Caravaggio: The Contarelli Chapel

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) was born in small community called Caravaggio just east of Milan. He first became recognized as a painter of genius in 1602 when he completed a set of three paintings on the life of Saint Matthew for the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. Caravaggio had a ferocious temper and in 1606 he killed a man in a brawl and was banished from Rome. After a period of exile in Malta, Sicily and Naples, he negotiated a pardon. However, in Naples in 1609 he was violently assaulted by his enemies. He died in Porte Ercole as he tried to return to Rome. The portrait by Ottavio Leoni derives from the time when Caravaggio was in Rome at the height of his powers, though it was likely completed later.

Matteo Contarelli

The story begins with Matthieu Cointerel (1519-1585) a French Cardinal who provided support for the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, France’s national church in Rome:

Though construction had started in 1518, all building had been halted during the sack of Rome by mutinous German troops in 1527. The church exterior was not completed until 1589, two years after the death of its benefactor Cointreau. The austere Renaissance façade now contains statues (by Pierre de l'Estache, 18th Century) of the important saints and kings that came from France: Charlemagne and Saint Louis (lower level), Saint Clothilde and Saint Jeanne de Valois (upper level). The interior decoration, much of which was completed in the 18th Century, is far more extravagant than the exterior, tending to Rococo rather than Renaissance. The ceiling has a large fresco showing the apotheosis of Saint Louis by Charles-Joseph Natoire (18th Century).

Saint Matthew

As well as supporting the building, Matteo Contarelli (as he was known in Italy) also provided an endowment for one of the side chapels to be dedicated to his namesake Saint Matthew. Matthew is traditionally considered to be the author of the *Gospel of Matthew* although it is likely that this gospel was written by another person, perhaps a colleague or follower of the Saint (see discussion by Allison, 2004, pp 7-72).

The calling of Matthew (also known a Levi or Alpheus) to be a disciple is mentioned briefly in the three synoptic gospels, though only in the *Gospel of Matthew* (9: 9-13) is he named Matthew:

> And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.
>
> And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples.

> And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?
>
> But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.
>
> But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Although this is the only mention of the saint in the Bible, many legends grew up over the years about his exploits after the life of Jesus. These stories were compiled in Volume 5 of *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine (1275). According to legend, Saint Matthew spread the gospel to the land of Ethiopia. While there he came upon two sorcerers who were using dragons to torment the people. By making the sign of the cross, Matthew tamed the dragons and defeated the sorcerers. He also raised from the dead the daughter (or son) of King Egippus. In return for this miracle, the king's daughter Ephigenia became a nun. After Egippus died, his successor Hirtacus lusted after Ephigenia. Matthew refused to release her from her vows of chastity, and the infuriated king arranged for Matthew to be murdered.

In 1868, Andrea Orcagna (1308-1368) constructed a pilaster for the Church of the Orsanmichele in Florence with scenes from the life of Saint Matthew: on the left are the calling to discipleship, and the taming of the dragons: on the right are the raising of the king's daughter and the martyrdom of the saint; in the center is the writing of the gospel.

In 1587, the executors of Contarelli’s will commissioned Giuseppi Cesari, Cavalier d’Arpino (1568-1640), to provide frescos for the walls and ceiling of the chapel. He painted the barrel vault of the chapel with a fresco showing Matthew raising the king’s daughter from her death bed. On the sides of the vault were two paintings showing anonymous prophets in the style of Michelangelo but without his genius:

Matthew and the Angel

Cesari completed the ceiling in 1593. Financial difficulties delayed his payment, and the Cavalier went on to other projects. In 1587, the executor had also commissioned a sculpture depicting the inspiration of Saint Matthew from Jacques Cobaert (1535–1615) for the altar. However, he experienced great difficulty finishing the sculpture (Hess, 1951). The figure of Matthew alone was finished in 1602, but the priests deemed it incomplete and refused to take it. After Cobaert's death, Pompeo Ferrucci provided the angel to go with Matthew, and the strangely disjointed sculpture now resides in the Church of the Santissima Trinità dei Pellegrini:

In 1599, the financing of the Contarelli Chapel was taken over by the *Fabbrica* (works office) of Saint Peter’s (Graham-Dixon, 2010, p 192). Cesari was offered a contract to complete the chapel, but by then he was too busy. The contract was therefore given to Caravaggio, a protégé of the Cardinal del

Monte. He agreed to complete the side panels by 1600. But he would paint using oil on canvas rather than in situ frescos. Caravaggio did not make preparatory drawings, but painted directly onto the canvas using models posed under carefully controlled lighting. He painted rapidly using a severe chiaroscuro style that came to be known as "tenebrism."

The Calling of Saint Matthew

The first painting Caravaggio completed was *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1600):

Caravaggio has transposed the event to his own time and place.

On the left two people enter a darkened office. One of them has a faint halo: this is Jesus. In front on him, standing between the viewer and the savior is Saint Peter in a dull yellow cloak. From what may be an open window bright light streams diagonally into the office illuminating the faces of a group of five people at a table. There is some ambiguity about who is who (Dubouclez, 2024): I shall follow the interpretation of Graham-Dixon (2010, pp 194-197). The central person with a distinguished beard and a luxurious red and yellow doublet is Matthew Levi, a prosperous tax collector. Counting the money on the table is a rueful taxpayer. Looking over his shoulder through spectacles is an elderly man who appears to be checking the calculations. At Matthew's left shoulder is a young page with a feathered cap and a golden doublet. At the corner of the table with his back to the viewer, dressed elegantly in black and white and wearing a sword, is Matthew's bodyguard (or *bravo*). There is a space at the table: the viewer can imagine himself or herself sitting there.

The group at the table is reminiscent of an earlier painting of Caravaggio: *The Cardsharps* (1597). Paying taxes always seems like being cheated. Both paintings display Caravaggio's mastery of the feathers and fashions of the day.

