A DISCOVERY OF HUMANITY: THE DIVERSITY OF FACES REFLECT THE DIVERSITY IN GOD

The human face: masterpieces of the Renaissance. Top row, left to right: Pope Julius II *by Raphael;* Simonetta Vespucci *by Botticelli;* Lady in Green *by Bronzino;* Pope Leo X *by Raphael;* Madonna and Child *detail by Pontormo. Second Row:* Mary Magdalene *detail by Titian;* Man and Grandson *detail by Ghirlandaio;* Portrait of King Francis I *by Clouet;* Portrait of a Young Woman *by Titian;* Portrait of a Young Englishman *by Titian. Third Row: Bust of Niccolo da Uzzano by Donatello; detail from* Young Man With an Arrow *by Giorgione;* Portrait of a Young Man *by Botticelli;* Leonardo Loredan, Doge of Venice *by Bellini;* Portrait of a Woman *by Van der Weyden. Fourth Row: Adam from the Ghent Altarpiece by Van Eyck; possible self-portrait of Leonardo da Vinci;* Catherine of Aragon *by Sittow;* Portrait of Giovanni Emo *by Bellini;* Portrait of Burkard *by Dürer. Bottom Row:* Portrait of a Lady, *inspired by Lucrezia Borgia, by Lotto;* Ecce Homo *("Behold the Man") Christ detail by da Messina; Cupid detail from Sistine Chapel;* Madonna and Child *by Raphael;* Portrait of Ranuccio Farnese *by Titian;* Virgin of the Rocks *detail by da Vinci.*

The greatest outpouring of artistic creativity the world has ever seen

In a magnificent conclusion to the Middle Ages, Renaissance Italy looks to God and the ancients to create a world beautiful, profane, and divine

What is man, that thou art mindful of him:
and the son of man that thou visitest him?
Thou madest him lower than the angels:
to crown him with glory and power.
— Psalm 8:4–5

It is no doubt ironic that the painter who touched off the great explosion of beautiful art that defines the Italian Renaissance was an ugly little man. Giotto di Bondone, who like most noted artists became known by a single name, Giotto (pronounced "*Jee-otto*"), was in fact a dwarf who stood no taller than four feet, had a hooked nose, and regarded the world through mismatched eyes: one protuberant, the other sunken. There was, insisted Giorgio Vasari, the sixteenth-century biographer of Renaissance artists, "no uglier man in Florence."[1]

But after being discovered on a Tuscan farm and apprenticed to the then popular Florentine painter Cimabue (pronounced "*Cheema-booay*"), it soon became clear this unprepossessing shepherd boy had a gift. Vasari recounts how the young Giotto painted a fly on a canvas Cimabue was working on with such life-likeness that the master repeatedly tried to flick it away. When Pope Benedict XI expressed an interest in seeing the young prodigy's work, Giotto drew a red circle by hand so perfectly that it looked to have been done with a compass. Soon he was receiving papal commissions to paint frescoes on church walls in Rome and, despite his physical shortcomings, began to enjoy the celebrity status that would become the Renaissance artist's due.

1. Giorgio Vasari was a Florentine painter, sculptor, and architect of the second rank who immortalized himself by more or less reinventing the literary genre of biography and applying it to the artists of the Renaissance in his *Le Vite delle più eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori* (The Life of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects). According to his own twentieth-century biographer, T.S.R. Boase, Vasari "fixed for some two hundred years the general views of Europe about the art of the Renaissance, and some of its influence still lingers about us today. His grading of artistic achievements formed a canon that was long unquestioned, and any artist who escaped his notice has had a retarded progress in finding appreciation."

The statue of Giotto (below) is among the pantheon of depicted artists outside Florence's Uffizi Gallery. An unprepossessing little man, Giotto nonetheless touched off the art of the Renaissance by bringing several new elements to his early fourteenth-century paintings, including the first development of three-dimensional perspective—a quality which can be seen in his Adoration of the Magi *in the Arena Chapel in Padua, which also features a depiction of Halley's Comet doubling as the Star of Bethlehem (right).*

The poet Dante Alighieri, who would praise Giotto's work in his *Divine Comedy* (see chapter 1), became a friend of the humorous little painter. In 1305, when Giotto was completing his most famous work, the frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua that depict the lives of the Virgin and of Christ, Dante stopped by and noticed several of the painter's eight children underfoot. How, joked Dante, could a man who painted so beautifully create such plain children? "Ah," said Giotto, eyes twinkling unevenly, "I made them in the dark."

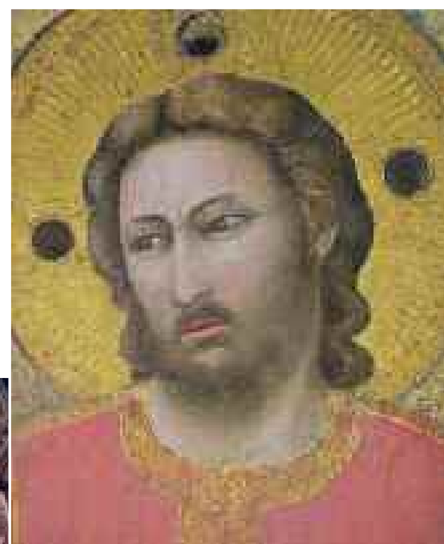
Giotto's art came upon Italy's dawning fourteenth century like a light suddenly turned on in a dark room. The Gothic painting that had prevailed in the preceding two hundred years was all two-dimensional, elongated figures, stiffly posed and with faces (generally in stark profile and with gilded halos) carrying, some said, all the expressiveness of a sundial. The Romanesque, which had preceded the Gothic, was plainer still. And while Giotto's work might look a little crude beside that of his later Renaissance successors, it was nevertheless clear that this Tuscan dwarf was radically transforming the whole manifestation of visual art.

For a start, there was depth; the third dimension was

emerging. Perspective would not be fully understood for another century or more, but Giotto used an algebraic method for calculating the sizes of objects in relation to the eye of the viewer, and this created three-dimensionality. To make his paintings more intimate, he included familiar local landscapes and buildings, and sometimes even added what a later generation might recognize as a journalistic element. In the *Adoration of the Magi* panel in the Arena Chapel, for example, Halley's Comet, which Giotto had seen during its 1301 passage, plays the Star of Bethlehem.[2]

But the most remarkable change was in the people who appear in his paintings: Not only are they solidly three-dimensional; they are decidedly human. Joy, suspicion, shame, desolation, mirth, and anger animate their faces. For instance, in Giotto's *Last Judgment*—considered by many as one of the two best Last Judgments of the Renaissance (the other being Michelangelo's in the Sistine Chapel two centuries later)—the contented blissfully ascend to heaven while the damned hurtle in horror the other way. The Paduans would have gazed up at the walls, delighted or appalled, because the people depicted looked disturbingly

Giotto's Last Judgment, *another of his Arena Chapel frescoes, is shown below with details inset above. It is considered to rank with Michelangelo's* Last Judgment *(done two hundred years later) as the world's best rendering of the subject. Paduans would have gazed up at the walls, delighted or appalled, because the people depicted looked surprisingly like themselves.*



2. Named for Edmund Halley (1656–1742), the English astronomer who calculated its orbit and the intervals between its appearance (about every seventy-five years), Halley's Comet was tracked and photographed in 1986 by a probe launched by the European Space Agency, which they called "Giotto" in honor of the first known depicter of this heavenly body. Although some theologians and astronomers have suggested the comet was the actual Star of Bethlehem, its closest appearance to the Nativity was 12 B.C., and the prevailing belief is that a planetary conjunction guided the magi.

The six panels above and on the facing page, a mere fraction of the multitudinous renderings of Madonna and Child appearing through the Renaissance, show how the skill and the style of painting progressed. From left to right: an unidentified thirteenth-century painting, Giotto's Madonna and Child *from 1305, Masaccio's from 1422, Botticelli's from 1465, Raphael's from 1508, and Veronese's from 1562.*

like themselves. "He painted the Madonna and St. Joseph and the Christ, yes, by all means," wrote the eminent nineteenth-century English art critic John Ruskin, ". . . but essentially Mama, Papa, and Baby."

The vast changes in art, literature, and learning of which Giotto was the herald are known to history as the Renaissance—the rebirth. But the term would not be used as catchall for the entire period until the mid-nineteenth century, when religiously skeptical historians like France's Jules Michelet and the Swiss Jakob Burckhardt used it to denote the rebirth of a superior ancient civilization in Europe following a millennium of barbarism, superstition, and religion that they dismissed as the Dark Ages. This view was revised by historians in the twentieth century, who decided—though certainly not unanimously—that the Renaissance was not a rebellion against the Middle Ages but their flowering and fulfillment. "The Renaissance is not the beginning of the cultural dynamism of western society," writes Charles G. Nauert in *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge UK, 1995), "but rather a highly significant reorientation of an advanced civilization already two or three centuries old."

This reorientation is generally agreed to have occurred in the centuries known as the *quattrocento* and *cinquecento*—the Italian words art historians favor for the 1400s and the 1500s—but there is no doubt it got its artistic and intellectual start in the Florence of the 1300s. For it was in that century that the Florentine poets Petrarch and Boccaccio began examining the pinnacle of God's creation—namely man—and applying to him the intellectual methods of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Thus was born humanism—the phenomenon that would form the intellectual underpinning of the whole Renaissance.

Humanism was not naturally inimical to the faith. From Petrarch onward, virtually all the humanist intellectuals were avowed Christians. And the vast majority of the paintings and sculptures produced, from Giotto all the way through to Michelangelo, showed the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of the faithful. For

humanism, at its best, was the encouragement of man to live up to his full potential as God's highest creation—the creation imagined by the protagonist in Shakespeare's play, who says:

> What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. (Hamlet, Act II, Scene II)

But humanism was not always at its best, and some Christian historians view Renaissance Italy as a way station on the road to perdition. "The Renaissance was not the Middle Ages plus man," wrote the French Catholic historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson in the 1930s, "but the Middle Ages minus God." To be sure, in the centuries following Giotto and Dante, there would be no shortage of trespasses that needed forgiving. But as the American Catholic historian Warren H. Carroll writes: "For all the perversions of the Renaissance into strutting pride and anti-Christian humanism, for all its pervasive and often repulsive immorality, its impetus had been Christian and these its greatest works were profoundly Christian" (*The Glory of Christendom*, Front Royal VA, 1993). And as the artists of the Renaissance—personally imperfect, as all men are—set about capturing God's redeemed animal in paint and marble and bronze, great works appeared.

One reason the Renaissance flowered in Italy was that Italy was rich and relatively peaceful. At the end of the thirteenth century, the northern Italian cities had broken free of the German kings who had tried ruling them as emperors. Instead, they became, for the most part, autonomous republics—enriched by foreign trade, the production of luxury goods, the manufacture of textiles, and banking. These republics would, as Florence did, occasionally revert to monarchy or even tyranny. And sometimes the monarchies and republics would fight one another or find themselves attacked by outside powers such as the French. But in Renaissance Italy such squabbles did not last and were therefore not nearly as devastating as the English war on France or the Ottoman advances into Byzantium.

In fact, the campaigns between the city-states rather improved the economy by stimulating the market for war materials. These little wars established a new type of patron of the arts: the gentleman mercenary, or *condottiere*, whose private armies were hired by the city-states to do their fighting. Condottieri families like the Gonzagas of Mantua or the Sforzas of Milan built big, showy palaces that provided much work for the artisans and artists of the new age.

The richest and most influential families, however, were the bankers. The charging of interest—an activity known as usury, hitherto deemed sinful and prohibited by the church for non-Jews—would slowly be adopted by the city administrators and quietly sanctioned by the Vatican in Rome, for both church and state were learning the benefits of credit. By the 1300s northern Italy had become banker not only to Italians but to all of Europe. King Edward III of England, for example, whose country provided Florence with what was then the best wool in the world for her textiles, financed the first decades of the Hundred Years' War with loans from northern Italian bankers (see chapter 5). Unhappily for the bankers, the king defaulted on his debts and pushed a number of them into bankruptcy. Most bankers, however, collected on their loans and prospered, becoming the powers behind the power in the city-states.

The Medici, the banking family, became the power in politics and the arts in Renaissance Florence, beginning with Giovanni de' Medici (above) whose net worth was said to be equivalent to the annual pay of two thousand woolen workers. His son, Cosimo de' Medici, depicted below in a sixteenth-century portrait by Bronzino and on the face of a gold florin from the mid-1400s, was the first patriarch to seriously patronize the arts. Spending money, he concluded, gave him more pleasure than making it.

The banking family that was the driving force of the Renaissance in Italy—and later of the papacy—was the House of Medici. Their name came from the original family vocation—medicine—but by 1397 their prudent investments in the wool trade had provided the wherewithal to create the Medici Bank. Using the newly developed double entry bookkeeping system, the bank profited from a suite of services that included maritime insurance and money transfers to agents throughout Europe that accommodated traveling customers, including the Vatican.[3] By the early 1400s, Patriarch Giovanni de' Medici was the richest man in Florence, said to be worth the annual pay of two thousand woolen workers. But it was when Giovanni's forty-year-old son, Cosimo, became *gran maestro* in 1434 that the power and influence of the Medici was really felt in Florence and elsewhere.

