



## SACRED WINDOWS



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Sunday, April 30, 2023

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### Who Taught Michelangelo to Paint and Sculpt?

Dear Thomas,

Back in 1987, the clever creator of **the Far Side comic strip**, Gary Larson, drew a single-panel cartoon entitled simply, "Michelangelo's father." It shows a toothless old man standing at the foot of a very tall ladder, looking up, and apparently giving instructions to his son during the painting of the Sistine Chapel. What makes it so funny is that the viewer gets to hear only **the father's side of the conversation**:

*Watch those flesh tones, son – they're too yellow ... How much they payin' you for this? Back in my day we'd finish a ceiling twice this big in less than a week! 'Course in those days we had to make our own brushes.*

Hilarious! And in case you were wondering, it *wasn't* Michelangelo's father who taught him to paint and sculpt. **His father was actually a banker** who was not very pleased that his only son decided to run off to art school.

### Genius Proportions

But the rest of the world is glad he did. Art was both his son's passion and his calling, and eventually that son became **the world's undisputed grandmaster of sculpture**, not to mention the fiery, temperamental, and often brash fresco painter of the Sistine Chapel.

And did you know that Michelangelo also **designed the magnificent dome** of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome?



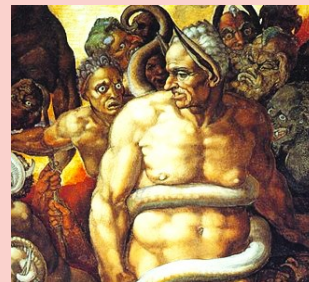
Sculpture, Painting, Architecture. **He did it all**, and he did it supremely well, even for an era that was filled with geniuses in those fields.

Michelangelo Buonarroti **lived to nearly 89 years of age**(1475-1564) and offered his gifts to the world for nearly eight decades with an amazing generosity of spirit. It is said that in his 18 years of work on the Dome of St. Peter's he never accepted a cent from the pope who commissioned him. He did all for the glory of God alone.

That's not necessarily a pitch for his canonization. Michelangelo surely was a man of faith, but, **despite his name, he was hardly an angel!**

## The Infamous Portrait

To give you an idea of what I mean, when he was painting **the Final Judgment scene** on the back wall of the Sistine Chapel (from 1536 to 1541), Michelangelo painted the face of one of his enemies onto an ugly, donkey-eared figure enveloped by a snake.



He placed this mythical creature in the very bottom corner of the mammoth painting (so that observers could see it more easily.)

Said enemy was actually the pope's Master of Ceremonies, and when **Archbishop Baigio da Cesena** found out about this insult to his dignity, he complained bitterly to Pope Paul III about the uppity artist. But the pope is alleged to have replied,

*"Well, if he had put you in Purgatory I might be able to do something about it...."*

It seems that Michelangelo had placed the good prelate in Hell. **Done deal.**



## Mentors or Influencers?

**There is some debate** as to whether a world class genius *in any field* can actually be taught the elements of his particular realm of genius or whether he has them innately. I maintain that both are true, and Michelangelo is a prime example.

Here we have to make a distinction between those who teach (in the sense of apprenticeship) and **those who exercise influence** (in the sense of opening up avenues for that person's genius to express itself).

The question has a direct answer in Michelangelo's two mentors. As an early teen, he was apprenticed to a master painter in his own right who became one of the more famous Renaissance painters, (see inset) **Domenico Ghirlandaio** (1448-1494), who was himself a student of the famous **Donatello** (1386-1466). This was quite an artistic pedigree.

But Ghirlandaio is the very reason Michelangelo had the ability to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling so many years later. He had been **taught to paint frescoes by a master** of that technique.



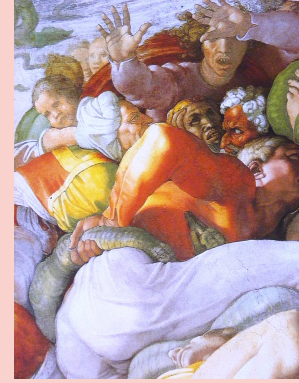




The Oracle of Delphi.



God creating the sun and the moon.



Serpent & Sinners.

In his later teens, his sculptural mentor was more of an *influencer* than a teacher – at least Michelangelo thought so. The man was a Florentine sculptor named **Bertoldo di Giovanni** (1420-1491), who was the master in residence and caretaker of the Medici family's art academy. He is **almost entirely unknown today** due to his being eclipsed in reputation and talent by his most famous student.

In terms of influence, however, Bertoldo **held a key that opened a door** for the young artist. He was the one who recommended his prize student to Lorenzo di Medici for further opportunities at artistic development. This recommendation exposed Michelangelo to a vast range of other artistic prodigies and launched the young sculptor into his prime work of sculpting for rich patrons.

The first and **grandest of all his masterpieces** followed soon after: namely, his famous *Pietà*, which he sculpted at just 24 years of age.