The difference is the right hand of Jesus. Jesus points to Matthew and says simply, “Follow me.” In the shadows, he holds out his left hand as though beckoning the viewer to join him as well. After his Matthew paintings, Caravaggio seldom returned to the genre subjects of his youth. It was as if he also felt called to a more meaningful life.

If one look carefully at the feet in the shadows on the lower right, we can see that Jesus is turning to leave the office of the tax-collector (Puttfarken, 1998, p 170). He already knows that Matthew will come after him. Matthew appears uncertain about what to do. But if we look at his legs beneath the table, we note that he is already turning toward Jesus:

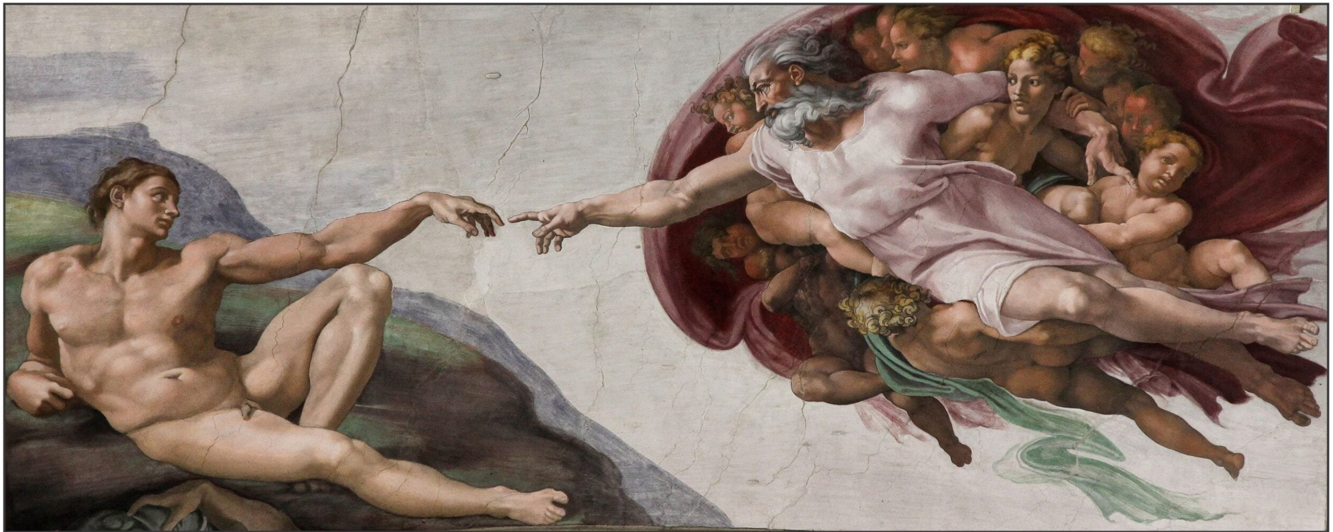
> Matthew, in his wine-dark velvet hat, points to his own chest as if to say “Who, me?,” but underneath the table where they sit his legs have already answered the call long before the message has reached his brain. We can see Matthew’s legs because Caravaggio has omitted one leg of the table. In the real world, it would crash to the ground. In the world Caravaggio has created, we barely notice: we are too absorbed in the dilemma of an ordinary man whose mind lags behind his heart. (Rowland, 2024, pp 3-4)

The following illustration shows on the left the legs of Matthew (and the absent table leg), on the upper right the hands of Jesus and on the lower right the feet of Peter and Jesus:

Jesus’ right hand is copied from Michelangelo:

> The shrouded gesture of Christ, the most noteworthy single motif in Caravaggio’s picture, is a studied quotation from Michelangelo’s most famous image, the *Creation of Adam* on the Sistine ceiling. Christ’s oddly limp right hand, seen as if stopped by the camera, mirrors that of Michelangelo’s inert Adam, who is about to be invested with life by God. Christ is the New Adam, and “as in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life” (I Corinthians 15:22). Caravaggio was no Michelangelo, yet we may see here a kind of identification, perhaps the first that Michelangelo Merisi made with his great predecessor and namesake. (Hibberd, 1983, pp 97-99).

The following illustration shows Michelangelo’s 1511 painting with an expanded view of the hands of God and Adam, and Caravaggio’s hand of Jesus, the mirror image of the hand of Adam:



The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew

The contract for the painting was very specific:

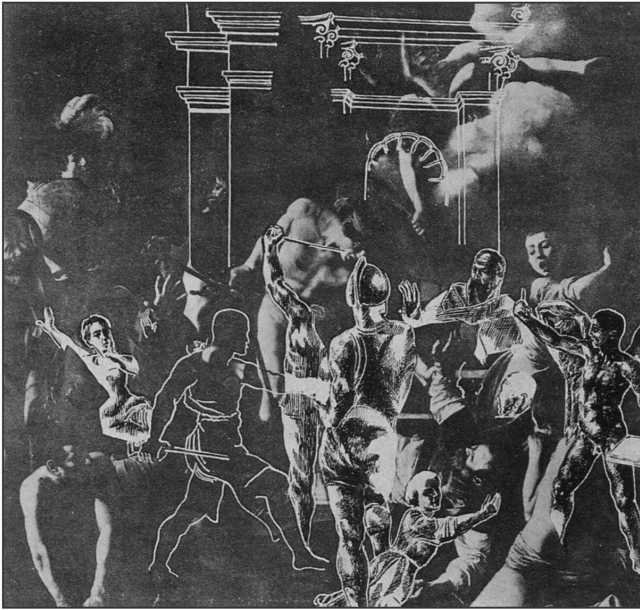
> a long wide space in the form of a temple, with an altar raised up on the top of three, four, or five steps: where St Matthew dressed in vestments to celebrate the mass is killed by the hands of soldiers and it might be more artistic to show the moment of being killed, where he is wounded and already fallen, or falling but not yet dead, while in the temple there are many men, women, young and old people, and children, mostly in different attitudes of prayer, and dressed according to their station and nobility, and benches, carpets, and other furnishings, most of them terrified by the event, others appalled, and still others filled with compassion (quoted in Graham-Dixon, 2010, p 194)

