

Arguably the greatest artist of all time, Michelangelo's works are now being collected in a comprehensive new book.

Leaonne Hall looks at the life of the Renaissance master...

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni was born on March 6th, 1475, and died on February 18th, 1564. An incredibly talented painter, sculptor, architect, poet and draughtsman, his versatility in all these mediums has led many to consider him to be the ultimate Renaissance man. The talents of Michelangelo were immense and today he's regarded as one of the greatest artists who ever lived, exerting a massive influence on the development of Western art. He designed and painted some of the most inspirational works of our time, such as the frescos of the Sistine Chapel, and created one of the most famous sculptures in the world – the statue of David.

Although it wasn't unusual for artists of this age to work in different disciplines, Michelangelo was regarded as the most accomplished, although he saw himself as a sculptor above all else – he worked in marble throughout his life, only creating art in other mediums during certain periods.

He was famous during his lifetime, unlike many of his contemporaries, and was seen as the most gifted artist of his age by his peers. He was the first Western artist whose biography was published while he was alive, being featured in painter and architect Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* in 1550, where Vasari described Michelangelo's works as the culminating perfection of art, surpassing the efforts of all those before him. Many of his works went beyond the boundaries and vocabulary of the time and were extremely unconventional, with Michelangelo managing to pour every

element of his being into his work. He created pieces that not only exuded strength and charisma, but also showed a certain fragility that was unique at the time.

THE EARLY YEARS

Michelangelo was born into a family of minor nobility, which gave him a standing beyond that of his many contemporaries. Raised in Florence, his decision to become an artist was frowned upon by his magistrate father, who saw it as being a step down the social ladder. Beginning his career by working in a small quarry with a stonemason, Michelangelo continued his apprenticeship with painter Domenico Ghirlandaio and sculptor Bertoldo di Giovanni, before being taken under the wing of Florence's ruler and patron of the arts, Lorenzo de' Medici. From 1490 to 1492, Michelangelo attended Lorenzo's school and became a sort of son to Lorenzo, who commissioned many works from him in his early days, including the sculpture *Battle of the Centaurs*. At the tender age of 16, he produced his first masterpiece, *Madonna of the Stairs*.

After Lorenzo's death, Michelangelo left Florence for Bologna, where he set to work on the shrine of St Dominic, creating figures with the seriousness and classical edge that was to become a trademark feature of his works with marble. In 1496, he began work on his first surviving large statue, that of *Bacchus*. Produced in Rome, it showed Bacchus, the god of wine and debauchery, in a virtuous »

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The genius of Michelangelo

light, and in the Roman tradition of a nude. The painter Francis Bacon later said, "As most of my figures are taken from the male nude, I am sure that I have been influenced by the fact that Michelangelo made the most voluptuous male nudes in the plastic arts."

Following the creation of *Bacchus*, Michelangelo went on to produce *Pietà* in 1498, a scene of the lamentation of Christ's death, and a groundbreaking project that saw him extract two figures from one marble block. Vasari said of it, "It is certainly a miracle that a formless block of stone could ever have been reduced to a perfection that nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh."

If *Pietà* made him a prominent sculptor, then *David*, commissioned in 1501, ensured his fame would last an eternity. Again employing the style of classical antiquity, *David* was commissioned for Florence's cathedral and was a statement of the Renaissance desire to find the perfect human form. The huge success of *David* was to lead to a number of exciting new projects for Michelangelo.

THE CREATION OF A LEGEND

Michelangelo was a solitary figure who liked to work alone and he rejected the help of assistants. Consequently, over the coming years, many of his more expansive projects remained unfinished, as one man alone could not complete such epic pieces. In 1505, he began work on a set of 12 marble Apostles for Florence cathedral, but only one was ever started, that of St. Matthew.

1504 saw him work with Leonardo da Vinci on a pair of huge frescos of military victories for Florence's city hall. Sadly, both works only survive in copies and partial sketches, but interestingly, what is evident is the influence of da Vinci on Michelangelo's works. Michelangelo regularly denied that anyone influenced his art, but many experts contest this, believing that from 1500 onwards, Michelangelo began blending the sheer power he could imbibe into a statue or painting with the fluidity of da Vinci.

