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## Restoration of Michelangelo's Bandini Pietà completed with support from the Friends of Florence Foundation

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Michelangelo's Pietà dell'Opera del Duomo known as the Bandini Pietà after the restoration. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Firenze. Courtesy Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore. Photo Claudio Giovannini

**One of Michelangelo's most intense masterpieces seen in new light free of surface deposits that marred its legibility and color**

**Restoration revealed new information about the sculpture and the artist's process**

**Project made possible by a donation from the Friends of Florence Foundation**

The restoration of Michelangelo's ***Pietà dell'Opera del Duomo***, better known as the ***Bandini Pietà***, in the **Museo dell'Opera del Duomo** in Florence has been completed. Begun in November 2019 but delayed several times due to the Covid-19 health crisis, the restoration process provided a unique opportunity to gain a better understanding of the sculpture's complex history, the various phases in its creation, and the Renaissance master's techniques. After a comprehensive evaluation and meticulous cleaning, the legibility of one of Michelangelo's most intense and troubled masterpieces is vastly improved and a deeper understanding of his intent and artistic challenges revealed.

The "open" restoration laboratory allowed visitors to the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo to witness the process while it was happening. **For the next six months only**, from September 25, 2021, to March 30, 2022, the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore will leave the workspace in place so that visitors can enjoy the unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience of joining a guided tour to see the restored *Pietà* at close range.

The restoration was commissioned and directed by the **Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore** with funding from the not-for-profit **Friends of Florence Foundation** and under the supervision of the **Soprintendenza ABAP per la Città Metropolitana di Firenze e le Province di Pistoia e Prato**. It was performed by **Paola Rosa**, whose thirty-year career encompasses the restoration of work by major artists of the past including Michelangelo, with **Emanuela Peiretti** and the assistance of a team of experts comprising both Opera staff and outside specialists.



Michelangelo's *Pietà dell'Opera del Duomo* known as the *Bandini Pietà* during the restoration. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Firenze. Courtesy Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore. Photo Claudio Giovannini

The four figures that make up the group, including the aged Nicodemus to whom the artist bestowed his own features, are carved from a single block of marble and measures 2.25 meters tall and weighs some 2,700 kg. Diagnostic inspection led to the discovery that the marble came from quarries in Seravezza, in the province of Lucca, rather than from Carrara as had been believed. This discovery is significant because the quarries in

Seravezza were owned by the Medici, and Giovanni de' Medici, soon to be Pope Leo X, had enjoined Michelangelo to use marble from the quarry for the façade of the church of San Lorenzo in Florence. How this huge block of marble got to Rome where Michelangelo carved this *Pietà* from it between 1547 and 1555 is still a mystery.



Michelangelo's *Pietà dell'Opera del Duomo* known as the Bandini *Pietà* during the restoration. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Firenze. Courtesy Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore. Photo Alena Fialová

Michelangelo was unhappy with the quality of the marble from these quarries because it revealed sudden veining and minute cracks difficult to detect from the surface. **Thanks to the restoration, it has proven possible to confirm that the block used for the *Pietà* was indeed flawed**, as Vasari tells us. In his *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari describes it as hard and full of impurities and that sparks flew from it with every blow of the chisel. Numerous small inclusions of pyrite were discovered, and they most certainly would have caused sparks when hit with a chisel. More importantly, **the presence of numerous minute cracks, particularly on the back and front of the base, suggests that Michelangelo may well have encountered them when carving Christ and the Virgin's left arms and was forced to stop working on it.** This is a more likely hypothesis than that of a now ageing Michelangelo, unhappy with the result, trying to destroy the sculpture in a moment of distress and frustration by taking a hammer to it, **because the restorers found no sign of any hammer blows, unless, of course, they were erased later by someone else.**

The restoration may be considered the Florentine *Pietà*'s first because various sources recorded no special intervention since it was "restored" by Tiberio Calcagni, a Florentine sculptor close to Michelangelo, some time before 1565. In over 470 years, with numerous changes of hands and installations, the *Pietà* has been cleaned and subject to standard maintenance on more than one occasion, but no record of such operations exists precisely because they were considered purely routine.

