

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (born in Caprese, Republic of Florence, 6 March 1475; died in Rome, Papal States, 18 February 1564); [Spirituali Pietà]; indistinctly dated 154 [?]; oil on linen canvas, relined; 134.7 x 107.2 cm \*; featuring the artist's painted monogram twice, once at the lower centre left and once at the centre.

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\* The dimensions of the painting, following the removal of a strip in order to restore it to its original size, are outlined herein. This strip had been affixed to the painting sometime as of 1920, when titanium white came into use. Titanium white is present in the strip, mixed with other colours. The strip was removed in 2024 during restoration undertaken by Arcanes Sarl - Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France (C2RMF). Prior to this restoration, the dimensions of the painting were recorded as 137 x 108 cm, as indicated in the Laboratory Analysis Report emitted by the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique in Brussels on 10 September 2024.

## A Note to the Reader

*The mind should be prepared to be receptive. Readers should not seek confirmation of pre-existing knowledge or beliefs; rather, they should allow for a gradual unfolding of comprehension. It is important to remember that the only paintings by Michelangelo that academic scholarship definitively accepts were executed during his early years. The latest of these works, depicting the Holy Family With the Infant Saint John the Baptist (alternatively referred to as the Doni Tondo or Doni Madonna), is dated to 1503–1504 or possibly 1507.*

*To conceptualise the present painting in relation to the Uffizi room where the Doni Tondo is currently displayed, one must traverse the entire sequence of galleries on the museum's piano nobile, descend one floor, pass through the collection of self-portraits, and then continue through the rooms dedicated to various Mannerist inclinations—where works derived from Michelangelo's drawings are found, most notably those by Marcello Venusti—before reaching the space reserved for Titian and Tintoretto. It is here that the Pietà under discussion finds the context to which it most authentically belongs; here, too, lies the intellectual framework within which this study should be interpreted.*

*It is of equal significance to bear in mind that Vasari's frequently cited assertion that Michelangelo produced only four panel paintings throughout his entire career cannot be accepted as an unassailable truth. Vasari was sufficiently often incorrect for Michelangelo to have encouraged his assistant, Ascanio Condivi, to compose a counter-biography... and Condivi was himself not at liberty to disclose all information.*

Michel Draguet  
Brussels, the 26th of August 2025\*

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\* Translated from the French by Polisemia.

## SUMMARY

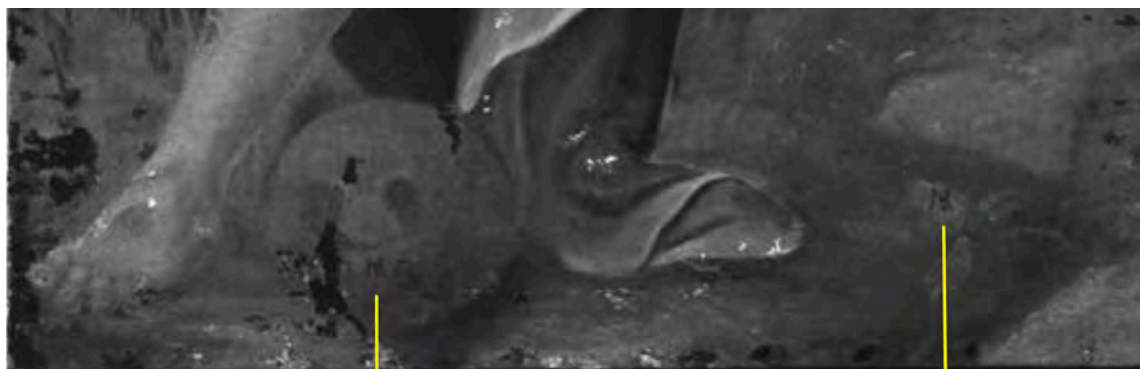
### Part I: Material and visual analysis of the work

The reports regarding the analyses carried out by the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique in Brussels (hereinafter referred to as the IRPA) (including X-ray, infrared and ultraviolet imaging, IRR examination and MA-XRF scanning, as well as carbon-14 dating of the canvas: see IRPA Report, Appendices 2 and 3), reveal that the painting is in a good state of conservation commensurate with its age. The study of the pigments and carbon-14 dating of the canvas indicate that the materials used in the work can be dated to the sixteenth century (pp. 15-174) and that the canvas itself can be dated to between 1520 and 1580.

In addition to the aforementioned techniques, UV photography provided vital information about surface materials, revealing retouching and varnish applications through their characteristic fluorescence. Infrared photography and reflectography were essential, allowing for an analysis of the artist's initial design choices and modifications made during the painting process. The X-radiographs offered a detailed view of the underlying structural elements, exposing any hidden components or repairs not visible to the naked eye.

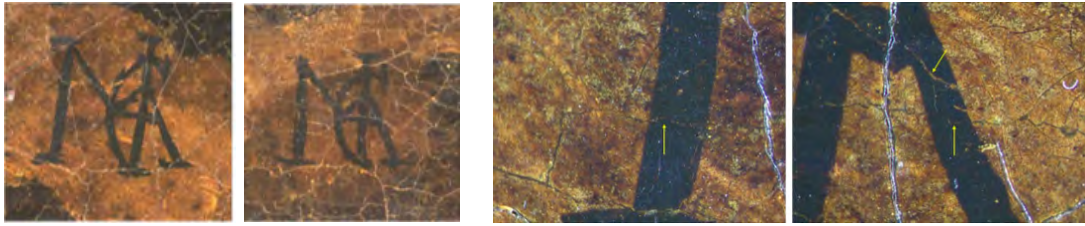
Macro x-ray fluorescence (MA-XRF) scanning produced comprehensive elemental maps, illustrating the distribution of pigments and revealing variations that suggest a sophisticated understanding of material use by the artist. Cross-section studies allowed for an in-depth examination of the paint layers, elucidating the stratigraphy of materials applied throughout the work's history. This was complemented by cross-section preparation techniques that facilitated the analysis of individual layers under high-powered optical and scanning electron microscopy (SEM-EDX), providing precise elemental identification and microstructural details.

High-resolution technical photography documented the monograms, capturing intricate details that contribute to the artwork's history. The MA-XRF results, including element maps and composite images, offered a visual synthesis of the elemental composition, which, combined with studies of the cross-sections and monograms, enhanced our understanding of the artist's palette and technique. These non-invasive techniques collectively affirm the painting's authenticity and historical context.



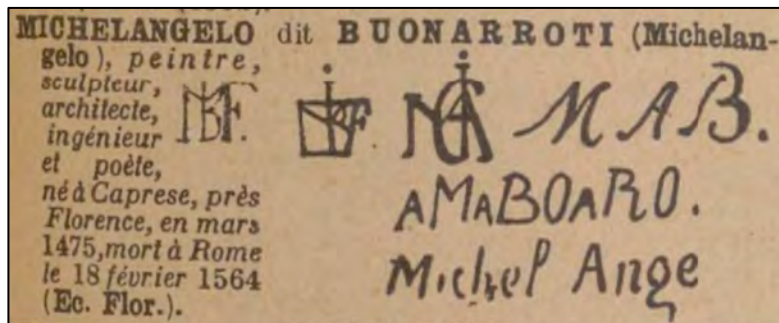
Monogram 1

Monogram 2



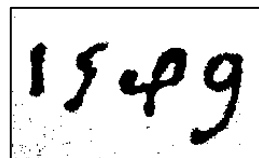
On the left, a detail of the monograms under normal light (the one below centre; on the right, the one on Adam's skull). On the right, a detail of the central monogram shows craquelure in the paint (indicated by yellow arrows) crossing the monogram.

The analyses also reveal two crucial elements. First, the two monograms were applied to the original painted surface while it was dry, as was customary (pp. 8-11). This was done before the craquelure appeared. No modern pigments were identified in the painting, including in the monograms. Craquelure in the paint runs across the monograms, and their handling is reminiscent of the Tuscan script known as “mercantesca” (pp. 12-14).



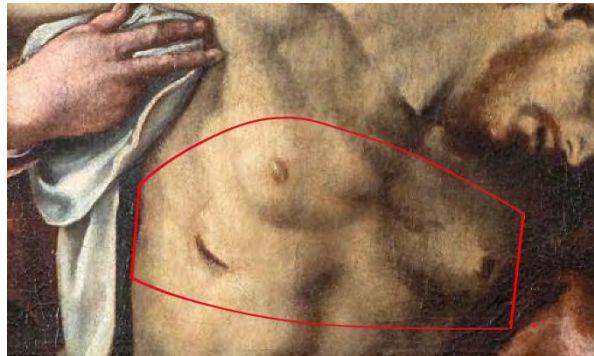
Emmanuel Bénézit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs & graveurs, Paris, Gründ, 1924, III, p.269.*

In addition to these monograms, to the lower right of the second monogram, on a leaf, there is a cryptic series of marks which can be likened to the numbers that appear in the artist's correspondence: 1–5–4 and a fourth number that is lost in the paint surface. If we accept the obvious match with the style of the numbers in the artist's correspondence, we have a double monographic signature and a date placing the work in the 1540s, but with no further indication of the exact year.



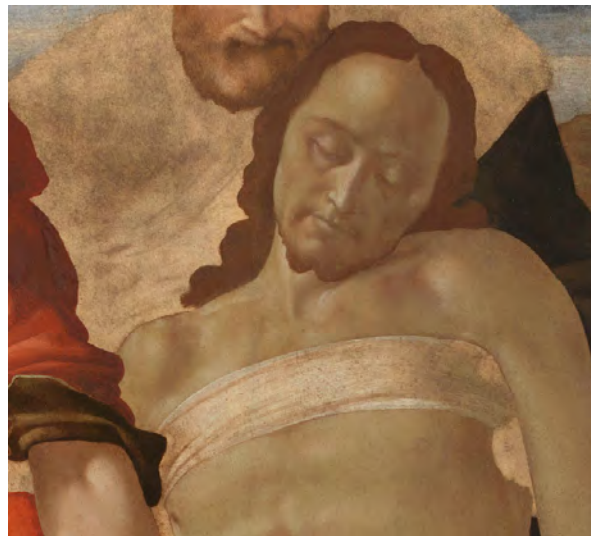
On the right, a detail of the numbers below the second monogram forming the sequence 154 [?]. Above, the date 1549 is taken from a letter by Michelangelo to his nephew Leonardo, dated 1549, Florence, Casa Buonarroti.

Also of interest, the underlying layers of colour (pp. 17–19), applied to enhance the chiaroscuro effect, reveal a change in the composition. This change, in itself, excludes the possibility that the work is a copy after another painting regarded as the original.



On the left, the *Spirituali Pietà*, an infrared photograph; above, the area revealing a colour change in the ground layer.

While the light ground preparation makes sense for certain parts of the body, such as the Virgin's face, it also creates a zone around the chest of Christ, whose body would have required distinct handling to articulate its mortuary character. Why consider a lighter area on the chest? The change in composition is intriguing. It is likely that Michelangelo initially intended to place carrying bands here, similar to those visible in *The Entombment* at the National Gallery in London, *The Dying Slave* at the Louvre, one of the Chosen in *The Last Judgement* at the Sistine Chapel, and later in *The Deposition*, or *Bandini Pietà*, of 1547 (pp. 20-21).



Michelangelo, Details of the torso of Christ in the *Pietà Bandini* (1547–1555) and in *The Entombment* (1500–1501).

According to Steven Saverwyns, Director of the Pigment Analysis Laboratory, who was responsible for coordinating the painting's analyses at IRPA, "The results of the material and technical research are consistent with those of a sixteenth-century painting": handling of the

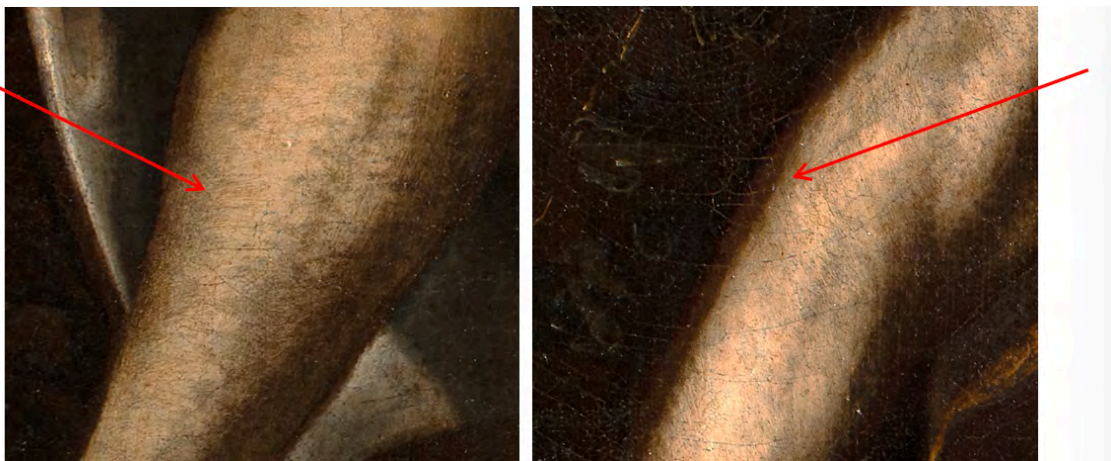
under-layers to enhance the chiaroscuro, the complementarity of shadows and light conceived as colours, etc.

