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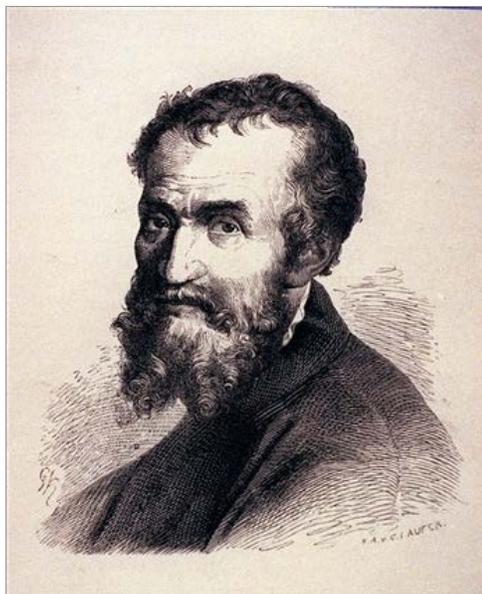
Michelangelo Chiseled His Legacy In Solid Rock

By MARY O'NEILL, FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

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Michelangelo towered in the 16th century with his paintings, sculptures and architecture. AP [View Enlarged Image](#)

Imagine the original setup:

The colossal, nude David, installed 60 feet high on Florence's cathedral, standing sentry over the city.

Eyes glaring, muscles taut, weapons in hand, he is ready to unleash in defense of his people.

His intensity would be aimed at the Goliaths — powerhouses like Milan, Venice and Naples that routinely attacked Florence. Troops would spot the fearless David on their approach. The biblical hero was a favorite of the Florentines, who saw parallels with their situation as a scrappy small fry on the Italian political stage.

No other depiction captured their civic pride like the 17-foot-high marble by the Renaissance master, Michelangelo Buonarroti.

At its unveiling in 1504, Michelangelo's David so galvanized the fledgling Florentine Republic that the government placed it in the political center, in front of its town hall.

A copy remains in that piazza.

The original stands, protected from the elements, in the Accademia Gallery nearby.

The David is one of the earliest of many iconic works from Michelangelo (1475-1564).

His superiority in every category of the visual arts — the Sistine Chapel for painting, the David and Pieta for sculpture, St. Peter's for architecture — makes him a near-mythic figure in Western civilization.

A happy combination of talent, longevity and extreme dedication accounts for

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Michelangelo's success.

His single-pointed ambition carried him through the service of nine popes, three major shifts in religious history, sieges of Florence and Rome, and the whims of well-placed patrons whose careers were caught up in the tumult.

He thrived through all of it, in a career that lasted 75 years.

Local Depth

Though Michelangelo achieved international renown, his roots remained central to his identity.

He was proud to be patrician (his claim on that status is unproven, yet a surname did indicate a noble lineage in the Renaissance) and proud to be Florentine. He was raised in a hamlet called Settignano, which is surrounded by quarries and populated by families of stonecutters.

Dignity, Florence, marble: These were the seeds of his personality, and the David exemplified all three.

In depicting the symbol of his native city as a nude colossus, Michelangelo was using the language of the ancients, whose ideals about humanity were revived in the Renaissance. In depicting it in marble — a 40-year-old, nearly ruined block that was only four feet wide — he proved that he was, as he claimed, born to sculpt.

He spent months in marble quarries hunting down the best material, even building pulley systems and roads to get to the sites he wanted. Mundane labor went hand in hand with his artistic vision.



Michelangelo finished David in 1504, and it instantly became an emblem of heroism for his native Florence. AP [View Enlarged Image](#)

"He was a master of business and logistics; he is genius as entrepreneur," William Wallace, author of "Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man and His Times," told IBD.

The best block he ever found was for the Pieta, and he took full advantage. As promised in the contract, he delivered "the most beautiful marble statue in Rome."

Despite no standard apprenticeship, after the early Pieta and David, Michelangelo never lacked for work. He entertained offers from Turkey and France and juggled projects the rest of his life.

Yet few written contracts remain. Michelangelo's talent made negotiation pointless for most patrons. He could proceed with no upfront agreement, assured that if one patron refused his price, another would gladly pay. One pope doubled the salary Michelangelo himself set.

Said Wallace: "Michelangelo ushered in the modern version of art, because his valuation had nothing to do with the craft. He refused to be paid as a craftsman, according to the cost of materials or the number of figures or time spent. Instead he charged for what was

later called 'the knowledge of a lifetime.' After a certain point, he only worked for people who understood the new rules."

Even Pope Julius II, the power-driving subsidizer of the Roman Renaissance, complained: "You have waited for us to come to you."

Julius had a vision of restored grandeur for the papal city, and now he had found the ideal counterpart. The muscularity and vitality of Michelangelo's art perfectly expressed the pope's ambition for a new golden age.

In 1508, he commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Michelangelo complained that painting "isn't my art." But he spent the next four years creating images for the story of Genesis: a riot of pagan, Hebrew and Christian figures contained within — and sometimes writhing across — illusionistic cornices, moldings and columns.

To Michelangelo, the human body expressed the soul's life; he never tired of contorting it. Each Sistine character is unique and convincingly three-dimensional, though the artist's canvas was a nubbly curved vault, his viewers 65 feet below.

He stood on a movable scaffold of his own design and cursed the toll on his body. "I've got myself a goiter from this strain. ... I am bending like a Syrian bow," he wrote.



Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam," completed in 1512, is part of his work adorning the Sistine Chapel's ceiling. AP [View Enlarged Image](#)

In "History of Italian Renaissance Art," Frederick Hartt wrote: "Of all the images that crowd the ceiling, the 'Creation of Adam' is the one that has most deeply impressed posterity ... an unprecedented vision of the sublimity of God and the potential nobility of humanity."

The near-contact between the fingers is a "current," according to Hartt, "ready to flow from God into the waiting body of Adam."

Said Wallace: "Just as he gave Florence its identity image, Michelangelo gave Christianity its identity image."

Twenty-four years and four popes later, Michelangelo again found himself in the Sistine Chapel.

At age 66, twice the life expectancy in the 16th century, Michelangelo complemented the ceiling with a 45-foot-high mural of the "Last Judgment" behind the Sistine altar. At the center of a battle for souls, a nod to religious politics of the day, he arranged Christ's figure to catch the sunlight from nearby windows.

Such context is central to Michelangelo's art. He put the viewer's experience before rigid rules. His litmus test: How did it look?

"One must keep one's compasses in the eyes," he asserted.

Whether making an oversized saint or a facade or dome, Michelangelo adjusted proportions and scale for maximum effect.

"He would adhere to the rules, but then break them," David Rosand, a professor of art history at Columbia University, told IBD. "He imposed his own personality, even imposed

himself on works begun by others."

Aiming High

The most famous of such works is St. Peter's. An overhaul of the fourth-century basilica was stalled, so Michelangelo was appointed supreme architect, "to his intense dismay and completely against his will," according to a contemporary.

The 71-year-old sculptor again asserted that architecture "isn't my art," but he gave grandeur to Rome's ecclesiastical center.

Deeply religious, Michelangelo devoted his final years to carrying out his design for St. Peter's. He was also managing other commissions when he died, three weeks short of his 89th birthday.

"One must have patience," he wrote. His achievements took years, and some were thwarted by politics, yet Michelangelo's art helped shape Western ideas about religion, and his life shaped what we believe about human potential.

Michelangelo's Keys

•Displayed an artistic superiority with his creations at Vatican City's Sistine Chapel and St. Peter's Basilica.

•"Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish."

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