

# Michelangelo in Florence

Michelangelo spent many long years in Florence and left an immense legacy of artworks, as well as many others that he produced elsewhere and were brought here later. This pamphlet is a little invitation to go “beyond the David” and discover these masterpieces and the famous, or less known but splendid settings where they are found.

## Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1475-1564

The Buonarroti family had its roots in Florence and lived on the Santa Croce district. Michelangelo himself was born at Caprese, near Arezzo, where his father was the “podestà” or chief magistrate. The family moved back to Florence shortly after the boy's birth. When he was thirteen he was apprenticed to Ghirlandajo's flourishing workshop (scholars have said that he worked on the choir frescoes in the church of Santa Maria Novella), and studied the great masters of Tuscan painting, Giotto and Masaccio. Shortly thereafter he entered what was known as the Garden of San Marco: an academy founded by Lorenzo the Magnificent and directed by one of Donatello's pupils (the famous sculptor Bertoldo di Giovanni), where ancient sculptures were kept partly for teaching purposes. Lorenzo the Magnificent quickly recognized the young Michelangelo's talents and took him to live in his palace on Via Larga (that is now known as Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, where Michelangelo would later design the “kneeling windows” to enclose the loggia designed by Michelozzo). In the Medici palace the young artist was exposed to the humanistic environment of the Medici cultural circle

(Poliziano, Ficino, Pico della Mirandola), and this had a great impact on his development. It was in this context that he carved his earliest masterpieces, the **Battle of the Centaurs** and the **Madonna of the Stairs**, both of which are conserved in the Casa Buonarroti Museum. Shortly thereafter he carved the wooden **Crucifix** for the Prior of Santo Spirito, following the death of his first patron, Lorenzo the Magnificent, and perhaps partly because of it, Michelangelo embarked on a series of travels that would take him to Rome (1496). There, contact with the classical world had an important influence on his future works. He obtained important commissions from cardinals such as the classical **Bacchus** that is now in the Bargello Museum, and the famous Pietà in Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. During this period he also made the first of many trips to the marble quarries at Carrara to choose the material for his statues. In 1501, back in Florence, within a few years he created two of his greatest masterpieces: the **David** in the Academy Gallery and the **Doni Tondo**, a painting in the Uffizi Gallery, as well as the **Pitti Tondo** in the Bargello and the **Saint Matthew** in the Academy Gallery

It was during this period, that was also the era of the first Florentine Republic (1494-1512), that Michelangelo came into contact with Leonardo da Vinci. The two artists were commissioned to paint two grandiose frescoes in the Sala del Gran Consiglio in Palazzo Vecchio. Neither of these frescoes have survived; Michelangelo had only done the preparatory cartoons for the Battle of Cascina, but these drawings were lost over time. Over the following years Michelangelo was busy with two very important commissions for Pope Julius II in Rome – the tortured project that was modified several times for the pope's tomb (for this he carved the **Slaves** that are in the Academy Gallery and the Louvre in Paris, as well as the **Victory** in Palazzo Vecchio) - and the titanic task of frescoing the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1508-12). Back in Florence, between 1515-34, under the Medici pontiffs Leo X and Clement VII (Lorenzo the Magnificent's son and nephew respectively) he worked on the San Lorenzo, the complex that had always been the Medici family church and mausoleum: the façade that was never built, the famous **New Sacristy** and the **Laurentian Library**. Michelangelo had also been active in the second Florentine Republic, he served as superintendent of the city's military fortifications

(after long resistance the city capitulated to the imperial siege in 1530, and the emperor sanctioned the return of the Medici). The **David-Apollo** now in the Bargello dates from this period. In 1534 Michelangelo departed – this time definitively – for Rome where other great projects were waiting: the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel (where more than in any other of his works he revealed a profound, and tormented religious spirit), the final version of the tomb of Julius II in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli (this project had been considerably downsized with respect to the original plans and includes the famous statue of Moses) and his final, great architectural achievement, the dome of Saint Peter's Basilica. His last two sculptures were the **Pietà** (“Bandini”) in the Opera del Duomo Museum and the “Rondanini” Pietà (in Milan) that he was working on shortly before his death in 1564 at the age of 89. His body was brought back to Florence shortly after his death. After a lavish funeral Michelangelo was buried in the Basilica of Santa Croce, where a few years later the funeral monument designed by Vasari was erected.

