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RESTORATION REVEALS THE SECRETS OF MICHELANGELO'S PIETÀ BANDINI

By [Barbara Minafra](#) | October 12, 2021



Michelangelo's Pietà restoration, Courtesy Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, photo Claudio Giovannini/CGE

ENGLISH | **ITALIAN**

We are between 1547 and 1555. **Michelangelo** sculpts the Pietà in a single large block of white marble. It depicts the Virgin and Mary Magdalene receiving the body of Christ, deposed from the cross by the elderly Nicodemus. Buonarroti, in his seventies, thought that the sculpture could be placed on the altar where he wanted to be buried. But then, unsatisfied, he abandons the Pietà, still unfinished, and gives it to his servant **Antonio da Casteldurante**. He has it restored by **Tiberio Calcagni**, Florentine sculptor student of the master and

sells it for 200 *scudi* to the banker **Francesco Bandini**, who will place it in the garden of his residence, the *villa di Montecavallo* in Rome. After several ownership changes, it was purchased in 1671 by Cosimo III de' Medici. Transporting it to Florence wasn't simple, reason for which it reached the Tuscan city only three years later, by sea and then along the Arno. Today the sculptural group known as the **Pietà Bandini** is in the new **Museo dell'Opera del Duomo** in Florence on a pedestal that recalls the altar to which it was probably destined.



Florence: a stage of the Pietà's restoration. Photo courtesy of Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore/ Claudio Giovannini

Its restoration — which began in November 2019, but was interrupted several times due to Covid-19— has just been completed, returning to the public one of Michelangelo's most intense and troubled masterpieces in all its beauty, freed from the surface deposits that masked its superb sculptural qualities and color.

But the restoration, commissioned and directed by the **Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore**, under the high supervision of the **Soprintendenza Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio** of Florence and the provinces of Pistoia and Prato, has revealed many details, such as the presence of micro-fractures in the stone.

Michelangelo, who portrayed himself in the features of Nicodemus, perhaps interrupted the work precisely because of the imperfect quality of the marble. This is a more likely hypothesis than that of an aging artist who, unhappy with his work, tries to destroy the sculpture by taking a hammer to it, in a moment of frustration. The restorers found no sign of hammer blows unless, of course, Tiberio Calcagni, who intervened on the work sometimes around 1565, erased

them all. What is certain, however, is that the enormous, 2.25 meters high block, weighing about 2700 kg and corresponding to a cubic meter of marble, comes from the Medicean quarries of **Seravezza** and not Carrara, as believed until today.

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 asked Michelangelo to use marble from the quarry for the façade of the church of San Lorenzo in Florence. How this huge block of marble happened to be in Rome so that Michelangelo could carve his Pietà from it, however, is still a mystery. We know that Michelangelo was unhappy with the quality of the marble from these quarries because it often presented veining and microscopic cracks that were difficult to detect with the naked eye.



A phase of the sculpture's cleaning. Photo courtesy of Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore/Claudio Giovannini/CGE

Thanks to the restoration, it was possible to confirm, for the very first time, that the block used for the Pietà was indeed flawed, as **Vasari** tells us in his *Lives of the Artists* when he describes it as hard and full of impurities, adding that “sparks would flow” from it with every blow of the chisel. Indeed, numerous small inclusions of pyrite were discovered and they most certainly would have caused sparks to fly when hit with a chisel. More important, however, is the presence of numerous minute cracks, particularly of one on the back and front of the base, which means that, likely, Michelangelo may have found cracks also while working on Christ's and the Virgin's left arms. Likely, he was forced to abandon the work at that stage.

But practical aspects could be only a part of the explanation. **Timothy Verdon**, Director of the *Museo dell'Opera del Duomo* in Florence, says: “It should be

remembered that in the years 1547-1555 Michelangelo was occupied above all with the dome of the Vatican Basilica, and could therefore devote little time to his Pietà, working on it even at night.”

Vasari himself remembers that the elderly artist “often got up at night, unable to sleep, to work with the chisel, having made a cardboard helmet, and on top of it he kept a burning candle, in this way casting a light where he was working, leaving his hands free.” This means that in the dark, the old master saw only a few centimeters of the surface in front of him and worked based on his own inner vision. Maybe, at a certain point, he understood he had made a mistake, and could not add Christ’s left leg without destroying the compositional harmony of the group. According to **Jack Wasserman**, Professor Emeritus of Renaissance Art History at Temple University in Philadelphia, Buonarroti did not destroy but, rather, “disassembled” parts of the sculpture, to change radically the posture of each figure.

