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Michelangelo's Pietà: Restoring his final masterpiece

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When he was about 75 years old, Michelangelo set out to carve a difficult sculptural group. **Difficult in composition and subject matter, in technique, and most of all, for its personal implications.** For the *Bandini Pietà*, today housed in the **Museo dell'Opera del Duomo** in Florence, was what Michelangelo intended for **his own tomb** (more correctly, for the altar of the chapel in a Roman church where the artist wanted to be buried). No wonder he was unable to finish it – think of the implications! As Will Wallace writes, “To finish the sculpture was to bring the marble to life but also to resign oneself to death” (in an article in *Artibus et Historiae*, 2000).



Michelangelo's Pietà after restoration in the Opera del Duomo Museum, Florence, Ph. Alexandra Korey

A conservative restoration of Michelangelo's Pietà **funded by the American non-profit Friends of Florence** is finally complete after almost two years (the work was suspended several times due to Covid restrictions). A work that has always been considered, by us art historians and teachers, to be very useful as **a document of Michelangelo's working methods** due to the ability to see the marks of different types of scalpels and the order in which he approached the block now boasts greater legibility thanks to cleaning. Furthermore, the restoration reveals **new information about the marble block** itself. While the restoration was carried out in a lab visible to the public, the museum has decided to leave up the raised platform used for restoration for an additional six months, making it possible to view the sculpture at close quarters through a guided tour. I went to check it out.

About Michelangelo's Pietà



Michelangelo's Pietà after restoration, Ph. Alexandra Korey

The sculptural group consists of the figures of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene who hold the body of Christ, deposited from the cross by an old hooded man now identified as Nicodemus whose face is a self-portrait of Michelangelo. His intention was to carve the group of four figures from one, massive block; this was a Herculean enterprise that no modern sculptor had tried or succeeded in. The sculpture remained incomplete, and in fact was damaged by Michelangelo himself, who supposedly took a hammer to it, removed the leg of Christ with the intention of replacing it with a different one, and finally gave up, leaving it to his servant Antonio da Casteldurante. The latter had it “restored” by Michelangelo's close collaborator, Tiberio Calcagni, who finished some parts and smartly left others rough; it was then sold to the banker Francesco Bandini, who was a good friend of the artist. The name *Bandini Pietà* refers to this owner, and serves to distinguish it from the youthful *Vatican Pietà* and the Milan *Rondanini Pietà*, another unfinished, late work.

The state of conservation



Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, cleaning the Pietà - Photo Courtesy Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Claudio Giovannini/CGE

Until this intervention, the *Pietà* has been cleaned and subject to routine maintenance, but no major documented restorations have been carried out. Of course, the sculpture had plenty of surface deposit (basically, it was dirty with centuries of dust of the kind that requires a good scrub that nobody was willing to give it). A plaster cast taken in 1882 left a trace of dry, white chalk on the surface, which someone tried to remedy by covering this with a layer of wax, only compounding the issue with later dirt for an unsightly and thick yellow coating.



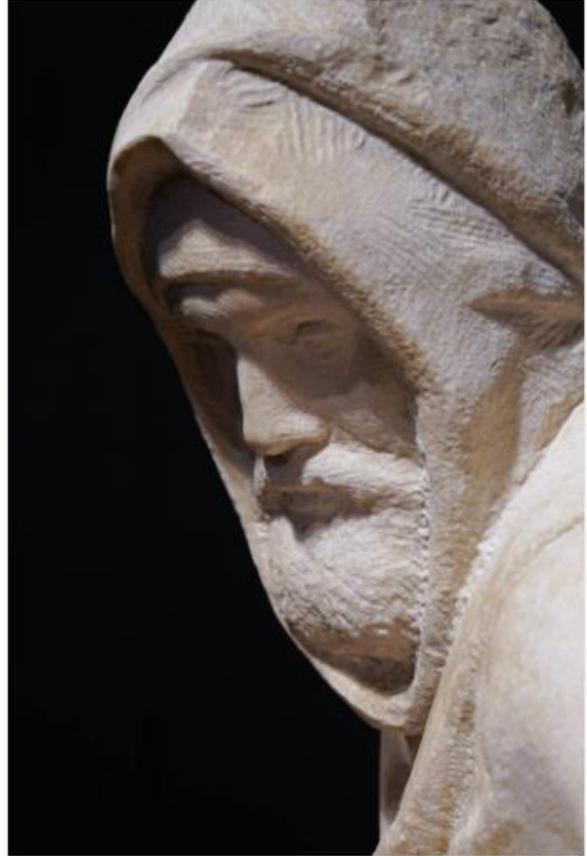
Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, cleaning the Pietà with scalpel - Photo Courtesy Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Claudio Giovannini/CGE Courtesy Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, foto Claudio Giovannini/CGE

The layers of dirt were removed using a non-invasive, gradual and controlled method based on the use of cotton pads soaked in deionised and lightly heated water. In addition, the sculpture was splashed with wax from the candles of the church in which it stood for 220 years, and this was removed in some cases with a scalpel.