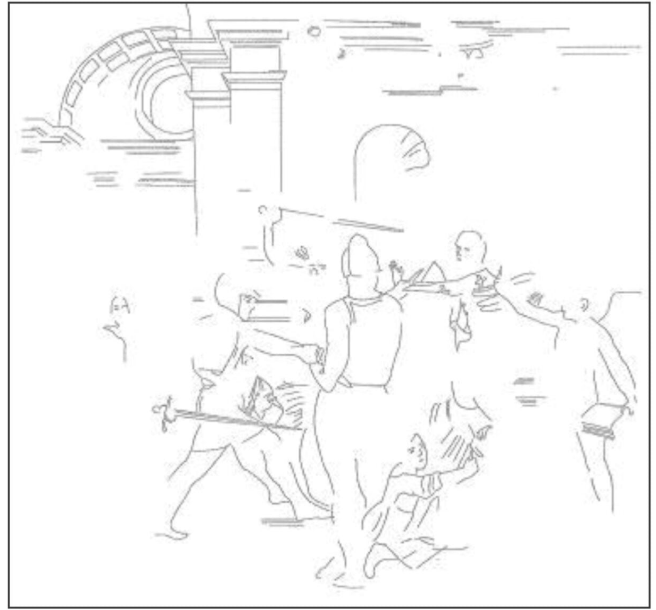
Caravaggio had no previous experience with painting more than three or four people together. He experienced great difficulty with the *Martyrdom*. Radiographic studies revealed pentimenti with a design completely different from the final painting. It is likely that Caravaggio had begun *The Martyrdom* before *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, given up and then returned to it after the latter was completed.

In his original effort, Caravaggio took pains to depict the altar and the temple, and outlined three assassins. The focus of the picture was a helmeted assassin with his back to the viewer. Saint Matthew is shown falling under the blows of his executioners. Caravaggio realized that this design was not working. Saint Matthew's death was not at the center; everything was far too crowded; the central assassin was faceless.

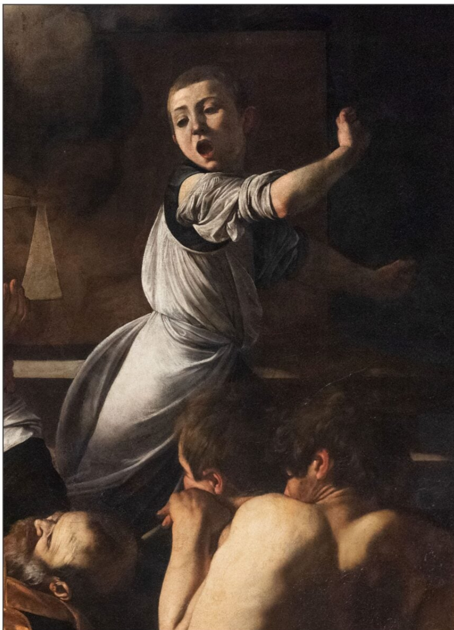
He decided to start over. He opened up the center of the painting to show the dying Saint Matthew who has fallen to the ground. Members of the congregation turn away from the horror of his murder. Some are without clothes – probably about to be baptized. The artist himself is portrayed in the background watching the martyrdom with a combination of terror and pity. An angel reaches out to the saint to give him a palm branch, symbol of salvation and eternal life. There is now only one assassin and he faces the viewer. He is almost naked. He exudes rage.

The following illustration shows the pentimenti of the earlier versions of the painting (Camiz, 1990; Olson, 2002; Vodret-Adamo, 2011, p 73). There were several aborted attempts to portray the architecture of the temple. Caravaggio soon realized that he was not interested in architecture: most of his later paintings use a background of either dark shadows or bare walls.



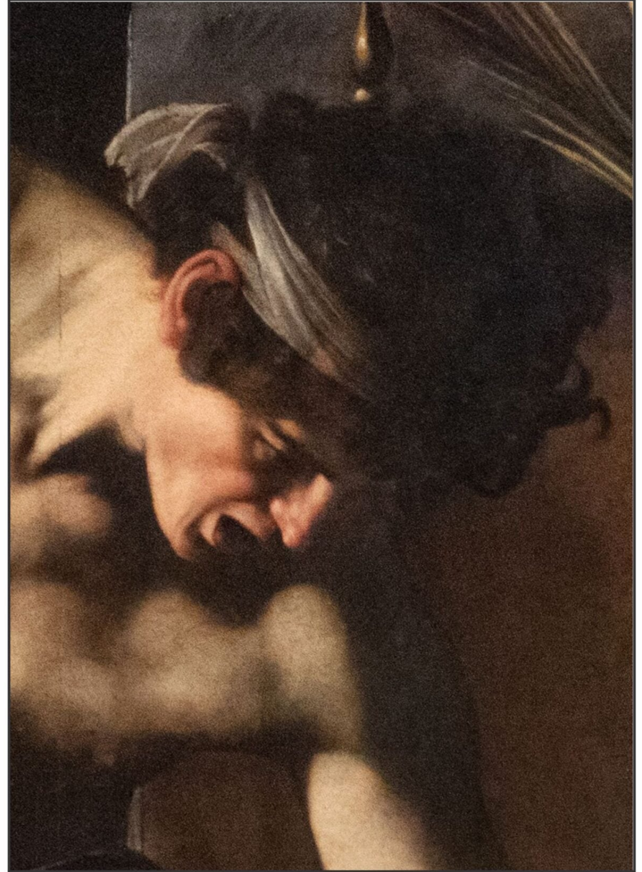


The figure on the right of the altar boy recoiling from the murder of the saint derives from Titian’s 1529 painting of *The Assassination of Saint Peter of Verona*, which Caravaggio has likely seen in the form of a 1560 etching by Martino Rota:



The imposing body of the assassin is reminiscent of Michelangelo’s Adam in *The Creation of Adam* (1511) in the Sistine Chapel (Clayton website).