Cosimo took an active interest in the affairs of both state and church—he'd accompanied the antipope John XXIII to the Council of Constance—and although he claimed to be uninterested in politics

and rarely held public office, he had no need to: his financial clout made his voice heard and enabled the purchase of votes among a limited and mercantile electorate, many of whom were customers of the Medici Bank. Aeneas Sylvius, bishop of Siena and later Pope Pius II, said, "Political questions are settled in [Cosimo's] house. The man he chooses holds office . . . He it is who decides peace and war . . . he is king in all but name." Cosimo and his descendants, in particular his grandson Lorenzo the Magnificent, poured great amounts of money into the arts and humanities, partly to burnish their prestige, partly for the sheer joy of it. "For fifty years," said Cosimo toward the end of his life, "I have done nothing else but earn money and spend money; and it became clear that spending money gives me greater pleasure than earning it."

By building churches and sponsoring great works of religious art, the rich also hoped to derive something more lasting. Giotto's big commission, the Arena Chapel, was paid for by the Paduan nobleman Enrico degli Scrovengni to atone for his father Reginaldo's sin of usury—a practice that in those early days carried a great stigma. (Dante had placed Reginaldo in the seventh circle of hell in the *Inferno*.) From these and other lucrative contracts, Giotto did very well for himself. By the time of his death at seventy in 1337, he was a rich man who owned several estates. Before him, artists had been mere tradesmen, working anonymously in the goldsmithing or stonecutting shops that provided a variety of luxury services to the affluent customer. The homely little dwarf with the prodigious talent had, in a feat of humanist alchemy, turned the role of such tradesmen into that most gilded of Renaissance individuals, the artist.

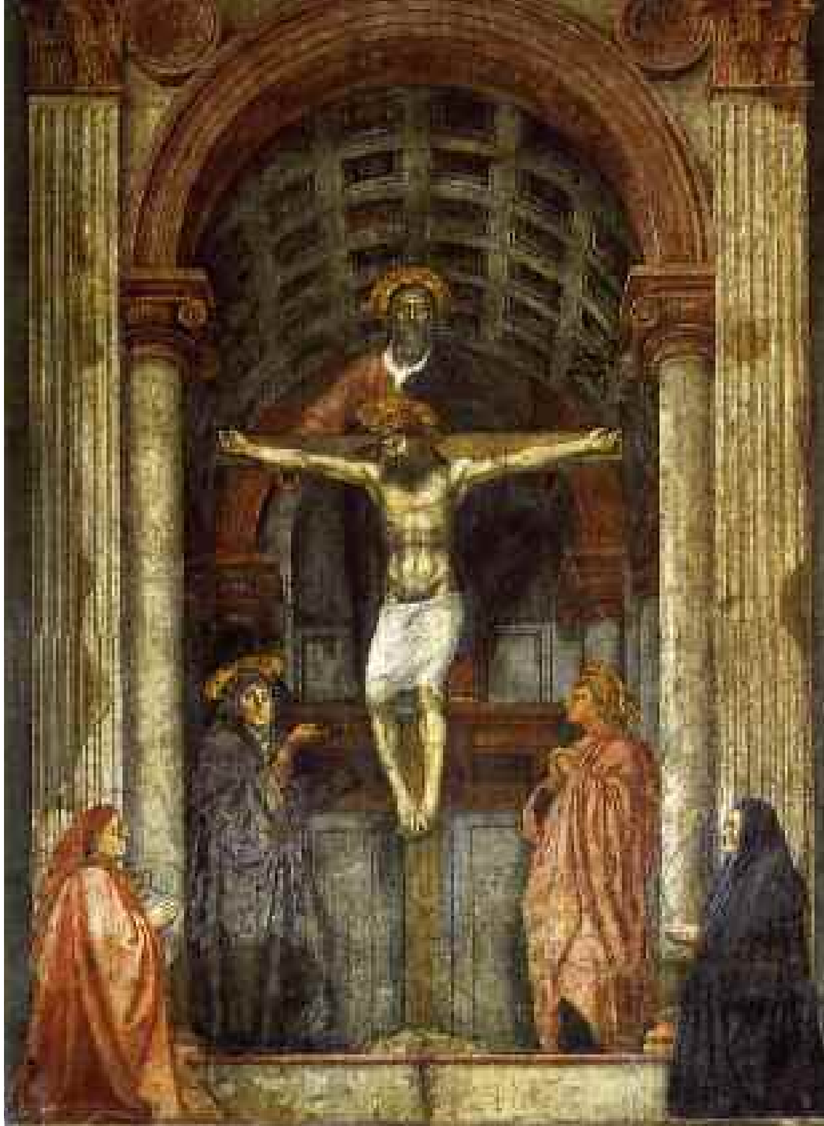
Lorenzo de' Medici—"The Magnificent"—as portrayed by the biographer and artist Giorgio Vasari. His court coincided with the late-quattrocento period that was the High Renaissance and spawned such talents as da Vinci and Michelangelo.

Soon customers were asking for a particular artist by name, and artists competed hard to paint better Madonnas, Last Judgments, Annunciations, Crucifixions, Adorations of Magi, and martyrdoms of favorite saints to earn that particular name—the single name—that brought the big commissions. The chronicler Vasari was the first writer to use the word competition (*concorrenza*) in its economic sense and apply it to the artists. They excelled because they were hungry, he wrote, and it was the fierce competition for commissions that kept them hungry, competition being "one of the nourishments that maintain them."

Artists reveled in their fame—not only signing their work but touting their own genius. A contemporary of Giotto, the early-fourteenth-century sculptor Giovanni Pisano, managed to combine piety, toadying, advertising, and braggadocio in the inscription he attached to an altar in Pisa that he had finished after his father Nicola died. "In praise of the threefold God," Pisano carved, "I link the end with the beginning of this task in one thousand three hundred and one. The chief director and donor of the work is Arnoldus the canon, be he ever blessed. Andreas Vitelli, also Tino son of Vitale . . . are the best of treasurers. Giovanni carved it, who performed no empty works. Born of Nicola but blessed with greater science, Pisa gave him birth and endowed him with learning in visual things."

Sculptors were the kings of Renaissance art. Chronically difficult—the brooding and captious Michelangelo would be the archetype—they worked in the expensive mediums of marble and bronze, producing the most costly, monumental, and identifiably Greco-Roman of objects. The beau monde of Renaissance Italy, fancying themselves successors to the caesars, craved all things Greco-Roman.

3. The Italian Renaissance is credited with developing the double entry bookkeeping system, which by making two records of every transaction helped to ensure the integrity of accounts and to track vast sums of money. Florentine account books that reflect elements of double entry bookkeeping date back to 1211. Many years later, in 1494, the Franciscan monk Luca Pacioli wrote a tome on mathematics that includes thirty-six chapters on double entry bookkeeping as then practiced in Venice, but he makes no claim to have invented the system. Benedetto Cotrugli, a Croatian merchant who lived in Italy, wrote an entire book on the system in 1458, but it was not published until 1573. So Pacioli could correctly claim to have published the first book on double entry bookkeeping.



In his short life, Masaccio took painting to its next level, bringing from the sculptors a new grasp of perspective that was famously demonstrated in the Holy Trinity, *a fresco painted for Florence's church of Santa Maria Novella in the 1420s. The Roman architecture depicted in the triumphal arch and coffered ceiling suggests the influence of the architect Brunelleschi, a friend of Masaccio who spent several years studying the ancient buildings in Rome and developing theories of perspective that would inform all the art that followed.*

Classical painting, at least until Nero's Golden House and its lavish frescoes were uncovered in Rome in the late 1490s, had provided virtually no models for emulation.

Sculptors, on the other hand, were privy to all the Roman architecture and statuary still scattered in ruins of varying deterioration about the Italian countryside. Two intact Roman sculptures—the *Lo Spinario* (a nude adolescent removing a thorn from his foot) and the bronze equestrian statue of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius—had been on display in Rome more or less continuously since their creation in the first and second centuries. Renaissance sculptors were thus able to mimic and expand upon these classic remnants, so establishing themselves as the trendsetters of Renaissance art.

Painters, to an extent, were forced to follow—and often ape—the sculptors in their quest to paint human reality on walls and panels.[4] Masaccio, the early quattrocento painter of *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, is believed to have copied his depiction of Eve from the immodest Pisano's stone pulpit in the Cathedral of Pisa, an early masterpiece of intricate realistic sculpture finished a hundred years earlier. And it had taken until Masaccio for any painter to make any significant progress over Giotto.

Masaccio's given name was Tommaso Cassai, and he was another less-than-gorgeous physical specimen. He was given the nickname Masaccio (pronounced "*Mass-atch-eeo*")—meaning big, fat, and clumsy—by his colleagues in the Florentine painters' guild. He had a pointy face, a weak chin, and a reputation for being a slob, but he was a good-natured slob, had plenty of friends, and possessed a prodigious talent. And brief though this Florentine's life was—he died in 1428 aged twenty-seven, poisoned, says the legend, by a jealous rival—his frescoes and altarpieces took painting to its next level.

It was Masaccio who introduced the *ignudi* (nudes)—the woeful, anatomically convincing Adam and Eve in flight—to the frescoed walls of churches. (Fig leaves would be applied during a burst of moral rectitude in the late seventeenth century.) In his two most celebrated frescoes, the *Holy Trinity* and *Tribute Money*, Masaccio created a new kind of light in his paintings. This light came from a single source, cast shadows, and created in the figures a rounding and softening that added to their three-dimensionality. (A hundred years later, Leonardo da Vinci would use this same technique, called *chiaroscuro*, to greater effect in paintings like the *Mona Lisa*.) Masaccio's perspective is most evident in the *Holy Trinity* in Florence's Santa Maria Novella Church. Christ hangs on a cross supported from

4. Most early Renaissance painting was done on fresh wet plaster (fresco) using egg whites in the paint (tempera) to effect a bright, durable, but somewhat watery colored finish. Altarpieces and other panels were painted with the same kind of paint on wood planks. Oil paint, created by mixing pigments with linseed or walnut oil, and providing more vivid and enduring color, had been described by the early twelfth-century monk Theophilus but did not come to the Renaissance until the Fleming Jan van Eyck revived its use around 1420. Canvas, which takes its name from the Greek word for hemp and was made from hempen sailcloth, was first used by Italian artists around 1500. Canvas's portability made it possible for artists to take it and an easel to the subject, thus starting a boom in portraiture and landscapes.

behind by God the Father, framed inside a painted Roman triumphal arch. The coffered barrel roof of the arch appears to stretch back into the wall of the church, tricking the eye—*trompe l'oeil* is the French term—by means of lines converging toward a vanishing point.

Masaccio picked up this startling advance in realism, along with his classical Roman architectural touches, from a pair of eminent Florentine friends—the architect Filippo Brunelleschi and the sculptor Donato di Niccolo di Betto Bardi (or Donatello). Brunelleschi, a small man of compulsive habit, had a thirst to learn everything he could about architecture. Donatello, the rough-edged son of a humble wool-comber, had no interest in social advancement or education, but could do anything with his hands and lived to create. The two became—according to Vasari—inseparable while working as colleagues in a goldsmithing workshop.

After losing a competition to build the massive bronze doors of the Florence Baptistery to Lorenzo Ghiberti, the thirty-four-year-old Brunelleschi and the seventeen-year-old Donatello traveled to Rome in 1404.[5] There they spent three years scrutinizing and sketching the classical buildings and remains of the city, by now diminished by the long absence of the papacy and the Great Western Schism but still containing many classical marvels, including that most impressive of Roman engineering achievements, the great concrete dome of the Pantheon.

Brunelleschi was characteristically avid in his research. "Neither did he cease from his studies," writes Vasari, "until he had drawn every kind of building, temples round and square and eight-sided, basilicas, aqueducts, baths, arches, and others, and the different orders, Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian, until he was able to

5. Ghiberti spent fifteen years on the massive doors of the Florence Baptistery, whose twenty-eight panels depict New Testament scenes. He then completed two more doors for the cathedral depicting Old Testament stories. Ghiberti had reinvented the Roman lost wax method of casting bronze. Simply put, a wax or clay model is sculpted, then encased in plaster. When the plaster is dry, it is removed from the model, and molten bronze is poured into the negative plaster impression. Ghiberti's magnificent doors, which Michelangelo later dubbed the "Gates of Paradise," made his workshop the most successful of the early 1400s and a training ground for such famous sculptors as Donatello, Uccello, and Pollaiuolo.

Masaccio's Tribute Money *(c. 1427), in the Brancacci Chapel of the church of* Santa Maria della Carmine *in Florence, depicts a scene from St. Matthew's gospel: the arrival of Jesus and the apostles in Capernaum and a visit from the tax collector (Matt. 17:24–27). Along with Masaccio's innovative use of perspective, this painting also demonstrates the* chiaroscuro *technique, whereby a single source of illumination creates light and shadow, softening the contours of the figures to enhance their three-dimensionality—a method that would be exploited to great effect by da Vinci.*

see in imagination Rome as she was before she fell into ruins." Brunelleschi came back from Rome with a new perspective; Donatello came back eager to sculpt.