From Florence, Michelangelo was called to Rome on a commission for the tomb of Pope Julius II. While this project never got off the ground until 1513 and continued for many years, his time in Rome marked the start of Michelangelo's most ambitious undertaking – the painting of the Sistine Chapel, which lasted from 1508 until

1512. Michelangelo was asked to paint the ceiling – regarded as an unimportant area – and the theme was to be the 12 Apostles. However, he added his own individual mark on the project, painting 12 figures, five of which were women. He filled the central portion of the ceiling with nine scenes from the book of Genesis, and the most famous today remains the creation of Adam. In these paintings, tensions between the Renaissance concept of harmony and stability and a new, more modern idea of mankind's uncertainty and confusion can clearly be seen.

Michelangelo soon moved into architectural projects, and one of his most famous efforts was the Medici Chapel. Constructed to mark the deaths of Giuliano and Lorenzo, Michelangelo worked on the marble interior until 1527, again reviving many traditional classical forms in

his work. His carvings of *Day*, *Night*, *Dusk* and *Dawn* on the tombs are among his most famous works, and they again show what a strikingly original and creative mind he possessed.

OTHER WORKS AND LATER LIFE

It's impossible to talk in detail here about his numerous other projects, but among some of his later works are the figures of *Apollo* and *Victory*, which were created for the Medici when they returned to Florence in 1530.

Michelangelo left Florence in 1534 and returned to Rome, where he would end his days. He left behind many unfinished works that he intended to return to and complete, but



Above: Michelangelo crafted two figures from one marble block to create the astonishing *Pietà*. Facing page: A statue of Giuliano de' Medici, 1525-1534. Page 37: *David* is one of the most famous statues in the world.

never did. During this period he wrote a number of poems, and over 300 are preserved today. As with his art works, they're elegant and expressive and reveal a belief that love can help man to begin the difficult task of divine ascension.

In 1534, Michelangelo once more turned his hand to fresco painting with the fabulous *Last Judgement* for Pope Paul III. This epic work was created to adorn the end wall of the Sistine Chapel, although it has a very different style from the ceiling he painted nearly 20 years earlier.

Michelangelo's last years saw him concentrating mainly on architectural projects, and two of Rome's most famous monuments – the Capitoline Square and the dome of St. Peter's Cathedral – were planned, but never finished, by him. »

Above: *The Creation of Adam* is one of the most famous paintings from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

Right: A sketch of the Roman god Bacchus



Archivio Fotografico Musei Vaticani; Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin

Nevertheless, he remained the chief architect at St. Peter's until his death.

At this point in his life, Michelangelo's poetry became more religious in nature as he began to worry about his impending death. He also began a huge sculpture of Christ being mourned, which he intended to use on his own tomb, but again, this was never finished.

MICHELANGELO: THE MAN

Unlike many artists of his period, we know a great deal about Michelangelo, even down to what he looked like. He was fond of his family and spent a large part of his wealth on improving their social standing, although he said of himself, "However rich I may have been, I have always lived like a poor man."

He had a great thirst for money and commissions, but was tight fisted, despite his immense wealth, and was

unpopular with some due to his uncouth nature – he often slept in his clothes and shoes. He was regularly dissatisfied with his work, believing that art originated from inner inspiration. Unlike his rival Leonardo da Vinci, when it came to art he believed that nature was a force that had to be overcome – hence the strength and force his works exude.

Throughout the ages, Michelangelo has received many accolades, although one of the most notable was written during his lifetime by the Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto, who described him as "*il divino*" – the divine one.

Undoubtedly, Michelangelo and his works can be regarded as one-of-a-kind, and quite rightly, he has been posthumously heralded as an incredibly gifted artist, able to express mankind's plethora of experiences with dynamism and feeling.

Michelangelo was the first man to really shake off the shackles of traditionalism – he found unique ways to express himself through his art, and he wasn't afraid to follow his impulses, which often took him to new and exciting levels of creativity. Thankfully, we still have many of Michelangelo's finest creations with us as a reminder of his unique genius. **TIM**



● *Michelangelo: Complete Works* is published by Taschen and costs £120. It's available now from all good bookshops, or from the Taschen website: visit www.taschen.com to order.