The head of Caravaggio and the head of the assassin look down in parallel on the dying saint, one in the shadows with pity and one in the light with anger:



The Inspiration of Saint Matthew

In 1602, after Contarelli’s executors had refused Cobaert’s incomplete sculpture of *Saint Matthew and the Angel*, they asked Caravaggio to produce a painted version for the altar (Graham-Dixon, 2010, pp 234-237). Caravaggio’s first version of *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew* portrayed the saint as an old man who appears not to comprehend what is going on as a youthful angel guides his hand. The writing on the tablet shows the Hebrew version of the opening two verses of Matthew’s gospel (Lavin, 1974).

> The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
>
> Abraham begat …

Lavin (p 64) notes that this represents the transition between Old and New Testaments:

> The lineage of salvation has been announced, the founding father has been named and his seed is being sown. The light of a new age has dawned.

The Hebrew gospel is an intriguing idea. Saint Matthew was certainly Jewish and, if he was the author of the gospel that bears his name, he would probably have written it in Hebrew. However, as far as we know, the original version was in Greek, perhaps compiled by a follower of Matthew rather than by Matthew himself.

The following shows a black-and-white photograph of the painting, which was destroyed by fire in Berlin in 1945, together with an enlargement of the saint’s writing and the Hebrew text (from Lavin, 1974).

ספר תולדות ישוע המשיח

בן דוד בן אברהם:

אברהם הול

Jesus chose his disciples from ordinary people and Caravaggio wanted to show Matthew as a “simple man stunned by the directness of his revelation” (Graham Dixon, 2010, p 236):

> Perhaps the most touching aspect of the painting is the intimacy of the relationship between the stooped saint and the tender young angel, whose wings enfold the whole scene in a hushed embrace. The angel is God’s messenger but also the embodiment of Christian love – a love so generous that it encompasses even those as ragged and gnarled as the cross-legged, doltish St Matthew.

The most striking aspect of Caravaggio’s Matthew is his humility. Thomas (1985) quotes from a description of Matthew by Lazius (1555):

> Even though he was most learned, yet he was not at all exalted, but in accord with the meaning of his name, truly strove to present himself as humble and lowly. He would always remark that, “to whatever degree you are great, so much more be you humble in all things.” And this to the wise man: “disgrace follows the proud, but exaltation follows the humble” . . . as a pauper himself he followed Christ the pauper.

The name Matthew in Hebrew means “gift of God” (*Matityahu*). The gospel was not created by him but given from God.

However, the priests were dismayed by the portrayal of Matthew as a holy fool rather than an inspired saint, and refused the painting. One of Caravaggio’s patrons was happy to take the rejected canvas. He was also able to convince the priests as San Luigi dei Francesi to allow Caravaggio to create another version. In the second version, the saint was far more distinguished, albeit still barefoot:

> Matthew the shockingly illiterate peasant has suddenly been turned into Matthew the dignified, grey-haired sage. This scholar-saint kneels at his desk, quill pen at the ready. He is draped in red robes and has been equipped with an expression of dignified attentiveness. Rather than guiding his uncertain hand, the angel now counts off the verses as

> he dictates them. The pages of the book are no longer visible, but since the angel has got to the index finger of his left hand – number two, in the gestural rhetoric of the time, since Italians counted the number one with their thumbs –it seems that he has once more got to the start of the second verse, and Abraham’s begetting of Christ’s lineage. (Graham-Dixon, 2010, p 237).

Lavin (1974) compares Caravaggio’s two versions:

> In the first version the divine word was conveyed mechanically through a laborious and earthbound process of physical instruction to a humble proletarian whose chief virtue lay in his knowledge of his own ignorance. In the second version it is conveyed miraculously to a stunned intellectual through a heaven-sent process of strictly rational analysis and exposition. Again, the key to the irony lies in the divine mystery itself, which brings truth to him who is wise, be he ignorant or learned.

The background is almost completely dark. The figures spiral around each other: divine forces binding the saint to the angel. The saint's robe is pulled down by gravity; the angel's robe billows upward toward heaven.

The table at which Matthew is writing is askew, and the bench upon which he kneels threatens to tumble out of the picture frame. This feeling of imminent upset fits with the revolutionary message of the gospel.

Lavin (1974) points out how Caravaggio was indebted to Tintoretto's *The Virgin Appearing to Saint Jerome* (1583) which Caravaggio has probably seen in a 1588 etching by Agostino Carracci. And Caravaggio's painting in its turn inspired Guido Reni's 1635 depiction of Saint Jerome. The illustration shows the earlier etching on the left and later painting on the right:

However, no one – before or after – could ever rival Caravaggio’s airborne angels. Young and sensuous. they float lightly in the clouds as erotic representatives of the divine. The following illustration compares the angels in the *Inspiration* and the in the *Martyrdom*.

Farewell

Caravaggio's paintings for the Contarelli Chapel made him famous. They also represented a turning point in his choice of subject matter. From then on, he concentrated on religious themes. It was almost as though, like Matthew, he had been called to greater things. To see the chapel and the paintings is a deeply moving experience. But hard to describe, just as the chapel is notoriously difficult to photograph. We say farewell with a photograph by Robert Wash.

And the ending to a poem about *The Calling of Saint Matthew* by Karen Fish (2021, p 29)

> Only a few ways to describe what actually happened—Matthew
> touches his chest, indicating a confusion
> with this unlikely enlistment.

