

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

OAO Michelangelo Pieta TRANSCRIPT

KATHLEEN CHRISTIAN: I'm Kathleen Christian. I'm a Senior Lecturer in Art History at the Open University and today I'm going to be talking about Michelangelo's Pieta in the Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome. The sculpture was made between 1498 and 1499 by Michelangelo when he was only 23 or 24-years-old and relatively unknown. It was made for a French cardinal for his own tomb, which was in the old Basilica of St. Peter's. It was destroyed only a few years after Michelangelo made the Pieta, to make room for the new Church of St. Peter's.

The cardinal asked for the statue because he wanted to put it on his tomb, which was in the small chapel of Santa Petronilla, a chapel dedicated to a saint who was thought to be the daughter of St. Peter. Originally this small chapel was a mausoleum, and it became a chapel dedicated to the French kings in Rome. So this French cardinal wanted his burial in this French royal space.

The cardinal chose Michelangelo in part because Michelangelo had already worked for another cardinal in Rome, Cardinal Riario. So he was known inside the right circles. At the same time he also chose Michelangelo because Michelangelo was Tuscan, and as a Tuscan he knew how to work with marble. Marble was not a material that was native to Rome. Roman sculptors didn't know how to work it as well as Tuscan sculptors. So the cardinal took a bit of a chance on a relatively unknown Tuscan sculptor because of his connections, and because of his ability to work with this material.

The contract still survives, and it specifies that Michelangelo had to finish the work within one year, in part because the cardinal was at an advanced age, and wanted this sculpture for his tomb, but also because the year 1500 was approaching, which was a very special year. It was going to be a Jubilee year, in which pilgrims were expected to come to Rome to receive a special indulgence, and they would see this sculpture in place at St. Peter's.

The contract also specified that the sculpture was guaranteed to be better than any other sculpture in marble, visible in Rome. So that means any antique sculpture, and also any contemporary sculpture. And the marble of this sculpture is a very important aspect of its appearance, and its meaning. It was quarried in Carrara, which is an area of Tuscany by the sea between Pisa and Genoa. And this site was known since antiquity as the source of the purest white marble. It was used by the Romans. It was known in the Renaissance.

And Michelangelo, after he got the commission for this statue, went himself to the quarries, working with the quarry masters to find the best block of marble. And the best block was one that was pure white, without veins, without marks. It had to be chosen very carefully. And this is

something that Michelangelo would continue to do throughout his career - spend a great deal of time in the quarries, finding the best block he possibly could.

The sculpture depicts the scene of Mary holding the dead Christ on her lap. This is a moment just after the crucifixion, and before the entombment that actually isn't described in the Bible, but it's a moment of great piety, of great emotional charge. It's a moment when the mother of Christ is holding her own son, and accepting the fact that his death has been necessary.

So the viewers who would have seen this would have experienced a very intense emotion - one that asked them to remember Christ's sacrifice, and also recognises the sacrifice of Mary, and allows the viewer to remember that this sacrifice was for them, in the end - the sacrifice that allows them to be saved, ultimately.

The subject certainly comes from the fact that the patron was French, because this type of sculpture was known in France and in northern Europe. In this comparison you see a French example from around 1515 in limestone, and it's nearly life-sized. You have Mary holding the adult Christ after his crucifixion. And you see that the subject comes from this type of Pieta.

You also see the difference between a limestone version and Michelangelo's version in luminous white marble. If you look at Michelangelo's sculpture, you see that it's meant to be seen from a particular angle. And you'll remember that the sculpture was inside a small round chapel. And the viewers who would have approached it, would have circulated past it. And if you look at the sculpture you can see that there is a way in for them to the composition.

If you look at Mary, and you look at her left hand, you can see that it's opening the composition to the viewer, who is approaching from her left. Her hand gesture invites the viewer in towards her, and the viewer would have circulated past her. And you can see that the movement of the viewer, taken account of by the composition of the sculpture itself. Mary invites the viewer in, and then the viewer walks past and sees this handsome body of the dead Christ, looks at the wounds of Christ, and then circulates past to the point where they see the face of Christ, which is another intense devotional sight.

Mary is shown here as a very young woman. This is something that's often remarked upon about this sculpture. Mary looks like she's almost the same age as Christ. That's in part because of standards of beauty. She was shown as a beautiful young woman, but also because Mary was often said to be, not only the mother of Christ, but the bride of Christ. She's often seen as a stand in for the church, or ecclesia. And the church is said to be the bride of Christ. It is married to Christ, and the devout's passage into salvation is through Mary, through the church.

If you look at the sculpture you see how wonderfully Michelangelo has carved the deep folds of fabric that are enveloping Mary. This is also something that is more typical of northern European sculpture, but one that Michelangelo has performed in an absolutely masterful way. You see how deeply he's carved the sculpture, and how he has found this figure in a block that is actually not as deep as it seems.

If you look at the sculpture from the side, you see that it's actually more shallow than it seems when you're looking at it from the front. It was meant to be positioned inside a niche. So the front of the figure is highly finished. The back is actually not. And where the viewer would have seen the figure from the front, Michelangelo has finished the sculpture to an incredible level of polish.

And this polish would have taken an enormous amount of time and labour. When he was so young, he had the time to commit to finishing to an absolute level of perfection, which he would never have again, later in his career when he was more in demand. This polish is something that adds to the absolute luminosity of the marble, which, as we've seen, is this pure white Carrara marble. And it creates this holy appearance when you look at the sculpture.

So another notable feature of this statue is the really prominent signature that you see on Mary's chest. And this is one of the most famous signatures in the history of art, because of its prominence, and the fact that Michelangelo was relatively unknown when he signed this work of art in such a prominent way. If you look at the signature it has his name. Michelangelo Buonarroti of Florence made this, "Faciebat." The way that he signed this work, particularly that word, "Faciebat," refers to the way that a particular famous ancient sculptor was said to have signed his works. So Michelangelo is showing off a bit with his classical learning here.

So we can imagine the pilgrims coming to Rome, seeing all of the ancient works of art, and the modern works of art, and coming to St. Peter's, seeing this extraordinary marble sculpture, and seeing Michelangelo's signature. Remember, this was supposed to be the greatest work of art in Rome. Michelangelo makes sure that they know who made it.

At the same time, we can say that his signature here is also part of the devotion that he has towards Mary. If you think about the fact that he's putting his name on this statue, the act of carving it, is itself a devotional act. Michelangelo is, in a way, offering himself to Mary, I think, with this signature, asking himself for Mary's and Christ's help and salvation.

Unfortunately Michelangelo's Pieta was also the victim of one of the most famous acts of art terrorism in history, which happened in 1972 when a Hungarian-born Australian geologist took a hammer to the statue, and attacked it on Pentecost Sunday. Fragments of marble went flying into the crowd, some of them were never recovered. The statue was restored, but moved behind bulletproof glass, and put in an inaccessible place where one can no longer have the same relationship with the sculpture that one would have had in Michelangelo's own day.