



The Pieta by Michelangelo, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome

Carved in Carrara marble, 1498 – 1499

In 1498 when a mostly unknown French Cardinal in Rome commissioned a mostly unknown young artist from Florence to carve a statue for his funeral monument, the resultant statue to this day is arguably the world's most famous sculpture of a religious subject. It took 24 year-old Michelangelo Buonarroti a little more than a year to sculpt **The Pieta** -- a masterpiece that displayed such rare artistic talent, such exceptional genius, and such deep faith, that art critics and people of faith around the world for nearly six centuries have marveled at its sheer magnificence.

A "pieta" is an image of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ after the crucifixion. ("Pieta" is the Italian word for "pity.") By the late 1400's, pietas were seen in the northern European art world (Germany and France mostly), but they had not yet been introduced into Italian art. So when the French Cardinal requested a pieta, it was a groundbreaking endeavor in Rome. Michelangelo's finished pieta stands six feet across and almost six feet tall. He set the two figures atop the rocky stones of Golgotha. To answer the visual challenges and weight-bearing requirements of positioning a fully grown man's body naturally across a mother's lap in heavy stone, Michelangelo did not sculpt the two bodies in proportion. He made the mother's body larger, and added voluminous drapery to her clothing, which is so exquisitely carved that it looks wispy, light, and flowing rather than like stationary stone. Michelangelo's expert knowledge of human anatomy is very apparent. Veins coursing limbs and necks, bones and muscles sculpted with precise accuracy, physical positioning that in every detail mimics reality make the two figures appear as flesh and blood before us, not cold, hard Carrara marble.

What is so very intriguing about Michelangelo's pieta is that he did NOT portray an aged, remorseful, inconsolable, almost despairing mother grieving her scourged and bloodied son, as the northern Europeans had in their pietas. Michelangelo, a very devout Catholic who experienced much suffering in his own life, interpreted the moment of Mary cradling the crucified body of Christ in an altogether different vision. His Mary is young and serene; his Christ has the marks of crucifixion on his hands, feet, and side, but is otherwise left intact and beautiful. Why? The "pity" Michelangelo chose to portray in his pieta is the pity of Almighty God on us poor sinners, and the unfathomable mercy God bestowed upon mankind by sending His only Son so that we might be freed from the bonds of sin and death and have eternal life. Michelangelo's Christ lays serene after He has poured Himself out in total love and has demonstrated complete obedience to the Father. His suffering has not been void of meaning or in vain, rather it was redemptive and the greatest act of love ever lived out. Communion between man and God was restored, and Michelangelo sees this as a sacred moment to behold. Therefore he sculpted Christ as divinely beautiful. Notice Mary's hands do not directly touch her beloved Son's body -- for He is God after all and worthy of devout adoration, even from the most blessed among women. Mary's face is young, with a gaze of humble wisdom, revealing the very first among human creatures comprehending the victory won by her beloved Son's sacrifice and suffering. She is sad, yes, because she is human and a mother and has just witnessed the worst of human brutality and injustice, but she is also calmly serene, because she is perfectly abandoned to God's holy will and completely trusting in His divine plan of salvation. Michelangelo often said God is the source of all beauty, and he reasoned that because Mary is one of the closest to God, she can only be beautiful, incorruptible, chaste, and pure. (Michelangelo said he thought of his own mother, who died when he was only six years old, as he carved the Blessed Mother's face.) He portrays Mary's moral beauty and shows the viewer how blessed viewers are to call Mary our "mother."

Studying Michelangelo's pieta is a study in Catholic understanding of sacrifice and suffering. It shows that we follow a suffering Lord and that a faithful, obedient, Catholic life is not easy. Christ didn't promise to take away all suffering in the world -- rather, He told us to expect it. But He also promised He'd be with us always, to the end of time, as we pick up the crosses that come to us in life, and as we follow Him. Michelangelo's masterful pieta vividly shows that Christian love demands sacrifice and that there is great opportunity in suffering. We can join our sufferings to Christ's and offer a gift of redemptive suffering to a sinful world.