The report also confirms the authenticity of the monograms, which is crucial. Inscribed in the material, they are not later additions, but are an integral part of the painting. Because of them, we can speak of an autographed work by Michelangelo.



The reserves left by the artist around the shapes enhance the effect of relief sculpture. Detail of ignudo, Vatican, Sistine Chapel, and detail of the *Spirituali Pietá*..

Other major clues can be found in the material aspects of the painting, which confirm it as a signed original by Michelangelo. In particular, the technique used is characteristic of the master's signature style, regardless of the medium employed: multidirectional strokes—emphatic parallel and cross-hatchings—as well as stippling, to enhance the texture of the paint, which is applied almost dry.



On the left, detail of the emphatic multidirectional brushstrokes used to render Christ's flesh; on the right, the contour effect created by reserving the subjacent layers. Copyright Arcanes

This technique gives a material presence to the *chiaroscuro* that is supported by the effect of the colours in the underlying layers. These point to a “sculptural” conception of painting

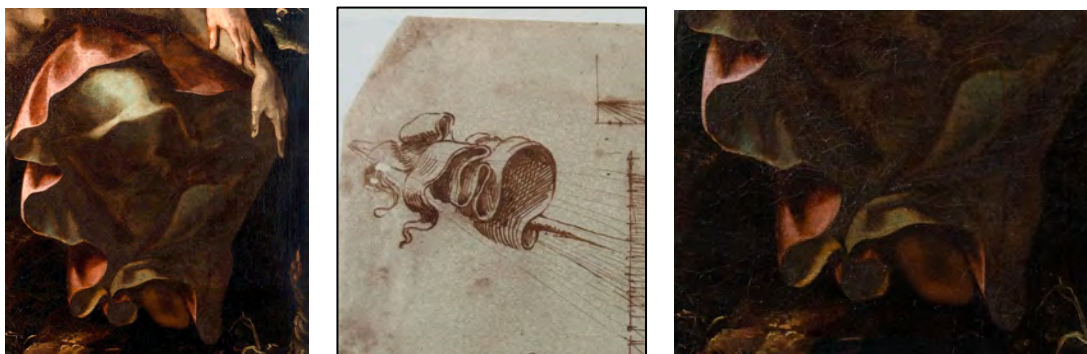
(pp. 33–37). The identification of this technique had already provided the principal basis for the — virtually unanimous — attribution by Met’s team of *The Torment of Saint Anthony*, an early work executed after Martin Schongauer’s engraving. Similarly, the way in which the entire surface is filled by the two figures treated in a monumental manner to enhance their power are veritable signatures of this artist (p. 38).

An initial stylistic analysis reveals numerous aspects typical of Michelangelo’s art. This is true in terms of both in the execution of the whole and of details such as a toe (p. 32) or a navel (p. 53), which reflect an almost “automatic”—even unconscious—practice that defines Michelangelo’s style in the most individual sense.



Above left: detail of Christ's left foot in the *Spirituali Pietà* and Cupid's left foot in Michelangelo's cartoon *Venus and Cupid*, Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe.  
 Above right: the Virgin's right hand in the *Spirituali Pietà*.  
 Below: the Virgin's right hand (inverted for comparison) in *Venus and Cupid*, Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe.

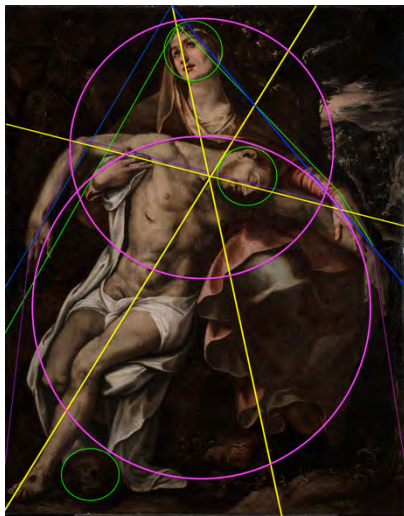
The conception of the subjacent layers (pp. 17-19); the presence of smalt, a pigment Michelangelo discovered with his master Ghirlandaio, which was also used by several of his disciples and friends, such as Sebastiano del Piombo and Bronzino (pp. 22-29); the presence of the cochineal variant of red lake pigment, which contributes to a comparison with Titian; the contouring of shapes by the use of reserves that emphasise their aspect of sculptural relief (p. 31); the symbolism of the circle and the sphere, which links the *Spirituali Pietà* to the figures



On the left, the Virgin's vestments in the *Spirituali Pietà*; in the centre, drawing 125a, numbered 629 in the *Corpus dei Disegni di Michelangelo (Disegni architettonici)*; on the right, the folds on the inside of the lower part of the Virgin's vestments in the *Spirituali Pietà*.



Above, a comparison of the navels of the central figure in Michelangelo's *The Dream* (1533) on the left, Christ's in the *Spirituali Pietà* in the centre, and Christ's in Michelangelo's *Pietà Bandini* (1547–1555) on the right.



of the sibyls and prophets at the Sistine Chapel (pp. 37-39, 41-42); the clues found in certain drawings, such as the so-called waterfall drapery folds inspired by antique sculpture (pp. 62-63); and the parallels that can be drawn with other works, from the drawing of Cupid's foot in the Naples cartoon to Christ's navel in the *Bandini Pietà*, through the movement of the arms related to the *Colonna Pietà* and *A Children's Bacchanal*—all of these fit perfectly with Michelangelo's art and thought.

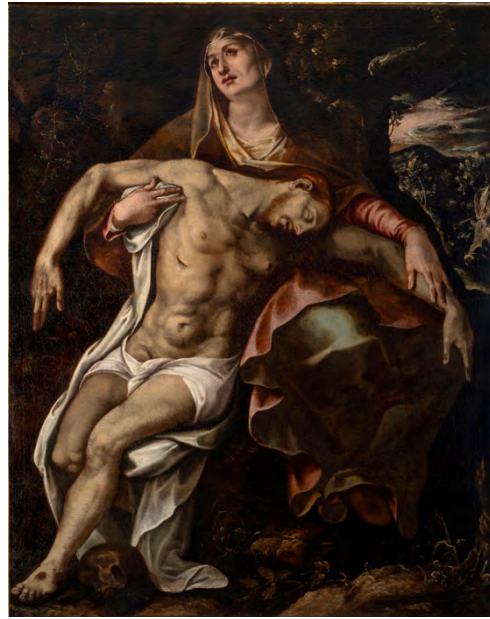
Composition diagram of the *Spirituali Pietà*



On the left, Michelangelo, detail from the *Colonna Pietà*, c. 1538–1544, black chalk on Fabriano paper (identified by its watermark, produced in 1532 with other uses dated 1538 in Vienna), 289 x 189 mm, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

On the right, Michelangelo, detail from *A Children's Bacchanal*, c. 1533, red chalk on two sheets of paper, 274 x 388 mm, London, The Royal Collection.

In this context, Christ's pose and the way his figure seems contained within that of the Virgin—directly inspired by the Sistine ceiling—exemplify a practice in Michelangelo's work that is far from isolated. Note the singular transfer of the ephebe and the orb from *The Dream* within a cryptic formula that makes the Christ of the *Spirituali Pietà* the counterpart of the resurrected Christ on the reverse side of *Tityus* (pp. 46-50). This transfer is accompanied

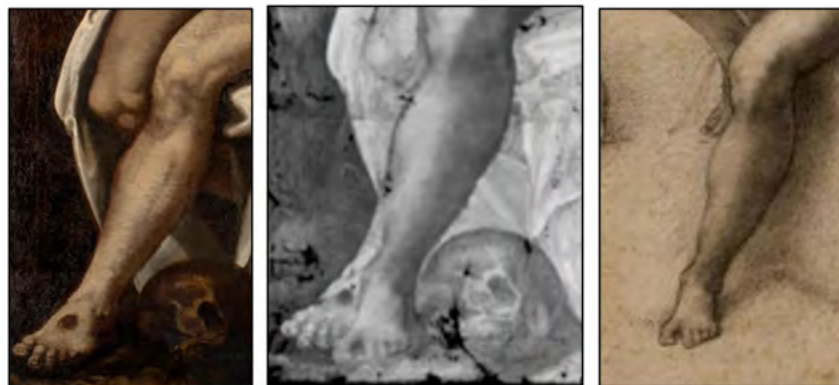


On the left, Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Dream*, c.1533, black chalk on laid paper, 398 x 281 mm, London, Courtauld Institute Collection and the *Spirituali Pietà*.

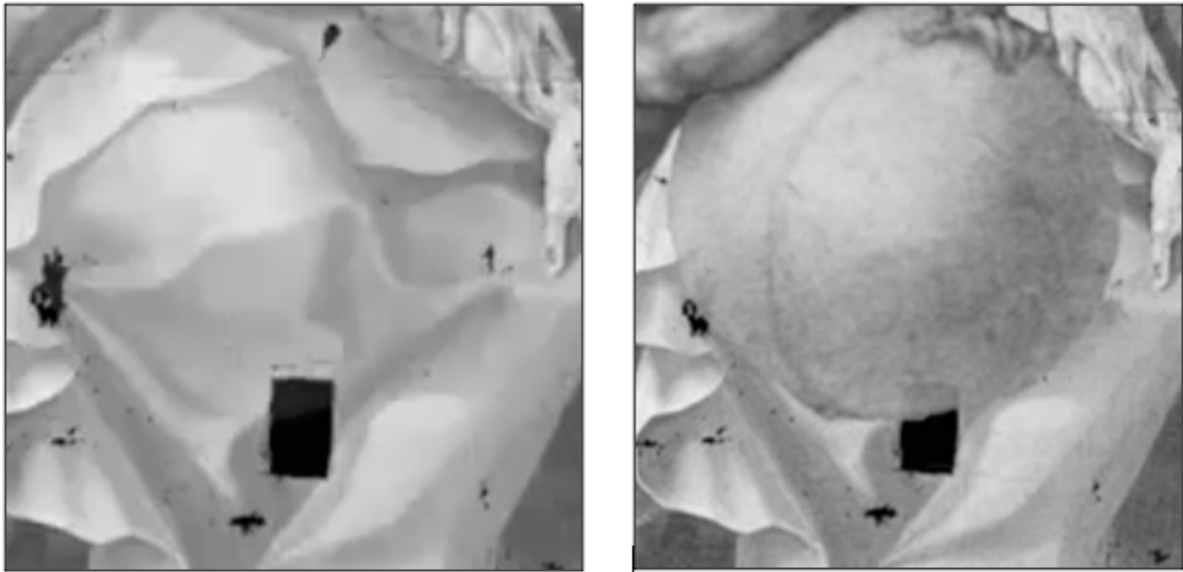
by a subtle “collage”, as we can see if we look at Christ’s arms, taken directly from the figure of Silenus in *A Children’s Bacchanal* (pp. 53–54).



Superimposition by morphism of the central figure and the sphere in Michelangelo’s *The Dream* on Christ and the orb in his *Spirituali Pietà*.



Comparison of the left leg of Christ in the *Spirituali Pietà* and the central figure’s left leg in Michelangelo’s *The Dream*. In the centre, a montage for illustrative purposes.



Detail of the *Spirituali Pietà* in a radiograph and superimposition of the orb from Michelangelo's *The Dream* onto the radiograph of the *Spirituali Pietà* for illustrative purposes.



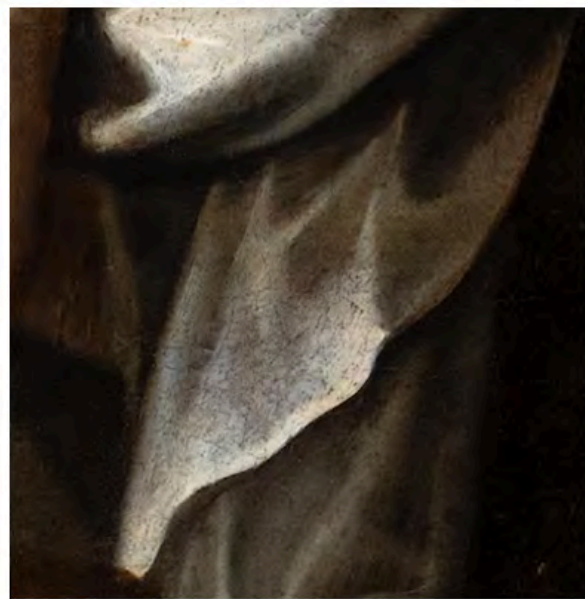
Comparison between the left leg of Christ in the *Spirituali Pietà* and the twist at the knee in Michelangelo's study of a leg for The Tomb of Julius II: front: red chalk, ink and pen; back: black chalk, ink and pen, 286 x 194 mm, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, inv. 1846.43.

