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6. MICHELANGELO'S VIEWS ON ART

Anthony Blunt

INTRODUCTION

In his *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450–1600* (1940; 2nd ed., 1956), Anthony Blunt traces the artistic theories of the Renaissance from their fully-developed humanist form in the writings of Alberti through the Mannerist doctrines of the sixteenth century.

Of particular interest is the contrast presented by the chapters on Leonardo and Michelangelo. Intensely fascinated by the phenomena of the material world and attuned to "the evidence of the senses," Leonardo emerges representative of the scientific current in Renaissance art. Yet Leonardo's conception of the artist is not that of a mere observer and recorder of phenomena. He is also the imaginative creator, but one whose invention is based nonetheless on the forms of nature. Michelangelo, for all the empirical factors in his conception of the human form, appears initially to comprehend the beauty of the human body as a reflection of the divine in the material world. This notion has its roots in Neoplatonism, which enjoyed an ephemeral popularity in the Italian Renaissance and attracted the artist during his early formative years in Florence. As Michelangelo's religious feeling shifted during the course of his long career toward an increasingly dark and introspective mood, his views on art still retained a measure of Neoplatonic tone. But in these later years, as Blunt demonstrates, he ceased finally to see human beauty as a symbol of the divine. Stylistically as well as chronologically there is a whole lifetime between the physical splendor of his early *David* and the Rondanini *Pietà*, which he left unfinished at his death. What this final work conveys is a spiritual presence, poignant and flawed.

For further reading on Michelangelo's thought, consult E. H. Ramsden, ed. and trans., *The Letters of Michelangelo*, 2 vols. (1963); Charles de Tolnay, *The Art and Thought of Michelangelo* (1964); and R. J. Clements, *Poetry of Michelangelo* (1965). Michelangelo's relationship to the Neoplatonic movement is treated in Erwin Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* (1939), available in paperback form since 1962. Other readings on Neoplatonism are P. O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (1943); J. C. Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love* (1958); E. H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XI (1948); and Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (1960), especially 182–200. For critical views of the Neoplatonic content in Michelangelo's art, consult Frederick Hartt, "The Meaning of Michelangelo's Medici Chapel," in *Essays in Honor of Georg Swarzenski* (1951), 145–155; and Creighton E. Gilbert, "Texts and Contexts of the Medici Chapel," *Art Quarterly*, XXXIV, 4 (1971), 391–409. An important study of this monument is Johannes Wilde, "Michelangelo's Designs for the Medici Tombs," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XVIII (1955), 54 ff. See also the bibliography in the selection on Michelangelo's architecture by James S. Ackerman for basic works on this artist, to which one should add Frederick Hartt, *Michelangelo. The Complete Sculpture* (1968); and Herbert von Einem, *Michelangelo*, rev. ed. (1973), a work first published in German in 1959.

Additional publications are Leo Steinberg, "Michelangelo's Florentine *Pietà*: the Missing Leg," *The Art Bulletin*, L, 4 (1968), 343–353, "Michelangelo's *Madonna Medici* and Related Works," *The Burlington Magazine*, 113 (March 1971), 144–149, and *Michelangelo's Last Paintings* (1975); Johannes Wilde, *Michelangelo and His Studio* (1975); Juergen Schulz, "Michelangelo's Unfinished Works," *The Art Bulletin*, LVII, 3 (September 1975), 366–373; Leo Steinberg, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," *Art in America*, LXIII (November–December 1975), 49–63, which one should read in conjunction with Marcia B. Hall, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*: Resurrection of the Body and Predestination," *The Art Bulletin*, LVIII, 1 (March 1976), 85–92; Esther G. Dotson, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling," *The Art Bulletin*, LXI, 2 (June 1979), 223–256, and 3 (September 1979), 405–429; *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo*, trans. by Creighton Gilbert (1980); and David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (1981).

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Our sources of knowledge for Michelangelo's views on the Fine Arts are varied. Of his own writings, the letters contain almost nothing of interest from the point of view of theory, since they are nearly all personal or business notes to his family or his patrons. The poems, on the other hand, are of great importance, for though they contain few direct references to the arts, many of them are love poems from which it is possible to deduce in what terms Michelangelo conceived of beauty.

In addition to his own writings we have the evidence of three of his contemporaries. The first of these is the Portuguese painter Francisco de Hollanda, who came to Rome in 1538 and worked his way for a time into Michelangelo's circle. He was probably never very intimate with the latter, and his dialogues[1] were almost certainly written to glorify himself and to show how closely he associated with the master. But however great his conceit may have been, his evidence is of importance, since it deals with a period of Michelangelo's life on which we are not otherwise well informed by his biographers.[2]

The second contemporary source is the biography of Michelangelo in Vasari's *Lives*. It was first published in 1550, but was greatly enlarged and almost entirely rewritten for the second edition of 1568. It contains less material than might be expected, but it gives some account of his methods of working and records some of his opinions.