The intervention aimed to achieve an even and balanced legibility of the Pietà, restoring it to the state in which Michelangelo probably intended it to be seen. The sculpture itself provides a map of its own troubled and complex history, the whole surface clearly revealing all the scars that altered its original look over the centuries: fractures, cracking, reworking, scratches, furrows, and deposits of various kinds bear witness to the traumatic events that characterized its inception and creation. Extensive surface deposits impaired its legibility and color, including considerable traces of the plaster cast taken by Florentine molder **Oronzio Lelli** in 1882 when the sculpture stood in the Cathedral (the cast is now in the *Gipsoteca dell’Istituto d’Arte di Firenze*). To reduce the excessive whiteness, wax was applied, which degraded in turn.



At work on the Pietà Bandini. Photo courtesy of Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, foto Claudio Giovannini/CGE

The restoration was performed by **Paola Rosa** who, in her 30 years long career, worked on masterpieces by major artists, including Michelangelo. With her, **Emanuela Peiretti**. Both of them were assisted by a team of professionals comprising both Opera staff and freelancers. “The criterion we adopted led to the careful and balanced removal of surface deposits and to the gradual lightening of chromatic alterations that interfered – the restorer Paola Rosa explained – with the pictorial character of the surfaces, which Michelangelo’s masterful use of his tools had achieved.”

Every surface of the sculptural group, including the degraded ones, helped us understand its 470-year history, they showed its state of preservation and suggested the most suitable, less invasive methods to clarify its visual message, matching it to the idea of it kept alive in our collective imagination. It is an image characterized by the forced cohabitation of different expressive languages and executive techniques: the one used by Michelangelo and the one used by Tiberio Calcagni, one more intense and personal, the other more academic and formal, both visible on the surface of the material and through workmanship.

“The Pietà – says **Samuele Caciagli**, Works Manager and Technical Area Manager – bears clear and unmistakable signs and scars of its story and of the events that have marked its 470-year history. The traumatic events narrated by historians and a collecting history consisting of various changes of hands and many changes of place have made this sculptural group an enigmatic work that is remarkably difficult to study or to understand in terms of the details of its execution, and have inevitably marked and altered its original aspect.”

The restoration was made possible by funding from the American non-profit **Friends of Florence Foundation**, which has donated over 10 million dollars to conservation projects in Tuscany since 1998.



Nicodemus, a self-portrait of Michelangelo. Photo courtesy of Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, photo Claudio Giovannini/CGE

Simonetta Brandolini d'Adda, Friends of Florence Foundation's President explains: "Friends of Florence was established to safeguard the art heritage of Florence and Tuscany. Our benefactors are frequently passionate about a given artist and Michelangelo, a true genius, is unquestionably one of the most important figures on whom we have focused in recent years: witness the restoration and preservation of his David or our work on his River God, on his Prisoners and a number of his youthful drawings and sculptures. The restoration of the Pietà, which instantly met with our benefactors' enthusiastic support because the sculpture is at once so intimate and so powerful, has revealed not only the artist's superb mastery of his medium but also the anguish of his tormented soul. On behalf of the Friends of Florence, I would like to thank the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore and its museum for involving us in the restoration of this immense masterpiece."

The decision to set up an "open" restoration laboratory has allowed visitors to the *Museo dell'Opera del Duomo* to witness the restoration process while it was happening. Exceptionally, for the next six months only, and until March 2022, the lab will remain accessible, so that visitors can enjoy the Pietà up close, in a unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Unlike the other two Pietà – the early Vatican one and the Pietà Rondanini – the body of Christ is supported not only by Mary but also by Magdalene and Nicodemus. In the face of the elderly character, whom Christian tradition believed to be a sculptor, Michelangelo, now in his seventies, depicted himself, as if he wanted to identify with Nicodemus while he lovingly cared for Jesus' body. The theme of death, burial, and of the Christian hope for Resurrection, is combined here with a Catholic reflection on the Eucharist: the Pietà reiterated the notion that the particle faithful receive during Mass is the body of Jesus, crucified, buried, and resurrected.

Beyond its human and devotional meaning, this Pietà also answers one of the doctrinal questions of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, which was undergoing at the time. In the years 1550-1551 – while Michelangelo was still working on it – the Council of Trento issued a decree confirming the Church believed in the "real presence" of the flesh and blood of the Redeemer in the bread and wine consecrated during Mass. And so the Pietà, which was supposed to place Christ directly above the Eucharistic table – the altar – invited viewers to connect the sculpted body with the sacramental *Corpus Domini*.

The Pietà, which arrived in Florence in 1674, in the Duomo in 1722, and in the Museo dell'Opera in 1981, is Michelangelo's last masterpiece. And while today we speak of it, and of other sculptures by Buonarroti, as a "non-finished work," the definition that best suits it is, perhaps, found in the way the same concept was described in the 16th century, when an unfinished work of art was still called "infinite."