

# 'Michelangelo and marble (Copenhagen Gads, 1876)'<sup>1</sup>

Julius Lange (trans. Karl Johns)

Michelangelo might enjoy greater fame than any other for artistic universality since he not merely practiced as a painter, sculptor and architect, but produced highly significant work in each and earned an unusual reputation. Aside from his artworks, his poetry also earns a place in human memory due to its content and beauty. The memory of his great, noble, true and full personality also survives in the descriptions by his contemporaries and the large number of his own preserved letters. For these reasons, the subject I have chosen, his relation to the material of sculpture, indeed only one of the materials used in sculpture, might appear too narrow, to teach us anything about Michelangelo the man and artist. I have chosen this topic however because I feel that no relationship within his range of creativity presentable in such a narrow space of time could be as enlightening as this. His own personal thoughts and reflection were not by any means spread evenly among the various genres of art. They were devoted to sculpture, and from his earliest to his last years, marble was his favourite material.

Only the command of a despotic prince could force him to the immense work of painting that might be his greatest source of fame, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. His activity as an architect occurred overwhelmingly in his last years. However, it is necessary to understand Michelangelo's relationship to marble, which had an epoch-making influence on the sculpture of later generations, if we wish to understand his works of sculpture at all. These magnificent and unique figures exert a force over our emotions unlike any other artist – in spite of the fact that so many survive unfinished with such a structure of irregularity to give a sense of incompleteness.

<sup>1</sup> Originally published as 'Michelangelo og marmoret (1876),' Axel Sophus Guldberg ed., *Fra Videnskabens Verden Almenfattelige Smaaskrifter af danske og norske Videnskabsmænd*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., Copenhagen: Gad, 1876, Julius Lange, *Billedkunst skildringer och studier fra hjemmet og udlandet*, København: P. G. Philipsens forlag, 1884, pp. 68-128. Reprinted: *Udvalgte skrifter af Julius Lange*, udgivne af Georg Brandes og P. Købke, Tredje bind, København: Det nordiske forlag, 1903, pp. 42-77. And in German translation as 'Michelangelo und der Marmor,' *Julius Lange's ausgewählte Schriften (1875-1885)*, herausgegeben von Georg Brandes und Peter Købke, unter Mitwirkung von Alfred Wien übersetzt von Ida Anders, Strasbourg: Heitz, Erster Band, 1911, pp. 45-78. [Plates added from my copy of Julius Lange, *Udvalgte skrifter af Julius Lange*, udgivne af Georg Brandes og P. Købke. [Click here](#). ED]

For many years, a very large block of marble lay in the court of the workshop at the cathedral of Florence, the *opera del duomo*, and caused great problems for management. A sculptor, Agostino di Duccio, had attempted to work it in 1463, but he was unable to elicit a figure from it, perhaps not surprising if we consider the technical state of stone-carving.<sup>2</sup> His unsuccessful work bedevilled his successors since, however flawed, since he had made a start on the figure and even carved away the space between the legs. With the accelerated progress in the arts around the end of the fifteenth century, it was natural to look again at this large block. The marble was of high quality, and whatever was done with it could only be better than leaving it lying unattended. They looked around for somebody who might be up to the task. When Leonardo da Vinci returned from Milan around 1500 after achieving notoriety there as a painter and sculptor, some thought of offering the block to him. Another distinguished and excellent sculptor, Andrea Sansovino, asked if it could be given to him. Around the same time, Michelangelo Buonarroti entered into the picture, although we do not know whether the authorities of the cathedral construction themselves approached him, or as others would have it, he turned to them. At that time he was a young man 26 years of age, but had attracted attention as a distinct talent from his earliest years. He had recently in addition completed marble works in Rome, particularly a Madonna with the Dead Christ in Her Lap, a Pietà, which had made him famous enough to gain a reputation of measuring up not merely to the sculptors of the present, but even those of antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

