

**RENAISSANCE  
FLORENCE:  
MICHELANGELO'S  
DAVID**



# RENAISSANCE FLORENCE: MICHELANGELO'S DAVID

## Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Michelangelo's place in Florentine society, how his most famous sculpture, David, was created, and why the statue is considered by many to be the personification of the Florentine Renaissance.

## Subjects

Art  
European History  
World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Academia Museum, Florence
- Michelangelo Museum, Caprese

## Essential Questions

- Who was Michelangelo?
- What was Michelangelo's place in 15th century Renaissance Florence?
- Why was Michelangelo given the commission for the sculpture David?
- Why is Michelangelo's famous sculpture David important to understanding the development of Renaissance art in Florence?

## Academic Summary

WHILE the most noble and industrious spirits were striving, by the light of the famous Giotto and of his followers, to give to the world a proof of the ability that the benign influence of the stars and the proportionate admixture of humors had given to their intellects, and while, desirous to imitate with the excellence of their art the grandeur of Nature in order to approach as near as possible to that supreme knowledge that many call understanding, they were universally toiling, although in vain, the most benign Ruler of Heaven in His clemency turned His eyes to the earth, and, having perceived the infinite vanity of all those labors, the ardent studies without any fruit, and the presumptuous self-sufficiency of men, which is even further removed from truth than is darkness from light, and desiring to deliver us from such great errors, became minded to send down to earth a spirit with universal ability in every art and every profession, who might be able, working by himself alone, to show what manner of thing is the perfection of the art of design in executing the, lines, contours, shadows, and high lights, so as to give relief to works of painting, and what it is to work with correct judgment in sculpture, and how in architecture it is possible to render habitations secure and commodious, healthy and cheerful, well-proportioned, and rich with varied ornaments.

He was pleased, in addition, to endow him with the true moral philosophy and with the ornament of sweet poesy, to the end that the world might choose him and admire him as its highest exemplar in the life, works, saintliness of character, and every action of human creatures, and that he might be acclaimed by us as a being rather divine than human. And since He saw that in the practice of these rare exercises and arts namely, in painting, in sculpture, and in architecture the Tuscan intellects have always been exalted and raised high above all others, from their being diligent in the labors and studies of every faculty beyond no matter what other people of Italy, He chose to give him Florence, as worthy beyond all other cities, for his country, in order to bring all the talents to their highest perfection in her, as was her due, in the person of one of her citizens.

There was born a son, then, in the Casentino, in the year 1474, under a fateful and happy star, from an excellent and noble mother, to Lodovico di Leonardo Buonarrothi Simoni, a descendant, so it is said, of the most noble and most ancient family of the Counts of Canossa. To that Lodovico, I say, who was in that year Podesta of the township of Chiusi and Caprese, near the Sasso della Vernia, where S. Francis received the Stigmata, in the Diocese of Arezzo, a son was born on the 6th of March, a Sunday, about the eighth hour of the night, to which son he gave the name Michelangelo, because, inspired by some influence from above, and giving it no more thought, he wished to suggest that he was something celestial and divine beyond the use of mortals, as was afterwards seen from the figures of his horoscope, he having had Mercury and Venus in the second house of Jupiter, with happy augury, which showed that from the art of his brain and of his hand there would be seen to issue forth works marvelous and stupendous.

... Letters were written to him from Florence by some of his friends, saying that he should return, because it was not unlikely that he might obtain the spoiled block of marble lying in the Office of Works, which Piero Soderini,

who at that time had been made Gonfalonier of the city for life, had very often talked of having executed by Leonardo da Vinci, and was then arranging to give to Maestro Andrea Contucci of Monte Sansovino, an excellent sculptor, who was seeking to obtain it. Now, however difficult it might be to carve a complete figure out of it without adding pieces (for which work of finishing it without adding pieces none of the others, save Buonarroti alone, had courage enough), Michelangelo had felt a desire for it for many years back; and, having come to Florence, he sought to obtain it. This block of marble was nine braccia high, and from it, unluckily, one Maestro Simone da Fiesole had begun a giant, and he had managed to work so ill, that he had hacked a hole between the legs, and it was altogether misshapen and reduced to ruin, insomuch that the Wardens of Works of S. Maria del Fiore, who had the charge of the undertaking, had placed it on one side without troubling to have it finished; and so it had remained for many years past, and was likely to remain.