## CASA BUONARROTI MUSEUM

This building is actually the result of a seventeenth century “merger” of three houses that Michelangelo had purchased some time around 1510 (and he had lived in one of them for a several years). It was his great-grandson, Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger (1568-1647), who made decorate the rooms with scenes celebrating the glories of the “divine artist” and his family, making it something of a “shrine to his memory”. In addition to being the permanent home of a large collection of letters, models (including the wooden model for the façade of San Lorenzo and of the River God) and original drawings, which are displayed on a rotating basis, the museum periodically hosts exhibits focusing on Michelangelo's world, his life and the family's collections.

## 1 MADONNA OF THE STAIRS

Michelangelo carved this bas-relief of the Virgin and Child against a background of steep stairs (hence the name) when he was 15 and



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was attending the garden of San Marco. Even though it reveals explicit references to Donatello, especially the stacciato or “flattened” style, the sculpture clearly heralds the artist's new, revolutionary language.

## 2 THE BATTLE OF THE CENTAURS

This sculpture also dates from Michelangelo's youth and it was Agnolo Poliziano, the famous poet of the Medici entourage, who suggested the subject. Based on an episode from Ovid's Metamorphoses, it portrays a lively melee of “heroic nudes” in a great variety of poses and expressions. Michelangelo drew the inspiration for this test of skill from antique sarcophagi depicting similar themes.

## CHURCH OF SANTO SPIRITO

The distinctive façade of the church is the backdrop for the lively, typically Florentine piazza of the same name. The church that also houses works by Perugino, Filippino Lippi and Andrea Sansovino – was designed by Brunelleschi (1432), and can be considered the apex of his artistic career. Michelangelo's crucifix is in the sacristy designed by Giuliano da Sangallo.

## 3 CRUCIFIX

Michelangelo, not yet twenty, carved this wooden crucifix for the Prior of Santo Spirito to thank him for allowing him to study the anatomy of dead bodies in the hospital prior to burial. It is the almost unanimous opinion of scholars that this is the same carving described in early sources.

## BARGELLO MUSEUM

This museum is located in the former Palazzo del Capitano del Popolo (XIII century), and it is one of the major sculpture museums in Italy. It conserves works by the greatest artists starting from the fifteenth century: from Donatello (two statues of David, Saint George and the Marzocco) to the Della Robbia family, from Ghiberti and Brunelleschi (two panels for the famous competition held in 1401) to Verrocchio, from Cellini to Giambologna to Bernini. A rich and very fine grouping of weapons, small bronzes, majolica items, ivory and other objects of the so-called “minor” arts completes the museum's collection.



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## 4 BACCHUS

This statue, commissioned by Cardinal Riario in 1496, dates from Michelangelo's first sojourn in Rome. It reveals an extraordinary emulation, and reinterpretation, of classical sculpture. The god of wine, unsteady on his feet, is raising a goblet, while a little satyr is stealing a bunch of grapes. The naturalistic treatment of the shapes and details is astonishing. Francesco I de' Medici purchased the statue and had it placed in the Uffizi Gallery.

## 5 PITTI TONDO

Michelangelo carved this round, marble bas-relief for Bartolomeo Pitti around 1505. It is contemporary to his other “tondi” (the Doni Tondo in the Uffizi and the Taddei Tondo in London). The Virgin Mary, with her intent expression seems to herald one of the Sibyls in the Sistine Chapel, and in the unfinished background we can see the figure of the Young Saint John.

## 6 BRUTUS

This bust, clearly inspired by classical statuary was carved in Rome around 1540 on the advice of Donato Giannotti, a Florentine who



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had been exiled to Rome and with whom Michelangelo shared his republican ideals. According to some hypothesis this statue would be a portrait of Lorenzino de' Medici (the ‘Lorenzaccio’ who killed the Duke Alessandro de' Medici in 1537), and a tribute to the man who did away with the tyrant.