Michelangelo certainly approached the task energetically. It must have appealed to his purely artistic drive, his inclination for heroic technical deeds as well as his ambition and powerful self-assurance to create forms on as large a scale as this. He already had a certain amount of experience in such projects. As a youth of 17 years, he bought a marble block four ells in height [over 4.5 metres] that had for many years been exposed to rain and wind, and used it to create a figure of Hercules. He had for some time desired to work on the large block at the *opera del duomo*. He took its measurements and felt that he could derive a 'reasonable' [*ragionevole*] figure from it 'by adjusting the pose of the figure to the stone, as it had been left by the earlier sculptor.'<sup>4</sup> He made a small sketch in wax and offered to use the entire block for a single figure without adding any pieces, something which not even Sansovino had dared. On August 16, 1501, he was commissioned to 'make, execute and complete' (*faciendum et perficiendum et perfecte finiendum*) a human figure 9 ells in height [slightly over 10 metres], a so-called giant as had already been

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Gaye, *Carteggio*, vol. 1, pp. 465 ff. *Le Lettere di Michelangelo Buonarroti* ed., Gaetano Milanesi, 620.

<sup>3</sup> Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelangelo*, chap. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Vasari, 'Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti,' *Le Vite*, Florence: Le Monnier, 1856, vol. 12, p. 172 [*Le Vite*, ed. Milanesi, Florence: Sansoni, 1906, vol. 7, p. 153].

begun.<sup>5</sup> He created a large wooden structure in the work area and set up the block inside. After testing the marble with a stroke of the chisel, he began working early in the morning of Monday, September 13, in his manner (*firmiter et fortiter laborare*). Nobody was permitted to see his work until it was finished.

The statue that emerged from the marble and was complete in January 1504, was the famous David that stood at the entrance to the old city hall of Florence and was only moved to the academy of arts in 1875. In spite of obvious shortcomings, the masterful, brilliant technique in the surface forms and the marvellous expression, particularly in the head, invest this sculpture with a completely extraordinary artistic value. It is important to know the history by way of explanation for such an apparent arbitrariness in the bodily proportions, the abnormally large size of the head and hands in relation to the midriff and arms, flatness of shoulder blades, the back and behind. We are told that Michelangelo intentionally left parts of the original block to show that its dimensions did not permit him to completely realize his own intentions with this statue. Not all mistaken proportions, such as the relation of parts of the head to one another, can be attributed to the difficult challenge provided to the artist by this particular block, but result from the fact that he never arrived at complete clarity in his artistic principles for treating bodily proportions. To understand the broader significance of this, it is however, important to recognize his relationship to the marble.

The figure of David announces a new period in Michelangelo's artistic activity and in the history of modern sculpture. Compared to what was now being ventured, earlier marble sculpture almost gives an appearance of modest achievements. It would not be long before, in matters of dimensions and technique, even less talented sculptors embraced tasks that would have caused the greatest 15<sup>th</sup> century masters themselves to recoil. Michelangelo's own desire to work on the large scale was so little satisfied with the giant of nine ells that quite to the contrary, he began to fancy fantastic realms. A year after the David had been completed he was already actively designing a tomb for Pope Julius II, intended to become an entire mountain of marble, and this plan quickly led to a yet more gigantic project – the erection of a new basilica of St. Peter. Work on the tomb of the pope required Michelangelo to spend a greater period of time in Carrara to direct the excavation of larger quantities of marble. In 1505, he lived for eight months in the remote place, certainly without anybody nearby to allow something like an exchange of ideas. On the other hand, there was enough marble for an infinite number of statues. He was led to peculiar ideas while wandering there on the beautiful mountains at the seacoast.

His contemporary biographer Ascanio Condivi tells us that 'one day he contemplated the landscape from the height of a mountain facing the sea and conceived the wish to create a colossus to be seen at a great distance by the

<sup>5</sup> *Le Lettere di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, Florence: Le Monnier, 1876, pp. 620-622.

travellers at sea. This idea was inspired by the form of the massive cliff that seemed suited to be transformed into a colossal figure. He also desired to compete with the ancients who, possibly for the same purpose as he, had come to this area, or possibly simply to pass the time, left carved traces of their visits, crude and incomplete for certain, but giving a good sense of their artistic gifts...He would certainly have fulfilled his plan if time had permitted or if his committed project made it possible. I once heard him express great sadness that he was not able to do so.<sup>6</sup>

