Michelangelo Biography

Michelangelo (1475 – 1564)

Italian Renaissance sculptor, painter, poet and architect. One of the most influential Western artists of all time.

“I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free. “

– Michelangelo

Short biography of Michelangelo

Michelangelo Buonarroti was born on 6 March 1475, in a Florentine village called Caprese. His father was a serving magistrate of the Florentine Republic and came from an important family.

However, Michelangelo did not wish to imitate his father’s career, and was attracted by the artistic world. At the time, this was considered an inferior occupation for a family of his standing. But, aged 13, Michelangelo was apprenticed to Domenico Ghirlandaio, the leading fresco wall painter in Florence. Here Michelangelo learned some of the basic painting techniques, and also taught himself new skills such as sculpting.
Madonna of the stairs – Michelangelo’s earliest works

His talents were soon noticed by one of the most powerful families in Florence – Lorezo de’ Medici. Here, at de Medici’s court, Michelangelo was able to learn from the classic Masters and he became determined to improve upon the great classics of Greek and Latin art.
Michelangelo, was born in the heart of the Renaissance movement, at exactly the right place – Florence. But, despite being at the heart of the Renaissance, Florence was undergoing tremendous political turmoil. His first patrons, the de Medici’s, lost power and Michelangelo was forced to look elsewhere for commissions. In 1496, he travelled to Rome where he began a long relationship of doing commissions for the Popes who were making St Peter’s Basilica a pinnacle of Western art. It was in 1496, that he began work on his beloved Pieta, commissioned by a French cardinal-diplomat, Jean Bilheres. The Pieta is a tender and compassionate sculpture of the Virgin Mary, nursing her crucified son – Jesus Christ. The sculpture captured so much power and tender emotion his reputation rose rapidly.

Michelangelo’s Pieta
His next most famous sculpture was his huge undertaking of a life size David. This was hewn from a huge block of marble dragged down from a nearby Florentine mine. Michelangelo created a masterpiece – a perfection of the human form – and most agreed, Michelangelo had surpassed the classic predecessors. David was put pride of place in front of the seat of Florentine government.

Michelangelo’s David
Michelangelo was a contemporary of the other sublime artist of his generation – the genius of Leonardo da Vinci. However, with Michelangelo’s short temper and pride, the two had a difficult relationship. At one time, the Florentine government wanted the two genius’ of art to work side by side – each painting a side of a council chamber. But, it was not a success and neither finished.

In 1505, Pope Julius II summoned Michelangelo to Rome and commissioned him in a number of projects. The first was to create a magnificent tomb. However, this ran into problems as the Pope later diverted funds to the ambitious scheme to rebuild St Peter’s. Michelangelo was quick to anger – it did not matter even if it was the Pope. But, the Pope deflected Michelangelo’s anger and through a combination of persuasion, threat and flattery, later offered Michelangelo a new commission to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

The Creation of Adam from Sistine Chapel
This was a huge undertaking. Initially the Pope suggested scenes from the New Testament, but, Michelangelo chose the Old Testament with its great variety of characters and dramatic scenes. The project took four years to complete and involved Michelangelo working in awkward positions painting through great neck pain.

The Sistine Chapel which took Michelangelo four years to pain.
“If you knew how much work went into it, you would not call it genius. “

– Michelangelo as quoted in Speeches & Presentations Unzipped (2007) by Lori Rozakis, p. 71

But, on completion, everyone was awestruck by the magnificence of the work. Michelangelo gained the reputation of the ‘divine Michelangelo’ – A reputation he was only too quick to encourage. Michelangelo suffered from no false modesty and always felt himself to be God’s Artist.

“The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.”

— Michelangelo

In later years, Michelangelo returned to Florence and became embroiled in politics as he helped defend the city against the attacks of the De Medici’s. When the city fell to the De Medici’s, Michelangelo feared for his life. But, his fame as the greatest artist of his generation made him too valuable to kill and he was simply given more art to work on.

In his final years, he became increasingly religious. His depth of religious feeling can be seen through his poetry and direction of his art.

The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection.

– Michelangelo

Michelangelo was a unique artist who created works of such sublime beauty his reputation will always be treasured.