More important is the third authority, Ascanio Condivi, a pupil of Michelangelo, who published a biography of his master in 1553. The life seems to have been written to correct certain false statements made by Vasari; and, though Condivi was a somewhat naïve character, he is probably more reliable than either Hollanda or Vasari when he reports Michelangelo's own views and statements.

Michelangelo lived to a great age, and his views were constantly developing and changing, so that it is impossible to treat his theories as a single consistent whole. Born in 1475, he was trained under masters who still belonged to the Quattrocento. His earliest works in Rome represent the full blooming of the High Renaissance, but before he died in 1564 Mannerism was firmly estab-

lished. It is impossible to divide his works or his ideas into sharply separate compartments, but for the present purpose they can be roughly grouped in three periods, if we ignore the very early years from which no documents survive.

In the first period, ending roughly in 1530, Michelangelo's view of the arts is that of High Renaissance humanism. It is most clearly typified in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the *Pietà* in St. Peter's, and the early love-poems. In these works the various elements which made up Michelangelo's early training are clearly visible. Like Leonardo he was heir to the scientific tradition of Florentine painting, but he was also affected by the atmosphere of Neoplatonism in which he grew up. His highest allegiance, however, was to beauty rather than to scientific truth; and although in his early years at least he felt that the attainment of beauty depended in large part on the knowledge of nature, he did not feel the urge to undertake the investigation of natural causes for their own sake. Consequently the observation of nature which he absorbed in the studio of Ghirlandaio could fairly easily be fused with the doctrines of beauty which he learned from the circle of Lorenzo de' Medici. But there was another factor which favored Michelangelo in comparison with Leonardo. Neither Florence nor Milan could provide the latter with the atmosphere of buoyancy which alone can produce a great synthesis such as had been achieved in Florence in the early years of the fifteenth century. In Rome, on the other hand, Michelangelo found a city at the height of its wealth and politically in a leading position for the whole of Italy. In this atmosphere the artist felt at ease with the world, at which he could look out steadily, and which he could reflect directly in his works. A training in Neoplatonism led to a belief in the beauty of the visible universe, above all in human beauty, which was no longer colored by the nostalgic mysticism of Florence. The grandeur of the figures on the Sistine ceiling depends on far more than the simple imitation of natural forms, but its idealization is based on a close knowledge and study of these forms. Whatever heroic quality is added, the foundation is a worship of the beauty of the human body.

In the field of thought the two apparently conflicting systems of Christianity and paganism are still perfectly fused in the Rome of the High Renaissance. The iconographical scheme of the Sistine ceiling frescoes is based on the most erudite theology, but the forms in which it is clothed are those of pagan gods. In Raphael's

frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura the four themes of Theology, Pagan Philosophy, Poetry, and Justice are intricately blended. The catalyst, however, is no longer the hard reason of the Florentines like Alberti, but rather the elaborate Neoplatonism of the later Quattrocento stripped of its more nostalgic elements. In Michelangelo the two faiths were both perfectly sincere. From the days when he was first influenced by the teaching of Savonarola he was a good member of the Catholic Church, though at first without that passionate self-abnegation which came into his faith in the last years of his life.

Michelangelo's belief in the beauty of the material world was very great. His early love-poems reflect this feeling in their expression of strong emotional and often physical passion, directed as much towards visible beauty as toward the spiritual beauty of which the Neoplatonists spoke.[3] Moreover, Michelangelo's contemporaries tell us that he did not merely look at nature, but, throughout his life, studied it scientifically. Condivi speaks of his knowledge of perspective,[4] and both he and Vasari record the care which he devoted to anatomy, not merely learning it at second-hand but dissecting bodies himself.[5]

Michelangelo did not, however, believe in the exact imitation of nature. Vasari says that he made a pencil drawing of Tommaso de' Cavalieri "and neither before nor afterward did he take the portrait of anyone, because he abhorred executing a resemblance to the living subject, unless it were of extraordinary beauty."[6] According to Hollanda his scorn for Flemish painting was based on the same idea: "In Flanders they paint with a view to external exactness . . . without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skillful choice or boldness."[7] This view that the artist must select from nature is in agreement with Alberti, though it is unlikely that the latter would have protested so vigorously against Flemish naturalism. His standards were not the same as those of Michelangelo. Alberti acted according to a strictly rational choice, and sought the typical. Michelangelo pursued the beautiful. Condivi describes his methods as follows, alluding to Zeuxis's painting of the Crotonian Venus:

> He loved not only human beauty but universally every beautiful thing . . . choosing the beauty in nature, as the bees gather honey from the flowers using it afterwards in their works, as all those have done who have ever made a noise in painting. That

> old master who had to paint a Venus was not content to see one virgin only, but studied many, and taking from each her most beautiful and perfect feature gave them to his Venus.[8]

