

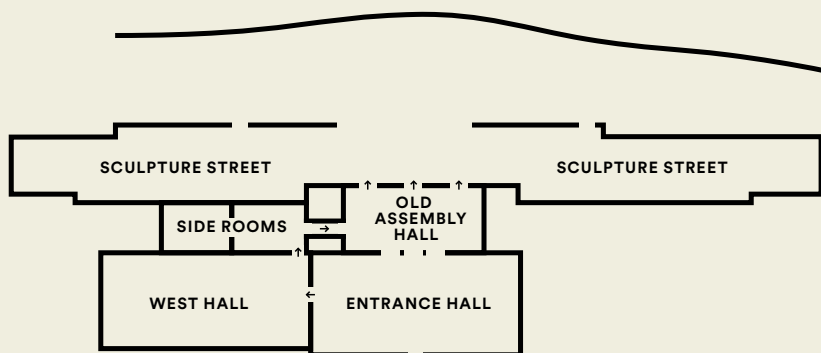
GUIDE / ENGLISH



MICHELANGELO
IMPERFECT

MICHELANGELO IMPERFECT

28 MARCH - 31 AUGUST 2025



WELCOME

In this guide, you can read about all the artworks and objects in the exhibition *MICHELANGELO IMPERFECT*. The exhibition begins in the West Hall and continues through the Side Rooms to the Old Assembly Hall and the Sculpture Street. Take the guide with you as you explore. You are welcome to keep it – or you can return it for reuse.

QUARRY IN THE ENTRANCE HALL

In the Entrance Hall, the museum has invited Danish poet Morten Søndergaard to create a marble and sound installation using stone from the very mountains in Carrara from which Michelangelo sourced the blocks used for his original sculptures. Søndergaard engages directly with those mountains and with Michelangelo. In addition to the installation *QUARRY*, he has written a poem to accompany Michelangelo's sculpture *Rondanini Pietà* in the Old Assembly Hall – and created audio narratives for four other selected artworks.

AUDIO STORIES

Take a seat by *David*, *Pietà*, the *Tomb of Pope Julius II*, or in the *Medici Chapel* and listen to curator Matthias Wivel's art historical observations on the works – and to poet Morten Søndergaard's response to encountering the originals in Italy. Use the headphones provided or scan the QR codes to listen on your own device.

FILM

In the rear Side Room, you can watch films about the three primary materials and techniques used for the sculptures: marble and marble carving, plaster casts, and new 3D reproduction techniques based on digital recordings. A screen in the West Hall offers a close-up look at the production of a specific facsimile, that of *The Infant St. John the Baptist*.

DRAWING

Perhaps you would like to explore the sculptures in detail by drawing them? Take a seat at the drawing table in the Sculpture Street or grab some materials and head into the exhibition to draw.



MICHELANGELO IMPERFECT

Michelangelo (1475–1564) was a pivotal figure for the establishment of the idea that art is personal expression. He was also eminently gifted at creating images that stick in the mind: he painted *The Creation of Adam* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome and designed the dome of St. Peter's Basilica. And he created two of the world's best-known sculptures: *Pietà* and *David*.

Michelangelo merges the individual with the exalted. His renditions of the human body – and especially the male form – are ideals, yet always convey an immediately relatable sense of inner life.

Many of his works remain unfinished. Events beyond his control and unrealistically high ambitions got in the way, but he also often emphasised his artistic process by working creatively with the unfinished and imperfect.

Sculpture was Michelangelo's preferred medium and is the focus of this exhibition. SMK owns the world's largest collection of reproductions after Michelangelo's sculptures. Historical plaster casts are supplemented by new facsimiles, created through a combination of digital technology and traditional craftsmanship. Supplemented by original drawings and sculptural models, they tell the story of his sculpture.

The exhibition also offers a new perspective on the significance of reproduction to our experience of art at a time when images are everywhere, ceaselessly circulated, copied, and reinterpreted.

The exhibition starts in the West Hall and continues through the Side Rooms to the Old Assembly Hall and the Sculpture Street.



WEST HALL

Crucified Figure

1

The figure is unfinished, roughly carved to enhance tactility and support its expressive impact. Michelangelo was in his eighties when he made it and was clearly unconcerned with perfection. He dispenses with the figure's arms, creating a more powerful form, almost abstract. We know that he was working on a crucifix for his nephew Lionardo. This may have been that figure, but it could also have been carved as a model for a sculpture that he never managed to begin.