## Part II: Iconographic and stylistic analysis

This *Pietà* painted in the 1540s is not an isolated case in the artist's oeuvre. It belongs in a series of explorations begun in his early years with the *Pietà* at the Vatican and *The Entombment*. Inscribed in the *Vesperbild* tradition, it inaugurates a motif that Michelangelo would continue to explore until his last sculpture, left unfinished at his death in 1564. Analysis of the corpus of drawings created from 1520 onwards reveals the ongoing development of a theme relating to the concerns that would inform the painted *Pietà*: the inertia of the dead body, the effort required of those supporting it, and the difficulty of keeping it upright are all challenges for the hand seeking to render, in a single movement, the dynamics of the bodies and their inner life, and that of the spirit attempting to organise matter. These investigations, carried out mainly on paper, all express a questioning of faith centred on the person of Christ.

From *The Crucifixion* to *The Resurrection*, Michelangelo shifts the focus of the Scriptures in order to link the episodes of the Passion in a synthetic form marked by *terribilità* (p. 80). Exploiting the possibilities of free will, a tenet to which he had always been passionately attached, Michelangelo sought forms whose originality of *inventio* broke with tradition.

Throughout this work, which also reflects the artist's ongoing conversation with Vittoria Colonna since 1538, we can observe an increasingly marked taste for the primitive, considered as close to the original faith and therefore pure. Elements drawn from the art of the Duecento and Trecento now permeate the work, while the artist distances himself somewhat from the expressive principles derived from the formal pathos of antiquity, as theorised by Warburg at the beginning of the twentieth century. In harking back to Proto-Renaissance art, Michelangelo was also asserting a strong Italian identity—a response, no doubt, to the historical and political conditions experienced in the aftermath of the Sack of Rome in 1527.



Detail of the so-called waterfall drapery folds in Michelangelo's *Study of Jupiter* (c. 1487–1490) and comparison with a similar detail in the *Spirituali Pietà*, where one can distinguish the evocation of a skull emphasising Christ's sacrifice.

Thus, the aesthetic investigations rooted in the theological reflection articulated within the *Ecclesia Viterbiensis* provided a corrective to the *terribilità* displayed in *The Last Judgement* at the Sistine Chapel. This is particularly true as regards the primacy of aesthetic concerns, which many detractors of this work saw as a sign of impiety. This turning to earlier art constituted a movement of introspection that shifted the centre of gravity of the work and inaugurated the artist's late period. It also constituted a response to the naturalism that dominated easel painting at the time, and of which Titian stands as the most advanced expression. Michelangelo countered this with the expressive intensity of deliberately crude forms, at once unrealistic in their anatomy and powerfully pared down. He did this by taking up the questions of Nicodemus, whose protective form dominates the *Bandini Pietà* (p. 88). This archaism is rooted in a cultural tradition that passes through Savonarola, whose sermons made a deep impression on the artist in his youth.

Iconographic and stylistic analysis reveals a refocusing of dogma on the figure of Christ. We have already highlighted the combinatorial approach involved here. The theological orientation determines the development of a "formal pathos" that is part of the classical heritage, itself now increasingly contested (p. 90).

The sculptural archaism is set against a meditation on the modernity of easel painting, viewed in contrast to the fresco tradition that, for Michelangelo, remained the privileged medium of the Christian message.

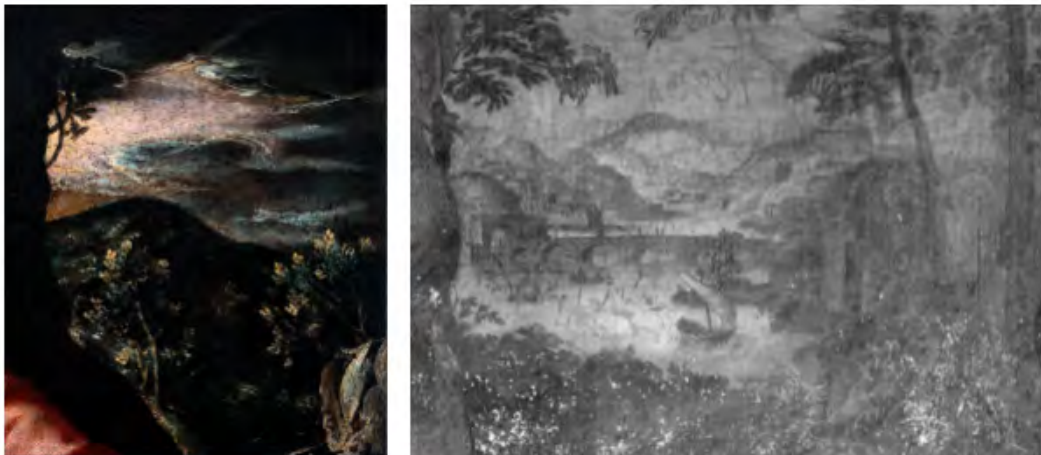
The evolution of the theme of the *Man of Sorrows* reflects Michelangelo's strategy of transforming traditional representations into new formulations that respond to the evolution of faith. The *Spirituali Pietà* partakes of this dynamic. It constitutes a culmination that aims to strike a balance between the narrative conveying the biblical teaching—Christ sacrificing himself to save humanity—and the iconic presence of the two figures that interlock in a symbolic chiasma. The figures here are emblems: that of Christ reflects the conditions of salvation and the price to be paid, while that of the Virgin Mary reflects the deeply rooted faith on which the Church is founded. Compared to the *Colonna Pietà*, we may observe the transition from devotional work to altarpiece, reflecting a marked rhetorical intensification.



Comparison of the drapery of the perizonium and the shroud of Christ in Rogier van der Weyden's *Entombment of Christ* (1450), oak panel, 110 x 96 cm, Florence, Galleria Nazionale degli Uffizi, and the *Spirituali Pietà*.

The representation of the dead Christ constitutes the theological heart of the composition. His body appears without blemish, free from the bloody signs of his suffering. Likewise, the *Arma Christi* (instruments of the Passion) have also been removed, as was already the case in the paintings in the two lunettes of *The Last Judgement*. The viewer witnesses that moment suspended between death and resurrection during which the mystery of faith is about to be accomplished. While the *Colonna Pietà* embodied within a single image the time of lamentation and supplication, the *Spirituali Pietà*, which does not abandon this ambition, but limits it to the two tears suspended in the Virgin's heavenward gaze, directs us instead towards the expectation of fulfilment of the divine promise. Although held at a distance, the viewer takes their place in the composition that stands before them with the power of an icon. Outside the pictorial field, he nonetheless stands within the grotto whose contour underscores its function as an enveloping frame for the scene. He thus joins those who witnessed Christ's death: without his firm and deeply rooted faith, the resurrection might not take place and salvation itself might vanish from the very horizon.

True to his habitual practice, Michelangelo took liberties with the established iconography and with the scriptural sources that informed it: the appearance of Adam's skull in the tomb, the relocation of the action to the countryside of Tivoli, and the absence of a cross on the hill that serves as Golgotha—the aim is not to offer textual correspondence but rather to activate an emotion imbued with personal symbolism.



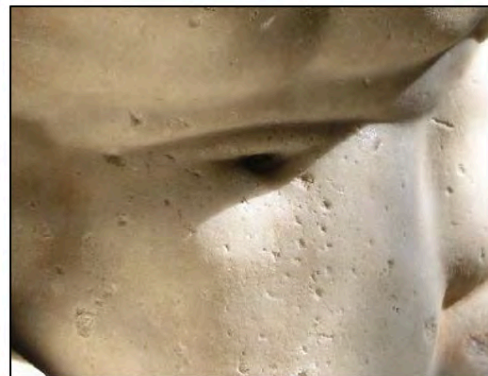
On the right, detail of the landscape in the *Spirituali Pietà*; on the left, *View of the Ponte Lucano*, Salone of the Villa d'Este, c. 1570–1580, fresco.

The spatial arrangement adopted here, with depth reduced to the dark wall of a grotto housing the protagonists and the opening on the right towards the infinity of the initial action, echoes the *Pietà* executed around 1512 by Correggio, who was himself inspired by Michelangelo's *Pietà* in the Vatican, which he probably admired during a stay in Rome (pp. 100–101). The pictorial dialogue thus established questions the representation of nature, which differs from Correggio to Michelangelo. For the latter, the landscape vista does not serve to inscribe an eternal action in the moment of sensory perception; on the contrary, the landscape takes on a fundamentally inward value, as if it were meant to convey a state of mind linked simultaneously to the tragedy of sacrifice and the hope of a luminous salvation. Thus, the landscape emphasises the nature of the relationship between Christ and the Virgin in which death is perceived as a “passage”.



On the left, Antonio Allegri, known as Correggio (1489–1534), *Pietà*, c. 1512, oil on wood panel, 34.2 x 29.2 cm, Correggio, Museo Civico; on the right, the *Spirituali Pietà*.

The *Spirituali Pietà* is thus based primarily on a new approach to the representation of Christ, one that both continues and breaks with earlier representations. In Part I we saw how the compositional process combines *The Dream* with *A Children's Bacchanal*. Other significant details are worth highlighting. For example, the navel—an emblem of filiation inscribed here in the metaphysics of circles that shapes the composition—is not only symbolic, but also a striking element of identification. Its form is found in the *Bandini Pietà* and refers directly to that of the *Belvedere Torso* in the Vatican. This sculpture fascinated Michelangelo from the moment he first saw it (p. 108).



Comparison of the navels of Christ in the *Spirituali Pietà* and the *Belvedere Torso* in the Vatican.

Similarly, the reference to *Laocoön*, though inverted, is evident in the dynamics of Christ's body: the head, navel and knee appear as points of articulation in the folding of the body, in anticipation of its resurrection. In relation to *Laocoön*, the *Spirituali Pietà* appears to express an "identity of opposites" which also characterises the work's relation to the "radiant body" of Christ in *The Last Judgement* (p. 121). In this dialectic linking of the two Christs, who are more or less contemporaries, a new relation to antiquity is also affirmed. Michelangelo plays

on “formal pathos” in order to convey a perception focused on Christ’s state, between death and resurrection.



Comparison of the resurrected Christ of *The Last Judgement* and the dead Christ of the *Spirituali Pietà*.

The *Spirituali Pietà* develops a vision of Christ that transcends the simple combination of motifs, such as those found in *The Dream* or *A Children's Bacchanal*. The “collage” is not just an effect. It responds to a need for meaning that informs the images. Thus, *The Fall of Phaeton* and a study for *Night* (p. 127) led to the figure of the drunken Silenus in *A Children's Bacchanal*, executed around 1533. The transfers of visual elements reflect the circulation of meanings which, beyond the Bacchic theme, reveal the vital drunkenness that takes hold of the body and reflects the “vulnerable power” of the dead Christ (p. 130).



On the left, Michelangelo, lower detail of *The Fall of Phaeton*, c. 1533, black chalk on paper, 413 x 234mm, Windsor, The Royal Collection; on the right, Michelangelo, *Study for a Medici Tomb*, detail of the lower part, 1524, pen, ink and sanguine on paper, 320 x 200 mm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

This transition from Silenus to Christ is not the result of extrapolation. It was made early on. And not by the hand of Michelangelo, if we are to judge from Giovanni Battista Franco's (known as *Il Semolei*) *Lamentation*, which offers an early formulation of the *Pietà* to which Michelangelo would later return with the *Spirituali Pietà*.

This practice of self-quotation is not merely formal. It reveals a cryptic construction of meaning developed through stratification and the transfer of motifs. With his work, Michelangelo delivers a long-standing reflection on the weight of Christ's dead



body and the conditions of its display. These two aspects lead to a redefinition of the place and function of the Virgin Mary in a representation suffused with the expectation of resurrection.

On the left, Michelangelo, *Study for Lazarus Rising From the Dead*, 1516, stylus and red chalk on paper, 250 x 183 mm, London, British Museum; on the right, the *Spirituali Pietà*. The resurrection is expressed by the raising of the torso, based on the model in *The Dream*, and the right leg of the resurrected figure.

To understand the *Spirituali Pietà*, we must refer to another work executed in 1525–1526 by Rosso Fiorentino. Michelangesque in its plasticity, his *Dead Christ* transformed the tradition of the Man of Sorrows in order to express the sensual thrill of the approach of resurrection (pp. 139–140). The anticipation of awakening infuses the composition in the play on internal references within the work. Thus, Tityos and the Silenus of *A Children's*



Rosso Fiorentino, *Dead Christ*, 1525–1526, oil on canvas, 133.4 x 104.1 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

*Bacchanal* are joined by a third reference in the drawing Michelangelo made for Sebastiano del Piombo's *The Raising of Lazarus*. The principle of resurrection passes from Christ to Lazarus simply by the disposal of the legs. The difference in Christ's right leg therefore probably expresses the expectation of this coming resurrection. It is this interplay of references that gives the Christ of the *Spirituali Pietà* its symbolic density.