For Michelangelo it is by means of the imagination that the artist attains to a beauty above that of nature, and in this he appears as a Neoplatonist compared with the rational Alberti. To him beauty is the reflection of the divine in the material world.[9] . . . It is clear that the human figure is the particular form in which he finds this divine beauty most clearly manifested: "I can never now perceive Thy eternal light within a mortal being without great longing."[10]

In other cases he talks of the inward image which the beauty of the visible world arouses in his mind. The idea of beauty set up in this way is superior to material beauty, for the mind refines the images which it receives, and makes them approach more nearly the Ideas which exist in it by direct infusion from God. . . .[11]

But at this time Michelangelo still firmly believes that the inward image is dependent on the existence of beauty in the outside world which is transformed by the mind into something nobler. In an early sonnet, written in the form of a dialogue, he asks Love:

> Tell me, Love, I beseech thee, if my eyes truly see the beauty which is the breath of my being, or if it is only an inward image I behold when, wherever I look, I see the carven image of her face.[12]

And Love answers:

> The beauty you behold indeed emanates from her, but it grows greater as it flows through mortal eyes to its nobler abode—the soul. Here it becomes divine, perfect to match the soul's immortality. It is this beauty, not the other, which ever outruns your vision.[13]

These passages may be compared with Raphael's letters to Castiglione, referring to his fresco of Galatea in the Farnesina, in which he says: "To paint a beauty I need to see many beauties, but since there is a dearth of beautiful women, I use a certain idea which comes into my mind."[14]

Michelangelo's views, therefore, in his first period are still related to those of Alberti, but with a strong tinge of Neoplatonic

idealism. For Alberti the artist is entirely dependent on nature in his work, and he can only improve on it by attempting to reach the types at which nature aims. For Michelangelo, on the other hand, the artist, though directly inspired by nature, must make what he sees in nature conform to an ideal standard in his own mind. Compared with Alberti this approach may seem already somewhat unrealistic, but compared with Michelangelo's later views it represents a close and direct connection with nature.

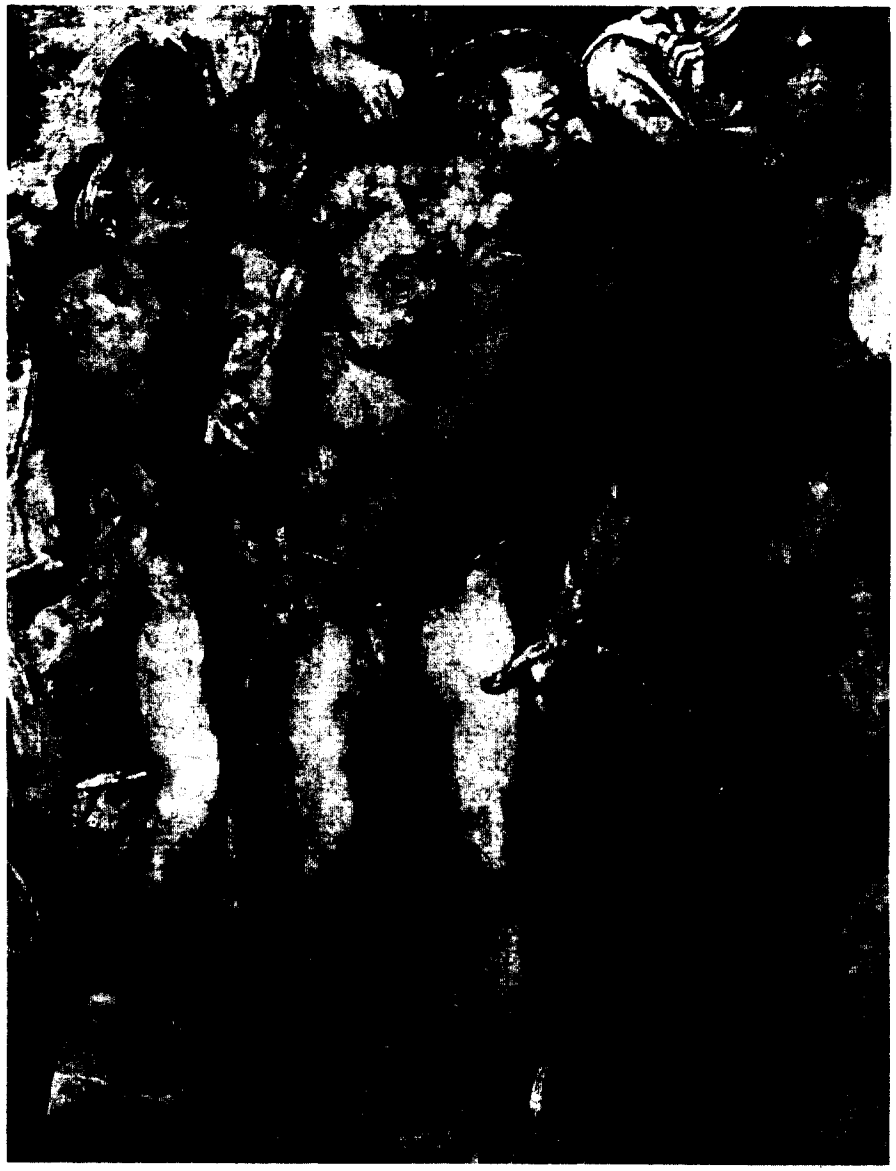
By about 1530 the attempts of the Papacy to form a powerful secular State in Italy had failed. The Reformation had split the Church and incalculably weakened the position of the Pope. Financial disorders of every kind added to the confusion, and the greatest single blow of all had come with the Sack of Rome in 1527, which left Clement VII almost powerless. The whole social structure on which the humanist art of High Renaissance Rome was based was swept away. Instead of a sense of security men felt the general disturbance of events, which seemed to threaten the existence of the Catholic Church and, with it, of the whole of Italian society.