Madonna of the Stairs

2

The Christ Child resembles a Greek hero, but like any ordinary child, he has fallen asleep at his mother's breast. When the young Michelangelo carved this relief, he was already developing the combination of the ideal and the everyday that would become a recurring feature of his work. The stone on which Mary sits symbolises Christ as the foundation of the Church. The significance of the stairs and the children playing in the background is less clear. Donatello's reliefs inspired the linear definition of the figures and the sense of depth evoked in the background.

The Infant St. John the Baptist

3

John was a cousin of Jesus Christ. He foretold Christ's coming as the Saviour and baptised him in the River Jordan. Here John is portrayed tenderly as a lanky nine- or ten-year-old boy, marked by the insecurity of youth. He steps forward tentatively, perhaps into the river, the baptismal bowl wedged under his arm. His damaged right hand may once have held a metal crucifix. His gaze is distant, directed towards the future. The statue was shattered in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. This facsimile is a reconstruction based on salvaged fragments and historical photographs. For more information, watch the film on the wall to the left.

Battle of the Centaurs

4

Advised by his tutor in classical literature at the Medici court, Angelo Poliziano, Michelangelo here unfolds the story of how the Greek hero Heracles rescues his betrothed, Deianeira, from a forced marriage to the centaur (half man, half horse) Eurytion. Heracles is presumably the man with the rock on the left, Eurytion the one in the centre with his arm raised, while Deianeira is being pulled in both directions in the foreground. Beautiful bodies in conflict, staged here as an entangled chaos, would become a central motif for Michelangelo.

For this figure of the little god of love, created for a close friend in Rome, Michelangelo stretches the body far beyond what is anatomically possible in a dancing, upward-spiralling pirouette. It is worn by wind and weather, and its limbs have broken off; originally, *Cupid* was shown pulling one of his arrows of love from his lion's paw quiver with his left hand, while his right arm was bent across his chest. Throughout his life, Michelangelo explored twisted bodies and bent arms in similar poses – a nearby example is *The Risen Christ* #12.

This Greco-Roman god of wine staggers forward in a state of inebriation, close to spilling his wine. His belly is soft, his eyes unfocused; behind him lurks a beast-like infant satyr with a vine. The cardinal who commissioned the sculpture wanted something in the tradition of the exalted ideals of antiquity. Contemporaries described how the *Bacchus* combined traditionally masculine and feminine qualities, which, while in line with ancient tradition, was hardly exalted, especially as combined with its expression of loss of control. The cardinal never collected it.

Kneeling Angels with Candlesticks

7-8

Michelangelo continued and completed the work on a series of sculptures for the tomb of St. Dominic in Bologna after his older fellow artist Niccolò dell'Arca, who died in 1494. One of them was the angel on the right, designed to hold an altar candle, as a counterpart to Niccolò's angel on the left. Niccolò's figure is elegant, its flowing drapery carved with virtuoso skill. Michelangelo learnt much from this technique, but his angel is simpler and more robust, full of compressed energy.

Bruges Madonna

9

The young Virgin encloses her muscular child in the loins that bore him. It is time to let go. Their hands are still clasped, but he is about to take his first step away – and towards his death on the cross. Mary's distant expression hints at awareness of this inevitable loss. The sculpture was commissioned by the Moscron family, who were Flemish cloth merchants with business in Florence. It was installed in their chapel in the Church of Our Lady in their home city of Bruges.



WEST HALL

The infant St. John the Baptist, on the left, hands the Christ Child a fluttering bird, a symbol of his future death on the cross. Christ flinches in surprise and – perhaps – fear. But he also looks back in recognition of the sacrifice he must eventually make. Mary knows that he must die, yet gently tries to keep John, the harbinger of that fate, at a distance. The figure of St. John is unfinished, but the patron, the Florentine cloth merchant Taddeo Taddei, nonetheless proudly displayed the relief in his home.

The Virgin breaks the circular frame of the image as if she were part of the viewer's space. She gazes ahead in awareness of her son, Christ's fate on the cross. He leans casually against a book containing prophecy of his death. The infant St. John the Baptist watches anxiously. The round format, the tondo, was popular in Florence; this one was commissioned by the nobleman Bartolommeo Pitti. The rough-hewn area beneath John suggests that Michelangelo was in the process of carving him away when he abandoned work on the relief. We do not know why.

The Bible tells of how Christ rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. Here, he is depicted as a heroically muscular figure, like a Greek god – unscathed and immaculate, triumphant over death. He carries the instruments of his torture: the rope that bound him, the vinegar-soaked sponge from which he drank, and the cross upon which he died. The sculpture changes its aspect dynamically as one moves around it, almost as if he were in motion.