His companions slouch, dumbfounded amid
the flush and feathers and swords.
There is the humble disbelief
all who are chosen share—that moment
when the world seems just a pile of hammers,
hatchets, buckets of coins—one
thinks plainly *how unlikely*,
absolved from all that is ordinary.

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Michelangelo: The Late Pietàs

Toward the end of his life, Michelangelo (1475-1564) attempted to sculpt a marble representation of the *Pietà* – the moment when Christ’s lifeless body is taken from the cross and held by his mother. In this endeavour he was returning to the subject of the sculpture that first brought him fame – the *Rome Pietà* of 1499. The ageing sculptor was unable to complete his task. One of his efforts – the *Florentine Pietà of* – he broke into pieces in 1555. A second attempt – the *Rondanini Pietà* – was still unfinished when he died in 1564. Both sculptures have an intense emotional power.

The Deposition

The gospels provide only a few details about what happened between the death of Jesus on the cross and his entombment. Joseph of Arimathea requested permission from Pilate to bury the body. After the body was taken from the cross, Nicodemus helped to anoint the body with spices in preparation for burial. The body was then placed in an empty tomb, which was sealed with a great stone before the dawn of the Sabbath.

As the centuries passed, believers filled in what must have happened in those hours. Christian iconography describes four episodes. The body is taken down from the cross: the *Deposition*. Then Mother Mary, the disciples, and various angels weep over the body: the *Lamentation*. After this period of general grief, Mary alone holds her dead son in her arms: the *Pietà*. The body is then anointed and placed in the Tomb: the *Entombment.*

The following is a description of the Deposition from an anonymous 14th-Century *Meditations on the Life of Christ,* popular in Italy in Michelangelo's time:

> Two ladders are placed on opposite sides of the cross. Joseph ascends the ladder placed on the right side and tries to extract the nail from His hand. But this is difficult, because the long, heavy nail is fixed firmly into the wood; and it does not seem possible to do it without great pressure on the hand of the Lord. Yet it is not brutal, because he acts faithfully; and the Lord accepts everything. The nail pulled out. John makes a sign to Joseph to extend the said nail to him, that the Lady might not see it. Afterwards Nicodemus extracts the other nail from the left hand and similarly gives it to John. Nicodemus descends and comes to the nail in the feet. Joseph supported the body of the Lord: happy indeed is this Joseph, who deserves thus to embrace the body of the Lord! Then the Lady reverently receives the hanging right hand and places it against her cheek, gazes upon it and kisses it with heavy tears and sorrowful sighs. The nail in the feet pulled out, Joseph descends part way, and all receive the body of the Lord and place it on the ground. The Lady supports the head and shoulders in her lap, the Magdalen the feet at which she had formerly found so much grace. (translation Ragusa & Green, 1961).

In the 1520s (or perhaps later), Michelangelo made a drawing

of *The Deposition* that is now in the Teyler Museum in Haarlem (Nagel, 1995). A small gesso relief now in the Victoria and Albert Museum was likely derived from the drawing by one of Michelangelo's students or apprentices (Chapman, 2005):

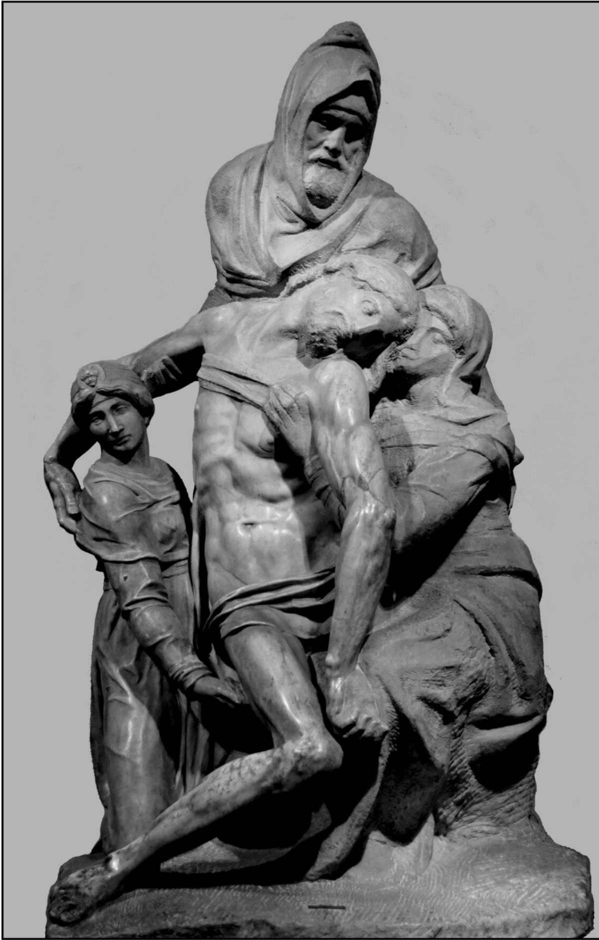
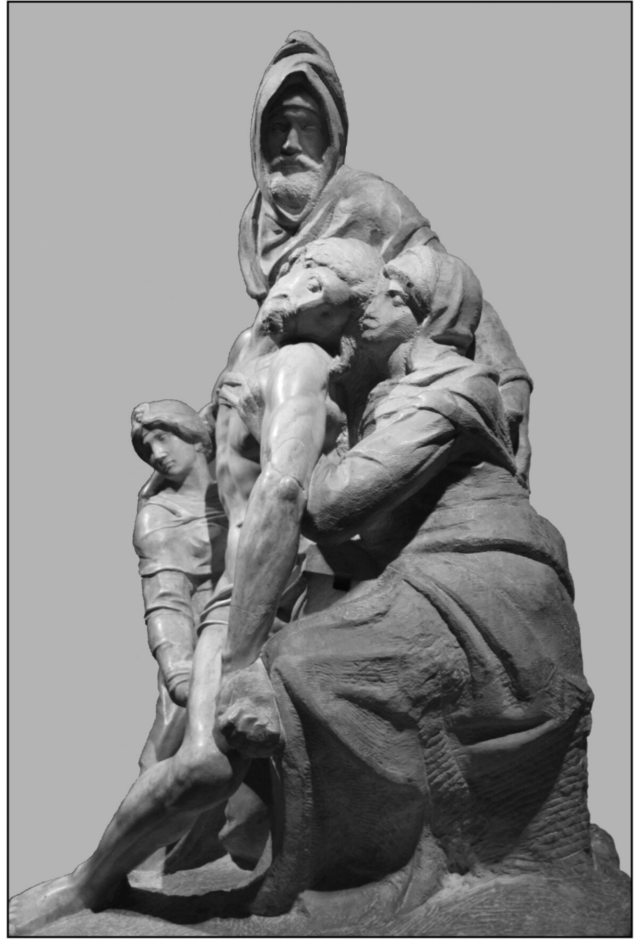
The Florentine Pietà