The renewed representation of Christ necessarily entailed a revision of the Virgin's position in the closed setting of the *Spirituali Pietà*. This transition is achieved through the motif of the sphere, which, from *The Dream* to the *Spirituali Pietà*, changes from the globe to the mysterious sphere sheltered by the Virgin's vestments. In this composition, Michelangelo reinterprets the motif of *The Virgin of Mercy*, transforming the model first staged by his

master Ghirlandaio in the Vespucci Chapel in 1472 into a meditation on protection and compassion that transcends its devotional prototype (p. 152). Michelangelo was fully in tune with his times, which were witnessing fundamental changes in the spaces of both Catholicism and Protestantism.



On the left, Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Virgin of Mercy*, 1472, fresco, Florence, Church of San Salvatore in Ognissanti, Vespucci Chapel. On the right, the Virgin's vestments in the *Spirituali Pietà*.

This is the context for the Virgin's tears of hope; they have the power of a philtre of life that prevents the flesh from decaying. The Virgin of the *Spirituali Pietà* condenses this mystical experience through her gift of tears (p. 161), which is echoed by the removal of the *Arma Christi*. The Virgin presented here is not the figure who agonised at the Passion, wracked between despair and hope. That ordeal is behind her. With her son offered as a sacrifice to save humanity, she waits for heaven to keep its promise at that ultimate moment when she alone embodies faith in God. She thus appears as the personification of the Church that will be born once the resurrection has taken place.

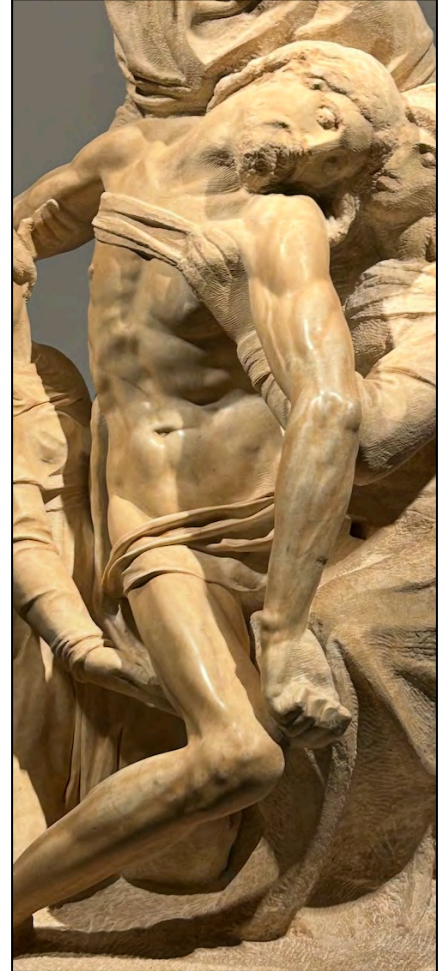


Michelangelo, *The Conversion of Saul*, 1542–1545, fresco, 625 x 661, Vatican, Pauline Chapel.

Michelangelo's representation results in a kind of mystical fusion of Christ and the Virgin in a single Assumption. This brings together numerous earlier experiments that would continue in the *Bandini Pietà* and culminate in the *Rondanini Pietà*. In his quest for an absolute formula, the artist broke away from the decorum that had governed the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel. As in the frescoes of the Pauline Chapel, *terribilità* is internalised to make introspection the direct path to God.

Michelangelo produced drawing after drawing to express both the intensity of the biblical narrative animating the figures and the density they acquire as they assert their iconic presence. The electrifying group scenes are counterbalanced in the drawings, where the action is less tempestuous, by the silent dialogue between the son and his mother. Exploring the different facets of the Passion, Michelangelo experimented with different artistic

solutions, his quest continuing as he sought for a culmination. The first stage was the drawings for Vittoria Colonna, followed by the frescoes in the Pauline Chapel—executed at the same time as the completion of The Tomb of Julius II—and then the *Spirituali Pietà*, which paved the way for the *Bandini Pietà*.



Michelangelo, *Spirituali Pietà* and *Bandini Pietà*.

### Part III: Contextual analysis

Michelangelo's graphic investigations leading up to the fresco on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel reveal a kind of permanent anxiety that troubled the artist and fuelled the *terribilità* that transfigures *The Last Judgement*, which was revealed to the public in the autumn of 1541.



Michelangelo, *Pietà*, c. 1530–1534, red and black chalk, and metal point on paper enhanced with green wash, 411 x 234 mm, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina.

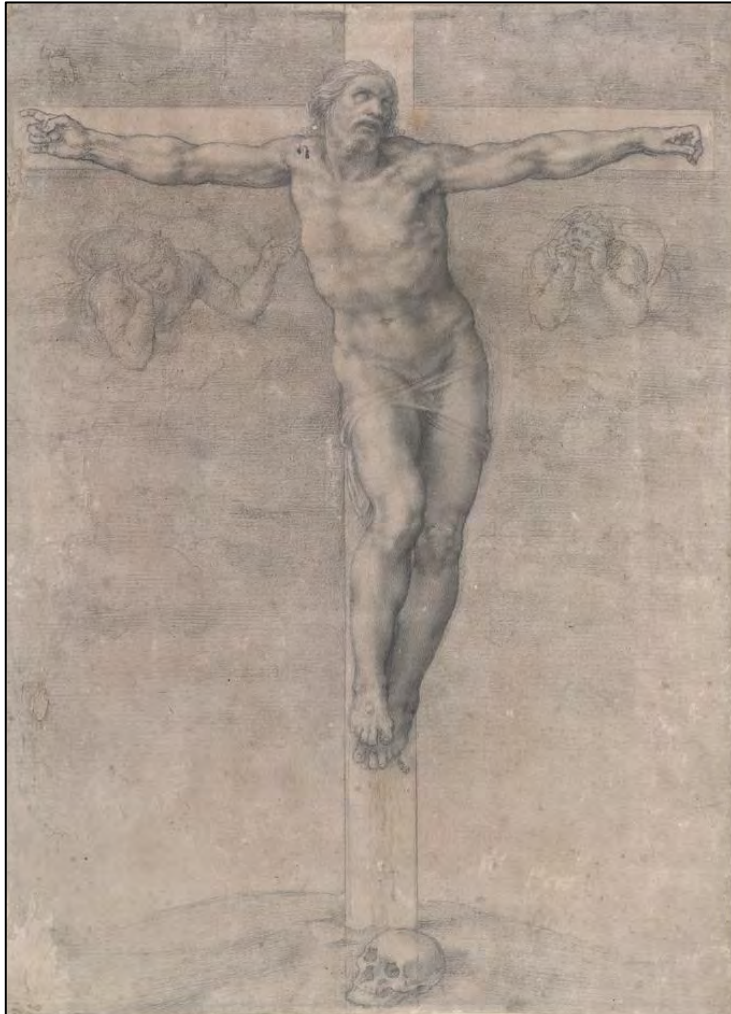


Michelangelo, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, c. 1530, red and black chalk on paper, 320 x 249 mm, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina.

The artist perceived art as a field of exploration that delved into theological questions while appeasing them through the affirmation of a salutary Beauty. He was shaken by the accusations of impiety levelled at him by reactionary circles, who echoed the harsh criticism of Pietro Aretino, even though his fiercely independent temperament made him refuse any concessions. The frescoes in the Pauline Chapel bear witness to this; they feature the same nudes that were deemed immoral.

Yet Michelangelo's association with Vittoria Colonna and the *Spirituali* brought about a fundamental transformation within him that called into question the balance governing the relationship between art and faith. Philosophical and theological intransigence gave way to an internalised vision of creation, in which free will tended to merge with the intimate dialogue that links human consciousness to God, away from any institutional intermediaries. This conception, unique to Michelangelo—if already partially expressed in the passionate speeches of Savonarola that the artist heard in his youth—found in Vittoria Colonna not only a privileged echo but also a source of confirmation for theological thinking that would henceforth be closely linked to the evolution of the Italian evangelical circles which developed from Naples to Viterbo via Modena and Verona in the wake of the rupture initiated by Luther in 1515.

Through his association with Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara, around 1536–1538, the ideas of the *Spirituali* came increasingly to permeate Michelangelo's thought and art. A young widow from the upper echelons of Italy's aristocracy, known for her unshakeable integrity and with family ties to the imperial party, she enjoyed great prestige as a poetess in the tradition of Petrarch. This shared culture shaped and nurtured their intensifying



Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Christ on the Cross*, c. 1543, charcoal, 368 x 268 mm, London, British Museum.

exchanges. Evangelical principles reinforced the artist's aspirations, and he transformed their terms in his drawings, which he saw as the ideal laboratory for his theological explorations, fuelled by the desire to consecrate creation as an act of faith nourished by direct dialogue with God.

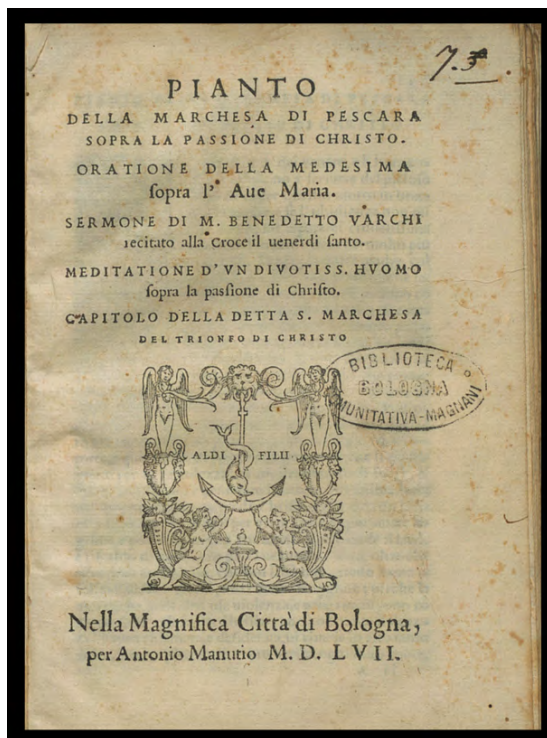
The poetic understanding between Michelangelo and Colonna (p. 192 ff.) transfused the artist's poetic work and stimulated his graphic investigations. The practice of the "presentation drawing," established in the context of his personal dialogue with Tommaso de' Cavalieri, evolved significantly. Mythological inspiration rooted in ancient references was replaced by research at the heart of developments in Catholic theology, which, under pressure from Protestantism, was forced to reform. Even when placed at the service of Catholicism, the classical legacy appeared to be a disruptive element, one that

needed to be transfigured in order to become, in a characteristic primitivist impulse, the foundation of a Christianity purified by going back to its roots. The drawings for Vittoria Colonna bear witness to this, while opening the door to the "senile sublime"—to borrow Antoine Compagnon's formula—in the final drawings of *The Crucifixion* and the last *Pietà*, known as the *Rondanini*.

Through Colonna, who has attracted most of the attention of researchers over the last twenty years, Michelangelo was able to enter the Italian evangelical milieu, where he formed powerful friendships. In particular, he became involved with the *Ecclesia Viterbiensis*, the "Church of Viterbo" regrouped around Cardinal Reginald Pole. The artist, now aged sixty-five, discovered a circle of scholars and aesthetes who formed a court whose aristocracy

was based on a form of cultural asceticism founded on grace. All subjects were discussed, and texts were written collectively. Theological thought was inseparable from literary ambition, while poetry and the visual arts were privileged forms of expression. Seeking to reform the ecclesiastical institution in depth in order to rebuild the Catholic faith, this circle did not rule out the integration of elements of Calvinist or Lutheran thought that drew on the same sources as the early Church. It was hoped that this proclaimed open-mindedness would promote understanding, creating the conditions whereby these staunch Catholics hoped to restore the unity of European Christianity.

Stimulated by his contact with Colonna, Michelangelo's spiritual development found a receptive response in Pole's Viterban circle. His drawings circulated freely there and attracted such interest that they were transposed into painting at Colonna's request. Michelangelo's devotional images were central to the discourse of the *Spirituali* in that they offered a visual expression of the principles espoused in the circle's treatises and poetry:



Vittoria Colonna, *Pianto della Marchesa di Pescara sopra la Passione di Christo*, Bologna, Antonio Manutio, 1557.

justification by faith alone and free will in understanding the message of Christ, based exclusively on the Holy Scriptures—so much so that the drawings for Colonna can, so to speak, be considered as penetrating “illustrations” of the values defended by the evangelicals. Notably the ones used in *Trattato Utilissimo del Beneficio di Giesu Christo Crocifisso*, by the Benedictine Benedetto da Mantova, as reprised, reoriented and amplified by Marcantonio Flaminio in 1543. For Michelangelo, as for Colonna, the work must embody in both its intention and form this renewed faith that gives the subject a central place.