What the restoration revealed

It's always surprising when a restoration of a famous work of art reveals something new, and yet numerous restorations I've reported on, from [Leonardo's Adoration](#) to [Pontorno's Deposition](#) (also funded by Friends of Florence) to [Raphael's Leo X](#), have all made major contributions to our understanding of these important artists and their masterpieces. To this regard, the restoration of Michelangelo's *Pietà* does not disappoint.

The discovery: The marble used for this sculpture doesn't come from Carrara. Who cares, you say? Well, this is important because all the literature on the sculpture – and most of the time we talk about Michelangelo's sculptures in fact – refer to blocks from the Tuscan quarries of Carrara, which yielded **excellent white marble**. **But this block comes from Seravezza** – another quarry in the Versilia area, that in the 16th century was owned by the Medici, and **this marble was not so good**.



In 1516, when Pope Leo X commissioned Michelangelo to design the façade of the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, it was suggested that he use marble from Seravezza. However, **Michelangelo was unhappy with the quality of these blocks** because they revealed sudden unforeseen veining and micro-fractures whose direction inside the block was impossible to predict. There is no document of purchase for this block, so scholars have no idea how the artist got his hands on it. I do have to wonder, if he knew he disliked it so, why he would use it for such a large and personally relevant project. Then again, given the cost of extracting and transporting Carrara marble and the fact that this was for himself rather than for a paying patron may have been motivation enough.

The restoration provides solid confirmation of the fact that the marble used for the *Pietà* was flawed as Vasari claims in his “Lives of the Artists” when he talks about a marble that was hard, full of impurities and gave off sparks with every blow of the chisel. Restorers in fact found numerous small inclusions of pyrite (which would cause those sparks) and plenty of micro-cracks, one in particular on the base which can be seen at both the front and the back of the sculpture and which Michelangelo may well have found inside the block of marble while he was carving Christ’s and the Virgin’s left arms. Looking closely, you can see where marble must have broken off, leaving the sculptor with not enough with which to work.

The restoration also questions the oft-repeated action of Michelangelo taking a hammer to his own work. The aforementioned large crack may have been reason enough to give up working on the sculpture – the marble was too flawed – and in fact **the restorers found no sign of any hammer blows**, unless these were removed in the restoration by Tiberio Calcagni. Michelangelo did remove Christ’s leg with the intention of replacing it with a different (less awkward?) one, but perhaps he did not attack his sculpture after all.

What these discoveries mean for our understanding of the work



Detail of the torso of the Pietà after restoration, Ph. Alexandra Korey

A better understanding of the physicality of the block helps us make a **more reasoned reading of the sculpture** in light of Michelangelo's physical and mental state late in life; examination of the marks on the work help confirm or discredit historical storytelling on the matter. Without a doubt, the work is extremely touching, fraught with the experience and knowledge of old age that becomes clear when comparing the sculptural group to the youthful Michelangelo's rendering of the same subject in the Vatican. Physically, he was affected by old age, and his mind was preoccupied with divine judgement.

But there are **additional practical considerations that the restoration helps bring to light**. **Timonthy Verdon** has written a short and elegant essay with his reflections after the restoration on why Michelangelo left the block unfinished, adding to the long historiography on the topic (the essay is part of the press kit and partially reproduced in a brochure about the work, but currently unpublished). He points out that the very elderly Michelangelo worked on the sculpture essentially in his spare time, at night, being very busy completing the Dome of the Vatican. Condivi writes of a visit by Vasari at 1am, and Vasari "found the artist working on the *Pietà* in marble that was broken". Vasari also writes of Michelangelo as an insomniac who worked in the dark with a candle attached to a cardboard hat.

"This means that in the dark, the old master saw only a few centimetres of the surface in front of him and worked on the basis of an inner vision of the work to be created," concludes Verdon. "Thus, the elderly sculptor, who had always believed that in every block of marble he could glimpse

the perfect statue to be made from it, at 80 years of age discovered that he no longer possessed that magic.”

We will surely never know the whole story behind the *Pietà* and the challenges it posed for Michelangelo. This is the joy of art history and the reason I chose to study the Renaissance.

Although I no longer work in this field, this kind of art historical mystery, in which **tiny clues reveal themselves over centuries**, thrills me much more than any whodunit film. Good art history is made up by advancing small hypotheses based on reliable physical and documentary evidence coupled with plain logic, just as Verdon has done in his essay and many have done before him. Thanks to this restoration, we're one step closer in our investigation into this mystery that will always remain unsolved, and **one step closer to knowing Michelangelo.**

Visitor information

Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence

Guided visits to the *Pietà* from 25 September 2021 to 30 March 2022.

[Reserve on the official website.](#)