Brunelleschi's creation was called the one-point perspective—something that is today taken for granted but which at the time was a revelation: lines converging on the horizon at the vanishing point. In 1413 he set up a demonstration by painting a picture of the Baptistery, across from the Florence Cathedral. He set this picture in the doorway of the cathedral, facing the Baptistery, and made in the picture a small hole. He then set up a mirror over at the Baptistery to reflect back the painting. Florentines, looking through the hole in the back of the painting, thus could see the reflection of the painting in the mirror, which, painted to perspective, appeared almost indistinguishable from the real Baptistery.

Masaccio picked up the technique, using it to best effect in his *Holy Trinity*, and soon many a painter was adding a checkerboard floor or a similar kind of grid to his paintings, to provide a perspective guide for the arrangement of figures and objects. Roman architecture, with its rules about the best arrangement of sizes and shapes for structural harmony, also became a regular feature in the paintings. Brunelleschi's friend Leon Battista Alberti would write all this down. Alberti was the original *uomo universale*—the universal man, or what would later be called the Renaissance man—exemplifying the humanist ideal of multifold achievement. He excelled in poetry, theology, playwriting, architecture, mountain climbing, and just about anything he put his active mind to. He took Brunelleschi's ideas on perspective and design, brought in a lot of classical mathematics and geometry from the likes of Euclid and Vitruvius, and produced three books: *On Painting*, *On Sculpture*, and *On the Art of Building*. These books became the bibles for Renaissance artists and architects. And it was Brunelleschi, who was about to emerge as the first of the three greatest Renaissance architects, to whom Alberti dedicated his books.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries Italy had largely ignored the Gothic architecture that had found its perfection in the cathedrals of northern Europe (see volume 7, *A Glorious Disaster,* chapter 2), preferring the forms and methods of classical Rome and Greece—Corinthian columns, roofed and open galleries (*loggia*), triumphal arches, and domes rather than spires. Renaissance architects saw themselves as bringing elements of grace and delicacy into play. Thus Brunelleschi perfected this hybridization in his 1419 orphanage in Florence (*Ospedale degli Innocenti*). It was his first commission, awarded by the philanthropic silk makers' guild that ran the orphanage and to which, as an erstwhile goldsmith, Brunelleschi belonged. The long two-story

A modern photograph of Florence's skyline dominated by the city's famous cathedral, the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, known as La Duomo, which was designed by the architect Brunelleschi and completed in 1436. Inspired by the ancient Pantheon in Rome, Brunelleschi could not use concrete for his dome, as the Roman formula providing adequate strength had been lost. Thus he used four million bricks to construct the 375-foot high dome, which was the largest in the world until St. Peter's in the Vatican was eventually completed.

building, which tempers its Roman form with fragile Corinthian columns fronting a ground floor loggia, is arguably the first true Renaissance building.

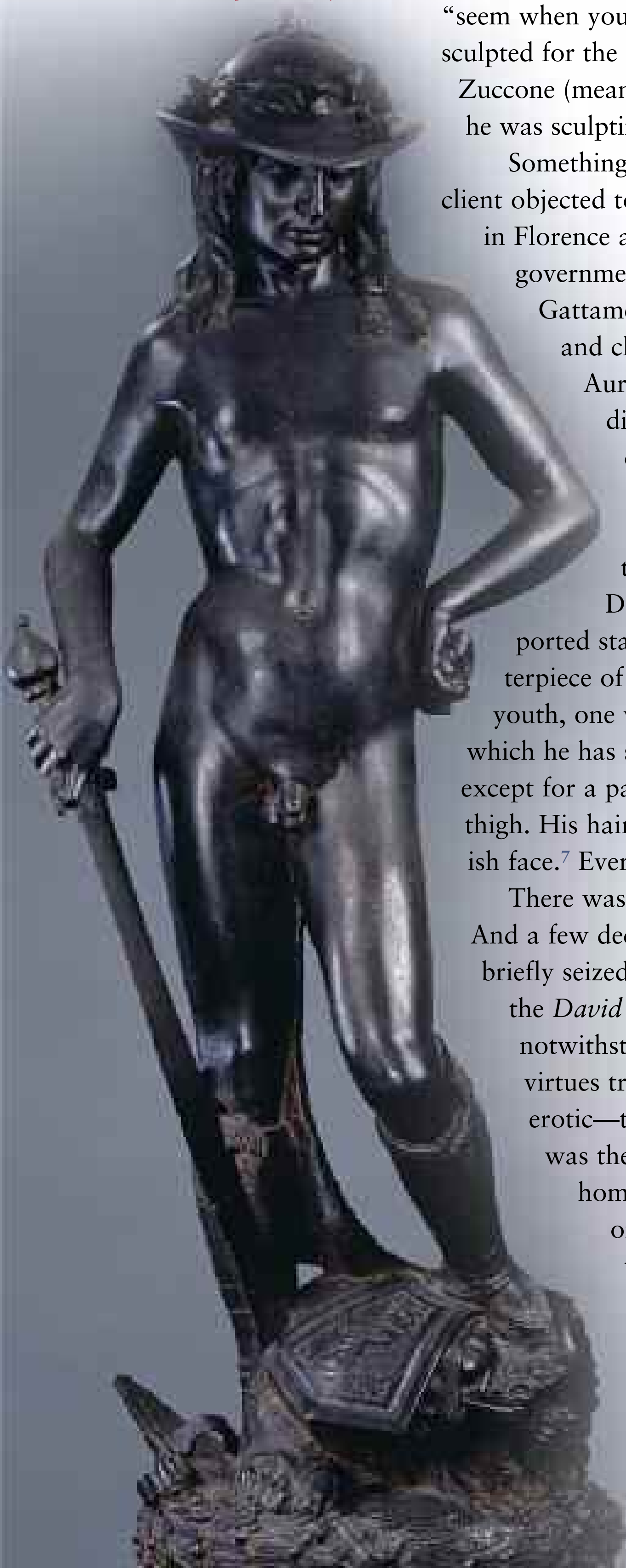
Dominating the Florentine skyline to this day is Brunelleschi's most monumental work: the octagonal, red brick dome of the *Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore*, known simply as *La Duomo* (the Cathedral), completed in 1436 and inspired by the Pantheon in Rome.[6] The cathedral had been completed by 1418 except for the dome. No one had been able to figure out how to build such a massive structure. A contest was held, with the two main competitors Brunelleschi and his old rival Lorenzo Ghiberti. When the consuls judging could not reach a decision, they agreed to a test of skill proposed by Brunelleschi: whoever could stand an egg up on a sheet of marble would be awarded the contract. One by one the architects tried and failed. Finally, Brunelleschi approached the table and smacked the egg down sharply, caving in its end and making it stand. "The architects protested that they could have done the same," writes Georgio Vasari, "but Filippo answered, laughing, that they could have made the dome if they had seen his design."

The interior of La Duomo was frescoed in the sixteenth century by Giorgio Vasari in the trompe l'oeil (trick the eye) style whereby painted objects appear to be part of the three-dimensional architecture. Vasari, left in self-portrait, is considered by art historians to be a second-tier, somewhat derivative painter. His book on the lives of the artists of the Renaissance, however, is first-rate and remains the definitive work on the subject.

Because the Roman formula for concrete strong enough to support such a span had been lost, Brunelleschi had to use bricks—four million of them—for his dome, and he patented both a special hoist to lift them and a river transport vessel to bring them down the Arno. He employed inner and outer skins to make the

6. The Pantheon, built as a temple to all the gods in the first century B.C., rebuilt in the second century A.D., and rededicated as a Christian church in the seventh century, continued until the twenty-first century to possess the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome—a feat accomplished through a complicated process of varying densities of aggregate (gravel) based on heights and stresses. During the Renaissance, the Pantheon began to be used for the tombs of illustrious citizens, including the painter Raphael.

Donatello's monumental sculpture of David was completed for Cosimo de' Medici in 1440 and touched off a controversy that lasted through the century because it was considered homoerotic. Sodomy had become all too common in Florence and provided a target for fiery preachers like Savonarola, who discerned that the age was increasingly amoral. This sculpture, however, was given pride of place in the Medici palace and would be copied, imitated, and admired by all the painters and sculptors who followed.



load lighter and reinforced the thirty-seven-thousand-ton, 375-foot-high structure with metal tension chains. When it was finished, it was the largest dome in the world and would remain so until St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was completed. Alberti wrote of Florence's dome "ascending above the skies, large enough to embrace in its shadow all the people of Tuscany." It was the symbol of Florence's artistic and technological dominance.

Donatello, meanwhile, was emerging as the distinguished sculptor of the quattrocento—if somewhat controversially. Never marrying, he lived simply in a modest house with other artists and their boy apprentices and models, devoting himself mostly to a succession of bas-reliefs and sculptures that, according to Vasari, "seem when you look at them to be alive and move." Of the four figures he sculpted for the facade of the Florence Cathedral, the beardless prophet known as Zuccone (meaning "pumpkin," for his bald head) was a personal favorite. While he was sculpting it, he would look at it and say, "Speak, speak!"

Something of a hothead, Donatello was known to smash his work if the client objected to the fee. Nonetheless, he became the most sought-after sculptor in Florence and beyond. He was commissioned by the Signoria (republican government) of Venice to produce a statue of its great condottiere Gattamelata in Padua. Donatello's rendition of the man on a neighing and chafing horse was the first equestrian statue since the Marcus Aurelius in Rome, and the prototype for countless mounted bronze dignitaries who would proliferate throughout Europe in the coming centuries. Cosimo de' Medici became Donatello's most enthusiastic supporter, and it was Cosimo who, in 1440, commissioned Donatello to sculpt his most celebrated and controversial statue, the bronze *David*.

Donatello's *David*, most art historians agree, was the first unsupported standing figure cast during the Renaissance and the sculptural masterpiece of the century. The scourge of the Philistines is portrayed as a lithe youth, one wrist cocked on his hip, his other hand holding the sword with which he has severed the head of Goliath, which lies at his feet. He is naked except for a pair of knee-length boots, from which a feather rises to caress his thigh. His hair hangs in ringlets from under a Hermes helmet and frames a girlish face.[7] Everything physical is perfectly proportioned.

There was some controversy when Cosimo and Donatello unveiled the boy. And a few decades later, the zealous reformer Fra Girolamo Savonarola, who briefly seized power from the Medici (see sidebar, page 254), would single out the *David* as an indictment of the Medici brand of humanism. The statue, notwithstanding Cosimo's humanist talk of it being an allegory of the civic virtues triumphing over brutality and irrationality, was most clearly homoerotic—the feather sticking from the boot, a recognized Florentine signal, was the giveaway. And everyone knew that Donatello himself was a homosexual and had supposedly called upon his master, Cosimo, on one occasion to patch up a lover's tiff that had developed between the artist and one of the boys working in his shop.

Sodomy was a crime, in some circumstances a capital crime, as it would remain in nearly all western countries until the twentieth century, but few of Florence's patrician and artistic practitioners

were ever convicted. The act itself had become widely jeered as the "Florentine style," and in Germany they called homosexuals "*Florenzer*." Periodically, reformers would attack this blight on the city from the pulpit. Bernardino of Siena, the thunderous Franciscan later canonized by Pope Nicholas V, preached that sodomy resulted from lax parenting, from mothers dressing their boys too prettily, and from fathers pimping their boys to men of higher standing as a means for social advancement. He blamed the prevalence of homosexuality for a population decline in Tuscany, and described a vision he had had of all the unborn babies looking down upon Florence, and wailing, "Vendetta, vendetta, vendetta!"

Bronzino's Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time, *which hangs in London's National Gallery, vividly demonstrates the pagan preoccupations of artists in the late quattrocento and cinquecento. Wearied of painting yet more versions of Madonna and Child or Adoration of the Magi, artists dug into Boccaccio's* Genealogies of the Pagan Gods *for stories from Greek and Roman mythology. The often licentious pictures that resulted were generally explained away as allegories of Christian virtues or sins.*

A special magistracy called the "Office of the Night" was set up in Florence in 1432 to catch and prosecute sodomy. In its seventy years of operation, an average of four hundred men and boys a year were implicated, about one percent of the Florentine population. But they included Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci, none of whom was convicted. Despite the prohibitions, the sneers about this Florentine proclivity survived well into the 1500s.

Although a number of angry sermons were preached against it, Donatello's *David* was left standing at the Medici palace, to be copied, imitated, and admired by all the painters and sculptors who followed. Its appearance signaled a new era of sublime realism and proportion, though the advent of artistic nudity would much upset Savonarola and his many followers. One of these was the late-quattrocento master Sandro Botticelli—but only after he had completed two of his most sublime pagan works: the *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*. Another Savonarola follower was Michelangelo.

