

Discovery of a Masterpiece Signed Michelangelo *The Spirituali Pietà*

“... This painting is an essential milestone leading to the Bandini Pietà and the artist's final work.” — Professor Michel Draguet



The Pietà was identified following its acquisition by a collector who wishes to remain anonymous. In June 2020, the work appeared in the catalogue of the Wannenes auction house in Genoa. Presented as the work of an anonymous artist from the 16th–17th century, the auction catalogue description states that “the iconography of the painting expresses a heterogeneous figurative culture, dictated by Tuscan-Roman influences inspired by the models of Andrea del Sarto, Pontormo, Francesco Salviati and, of course, Michelangelo”. After contacting the auction house, the collector acquired it in February 2024. The painting arrived at his home in April 2024, and after a few days, while examining the painting, he discovered the presence of two signatures. He then decided to commission several scientific studies which, combining laboratory tests and in-depth historical and artistic analysis, identified the previously unknown painting as an autograph work by Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475-1564). To distinguish this work from other representations of the same subject by Michelangelo, it was named the *Spirituali Pietà*. The press announcement of the discovery of this masterpiece coincides with the celebration of the 551st anniversary of Michelangelo's birth on 6 March 1475 in Caprese.

The discovery is substantiated by:

- Two advanced and exhaustive technical analysis reports from the **Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage of Belgium (KIK-IRPA)**, widely considered one of the top five most prestigious conservation and heritage science institutes in the world.
- An over six-hundred-page in-depth critical analysis, blending traditional connoisseurship with formalist study, authored by Professor Michel Draguet.
- Expert restoration executed by **Arcanes Sarl (Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France - C2RMF)**, described as an elite, top-tier painting restoration workshop in the highly specialized world of European art restoration. Their interventions and findings are set forth in an extensive, detailed report.

Scientific Evidence and Precise Dating

KIK-IRPA's key scientific findings include:

- **Carbon-14 Dating:** Analysis of the linen canvas dates the material to between 1520 and 1580, placing it squarely within the final decades of Michelangelo's life.
- **Pigment Analysis:** The painting uses a 16th-century palette, notably smalt, a blue mineral pigment that Michelangelo may have discovered during his apprenticeship with Domenico Ghirlandaio, and which he used to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Furthermore, *"the identification of carminic acid gives proof of the use of cochineal scale insects in the red lake of Mary's cloak (...). In the given 16th century context of the red lake, the Mexican cochineal species (Dactylopius coccus Costa) is the most likely source used"* says Dr. Steven Saverwyns, Director, Pigment Analysis Laboratory, KIK-IRPA. *"The presence of red lake made from Mexican cochineal insects supports a date as of 1540"*, says Professor Draguet, since this variant of red lake appeared in Europe during that decade and can be found in Titian's painting, which he used in *The Vendramin Family Venerating a Relic of the True Cross* (1543-1547).
- **MA-XRF Scanning:** Macro X-ray fluorescence confirmed that one of Michelangelo's amply documented monograms was twice applied by the artist to the original dry paint surface before the natural formation of craquelure. In addition to these monograms, there is a cryptic series of lines that can be likened to the numbers that appear in the artist's correspondence: 1-5-4. There is no further information regarding the exact year.
- **Infrared Reflectography:** This revealed significant compositional changes during the painting process, excluding the possibility that the work is a copy.

"No modern pigments could be identified in the composition of the paint (nor in the paint underlying the monograms). Craquelures formed in the paint layer run through both monograms, so they were definitely not applied after the craquelure in the paint had formed." — Dr. Saverwyns



Left monogram,
approximately 11mm. / 0.4330 in. high –
© Fredrik Johansson



Right monogram
approximately 11mm. / 0.4330 in. high –
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The Investigation

The investigation was directed by Professor Draguet, Member of the Class of Arts of the Royal Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Fine Arts of Belgium; High Representative of Belgian Federal Heritage; and Honorary Director General of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. Draguet is a Professor of Art History at the Free University of Brussels. Under his leadership, this discovery is the result of a rigorous synthesis of archival research and scientific stylistic analysis. By spearheading this investigation, Professor Draguet has bridged the gap between forensic data and traditional connoisseurship to confirm the presence of Michelangelo's hand.

“The presence of two indexed artist’s monograms, integrated into the material of the work itself, allows us to consider this an autograph work by Michelangelo.” — Professor Draguet

Restoration and "Sculptural" Technique

After the removal of a thin strip of painted canvas added to the work after 1920 to increase its height, Arcanes' restoration returned the work to its original dimensions. In the words of Dr. Saverwyns: *“The painting is in good condition commensurate with its age.”*

- **“Sculptural Approach”**: Central to Michelangelo's formal strategy is the consistent placement of a unidirectional light source from the left, which functions to articulate the sculptural mass of the entire composition. This lighting logic facilitates a rigorous application of chiaroscuro, most notably within the Virgin's mantle, where the light catches the ridges of the heavy, rounded “waterfall” folds, casting the deep recesses into sharp relief. Michelangelo borrowed this manner of rendering drapery from Ghirlandaio.

This mastery of form has its roots in Michelangelo's early studies. The same “waterfall” and “teardrop” folds identified by specialists such as Sir Timothy Clifford, Paul Joannides and David Ekserdjan during the 2019 authentication of the *Study of Jupiter* (circa 1490) — which draws direct inspiration from the classical Apollo Belvedere — find their most accomplished and evocative expression in the drapery of the *Spirituali Pietà*.