This changed situation affected different generations in different ways. The older humanists, men of Michelangelo's age, had felt that the Roman Church was in need of reform, and had anticipated many of the Pauline features in Luther's theology. The latter forms in some respects a parallel to Italian humanism, for, if the humanists asserted the rights of individual reason, Luther asserted those of individual conscience. The Italian humanists were too closely involved with the Church of Rome as an institution to follow Luther when it became a question of schism in the Church, but, as long as it appeared possible to combine the more moderate doctrines of reform, particularly justification by faith, with fidelity to Rome, many of them were in sympathy with the demands of the German reformers. In this way there was formed a party of humanists who aimed at an internal reform of the Roman Church and a compromise with the Protestants. This party, which later received the official support of Paul III, was led by men like Contarini, Pole, and Sadoleto, with whom were associated as close followers and supporters Vittoria Colonna and Michelangelo. The religion of the latter now became fervent, and took on the form of a serious but not fanatical piety, consonant with his humanistic principles, but gradually modifying them. He belongs, that

is to say, to those who wanted to build up a new and spiritualized Catholicism by means of such reforming doctrines as did not destroy the basis of the Roman Church.

This change of outlook naturally affected Michelangelo's art, and the change is most clearly shown in the great work of this period, the fresco of the *Last Judgement* over the altar of the Sistine Chapel, painted for Clement VII and Paul III between 1534 and 1541. This fresco is the work of a man shaken out of his secure position, no longer at ease with the world, and unable to face it directly. Michelangelo does not now deal directly with the visible beauty of the physical world. When he made the *Adam* on the Sistine ceiling he was aiming at a rendering of what would in actual life be a beautiful body, though it was idealized above reality. In the *Last Judgement* his aim was different. Here again nudes appear, but they are heavy and lumpish, with thick limbs, lacking in grace (Fig. 12). The truth is not, as has sometimes been said, that Michelangelo's hand was failing, but that he was no longer interested in physical beauty for its own sake. Instead he used it as a means of conveying an idea, or of revealing a spiritual state. Judged on the humanist standard of 1510 the *Last Judgement* is a failure, and it is not surprising that the admirers of Raphael could not stomach it. But as the most profound expression of the spiritualized Catholicism which Michelangelo practised, it is a masterpiece of equal importance with the ceiling. The ideals of Classic beauty which were relevant in the Sistine ceiling are no longer valid in the *Last Judgement*. Such Classical features as there are, like the Charon and Minos group, are seen through the eyes of Dante and are given a new spiritual significance. The most fundamental principle of the High Renaissance seems here to have been neglected, for there is little reconstruction of the real world, no real space, no perspective, no typical proportions. The artist is intent only on conveying his particular kind of idea, though the means by which he conveys it is still the traditional Renaissance symbol, the human figure.

The new approach to life and to art which is to be found in the *Last Judgement* can also be traced in Michelangelo's writings. In the poems of the thirties and early forties a new attitude toward beauty and toward the problem of love is visible. At this time one of the poet's most frequent themes is that physical beauty passes away, so that love directed toward it cannot give complete satisfaction and is degrading to the mind. . . .[15]



12. Michelangelo, Detail from *Last Judgement*, John the Baptist, 1534–1541, Fresco (Sistine Chapel, Vatican; Alinari/Editorial Photocolor Archives, Inc.)

