Santa Trinita Madonna,
c. 1260-1280.

Tempera on panel, 385 x 223 cm.

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Giotto di Bondone, Maestà
(Ognissanti Madonna), 1305-1310.
Tempera on wood, 325 x 204 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*
(landing of the second floor), 1450.
Fresco, 230 x 321 cm.
Convento di San Marco, Florence.

Next came a period of International Gothic influence in the 15th century, just as Masaccio erupted into the Florentine art scene with his rich intricacies of style. His impact on Michelangelo would be dramatic. Masaccio's actual name was Tommaso di Giovanni Cassi; born in 1401, he died after only twenty-seven hyperactive years. He was among the first to be called by his given name, a sure sign of the new, higher social status for artists. Two of his noteworthy works include *Trinity* at the Santa Maria Novella and *Expulsion from Paradise* in the Brancacci Chapel. This leading revolutionary of Italian Renaissance art upset all the existing rules. Influenced by Giotto, Brunelleschi's new architectural attitude to perspective, Donatello's sculpture, along with other friends or cohorts, Masaccio added perspective into his frescoes alongside those of Brancacci, populated with figures so lifelike the eye almost senses their movements.

Masaccio steers attention towards exactly what he wants you to notice, leaving viewers no leeway for apathy. *Expulsion from Paradise* is easily his masterpiece: hunched over with sin and guilt, the two figures radiate pure shame and suffering. It is distinctly more terrifying than Masolino's treatment of the same theme opposite it. Late 20th-century restoration work on the chapel abolished the fig leaves, bringing all genitalia back into full view: this was the first nude painting in history and Masaccio was now contributing art that was far removed from anything Byzantine. His painting was so original that Fra Angelico, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Caravaggio, Ingrès, and even Michelangelo himself all went out of their way to see it. Whatever direction their works took, each owed his debt to Masaccio.

Masaccio's legacy is vast. Fra Giovanni da Fiesole (known as Fra Angelico) was deeply influenced by him, though many years his senior. This pious and humble Dominican friar completed lovely frescoes for the cloisters and cells of the San Marco Convent, including the *Annunciation*. Then came Domenico Veneziano, who ripened Fra Angelico's style into the full firm substance and refinement specific to Florentine Renaissance art. In the mid-15th century, humanist philosophy turned its back on the Middle Ages and reached out to Antiquity for inspiration. Meanwhile, art was looking to its Greco-Roman heritage as it, too, shunned all things medieval. Yet the term 'Renaissance' was only invented in the 19th century when Jules Michelet published his *History of the Renaissance* in 1855.

Before going any further, we should review the different stages of the Renaissance. It is generally agreed that an initial 'Primitive' Renaissance spanned 1400 to 1480, followed by the 'Golden Age' from 1480 to between 1520 and 1530, closing with the Late Renaissance covering 1530 to 1600. Long considered decadent, this last period is only the logical end of a movement that dominated the 15th and early 16th centuries. Michelangelo started in the Golden Age

and continued into the Late Renaissance when Mannerism came to the fore. By the mid-15th century, Plato's works had reached Florence and, with leveraging from the printing press, Marsilio Ficino helped spread the humanist view that placed man at the centre of the universe throughout Europe. The new focus on Antiquity stimulated painting, sculpture, and architecture, but by building on it rather than just borrowing. Florence was the cradle of the Italian Renaissance and from there it spread to Rome in ways we shall see.

The Renaissance was characterised by refinement in literature as much as art. Filippo Lippi and Benozzo Gozzoli are but two protégés of the Medici. Lorenzo de' Medici (known as Il Magnifico) stood out as the patron of numerous artists but other prominent families followed his example. One such beneficiary was Leonardo da Vinci, who studied in the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, only to quickly surpass his mentor and drive him to despair. Da Vinci and Michelangelo went so far as to creatively emulate each other on occasion.

This was also the era of Sandro Botticelli's *Spring* and *Birth of Venus*. If Botticelli's strength lay in rendering the beauty, balance, grace, and harmony that typified 15th - century Florence, Michelangelo's focus lay entirely elsewhere. After Masolino and Masaccio, Fra Filippo Lippi's son Filippino, also a student of Botticelli, went on to work on the Brancacci Chapel. Lippi's frescoes in the Santa Maria Novella Church were already heralding the shift from the Golden Age to the Mannerism of the Late Renaissance.

Masaccio, *Expulsion from Paradise.*
Fresco.
Brancacci Chapel,
Santa Maria del Carmine, in Florence.

Botticelli, *Primavera*, c. 1482-1485.
Tempera on wood, 207 x 319 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Raphael, *Portrait of a Woman,*
known as La Velata, c. 1512-1516.
Oil on canvas, 82 x 60.5 cm.
Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina e
Appartamenti Reali, Florence.