After completing *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel in 1541, and the frescos of *The Crucifixion of Peter* and *The Conversion of Paul* in the Pauline Chapel in 1549, Michelangelo wished to return to sculpture, and he soon began work on what later became known as *The Florentine Pietà.* At this time Michelangelo was 75 years old. Sculpting was demanding work even for a young man. Nevertheless, he had become fascinated by the Greek statue of *Laocoön and his Sons* that had been unearthed in Rome in 1506. This work, likely sculpted in the 1st-Century CE, portrayed three interacting figures. Michelangelo wished to see whether he could carve four interacting figures in the round, and whether he could surpass

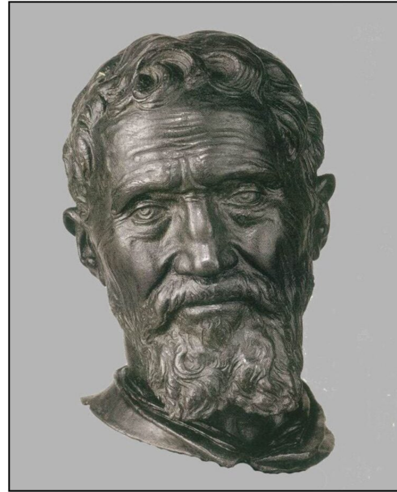
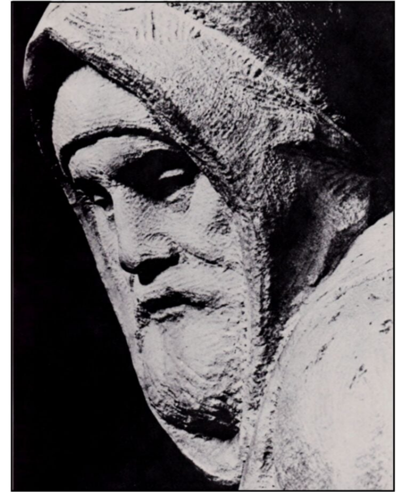
the ancients by using only one block of marble for this. According to Vasari (1568/1965):

> The spirit and genius of Michelangelo could not remain idle; and so, since he was unable to paint, he set to work on a piece of marble, intending to carve four figures in the round and larger than life-size (including a dead Christ) to amuse and occupy himself and also, as he used to say himself, because using the hammer kept his body healthy. This Christ, taken down from the cross, is supported by Our Lady, by Nicodemus (planted firmly on his feet as he bends down and assists and by one of the Marys who also gives her help on perceiving the failing strength of his mother, whose grief makes the burden intolerable. Nowhere else can one see a dead form compare with this figure of Christ; he is shown sinking down with his limbs hanging limp and he lies in an attitude altogether different not only from that of any other of Michelangelo's figures but from that of any other figure ever made. This work, the fruit of intense labour, was a rare achievement a single stone and truly inspired; but, as will be told later on, it remained unfinished and suffered many misfortunes, although Michelangelo had intended it to go at the foot of the altar where he hoped to place his own tomb.

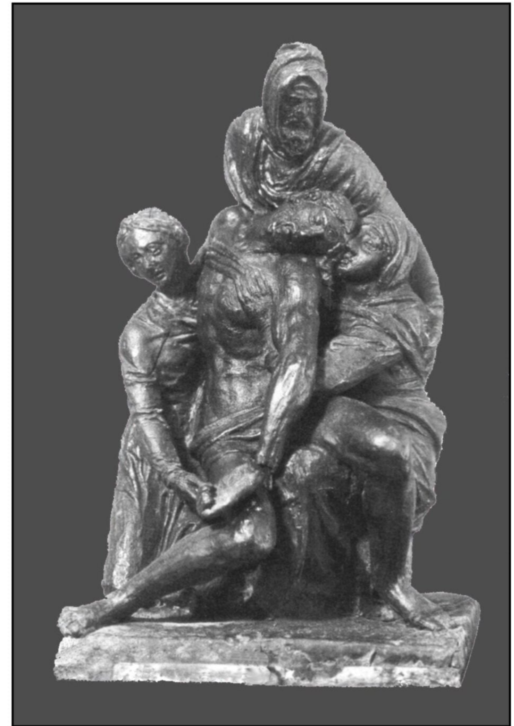
The illustration below shows the sculpture as viewed from the front and from the right. It probably represents the lowering of Christ's body from the cross: a *Deposition* rather than a true *Pietà* (Fehl, 2002). However, as Finn and Hartt (1975) point out, the Italian word *pietà,* with its double meaning of "pity" and "piety," accurately conveys the emotional power of the work.