RECTO:

Michelangelo studied human anatomy in depth. In this chalk study drawn from life, his interests as a sculptor are evident, as he renders the play of muscles under the skin and defines them by the light falling from the left. His inscribed measurements are based on the unit of 'a head' ('testa'), corresponding to the distance from the hairline to the chin or the schematic hand at the top right.

VERSO:

It is likely that Michelangelo hired craftsmen from his worksites to model for him. Here, we see a different model than on the other side. He appears to be shivering, as if cold. His pose closely resembles a sketch for one of the prisoners for the Tomb of Julius II, depicted in the timeline on the end wall of this exhibition space – suggesting that this sheet is linked to that project.

On several occasions, Michelangelo attended dissections, conducted with the Church's permission, on the remains of those with no family to claim them. This drawing may reflect such a session but was more likely made from an anatomical model (*écorché*). It illustrates, in diagrammatic fashion, how the chest muscles attach to the ribs and how the musculature of the back and buttocks is structured.



WEST HALL



WEST HALL

The four reclining figures on the sarcophagi are allegories, representing abstract ideas – specifically, four times of the day. Together, they reflect the relentless passage of time but also its eternal repetition. In the original, *Night* is highly polished and appears finished. It is the only one accompanied by symbols – an owl, a crescent moon, and a mask: redolent of darkness, sleep, and dreams. The head of *Day* is only roughly carved, while the rest of the body is more carefully finished. Perhaps Michelangelo thought it sufficiently expressive and felt that he could take it no further. The figures convey a certain unease, suggesting the struggle of earthly life.

Giuliano and Lorenzo de'Medici

19-20

The portraits of the two dukes reflect their military background. Their elaborate, fanciful armour references ancient Rome; *Giuliano* holds a commander's baton, while *Lorenzo* holds a kerchief – Roman symbols of military and political authority. *Giuliano* appears alert, while *Lorenzo* is lost in thought. They thus represent two different but complementary principles: action and contemplation, the external and the internal. The portraits are not accurate likenesses of the deceased; Michelangelo was interested in ideals rather than specific individuals. He is said to have remarked, 'in a thousand years, no one will be able to tell that they ever looked different.'

Medici Madonna

21

The Virgin gazes ahead while her small, muscular son eagerly seeks her breast and its life-giving milk. She knows he must die and is already letting go of him, offering no support except a light touch with her left hand. She is meant to remind us of death but also of the salvation promised by faith. In the Medici Chapel, the two dukes, *Giuliano* and *Lorenzo* – and we, along with them – fix their gaze upon her and the energetic Christ. His propulsive, upward movement seems to foreshadow his later resurrection.

The figure's form closes in on itself, as if it were still enclosed within the marble block from which it was carved. It is a mourning figure, intended as one of four at attic level of one of the tomb monuments. These were never completed, and Michelangelo reworked the design. The surface of the original exhibits unevenly intersecting hatch marks, faintly visible in the plaster, which is uncharacteristic of his generally more uniformly directional chisel strokes. This suggests that the figure was carved by an assistant after one of his models.

Like #24–26, this drawing is part of Michelangelo's brainstorming process for the tombs in the Medici Chapel. At top, is a loosely sketched, wall-mounted tabernacle with a suspended sarcophagus; to the right is a draft of a freestanding, open structure with arches and sarcophagi on top. At lower left, he begins with a simple sarcophagus with a lid, but then adds increasingly complex structures on top. The final elevation is too tall but begins to resemble the finished designs, with allegorical figures on sarcophagi beneath niches containing statues.

These three drawings were cut from the same sheet by a later owner. Along with #23, they form part of Michelangelo's conceptual phase for the tombs in the Medici Chapel: ideas flow, merge, intermingle, and mutate – often with original ideas unprecedented in architecture at the time.

A draft for a wall-mounted tabernacle appears in the centre of #25. However, Michelangelo was more interested in a free-standing monument positioned at the centre of the chapel: a draft, revised several times, appears on the right in #25, while an octagonal variation with inset urns is projected in plan and elevation at left in #26. At left in #25 is a more open structure consisting of four arches with the sarcophagi placed on top.

A further development of the plan for a freestanding monument appears at left in #24: inset urns are flanked by mourning figures at the corners. Above, an octagonal structure with small statues on the roof is sketched – clearly not a realistic idea for the relatively small sacristy. To the right, a floor plan shows tombs placed within walls enclosing a burial chamber or mausoleum. Above it are sketches for wall-tombs.

A study for one of the ducal wall-tombs

Here, Michelangelo approaches the final designs for the tombs of Dukes Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici. At the centre, a sarcophagus is depicted, its lid supporting allegorical figures. Beneath them, on the floor, are two reclining river gods. To the left, he experiments with a seated figure of unknown significance. Above, three niches are intended for statues, while centrally at top, arms and armour arranged as a trophy are flanked by empty, ornamental thrones. Small figures seated under garlands appear on either side.