The 15th century was as intense for religion as it was for art. The Dominicans of San Marco exerted strong influence on art, as witnessed in the works of Fra Angelico. At the close of the century, the general mood in Florence was fast deteriorating with the death of Il Magnifico and the extremist preachings of the self-styled fundamentalist prophet and book burner, Girolamo Savonarola. Savonarola

had been out to eradicate immorality and corruption in the Medici family, clergy, and general population until he was finally arrested by the Inquisition, tortured, excommunicated, hanged, and then burned at the stake for good measure. Moreover, the Medici went into exile. All of these events seriously mutilated the local art scene. One upshot was that Botticelli, Filippino Lippi, Benozzo Gozzoli, and Michelangelo all veered into more dramatised depictions.

The Flemish School also had an impact on 15th -century Florence; strong trade links to Flanders enhanced the arts of Florence too. The Flemish used oil paint with a particular approach to colour, along with the addition of aerial perspective while the Florentines were discovering linear perspective. Influential Flemish masters include Jan van Eyck, Hugo van der Goes, Hans Memling, and Rogier van der Weyden. Michelangelo's early 16th-century *Madonna of Bruges* was commissioned by Flemish merchants. But Michelangelo remained faithful to fresco painting though he once said that Flemish painting could make him cry, which Italian works could not.

Early in the 15th century, the figurative trend started by Fra Angelico in San Marco's was picked up by fellow friar Fra Bartolomeo, a disciple of Savonarola's. The style concentrated on incarnating religious ideals. Fra Bartolomeo's *Portrait of Girolamo Savonarola* was one work that gave a neat, sharp picture of its feisty, fiery subject and this artist's use of colour was to have an impact on Raphael, who would, in turn, pass on the influences to Michelangelo, some more obviously than others.

The early 16th century was of capital importance to Florentine art, the unprecedented wealth and variety of the 15th century notwithstanding. Michelangelo was facing difficult years at the time when he studied under Ghirlandaio in 1488 before turning his attention to the works of Antiquity in the San Marco Garden under the patronage of

Lorenzo de’ Medici. Responding intensely to Donatello, Giotto, Masaccio, and Signorelli, Michelangelo scrutinised them and copied any gesture, pose, drapery arrangement, or facial expression that took his fancy – something intellectual property lawyers would frown upon today. And he invariably refused to show any works in progress, even when the patron was the Pope himself: he copied prolifically but had no intention of being copied himself! He also hated reproducing the features of living persons unless he thought their beauty infinite. He was furthermore the first artist to claim beauty as the absolute baseline for his work. All his output was grounded in his imagination, in contrast to other art that followed the precepts of Raphael and the Primitives. All his life, Michelangelo would remain torn between Florence, where his career truly began, and Rome, where he decorated the Sistine Chapel for the Popes.

Leonardo da Vinci,
Mona Lisa, 1503-1505.
Oil on canvas, 77 x 53 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Rosso Fiorentino,
Moses Defends Jethro's Daughters.
Oil on canvas, 160 x 117 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci were the nucleus of 15th -century Florentine art. Also worth citing is the painter and historian Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* first came out in 1550, with the enlarged edition appearing in 1568. Lastly, there was Michelangelo's close friend and first biographer, Ascavio Condivi. Whatever the shortcomings of these two men's works, they provide invaluable insight into the Florentine Renaissance and the people who made it happen.

Michelangelo and Da Vinci stood out as strong and mighty personalities with two irreconcilably opposed attitudes to art – yet Vasari reports a bond of deep understanding between them. Da Vinci was twenty years Michelangelo's senior and each had his own set vision about art. Their fierce independence led to clashes whenever circumstances, such as simultaneous commissions for cartoons of the Palazzo Vecchio, brought them face-to-face. From Donatello and Verrocchio, Da Vinci developed his *sfumato* style, best defined as "blending light and shadow without trait or sign, like smoke" and best witnessed in the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre Museum of Paris. It obtains hazy contours and dark colours, opposite to Michelangelo's technique seen in his *The Holy Family* (*Tondo Doni*) (p. 107, 109) at the Uffizi in Florence. Da Vinci spent years under Verrocchio while Michelangelo lasted just one at the Ghirlandaio workshop before studying under Bertoldo: Michelangelo saw himself primarily as a man who worked stone.

For Da Vinci, the essential concern was the long quest for truth while Michelangelo was dogged all his life by the meaning of art itself. Both had dissected cadavers to learn anatomy but for different reasons: Da Vinci was out to render the truth of a gesture in order to better represent action and emotion while Michelangelo simply had a hardwired interest in crafting nudes, which Da Vinci never painted. Michelangelo's *David* (pp. 24, 55, 56) standing in

contrapposto is the direct result of his anatomical studies. In short, anatomy affected the two great artists very differently.

Each of these rivals also had a penchant for *non finito*, the abandonment of artworks in progress. Da Vinci would regularly abandon canvasses while Michelangelo would leave off sculptures. Da Vinci blends *non finito* into *sfumato* until they become hard to distinguish while in Michelangelo *non finito* is only rarer in his paintings. Either Michelangelo abandoned a work because of pressure from other commissions or he was deliberately toying with a novel form of particularly dynamic and expressive art. After sculpting a model, he would apply himself erratically to the actual statue, with hyperactive frenzy powering him through some sessions and cool detachment through others. The fury he hurled at marble would pare away the excess and liberate the stone's soul but he didn't always follow through; *non finito* was a spin-off of his exceptional creative talent. Instead of aping his predecessors in Christian figurative painting, he opted to start off in stone. He even painted his *The Holy Family (Tondo Doni)* as if it were a work of stone. When Pope Julius II handed him the commission for the Sistine Chapel, Bramante, Raphael and other rivals were hoping he would wheedle his way out of it. Yet, instead, he made a success of it and, in the end, Michelangelo demonstrated excellence in painting, too. When it came to architecture, Michelangelo had amassed the maturity to integrate Bramante's way of empowering buildings with dimensions proportionate to those of the human body.