But this element of bitterness and gloom is balanced by a more optimistic Neoplatonic belief. Love of physical beauty is a cheat, but the true love, that of spiritual beauty, gives perfect satisfaction, does not fade with time, and elevates the mind to the contemplation of the divine. This feeling is expressed most clearly in the poems to Tommaso de' Cavalieri, who dominates Michelangelo's emotional life from 1532 onward. The artist was evidently overwhelmed by the physical beauty of the young man, but he regarded it as an outward sign of spiritual and mental beauty, and the friendship was built upon that basis, though the violence of Michelangelo's passion was no less than in his earlier affections. This is summed up in a sonnet to Cavalieri. . . .[16]

However, not only is love directed toward spiritual qualities, but it has also the effect of raising the lover's mind by means of beauty to a contemplation of the divine beauty and therefore to communion with God. . . .[17]

But it must not be supposed that Michelangelo's view of beauty is wholly incorporeal and spiritualized. Visible beauty is still for him of the greatest significance, since it is the most effective symbol for the true spiritual beauty, and the beauty of man leads more easily than any other means to the contemplation of the divine. Love is stirred up most easily through the eye, which, according to the Neoplatonists, was the noblest of the senses. . . .[18] It is only through the eye that the artist is stimulated to creation and the spectator to contemplation of divine beauty. . . .[19] And it is in the human body that divine beauty is most completely manifested:

> Nowhere does God, in his grace, reveal himself to me more clearly than in some lovely human form, which I love solely because it is a mirrored image of Himself.[20]

The same idea is expressed in the following madrigal by means of the familiar Neoplatonic doctrine that beauty is the light which streams from the face of God:

> Neither my eyes in love with all that is beautiful, nor my soul thirsting for salvation, possess any power that can raise them to Heaven but the contemplation of beautiful things. From the highest Heaven there streams down a splendor which draws desire up toward the stars, and here on earth men call it love. And there is nothing that can captivate, fire and give wisdom to a noble heart as can a face lit with star-like eyes.[21]

At this period of his life, therefore, Michelangelo's poems show strongly the influence of the more mystical elements of Neoplatonism. The strong physical passion of the early love poems has given place to doctrines which make of love the contemplation of an incorporeal beauty. This is only another manifestation of the same tendency which we have traced in the paintings of the second period, such as the *Last Judgement*. It is also the equivalent of the spiritualized form of religion with which Michelangelo was associated in the thirties and forties. In all branches of his art and thought we feel a withdrawal from that direct contact with life which characterized the early period.

It may be suggested that this tendency away from the material and toward the things of the spirit can really be put down to the fact that Michelangelo was growing old. No doubt this provides a part of the explanation, but not the whole of it. Not all old men become spiritually minded. They only become so in certain circumstances, and Michelangelo's mysticism was a mode of escape from finding that his own world had crumbled about him. Age played its part, because had he been younger Michelangelo might have been able to fit himself to the changed circumstances, and have been drawn into the Counter-Reformation movement. But the general situation also played its part in breaking up the foundation on which his life was built.

In those passages of Michelangelo's poems which refer directly to the art of painting and sculpture we find a change corresponding to that in his ideas on beauty in the abstract.

In the first place Michelangelo is much more explicit about the religious function of the arts. Hollanda records a conversation in which Michelangelo explains his idea of the religious painter, who according to him must be skillful in his art and at the same time a man of pious life:

> In order to imitate in some degree the venerable image of Our Lord, it is not enough to be a painter, a great and skillful master; I believe that one must further be of blameless life, even if possible a saint, that the Holy Spirit may inspire one's understanding. . . . Often badly wrought images distract the attention and prevent devotion, at least with persons who have but little; while those which are divinely fashioned excite even those who have little devotion or sensibility to contemplation and tears, and by their austere beauty inspire them with great reverence and fear.[22]

The view which he expresses here is curiously close to that of Savonarola on religious art.[23] We know from Condivi[24] that Savanarola was an important influence in his life, and it is quite likely that his conception of painting as an art devoted to the service of the Church was affected by the teaching of the Dominican.

In the more purely aesthetic part of Michelangelo's writings on the arts the dominant influence in this period is that of Neoplatonism, which affects his view of the relation of painting to the visible world. Painting is no longer talked of as an imitation of nature, and the artist's interest is diverted almost entirely toward the inward mental image, which excels everything that can be found in the visible world:

> Love, thy beauty is not mortal. No face on earth can compare with the image awakened in the heart which you inflame and govern, sustaining it with strange fire, uplifting it on strange wings.[25]

The idea in the mind of the artist is more beautiful than the final work, which is only a feeble reflection of it. According to Condivi Michelangelo "has a most powerful imagination, whence it comes, chiefly, that he is little contented with his works and has always underrated them, his hand not appearing to carry out the ideas he has conceived in his mind."[26]

At this time Michelangelo lays great stress on the divine inspiration of the artist. God is the source of all beauty.[27] . . . And art is a gift received by the artist from heaven.[28] . . . By means of this divine gift the artist can give life to the stone in which he carves his statue.[29] . . . The stone itself, the material part of the work, is useless and dead till the imagination has acted upon it.[30] . . .