## Taught or Caught?

Michelangelo always **claimed that no one could have taught him his trade** and it's not hard to see that he had a point. When you observe the incomparable grandeur of the *Pietà* or his *David*, for example, how is it possible that one could be taught to sculpt works like these?

Rather, he "caught" or picked up the elements of sculpting from his **influencers and environment**, but he did not *get* his talent or techniques from them. So he claimed.

There is another little-known story of Michelangelo's life that showed a certain artistic influence on him as a child. His mother died when he was just six years old, and he was then given over to the care of a nanny in those tender years. **The nanny's husband was a stone mason.** The artist's love-affair with stone writes itself after that.

**As for architecture:** if you can believe it, the creator of the dome of St. Peter was entirely *self-taught*. Imagine. Further wonder: he only began to study architecture **at the age of 40**.

He was 71 years old when the pope commissioned him to do **something no one had ever done before**: raise a dome the size of Rome's ancient Pantheon 200 feet off the ground and place it on the top of the still unfinished St. Peter's!

## Genius vs. Talent

The famous French philosopher, Etienne Gilson, says that **genius differs from mere talent** in one major respect: genius absorbs and assimilates the best examples of one's field of expertise and then *produces unique creations* in that field out of whole cloth.

Talent, on the other hand, is something less than genius. It may express itself in precocious and fascinating ways, but **talent is essentially imitative**. It reproduces the designs that have gone before it and adapts what it sees to its own style.

Michelangelo

One brief example using **Michelangelo's David** (completed in 1504) should make this clear. His genius was not in being the first to sculpt a freestanding David statue. That title belongs to Donatello who crafted a very bizarre bronze sculpture of David in the 1440s, sixty years before Michelangelo carved his marble monolith.

Then, another famous Florentine sculptor, **Andrea del Verrocchio**, fashioned another (slightly less-weird) bronze *David* in the year Michelangelo was born (1475). Verrocchio was Leonardo Da Vinci's mentor, and it is sometimes claimed that Leonardo was his model for the statue.

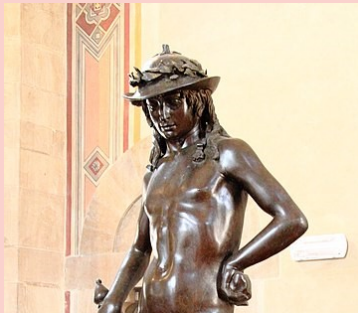
Be that as it may, **both bronze images** of David show the young biblical patriarch standing over the severed head of Goliath holding the sword used for decapitation. In other words, they picture a victorious David *after* battle.

## Surpassing His Tradition

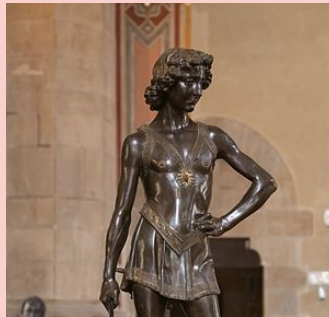
Having studied these sculptures, which were in the Medici collection at the time, Michelangelo came up with a different – rather genius – idea when received a commission to carve a David out of a huge, **abandoned chunk of marble** for the community of Florence.

His idea was to show David *before* battle, not with Goliath's sword but **with the actual lethal weapon** he used to slay the giant: the slingshot.

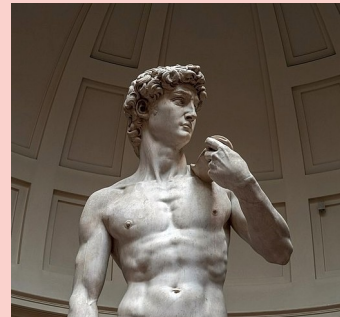
The intrepid youth looks with steely eyes at his nemesis and contemplates his battle strategy. I'm sure you'll be able to notice **the superiority of Michelangelo's genius** in these comparison pictures:



Donatello



Verrocchio



Michelangelo

You may also notice that Michelangelo took certain aspects of the past masters – particularly, the similar posture – and enhanced their previous, rather bland, styles with his own genius. This checklist offers a **few points of comparison**:



Donatello and Verrocchio	Michelangelo
Height: 5 ft. and 4 ft. respectively	Height: <b>17 feet!</b>
Presentation: an adolescent or boy	Presentation: a virile young man
Medium: Bronze	Medium: Marble
Vertical Posture: Leaning back on R leg in resting position	Vertical Posture: Leaning back on R leg in ready position
Arms: R arm extending down holding weapon; L arm resting on hip	Arms: R arm extending down holding projectile; L arm bent, readying sling over shoulder
Head: Looking down (at vanquished enemy)	Head: Looking out (to battle)
Emotion: Finished with battle	Emotion: preparing for battle

As Gilson noted above, genius is not a detachment from a tradition; even less is it a rejection of past precedents. Rather, it's **a mature artistic mind** that absorbs, assimilates, and re-presents the imagery in stunning new formulations. Michelangelo has clearly done this with his *David*.