## 7 DAVID/APOLLO

The dual name of this statue is due to the uncertainties in the interpretation of the subject. At the end of the siege of 1530 (that sanctioned the return of the Medici to Florence) Michelangelo was practically forced to carve this statue for Baccio Valori, papal governor of Florence as a condition to regain the favor of the Medici.

## ACADEMY GALLERY

This museum's name is practically synonymous with Michelangelo's David, but there is much more to see. It was established in the eighteenth century as a teaching facility for the students of the adjacent Accademia di Belle Arti. Then, since 1873 when the David was moved there, and other works by Michelangelo were acquired (including



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the controversial Palestrina Pietà) it has been identified as a “Michelangelo museum”. In addition to the sculpture collection that includes works by other artists, there is the painting gallery (with works dating from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century) and the Museum of Antique Musical Instruments.

## 8 DAVID

This statue was originally commissioned by the Opera del Duomo in 1501 and was completed three years later. Out of a block of marble that another artist had begun carving and abandoned Michelangelo created a revolutionary interpretation of the biblical hero as well as the archetype of the Renaissance ideal of beauty. The statue, immediately rechristened as “the giant” was placed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio in Piazza della Signoria and became the symbol of the proud Florentine Republic. The original was moved to this museum in 1873 and a copy was raised in Piazza della Signoria.

## 9 SLAVES

These 4, unfinished statues were begun for one of the many versions of the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome; two other slaves from the



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same project are now in the Louvre. Known by different names (the Awakening Slave, the Bearded Slave, the Young Slave and Atlas) they have been interpreted in several ways. As we see them, in various stages of completion they evoke the enormous strength of the creative concept as they try to free themselves from the bonds and physical weight of the marble. They were originally purchased by Cosimo I who had them placed in Buontalenti's Grotto in the Boboli Gardens.

**10 SAINT MATTHEW**

Michelangelo did only one of the statues for the ambitious project calling for twelve marble Apostles for the cathedral of Florence, and he left it unfinished.

**UFFIZI GALLERY**

This is one of the most important museums in the world. It offers an extraordinary overview of Italian and European painting from the XIII to the

Family is portrayed against a background with nudes, probably allusions to the pagan world, with the Young Saint John in a significant intermediate position. The splendidly carved frame dates from the same period as the painting.

**PALAZZO VECCHIO MUSEUM**

This monument and symbol of the city was designed by Arnolfo di Cambio at the end of the 1200s, and is still the seat of the city government. With the advent of Cosimo I de' Medici, who chose it as his residence (1540) a project was launched to decorate the interior – Vasari and his pupils centered the design on a celebration of the Medici House. In the oldest part of the building, where there are still decorations dating from the republican period, we can admire masterpieces such as Judith and Holofernes by Donatello and the Puttino by Verrocchio.

**12 VICTORY**

This allegorical statue stands in the Salone de' Cinquecento, the same room (then known as the Sala del Gran Consiglio) where Michelangelo was to have painted the Battle



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of Cascina – as the companion fresco to another battle scene by Leonardo. This statue, that has more than a few similarities to the David, was carved for one of the many versions of the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome.

**THE SAN LORENZO COMPLEX**

is a group of monuments (the Basilica, the Laurentian Library and the Medici Chapels) all erected around the site of the church and under the patronage of the Medici family. The original church of San Lorenzo dates from 393 A.D., and it was Brunelleschi who designed the splendid Renaissance interior (including the "Old Sacristy" which is the first nucleus of the Medici mausoleum). Here we can admire works by Donatello, Verrocchio, Filippo Lippi and Rosso Fiorentino. Michelangelo's wooden model for the façade that was never built - so the church still has its original rough stone exterior – is in the Casa Buonarroti Museum.