Michelangelo's theory of sculpture can be deduced from some of the poems, particularly the sonnet beginning:

> The greatest artist has no conception which a single block of marble does not potentially contain within its mass, but only a hand obedient to the mind can penetrate to this image.[31]

The explanation of this idea is to be found in the fact that when Michelangelo speaks of sculpture he always has in mind sculpture in marble or stone and not modeling in clay. "By sculpture I mean

the sort that is executed by cutting away from the block: the sort that is executed by building up resembles painting."[32] For Michelangelo the essential characteristic of sculpture is that the artist starts with a block of stone or marble and cuts away from it till he reveals or discovers the statue in it. This statue is the material equivalent of the idea which the artist had in his own mind; and, since the statue existed potentially in the block before the artist began to work on it, it is in a sense true to say that the idea in the artist's mind also existed potentially in the block, and that all he has done in carving his statue is to discover this idea.

In an early version of . . . [sonnet cxxxiv] Michelangelo gives further indications about his methods:

> After divine and perfect art has conceived the form and attitudes of a human figure, the first-born of this conception is a simple clay model. The second, of rugged live stone, then claims that which the chisel promised, and the conception lives again in such beauty that none may confine its spirit.[33]

This "double birth" corresponds exactly to what we know of Michelangelo's methods as a sculptor. In general he did not make a full-size clay version for a marble statue, but worked instead from a small model, perhaps only a foot high, which kept before him the idea which he had in his mind.[34] Starting from this he attacked the block directly, literally uncovering the statue, so that an unfinished figure like the *St. Matthew* (Fig. 13) gives the impression that it is all in the block and that one could just knock off the superfluous marble and reveal the complete statue.

Certain opinions of Michelangelo's which are recorded by his immediate followers show that he had almost consciously broken with the ideals of the earlier humanists. He was opposed, for instance, to the mathematical methods which formed an important part of Alberti's or Leonardo's theory. Lomazzo records a saying of his that "all the reasonings of geometry and arithmetic, and all the proofs of perspective were of no use to a man without the eye,"[35] and Vasari attributes to him the saying that "it was necessary to have the compasses in the eyes and not in the hand, because the hands work and the eyes judge."[36] He disapproved further of the importance which Alberti and the early Renaissance artists attributed to rules in painting, and he seems not to have sympathized at all with their idea that nature was based on general rules and a general orderliness. He condemns Dürer's treat-

13. Michelangelo, *St. Matthew*, 1506, Marble, 8'11" high (Academy, Florence; Alinari/Editorial Photocolor Archives, Inc.)

ment of proportion in the human figure as too rigid, saying that this is a matter "for which one cannot make fixed rules, making figures as regular as posts";[37] and, according to Vasari, "he used to make his figures in the proportion of nine, ten, and even twelve faces,[38] seeking nought else but that in putting them all together there should be a certain harmony of grace in the whole, which nature does not present."[39] These opinions all show how far Michelangelo in his later period relied on imagination and individual inspiration rather than on obedience to any fixed standards of beauty. The same is true of his attitude toward architecture, for Vasari writes that

> he departed not a little from the work regulated by measure, order and rule which other men did according to a common use and after Vitruvius and the antiquities, to which he would not conform . . . wherefore the craftsmen owe him an infinite and ever-

> lasting obligation, he having broken down the bonds and chains by reason of which they had always followed a beaten path in the execution of their works.[40]

This independence of all rule and the individualism that accompanied it account for the opinion which was generally held in the middle of the sixteenth century that Raphael was the ideal balanced painter, universal in his talent, satisfying all the absolute standards, and obeying all the rules which were supposed to govern the arts, whereas Michelangelo was the eccentric genius, more brilliant than any other artist in his particular field, the drawing of the male nude, but unbalanced and lacking in certain qualities, such as grace and restraint, essential to the great artist. Those, like Dolce and Aretino, who held this view were usually the survivors of Renaissance humanism, unable to follow Michelangelo as he moved on into Mannerism. That this difference of aim was apparent to Michelangelo himself is evident from his remark recorded by Condivi that "Raphael had not his art by nature but acquired it by long study."[41]

In the last fifteen or twenty years of his life we can trace a further change in Michelangelo's art and ideas, though in some ways this change consists in an intensification of the characteristics of the art and ideas of the late thirties and early forties.

After about 1545 the situation of the Papacy changed. The schism with Protestantism had reached a more acute stage, and since the Diet of Ratisbon it had become apparent that any kind of compromise was impossible. Therefore the position of the moderate party to which Michelangelo was attached was steadily weakened. The Church could no longer hope to save itself by their methods and was forced to adopt a much more drastic policy. Even Paul III found himself compelled in his last years to give up his attempts at conciliation and to allow the more fanatical Counter-Reformers to put their ideas into practice. At the Council of Trent the survivors of the Contarini party were defeated, and their rivals, the Jesuits and Caraffa, had their way, gradually establishing their system of blind belief in authority, strict obedience, and absolute rigidity of doctrine.

One result of this change was that the moderates found themselves stranded. They could not sympathize with the new and drastic policy, and yet their own methods seemed useless. Their

14. Michelangelo, Rondanini *Pietà*, c. 1555–1564, Marble, 77½" high (Castello Sforzesco, Milan; Alinari/ Editorial Photocolor Archives, Inc.)

position was, in fact, hopeless, and for this reason their mysticism gradually takes on a more introspective character.