In this case, Michelangelo appears to us like an Atlas attempting to resolve things on his own two shoulders as the nations of antiquity had collectively attempted on thousands. His significance for the history of art has something of this tragic quality on the whole. The energy of an individual, even the greatest, could only fail when dealing with tasks on the order of entire nations. The only time that such a project was realized was during the very early days of human history when under the scourges of a despotic pharaoh, the Egyptians created the immense colossus of the Sphinx beside the pyramids of Giza, still today being marvelled as the largest stone carving in the world. Most of it is presently buried in the sands of the desert, but the whole is estimated to measure a hundred feet in length and 70 feet in height, hewn from the rock as it stood there. In Greece, the social conditions and the entire trend of the arts were not conducive to ideas or projects of this kind. It is remarkable that a similar idea arose precisely when an autocratic ruler, Alexander the Great, controlled the Greek republics and planned to combine his rule of Hellas with Asia, an immense political unit and something of a 'wild idea'. It has been assumed that Michelangelo was familiar with this idea and was inspired by it in forming his own. Yet this Greek conception provides a striking counterpart to his, contributes to its significance, and we therefore report the anecdote from antiquity.<sup>7</sup>

Already during the earlier part of Alexander's reign, he was approached in his military camp by Dinocrates, a young architect from Macedonia. Dinocrates is described as a man with great faith in himself, his brilliant projects and in his energy. His appealing physical appearance and attractive facial features also recommended him. He brought letters on his behalf to the most noble men in the circle of Alexander, who welcomed him and promised to soon introduce him to the king. Yet time passed and the artist became impatient. He decided to take the step of his own accord.

One day when he knew that the king was holding court he bathed and anointed his body, left his clothing at his lodgings, donned a wreath of poplar leaves, draped a lion skin over his left shoulder, took a club in his right hand and approached the royal throne in the costume of Hercules. This could not fail to make an impression, people congregated around him, and when the king saw him he

<sup>6</sup> Condivi, chap. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Vitruvius, preface to book 2; Plutarch, *The Life of Alexander*, chap. 72; Strabo, book 14.

commanded to make space for Dinocrates. They were soon conversing, and Dinocrates reported to have made a model for transforming the foothills of Athos into a male figure, presumably as some say, in the form of Alexander himself. In its left hand, this statue would be holding a city that could hold ten thousand people within its walls, and an enormous sacrificial bowl in its right, intended to collect the water from all rivers of the mountain and emit them into the sea. Others describe the design less clearly with the statue pouring the water from a basin into a bowl so that it would flow from a city to the right of the figure to another to its left. Alexander amused himself at the idea, but in a practical manner immediately asked the artist if he had thought of surrounding the city with farmland for its subsistence. No, Dinocrates had not thought of that. The city would need to be supplied from the sea. This caused Alexander to reject the design while vividly acknowledging its magnificence. A city laid out in such a way could no more thrive and grow than a child deprived of the milk from its wet nurse. Yet the king realized that he had a brilliant man standing before him, adopted him as an attendant and commissioned him to create great projects such as founding the city of Alexandria in Egypt, the site having been selected by the king of course, a site so perfect that the city still stands as a monument to the political genius of Alexander more than two millennia later.

It is true that Dinocrates intended far more with his project than Michelangelo with his, although on such a colossal scale that the sculptural element of the idea receded somewhat into the background. If we consider aside from this that Michelangelo had no Alexander the Great to support his intended transformation of the immensity of nature as it actually existed, and everything suggests that his project would only have relied on his own personal and artistic resources, then his creative spunk is probably the greater of the two. Although he might appear as something of a Michelangelo of antiquity, Dinocrates was presumably something of a charlatan, which Michelangelo was certainly not. There is no doubt that the Florentine meant it more seriously than the Macedonian artist. We have seen how Michelangelo's courage in relation to the marble consistently grew. In addition, an incident only recently discovered was to later affect his artistic career, and on the one hand is quite illuminating about what he wanted and demanded of his work in marble, and on the other provides an almost satirical finale to his striving for continuously larger formats. Historians with the attitude of Herodotus could consider such an event as an act of envious gods avenging an exaggerated artistic pride, inflated to such a point as to question the power of the gods – the power to give form to the freedom of nature. It was a project, a wild idea, another complement to that of Dinocrates. In this instance it was the sovereign appearing as the source of the project while the artist annihilated it with merciless criticism. Pope Clement VII from the Medici family had in all seriousness planned to have Michelangelo work a colossal marble forty ells high intended to stand on a street corner in Florence facing the Medici palace, now Palazzo Riccardi. For the negotiations he availed himself of a Florentine priest and good friend of Michelangelo then living in Rome. As the priest expressly states in a letter in the