The few surviving letters between the painter of the Sistine Chapel and the Marchioness of Pescara reflect the experience that she shared with him. Through her, he deepened his understanding of a religious culture that had always shone with a highly personal light. The central place of the Passion and the

eschatological hope that flows from it, justification by faith alone, the suffering of Mary, which appears to be consubstantial with her joy at the fulfilment of the divine promise, and the central place of grace, from which flows a culture of giving, are all facets of a philosophy that drew on various Italian evangelical tendencies, from the Waldensian heresy, which had spread throughout northern Italy, to the circle of Juan de Valdés in Naples (pp. 206–210), via the Academy of Modena, the Roman circles and those who gathered in the churches of Rome to hear the sermons of Ambrogio Catarino. The time had come for an attempt at pacification with the Protestants on the basis of mutual receptiveness. This was a cause to which Paul III was committed for a while when, in 1541, he sent Cardinal Gaspare Contarini to dialogue with Melanchthon at the Regensburg Colloquy with a view to laying the

groundwork for a consensus. The concept of “double justification” devised by Contarini was the most advanced point of this undertaking which found favour with neither Luther nor the Roman Curia. The rejection suffered by Melanchthon and Contarini was the sign of an impasse that made the confrontation irreversible. For the *Spirituali*, this first failure heralded others with more serious consequences (pp. 213–216).

The doctrines of the *Spirituali*, which were both theological and cultural and which, with Colonna and Michelangelo, but also the portraitist Sebastiano del Piombo, affirmed an aesthetic, were now confronted with a radicalism that structured a new party soon to be supported by the Inquisition, which was reinstated in Rome in 1542 at the instigation of Cardinal Gian Pietro Carafa. This was at a time when Protestant thought was gaining ground in northern Italy, encouraging the emergence of pockets of heterodoxy such as Verona and Modena, where Cardinal Giovanni Morone struggled to defend the authority of the Church (pp. 217–220).

After Contarini’s death in 1542, Cardinal Reginald Pole (1500–1558) emerged as the leader of the movement he represented within the Catholic Church. Born into the English aristocracy, a potential pretender to the throne of Henry VIII and, as such, persecuted by the King of England, he was an aesthete and a fine scholar, a diplomat with little inclination for the subtleties of rhetoric or direct confrontation, but formidable in interpersonal dialogue. Pole emerged as the central figure of the Italian evangelical movement. Supported by the imperial party, he was the putative successor to Paul III. Uncomfortable with group strategies, Pole instead preferred meditative retreat among kindred spirits. According to his biographer Thomas Mayer, this psychological trait was the cause of many of his failures. It also explains his interest in taking part in the debates that brought together Colonna and Michelangelo. For Michelangelo, Pole was one of the few people whose friendship he really valued.

Like Cardinals Morone and Gonzaga, Pole was an art lover, even though his financial situation prevented him from collecting. He was particularly fond of Michelangelo’s drawings, which circulated in Viterbo, where Colonna had followed Pole. It is likely that Pole, who exercised a decisive influence over Colonna, had a profound effect on Michelangelo’s thinking. Pole was convinced of the need to organise a council that would determine the direction of the Catholic faith and thus, as he saw it, help rebuild the unity of Western Christianity. To achieve this, he relied on the persuasive power of the theses he championed. This led to the publication in Venice of the *Beneficio*, which brilliantly summarised the doctrines of the *Spirituali* (pp. 253–268). Analysis of the text—which would be lost to us were it not for the copy preserved at the University of Cambridge—shows the influence of pre-Tridentine evangelical thought on Michelangelo’s work, from the frescoes in the Pauline Chapel to The Tomb of Julius II completed in 1550, including the drawings for Colonna and, above all, the *Spirituali Pietà*.

Based on a synthesis of different currents ranging from Waldensian doctrine to the thinking of Juan de Valdés and Erasmus’s irenicism, for Michelangelo the *Beneficio* had resonance as a theological confirmation of his own work and approach: the weight of original sin that prevents man from being one with God; justification by faith alone and rejection of purgatory;

the aspiration to asceticism and detachment; God's wish that man should act in full consciousness, based on his free will; the primacy of grace regardless of works or merit; attachment to the tutelary figure of Christ through the events of the Passion; the need to act "in imitation of Christ" in order to dispel all doubt and affirm the salvation promised to humanity, etc.

Michelangelo's work reflects these principles. Like prayer, the memory of baptism and communion with the body and blood of Christ, and even the certainty of predestination (is this not one of the points made by Condivi when he describes Michelangelo as sculpting from early childhood and developing without ever having had a teacher?), it dispels doubt by revealing to the beholder the presence of the risen Christ holding up the promise of redemption.

The *Beneficio* was a success. Experts estimate that some 40,000 copies were distributed throughout Europe in just a few years. The text made a strong impression by adopting a position that favoured synthesis over exclusion. The risk—soon confirmed—was that it would appear heretical to those who held more radical views. For Pole, the treatise provided a basis from which verbal exchange, based on free will, would lead a majority of prelates



*Trattato Utilissimo del Beneficio di Giesu Cristo Crocifisso*, the only copy of the 1543 edition to have escaped the Inquisition, Cambridge, St John's College.

gathered in council to adopt a position of openness and understanding. In this context, he was struck by the power and immediacy of Michelangelo's work. In contrast to arid doctrine, images offer a tool of persuasion that speaks straight to the individual without imposing a pre-established line of thought. The prelate himself must have experienced this when contemplating the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, in which the artist had taken certain liberties with regard to dogma. For Pole, artistic creation

was a tool of persuasion that acted directly on individual free will. His interest in art was therefore strategic. He did not see it as *divertissement* (in the Pascalian sense) and indeed became involved in conceptualizing themes that arose from the penetrating exchanges between Colonna and Michelangelo. In this respect, Pole immediately comes across as a prelate of the Counter-Reformation, but with one nuance: for him, art was not at all constrained by the body of doctrines that would emerge from the proceedings at Trent. On the contrary, he saw it as the privileged place for personal interpretation delivered by each artist armed with their unique faith, their work constituting a milestone in a progression that could be described as theological precisely because it was fully aesthetic. Beauty as the ultimate revelation of Truth.

Considered “divine”, Michelangelo was therefore perceived less as a genius—which would imply recognition of free creativity driven by acquired mastery and, by independent thought—than as the privileged “vehicle” of divine will exercised through his mind and hand.

Faced with Paul III’s political hesitations and his lack of determination to force the union, if



not the unity, of Christendom, Pole appeared as an alternative that could be described, somewhat simplistically, as “progressive”: the Pope’s indecision regarding the reform of the ecclesiastical institution, his seeming lack of eagerness to correct abuses and venality, his procrastination over the holding of the announced ecumenical council in Trent that was constantly being postponed, showed a true lack of initiative. Day after day, this time-wasting only strengthened the Protestants’ desire for independence and threatened Catholicism with an expansion of Protestantism that might eventually prove fatal—and this at a time when, outside Christendom, Turkish military pressure was increasingly threatening.

Sebastiano del Piombo, *Portrait of Cardinal Pole*, c. 1549, oil on canvas, 115 x 88 cm, Budapest, Museum of Fine Art.

After Contarini’s predicted failure in 1541, the initiative passed into the hands of Pole, who failed to make anything of it. His position was weakened by the first defections, which began in 1542, when the Inquisition, barely reinstated, took steps to interrogate figures it considered unorthodox. Some, such as the Benedictine preacher Bernardino Ochino, preferred to flee to Lutheran or Calvinist territories. Their defection cast suspicion on the *Spirituali* and on Colonna, who had significantly exposed herself by defending the Benedictines and Ochino before the Pope.

Pole established an elitist and refined court around him in Viterbo, where the investigations of Michelangelo and Colonna, moving from poetry to drawing and back, stimulated discussion. Thomas Mayer has shown that this was not exclusively theological. Politics, too, were omnipresent, as were philosophy and the arts. By attracting figures such as Marcantonio Flaminio and Alvise Priuli, he showed that the advance of reformist thought was founded not only on analysis and discussion of the texts, but also on aesthetic sensibility. He also accorded considerable importance, if not to the question of sexuality, then at least to the gender fluidity characteristic of this circle with its homoerotic sensibility (pp. 226–246). This was in line with Neoplatonic theories about accessing God through love.

Colonna's attachment to Pole has been the subject of much discussion. The Inquisition spoke of a form of "charismatic fascination" (p. 248). Michelangelo's relationship with the cardinal attracted less attention, even though two years before Carafa's election to the papacy, Ascanio Condivi, writing more or less under Michelangelo's dictation, emphasised the bond of friendship between the artist and the cardinal, who was then under scrutiny from the Inquisition. This relationship is central and should be emphasised, because it is part of the fruitful exchanges that linked the artist of the Sistine Chapel—and then the Pauline Chapel—to the Marchioness of Pescara, who died in 1547.

This theological-philosophical context justifies the interest in the works created by Michelangelo for Colonna and the conditions under which they were produced, which could be described as "dialogical", in the same way as the treatises, written jointly by the members of the *Ecclesia Viterbiensis*. The transition from poems to drawings and from drawings to poems reflects an exceptional closeness, even if the loss of a large part of the archives limits our understanding of them (p. 261 ff.). Unity of vision was expressed in a common iconography, and the sensitivity that translates these images was equally present in word and line. Michelangelo here attained a way of thinking that seems consubstantial with drawing. Hence the hitherto dominant impression that the artist took refuge in it, closing the door on the world and society—all this while becoming the principal architect of Saint Peter's in 1546! The drawings made for Colonna—*The Crucifixion, Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, the *Pietà*, all dated between the probable year of their meeting (1538) and 1543—constitute the first steps towards the final work painted by the artist for the benefit of the *Spirituali*.

Analysis of these drawings and the painted transpositions that were made from them to meet a strong demand for devotional works reveal a climate of inner withdrawal that followed the *terribilità* powerfully displayed on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel. *The Last Judgement* was a turning point that led Michelangelo—no doubt encouraged by Colonna, who was working on her *Pianto della Marchesa di Pescara sopra la Passione di Christo*—to radically change his style. This transformation is evident in the *Spirituali Pietà* (p. 319 ff.).

This title which we have given the work here, which is not one as such, expresses Michelangelo's positioning within the *Ecclesia Viterbiensis*. In recent years, several studies have emphasised this decisive link (Adriano Prosperi, Romeo de Maio, Maria Forcellino, etc.). His poetry at the time reflects the change of mindset that is evident in his works, be it in certain commissions, such as that of Cardinal Morone (pp. 304–305), or in the choice of certain unexpected iconographic themes, such as *Christ Taking Leave of His Mother*. The artist's drawings were perceived as "divine" and, circulating within evangelical circles, aroused the interest of prelates who were also collectors, and their letters speak of the wish to own transpositions or copies of these works painted by a third party. This was particularly the case with Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga (pp. 306–309), who hoped to copy a work—probably a painting—that was held by Cardinal Pole.



Michelangelo, *Pietà*, c. 1538–1543, black chalk on cardboard, 289 x 189 mm, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

The drawings for Colonna were part of a practice of gift-giving that broke with the constraints of commissions, which Michelangelo found deeply irksome. This approach freed the artist from his subservience to patrons who abused their position to impose commitments on the artist. In this new economy that presided over the creation of drawings—but which did not prevent the development of a market for painted transpositions, from which the artist always distanced himself—gift-giving fitted within an aesthetic of grace characteristic of the ideal cherished by the *Spirituali*. Hence a hypothesis explaining the creation of a final painting which, because of its format, was not integrated into devotional practices, but returned to the realm of public art, in which it expressed Michelangelo's vision of the altarpiece (pp. 317–

318). By its nature, it was the antithesis of *The Last Judgement* wall, which by its presence negated the very possibility of a painting identified with the sacraments.



Marcello Venusti, *Pietà*, tempera on canvas, 230 x 140, Palermo, Church of the former Priests' Hospital

Through this dynamic, Michelangelo can be seen to anticipate, in certain respects, some of the conclusions of the Council of Trent. His premonitory work embraced an educational and demonstrative ambition free from the artifices of faith that would return in the wake of the Council's proceedings. Clearly, Michelangelo delivered a prescient work he was able to gift to Pole in order to convey his faith in the simplicity of his primitivist sensibility and in the concatenation of his skillfully crafted symbolism. Made in anticipation of Pole's intervention at the Council of Trent, this gift to the *Spirituali* symbolized a unity of vision that aspired to transform both the Church and dogma. With this painting, Michelangelo offered the prelate a powerful image that summarized his theses without exposing him to the interpretations and suspicion that Contarini had faced in 1541. Working in parallel with Colonna,

Michelangelo produced a synthesis of the *Spirituali's* thinking as recorded in the *Beneficio*. The representation may be silent, but its manifest message is powerful.