In the latter part of the quattrocento, artists began digging into a new font of subject matter: the pagan myths of the ancients. Chronicled by Boccaccio in his 1360 *Genealogies of the Pagan Gods*, the standard reference work for centuries, these stories offered endless possibilities for prurience—Europa's rape by a bull; Leda's rape by a swan; the escapades of Pan and Bacchus; the endless deployments of the voluptuous Venuses and pert-bottomed Cupids.[8] In the language of the day, these provocative pagan personages were explained away as humanist symbols of cardinal virtues or sins—justice, prudence, lust, et cetera.

Pagan works did creep into the churches during the reigns of worldlier popes, but most were commissioned by wealthy families for private display in their palaces. The bulk of the art produced remained Christian in theme—though even there the clothing was becoming skimpier. The naked or semi-naked figure of St. Sebastian, the middle-aged Roman soldier martyr penetrated by arrows, who had somehow transmogrified into a young Adonis under the brushes of Renaissance

7. The fact that *David* seems to be wearing the headgear of Hermes, the Greek messenger god known as Mercury in Roman mythology, led to debate among twentieth-century art historians over whether the youth is David standing atop Goliath or Mercury standing over the slain giant Argus Panoptes. In the myth, Mercury was dressed as a shepherd and killed Argus with a stone but did not behead him. Nonetheless, some have taken to calling the sculpture the *David-Mercury*.

8. In a 1999 British television documentary on the history of pornography, the art historian Edward Lucie-Smith expressed amusement at the modern veneration of such works as Agnolo Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time*, which hangs in Britain's National Gallery and apparently represents both the licentious and the incestuous. Yet it is regularly gazed upon by troops of schoolchildren. He often wonders, he remarks, how their teachers explain these things. "We have a curious kind of consensus in our society to ignore the erotic—even pornographic—content of images that are considered to be classics."

Pope Nicholas V, who in the mid-1400s began the process of rebuilding Rome to its former splendor, hired Fra Angelico, a Dominican monk and painter, to illustrate the walls of the Niccoline Chapel with evocative religious depictions like the Massacre of the Innocents *(above), which shows Herod's soldiers swooping down to seize the first born of the women of Bethlehem.*

artists—was a favorite subject. During Savonarola's rule, the Dominican friar and painter Fra Bartolomeo was made to remove his St. Sebastian from a convent chapel because, said Savonarola, "the women sinned in looking at it for its soft and lascivious imitation of living flesh."

There is no doubt that by the second half of 1400s Italy, in its lust for the ancient, had taken on some of Rome's imperial decadence. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* speaks of the "cancerous vices which were sapping the life of Italy." These were by no means confined to the homosexual. Brothels, pornography, adultery, and illegitimacy had become unremarkable aspects of the lives of Florence's smart set. Syphilis would soon become rampant, and Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere was said to have contracted the disease before becoming Pope Julius II. He had also fathered three illegitimate daughters.

By 1417 the church had healed its schism, and the ensuing popes, with several estimable exceptions, were more worldly than godly. For better or worse, the church was once again a force in Rome, and no sooner were the pontiffs back in their home palace than they began a campaign to restore the dilapidated city to

a grandeur befitting the capital of Christendom. “God has given us the papacy,” Leo X, the first Medici pope, famously enjoined his brother Giuliano. “Let us enjoy it!” And most Renaissance popes did just that.

In 1450 Pope Nicholas V, a bookish and gentle humanist scholar, started the process of rebuilding the capital city of Christianity in the Renaissance style. He used the proceeds collected from the mid-century jubilee pilgrims to raise new churches, renovate old ones, and expand the papal library to hold the hundreds of Greek and Roman texts he had imported from Constantinople just three years before it fell to the Turks (see chapter 6). Nicholas brought in the brilliant Dominican friar Giovanni Angelico, a man who wept every time he painted the Crucifixion. He produced a series of frescoes in the Niccoline Chapel, which the pope had built and named for himself. Fra Angelico could bring the light of divinity to devotional paintings like the effulgent *Presentation of Jesus in the Temple*. He could also terrify, as in his *Massacre of the Innocents*, where Herod’s black-clad soldiers swoop down like evil itself on the distraught mothers of Bethlehem. John Ruskin claimed Angelico “was not an artist properly so-called, but an inspired saint.” Vasari called his “a rare and perfect talent.”

In frescoes like the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple *(1441), in the Convent of St. Mark, Florence, Fra Angelico demonstrated his ability to combine the light of divinity and realistically depict human figures in inspirational art that made him popular with the humanistically inclined higher clergy of the day. Because of Fra Angelico’s talent, his affability, and his undoubted holiness, Pope Nicholas offered the monk the archbishopric of Florence—a post that Angelico modestly declined.*

Angelico attracted the custom of church and Medici alike, and ran the busiest workshop in Florence. His Vatican frescoes depicting the biblical St. Stephen and the third-century martyr St. Lawrence were fittingly devotional but enlivened by the inclusion of secondary clerics chatting on the side or exchanging conspiratorial glances. They delighted Pope Nicholas almost as much as the friar’s undoubted holiness did. He offered Angelico the prestigious archbishopric of Florence, but the humble friar turned him down, saying he had no aptitude for governing men. He recommended another of his order, Fra Antonino, a prior known for his humanist sermons about (fittingly for the era) the virtue of magnificence. Antonino would become one of Florence’s most able archbishops and was canonized in the 1520s by the reformist Pope Adrian VI.[9] Fra Angelico would be canonized more than five hundred years after his death by Pope John Paul II in 1984.

Fra Angelico’s papal commission marked the beginning of the seventy-five-year period known as the High Renaissance. The restoration of the church as a major patron of the arts, the rule of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the advancement of artistic technique and theory to the stage where it was eclipsing the Roman, and the ascension of humanist thought and theory to where it was being espoused by the rich and embraced by the church in Rome all converged in a perfect fortuity that would produce what many regard as the best art ever made by man.

Florence and Rome were now competitors in magnificence, and Venice would soon be. The brilliance had even spread outside of Italy and was being reflected back in the works of the Fleming Jan van Eyck and the German Albrecht Dürer.

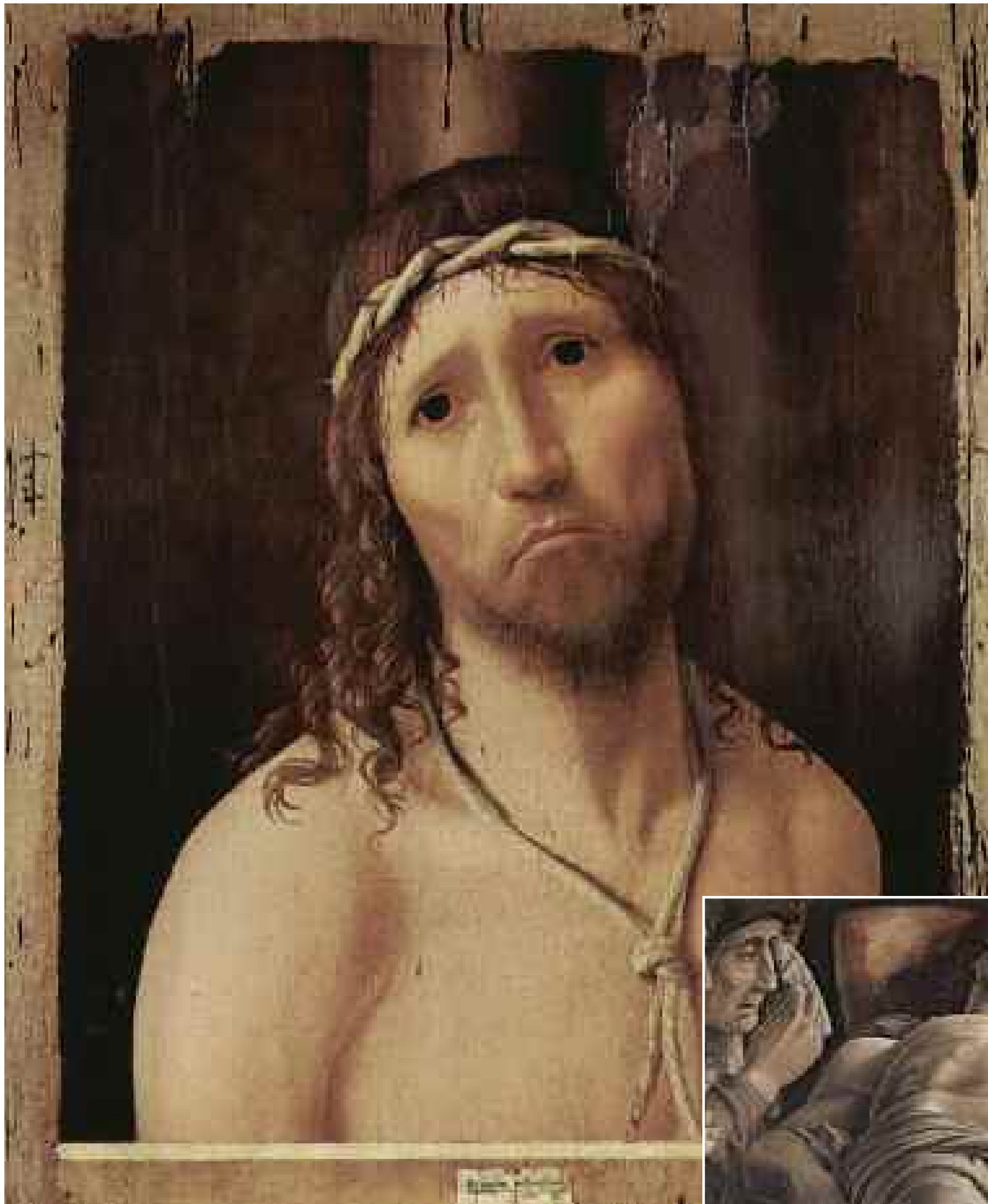
9. Fra Antonino, taking a lead from St. Thomas Aquinas, listed magnificence as a virtue. It was, Fra Antonio reasoned, a “potential component” of the virtue of fortitude, though not an “integral” part of it because it did not involve the risk of death or martyrdom (the hallmark of true fortitude). As Antonino defined it, magnificence was the spending of “a great deal of money, responsibly, so that, for the honor of God or the good of the republic, churches and the like may be built.” He and other clerics of the mid-1400s urged wealthy citizens to undertake major projects for the common good and the honor of the city. Thus, the pivotal Florentine ruler and benefactor of the High Renaissance, Lorenzo de’ Medici, was given the sobriquet “the Magnificent,” not because of vainglory but as a mark of virtue.

Northern painters like the Fleming Jan Van Eyck and the German Albrecht Dürer—shown in self-portraits above left and center—brought an almost photographic realism to works like Van Eyck's 1434 Arnolfini Portrait (below) and Dürer's 1526 Portrait of Hieronymus Holzschuher *(above right). One might almost imagine such images gracing the covers of popular magazines, had there yet been such things.*

Their painstakingly detailed oils look to the modern viewer almost like skilled photographic portraits that have frozen a moment of Renaissance time. Dürer's *Portrait of Hieronymus Holzschuher*, a fifty-seven-year-old Nuremberg burgomaster and religious reformer, glowers from the canvas with cold steel eyes so realistically rendered by Dürer's fine brushwork that one might imagine the cover of a 1526 edition of *Time* magazine over the headline "Heretic Threat from the North." Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait*, showing a Flemish merchant in sable coat and extremely fashionable (and thus ridiculous) hat, holding hands with a pregnant wife wearing an expensive, ermine-trimmed green dress, both of them standing in a well-appointed bedroom with their Brussels griffon lapdog posed alertly on the floor between them, could be the cover of a 1434 edition of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Headline: "Living Large in Bruges."

But art's epicenter remained in Italy. The High Renaissance produced the likes of Antonello da Messina, who picked up oil painting and attention to detail from van Eyck, married it with Italian simplicity, and brought it all to perfection in works like *Ecce Homo*, in which the thorn-crowned Christ gently weeps, it seems, with us. It introduced to the world Giovanni Bellini, the great Venetian colorist, who combined atmosphere, nature, and symbolism in contemplative paintings like *St. Jerome Reading in the Countryside* and trumped Flemish verisimilitude with loving detail and the affecting use of chiaroscuro in portraits such as *The Doge Leonardo Loredan*.[10]

There was also Andrea Mantegna, another Venetian, who lowered the horizon in his paintings and gave his sculptural figures a stony look, these two effects making paintings like *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* or the craggy, more mature *St. Sebastian* somehow more masculine and forceful than the works of the some of



10. Symbolism was as rife in Renaissance art as it had been in Byzantine iconography, with virtually every animal, vegetable, and mineral, every color, having some allegorical meaning. Blue, favored for the Virgin, means purity, white innocence, and red lust. Peacocks suggested immortality, rabbits unthinking fecundity, dogs loyalty, and lions—depending on their aspect—majesty and wisdom or tyranny and ferocity. The pagan deities in High Renaissance art brought a set of Neoplatonic meanings. Nymphs might represent the beauty of nature, the Graces the refined pleasures of the world, and Mercury reason. Hardworking Venus, according to the art historian E. H. Gombrich, "stands for *humanitas* . . . which embraces love and charity, dignity and magnanimity, liberality and magnificence, comeliness and modesty, charm, and splendor."

his competitors. And there was, of course, Leonardo da Vinci, the epitome of the Renaissance man, whose oeuvre was disappointingly small but monumentally influential (see sidebar, page 234).