Christ’s lifeless body is gently lowered from the cross by Nicodemus. Tuscan legends describe Nicodemus as the sculptor who had originally carved the *Volto Santo* (Sacred Face) in the Cathedral of Lucca, bought there from the Holy Land in the 8th Century CE. Vasari pointed out that the face of Nicodemus in Michelangelo’s sculpture was a self-portrait. The following illustration compares it to a 1545 portrait of Michelangelo, and to a 1560 bust, both by Daniele de Volterra:

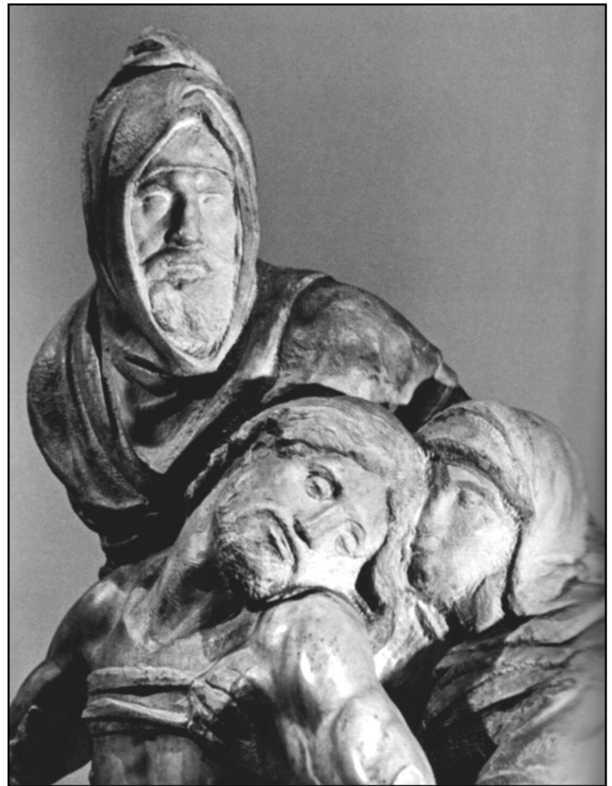
 

Michelangelo worked on the sculpture for several years, but could not make it conform to what he envisioned. The first problem was with Christ’s right leg, which was meant to rest on the lap of the Virgin Mary. The leg did not sit right. Exasperated, he broke the leg off. A later wax model of the sculpture (below, right) shows where the leg would have been. Other problems with the sculpture were that the face of the Virgin Mary was too close to the edge of the marble block to finish properly, and that the figure of Mary Magdalen had to be made smaller than desired. Finally, in 1555, a frustrated Michelangelo broke off the both arms of Christ and the left arm of Mother Mary. The pieces (except for Christ’s leg which has never been found) are shown in the illustration below (left) from a virtual model of the sculpture (Bernardini et al., 2002; Wasserman et al., 2003):



Michelangelo gave the damaged sculpture to his servant Urbino, who sold the pieces to the banker Francesco Bandini. Bandini arranged for Tiberio Calcagni to put the sculpture back together as best he could. Calcagni finished the face of the Magdalen, but not the other figures, which remain as Michelangelo left them. The Florentine Pietà is currently in the Museum of the Cathedral of Florence.

Although maimed, the sculpture still has a tremendous emotional power. This resides mainly in the beautifully sculpted body of the Christ, and in the interaction between the heads of Nicodemus, Christ and the Virgin Mary (the latter from Garoglio et al, 2018):



The Rondini Pietà

A little while after giving away his failed Pietà, Michelangelo started to create another sculpture on the same theme. Some preparatory sketches, now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, are illustrated on the right (Murray, 1980). Michelangelo restricted the new sculpture to just two figures: the Virgin Mary and Christ. The two figures seem to be

floating upward toward heaven rather than grounded in the world. The arrangement not realistic: Mary could not support the lifeless body of her son in this manner. The sculpture seems rather to represent the yearning for union between mother and son, a lifelong concern of Michelangelo, who had lost his mother when he was 6 years old.

Initially, the head and torso of Christ would likely have been similar to that of *The Florentine Pietà*, as suggested by Veres (2019) in the illustration on the right. Michelangelo may have thought the body of Christ too heavy, or perhaps the marble was flawed. Whatever the reason, he erased much of the original body and separated it from its beautifully carved right arm. The head of Christ was removed and recarved in the shoulder of the Virgin.

Irving Stone (1961) imagines:

> He rose, picked up his heaviest hammer and chisel and removed the head of Christ, carving a new face and head from what had been the Virgin's shoulder. He then dissected Christ's right arm from the body, just above the elbow, though the detached arm and hand remained as part of the supporting marble that went down to the base. What had previously been the left shoulder and part of the chest of

> Christ he converted into the left arm and hand of the Virgin. Christ’s magnificent long legs were now out of proportion, constituting three fifths of the entire body. The new attenuation created an emotional effect of limpidity, youth and grace. Now he began to be satisfied. Through the distortion of the elongated figure he felt that he had achieved a truth about man: the heart might tire but humanity, carried on its ever-young legs, would continue t move across the face of the earth.

Michelangelo kept the isolated arm, probably as a model for recarving the arm more posteriorly. Two parallel arms can be seen when viewing the sculpture from the left. Michelangelo worked on the sculpture right up to his death, but it remained unfinished:

Barricelli (1993) describes the final form of the sculpture:

> Two disquieting figures, not without fear, groping their way out of stone, suggesting in Christ’s upright yet falling pose that death is not a final solution; his feet set outward, in no way sustaining his legs which pull with them a body that clings to the rock as to its sole security. He can neither stand nor fall, breathe nor expire; he shrinks away from his previous vital arm and shows legs that do not seem to belong to his chest, and above these limbs he presents a distorted, unformed face. Here anguish makes no sound, and, except for her eyes, Mary is mute. Her eyes, though, relate a long and painful story; her arm and hand are not poised in an act of giving.

After Michelangelo’s death, his final Pietà somehow wound up in the Palazzo Rondanini in Rome, and has since then been known as *The Rondanini Pietà.* It is presently housed in the Sforza Castle in Milan.