name of the pope, it was understood that the colossus would be assembled from smaller increments (*di pezzi*).<sup>8</sup> The answer from the artist from October 1525, preserved in an autograph draft, begins with the regret that he 'does not believe he has as much energy as the amusement' caused by the letter from this friend. He begins to speak seriously about the project, but says:

It seems to me that the colossus would not be well-placed at that particular corner since it would remove too much of the street. The other corner where the barber has his shop would be far better since it would there command the entire square and not inhibit the traffic so much. Since it is probably preferable not to curtail the barber's business, the figure might rather be shown seated, and the seat placed high enough so that if the whole is composed of individual parts, the interior could be left hollow to create a space for the barber without loss of that rental income. In order to permit the smoke to escape from that business as it does now, the statue should be given a cornucopia to function as a chimney. Since the head be hollow together with the rest, this could be put to use since a grocer lives on that corner, who is a very good friend of mine and has told me in confidence that he would like to install a beautiful pigeon loft in the head of the colossus. I also have another idea that would be a great improvement if indeed, the figure is to be made substantially larger, easily possible since the small parts can be used to compose an entire tower, and this would be for it to provide the bell tower lacking from the church of San Lorenzo.

If the bells were hung inside and the sound emitted from the mouth, then it would be as if the colossus were sounding the misericords, especially on festival days when larger bells are used and played more often than usual. As far as transporting the marble for the statue is concerned, I suggest that the pieces be brought at night and well packaged so that none will notice or see. It will become somewhat dangerous at the city gate, but even that can be resolved since in the worst scenario we would always have the Porta San Gallo where a small grate remains open until the daybreak.<sup>9</sup>

The artist ends with the statement that if he should work on an assignment, it must only be '*cosa onorevole*', something honourable. What was actually angering him here? What led to this torrent of satire and innuendo surrounding the stinginess and petty cunning of the pope in such an ill-fated but obviously so grand a project? The pope was certainly very surprised at Michelangelo's ill humour at this plan. What else could he have been counting on other than the well-known inclination on the

<sup>8</sup> Aurelio Gotti, *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, vol. 1, Florence: Gazzetta d'Italia, 1875, pp. 168-169, Milanese ed. *Le Lettere di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, ['Giovan Francesco, prete di Santa Maria del Fiore di Firenze in Roma'] pp. 448-449.

<sup>9</sup> [Creighton Gilbert and Linscott, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, pp. 246-247.]

part of the artist for the largest conceivable tasks in carving marble and his unique capacity in resolving them? We can see proof from the aforementioned examples of Michelangelo's art and artistic purposes that it was by no means the grandeur of the plan for a marble colossus of forty ells that repelled the artist. He must on the whole have fully sympathized with the idea. He must however have been dismayed in the first place at the idea of its location at a street corner, but decisively, the thought of a colossus composed of numerous smaller parts would have seemed pitiful and ridiculous. In directing such a request at Michelangelo, the pope could not in reality have had any notion of his relationship to the marble, his conception of sculpture or his technical processes. Far more than the artists of our own day, Michelangelo considered it important for every work of sculpture, even a group of figures, to be monolithic, carved from a single stone. He far preferred to leave irregularities in a work, to leave it unfinished than to be cobbled together from numerous pieces of marble. None of the original works by Michelangelo consist of more than one piece. The more we recognize characteristics of his relation to marble, the more we see the meaning of this idiosyncrasy. We must emphasize that the idea of a colossus pieced together in parts must have profoundly offended his conception of monumentality. His semi-imaginary emotions about large formats were well integrated into his feeling for solidity. In this sense, his feelings were less related to the cultures of classical antiquity or our present, than to the earliest or most barbarian civilizations, something more like the original population of Scandinavia foisting their enormous stone blocks onto the megalithic graves, the feeling of the Goths in lifting the unspeakably heavy dome from across the Adriatic onto the tomb of Theoderich in Ravenna or the sense of Egyptians whose art boasted its immense monolithic stone interiors, obelisks and statues. Monumentality is best achieved when the work of sculpture is created from the stone of the cliff without being alienated from its relation to the rock or the mountain; also that the figure is hewn from a single solid piece of stone with its heavy weight anchored in the ground while a statue assembled from small parts could never 'achieve honour'.