**MEDICI CHAPELS**

This is the dynasty's mausoleum and comprises several clearly separate areas:



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from the dark crypt one can reach the majestic Chapel of the Princes (built between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and sumptuously clad with semiprecious stone inlays by the famous Opificio delle Pietre Dure that houses the tombs of the Medici Grand Dukes) which leads into Michelangelo's Medici Chapel, also known as New Sacristy

**13 NEW SACRISTY**

It is new in relation to the "old" sacristy designed by Brunelleschi on the opposite side of the transept of the Basilica of San Lorenzo. This extraordinary room, a sublime blend of sculpture and architecture, is particularly rich in symbolism. Michelangelo worked on it for 14 years during the period that coincided with the dramatic events of the siege of 1530. The tombs of Giuliano Duke of Nemours and Lorenzo Duke of Urbino (with their famous allegorical statues of Day and Night, Dusk and Dawn respectively) are completed. On the unfinished tomb of Lorenzo the Magnificent and Giuliano de' Medici, between the patron saints of the Medici dynasty (carved by pupils) is the sublime Madonna and Child by the master's hand.



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**14 LAURENTIAN LIBRARY**

This collection of books, manuscripts and parchments, begun by Cosimo the Elder with the assistance of renowned humanists is the only one of its kind in the world. In 1523 the Medici pope, Clement VII, commissioned Michelangelo to design the library, and he continued monitoring the work even after his definitive departure for Rome in 1534. The magnificent vestibule, "sculpted architecture", is dominated by the tripartite staircase that leads into the main room – the reading room - which was entirely decorated (from the walls to the design of the desks) according to precise instructions from the master. It is reachable through the main cloister of the Basilica.

**OPERA DEL DUOMO MUSEUM**

This museum features a group of important, original masterpieces that relate to the history of the cathedral. From the sculptures for the original façade by Arnolfo di Cambio, to the choirs by Luca della Robbia and Donatello (as well as the latter's Magdalene and the Prophets carved for the bell tower) to Ghiberti's panels from the Door of Paradise of the Baptistery. Other sections of the museum are dedicated to reliquaries and Brunelleschi's dome.



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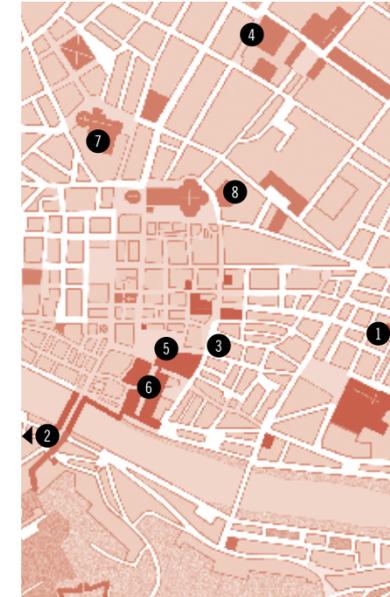
**15 PIETA'**

This is a masterpiece of great dramatic intensity. Originally conceived for his own funerary monument in the church Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, the elderly artist carved the statue around 1550. Then, unsatisfied, he damaged it himself and it was restored and completed by one of his pupils. At the apex of the pyramidal composition is Nicodemus (that is actually a self-portrait) holding and contemplating the body of the dead Christ.

By Andrea Giordani  
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- 1 ● Casa Buonarroti Museum, Via Ghibellina 70
- 2 ● Church of Santo Spirito, Piazza S. Spirito
- 3 ● Bargello Museum, Via del Proconsolo 4
- 4 ● Academy Gallery, Via Ricasoli 60
- 5 ● Palazzo Vecchio Museum, Piazza Signoria
- 6 ● Galleria degli Uffizi, Piazzale degli Uffizi
- 7 ● Complex of San Lorenzo,  
– Medici Chapels, Piazza Madonna d. Aldobrandini  
– Laurentian Library, Piazza S. Lorenzo
- 8 ● Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Piazza Duomo 9

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The Great Artists

FLORENTINE ITINERARIES

Michelangelo in Florence

His Masterpieces in His City