Demonstration drawing for the ducal tombs

This carefully executed drawing was likely created to present the project to its patron, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici. The design is close to the final arrangement but was created before Michelangelo began carving the sculptures. Details such as the duke's baton and chair, as well as the clusters of reeds behind the river gods, would have been difficult to render in marble and were probably only included for visual effect. The heads of the allegorical figures on the sarcophagus are marked with lightning and horns, suggesting that they symbolise Day and Night, as in the completed monument. The two mourning figures in the side niches are harder to identify. At the top, more grieving figures appear – one of which was later sculpted (see #22).

On both recto and verso, this working drawing lets us trace Michelangelo's development of the sacristy's third, never-realised double tomb, intended for the Patriarchs Lorenzo 'il Magnifico' and his brother Giuliano de'Medici.

VERSO:

A simple elevation of two sarcophagi with triangular lids and the suggestion of a superstructure is at the top, upside down. A single sarcophagus with a curved lid is drawn over it at upper left. Drawn centrally, on top of these designs, is a sarcophagus with a two-tiered superstructure, flanked by standing figures beneath garlands.

RECTO:

The central structure from the verso is repeated twice, side by side. Michelangelo tests different sarcophagus designs, with and without figures positioned beneath and on top, while also experimenting with various niche types. He places a standing figure in the niche on the right and sketches larger figures in the central and right niches. At the top, upside down, is a draft for an allegorical figure of the type placed on the completed sarcophagi of Dukes Giuliano and Lorenzo.

VERSO:

Michelangelo refines the idea developed in #29 into a more clearly structured three-tiered elevation. It consists of two sarcophagi with seated figures, possibly portraits of the patriarchs. Above, in the central niche, a standing figure is faintly suggested – most likely, it is the Virgin and Child. In a revision drawn over the original sketch, he unites the second and third tiers by introducing a tall pilaster (a flat, projecting column-like decorative element).

RECTO:

The design from the verso is further developed: the figure in the central niche is corrected from its initial standing position to seated and flanked by two standing figures. At centre, a loosely drawn figure unites the three sections with outstretched arms. The poetic text below reveals that this is an allegory of the fame that follows death, yet is eventually forgotten too. It references epitaphs that were likely intended to be incorporated into the monument:

‘Fame holds the epitaphs in line, for they are dead, and their work is stilled, it goes neither forward nor backward’

Reclining male figure

31

Once Michelangelo had settled on a given pose in sketches, he seems generally to have modelled his figures at a scale of 1:5. From this, he could scale them up to full size and transfer their outline onto the marble block, allowing the fine carving to begin. This wax model broke at some point and was only re-assembled in the early twentieth century, which means that it may not fully reflect Michelangelo's original idea. It was most likely created during his work on the Medici Chapel.

A left arm and a shoulder, sharply bent

32

Michelangelo presumably drew this arm on the basis of other sketches, though he may also have drawn from life, as in #33. It is a meticulously executed drawing: first incised into the paper with a metal stylus, then drawn with pen and ink, and finally shaded with black chalk. He exaggerates the anatomy to clarify the individual elements. The tension in the shoulder and the contraction of the muscles are almost palpable. This study probably relates to the right arm of *Night* in the Medici Chapel (see #15).

Here, Michelangelo draws directly from a live model, studying the left shoulder and arm three times. On the right, he outlines its contours and structure; on the left, he adds further shading to create depth. In the centre, he focuses on describing the flex of muscle beneath skin through delicate hatching. Unlike the linear clarity of pen work (see #32), chalk allows him to capture the play of light across the surface of the skin. The drawing likely represents an early pose of the right arm of *Night* in the Medici Chapel (see #15).

The semi-reclining figure, a river god, was drawn freehand and shows the figure from three angles, one of them 'upside down' at lower right. Measurements are added. The drawing was probably made for an assistant to aid in the creation of full-scale clay models, which Michelangelo used for all the sculptures in the Medici Chapel (see #35).

This is a 3D print of a clay model. Despite some loss of detail in the printing process, Michelangelo's hand-worked surface can still be discerned. While he often scaled up his smaller preparatory models directly onto the marble blocks, he would create full-scale models when the assignment called for it. This was the case in the Medici Chapel for which he made such models of all the sculptures. This one was intended for one of the river gods that he planned to place on the floor on either side of the sarcophagi.