The restoration, preceded by a multifaceted diagnostic campaign, provided information crucial both for understanding the work itself and for its subsequent preservation. The *Pietà* was devoid of any historical patina aside from a few traces discovered on the base of the sculpture, but it did reveal a great deal of surface deposit. This included a large quantity of plaster residue from a plaster cast taken in 1882, which inevitably left a glaring white effect and excessively dry surfaces. To remedy this issue, layers of wax had been applied on top of the plaster residue over time. The natural ageing process of the wax

mixed with deposits of dust, particularly in the folds of the drapery and on the parts of the sculpture in relief—in clear contrast with the undercut which had remained much lighter—gave the surface a deep amber tinge and made it look chromatically uneven.

Based on these discoveries, it was decided to proceed by first conducting cleaning trials in order to identify the most suitable methodology. Once established, the restoration process proper began where the deposits were thickest, using a non-invasive, gradual, and controlled method of cotton pads soaked in deionised and lightly heated water. For the wax build-up applied to the group's surface, small, closely spaced splashes and drippings caused by candles on Florence Cathedral's high altar, behind which the group had stood for 220 years, cleaning with water was supplemented with the use of a scalpel in the toughest areas.

## Background

The *Pietà dell'Opera del Duomo* in Florence is one of three versions of the theme carved by the artist. Unlike the other two, the youthful *Pietà* in the Vatican and the *Rondanini Pietà* in Milan, in this instance the body of Christ is supported not only by Mary but also by the Magdalen and by the aged Nicodemus, to whom Michelangelo gave his own features. This detail is confirmed by the artist's two contemporary biographers, Giorgio Vasari and Ascanio Condivi, who also noted that the sculpture was intended for the altar of a church in Rome, at the foot of which the great artist wished to be buried.

Michelangelo carved the grouping, also known as the *Bandini Pietà*, between 1547 and 1555, when he was about 75 years old. While conveying a sense of elegiac beauty, it is weighted with experience and suffering. He never finished the sculpture, giving it to his servant Antonio da Casteldurante. Antonio had it “restored” by Tiberio Calcagni and then sold it for 200 *scudi* to the banker Francesco Bandini, who placed it in the garden of his villa at Montecavallo in Rome. Bandini's heirs sold it in 1649 to Cardinal Luigi Capponi, who had it brought first to his *palazzo* at Montecitorio in Rome then to Palazzo Rusticucci Accoramboni four years later.

Cardinal Capponi's great-nephew Piero sold it on July 25, 1671, to Cosimo III de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, through a Florentine courtier named Paolo Falconieri. It remained in Rome due to the difficulties encountered in trying to move it. In 1674, it finally got to Civitavecchia where it was put on board a ship bound for Livorno. From there it sailed up the Arno River and, on reaching Florence, it was placed in the crypt of San Lorenzo, staying there until 1722 when Cosimo III had it placed behind the high altar in the Cathedral. It was moved again in 1933 to the Chapel of St. Andrew to increase its visibility. It was sheltered in the Cathedral from 1942 to 1945 to protect it from war damage and returned to the Chapel of St. Andrew in 1949.

In 1981, it was moved to the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo both to prevent the massive influx of tourists from disturbing church services and for security reasons (the Vatican *Pietà* had been vandalised in 1972). In 2015, in the new Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, it was placed in the center of the room entitled *Michelangelo's Tribune* on a base designed to conjure up an image of the altar for which it had originally been designed.

**For information on opening hours and guided tours, please visit: [www.duomo.firenze.it](http://www.duomo.firenze.it)**

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- Andrea Pessina, Soprintendenza ABAP per la Città Metropolitana di Firenze e le Province di Pistoia e Prato's Director General
- Antonio Natali, Board of Directors
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- Samuele Caciagli, Works Manager and Technical Area Manager
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To view a selection of press images, [click here](#).

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