Michelangelo's most representative work in this period is the last group which he carved, the Rondanini *Pietà* (Fig. 14), left unfinished at his death, in which he seems to have deprived his human symbols of all corporeal quality and to succeed at last in conveying directly a purely spiritual idea. Like most of the other works of this period, such as the *Pietà* in the Cathedral of Florence, and the group of late drawings, it is concerned with the central features of the Christian faith, the events of the Passion. Michelangelo has given up Classical subjects, but even the religious themes which he treats are no longer those which he preferred in his younger days. Then he chose for his subjects either Old Testament figures, like David, or themes from the New Testament, like the Holy Family, which had a direct and general human appeal. When he carved a *Pietà*, as in St. Peter's, it was conceived as a human tragedy, without much indication of the supernatural implications. The *Pietà* of the last years is an expression of violent, personal, mystical Christian faith, which appears with equal intensity in the drawings for the Crucifixion of the same period.

A corresponding change takes place in Michelangelo's writings. Much of what has been said about his views in the middle period of his life applies even more strongly to his last years. His approach to the world and the arts becomes even more spiritual, but at the same time more specifically Christian. His religious feeling now combines the mystical conception of Neoplatonism with the intense belief in Justification by Faith which he learned from Savonarola and the Contarini group. But he talks less of an abstract divine essence and more of a God whom he addresses personally. We may suppose that his comment on the paintings of Fra Angelico, which shows how much importance he attributed to Christian piety in an artist, was made about this time: "This good man painted with his heart, so that he was able with his pencil to give outward expression to his inner devotion and piety, which I can never achieve, since I do not feel myself to have so well disposed a heart."[42]

He wishes to abandon the whole world and to fix all his thoughts on God, but he feels that he can do nothing without God's grace. . . .[43] All mortal love must be given up. Michelangelo seems no longer to have faith in human beauty as a symbol of the divine. He rather fears it as a distraction from the pure things of the spirit. . . .[44] He hates and fears the things of this world which he regards as temptations, or, at best, as distractions from a higher duty. In passionate repentance he writes:

> I have let the vanities of the world rob me of the time I had for the contemplation of God. Not alone have these vanities caused me to forget His blessings, but God's very blessings have turned me into sinful paths. The things which make others wise make me blind and stupid and slow in recognizing my fault. Hope fails me, yet my desire grows that by Thee I may be freed from the love that possesses me. Dear Lord, halve for me the road that mounts to Heaven, and if I am to climb even this shortened road, my need of Thy help is great. Take from me all liking for what the world holds dear and for such of its fair things as I esteem and prize, so that, before death, I may have some earnest of eternal life.[45]

But most remarkable of all is the sonnet in which he turns not only against the world and mortal beauty but against the imagination itself and against the arts to which it has led him:

Giunto è già 'l corso della vita mia
  Con tempestoso mar per fragil barca,
  Al comun porto, ov' a render si varca
  Conto e ragion d'ogni opra trista e pia.
Onde l'affettuosa fantasia
  Che l'arte mi fece idol' e monarca
  Conosco or ben, com' era d'error carca
  E quel ch'a mal suo grado ogn' uom desia.
Gli amorosi pensier, già vani e lieti,
  Che fien or s'a duo morte m'avvicino?
  D'una so 'l certo, e l'altra mi minaccia.
Nè pinger nè scolpir fie più che quieti
  L'anima, volta a quell' amor divino,
  Ch'aperse, a prender noi, 'n croce le braccia.[46]

This sonnet is perhaps the supreme proof of the changes that had come over Michelangelo since his youth. It is hard to believe that the humanist creator of the early Bacchus or even the painter of the Sistine ceiling would one day pray to renounce the arts from feelings of Christian piety.

In Michelangelo we have an example of that rare phenomenon, the great artist who is both able and willing to put in writing what he feels about his art. The value of these writings to us depends largely on the light which they throw on the artist's work in painting and sculpture. It is possible to enjoy and even to understand the frescoes on the Sistine roof without reading any of the sonnets, but the appreciation of both the poetry and the paintings can be increased by the comparison of the one with the other; and in the case of Michelangelo's latest works, like the Rondanini *Pietà*, the exposition in words in the late sonnets of the ideas expressed more obscurely, but not less completely, in the carved forms of the statue may provide a clue to the meaning of the latter, for which any one unacquainted with the poems might long search without success. We could deduce the changes traceable in Michelangelo's view of life from his paintings and sculpture, but the evidence of the written word is more compelling, because less liable to misinterpretation; and an hypothesis based on the former is more than doubled in strength when it is confirmed by the latter. The changes that have been traced above, however, are not merely those of a single individual. For Michelangelo was the type of those men who belonged to the Renaissance but lived on into the

early stages of the Counter-Reformation. The development in his ideas, therefore, follows the change from one epoch to another, and prepares the way for the art and doctrines of Mannerism.

