

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 – 1564) THE DELPHIC SIBYL

Props:
Timeline
Books of Michelangelo

Our artist for today, Michelangelo Buonarroti (my-kul-an-gel-o bwan-a-rot-ee), has been described as the greatest artist and sculptor who ever lived. He grew up in Florence, during the age of Renaissance -- the period in European history which is known for the greatest flowering of arts, literature, and knowledge. Florence was supposed to be the heart of the Renaissance art and by Michelangelo's time the city had become a living museum with masterpieces of painting and sculpture everywhere. In an age of great artists he was perhaps the greatest, creating immortal works in all three of the major arts – sculpture, painting, and architecture.

Artist Background:

Michelangelo was born on March 6, 1475 in Caprese, Italy. He was the 2nd of 5 brothers. His father Ludovico Buonarroti was a proud and respectable man who was a civil servant. The Buonarroti family was not exactly poor but they had to be very careful with their money. Michelangelo's mother was in poor health so he had a nurse take care of him. His nurse was a stonemason's wife and at some point he may have got his first lessons in carving stone here.

Michelangelo's mother died when he was only 6 years old. When he was 10 years old his father sent him to grammar school to learn reading, penmanship and little of Latin to prepare him for a life as a gentleman. But Michelangelo, who spent all his free time drawing on every scrap of paper he could find, had very different plans for his future. When he was 13 years old he asked his father's permission to quit school and become an artist's apprentice. His father was outraged as he felt an artist's work was like that of a common laborer and not a worthy occupation for a son of a gentleman. But Michelangelo did not give up and his father finally relented. He was apprenticed to a prominent Florentine painter Domenico (do-men-ick-o) Ghirlandaio (geer-lon-die-yo) for a period of 3 years.

Though Michelangelo was just a beginner he soon found himself working along with Ghirlandaio's other apprentices on the most important commission of their master's career – fresco paintings in the church of Santa Maria Novella. For a year he learned the art of fresco painting from Ghirlandaio. Then the course of Michelangelo's life took a turn when the most powerful man in Florence, Lorenzo the Magnificent (de Medici) noticed his unusual talent. Lorenzo took Michelangelo to live with him and educated Michelangelo with the Medici children. During this time Michelangelo came in contact with some of the most famous and brilliant men of the time. However when Lorenzo the Magnificent died, Michelangelo returned to his father's house.

When a civil strife broke out in Florence Michelangelo fled to Bologna. As trouble continued in Florence Michelangelo went to Rome in 1496. A French cardinal gave him the commission of the Virgin Mary holding the dead Christ in her arms. Such a scene is called a *pieta* which means "pity" in Italian. It was supposed to be done in a year but it took Michelangelo two years to do. Unfortunately, the Frenchman died and never saw the sculpture. The sculpture won almost unanimous praise and pilgrims from all over Europe flocked to Rome when they heard about the new *Pieta*.

When Michelangelo returned to Florence in 1501 he was a reputed sculptor. Here he worked on his most famous work, the 17 feet high statue of *David*. The *David* established him as the greatest sculptor in all Italy. Michelangelo was only 29 years old when he completed the *David*.

In 1505 Pope Julius II summoned him to Rome to paint the ceiling of Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo was primarily a sculptor and not want to undertake the painting commission. But the Pope insisted. It is believed that Michelangelo's rivals, Raphael and Bramante were becoming jealous of his fame and

therefore convinced the Pope that he should do the painting. They thought Michelangelo would not be as successful as a painter since he was primarily a sculptor. It took Michelangelo 4 1/2 years to do painting. Today's painting, *The Delphic Sibyl*, is a part of the Sistine Chapel and we will talk about it in more detail. Years later Michelangelo painted the *Last Judgment* on the back wall of the Sistine chapel. The *Last Judgment* took Michelangelo 6 years to complete.

During the last years 17 of his life he worked on St. Peter's Cathedral. He was appointed the chief architect of the Cathedral by Pope Paul. He worked on it for the rest of his life but did not live to see it finished. Michelangelo died at the age of 89.

The Sistine Chapel – The Delphic Sibyl

The Sistine Chapel is 133 ft. long, 43 feet wide and up to 59 feet high (which is about 3 stories high)! Michelangelo devised a new way of scaffolding (temporary wooden or metal framework used by workmen) to work on the Sistine chapel. He would stand on his toes, head tilted back and his arms overhead. Imagine how tiring this must have been for him! In fact he wrote a letter to his friend complaining how tired he got and how the paint would drip in his eyes and ruined his vision.

If painting like this is not hard enough, the pope wanted the ceiling to be done in fresco style. **Frescos** are watercolors used on wet plaster. This kind of painting is durable but exhausting for the artist. First Michelangelo made sketches on paper and then drew the scenes on the ceiling. Next he covered a small part of the ceiling drawing, the amount he believed he could paint in a day, with wet plaster. With a sharp tool he would redraw the main lines in the soft plaster and finally begin to paint it. By night the plaster would dry so any unfinished part would have to be scraped off.

In the original commission, the Pope had asked only for 12 Apostles to be painted on the ceiling. Michelangelo convinced the Pope that just painting 12 Apostles would turn out to be a "poor affair". So the Pope gave Michelangelo freedom to paint it his way. So when Michelangelo finished painting there were around 346 figures over 5800 square feet – all of which he painted almost single-handedly. Early on when he began the work in the chapel Michelangelo hired 5 assistants from Florence to help him paint. But this arrangement did not last as he was impatient and a perfectionist so he sent them home and from then on worked alone and used helpers only for the most mechanical tasks.

(Show the picture of the whole ceiling and point to the picture as you explain)

Michelangelo had divided the vast central space in nine panels which told the biblical story of the creation and destruction. In the first 3 panels, God made the heaven and the earth. Next was the story of man, from creation of Adam and Eve to the temptation by the serpent and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The last 3 panels dealt with the life of Noah and the story of the Flood balancing creation on one end with destruction on the other. Around the edge of the ceiling he painted the biblical ancestors of Jesus and scenes from the Bible. Between them were massive figures of the Hebrew prophets and pagan sibyls who foretold the coming of Christ. Michelangelo had worked it out so neatly so that creation part of the ceiling rested over the altar, while the saga of human downfall rested over the heads of the people.

The Delphic Sibyl is here in the painting (point to the picture). The **Delphic Sibyl** was a legendary figure who made prophecies in Delphi. The word **sibyl** comes from the Greek word *sibylla*, meaning prophethess.

From the day it was finished the Sistine Chapel was considered one of the greatest masterpieces in the world.