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We have chosen a few examples of Michelangelo striving for grandeur and monumentality. Yet these examples, the David, the idea for a colossus in Carrara, possibly in the earlier figure of Hercules and the project of Dinocrates, also expressed another remarkable thought, that of using the existing form within a rock formation of a marble block for a sculptural figure. A similar idea had already been expressed before Michelangelo, by the extraordinary and influential theorist Leon Battista Alberti.<sup>10</sup> He saw the origins of the entire art of sculpture in the moment when characteristics were recognized in certain inert objects such as a piece of wood, a clump of earth or the like, which with only slight adjustments could be

<sup>10</sup> Alberti, *De statua*, *Leon Battista Albertis kleinere kunsttheoretische Schriften*, [bilingual] ed., trans., and commentary, introduction and excurses by Hubert Janitschek, *Quellenschriften für Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttechnik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance XI*, Vienna: Braumüller, 1877, pp. 168-169.

given a form that actually existed in nature. When the interest arose, attempts were made to discover whether it might not be possible to complete the image and achieve a resemblance by adding or removing here or there, correcting or smoothing over lines or surfaces. From then onward, humanity incrementally increased its aptitude, learned to depict what they wished even without the rudimentary similarity in an inanimate mass.

As far as Michelangelo is concerned, we also have other evidence suggesting something similar. For Michelangelo, Alberti's idea of the origin of all art applies to his own. His conception of this has survived for us in a number of hints among his poems. These never addresses the art directly, but often isolates an image alluding to a given artistic detail to illuminate his amorous feelings, since most of his poems are erotic and most often deal with unrequited love. In more than one spot he treats the possibility of sculptural imagery, or rather the two possibilities, a beautiful or a failed picture slumbering within the marble block.<sup>11</sup> For example:

The greatest artist has no single concept/Which a rough marble block does not contain/Already in its core: that can attain/Only the hand that serves the intellect/The evil I shun, and the good I expect/Are thus. Sweet Lady both divine and vain,/Hidden in you; but, to my utmost pain,/My art opposes its desired effect.

So love is to blame for all my woes,/Nor is your beauty, nor indeed my lot,/If in your heart at the one time you bear/Pity and death: it is simply because/My low intelligence, tough burning-hot,/Can only draw from you death and despair. [No. 83, Joseph Tusiani, Noonday 1960, pp. 76-77.]

In other passages he compares the figure hidden in the marble with the good, which the artist's role is to rescue from the evil, the menial, the sensual, the raw material.<sup>12</sup>

In mountain-marble white,/Doth hide a statue bright,/That waxeth ever while the rock doth wane;/E'en so from flesh-control/The timid trembling soul/Mine unward fair would liberate in vain,/Lady, I look to thee/Alone to set me free,/For in myself doth will nor power remain. (*Sonnets and Madrigals of Michelangelo Buonarroti*, trans. William Wells Newell, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1900, no. 8, p. 37.)

In his verses, Michelangelo often speaks in such general expressions about the relation of the sculptor to his marble that if we take them literally, they would apply to every sculptor, yet we do find statements that only align with his own

<sup>11</sup> *Le rime di Michelangelo Buonarroti, cavate degli autografi, e pubblicate da Cesare Guasti*, Florence: Le Monnier, 1863, sonnet 16, p. 174. *Le rime di Michelangelo Buonarroti, Nachdichtungen von Hans Grasberger*, Miniaturbibliothek klassischer Schriften des In- und Auslandes, Bremen, 1872.