Then, too, there was Sandro Botticelli, devoted painter to both church and grandee, who brought an almost modern minimalism to faces and figures but placed them in sumptuous, very arranged Roman surroundings. In an early version of product placement, Botticelli put his clients and their kin into his works, starting a trend. For example, the first king in Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi*, painted for a church door and paid for by Lorenzo the Magnificent, is none other than Lorenzo's recently deceased grandfather Cosimo. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, painted for a Medici villa, features the face of Simonetta Vespucci, the wife of a noble for whom the artist hopelessly pined. This pretty blond Venus on a half shell is one of the most recognizable of Renaissance paintings. It is also full of humanistic meaning that would be discussed at length by art historians. Suffice it to say, as Vasari did, that the work has "grace."

By the late quattrocento artists from other Italian cities were beginning to challenge the preeminence of the Florentines. The Sicilian Antonello da Messina married Flemish realism with Italian simplicity to create affecting works like Ecce Homo *(left), in which Christ gently weeps. Andrea Mantegna, a Venetian, lowered the horizon in his paintings and gave his figures a sculptural and stony look, the two effects adding an impact to works like* The Lamentation over the Dead Christ *(inset).*

Botticelli tended to paint what his masters told him to paint, whether it was a pagan/humanistic allegory for the bedroom wall of their precocious teenager, or a fresco for the wall of Pope Sixtus IV's self-named chapel, the Sistine, which the pontiff had built to the supposed dimensions of Solomon's Temple. Botticelli's Sistine fresco *The Temptation of Christ* looks rather like a classical Roman garden party enacted by fashionable Florentines, and there's even a cameo of Signora Vespucci. Sixtus IV loved it, and he paid the artist a tidy fee, which, Vasari claims, Botticelli "soon consumed by living improvidently." Twenty-five years later, however, the Sistine wall fresco would be upstaged, and Botticelli would be all but forgotten for the next four hundred years, until he was revived by some enthusiasts in the early 1900s.

Sandro Botticelli was the Renaissance's first major practitioner of what, in a later age, would be called product placement—placing his patrons and their kin in paintings, often in the roles of religious personages. The alluring face and figure of Simonetta Vespucci, the wife a noble for whom the artist hopelessly pined, was most famously captured in the Birth of Venus *(lower photo)—but she also makes cameos in other Botticellis, including* The Temptation of Christ *(upper photo), a biblical tableau looking more like a Florentine fancy dress ball, in which Simonetta can be spotted in the center left. In the late twentieth century, Simonetta as Venus became the icon for the computer drawing and editing application Adobe Illustrator.*

Standing at the peak of the peak of the High Renaissance, however, was a man who would never be forgotten, a man whose name remains synonymous with the age a half millennium on. "He who among the dead and living carries the palm, and transcends and outpasses us all," wrote Vasari, pronouncing the prodigy sent by God to "show what perfection means." Perfection for Vasari—and for a good many art critics since—was contained in the rather imperfect form of Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarrotti.

Michelangelo was born in 1475, the son of a socially ambitious *podesta* (chief magistrate) in the provincial town of Caprese (since renamed Caprese Michelangelo), southeast of Florence. He was wet-nursed by the wife of a stonemason and later told Vasari he'd "sucked in the chisels and mallet with her milk."

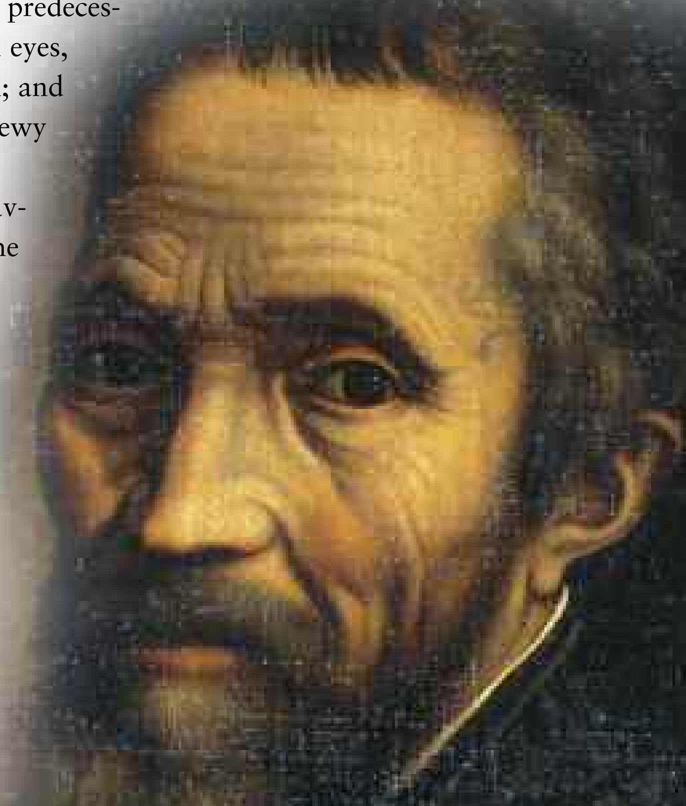
He studied grammar briefly but showed more interest in painting and, after being subjected to various beatings from his disappointed father, was apprenticed to the prestigious painter Domenico Ghirlandaio. Ghirlandaio, more so even than Botticelli, produced devotional works in which rich, fashionably dressed Florentines played the parts of the holy personages—the kind of thing demanded by clients, but never much admired by the independent Michelangelo.

He was rescued from Ghirlandaio's shop by Lorenzo the Magnificent, now the duke of Florence, who liked to make his palace a home to poets and artists. Lorenzo invited the talented Michelangelo into the household, where the teenaged prodigy was treated like a son, eating at the Medici table and receiving humanist instruction from the scholars that Lorenzo kept about the house to tutor his children and enliven dinnertime conversation. This elegant group included the philosopher Marsilio Ficino, the theosophist Pico della Mirandola, and the poet and Greek translator (and reputed lover of Mirandola) Angelo Poliziano (or Politian).

Lorenzo had a sculpture garden filled with Roman antiquities, works that Michelangelo began mimicking in stone relief, aided by the curator of the garden, Bertoldo, an aging sculptor who had been a pupil of Donatello's. It was the thirty-six-year old Politian who suggested to the sixteen-year-old Michelangelo that he carve *The Battle of the Centaurs*, a frenzy of naked Greeks warring with the centaurs from a story by the Roman poet Ovid. Michelangelo did so and created his first major work, touching off what became an obsession in Florence for depictions of naked fighting men. It was also the first of the artist's many glorifications of the heroic, idealized male form.[11]

Sadly, it was a form that, as with so many of his illustrious predecessors, had not been endowed upon Michelangelo. He had small eyes, small lips, and a scraggly beard; stood five feet, two inches tall; and weighed around a hundred pounds—albeit a muscular and sinewy hundred pounds. Nor was his less-than-Greek-god appearance helped by his habits. The artist cultivated an ascetic quality, having been influenced in his youth by Savonarola, and scorned the easy life. He became accustomed to sleeping in his clothes to save the trouble of dressing and undressing, and sometimes would not remove his dogskin boots for months on end. At night he would affix candles to his cap so he could work. Though taciturn, the artist had a sense of humor, usually with a sting in its tail. Upon meeting the handsome son of the contemporary artist Francesco Francia, for instance, he told the boy, "Your father knows how to make living figures better than painted ones."

At twenty-two he won his first important commission, the hard way. Lorenzo had died in 1492, and his disappointing son Piero "the Fatuous" was in exile, having fled Florence during its occupation by French King Charles VII. Michelangelo teamed up with a cousin of the late



Michelangelo Buonarrotti, the sculptor and painter who elevated the perfect male form to near divine levels, was himself no David. Shown here in a 1535 portrait by Marcello Venusti, the artist was small-eyed and scraggly-bearded, stood five foot two inches, and weighed around a hundred pounds. It was, however, a sinewy and muscular one hundred pounds.

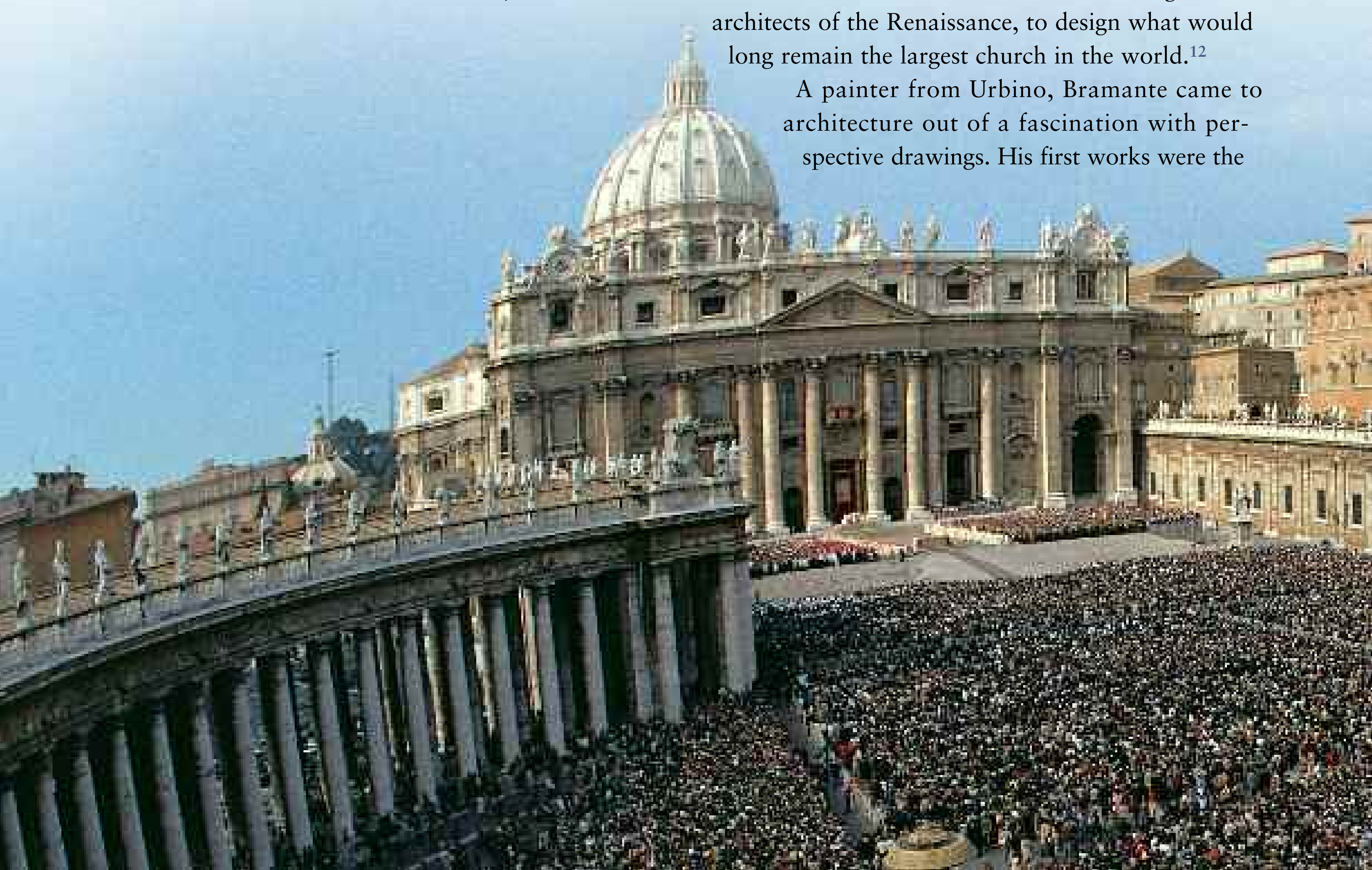
11. Michelangelo, who often ran afoul of church authorities for his seemingly gratuitous inclusion of naked men into virtually all his works, was likely homosexual. While antisocial and solitary to the point of misanthropy, he developed some close relationships with a number of young men that seemingly exceeded the platonic. Although he later developed a friendship with a forty-year-old widow, it was said to be nonsexual, and Michelangelo's interest in adolescent boys—expressed in numerous sonnets—continued at least into his late sixties. The sonnets were so obviously amorous that his grandnephew Michelangelo the Younger changed the gender of their pronouns when he published them in 1623. The Victorian English literary critic, poet, and defender of pederasty John Addington Symonds undid these changes in a two-volume biography of Michelangelo published in 1893.

Lorenzo—also named Lorenzo—who commissioned the young sculptor to produce a beautiful statue of Eros. Lorenzo asked Michelangelo to "fix" the statue to look like it had been buried. Lorenzo figured the statue could be passed off as an ancient work and sold to Raffaele Riario. He was the youthful cardinal who had helped elect the Borgia pope Alexander VI and in return had received a lucrative bishopric and a big palace in Rome, which he filled with antiquities. The scheme went awry when Riario discovered the Eros was a fake. But it was such a marvelously done fake that Riario brought Michelangelo to Rome to make him another statue, and it was Rome that would make the sculptor's career.