Michelangelo is the best-documented artist of the Renaissance. Hundreds of his letters, contracts, shopping lists, notes, and bank statements have been preserved. He writes both honestly and with confident self-awareness about matters of importance to him and what's on his mind, using his elegant humanist cursive handwriting, honed in his youth while living with the Medici. While this selection of widely different documents focuses on his many years of work on the tomb of Julius II, it is quite representative of his overall life and daily routine as an artist.

Demonstration drawing

43

This, Michelangelo's earliest surviving design for the tomb, was meticulously executed for presentation purposes. The monument is set against a wall but projects far enough to accommodate the pope's sarcophagus. Julius himself is depicted being lifted out of death by angels. The figures to his left and right scatter holy water and incense, while above, the Virgin and Child signal the salvation of his soul. The figures at bottom likely symbolise faith and charity; above them are a prophet and a sibyl – figures who foretold the coming of Christ. The della Rovere (Julius's family name, meaning 'of the oak') are represented in the central relief by an oak tree carried by angels scattering acorns.

Demonstration drawing

44

This drawing is a copy of a damaged original; a design for a wall-tomb made after the plan for a vast freestanding structure was abandoned (see timeline, opposite). The monument is still large enough to allow the pope's sarcophagus to project perpendicularly and to accommodate up to forty full-sized sculptures. At bottom, niches contain figures symbolising victory over death, surrounded by prisoners positioned against herm pilasters (flat columns featuring human upper bodies). The prophet at upper right is unmistakably Moses holding the Tablets of the Law, a figure Michelangelo would soon carve (see #73).

Demonstration drawing

45

This drawing, which is likely to have originally included the upper section of the tomb, is a variation on #44. The most significant difference is the prophet at upper right: here, he is not Moses but a bald man holding a book, possibly St. Paul the Evangelist. The drawing has been trimmed and joined at the centre, making it slightly narrower than it was originally. The horizontal section along the top is a later addition.

Model of a male nude

46

Michelangelo often sketched his figures in wax before developing and refining their posture and anatomy in drawings. This is an example. The wax is mixed with oil, making the material softer when warmed by the hand. He rested its lower part in his palm while working. Small pieces were added in some places, for example at the hip, while other elements were scraped away. This model informed both *The Awakening Prisoner* for the Julius tomb (see timeline, opposite) and *Dusk* in the Medici Chapel.

It seems that Michelangelo typically modelled his figures at a 1:5 scale before carving them at full size. In this preparatory work for *The Bearded Prisoner* (see #78 in the sculpture street), he appears to have modelled the head, arms, and legs separately, while also not concerning himself with the back. The damp cloth draped over it to keep the clay soft was used to lend texture to the surface. Additional scratched and scored patterns are reminiscent of the hatching in Michelangelo's drawings and of the surface treatment of his marble sculptures. The green paint is a later addition.

In drawings like this, Michelangelo documented the blocks he had quarried for his sculptures and architecture. The blocks depicted were likely intended for either the tomb of Julius II or the façade of the Church of San Lorenzo which he worked on between 1516 and 1519 but never completed.

We do not know the purpose of these studies of the crucified body of Christ. Michelangelo usually focuses on the parts of anatomy that challenge him rather than drawing the entire figure. On the verso (back), the figure studies are accompanied by architectural profiles in red chalk, which may be related to his work in the San Lorenzo complex, where he, in his capacity as architect, worked on both the Medici Chapel (see elsewhere in the West Hall) and the Medici (Laurentian) library. The rendition of Christ's body here is similar to that in the crucifixion group #51-53.

This compositional drawing may have been made with a bronze relief in mind, but we do not know. It depicts Christ crucified alongside the two thieves. He turns and meets the gaze of Dismas, the penitent thief. Gestas hangs passively with his eyes lowered. The Virgin faints while Mary Magdalene clings to the cross. Christ's posture is echoed in Dismas in the crucifixion group #51-53, while the depiction of Dismas found here clearly foreshadows the same figure in the crucifixion group #54-56.

Christ and the Two Thieves Crucified

51-53

The slumped, emaciated Christ here seems to reflect the sketches in #49. He is likely based on a model by Michelangelo and is more finely modelled and thinly cast than the two thieves, which suggests that he was created separately. Dismas, on the left, mirrors Christ in #50 but is relatively clumsily executed, suggesting that the figure is not based on a Michelangelo model. Gestas was likely based on the model reproduced in #57-58, albeit on a smaller scale. The figures were formerly mounted on crosses. They may have been created by two different artists. We do not know who.

Christ and the Two Thieves Crucified

54-56

Dismas seeks the gaze of Christ in remorse, while Gestas looks away, showing no repentance. Christ is larger than the thieves and was likely modelled and cast independently of them. He is more heroically muscular than his counterpart in the group #51-53, significantly different in interpretation, and probably based on a Michelangelo model made in another context. Gestas is very like the model depicted in #57-58. The figures were originally mounted on crosses. They may have been created by two different artists. We do not know who.