Alongside him stood the slightly younger Raffaello Sanzio d'Urbino (known as Raphael) who died at the young age of thirty-seven. His personality also contrasted sharply with Michelangelo's. To begin, Raphael was very sociable and he, too, had evolved a style of his own. Probably arriving in Florence in 1504 after solid training under Perugino, he mixed easily with his peers as he studied the cartoons of

Michelangelo and Da Vinci at the Palazzo Vecchio and savoured Fra Bartolomeo's palette of colours while borrowing odd touches from Ghirlandaio. After a few private commissions, he headed to Rome in 1508 (the same year as Michelangelo) where he painted the *Vatican Stanze*, the private apartments of Pope Julius II in the Vatican. Beyond his stunning flair for colours, Raphael excelled at rendering drape, velvet, damask, and silk distinctively – *La Velata* at the Pitti Palace is a prime example. The real rivalry between Raphael and Michelangelo was never actually aggressive – their technique and personalities were simply too different. Raphael's premature death left Michelangelo missing a true peer. Given that Raphael's works instilled the latter's output with a certain gentle sweetness and way of handling skin colour and fabrics, Michelangelo undoubtedly had a passing to mourn. In 1534, Michelangelo made his final move to Rome, leaving a trail of unfinished works behind him at the Church of San Lorenzo. He had been called to execute the *Last Judgment* for the Sistine Chapel, along with an assortment of jobs for San Marco. This was when he met Daniel da Volterra, who was to become his lifelong disciple.

Fra Bartolomeo,
Portrait of Girolamo Savonarola, c. 1498.
Oil on wood, 47 x 31 cm.
Museum of San Marco, Florence.

Meanwhile, the Mannerist School was also taking shape in Florence, with the likes of native-born Andrea del Sarto executing commissions for the Servi de la Nunziata too. Even today, the Santissima Annunziata Church remains a black sheep of Florentine Renaissance art. There on display are the works of Rosso Fiorentino, Pontormo, and Sarto, works typified by a Mannerist upset of harmony, overextended forms, wavy bodies, and various bodily

contortions with occasional recourse to dissonant colour combinations. In short, Mannerism was a radical reaction to Golden Age Classicism. The *Last Judgment* in the Pauline Chapel as well as Michelangelo's later figurative works are textbook examples of this school. And in the *The Holy Family (Tondo Doni)* itself, Michelangelo's new *manner* is plain for all to see. His works would go on to demonstrate a fusion of drama and fantasy. In architecture, Michelangelo blazed the trail with the curves and tension he created for the San Lorenzo Church. Mannerism even affected gardening. The gardens around the great private estates were rife with eccentricities, oddities, curious caves, fountains, and statues of animals – examples are in the Boboli Gardens of the Pitti Palace. But Michelangelo opened up new horizons in sculpture too. Though botched, Bartolomeo Ammannati's statue of the sea god at Piazza della Signoria was nonetheless based on Michelangelo's *David*, while Cellini's *Perseus* at the Loggia dei Lanzi is magnificent. A final worthy successor was Giambologna (known as Jean Boulogne or Giovanni Bologna) and his *Rape of a Sabine Woman* in the same loggia. But in the 16th century, the best artists were deserting Florence, Mannerism was floundering in the finer points, and real art now found itself in Rome.

Let us return to Sarto, an artist influenced by Raphael and Michelangelo, who completed Mannerism-based pieces. Mannerism was a response to the general unrest permeating Florence at the time due to the local political situation and the broader background of the Reformation. Around 1520 to 1524, Florentine painting began shifting from the Golden Age into the Late Renaissance.

For all his genius and social prominence, Michelangelo was never immune to the whims of his patrons, yet he, nevertheless, devoted his life to exercising his talents as a sculptor, painter, architect, and poet, leaving an enormous body of work in his wake.

In his late 19th -century *History of Art during the Renaissance*, Eugene Müntz includes a very thorough study of Michelangelo. However, the study needs updating to incorporate new data, transfer of works to new locations, discovery of additional drawings, recent issues, restorations and more compassion for Italian art prior to the 16th century. Nonetheless, Müntz did an enormous job and, in recognition of that, the only editing of his clear and straightforward style concerns a few idiomatic turns of phrase that would sound precious today.

Veronique Laflèche

Vasari, *Portrait of Lorenzo de Medici*.
Oil on canvas, 90 x 72 cm.
Private collection.

David (detail), 1504.
Marble, height: 434 cm.
Galleria dell’Academia, Florence.