There is literally no comparison between his style and his forebears in craftsmanship, fineness of musculature, intimate detail, or even emotion elicited by the gigantic marble masterpiece. *They were masters in their own right. Michelangelo was a genius.*

## A Sacred Window

Is human genius **a sort of sacred window** into God's creative blessing on the world? I have no doubt the answer is affirmative.

As noted, the possession of pure genius doesn't assure that a genius is easy to live with (Beethoven's atrocious personal care and egotism is one obvious example). Long human experience attests that **most geniuses are proud of their talent and tend to lord it over others** and sometimes the results are not as pleasant as their works. Apparently, neither Michelangelo nor Leonardo ever gave a single shred of credit to their mentors.

Church history also witnesses a number of authentic geniuses in their respective fields who have become canonized saints (St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine in theology, for example), but let's face it: **holy geniuses are exceedingly rare!**

In the final analysis, our lives are richer because of the many geniuses who have gone before us and offered their unique gifts for the sake of others, but we can be thankful that we don't have to live with them.

So, whenever we find ourselves reacting to some astonishing work of genius in amazement or wonder, we are **usually looking through a window** that shines a faint light of truth, beauty, or goodness on our lives from beyond.



As prodigious as the work of genius may be, it's still only human. It's just a spark of the grand bonfire of divine creativity...from the One who created genius itself.

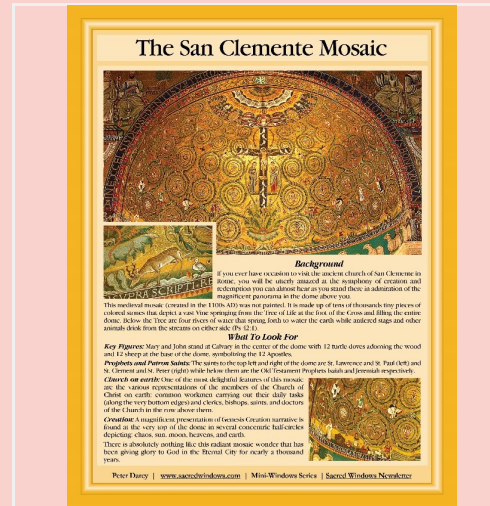
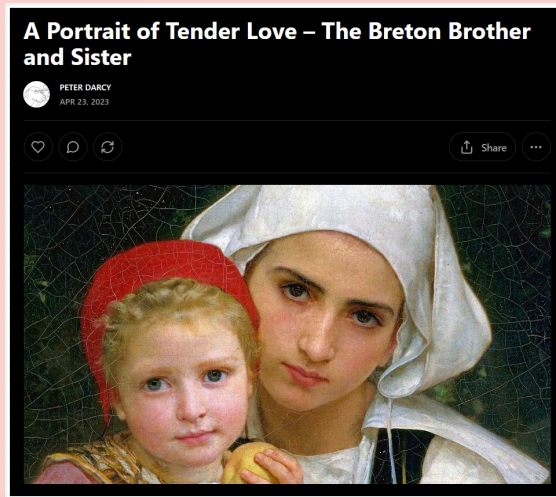
## Features

One of our recent Sacred Windows **Vignettes** features a marvelous modern painter who was renowned for his scenes of the Madonna (which I will feature in another article.) **William-Adolphe Bouguereau** (1825-1905) made a name for himself as a portrait painter to high society, but he had a deep love for religious themes. You will often find his lovely images of the Madonna and Child gracing the covers of Christmas cards.

This **portrait of two Breton children** is another favorite theme of his: the older sister with a younger sibling. It is wonderful in its simplicity and unaffected beauty. Have a quick look at this work on the

Sacred Windows *Vignettes* page and look for more of his religious themes in the future.

Please also take a moment to view our newest Mini-Window, from the “Radiance” category: **The San Clemente Mosaic.**



May God bless you and your families!

Peter Darcy

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**Photo Credits:** David ([Verrocchio](#)), ([Donatello](#)), (Michelangelo); *Pietà*; the following via Wikimedia Commons: Dome Interior [Erik Drost](#), CC BY 2.0; Dome Exterior, [Dennis Jarvis](#); Sistine Chapel Ceiling, [Aaron Logan](#); Ceiling (Brass Serpent Detail); Ceiling ([Oracle of Delphi](#) Detail); Ceiling (Frank Vincentz Creation of Sun and Moon Detail); Biago da Cesena; Portrait of Michelangelo, attributed to Daniele da Volterra, Public domain, c. 1545. Self-portrait of Ghirlandaio.

All Mini-Windows are created by Peter Darcy and designed by Joe Rouco of [JMR Graphic Arts](#).

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