Gestas, the Bad Thief

57

Several bronze casts of this figure exist. They may be the closest we will ever get to Michelangelo's original, now-lost model of Gestas, although this particular bronze is likely itself a copy of an earlier reproduction of the original. As with the original sculptural models elsewhere in the exhibition (#31, 46, and 47), it is not a complete figure but just a torso. The focus is on depicting the emotionally charged twisting of the body away from Christ.

Gestas, the Bad Thief

58

This plaster cast is slightly larger than #57, suggesting that it was cast from a bronze like it. The lighter colour of the material offers a clearer impression of the lost original: the elongated form and thin waist are likely a result of the model resting in the artist's palm during work. If this original was the basis for the sixteenth-century bronze versions on display in this exhibition (#53, 56), the artists behind them made significant additions of their own, contributing their own interpretations of the arms, legs, facial expressions, and other details.

After Daniele da Volterra, Portrait of Michelangelo

This is the most iconic portrait of Michelangelo, at once life-like and heroically idealised. We seem to sense the man behind it. At the same time, the myth of the melancholic genius is inscribed in the furrows of his face and the broken nose – flattened, as if it were made of clay, by a rival in his youth. The portrait was cast in multiple versions by Michelangelo's friend, Daniele da Volterra, shortly after the artist's death and has served as the prototype for most later portraits of him.

Archival materials from the Royal Cast Collection

60-63

In the display is an 1897 catalogue from Oronzio Lelli's Florence workshop, which specialised in casts after Florentine art, including Michelangelo's sculptures. Also exhibited is a correspondence record regarding orders of casts for the Royal Cast Collection in Copenhagen, an inventory documenting Michelangelo's works in the collection, and an 1897 issue of the Danish satirical magazine *Blæksprutten* ('The Octopus'/'ink sprayer').

Copy After *Day*

64

This figure is cast from a downscaled terracotta version of Michelangelo's *Day* from the Medici Chapel (cast displayed in the West Hall, #16). The terracotta is an interpretation of the original, rather than a direct copy, by the Dutch artist Johan Gregor van der Schardt: the figure is more elongated, and its arms and legs are thinner in proportion to the torso. Most notably, the head is smaller and has been given more distinct facial features.

The figure, said to be of the Cretan princess of myth, Ariadne, is cast after a bronze sculpture by Francesco Primaticcio, created for the French King Francis I's sculpture gallery at Fontainebleau. Primaticcio's sculpture was based on the famous *Sleeping Ariadne* in the Vatican – a Roman marble copy of a lost Hellenistic-Pergamene original. The Vatican sculpture has since been restored so that it appears with a more upright torso. It reflects an ideal of femininity that proved pivotal to Michelangelo, who drew direct inspiration from it for his reclining figures in the Medici Chapel and, notably, for his painting of God the Father giving life to Adam on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.



OLD ASSEMBLY HALL

Michelangelo's breakthrough work is executed with virtuoso skill: the marble is carved daringly thin in places, such as in the Virgin's cloak on the left. The draperies appear fluid to the point of suggesting movement. The original is brought to a high polish, reflecting light. Michelangelo was conscious of his achievement: this sculpture would be the only work he ever signed. He used the active, past imperfect Latin tense of the verb *to create*, inscribing it diagonally across Mary's chest: *MICHELANGELO FACIEBAT* – meaning Michelangelo *was creating* this work, as if to emphasise his individual and ongoing creative process rather than the final result.



OLD ASSEMBLY HALL

The lifeless Christ, perhaps just removed from the cross, is presented by the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, supported by Nicodemus, whose features bear Michelangelo's likeness. The sculpture is a personal and spiritual statement, intended for his own tomb. Michelangelo attempted the unprecedented feat of carving four figures from a single block, a challenge that may have led to his decision to scale the figures at different sizes. This also lent dramatic purpose to the group: Nicodemus seems to envelop the others. There was insufficient stone to endow the Virgin Mary with great volume, and there appears to have been issues with the left leg of Christ: a slot is carved to receive a replacement, which is also missing. Michelangelo broke apart the sculpture in apparent frustration, but it was later restored by his assistant, Tiberio Calcagni. The fractures can still be discerned, even in this plaster cast.