The Poetry

At the height of his fame, Michelangelo believed that he could accurately depict the human body in marble. Time might later distort the representation, but, even then, one would still be able to see what he had perceived. The following is an unfinished sonnet from 1545:

> Molto diletta al gusto intero e sano
> l’opra della prim’arte, che n’assembra
> i volti e gli atti, e con più vive membra,
> di cera o terra o pietra un corp’ umano.
>
> Se po’ ’l tempo ingiurioso, aspro e villano5
> la rompe o storce o del tutto dismembra,
> la beltà che prim’era si rimembra,
> e serba a miglior loco il piacer vano.

> To one whose taste is healthy and unspoiled, the work of the first art brings great delight: in wax or clay or stone it makes a likeness for us of the face, the gestures, the whole

human body, and indeed gives greater life to the body's members.

If destructive, harsh and boorish time then breaks, distorts or dismembers such a work, the beauty which first existed is remembered, and keeps for a better place the pleasure that here proved vain. (# 237, translation, Ryan, 1996)

A few years later, Michelangelo became more aware of his limitations. No longer was he able to represent in marble what he had envisioned. The following is one of his last poems:

Giunto è già 'l corso della vita mia
Con tempestoso mar per fragil barca
Al comun porto, ov' a render si varca
Giusta ragion d'ogni opra trista e pia:

Onde l'affettuosa fantasia,
Che l'arte si fece idolo e monarca,
Conosco ben quant' era d'error carca;
Ch' errore è ciò che l'uom quaggiù desia.

I pensier miei, già de' mie' danni lieti,
Che fian or, s' a due morti m'avvicino?
L'una m' è certa, e l'altra mi minaccia;

Nè pinger nè scolpir fia più che queti
L'anima volta a quell' amor divino,
Ch' aperse a prender noi in croce le braccia.

My life's journey has finally arrived, after a stormy sea, in a fragile boat, at the common port, through which all must pass to render an account and explanation of their every act, evil and devout.

So I now fully recognize how my fond imagination which made art for me an idol and a tyrant was laden with error, as is that which all men desire to their own harm.

What will now become of my former thoughts of love, empty

> yet happy, if I am now approaching a double death? Of one I am quite certain, and the other threatens me.
>
> Neither painting nor sculpting can any longer quieten my soul, turned now to that divine love which on the cross, to embrace us, opened wide its arms. (# 285, translation, Ryan, 1996)

(The "double death" is of the body and of the soul. The body must grow old and die; the soul is destined for annihilation without the grace of God.)

Non Finito

During his lifetime, Michelangelo left several works in an unfinished (*non finito*) state: most importantly, the four *Slaves/Prisoners* originally sculpted for the tomb of Pope Julius II, and currently in the Accademia Museum in Florence. Many have suggested that Michelangelo deliberately left these incomplete to represent the "eternal struggle of human beings to free themselves from their material trappings" (Accademia website).

However, Michelangelo certainly did not choose to leave his two last *Pietàs* unfinished. He deliberately broke the

Florentine Pietà into pieces. He was still working on the Rondanini Pietà a few days before he died (Bull, 1995). Nevertheless, to the modern eye the defects of these last *Pietàs* add to their beauty. The viewer imagines what the artist sought to portray, but because of physical limitations or the passage of time, was unable to complete.

One of Michelangelo's early sonnets considers the role of the sculptor in releasing an ideal form from unformed matter. He realizes that this activity is directed by some force greater than the artist, who is only a transient intermediary in the process of creation:

> Se 'l mie rozzo martello i duri sassi
> forma d'uman aspetto or questo or quello,
> dal ministro che 'l guida, iscorge e tiello,
> prendendo il moto, va con gli altrui passi.
>
> Ma quel divin che in cielo alberga e stassi,5
> altri, e sé più, col propio andar fa bello;
> e se nessun martel senza martello
> si può far, da quel vivo ogni altro fassi.
>
> E perché 'l colpo è di valor più pieno
> quant'alza più se stesso alla fucina,10
> sopra 'l mie questo al ciel n'è gito a volo.
>
> Onde a me non finito verrà meno,
> s'or non gli dà la fabbrica divina
> aiuto a farlo, c'al mondo era solo.

If my rough hammer, in shaping the hard stones into the form of this or that human appearance, derives its motion from the master who guides, directs and sustains it, then it moves as another would have it do.

But that divine hammer, which lodges and abides in heaven, with its own movement makes others beautiful, and all the more itself; and if no hammer can be made without a hammer,

then every other hammer is made from that living one.

And since every blow is of greater strength the higher the hammer is raised at the forge, this one has flown to heaven above mine.

So mine will remain unfinished for me, if the divine smith will not now give help to make it to him who was on earth my only help. (# 46, translation, Ryan, 1996)

Hibbard (1978) considered the unfinished *Rondanini Pietà* as an indication of Michelangelo’s failing abilities:

> But this final statue is the result of old-age debility, and although it is strangely moving, its interest is chiefly autobiographical. Unlike Michelangelo’s other unfinished works, this is hardly a potential work of art. It is a record of the old man’s solitary need to express something more in stone, his beloved enemy. … The Gothic, formless, anti-physicality of this wreck is unbearably pathetic.

Wallace (2009) presents a far more romantic notion of Michelangelo’s last unfinished work:

> Michelangelo has carved a miracle, transforming stone first into flesh and then into spirit. Sculpture, the most physical of the arts, is made to express the ineffable.

Barricelli (1993) suggests that *The Rondanini Pietà* could never have been completed. It depicts the human need to transcend mortality. And we can never know whether or how such a need will be fulfilled.

In *The Florentine Pietà* the sculptor himself supports the mother and son. In the final *Rondanini Pietà,* the artist is no longer necessary. The sculpture has become a *Resurrection* rather than a *Deposition.* Mary and Jesus rise heavenward by the grace of God. And even if we might now believe in neither God nor Christ, the sculpture still conveys to us the need for

human transcendence.

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