Michelangelo measured it all anew, considering whether he might be able to carve a reasonable figure from that block by accommodating himself as to the attitude to the marble as it had been left all misshapen by Maestro Simone; and he resolved to ask for it from Soderini and the Wardens, by whom it was granted to him as a thing of no value, they thinking that whatever he might make of it would be better than the state in which it was at that time, seeing that neither in pieces nor in that condition could it be of any use to their building. Whereupon Michelangelo made a model of wax, fashioning in it, as a device for the Palace, a young David with a sling hi his hand, to the end that, even as he had defended his people and governed them with justice, so those governing that city might defend her valiantly and govern her justly. And he began it in the Office of Works of S. Maria del Fiore, in which he made an enclosure of planks and masonry, thus surrounding the marble; and, working at it continuously without anyone seeing it, he carried it to perfect completion. And truly it was a miracle on the part of Michelangelo to restore to life a thing that was dead.

This statue, when finished, was of such a kind that many disputes took place as to how to transport it to the Piazza, della Signoria. Whereupon Giuliano da San Gallo and his brother Antonio made a very strong framework of wood and suspended the figure from it with ropes, to the end that it might not hit against the wood and break to pieces, but might rather keep rocking gently; and they drew it with windlasses over flat beams laid upon the ground, and then set it in place. On the rope which held the figure suspended he made a slip-knot which was very easy to undo but tightened as the weight increased, which is a most beautiful and ingenious thing; and I have in my book a drawing of it by his own hand an admirable, secure, and strong contrivance for suspending weights.

It happened at this time that Piero Soderini, having seen it in place, was well pleased with it, but said to Michelangelo, at a moment when he was retouching it in certain parts, that it seemed to him that the nose of the figure was too thick. Michelangelo noticed that the Gonfalonier was beneath the Giant, and that his point of view prevented him from seeing it properly; but in order to satisfy him he climbed upon the staging, which was against the shoulders, and quickly took up a chisel in his left hand, with a little of the marble-dust that lay upon the planks of the staging, and then, beginning to strike lightly with the chisel, let fall the dust little by little, nor

changed the nose a whit from what it was before. Then, looking down at the Gonfalonier, who stood watching him, he said, "Look at it now." "I like it better," said the Gonfalonier, "you have given it life." And so Michelangelo came down, laughing to himself at having satisfied that lord, for he had compassion on those who, in order to appear full of knowledge, talk about things of which they know nothing.

When it was built up, and all was finished, he uncovered it, and it cannot be denied that this work has carried off the palm from all other statues, modern or ancient, Greek or Latin; and it may be said that neither the Marforio at Rome, nor the Tiber and the Nile of the Belvedere, nor the Giants of Monte Cavallo, are equal to it in any respect, with such just proportion, beauty and excellence did Michelangelo finish it. For in it may be seen most beautiful contours of legs, with attachments of limbs and slender outlines of flanks that are divine; nor has there ever been seen a pose so easy, or any grace to equal that in this work, or feet, hands and head so well in accord, one member with another, in harmony, design, and excellence of artistry. And, of a truth, whoever has seen this work need not trouble to see any other work executed in sculpture, either in our own or in other times, by no matter what craftsman.

*Excerpts from Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Artists, 16th century*

Florence, Italy was the center of Renaissance art, architecture and humanist thought during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Museums like the Uffizi and the Academia are filled with priceless paintings and sculptures that are the envy of places around the world. The Piazza della Signoria, Florence's central square and the political hub of the city since the days of the Medici family, contains priceless statues such as the Rape of the Sabine Women by Gianbologna and Cellini's masterpiece Perseus with the Head of Medusa which have stood open to the public since their creation in the 16th century. Even the buildings themselves, many of them constructed during Florence's golden age, were designed to be expressions of artistic beauty. People around the world learn the names of artists, architects and writers associated with Renaissance Florentine society: Donatello, Giotto, Raphael, Machiavelli and Brunelleschi. Florence is even associated with the ultimate so-called "Renaissance Man" himself: Leonardo da Vinci.

Perhaps the greatest artist of them all was Michelangelo.