Christ is limp, the mourning figure of the Virgin holds him upright. A fragment of an earlier right arm and a face repeated on the side of the Virgin's head underscore the sculpture's state of unfinish. Some parts are only roughly hewn, while others are highly polished. We are witnessing palpable traces of the creative process. Michelangelo was likely unsatisfied with the sculpture, but its rejection of conventional beauty and polish, the figures' apparent weightlessness, and their elongated, upward-reaching forms are unlike anything he had done before. They represent something new.



SCULPTURE STREET

After Battista di Domenico Lorenzi, Portrait of Michelangelo

69

The bust was made for Michelangelo's tomb in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence on the order of the artist Giorgio Vasari, who oversaw the project. Battista clearly based his portrait on Daniele da Volterra's simultaneously lifelike and idealised depiction of Michelangelo (see this sculpture at the exhibition entrance, #59).

Laocoön and his sons

70

Laocoön was a Trojan priest who tried to warn his people about the Greek invasion via the Trojan horse. Angered at this, the gods sent venomous serpents to kill him and his sons. The sculpture was legendary in Michelangelo's time, described in ancient texts. In 1506, it was discovered and unearthed in a vineyard on Rome's Esquiline Hill; Michelangelo was present at the excavation. It was soon hailed as the ultimate depiction of human suffering and of the precise moment of death. As such, it was a key reference for Michelangelo throughout his career.

Apollo Belvedere

71

The cast is after a Roman copy of a lost Greek-Hellenistic bronze original. Even at Michelangelo's time, it was the most admired of all depictions of the Greco-Roman sun god, a prime example of ancient elegance and beauty. It was displayed in the garden of Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere in Rome, where the young Michelangelo must have seen it, as it clearly influenced his statue of *David*. After Giuliano was elected as Pope Julius II, he placed the sculpture in the courtyard of the Belvedere Palace in the Vatican, hence its nickname.

Belvedere Torso

72

This cast is after a Roman marble copy of a lost Greek original, and one of the most influential sculptures in Western art. Michelangelo found in its muscular anatomy a bodily ideal, was inspired by its hint of melancholy, and borrowed its tension between rest and impending movement in works such as *Moses* and the ducal portraits of *Giuliano* and *Lorenzo de' Medici* in the Medici Chapel (#19-20). We do not know where in Rome it was located during this period, but it would be installed in the Vatican's Belvedere Courtyard later in Michelangelo's lifetime, giving it its nickname.



SCULPTURE STREET



SCULPTURE STREET

Moses turns his head, eyes blazing. His body seems to follow, his left leg tense, as if he is about to rise. The locks of his beard flow through his fingers. We may be seeing him, as described in the Bible, upon his second ascent to Mount Sinai. He has just destroyed the first set of tablets inscribed with the ten commandments, in anger at his people. God now appears to him, showing only his back. Under his arm are uninscribed tablets upon which God's covenant will be reaffirmed. The Hebrew word for the radiance around Moses's head can also be interpreted as 'horns', which led to him frequently being depicted with horns on his forehead.

One appears ecstatic, the other twisted as if by external force. Both are bound. These two men, passionate and pained, are Michelangelo's interpretations of the conditions of embodiment: eroticism is connected with oblivion, while resistance and struggle are associated with pain. Both are interpreted as states of captivity – the soul imprisoned in the body. Nevertheless, or perhaps to emphasise this point, Michelangelo depicts bodies of great beauty, sensually present. He seems to strive for an emotional and physical sense of identification from the viewer.

Rachel and *Leah*, the daughters of Lot and wives of Jacob as described in the Bible, represent two complementary paths to salvation: the contemplative and the active. Rachel symbolises inner, spiritual life, while Leah represents active, worldly life. They embody thought and action, and the Church's dual emphasis on faith and good works. They also reflect a period of intellectual and spiritual exploration in Michelangelo's life, during which he sought to suppress physical sensuality. Unlike his other sculptures, they are modestly dressed, emotionally distant, and characterised by simplicity and restraint in form and line.

The backs of the facsimiles are flat, as the original sculptures are located in niches and thus inaccessible to recording.

The Bearded Prisoner and The Young Prisoner

These colossal figures were never completed, as is also true of two others not represented in the exhibition (see the timeline in the West Hall). They remain rough, only partially defined, laying bare Michelangelo's carving process. They were primarily worked from two of the four sides of the blocks. He explained that he could see the figures within the stone and worked to 'set them free' with his chisel. We do not know why he abandoned work on the sculptures, but they are emblematic of an approach that became increasingly prevalent in his work: the partly deliberate application of differing levels of finish.

The casts were made from moulds taken from earlier copies in a lightweight plaster material. Their renditions of surface detail and texture are less clear than those of the surrounding plaster casts, which were taken directly from the originals.