In light of this hypothesis, we should revisit the indistinctly written date hidden in a detail of the painting and compare it with the events that form its context, starting with the certainty, provided by Ercole Gonzaga's correspondence, that Pole held a *Pietà* by Michelangelo in his possession in Viterbo in 1546. Hence our hypothesis, which places the work between 1545 and the *terminus antequem* of 1546. We could narrow this window by considering that the *Spirituali Pietà* was executed after the completion of the first fresco for the Pauline Chapel, which came shortly after the completion of The Tomb of Julius II. These are two works rich in references to the *Spirituali* which Michelangelo completed, not without difficulty, in 1545. The analyses of the frescoes in the Pauline Chapel by Sydney Joseph Freedberg and Leo Steinberg highlight the stylistic break here, in contrast with the concern for grace and the search for decorum evident in *The Last Judgement*. It perfectly captures the aesthetic that

pervades the *Spirituali Pietà*: the simplicity of direct narration immobilized in monumental figures abstracted from any notion of place or contingency; a striving for universality through primitivist rigor that brings faith back to its original purity. This moment, which can be dated to around March 1545, was no coincidence. While Michelangelo was completing the fresco, Paul III confirmed Pole in his position as legate to Trent, where his mission was to open the Council. This took place on 7 January 1546.

Michelangelo did not come to the idea for this painting by chance. From the outset, his practice of drawing seems to have been driven by a desire for the monumental, a desire to leave the intimate space of devotion and move into that of the altarpiece, where the mystery of the sacraments, then a subject of heated controversy, is endlessly rehearsed. While transpositions remained the preserve of artists involved in the process of creation and commercialisation, inscribing the *Pietà* in the public space of church painting by donating this image with its carefully crafted rhetoric was an act of personal engagement on the part of the artist. The execution of the work could not be entrusted to a third party. This question was clearly the subject of debate between Michelangelo and Colonna. A letter (unfortunately undated) from the latter bears witness to this (*Carteggio*, IV, CMLXIX, p. 105). In it, Colonna expresses her wariness of having a transposition made by another artist. No doubt she is thinking of Marcello Venusti, who, it seems, lacked Michelangelo's divine touch. She is clearly referring here to the pictorial extension of a drawing. We can assume that she has in mind the *Pietà* that the artist has given her, which she imagines being enlarged to the scale of an altar painting. The same is evidenced by another letter that describes a projection device used to imagine the effect that would be produced on a monumental scale (*Carteggio*, IV, CMLVIII, p. 104). The staging was a matter solely for the Marchioness. Michelangelo was never involved in this, just as the drawing, although it forms a study by isolating a fragment from the whole, never constituted a sketch for a painting. That was not the artist's approach. Through its quality and *inventio*, the "presentation drawing" constituted an end in itself, with its own economy. Its conversion to painting could only be the work of a third party with connections to a market in which Michelangelo did not wish to be involved. All the more so because, in going from devotional drawing to altar painting, the very spirit of the work had changed: the ethereal dimension was replaced by primitivist rigidity; the atmospheric colouring by a contrastingly reduced palette; the gentle introspection of the smaller work gave way to the moral integrity of a discourse displayed with a radicalism foreign to Venusti's sugary compositions.

These transpositions by third parties have rather muddied the waters when it comes to the existence of a painting of a *Pietà* executed by Michelangelo himself. However, a series of letters exchanged between Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga and Pietro Bertano, the Bishop of Fano, indicates that Pole had in his possession in Trent a *Pietà* and that this was by Michelangelo (Chapter IV, pp. 403–407). In his letter the prelate expresses the wish to borrow the work so that his painter Giulio Romano might make a copy of it. This was not, as has long been repeated, a matter of transposing a drawing into a painting. Gonzaga would have had no need of Pole to get this done, since the drawing made for Colonna had been engraved shortly before by Giulio Bonasone. Nicolas Benatrizet would publish his own version a year later.



On the left, Marcello Venusti after Michelangelo, *Pietà*, c. 1545–1546, black chalk, brown ink wash, and coloured pencil on paper, 33 x 195 mm, Haarlem, Tyler Museum; in the centre, Giulio Bonasone after Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1546, engraving, 360 x 206 mm, Prague, Narodni Gallery; on the right, Nicolas Beatrizet after Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1547, published by Antonio Lafreri, 2<sup>nd</sup> state/2, copper on paper, 375 x 262 mm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It is reasonable to assume that, in Trent, the *Spirituali Pietà* served as a reference in Pole's private discussions; it helped him rally as many Council participants as possible to his cause without having to engage in the kind of risky verbal jousting that would have taken place in session.

It may be assumed that, at Trent, the *Spirituali Pietà* was intended to support the private discussions conducted by Pole, helping him to gather as much support as possible among the Council participants without having to engage in the precarious verbal contests that might have arisen in open session.

Disinclined to conflict, Pole hoped to rally support in advance so that the Council sessions would be a mere formality, free from the threat of open clashes. The painting was thus intended to complement his dialectical discourse by bringing faith back to its quintessential expression with the persuasive force of its appearance. It did not perform the function for which it was conceived, however, and Pole never succeeded in imposing his conception on the conciliar fathers (pp. 339–352). Not wanting to compromise his chances for the papacy, he preferred to leave the Council, pleading poor health. By his premature departure, Pole reduced Michelangelo's *Spirituali Pietà* to silence. His failure at the conclave of 1549 stalled the momentum of the *Spirituali*, who soon found themselves having to answer accusations of heresy (pp. 354–356).

While the *Spirituali Pietà* embodies the theological vision of the Ecclesia Viterbiensis, it also conveys a political vision nourished by the same unitarian sensibility. It conveys a message of peace already present in the *Beneficio*. That "sweet book," as Flaminio called it, aimed to bring the Christian families of Europe, whose differences were only minor, back under the same pacified roof. This purely spiritual ambition, founded on theological debate, existed in relation to a political question linked to the affirmation of temporal power rooted in the assertion of new national consciousnesses.



Comparison of the *Colonna Pietà* and the *Spirituali Pietà*.

Driven by a desire for freedom from all spiritual authority, European monarchies looked to faith for ways of consolidating their power. In this strategy, the figure of the Virgin was widely used to provide temporal power with the foundation that she had previously provided for the Church. The figure of Mary was invoked particularly at the pivotal moment of the Passion, when she alone supported the biblical message (pp. 358–361), both to protect states and to support the monarchical power that embodied them. Instrumentalised by the Habsburgs, she symbolised the action to which the Emperor dedicated himself, anchoring the spiritual power of Catholicism in the temporal power of a triumphant Christian empire.

Hence the question of the exercise of power over the world, one alluded to in the iconographic motif of the orb. The political interpretation of the globe— consecrated as an emblem of power in the form of the *globus cruciger* (“cross-bearing orb”)—transformed the symbolism deployed, on a theological level, with the theme of the Virgin’s legs, on which Christ rests while awaiting resurrection. This theme consecrated the spiritual and universal power of the Pope. It also evoked the temporal power of the Emperor, who presented himself as the ultimate defender of the *res publica christiana*—notably by demanding the holding of the Council, which some considered to be the very condition for the salvation of the Church (pp. 362–371). Articulated around the talks that brought the Pope and Charles V face to face in Bologna in 1530, the opposition—which reached its extreme and traumatic climax in the sack of Rome in 1527—proved all the more decisive as, beyond the borders of Christian European nations, the Turkish threat was increasingly pressing (pp. 371–374). Once again, the discourse of the *Spirituali Pietà* was intended as a call for unity, as expressed by the enveloping gesture of the Virgin’s hand redoubling and supporting that of her son, the bringer of spiritual renewal. The chiasma formed by the two bodies embodied the *res publica christiana* invoked by Charles V to legitimise his imperial dream, which itself

revealed an archaic way of thinking. In a way, Michelangelo, like Pole, defended that vision of unity, of which the Virgin was seen as the polymorphous emblem.



On the left, The Imperial Orb of the Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, West Germany, late 17<sup>th</sup> century, wooden core, resin, gold leaf, chiselled gold, pearls and precious stones, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum; in the centre, Sebastiano del Piombo, [untitled], 1530, black chalk on paper, 309 x 462 mm, London, British Museum; on the right, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Shitting on the World”, detail from *The Flemish Proverbs*, 1559, oil on panel, 117 x 163 cm, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.

In the *Spirituali Pietà*, this political affirmation is also expressed in the landscape, which effects a shift in time, bringing the biblical question back to its historical contemporaneity. Moving from Pilate’s Jerusalem to modern Rome, attention was focused on the threat of a new invasion of the Eternal City by imperial troops, this time led by the Duke of Alba. Once again, the fate of the classical legacy was at stake in the face of contemporary demands. In his own manner, Michelangelo reflects this in that the stance of his Christ here is the opposite of his earlier compositions. This reversal is already noticeable in the frescoes of the Pauline Chapel, begun in 1542. The modelling of the body has broken away from the artist’s ancient prototypes, which now continue only in the realm of detail, like the navel of the *Belvedere Torso*. It expresses a primitivist stiffening aiming to replace references to antiquity with the demand for a faith restored to its original purity. We can thus see the link between the Christ in the *Spirituali Pietà* and the *Slaves (Prigioni)*, which Vasari read as an affirmation of the power of the Church—that is to say, the power of the Pope, whose magisterium was rooted in that of Peter, who, on the walls of the Pauline Chapel, casts a stern, if not reproachful, gaze at his successors, for whom the chapel was reserved (p. 379). Thus, the *Spirituali Pietà* conveys Michelangelo’s personal vision of the *res publica christiana* (p. 382). This political interpretation is consistent with his view of the “republic” as he advocated it for Florence. It involves a call for peace that echoes the line from Dante

Thus, the *Spirituali Pietà* conveys Michelangelo’s personal vision of the *res publica christiana* (p. 382). This political interpretation is consistent with his view of the “republic” as he advocated it for Florence. It involves a call for peace that echoes the line from Dante inscribed on the cross of the *Colonna Pietà*: “Down there one does not think how much blood it cost.”

This reads like a warning of the disaster that will inevitably result from the radicalisation of intransigent positions (pp. 382–383). Michelangelo prophetically saw this as a harbinger of the spread of conflicts that would tear apart the Holy Roman Empire and indeed the whole of Europe. This premonition came true two years before his death, in France, in 1562, before engulfing the entire continent.

## Part IV: Painting in 154[?]

The *Spirituali Pietà* is the result of a complex construction involving theological reflections and the appropriate aesthetic responses. This came at a time when, weighed down by age, Michelangelo looked back on his life with horror at the mistakes he had made, thereby endangering his salvation, which he considered uncertain. Poetry was the vector for these anxious meditations, which he then went on to express in drawing and then sculpture.

While the canvas constitutes a theologically subtle demonstration— something not offered by *The Last Judgement*, whose more personal expression would pose a critical problem—it is also the site of personal reflection nourished by the thinking of Savonarola and, possibly, Erasmus (p. 389). The message was intended to be personal—which would soon expose Michelangelo to the threat of the Inquisition—while contributing to the evolution of altar painting in the mid–sixteenth century. This led the artist to take an interest in easel painting, which he otherwise liked to dismiss as a “woman’s practice”. Michelangelo intended to challenge its evolution, which had led painting into a form of narrative frenzy that, from Raphael to Titian, was characteristic of a style of painting committed to naturalism. Michelangelo never ceased to show his hostility towards this weakness, as he saw it. The work therefore also constitutes a challenge to easel painting, which was in the process of becoming autonomous, and to his one remaining rival since the deaths of Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael: Titian. Michelangelo appears to have been aware of the limitations of the Mannerism that then dominated easel painting. He put forward his primitivism as a formal cure, motivated by the same principles he applied to theology: a return to an original form of expression reflecting pure inspiration. In Michelangelo’s view, this could only come from a tried and tested faith in free will.



Tiziano Vecellio, left, *The Worship of Venus*, 1518–1519, oil on canvas, 172 x 175 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado; on the right, *The Bacchanal of the Andrians*, c. 1523–1526, oil on canvas, 173 x 193 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

The artist thus offered a new formulation of altar painting. His investigations were rooted in the evolution of formal solutions tried and tested on paper since his early years. It was not a matter of taking up characteristics from Colonna’s drawings in relation to their devotional value. Although Michelangelo did take up certain aspects, he reformulated these in a new creation appropriate to the scale of the altarpiece. All the more so in that his artistic development ran counter to what he had put in place in the Sistine Chapel, where *The Last*

*Judgement* set out to eliminate the very possibility of the altarpiece. At the same time, this reversal is expressed in the frescoes a few metres away in the Pauline Chapel, where the painter abandons decorum and eliminates detail in order to assert the rigour of his new vision.

It is in relation to this extreme point that historians have considered that Michelangelo, who was too old to physically take on the work of a fresco painter, was taking refuge, not without melancholy, in intimate works on paper as the medium for expressing his painful introspection linked to the decline of age. This trajectory seems coherent if we consider only the drawings and poems, which are intertwined. However, this reasoning becomes more uncertain if we include his return to stone and the sculptor's craft in the *Bandini Pietà* and the *Rondanini Pietà*, which occupied him continuously from 1547 until his death in 1564.