Born Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni in Caprese (about 100 km east of Florence) in 1475, Michelangelo spent much of his youth in a small village just outside of Florence in the home of a stonecutter who worked for his father in a marble quarry. According to the artist himself, at an early age he was "handling chisel and hammer, with which I make my figures." By age 13, Michelangelo was an apprentice working for Domenico Ghirlandaio in Florence, who quickly saw that the young man had been blessed with immense talent. Lorenzo de Medici, de facto ruler of the city, took an interest in the young artist and took the extraordinary step of bringing Michelangelo into the Medici court. The rising star was on his way to fame. By the time he reached the age of twenty, Michelangelo's body of work was getting recognition around Italy, to the point where even his contemporaries began referring to him as "Il Divino" (The Divine). Over the remainder of his life, he would work all over the Italian peninsula creating many of the most famous artistic works of the Renaissance, including working in Rome for different popes creating the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the Pieta at St. Peter's Cathedral and The Last Judgment. His home, however, would always be Florence, and it is in the Tuscan city where he create arguably his most

perfect piece, the gigantic 17-foot statue David.

There are many statues of David in Florence, as the biblical story was a favorite of the Medici family (and thus Florence) because of its message that David was more powerful than he seemed (they saw Florence under their leadership in much the same way). Florentine museums are filled with artistic representations of the hero from such artists as Verrocchio, Donatello and others. This one, however, was different.

According to stories handed down through history, the block of marble from which the David would eventually be carved had lay unused in Florence for over four decades when the Wool Guild, one of the most important and wealthy trade associations in the city, commissioned the 26-year-old Michelangelo in 1501 to create a statue for the Duomo. Two other artists had tried to use the immense block over the preceding decades, but its sheer size overwhelmed them.

Michelangelo took up the challenge, and he spent the next three years in an almost fanatical endeavor to coax the great figure from the rock. When it was unveiled in September 1504, it was not on the cathedral as originally intended, but rather in the square of the Palazzo della Signoria, at the entrance to the town hall, the seat of government and power of Florence. Visitors and residents alike would thus have a very tangible personification of power and grace, something that made Florentine citizens immensely proud in an age when they were jockeying for supremacy on the peninsula.

The figure itself is unlike other representations of David in that the young biblical hero appears ready to fight Goliath. The expression on his face is one of confidence. Whereas other sculptures and paintings of the subject depicted David after he had killed Goliath, Michelangelo omitted the giant altogether from his piece. Instead, the fight has yet to take place, but the expression on the hero's face leaves no doubt as to the eventual outcome. Seen by millions of people every year, the David may be the most famous statue in the world. Replicas are found around the globe. Today a reproduction even stands in the town square in Florence. The original statue was moved inside the Academia Museum in 1873 for protection.

Any study or analysis of Florentine Renaissance art necessitates studying the great artists of the time, and it is natural for students to be drawn to Leonardo, Raphael, Brunelleschi and others, but the conversation eventually and inexorably turns to Michelangelo. Even in his own lifetime, he was seen by his contemporaries as the paramount sculptor and artist of the time period, earning the nickname of the "divine one." He was a prolific artist, and Italy is littered with his sculptures. Michelangelo's works would go on to inspire later generations of artists for centuries to come. It might even be argued that without "Il Divino", there would have been no Renaissance.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Michelangelo's place in Florentine society, how his most famous sculpture, David, was created, and why the statue is considered by many to be the personification of the Florentine Renaissance.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Michelangelo's place in Renaissance Florentine society in terms of his own artistic creations, focusing on why he was called "il Divino" (the Divine One) by contemporaries in his lifetime.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Michelangelo's most famous sculpture, *David*, was created, and why the statue is considered by many to be the personification of the Florentine Renaissance.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Who is the most famous artist of all time? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Michelangelo (30 min)
- Video – Michelangelo (50 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Michelangelo (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was Michelangelo's place in Renaissance Florentine society? How was his statue *David* created? Why is the statue considered by many to be the personification of the Florentine Renaissance? (30 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail explain Michelangelo's place in Florentine society, how his most famous sculpture, David, was created, and why the statue is considered by many to be the personification of the Florentine Renaissance.
- Note to teachers: This essay question is similar to one of the FRQs (Free Response Questions) on the 2010 AP European History exam.