Rome was by now challenging Florence in its patronage of the arts. Since Pope Nicholas V had started rebuilding the Holy City, the pace of change had accelerated with each successive pope. (The account of the Renaissance popes appears in chapter 11.) Whatever his shortcomings, Alexander VI had an eye for beauty, and while the rest of the city sank into disrepair and swarmed with prostitutes and Spanish assassins, the Apostolic Palace was expanded and adorned. But it was under Giuliano della Rovere, who became the warrior pope Julius II (1503–1513), that Rome truly blossomed. Preoccupied though he was militarily defending the papal states against invaders, Julius nevertheless found time and money for several major projects, the biggest being St. Peter's Basilica.

The existing St. Peter's had been built by the emperor Constantine in the fourth century atop the apostle Peter's tomb, but had become dilapidated and decidedly unclassical in appearance. Julius decided to replace it with a building of imperial grandeur that would enthrall Christendom. Vainglorious though he undoubtedly was, Julius passionately believed that a more magnificent Rome would restore the prestige of a church smitten by the Great Schism and by ever more insistent demands for fundamental reform. So Julius hired Donato Bramante, who after Brunelleschi would become the second of the three great architects of the Renaissance, to design what would long remain the largest church in the world.[12]

A painter from Urbino, Bramante came to architecture out of a fascination with perspective drawings. His first works were the



A large crowd gathers in St. Peter's Square, Rome, in this 1980 photograph. Julius II, the pope most enthusiastic in his efforts to re-aggrandize Rome, commissioned Donato Bramante—one of the three major architects of the Renaissance—to create a replacement for Constantine's Old St. Peter's. It took more than a century and a half to complete and more than a dozen architects, but St. Peter's Basilica, adhering to Bramante's original design, was finally opened in 1667. It remains the largest and tallest church in the world.

palaces of Lombardy dukes, which gave him a taste for the gigantic and made him simpatico with the pontiff. Like Brunelleschi before him, Bramante took his inspiration from the Pantheon. His design called for a cavernous interior laid out in the form of a Greek cross, with a colossal dome rising above the intersection of the cross. When it was finally completed, St. Peter's did not disappoint. Its interior could hold sixty thousand people, and its dome rose 448 feet—it is still the world's tallest dome. English historian Paul Johnson calls St. Peter's "the crowned monarch of ecclesiastical architecture."

Neither Julius nor Bramante, however, would see the work completed. For although Bramante's original design ultimately prevailed, there were various delays and interruptions in construction—not the least being the sack of Rome in 1527 (see next chapter). It would take thirty-two popes and more than a dozen architects to complete the church, finally finished in 1667. Another of Julius's major projects, however, he would live to see completed, as would its creator and his favorite artist, Michelangelo.

Shortly after Michelangelo arrived in Rome in 1496, he had a falling out with one benefactor, Cardinal Riario. However, he was immediately commissioned by the French ambassador to the Holy See to carve for the Chapel of the Virgin at St. Peter's a *pietà*, a French-style depiction of the Virgin Mary mourning her dead son. By now, pietàs had become almost commonplace. The Michelangelo work was anything but.

In 1500, the twenty-four-year-old sculptor produced a transcendent work in marble in which the accepting Virgin, obedient to the end, sits with Christ's lifeless body across her lap. It is arguably the most perfect sculpture ever carved. "The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection," Michelangelo would famously say much later in his life. *La Pietà* makes those words an understatement. "It is certainly a miracle," wrote Vasari, "that a formless block of stone could ever have been reduced to a perfection that nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh." The twentieth-century American popular historian Barbara Tuchman, a woman not known for either sentimentality or sympathy with Christianity, wrote that it is impossible to view the *Pietà* "without emotion" (*The March of Folly*, New York, 1984).

12. The third member of the architectural pantheon, and the only one whose name has endured as an adjective, was Andrea Palladio. Palladio was a mid-cinquecento Venetian who built palaces, villas, and churches that David Watkin, in *A History of Western Architecture* (London, 1986), calls "the quintessence of High Renaissance calm and harmony." The classic Palladian style of mansion—a two-story central box, with graceful two-story colonnades on each face—is best represented by the Villa Rotonda, built for a retired Roman priest outside Vincenza. The style spread throughout Europe and crossed the Atlantic. The original White House was built in the Palladian style, the second White House in a variation of Palladian called Georgian.

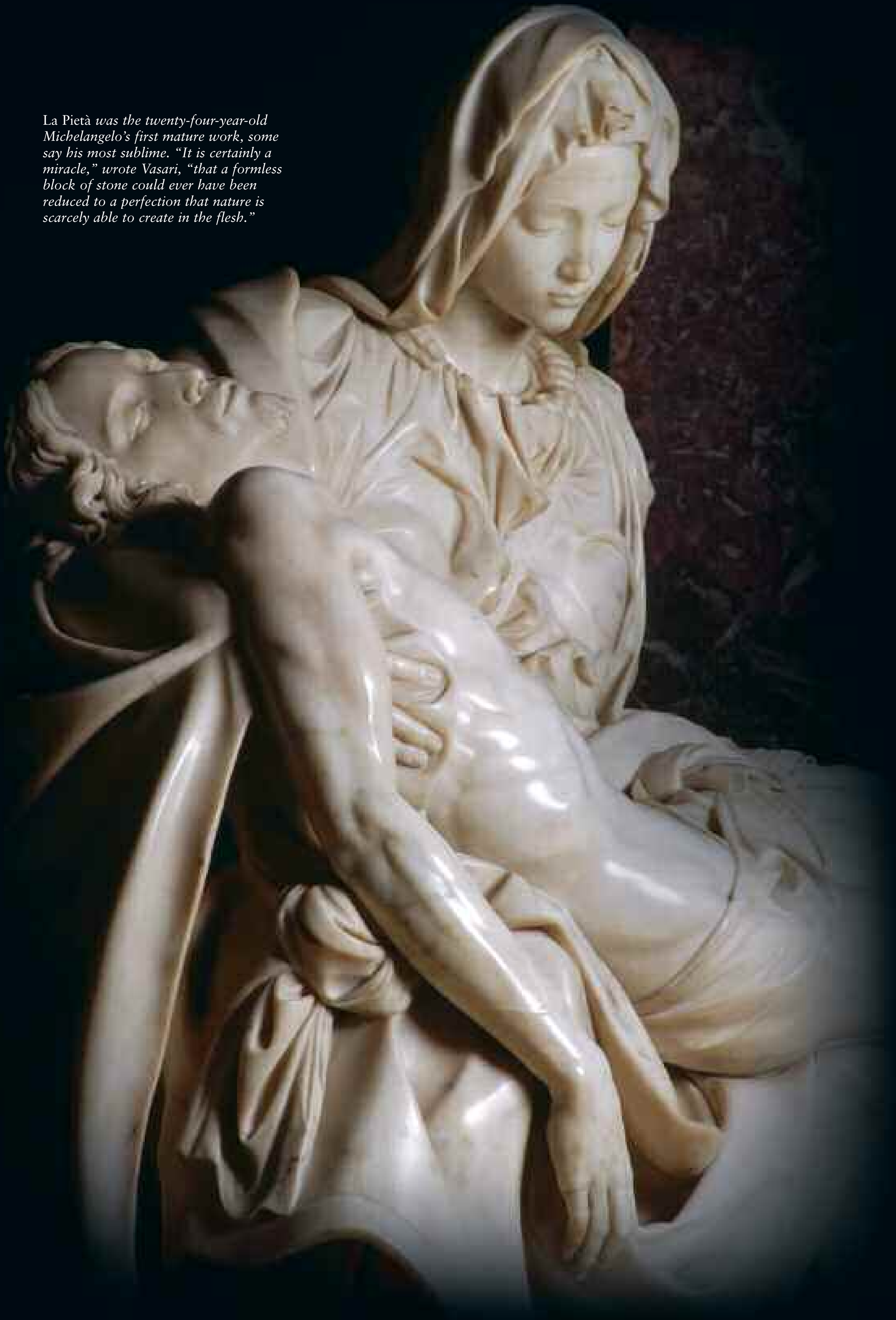
Michelangelo's seventeen-foot-tall David, now at the Gallerie dell'Academia in Florence, was originally placed outside of the palace of civic government, gazing defiantly southward as a warning to the exiled Medici not to come back. This worked, but for only a few years. In 1512, with the support of Pope Leo X, the family returned to rule anew in Florence.

Vasari tells the story of the artist visiting the work and overhearing some Lombard strangers admiring it. One asked another who had made it and was told, "Our hunchback from Milan." Unable to abide people thinking another had carved it, Michelangelo returned to the chapel at night with a lamp and a chisel and carved on the sash of the Virgin's garb: "MICHELANGELO BUONARROTTI, FLORENTINE, MADE IT." The *Pietà* is the only work he ever signed.

Michelangelo permanently established his reputation at age twenty-eight with his famous sculpture the statue *David*, carved during a two-year return to Florence. Many consider this seventeen-foot-tall piece of transformed Carrara marble the point at which the Renaissance moved past the classical and became something more. *David*, a symbol of the cardinal virtue of fortitude, was wrought and posed in the idealized Greek manner—well-muscled, uncircumcised, and standing with the weight on one leg in the style called *contrapposto*. But the turned head, the strained neck, and the furrowed brow suggested defiance and resolve. This exceeded the abstract Greek ideal, introducing individual consciousness—a humanist element—to the youth about to kill the giant. The republican Signoria, commissioner of the statue and ruler of Florence since the expulsion of the Medici, placed it significantly outside the palace of civic government, gazing defiantly southward as a warning to the family not to come back. (The Medici would nevertheless reconquer the city in 1512.)

Michelangelo was now in high demand both as a sculptor and as a painter. In his paintings he had picked up some of the chiaroscuro techniques of light and dark from da Vinci, who by 1500 was the forty-eight-year-old eminence of Italian painting. But Michelangelo brought in his own sculptural qualities, making his paintings crisper, bolder, and more monumental—qualities described in Italian as *terribilita*, the ability to inspire awe. *Terribilita* was just the thing that Julius II was looking for when he summoned Michelangelo back to Rome in 1505 to work on his papal tomb, a project of monumental self-aggrandizement and one that would not go smoothly. In Rome, Michelangelo found himself at odds with the architect Bramante and a brand-new talent called Raphael Sanzio, the twenty-three-year-old painter from Urbino whom Julius had hired on Bramante's recommendation to paint a series of frescoes in his personal library. They resented Michelangelo's lucrative commission for the tomb and apparently convinced Julius that it was bad luck to have his tomb built while he was still alive. They suggested that Michelangelo would be better employed painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—something they doubted Michelangelo, primarily a sculptor, was capable of executing. Julius, now embarked on the building of an even greater monument, St. Peter's, was easily convinced. And although Michelangelo would complete components of this tomb during the next twenty years—including a statue of Moses that some consider his best work—his efforts were now redirected to this painting.

The ceiling was twelve thousand square feet in area, rose to a height of sixty-eight feet, and was not something Michelangelo wanted to paint. He argued with Julius, but



La Pietà *was the twenty-four-year-old Michelangelo's first mature work, some say his most sublime. "It is certainly a miracle," wrote Vasari, "that a formless block of stone could ever have been reduced to a perfection that nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh."*

A man of inspired distraction

Leonardo da Vinci had a reputation as someone who did not finish things, but his genius in the arts and sciences created a legacy that lasted centuries

The man who produced the most famous painting in the western world did not produce a lot of paintings. Leonardo da Vinci tended to get distracted. In fact, he carried around for fifteen years the twenty-by-thirty-inch piece of poplar wood upon which he had started this portrait, and never did actually deliver it to the Florentine silk merchant who had hired him in 1503 to paint his twenty-four-year-old wife, Lisa. And da Vinci would not complete the *Mona Lisa* until just before he died in 1519.

He probably abandoned it for a more lucrative commission from the governing council of Florence: to paint the fresco of *The Battle of Anghiari* (a famous Florentine victory). Judging from the surviving cartoons (preparatory drawings), this fresco—all roiling horses, screaming warriors, and bloody dust—would have been his most dynamic work.

But while he and his apprentices were working on this, he was distracted by a flight of birds, which led to copious drawings and expansive notes on avian aeronautics and a further diversion into his dream of human flight. The bird is a machine operating under mathematical law, he wrote, and man has the power to duplicate that machine. This led to creation of a strap-on flying machine—a sort of hang glider—that according to legend almost killed the man who tried it out.

Giving up forever on human flight, Leonardo returned to *The Battle of Anghiari*, inventing in the process a collapsible, accordion-like scaffold (precursor to the modern scissor-lift). He then decided he could avoid the hurried requirements of fresco painting on wet plaster by using oil paints instead. In order to avoid the dampness that had so deteriorated his oil of the *Last Supper* in Milan, he had his assistants hoist huge braziers up alongside the painting to dry it.