Youthful, graceful, and powerful, this embodiment of victory triumphantly presses down upon his more roughly defined enemy. The sculpture can be compared to Michelangelo's colossal, still passive *David*, depicting the moment after action has been taken. Victory suggests different degrees of movement depending on our point of view: from the right, his body come across as tense; from the front, he seems poised to leap; from the left, he appears to be already in forward motion. His seemingly expressionless face hints at hesitation, perhaps in contemplation of the exercise of power that he embodies.



SCULPTURE STREET

Saints Paul, Peter, Gregory the Great and Augustine (or Pius?) 81-84

An overworked Michelangelo accepted a commission from Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini for fifteen figures of saints for the cardinal's family chapel in Siena Cathedral. He completed only four. The two founders of the Christian Church, *St. Paul* and *St. Peter*, suggest stern and gentle personalities, respectively, and their garments are rendered with flowing elegance. The church father *St. Gregory the Great* is dressed in papal vestments and holds a theological text. The bishop's identity is unclear, but he is likely a representation of another significant early Christian theologian, *St. Augustine*.

The backs of these facsimiles appear unfinished, as the roughly carved rear surfaces of the original sculptures were inaccessible for recording because of their placement in niches.

This statue was created for the Medici patriarch Cosimo the Elder and, in Michelangelo's time, stood on a column in the inner courtyard of the Medici Palace on Via Larga in Florence. Donatello's interpretation of the biblical hero, emblem of the city, was unique in several ways, most notably in its patently sensual nudity. This inspired Michelangelo to imbue his own figures with a similarly erotic, lifelike nudity, as seen in early works such as *Cupid* (facsimile exhibited in the West Hall, #5), but most significantly in *David*.

Donatello's statue of the dragon-slaying saint was his most famous work at Michelangelo's time, displayed in a niche on the Orsanmichele Church in central Florence. Its depiction of an upright, seemingly confident warrior with a furrowed brow and darting eyes became the basis for Michelangelo's *David*.

David has always been admired, but the statue has also provoked controversy. Michelangelo imbued his figures with an unmistakable sensuality, which in the twentieth century contributed to *David* becoming a queer icon. As early as upon its first installation in 1504, it was equipped with a gilded vine that covered its genitals. In 1846–47, the cast maker Clemente Papi took a mould from the original for both plaster and bronze reproductions. Danish master brewer Carl Jacobsen commissioned this version for the city of Copenhagen, and in 1897 it was briefly displayed outside City Hall, mirroring the original's placement in front of Florence's seat of government. However, complaints about the statue's nudity led to its relocation, and since 1903, it has served as a landmark for SMK, first at Østre Anlæg park and, since 1993, in front of the Royal Cast Collection at Amalienborg in the Copenhagen harbour.

This reproduction allows us to gaze into *David's* darting eyes. Their irises are heart-shaped; a sculptural device that, seen from a distance, creates the illusion of reflected light. The ears are carved to prevent water from pooling, and the nostrils and cavities between the classically styled curls were drilled. The head was cast following traditional techniques from a mould taken from the plaster cast that the Grand Duke of Tuscany gifted to Queen Victoria in 1857 (today at the Victoria and Albert Museum).

The figure twists upon itself, almost as if spiralling, as we move around it. As in the youthful work *Cupid* (#5, facsimile exhibited in the West Hall), he reaches for an arrow. His quiver, though only roughly hewn, identifies him as the Greco-Roman god of the sun and of plague, Apollo, who is often depicted carrying a bow. Michelangelo sculpted the statue as a gift for the tyrannical Florentine governor Baccio Valori in an effort to stay in his good graces. We do not know why he never completed it.

Brutus

90

Here, Michelangelo merges determination and brutality. His head turns alertly, suggesting the presence of others around him. The bust is an imaginary portrait of Marcus Junius Brutus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, whom he assassinated to forestall his tyranny. Brutus became a symbol of republican resistance against Medici rule in Florence. The bust was commissioned in Rome by the Florentine exile Donato Giannotti (depicted on the shoulder clasp) in memory of Lorenzino de'Medici's assassination of his uncle, the tyrannical Duke Alessandro de'Medici, in 1537.

Moses

91

This bronze reproduction of Moses (see also #73) was commissioned by Master Brewer Carl Jacobsen for the City of Copenhagen. It was installed in a number of different places before finding a home in the Nørrebro district, first by Hillebrødgade school in 1925-26 and, since 1973, Hans Tavsens park.

PHOTO CREDITS EXHIBITION AND GUIDE

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All contemporary photos from the Royal Cast Collection

Photo from the entry hall with the stairs at right: the photographic archive at SMK

The remaining historical photos: the Archive at the Royal Cast Collection.

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