## Extension

### On tour: Accademia Gallery, Florence

While on tour, students in Florence will visit the Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze (Gallery of the Academy of Florence), where they can see for themselves Michelangelo's masterpiece. The Accademia has been home to David since it was moved inside in 1873 to protect it from the elements and from crowds. While in the museum, students will also be able to see works from other artists as well, including a Giambologna's original plaster cast for the Rape of the Sabine Women and a number of medieval and renaissance pieces.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariMAngelo.html](http://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariMAngelo.html)  
Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Michelangelo (primary source)
- [vlsi.colorado.edu/~rbloem/david.html](http://vlsi.colorado.edu/~rbloem/david.html)  
Michelangelo's David (website) – from Roderick Bloem, Professor of Computer Science at Graz University of Technology (Austria)
- [www.michelangelo.com/buon/bio-index2.html](http://www.michelangelo.com/buon/bio-index2.html)  
Michelangelo (website)
- [www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/micheldavid/david.html](http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/micheldavid/david.html)  
Michelangelo's David (website). From Mary Ann Sullivan of the Digital Imaging Project at Bluffton University (OH).
- [www2.gwu.edu/~art/Temporary\\_SL/129:255/Readings/david.pdf](http://www2.gwu.edu/~art/Temporary_SL/129:255/Readings/david.pdf)  
Michelangelo in Florence: David (PDF article from The Burlington Magazine). From Michael Hirst, Professor Emeritus of Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. Article found on the George Washington University website.
- [www.humanistni.org/filestore/file/david%20michelangelo.pdf](http://www.humanistni.org/filestore/file/david%20michelangelo.pdf)  
Masterpieces: Michelangelo's David (web article)
- [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/mar/19/art](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/mar/19/art)  
Scientists show up Michelangelo's faults (web article) – from The Guardian newspaper (UK)
- [www.italianrenaissance.org/michelangelos-david/](http://www.italianrenaissance.org/michelangelos-david/)  
Michelangelo's David (website)
- [arthistoryblogger.blogspot.com/2011/10/sculpting-david-donatello-and.html](http://arthistoryblogger.blogspot.com/2011/10/sculpting-david-donatello-and.html)  
Sculpting David: Donatello and Michelangelo (website / blog) – from the Art History Blogger
- [fieldartdiscovery.com/michelangelo.ppt](http://fieldartdiscovery.com/michelangelo.ppt)  
Michelangelo (PowerPoint)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=INFxHm-WT68](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INFxHm-WT68)  
Michelangelo Private Life of a Masterpiece (video). From the BBC, this 41-minute video might be too long for some in-class showings, but it is well worth it. It details how the David was created. Highly recommended for both students and teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8ChAfzWaYg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8ChAfzWaYg) (part 1)  
The Divine Michelangelo – Part One (video) – This BBC documentary (2 hours long for both parts) is highly recommended as an out-of-class activity for all students and teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGa\\_2L76J3c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGa_2L76J3c) (part 2)  
The Divine Michelangelo – Part Two (video) – This BBC documentary (2 hours long for both parts) is highly recommended as an out-of-class activity for all students and teachers.

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelangelo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelangelo)  
Michelangelo – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_\(Michelangelo\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_(Michelangelo))  
David (Michelangelo) – Wikipedia article



- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/florence](https://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence)  
On the Road: Florence – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/florence\\_sightseeing](https://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence_sightseeing)  
On the Road: Florence Sightseeing – from Passports Educational Travel

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-botticelli-birth-of-venus)  
Renaissance Florence – Botticelli: Birth of Venus
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-brunelleschi-dome-on-the-duomo)  
Renaissance Florence – Brunelleschi: Dome of the Florence Duomo
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-donatello)  
Renaissance Florence – Donatello
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-giotto-father-of-renaissance-art)  
Renaissance Florence – Giotto
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-machiavelli-the-prince)  
Renaissance Florence – Machiavelli: The Prince
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-medici-family)  
Renaissance Florence – Medici Family
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-michelangelo-david)  
Renaissance Florence – Michelangelo: The David
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-verrocchio)  
Renaissance Florence -- Verrocchio
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-florence-leonardo-overview)  
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/renaissance-europe-leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa)  
Renaissance Europe – Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-italy-leonardo-last-supper)  
Renaissance Italy – Leonardo da Vinci: The Last Supper
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-last-judgment)  
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Last Judgment
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-sistine-chapel-ceiling)  
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel Ceiling
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-michelangelo-pieta)  
Renaissance Rome – Michelangelo: The Pieta
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/renaissance-rome-raphael-school-of-athens)  
Renaissance Rome – Raphael: School of Athens

## Key Terms

- Apprentice
- Biblical David
- Carving
- Florentine
- Michelangelo
- Renaissance
- Sculpture

