
Humanist Masterpieces

A new series which looks at some of the world's great Humanist cultural achievements

1. Michelangelo's David

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WITHOUT ANY DOUBT, wrote the painter and biographer Giorgio Vasari, "this figure has put in the shade every other statue, ancient and modern, Greek or Roman... such were the satisfying proportions and the beauty of the finished work... To be sure, anyone who has seen Michelangelo's *David* has no need to see anything else by any other sculptor, living or dead". Or, we might add, yet to be born. For, 500 years on, its timeless, universal appeal is undiminished. Every year, 2 million people flock to the city of Florence to see this enormous statue of a naked man, which yet remains the supreme icon of modern western civilisation.

To understand why, we have to consider the predominant Christian concept of man before the Renaissance. He was seen as a deprived, sinful, helpless creature, born of 'dirt' and, in St Augustine's words, 'crooked and sordid, bespotted and ulcerous'. At best, the ideal was represented as a beaten and crucified Jesus, resigned to his preordained fate – a violent, sacrificial death.

Renaissance Humanists wanted to create an entirely different image. In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), Pico Della Mirandola argues that God did not create a fixed human nature but gave us the freedom to fashion ourselves in the form that we prefer. Far from being a tortured soul trapped in a deformed bodily prison, man is a rational, beautiful and heroic being, worthy of happiness and capable of great achievement.

Both Pico and the neoplatonist philosopher Marsilio Ficino had tutored Michelangelo while he lived as a teenager in the palace of Lorenzo de' Medici and he was undoubtedly influenced by their ideas, for his entire art embodies the tension between pagan Humanist and Christian values.

When commissioned in 1501 by the Board of Works for Florence Cathedral to sculpt David from a huge block of Carrara marble which two other sculptors had abandoned in a mutilated condition, Michelangelo rose to the



"I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free"

– Michelangelo Buonarroti

challenge and chiselled away in the cathedral workshop day and night for over two years. It was originally intended for one of the cathedral buttresses, so that people would look up at it, hence the larger upper body features such as the oversized hands. But in the event it was considered so beautiful that it needed a more prominent position in front of the government building in the main square. It took forty men four days to transport the 17-foot high statue, dubbed 'Il Gigante', from the cathedral workshop to the Piazza della Signoria, where it remained until 1873 when it was moved inside the Galleria dell'Accademia to protect it from the ravages of time and the weather (a copy was erected in the plaza in 1882).

What Michelangelo did in his *David* masterpiece was to give the Humanist vision its first and most powerful artistic expression. He didn't merely free 'the angel in the marble'; in this Humanist tour-de-force he chipped away the whole medieval conception of humanity. Here was the new liberated man, at once beautiful and sublime, real and ideal, active and contemplative – man as indeed the measure of all things, the pinnacle of creation.

Here too, it unashamedly says, is a work created by a divine genius.

What makes *David* so special? The first quality is its stunning beauty. Michelangelo was obsessed with the male body, and in the Biblical story he found a perfect subject. In 1 Samuel 16:12 David is described as 'ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to'. Moreover, Michelangelo had an excuse for David's nakedness (Donatello's *David* is also nude, except for a hat and boots). In 1 Samuel 17:38 Saul gave David his armour, but David replied: "I cannot go with these; for I have not proved them" (verse 39). So David took off the armour, helmet and mail that Saul had given him. Although the Bible does not say that David went to face Goliath naked, Michelangelo seized the opportunity to portray naked beauty and at the same time pay deference to classical Greek models, leaving him uncircumcised.

In the event, he produced a God that surpasses Apollo or Adonis. Just compare his David with Donatello's (below), done about 60 or 70 years earlier. The latter is a delicate, scrawny boy in his early teens with smooth skin and long curls, and the ridiculous shepherd's hat he wears adds to his overall effeminate appearance. His head is bowed and shaded so that at a distance we can hardly see his face behind the hat.



Michelangelo's David is in his late teens, a blossoming, sensual young man, with the face of a Greek god, toned muscles, pulsing chest and a lithe, strong body. Vasari was right: "In it may be seen most beautiful contours of legs, with attachments of limbs and slender outlines of flanks that are divine; nor has there ever been seen a pose so easy, or any grace to equal that in this

work, or feet, hands and head so well in accord, one member with another, in harmony, design, and excellence of artistry".

The second quality is rationality. By depicting David before the fight, Michelangelo is able to present him as a thinking human being who is making a conscious choice to commit himself to act. He stands, with furrowed brow, anxiously yet resolutely gazing over his left shoulder into the distance at Goliath. He is preparing to kill, not by savagery and brute force but by intellect and skill. This David possesses the power to solve problems and achieve great things through the application of reason and the scientific method. He represents the Humanist ideal of the man who can become godlike by his own intelligence and strength of will. There is no indication of the nature of the battle because in a sense it is eternal and in every man.

David also displays the key Renaissance value of civic virtue. In contrast to the contemplative, ascetic, otherworldly passivity of medieval culture, Humanists sought to revive the classical notion of social duty. Michelangelo himself was devoted to the Florentine Republic and wanted its citizens to become aware of their responsibilities and commit themselves to the defence of its freedom. So he carved his giant partly as a symbol of the proud independence of Florence which, though threatened by more powerful states, was willing to take on all comers to protect its liberty. He wrote in a diary: "A civic hero, he was a warning... whoever governed Florence should govern justly and defend it bravely".

David has another quality which is shared by most of Michelangelo's creations: an astounding vitality. In this instance the feature is enhanced by the fact that the act of defeating Goliath has not yet happened. It is not a finished product, as in most David statues, but in the process of becoming. We almost expect David's pent-up energy to burst forth and for him to step off his pedestal and sling the stone at Goliath's forehead. And every viewing seems to reveal something different from this multifaceted creation.

Michelangelo believed that painting was inferior to sculpture because it lacks a third dimension. That is why his drawings and paintings frequently show more and more of each figure from different angles. A classic example is in the Sistine Chapel frescoes. In the second scene, where God creates the sun, the moon and plants, he moves in vast areas of space on the right, with his right finger pointing at the sun and his left pointing at the moon. Then on the left of the scene he has turned round to point his right finger at the plants, and we see that his lilac robe has slipped up his back to reveal – God's bum!



It is a stroke of extreme daring and arrogance right in the heart of western Christendom to display the buttocks of the Almighty to every Pope and Cardinal who looks upwards. And the iconic Creation of Adam scene, where the fingers of God and Adam almost touch, seems to reinforce the question: is God creating the universe or is the Divine Michelangelo creating God?

It has been said that before Michelangelo, there were craftsmen or skilful decorators; after him, artists. He is the archetype of genius partly because he was probably the first to use art to express his ideas about the world. And his ideas were not at all conventional, for he had a strong independence of mind. Despite their religious connotations, both the Sistine Chapel paintings and the *David* sculpture are statements about man. They transcend their Biblical settings to proclaim that human beings are special, not least because they have the power of creation. As Pico had suggested it in words, so Michelangelo expresses it in his divine art: we have the power through our free choice to create ourselves for good or ill.

The question is: has Michelangelo's artistic statement in *David* of the beauty, reason, courage and civic virtue of man endured into the 21st century, or has it been relegated to an excessively optimistic past? Is man a noble hero any more? Is he not now widely regarded as an ugly, corrupt, amoral being, trapped in an absurd and meaningless universe? Can modern-day Humanists help to revive the Renaissance conception so perfectly embodied in Michelangelo's divine statue? Or was it only an artist's dream – albeit the magnificent dream of an artist whose genius is quite simply without compare?