The physical handling further supports the attribution:

- **Brushstrokes:** Characterised by multidirectional brushstrokes (emphatic parallel and cross-hatching) used to render flesh and fabric, mirroring the methodology used by The Metropolitan Museum of Art to determine that *The Torment of Saint Anthony*, now at the Kimbell Art Museum, was indeed painted by Michelangelo.
- **“Reserves”:** “*The technique of leaving 'reddish reserves' around shapes to enhance the effect of relief sculpture is a hallmark of the master's hand.*” — Professor Draguet.
- **Composition:** The sculptural composition, in which the figures of the Virgin and Christ expand to the very boundaries of the support, represents another quintessentially Michelangelesque hallmark—a visual strategy so specific that it functions with the authority of an autograph signature.

Historical context

For centuries, Giorgio Vasari's statement in *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, that Michelangelo painted only four panels during his career, acquired a certain authority and led specialists to believe that Michelangelo had turned away from easel painting after completing the *Tondo Doni* (c. 1503–1507) to devote himself to frescoes and sculpture. However, several studies have shown that other paintings were executed by the artist, while the identification of the “four panels” has never been definitively resolved, except the *Tondo Doni*.

The identification of the *Spirituali Pietà* — a work closely linked to the Ecclesia Viterbiensis, a circle of reformers gathered around Cardinal Reginald Pole between 1541 and 1545 in the hope of restoring the unity of Christendom — challenges the established narrative by demonstrating that the master practised easel painting to express his evangelical convictions within this group.

This discovery provides a rare insight into Michelangelo's late career following his meeting with the poet Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara. She shared a close spiritual bond with Michelangelo, as evidenced by their correspondence, drawings and poems. At the same time, Michelangelo's work underwent a shift due to the negative reception of his fresco of *The Last Judgement* in the context of a dogmatic hardening, as evidenced by the restoration of the Roman Inquisition in 1542.

The short treatise *Il Beneficio di Cristo* (Venice, 1543), written by Benedetto da Mantova, crystallised this climate. Its main themes – original sin, justification by faith, the primacy of grace, the imitation of Christ, the role of free will – helped to define the religious horizon within which Michelangelo's late work was set.

A Theological Masterpiece

The Virgin's heavy drapery provides a monumental sweep and an expansive lap that serve as stable, altar-like foundation for the body of Christ, anchoring the composition and emphasizing her role as a pillar of strength. The composition captures a suspended moment between death and resurrection; amidst this play of shadow, Christ is rendered in a profound, serene sleep—a state entirely devoid of the physical markers of agony.

This is an unorthodox representation, marked by the conspicuous absence of the Arma Christi (instruments of the Passion). The work reflects a profound spiritual interiority that, during the Counter-

Reformation, bypassed the burgeoning dictates of the Vatican, rendering such idiosyncratic devotion and depiction both dangerous and prohibited; an altarpiece of cryptic construction that boldly challenges Titian's naturalism and adheres to a formal simplicity close to that of icons and Trecento painting, considered by Vittoria Colonna to be conducive to the intensification of religious sentiment.

This stillness is echoed by the oneiric landscape in the background, a dreamlike space that functions as a liminal realm rather than a realistic setting. The landscape, featuring a vista identified as the countryside of Tivoli near the Ponte Lucano, points towards the geographic sphere of influence of the Farnese and their allies.

The work employs a complex “visual collage” of Michelangelo’s own motifs; for instance, the torso of Christ and the orb are a direct formal transfer from his celebrated drawing *The Dream* (c. 1533) at the Courtauld, while Christ’s arms echo the figure of Silenus from *A Children’s Bacchanal* (1533) in the Royal Collection Trust. These self-quotations serve a cryptic theological purpose, transforming pagan imagery into a powerful meditation on salvation.

Michelangelo's most striking invention is an orb hidden under the Virgin's tunic, which distinguishes him from his predecessors. Whereas Ghirlandaio’s *Virgin of Mercy* depicts her as the literal Mother of the Church shielding the faithful under her mantle, Michelangelo introduces the invention of a concealed orb under her tunic, shifting the symbolism towards a more cosmic sovereignty. The Virgin’s countenance is marked by a stoic grace and restrained pathos; her youthful features convey a timeless, idealised sorrow rather than raw devastation, suggesting her anguish is deeply internalised.

Redefining Michelangelo’s Legacy

Upon the resurgence of the *Spirituali Pietà* years after Michelangelo’s death, the work emerged as a seminal archetype, catalysing a vast array of artistic interpretations among those who encountered it within one or more of the Farnese residences. Indeed, the specific iconographic arrangement of this Pietà has arguably become the most frequently replicated pose in the history of religious Western art and can be found in works by artists such as Federico Zuccari, Marcello Venusti, Otto van Veen, etc., who reproduce the main motifs: Christ's posture, arms outstretched, supported by the Virgin Mary, her gaze turned towards the sky, the twist of Christ's torso, the lateral position of his legs, etc. Crucially, the absence of any known contemporary copies further solidifies the work’s standing as the unique original.

About the Artwork

- Title: *Spirituali Pietà*
- Artist: Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (Caprese, Republic of Florence, 1475 – Rome, Papal States, 1564)
- Date: 154?
- Technic: Oil on linen canvas
- Size: 134,7 x 107,2 cm / 53 x 42,2 Inch
- Photo: © Fredrik Johansson

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