



## THE THREE *PIETÀ*S SCULPTED BY MICHELANGELO

### THE FIRST *PIETÀ*

Michelangelo's first *Pietà* was completed close to the Jubilee of 1500 when Cardinal Jean Bilhères de Lagraulas commissioned the young Buonarroti "the Virgin Mary, dressed, with the Dead Christ, naked in her arms". The client had been in Rome since 1491, as head of a delegation sent by Charles VIII of Valois to the papal court to prepare for the French reconquest of the Kingdom of Naples. The Florentine sculptor was able to devote himself to the theme of maternal pain and above all to the mystery of the Incarnation that "between the works of God is the one that most surpasses reason", as Saint Thomas recalled, "because it is not possible to think of a divine work more admirable than this, that the true God, the Son of God, would become true man". With the **Vatican Pietà** (1498-1499), the artist made an impression on his time: such was the beauty of that naked Christ lovingly supported by the Virgin, a very young, humble and chaste girl, wrapped in a drapery for which Mary is Mother and bride. That youthfulness was criticized by most, as it seemed unsuitable to Our Lady. As the sources remind us, Michelangelo defended himself from criticism by explaining that virginity and purity keep women young and beautiful. The masterpiece was placed in the chapel of Santa Petronilla shortly before 1500. Later the *Pietà* was moved to St. Peter's, and in the 18th century it was displayed to the right of the nave where it can still be admired today. In this *Pietà*, Michelangelo succeeded to represent the divinity of Jesus by setting it in the body of a 33-year-old man. Christ, just deposed from the cross, seems to sleep in the bosom of the young mother: radiant in her beauty, a luminous vision of graces and humility. Death will not insult this miraculous man: the most beautiful among living beings. In the intact body, without signs of violence, one can already see the risen one, he who conquers death.

### THE SECOND *PIETÀ*

Many years after the *Vatican Pietà*, Michelangelo returned to sculpt the same subject. In mean time, Rome had been sacked, the Republic of Florence had collapsed, and the Medici had returned to the city. Michelangelo left Florence in 1534 and settled in Rome. After the death of Alessandro de' Medici, who was killed by his cousin Lorenzo, Duke Cosimo I reigns as absolute ruler. In 1547, Vittoria Colonna died, to whom the artist was spiritually linked. Michelangelo is now an old artist who is increasingly concentrated on human destiny, on the death and resurrection of Christ; he works in the throes of frequent depressive episodes. He thrives on contrasts, between the attraction to beauty, the sting of the senses and the desire for asceticism. He begins to fear his own death and divine judgment.

He takes a vow of poverty. He finally clings to the cross and places it in the center of his existence and the inspiration of Christ, the Savior of Mankind. The execution of the **Bandini Pietà** is long and difficult, and the dating controversial. Certainly, the master began to work the marble block around 1547; however, Michelangelo did not complete the statue. Before being sold in 1561 to Francesco Bandini, some parts of it were completed by Tiberio Calcagni, Buonarroti's principal assistant. The statue would have been placed in Santa Maria Maggiore Church in Rome, perhaps intended for Michelangelo's own grave: one can see the profound and intense meditation on Death and Redemption and on the Sacrifice of Christ and Salvation.

According to Alessandro Parronchi, the marble block taken from Seravezza and used for the construction of the group was one of those left over for the tomb of Julius II. Vasari described this marble as hard and full of impurities, so much so that the chisel often struck sparks from it. In 1553, Vasari, on a visit to the artist's studio, had the impression that Michelangelo was hesitant to show it to him not finished. Trying to vary the position of Christ's legs, the sculptor broke a limb. Then, around 1555, he hammered the statue, breaking it in several places. Even today there are signs of breakage on the elbow, chest and shoulder of Jesus and on the hand of Mary. In 1564, the artist thought to use the group for his own funerary monument in Santa Croce in Florence. The work, instead, remained in the Bandini Villa in Montecavallo, and only in 1674 was it purchased by Cosimo III de' Medici, who assigned it to the basement of San Lorenzo. In 1722, the **Florentine Pietà** was transferred to Santa Maria del Fiore. Since 1981, it has been housed in the Opera del Duomo Museum.

## THE LAST PIETÀ

The sculpture dates back to the years 1552 and 1553. According to sources, Michelangelo worked on it until the final days of his life. The work was in fact found in Michelangelo's studio after his death. In an inventory conducted, the *Pietà* was described in these terms: "another statue at the front of which is a Christ with another figure above, stuck together, rough and unfinished". In the group, completed parts alternate, referable to the first draft, and unfinished parts, related to the second version. In 1744, the *Pietà* was purchased from the Marquis Giuseppe Rondanini and arrived to Milan where it has been kept in Castello Sforzesco since 1952.

### *History*

The final result of a long journey of art and faith, the **Rondanini Pietà** is rather a prayer than a work of art, or better, it is the artistic demonstration of the fact that the man of faith has seen beyond actual appearances, that the hand is unable to return what the inner eye has been able to contemplate. We are already in an experience of a dark night. In place of dreams, he often refers to his auroral inventions, paving the way for the artist's imagination is the mystical vision of the Christian immersed in a nighttime reflection on the Only Begotten, on the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus and Mary appear to be ghostly; the stone tends to become matter of light. The lifeless body of Christ appears to slide into the tomb and with the son, also the mother, whose humanity is as if entirely absorbed by the sentiment of love. A single destiny miraculously overwhelms mother and child in this mystical metamorphosis, the same already experienced at the moment of the Annunciation. Once again, Mary is a resting place for the Lord. The evident inclination of the two figures, viewed from the side, seems to suggest a reflection on the Resurrection and the Assumption. If we look closely, the two bodies seem to detach themselves from the ground and together reach the Father.