Going back to altarpieces meant suspending (only for a moment) this process of renunciation in favour of an intimate dialogue with paper. Renouncing his confinement to this silent interiority, painting led Michelangelo to re-enter Christian public space in order to deploy, on the scale of the altarpiece, his perception of an act of devotion that forms the basis of a sacred art whose perfection, in his view, was identified with Italianism. He considered this identification to be consubstantial with his work, as it was synonymous with "good painting" (pp. 396–397). This bore a close relationship to sculpture, as he would point out in the debate about the *Paragone*.

The primitivist reserve of the *Spirituali Pietà*—its emphatic asceticism, even—reflects a state of mind dominated by a melancholy rooted in old age, which he interprets as physical decline. Essentially verbal, this idea comes through in the poetry and correspondence, but it is opposed by the strength and will, elevated by wisdom, of the plastic work. This militant canvas of 1545–1546 also paves the way for what Antoine Compagnon calls the "senile sublime", which enters into a direct dialogue with death in order to remain as close as possible to the experience of Christ.

Thus, Michelangelo's return to easel painting seems all the more certain in that he had never really broken with the practice—even if only because of the third parties who carried out his transpositions. However, this raises the question of the status of these transpositions since critics have taken them as grounds for eliminating the question of painting—apart from frescoes—from the trajectory of his work. This elimination was all the easier to effect in that Vasari, no stranger to approximation, peremptorily limited Michelangelo's pictorial corpus to four panels. The history of these transpositions is well known (pp. 414–429). The earliest date back to a time when the artist did not exclude painting and indeed presented himself as a painter. His practice straddled different categories and required collaborators who were always linked to him by an essential bond of friendship. In this context, the work carried out with Marcello Venusti (c. 1512/1515–1579) led to the institution of an economy of transpositions (pp. 415–429) that would involve Cardinal Pole, whom Venusti is said to have followed to England in 1553–1554, perhaps carrying the *Spirituali Pietà* in his luggage (p. 422).

The combined effect of statements such as Vasari's and the transpositions of his drawings into paintings has helped cement the idea that, a handful of early works aside, Michelangelo did not have a real career as a painter. It is not possible to delimit with any certainty the four paintings mentioned by Vasari.



On the left, Marcello Venusti, *Annunciation*, c. 1555–1565, oil on canvas, 45 x 30 cm, Rome, Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini; on the right, Michelangelo, preparatory drawing for the *Annunciation to the Virgin* commissioned by Cardinal Federico Cesi, c. 1545–1550, black chalk and metal point drawing, 383 x 297 mm, New York, The Morgan Library and Museum.

Or more precisely, which are the other three alongside the *Tondo Doni*, which is the only confirmed painting in the catalogue raisonné: the painted copy of Schongauer's *Temptation of Saint Anthony*? The *Manchester Madonna* and *The Entombment*, both held at the National Gallery in London? Or might the reference concern only completed works? Most of these have been lost: a painted *Pietà* from the end of the fifteenth century that would have preceded the *Pietà* in the Vatican and which is reproduced in *Sixty Outlines from The Principal Works of Michel Angelo Buonarroti in Sculpture, Painting, Design and Architecture*, published in London by Henry G. Bohn in 1863? A *Virgin and Child* commissioned in 1519 by Lionardo di Zanobi de Bartolini, a banker working for Leo X, and mentioned in the archives (p. 429)? A *Saint Sebastian* reproduced—and transformed into a *Pyre*—in a book by Lucien Nass titled *Curiosités médico-artistiques*, published in Paris in 1907? Or *Leda and the Swan* from 1530, which was probably burned in an outburst of French moralism in the seventeenth century? Of course, these works would need to be examined in order to confirm or refute their attribution, but they do reflect Michelangelo's enduring interest in painting, which he continued to practise in between his all-consuming projects.

*Leda and the Swan* deserves special attention. Its well-documented and incredible history predates the *Spirituali Pietà* and contains elements that are important to us (pp. 430–446). Commissioned for Alfonso I d'Este, it brought Michelangelo face to face with the works by Titian on display in the *camerino d'alabastro*, where Alfonso had gathered some of the jewels of Venetian art. These stimulated the Tuscan's imagination and would be one motivation for his accepting a commission that he had previously refused. There was no reason why the 1530 painting should have been the last work by an artist whose career was

to continue for more than thirty-five years, even though, in 1555, fresco work was abandoned due to physical incapacity. Better still, *Leda and the Swan*, having taken shape in the intense dialogue that Michelangelo established with Titian's work, was bound to prolong the rivalry. This was made even more acute by Titian's stay in Rome in 1545. Vasari's account bears witness to a competitiveness that was still intense.



On the left, Rosso Fiorentino after Michelangelo, *Leda and the Swan*, c. 1530–1531, oil on canvas, 105 x 141 cm, London, National Gallery; on the right, Cornelis Bos after Michelangelo, *Leda and the Swan*, c. 1530–1550, copper, 280 x 410 mm, London, British Museum.

To this element, we might add that the analysis of *Leda and the Swan* highlights the referential connections that Michelangelo wove between his works. Closely linked to the figure of *Night* conceived for The Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici, the painting appears as the privileged locus of a symbolic process of linking meanings drawn from different sources specific to Michelangelo's art. The painting functions as a digression that directs the theme towards new horizons. This is precisely what happened in the *Spirituali Pietà* in relation to the presentation drawings conceived for Tommaso de' Cavalieri, which he assimilated into the *Colonna Pietà* in order to articulate a response to *The Last Judgement* (p. 447): the questioning of his approach which, by giving priority to aesthetic achievement, had, he thought, neglected the necessities of faith of which the *Spirituali* reminded him and, beyond that, the demands of his own salvation, as would be echoed in his *Rime* (p. 460). It is also to these missteps and errors that the *Spirituali Pietà* responds by linking the divine status of the artist to his personal commitment to a faith stripped of all excess: an art of simplicity and subtraction that explains the soon-to-be exclusive recourse to sculpture. The painting that concerns us here partakes of this ascetic ideal, which a French reader unworried by anachronism might naturally describe as "Jansenist". Far from the "seductive fantasy" with which Michelangelo, adopting the tone of Pascal, summarised his past work, the *Spirituali Pietà* starkly registers the realities of an existence that has entered its winter and fears the deluge that these heralds.

Despite this austere tone, the *Spirituali Pietà* attests to a militant dimension that is realised through painting and its inscription in the symbolic locus that is the altar, where the mystery of the sacraments is perpetually replayed. Michelangelo measures himself against it in its presentness. This is bound to confuse those who look to it for what we know of the artist's practice some thirty-five years earlier. The dialogue present here has little to do with that which characterised the artist in those days. Michelangelo pits himself against the painting of his time and that which he saw in Alfonso d'Este's camerino d'alabastro in 1530 (pp. 473–

477) (at the invitation of the Farnese family, this was installed in Rome in 1545: pp. 479–483).

Michelangelo was pitting himself against Venetian painting, its naturalism, the playful freedom of its palette and its shimmering light. The *Spirituali Pietà* gave the painter an opportunity to dialogue with Venetian painting, which had itself taken a great deal from his work. The artist's relationship with the city of the Doges is not without interest (p. 463 ff.). A liberal city, tolerant of free will and responsive to evangelical ideas, Venice represented a



Sebastiano del Piombo, *Pietà*, 1516–1517, oil on panel, 270 x 225 cm, Viterbo, Museo Civico.

freedom to which Michelangelo was regularly drawn in his moments of flight (pp. 463–466), whether passing through or, more rarely and without success, staying. His friendship with Sebastiano del Piombo gave him an insight into its subtleties, and the relationship between the two men grew into a fruitful partnership that established Sebastiano's work as the synthesis of a Tuscan-Roman tradition of drawing and the chromaticism specific to the Venetian school (p.466-473). This synthesis was derided by Titian, stirring Michelangelo's need to respond in his own work. The respective evolutions of the two artists around 1545–1550 made them rivals committed to resolutely different paths, though not completely unreceptive to each other. Michelangelo's path seems to have been determined by a primitivist *frisson* that fueled a visceral desire for simplicity. This contrasts with the

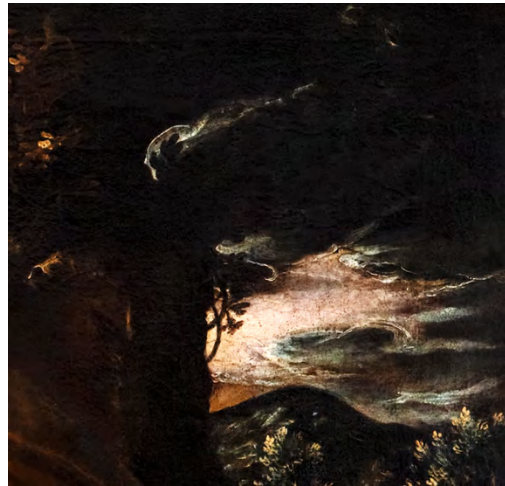
modernity of Titian, who was responsive to the subjective perception of reality, summed up in the ephemeral moment of its luminous epiphany. However, the needs of the Church led painting towards a decorum that eschewed fleeting sensations in favor of a rhetorical effectiveness that the Counter-Reformation would establish as a *sine qua non*. In this area, Michelangelo's work provided decisive themes that an artist such as Tintoretto would appropriate, adding his own lyricism, as an antidote to Titian's classicism (pp. 490–492).

The confrontation between Michelangelo and Titian, widely instrumentalized in polemics by Pietro Aretino and at the heart of the debate on the Paragone (pp. 482-483), reveals a singular moment in the



Tiziano Vecelli, *Pope Paul III With His Grandsons Alessandro and Ottavio Farnese*, 1545–1546, oil on canvas, 210 x 174, Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte

history of painting. While Titian assimilated the Mannerist principles derived from Michelangelo's *terribilità*, the latter measured himself against Venetian values by returning to easel painting and himself doing the work of placing the motif drawn from his graphic investigations within a spatial setting.



Detail of the landscape in the *Spirituali Pietà*

Without abandoning his own aesthetic, Michelangelo deployed forms whose plastic dialogue was complemented by chromatic contrasts that extended to the treatment of flesh tones. He electrifies the Virgin's skin tone in order to emphasise the contrast between her body, guarantor of the preservation of the faith and the future of the Church, and that of Christ, dead (to judge from his stone-grey flesh), awaiting resurrection. Michelangelo uses his palette with a sensitivity that makes the dialogue between the bodies an extension of the debate that confronts the sculptural iconicity conveyed by the drawing and the pictorial narrative inscribed in the chromatic effusion. Michelangelo does not, however, succumb to the vaporization of form entrained by the luminous epiphany of color. His composition does not yield to atmospheric impression; it maintains the primacy of form. To do this, it inscribes it in a tight frame corresponding to the rock wall of the grotto, which is enhanced by the ornament of the vegetation in the manner of an ancient tapestry.



On the left: detail of the Virgin's sleeve in the *Spirituali Pietà*; on the right: Tiziano Vecelli, detail of *Portrait of a Young Man*, c. 1515–1520, London, private collection on loan to the National Gallery.

Work on atmosphere is thus not absent in Michelangelo, but it is confined to what is undoubtedly the most unexpected element: the landscape around Tivoli immersed in this mystical night, another feature of Venetian painting (pp. 492–498). Sundering the darkness associated with Christ's sacrifice, the landscape is revealed with a gestural intensity that is every bit the equal of Tintoretto's later compositions. This fragment of nature is not a naturalistic snapshot. It echoes a tormented sentiment that could be described, without fear

of anachronism, as “pre-Romantic”: an expressive projection of a feeling experienced from within the consciousness in reaction to the action summarised by the symbolic outlines of the bodies: an existential landscape that involves both unrealistic chromaticism and a style imbued with *terribilità*.

### Part V: Partial eclipse of the *Spirituali Pietà*

Executed around 1545–1546, probably between the two opening sessions of the Council of Trent, Michelangelo’s painting deserves its name: *Spirituali Pietà*, even if this is not a title in the established sense of the term. The work was probably created as a gift to Cardinal Pole to provide visual support for the unitarian and tolerant discourse of the Italian evangelicals, who saw the Council of Trent as the place for restoring the unity of Western Christianity, which was then under external pressure from the Turks and rent by violent internal strife. The verse by Dante placed on the cross of the *Colonna Pietà*, like a thought from the Virgin Mary ascending to God, is in itself a premonition of the wars of religion and a call for unity through tolerance.



Marcello Venusti after Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement*, 1549, tempera on panel, 188.5 x 145 cm, Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte,

Pole’s failure—which, as Thomas F. Mayer has pointed out, can be attributed in part to his temperament—was also due to a groundswell that worked against tolerance and compromise and, rather than unity, preferred the militarisation of the Christian faith, structured as a “Counter-Reformation”.