NOTES

[1] Published in 1548 under the title, *Tractato de Pintura Antigua*.

[2] Hollanda's reliability has often and justifiably been challenged, e.g. by Tietze (cf. "Francisco de Hollanda und Donato Giannottis Dialoge und Michelangelo," *Rep. für Kunstwissenschaft*. [1905], xxviii, p. 295) and, more violently, by C. Aru (cf. "I Dialoghi Romani di Francisco de Hollanda," *L'Arte* [1928], xxxi, p. 117).

[3] Cf. Frey, *Die Dichtungen des Michelagniolo Buonarroti*, Nos. v, vi; and Thode, *Michaelangelo und das Ende der Renaissance* (1903), ii, pp. 138 ff.

[4] M. Holroyd, *Michael Angelo Buonarroti*, 2nd ed., p. 70.

[5] Ibid., p. 64; and Vasari, trans. de Vere (London, 1912–15), ix, p. 103.

[6] Vasari, op. cit., p. 106.

[7] Hollanda, *Four Dialogues of Painting*, trans. A. F. G. Bell, p. 15. It must be remembered, however, that in his youth in Florence, Michelangelo copied the work of a northern artist, Schongauer. He even planned a *Trattato di tutte le maniere de' moti umani, e apparenze, e dell' ossa*.

[8] Condivi, op. cit., p. 74.

[9] Frey, iv, probably 1505–11.

[10] Ibid. xxx, *c.* 1526. For this and the following translations of Michelangelo's poems I am indebted to the late Miss K. T. Butler.

[11] Ibid. xxxiv. 1530: "As my soul, looking through the eyes, draws near to beauty as I first saw it, the inner image grows, while the other recedes, as though shrinkingly and of no account."

[12] Ibid. xxxii. 1529–30.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Passavant, *Rafael* (1839), i. p. 533.

[15] Frey, cix. 34, 1536–46.

[16] Ibid. lxxix, shortly after 1534. The same idea is expressed in xcii, cix. 66 and cix. 101, all probably written in the late thirties or early forties.

[17] Ibid. lxiv. 1533–34; cf. also cix. 99 and xci, both written in the thirties or early forties.

[18] Frey, cix. 104, *c.* 1545: "The heart is slow to love what the eye cannot see."

[19] Ibid. xciv. 1541–44.

[20] Ibid. cix. 105, "To Cavalieri," 1536–42.

[21] Frey, cix. 99, probably 1534–42.

[22] Op. cit., p. 65.

[23] Cf. above, Ch. III.

[24] Op. cit., p. 74.

[25] Frey, lxii, 1533–34.

[26] Condivi, p. 77; cf. Vasari, *Lives*, ix, p. 104.

[27] Frey, ci. 1547.

[28] Ibid. cix. 94, shortly after 1534.

[29] Ibid. cxxxiv, *c.* 1547.

[30] Ibid. lxv, referring to Cavalieri.

[31] Ibid. lxxxiii. 1536–47.

[32] Letter to Varchi, 1549.

[33] Frey, p. 480, sonnet cxxxiv, version I, 1544–46.

[34] Cellini in his *Trattato della Scultura* (ch. iv) records that Michelangelo in general worked without a full-scale model, but that in his later work he sometimes used one. He quotes as examples the statues for the New Sacristy of S. Lorenzo.

[35] Lomazzo, *Trattato*, Bk. v, c. 7.

[36] Vasari, *Lives*, ix, p. 105.

[37] Condivi, p. 69.

[38] Though Vasari writes *teste* here he must mean *faces*, for a figure of twelve *heads* would be too elongated even for a Mannerist.

[39] Vasari, *Lives*, ix, p. 104.

[40] Ibid., p. 44; cf. also Condivi, p. 69. Since Vasari's day the licenses taken by Michelangelo with architecture have often been the subject of less favorable comment, as for instance by Symonds, who accuses him of slipping in his later years into "a Barocco-Mannerism."

[41] Condivi, p. 76.

[42] See Paleotti, *Archiepiscopale Bononiense* (Rome, 1594), p. 81.

[43] Frey, cxlviii, *c.* 1554–55.

[44] Ibid. cxxiii. 1547–50.

[45] Ibid. cl. *c.* 1555.

[46] Frey, cxlvii, *c.* 1554: "In a frail boat, through stormy seas, my life in its course has now reached the harbor, the bar of which all men must cross to render account of good and evil done. Thus I now know how fraught with error was the fond imagination which made Art my idol and my king, and how mistaken that earthly love which all men seek in their own despite. What of those thoughts of love, once light and gay, if now I approach a twofold death. I have certainty of the one and the other menaces me. No brush, no chisel will quieten the soul, once it is turned to the divine love of Him who, upon the Cross, outstretched His arms to take us to Himself."