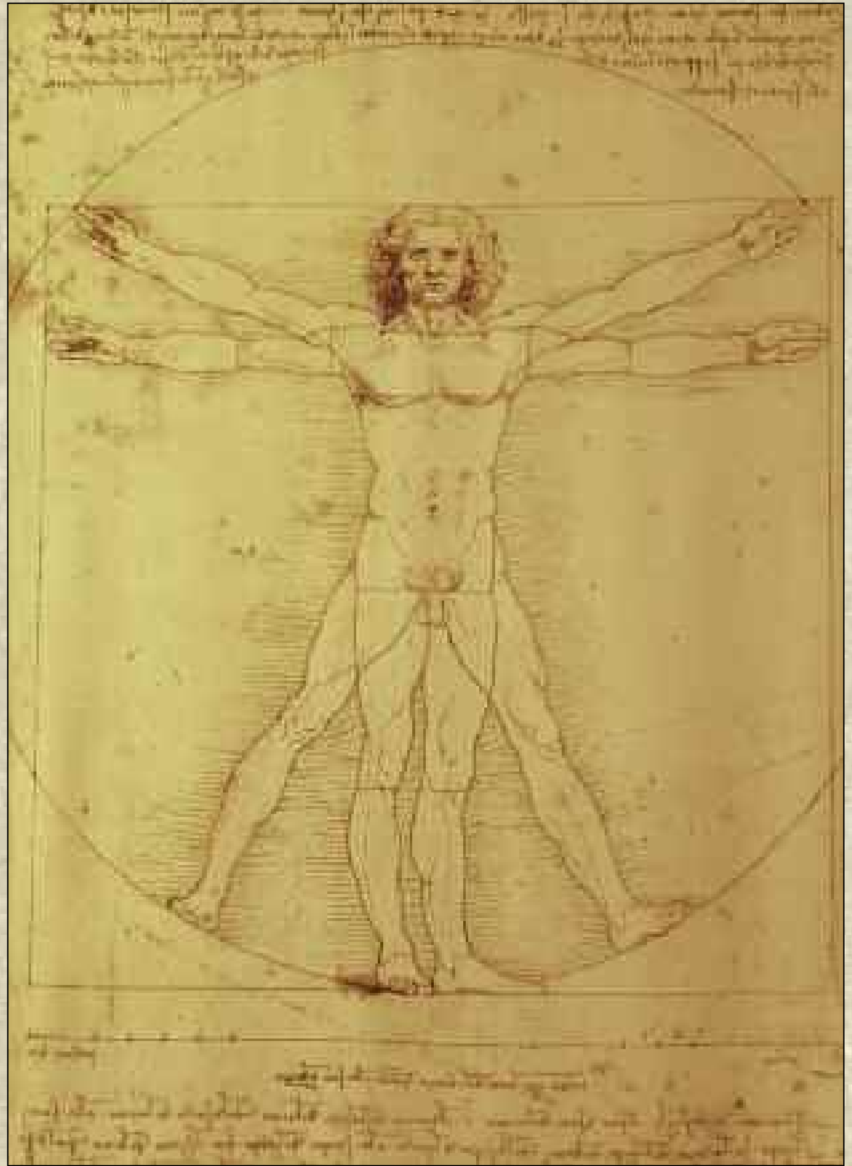
He had read of this process while struggling, with his self-taught Latin, through the writings of the Roman author and naturalist Pliny the Elder. Unfortunately, he had missed one sentence, "This method should not be applied to walls." The paint ran, and so did Leonardo, abandoning Florence and the fresco for Milan, where he was welcomed by its current French invaders, for whom he would develop a design for a waterway and a system of locks (later used for the Panama Canal). The city fathers of Florence were not pleased that Leonardo had walked out on his contract. But, as the pope once replied to someone who proposed da Vinci for a papal project, "Leonardo? Oh, he's the man who doesn't finish things."

For someone considered one of history's greatest geniuses, da Vinci's visible output was remarkably meager. In the sixty-seven years from his birth as the illegitimate son of a notary in the village of Vinci, near Florence, to his death at Amboise on the Loire as the prized intellectual adornment of the French court, he produced little more than a dozen finished works of art, half of which—including the *Mona Lisa*—never left his hands.[1]

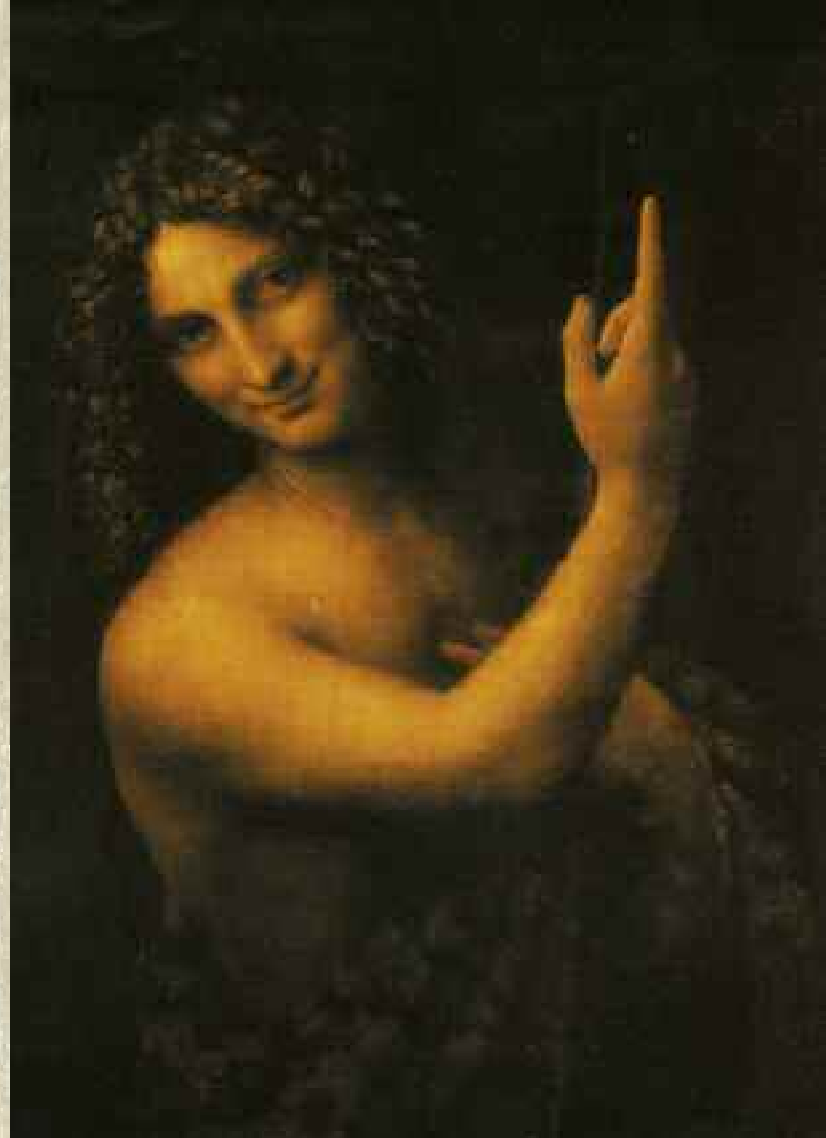
His career was marked from the beginning by delays, abandonments, and canceled contracts, yet he was greatly renowned even in his lifetime. His fame came partly from those few sublime works on display (*Annunciation*, *Virgin of the Rocks*, *John the Baptist*), whose virtuosity attracted study by emerging artists like Raphael. But his reputation was also validated by the favor of such grandees as Florence's de facto ruler, Lorenzo de' Medici. De' Medici liked having Leonardo as an ornament to his court; not only was he handsome and conversationally brilliant, he could play the lute and sing clever songs.

Duke Ludovico Sforza of Milan became da Vinci's next patron, maintaining him for sixteen years as an engineer, creator of theatrical extravaganzas, designer of war machines, and, occasionally, painter. (His portrait of Ludovico's mistress, Cecilia Gallerani, holding a pet ermine is considered his best work, though not the most famous.) When Sforza was chased out of Milan by the French king Louis XII, Leonardo returned to Florence, and later, as noted above, would become an ornament to the French court.

The single authenticated self-portrait of da Vinci was sketched in his favored red chalk toward the end of his sixty-seven-year life when he was the pampered guest of French King Louis XII.



Da Vinci's most enduring images: the Mona Lisa, Vitruvian Man, *and* The Last Supper. *For such a celebrated genius, Leonardo left very few completed works. From its beginning, his career was marked by delays, abandonments, and cancelled contracts. "Leonardo?" mused one pope. "Oh, he's the man who doesn't finish things."*



*The portraits of Ludovico Sforza's mistress Cecilia Gallerani (*Girl with Ermine*, left), and da Vinci's young assistant Salai (*John the Baptist*, right) show off the maestro's characteristic use of chiaroscuro and sfumato. The former was the skilled use of light and shadow to bring forms to life; the latter the use of successive layers of glaze and dots to create a softening of the contours to create further realism.*

Interestingly enough, even his paintings notably manifest da Vinci's myriad other interests. Their technical innovations —the skilled use of light and shadow, the anatomical detail, the carefully drawn vegetation and natural features, the successive layers of glaze and dots to soften the contours (called *sfumato*, from the Italian word *fumo*, or "smoke")—were artistic manifestations of his first love: science. The observation, recording, and analysis of the natural world—the things that filled the thousands of pages of his notebooks with sketches, diagrams, and notes written in a strange backward, mirrored script (to accommodate his left-handedness)—these were what chiefly obsessed him.

Though his rival Michelangelo claimed Leonardo had no patience for the abstractions of theology, he was not irreligious. He expounded on the importance of "experience" and the primacy of the eye as the preeminent organ of inquiry, praising it as: "Oh, excellent above all other things created by God."[2]

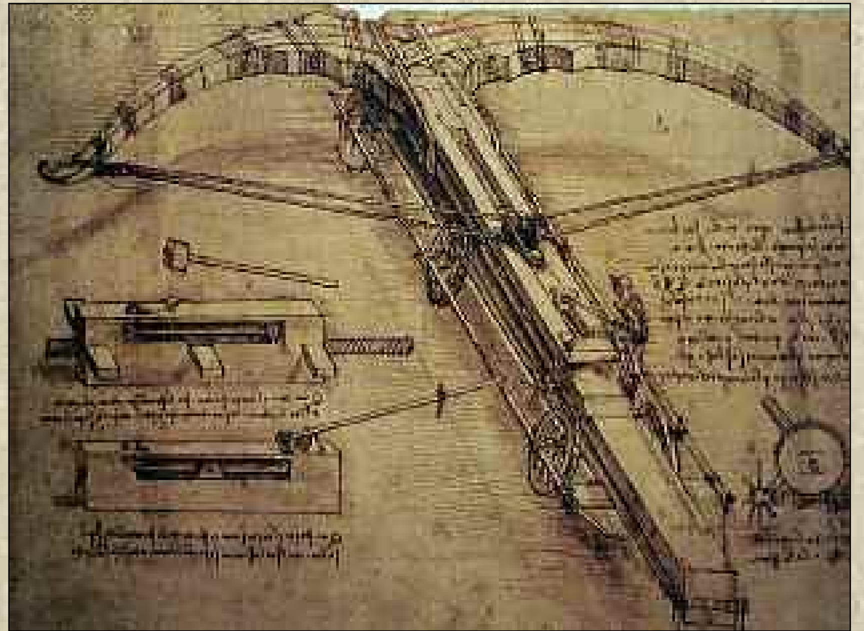
So he explored, to the point of exhaustion, the movement of water, the play of light, the relationship of music to the visual arts; he theorized on geometry, perspective, and mechanics; he adapted the Roman architect Vitruvius's theories about the proportions of the human body forming the basis of the squares and circles used to create proportional harmony in buildings (illustrated in da Vinci's famous *Vitruvian Man* diagram). He dissected human and animal cadavers and illustrated their workings. And he invented and sketched not just flying machines but tanks, machine guns, bridges, submarines, mortar shells, horseless carriages, scuba gear, pumps, cranes, and artificial heart valves. Few of these theories and designs were developed in his lifetime, but many would be tested and proven centuries after his death.

During da Vinci's frenetic career, his grandest schemes were generally laughed off by those to whom they were proposed. He could never, for example, get anyone to take him up on any of his architectural projects. In 1502 he presented to the Ottoman sultan Bajazed II a drawing of a single-span bridge across the entrance to Istanbul's harbor, the Golden Horn. "Impossible," scoffed the sultan, and that was that—until the year 2001, that is, when a smaller version was actually built in Norway. Five years later the Turkish government began work on the real thing, full size. At 720 feet long and seventy feet above the water, it adheres exactly to Leonardo's original design. ■

1. After Leonardo da Vinci's death,the French king, Francis I, bought the *Mona Lisa* from the painter's estate. It remained in the possession of French royalty, and later Napoleon (who hung it in his bedroom), before being put on permanent display in the Louvre at Paris. There it attracted no particular interest until the mid-nineteenth century, when a painting movement known as Symbolism (a combination of Gothic and Romantic) held up the *Mona Lisa* as the mythical embodiment of eternal femininity. Its fame was further enhanced in 1911 when it was stolen by an Italian employee of the Louvre, who was apprehended two years later in Italy. He merely wanted, the thief explained, to return it to its home country.

