

**RENAISSANCE ROME:  
MICHELANGELO: PIETA**



# RENAISSANCE ROME: MICHELANGELO: PIETA

## 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 Renaissance art, how his famous sculpture, *Pieta*, was created, and why the statue is considered by many to be the greatest sculptural work of the Roman Renaissance.

## Subjects

Art, European History, World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

## Essential Questions

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

## 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 Buonarroto 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.

... TO THIS WORK let no sculptor, however rare a craftsman, ever think to be able to approach in design or in grace, or ever to be able with all the pains in the world to attain to such delicacy and smoothness or to perforate the marble with such art as Michelangelo did therein, for in it may be seen all the power and worth of art. Among the lovely things to be seen in the work, to say nothing of the divinely beautiful draperies, is the body of Christ; nor let anyone think to see greater beauty of members or more mastery of art in any body, or a nude with more detail in the muscles, veins, and nerves over the framework of the bones, nor yet a corpse more similar than this to a real corpse. Here is perfect sweetness in the expression of the head, harmony in the joints and attachments of the arms, legs, and trunk, and the pulses and veins so wrought, that in truth Wonder herself must marvel that the hand of a craftsman should have been able to execute so divinely and so perfectly, in so short a time, a work so admirable; and it is certainly a miracle that a stone without any shape at the beginning should ever have been reduced to such perfection as Nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh. Such were Michelangelo's love and zeal together in this work, that he left his name a thing that he never did again in any other work written across a girdle that encircles the bosom of Our Lady. And the reason was that one day Michelangelo, entering the place where it was set up, found there a great number of strangers from Lombardy, who were praising it highly, and one of them asked one of the others who had done it, and he answered, "Our Gobbo from Milan." Michelangelo stood silent, but thought it something strange that his labors should be attributed to another; and one night he shut himself in there, and, having brought a little light and his chisels, carved his name upon it.

From this work he acquired very great fame, and although certain persons, rather fools than otherwise, say that he has made Our Lady too young, are these so ignorant as not to know that unspotted virgins maintain and preserve their freshness of countenance a long time without any mark, and that persons afflicted as Christ was do the contrary? That circumstance, therefore, won an even greater increase of glory and fame for his genius than all his previous works.

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

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. 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 David in Florence and The Last Judgment.

The Pieta was originally commissioned by Cardinal Jean de Billheres, the French ambassador to the Holy See, to be used as part of his burial monument in the chapel of St. Petronilla (deeper inside St. Peter's Basilica), but was moved to its current location in the 18th century. It now sits in the first chapel to the right as one enters the Basilica. Michelangelo was only 24 years old when he completed the sculpture, a process that remarkably took less than two years. The piece shows Mary, the mother of Jesus, grieving over the body of her son in the moments after he had been removed from the cross. Considered a masterpiece when the artist created it, the Pieta shows that Michelangelo had a remarkable understanding of coaxing emotion from the stone, something for which he would be known throughout his remarkable career. The statue is remarkable for a number of reasons. It is the only one Michelangelo ever signed (his signature was carved into the sash that goes across Mary's chest), a decision supposedly that the artist later regretted and never repeated. Mary is also depicted as a young woman in the piece, leading many faithful Christians to pick up on the idea of her incorruptibility in the years since its creation. Finally, although the sculpture's subject is Christ's death, the artist was able to give both Jesus and Mary a serene look, almost to the point of acceptance, as though all humanity had gained hope and peace through his sacrifice. There are now dozens of replicas of the sculpture around the world.

Any study or analysis of Renaissance art necessitates studying the great artists of the time, and it is natural for many 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 and paintings from the Milan to Rome. Today, there are major works from the artist across Europe in such places as Paris and St. Petersburg. After he died, Michelangelo's works went 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 Renaissance art, how his famous sculpture, *Pieta*, was created, and why the statue is considered by many to be the greatest sculptural work of the Roman Renaissance.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Michelangelo's place in Renaissance 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 famous sculpture *Pieta* was created, why the statue is unique in many ways, and how its construction cemented the twenty-four year old artist's reputation as the greatest sculptor of his age.

## Procedure

### 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 (20 min)
- Video – Michelangelo's *Pieta*: An Analysis (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about Michelangelo. (20 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 society? How and why was his statue *Pieta* created? Why is the statue considered by many to be the greatest sculpture of the Roman Renaissance? (30 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Michelangelo's place in Renaissance art, how his famous sculpture, *Pieta*, was created, and why the statue is considered by many to be the greatest sculptural work of the Roman Renaissance.

## Extension

### On tour: St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

While on tour, students at the Vatican will visit St. Peter's Basilica, where they can see for themselves some of the most famous works of art and architecture in the world, including Michelangelo's *Pieta*. The Basilica itself, rebuilt in the 16th century under various popes, stands at the heart of the Roman Catholic Church. As students enter the immense cathedral, if they will immediately turn their right, the first chapel contains the *Pieta*. It is now behind bulletproof glass. Over the years, the priceless masterpiece has sustained some damage. Four fingers on Mary's left hand were broken moving it in the 18th century. The most serious damage occurred as a result of an attack. In 1972, a mentally disturbed Australian geologist attacked it with a hammer, knocking off Mary's left arm at the elbow, damaging her nose and chipping one of her eyelids before he could be stopped by tourists and bystanders. The work was painstakingly restored, and now sits away from the public. Perhaps students can see Michelangelo's signature on Mary's sash?

## Web Links

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelangelo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelangelo)  
Michelangelo – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieta\\_\(Michelangelo\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieta_(Michelangelo))  
Pietà (Michelangelo) – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/the\\_vatican](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/the_vatican)  
On the Road: The Vatican – from Passports Educational Travel
- [members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariMAngelo.html](https://members.efn.org/~acd/vite/VasariMAngelo.html)  
Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Michelangelo (primary source)
- [www.rome.info/michelangelo/pieta/](http://www.rome.info/michelangelo/pieta/)  
Michelangelo's Pietà (website)
- [www.michelangelo.com/buon/bio-index2.html](http://www.michelangelo.com/buon/bio-index2.html)  
Michelangelo (website)
- [www.italianrenaissance.org/michelangelos-pieta/](http://www.italianrenaissance.org/michelangelos-pieta/)  
Michelangelo's Pietà (website)
- [saintpetersbasilica.org/Altars/Pieta/Pieta.htm](http://saintpetersbasilica.org/Altars/Pieta/Pieta.htm)  
Chapel of the Pietà (website) – from St. Peter's Basilica official website
- [newrenart.com/michelangelo-and-the-pieta/](http://newrenart.com/michelangelo-and-the-pieta/)  
Michelangelo and the Pietà (website)
- [fieldartdiscovery.com/michelangelo.ppt](http://fieldartdiscovery.com/michelangelo.ppt)  
Michelangelo (PowerPoint)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=taV8FTwpPao](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taV8FTwpPao)  
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=JdXmygDQCnc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdXmygDQCnc)  
Michelangelo's Pietà: An analysis (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0IUZ17Au0c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0IUZ17Au0c) (Part 1)  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=JC0mUvScstQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JC0mUvScstQ) (Part 2)  
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.

## **Key Terms**

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