Pole’s desertion during the Council foreshadowed his fruitless vacillations during the conclave of 1549, which saw the English cardinal fail to become pope by a single vote. Opposing the *Spirituali*, the rise to power of the intransigent clan supported by the Inquisition gradually drove the evangelical movement to political failure which, with the election of Cardinal Carafa to the papacy under the name of Paul IV, turned into stigmatisation and condemnation as heretics. Repression was now the order of the day. Cardinal Morone was the first to pay the price (pp. 501-503) and then the Inquisition attacked the entire

movement and its works. The *Beneficio*, for example, was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books. To belong to the *Spirituali* now constituted a major risk. Having been linked to the Ecclesia Viterbiensis—the “mala secta” according to Carafa— automatically meant persecution and interrogation. Even execution.

While Pole, in England, attempted to answer the accusations against him and at the same time define his conception of the papal office, Michelangelo, whom Carafa had severely criticised for the purported impiety of *The Last Judgement*, likening it to the excesses of the *Spirituali*, entered into a state of internal resistance while continuing, against all odds, his public mission as chief architect of Saint Peter’s. The “non-figurative” dimension of

architecture was paralleled by the figurative explorations now reserved for the intimacy of drawing—until, that is, the final sculpted *Pietà*s took over. The convictions still expressed in the frescoes of the Pauline Chapel—in direct contact with the Pope—gave way to the formulation of this “senile sublime” which involved a direct dialogue with God against the horizon of the artist’s impending death (pp. 503–509).

Michelangelo prudently cleaned out his archives and correspondence, much of which (the most compromising documents, no doubt) was destroyed. Today, only the work itself holds the heart of the artist’s discourse and thought, which turns away from the public dimension rooted in history to focus on *terribilità*, centred on the individual withdrawn into himself. Was he responsible for the concealment of the *Spirituali Pietà*? The logic of the gift would tend to place the responsibility for this with its owner. As Colonna died in 1547, it was probably Reginald Pole who ensured the preservation of the work in order to spare the artist from having to face the Inquisition.

What became of the *Spirituali Pietà* after 1555? Several hypotheses can be formulated. The



[Anonymous] *Pietà* known as *Ragusa*, c.1535–1545, oil on wood, private collection.

canvas may have accompanied Pole to England or been taken there by Venusti along with his own works. It would then have remained hidden there until Michelangelo’s death made its presence less perilous. Thereafter, it would have come into the hands of Pole’s executor, Alvise Priuli. This hypothesis is contradicted by the absence of any mention of the painting in the post-mortem inventory or in Pole’s will.

Another hypothesis is that it may have accompanied Ludovico Beccadelli, a loyal follower of the *Spirituali* and guardian of the memory of their leading figures, to Dalmatia. Having never been in the limelight, he was not put on trial, but simply removed from the centres of power by a posting as bishop of Ragusa (pp. 522–533). Beccadelli was close to Michelangelo, with whom he exchanged melancholy sonnets about age and exile. This figure resurfaced in 2016 in connection with a painting presented as an original work by Michelangelo. Some consider the so-called *Ragusa Pietà* to be the painting referred to in Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga’s correspondence. This is doubtful for technical reasons—the work is painted on spruce, contrary to the usual practices of a Tuscan or Roman artist—and stylistic reasons, since it would mean that Michelangelo had simply transposed the drawing made for Colonna into painting. It would seem that the *Ragusa Pietà* is a copy that remained in the Dalmatian city after Beccadelli’s departure. However, Beccadelli was a knowledgeable collector. Could the painting have been a diversionary tactic intended to divert attention from another *Pietà* passed on by Alvise Priuli? In the current state of knowledge, it is impossible to say.

We believe that the third hypothesis is the most plausible, since it is based on the circumstances surrounding the reappearance of the work in the late 1560s. This hypothesis involves the intervention of the Farnese family and, in particular, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, also known as the “Gran Cardinale”. The grandson of Paul III and a close friend of Michelangelo, the cardinal was a fervent supporter of Pole. This was particularly true during

the conclave of 1549, until he decided that Pole, bogged down in his own procrastination, was incapable of assuming power. A skilled diplomat and cunning politician, the Gran Cardinale then opted for caution by positioning himself at the centre of the political spectrum. His family's power, influence and wealth placed him beyond the reach of the conflicts that were tearing the Vatican apart. Therefore, if Pole felt compelled to keep the painting he had received from Michelangelo a secret, it is reasonable to assume that he would have turned to Alessandro Farnese to ensure that the *Spirituali Pietà* was kept in a safe place. The Farneses' vast collections were managed by Fulvio Orsini, and the work could easily have been "forgotten" in one of the family properties (pp. 552–563).

Having worked for the Farneses, Michelangelo knew that his work would be safe with them (pp. 555–557). It was probably omitted from existing inventories. After the artist's death, with all threats gone, it no doubt reappeared in a context that, in the absence of archives, remains undetermined. One thing is certain, however: the work could be seen by artists close to the Farnese family as early as 1569–1573.

Meanwhile, the conclusion of the Council of Trent defined a new horizon of expectation for artistic creation. Historians have termed this "Counter-Reformation art", meaning representations subject to the requirements of the dogma (pp. 564–569). It was in this context that the *Spirituali Pietà* emerged. It introduced new figures. Thanks to its association with Michelangelo and the chiastic arrangement of Christ and the Virgin, it soon became a popular model for both painting and the decorative arts. The work of the Zuccari brothers is a key reference here. Around 1563, Taddeo Zuccari created a *Pietà* featuring angels, clearly influenced by Rosso Fiorentino's *Colonna Pietà* and referencing Michelangelo. This work was widely disseminated in the form of engravings. Around 1570–1573, Taddeo's brother Federico created an updated version of the *Spirituali Pietà*, aligning it with the requirements



of the Counter-Reformation by incorporating the *Arma Christi* and angels, while retaining certain compositional elements of the original work, such as the crosslike position of the arms and bodies, as well as the globe hidden beneath the Virgin's vestments (pp. 570–580).

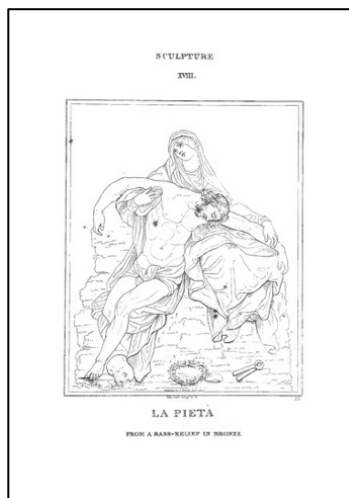
On the left: Taddeo Zuccari, *Pietà with Angels*, before 1563, oil on canvas, 29.2 x 48 cm, private collection; on the right: Federico Zuccari, *Pietà with Angels*, 1570–1573, oil on canvas, 169 x 117 cm, Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

From then on, this motif became a cliché of Catholic pictorial production, spreading throughout Europe thanks to artists such as Otto van Veen, Bartholomeus Spranger and Marcello Venusti. The latter went on to work for Philip II, enriching Hispanic colonial art with this same motif (pp. 580–588 and 582–583).

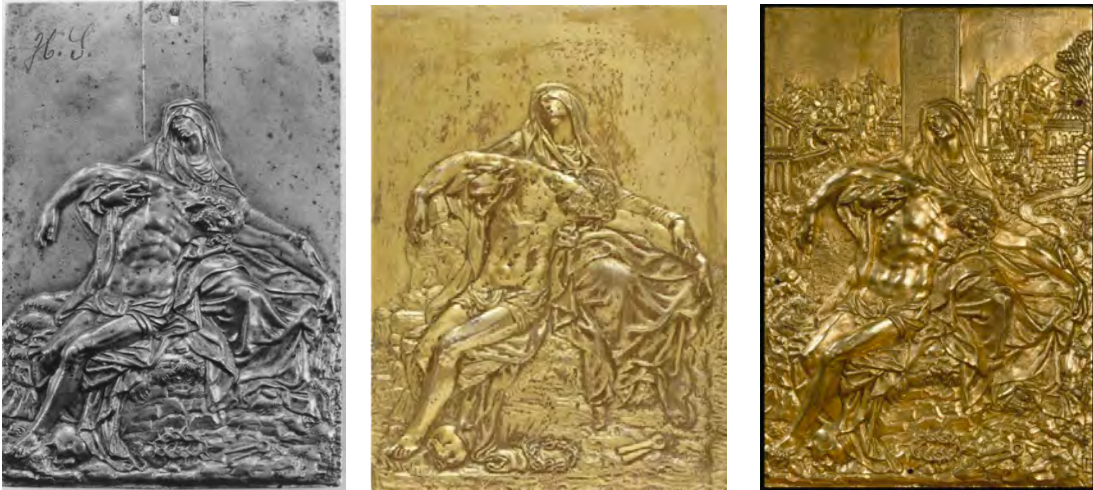


On the left, Otto Van Veen, *The Lamentation of Christ with Angels*, c. 1588–1589, oil on oak panel, 105.5 x 73.5 cm, Freiburg, Kunstmuseum; on the right, Attributed to Marcello Venusti, *Pietà*, c. 1570–1579, oil on copper plate, 23.5 x 18 cm, private collection.

All the artists involved, from the Zuccari brothers to Van Veen and Spranger, worked for the Farnese family. They worked in particular at the Farnese residence in Caprarola, where they may have had the opportunity to see Michelangelo's *Spirituali Pietà*. There they met another contributor to the rediscovery of the work: Guglielmo Della Porta (pp. 586–592), who had worked alongside Michelangelo for the Farnese family. He adopted the theme for bas-reliefs and “kisses of peace” (or “pax”) at around the same time as Federico Zuccari's painting.



*Sixty Outlines from The Principal Works of Michel Angelo Buonarroti in Sculpture, Painting, Design and Architecture*, London, Henry G. Bohn, 1863, PLXVIII



On the left, Guglielmo della Porta or workshop, *Lamentation*, c. 1569, bronze, 18.7 x 12.7 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund; in the centre, [anonymous], *Lamentation*, 16th century, Rome, gilded walnut, 19.2 x 14 cm, private collection. [https://www.artnet.com/artists/guglielmo-della-porta/the-lamentation-Swzxode1ofQcTXok\\_TEtTw2](https://www.artnet.com/artists/guglielmo-della-porta/the-lamentation-Swzxode1ofQcTXok_TEtTw2); on the right, attributed to Jacob Cornelis Cobaert after a drawing by Guglielmo Della Porta, *Pietà*, c. 1569, gilded bronze, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This suggests that the disappearance of the *Spirituali Pietà* was only partial and came to an end around 1569–1573. The motif was revisited with less understanding—the orb disappeared (pp. 591–592)—, but with such effectiveness that, in the words of Ulrich Middeldorf, it became “the most famous sacred image in Europe around 1600”. Indeed, it can be found in various forms everywhere, including in ivory sculptures, and never loses its Michelangesque connotations, as evidenced by an English publication from the mid–nineteenth century (p. 597).

Did the Farnese family play a key role in saving the *Spirituali Pietà*, as we believe? The absence of archives and of any trace of provenance make this impossible to prove. Despite repeated attempts to contact Wannenes Art Auctions, which sold the painting as a private transaction in 2024, no provenance could be established. However, the fact that the work clearly reappeared in the Farnese family sphere around 1569 strongly suggests that the Gran Cardinale was involved in the preservation of Michelangelo’s last painting (pp. 615–620).



On the left: [anonymous] Flemish artist, *Pietà*, early 17th century, oil on copper plate, 27.8 x 20.5 cm, private collection; in the centre: [anonymous] Spanish artist, *Pietà*, early 17th century, oil on canvas, 85 x 65 cm, private collection; on the right: [anonymous] Italian artist, *Pietà*, early 17th century, oil on copper plate, 28 x 21.5 cm, private collection.



On the left, Domingo de Bidarte, *Pietà*, polychrome wood, Pamplona, Catedral de Santa María la Real; in the centre, [anonymous], *Pietà*, c. 1600, polychrome and gilded terracotta, 20.6 x 30.5 cm, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Pieta/C6AEB258A97F2328>; on the right, [anonymous] *Pietà*, 1765, glazed ceramic on majolica, Trento, Castello del Buonconsiglio.

On the left, [Anonymous], *Saint Thomas's Doubt and Incredulity*, 18th-century Dieppe school, enamel and wood, 30 x 13 x 3, Marc Arthur Kohn auction, Paris, Hôtel Bristol, 30 March 2015, lot 72. <https://sculptureetcollection.com/ventes/ladeploration-du-christ-dapres-un-modele-de-guglielmo-della-porta-1515-1577/>(The Virgin Mary and Saint John).



On the right, [anonymous], *The Lamentation of Christ* (after a model by Guglielmo della Porta, 1515–1577), 18<sup>th</sup> century Dieppe school, holy water font carved in openwork bas-relief ivory; gilded metal cup, 23.5 x 4 cm, Pescheteau-Badin sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 26 March 2021, lot 104. <https://sculptureetcollection.com/ventes/la-deplorationduchrist-dapres-un-modele-de-guglielmo-della-porta-1515-1577/>