2. One source of inspiration for da Vinci was the English philosopher and Franciscan friar Roger Bacon (1214–1294). Like Leonardo, Bacon was a great exponent of "experience" and experimentation and is held by some to be the father of the modern scientific method. His book *Opus Maius* anticipates such later inventions as telescopes, flying machines, spectacles, hydraulics, and steamships. Drawing on the work of Arab scholars, Bacon wrote a large section on optics, including descriptions of the anatomy of the eye and the qualities of light. He recognized the visible spectrum in a glass of water four centuries before Isaac Newton discovered the prism.

Clockwise from left: the Madonna of the Rocks, *a study for the head of a girl, a diagram of a massive catapult, and one of Leonardo's many designs for a flying machine. His artistic techniques tended to be the manifestations of his first love: science. Few of da Vinci's inventions would be built in his lifetime, but many would be tested and proven centuries later.*



Although Michelangelo loathed Raphael (shown above left in a self-portrait), the younger artist drew great inspiration from Michelangelo's works. Raphael's artfully arranged tableaux—such as the School of Athens *(top) and* Entombment *(below)—together with his affability, made him popular among clerical and secular clientele alike, providing great wealth before an untimely death.*

13. In his manuscript *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo took veiled aim at Michelangelo by describing the typical sculptor as performing a "mechanical exercise, often accompanied by great sweat, which mixes with the marble dust and forms a kind of mud daubed all over his face . . . his house made filthy by the flakes and dust of stone." The painter, on the other hand, "sits before his work, perfectly at his ease and well dressed, and moves a very light brush dipped in delicate color . . . His house is clean and filled with charming pictures; and often he is accompanied by music or by the reading of various and beautiful works, which, since they are not mixed with the sound of the hammer . . . are heard with the greatest pleasure."

Julius prevailed, and on May 10, 1508, Michelangelo signed a contract for three thousand ducats to do the work. It took him four years. Contrary to popular belief—perpetuated by the 1965 Charlton Heston film *The Agony and the Ecstasy*—Michelangelo did not paint the ceiling lying on his back, but stood atop a scaffold of his own design.

Still, it was far from being an altogether joyous experience. "I have already developed a goiter . . . that pushes my belly under my chin," he wrote to a friend in a letter illustrated with a caricature of himself. "My beard points to heaven . . . and my brush, continuously dripping onto my face, turns it into a rich mosaic. My loins have penetrated my belly, my rump's a counterweight, and I walk around in vain, without seeing where I am going . . . Behind, my skin is shriveled for too much bending, and I am stretched like a Syrian bow."

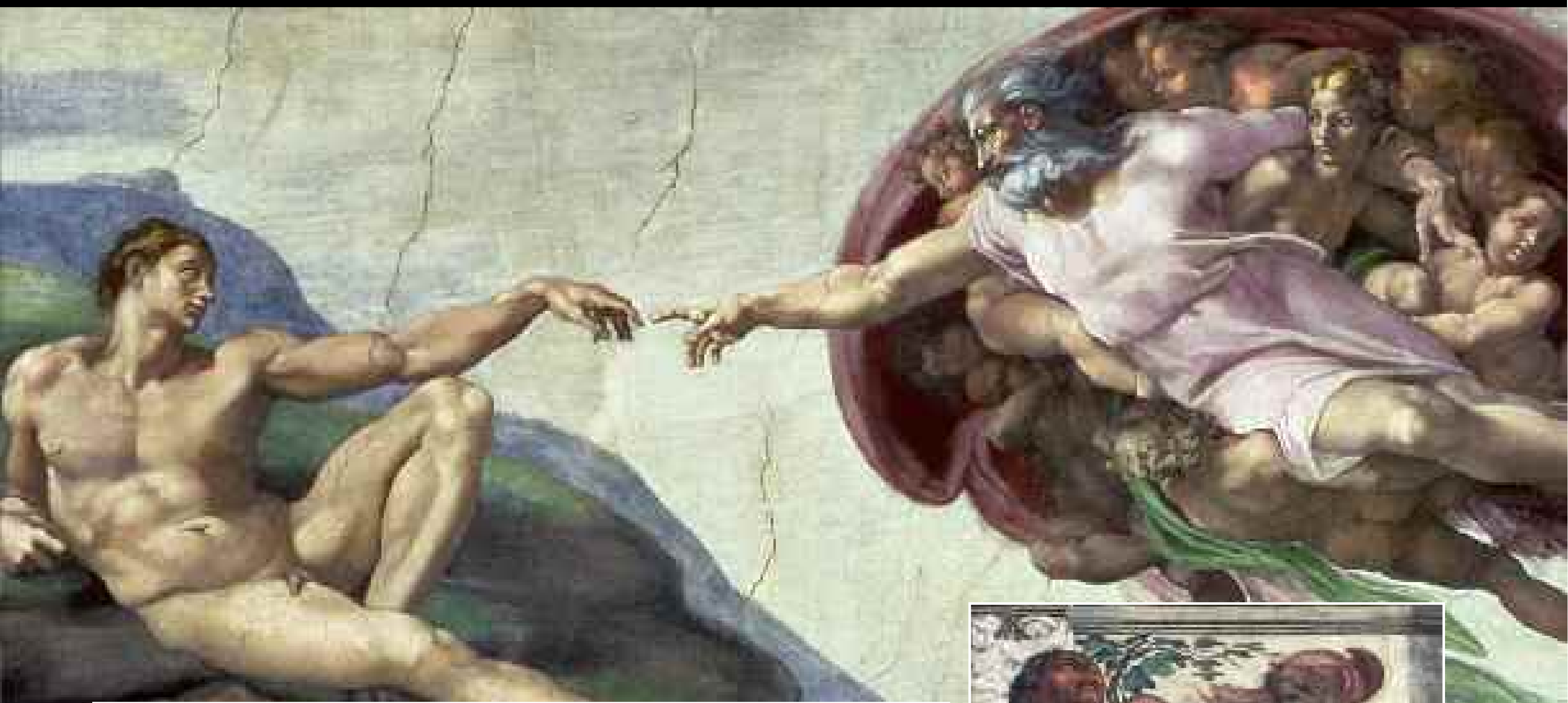
While the work was in progress, Raphael had Bramante let him into the chapel at night to secretly look at Michelangelo's ceiling. Raphael was quite different from Michelangelo: affable, cooperative, and always willing to take direction from his clients. This demeanor, along with his prodigious talent, made the handsome young artist rich and famous well before his death at age thirty-seven (following a night of

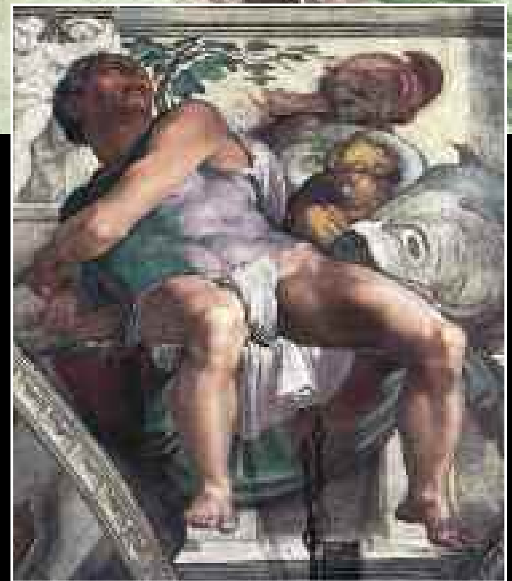
overly strenuous lovemaking with his mistress, according to Vasari). Raphael's prolific works, like the famous frescoes for Julius's library that include *The School of Athens*, in which ancient sages hobnob with Christian saints and philosophers, were perfect models of draftsmanship, aesthetic arrangement, and humanist idealism. Along with Michelangelo and da Vinci, Raphael would be held up as the third of the "divine trio" of Italian Renaissance art.

Michelangelo had never developed warm associations with his fellow artists. As a teenager in Lorenzo's garden he had ridiculed the work of another young sculptor, who thereupon smashed his fist into Michelangelo's nose, crushing the cartilage and giving the maestro a flat snout that did nothing to improve his already plain features. He and da Vinci had developed a mutual antipathy—da Vinci disdaining sculptors as grubby, jumped-up tradesmen, and Michelangelo considering da Vinci to be irreligious.[13] "Michelangelo, on the other hand," the English art historian Kenneth Clark observes, "was a profoundly religious man, to whom the reform of the Roman Church came to be a matter of passionate concern. His mind was dominated by ideas—good and evil, suffering, purification, unity with God, peace of mind—which to Leonardo seemed meaningless abstractions, but to Michelangelo were ultimate truths."

Michelangelo, of course, loathed Raphael and Bramante, an antipathy that increased after Michelangelo experienced trouble with mildew in part of his fresco. Bramante, adopting a told-you-so tone, suggested to Julius, in front of Michelangelo, that his friend Raphael finish the ceiling. Michelangelo was livid but was mollified by Julius, who considered the prickly little man the better artist. Thereafter, however, Michelangelo employed a junior painter of their mutual acquaintance to feed him bits of damaging gossip about Raphael. Which was why

The Sistine Chapel in Rome, seen here in a 2004, post-restoration photograph, took its name from Pope Sixtus IV, who renovated the structure in the mid-1400s. The wall frescoes were the work of Botticelli, Bernini, and Raphael, while the crowning glory—the ceiling—was eventually produced by a reluctant Michelangelo. When the work was finally unveiled in 1512, Florentines were reduced to a stunned silence. Inset is a caricature Michelangelo sketched of himself at work on the ceiling.





Details from Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling, which depicts nine scenes from Genesis. Clockwise from top: the creation of man; Jonah and the whale; the drunkenness of Noah; David beheading Goliath; and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Pope Adrian VI called the ceiling a "stew of nudity," and Pius V had drapery painted over the genitalia. But much later, John Paul II celebrated the Sistine Chapel as "the sanctuary of the theology of the human body."

Raphael needed to have Bramante sneak him into the Sistine at night to see how Michelangelo was progressing. There is no account of what Raphael thought of the ceiling, but several of the younger painter's later works contained figures that appeared to be imitations of Michelangelo's.

The ceiling was unveiled on All Saints' Day of 1512. Writes Vasari, "The whole world came running when the vault was revealed, and the sight of it was enough to reduce them to stunned silence." Howard Hibbard, in his 1974 biography *Michelangelo* (New York), writes, "Michelangelo's decoration of the Sistine ceiling is the most grandiose pictorial ensemble in all of western art." On that there can scarcely be any argument.

In successive panels stretching the 130-foot length of the barrel-vaulted ceiling, Michelangelo painted nine scenes from Genesis. They began with God dividing light from darkness and progressed to the Flood and the drunkenness of Noah. At the center was the creation of Adam—that most famous of Renaissance images—with God transmitting life through his finger to Adam's. At various lower points in the ceiling's intricate vaulting are roundels containing Old Testament scenes—David and Goliath, Judith and Holofernes, Jonah and the whale—and, over the windows, larger portraits of the seven prophets and five ancient sibyls who predicted the coming of the Messiah. The latter include the Cumaean Sibyl, quoted by Virgil as declaring that "a new progeny of heaven" would bring about a return of the Golden Age. The humanist touch is matched with the twenty *ignudi* who flank the roundels—ostensibly angels but also exemplars of the heroic male form that was the Renaissance ideal and Michelangelo's forte. This homely little man had reconciled the human and the divine in glorious grandeur. Five hundred years later, it was still reducing the ten thousand visitors who visited it every day to stunned silence.

The Renaissance was not yet officially over. There would be more artists—Pontormo, Bronzino, Correggio, Titian—who would carry the flame through the end of the century, as art evolved into the grander and fussier styles known first as Mannerism and then Baroque, which some say began with Raphael.[14] The art, architecture, and ideas born in Italy would spread to all corners of Europe, aided greatly by the 1454 invention of the printing press by that German goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg. Michelangelo himself would continue producing sculpture, painting, and architecture well into his venerable old age, outliving Raphael by forty-four years to die at eighty-nine. But both he and the Renaissance had reached their apogee with the Sistine ceiling.

During his brief papacy ten years later, Adrian VI called the Sistine ceiling "a stew of nudity," but it was not until the reformist pope Pius V came along in the 1550s that any censorship took place. Pius V had the nude statuary hauled from the Papal Palace and had drapery painted over the genitalia in Michelangelo's ceiling. Centuries later this drapery would be erased.

"It seems," observed Pope John Paul II in 1994, "that Michelangelo, in his own way, allowed himself to be guided by the evocative words of the Book of Genesis, which, as regards the creation of the human being, male and female, reveals: 'The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.' The Sistine Chapel is precisely—if one may say so—the sanctuary of the theology of the human body. In witnessing to the beauty of man created by God as male and female, it also expresses, in a certain way, the hope of a world transfigured, the world inaugurated by the risen Christ." ■

14. In London in 1848, a group of painters calling themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed as a reaction to the overly mannered and stylized compositions that they blamed Raphael for inaugurating. The Pre-Raphaelites espoused both the natural and medieval styles that came before and would later split over the differences between those two styles.