<sup>12</sup> Madrigal 12, Guasti ed., p. 37.

relationship to the marble so as to more individually illuminate the more generalized lines. In one of the famous sonnets he says,

even the greatest master of sculpture does not receive an idea not already present in a block of marble and circumscribed by its housing. The hand of the artist can only reach that hidden idea by obediently pursuing the intuition from the spirit. For this reason, my sovereign, you harbour both the evil I flee and the good that I strive for, both life and death. Of these two, death has been the one that has fallen to me and my art has therefore completely failed in its goals. I am not able to attribute the guilt for my failure to Amor as other lovers might do, or to your harshness or your wrath, but rather to fate and to my predetermined lot. If you bear death and compassion in your heart, and I with all the fire of my spirit am unable to retrieve anything other than death, then the reason is that I am a bad artist.<sup>13</sup>

For sculptors, marble is generally a material, and nothing further than a material. If one block of marble does not satisfy their purposes they find another. For Michelangelo, the marble block at hand also included the suggestion of a form, a living figure, an allusion that was vague and ambivalent to be sure, requiring a great master to be elucidated in a proper sculptural mode, but nevertheless an intimation that could or should be used. Usually, the idea for the marble only becomes germane once the artistic intention is completely clarified or even when a detailed model exists. For Michelangelo on the other hand, the random form of a block was itself a point of departure for a sculptural idea, it provided the initial impulse for the creation of a work of art, or potentially at least. We today can of course no longer precisely define the significance of this unique approach for Michelangelo's sculpture. We cannot know what his marble blocks originally looked like before being carved, and we have no documentation of his other works as we do for the *David*. In many cases we can surmise that the form of the block did not tell him any more than it would to other sculptors. I am nevertheless convinced that this unique relationship to the block of marble was not limited to random isolated instances. This is suggested by the general thoughts expressed in his poems as well as the intention to completely exploit the dimensions of the marble block, even when it occasionally leads to shortcomings. It was not then as simple a matter as now for a sculptor to supply themselves with marble for any conceivable purpose, and the sculptor advancing toward larger dimensions must have asked themselves how they could use a particular block to their greatest advantage.

In other ways as well, Michelangelo shows how the original arrangement of a work of art can be determined from without in the manner of verses being commissioned from a poet or a musician told to vary a given theme. Whether

<sup>13</sup> Sonnet 15, Guasti, p. 173 'Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto'. Trans. Wells, 1900 as above, no. 3, p. 5.

working as a sculptor or painter, they are often intent on using masses or lines to insert their figure into an empty flat or dimensional space defined by existing contours or surfaces. Such a space could appear to Michelangelo similar to the marble block either materially as a dense and obdurate material, or sculpturally as an equally empty space like the air. The question is confronted by every artist commissioned to work within a given space, such as filling in a pediment as Thorvaldsen with his group of St. John. This correspondence assumed a greater significance for Michelangelo since the relation not merely of the overall composition, but even the reciprocal parts of an individual figure were in some instances extrinsically given. A commission might for instance consist in painting or carving a pair of decorative figures to correspond symmetrically. Michelangelo in fact set himself that task in the paintings of the Sistine Ceiling and with the tombs of the Medici princes at San Lorenzo in Florence. On the simplest level, such symmetry is created by a figure seen in the same pose as the other with what is left to the one being right to the other. Such a correspondence can appear too even and boring, with a sense of lacking freedom or standing at attention. This is the reason that symmetry is varied with one figure shown from the back and the other from the front, with actual differences in their pose, movements and emotional expression differentiated while the ultimately definitive contours and masses are brought into a mutual symmetrical relationship. These examples clearly reveal how Michelangelo defined a reciprocal symmetry and seems to have told himself that at the corresponding spots, the larger motion of a lowered arm with the legs extending in the same direction with a protruding part well-lit section will match a recessive part less strongly illuminated, where the contours of the back need to lead, and so forth. We can imagine how he went about circumscribing such basic contours and surfaces of two figures with a differing emotional and corporeal motif, and then in a similar way how a figure could fit into the essentially insignificant irregular protrusions and depressions of a marble block.

This entire method then relates intimately and reciprocally to the way Michelangelo chose his subject matter and conceived the task of sculpture in general. He could never have proceeded this way if he had been one of those artists devoted primarily to studying nature and individuality as they existed among his historical contemporaries, or if he had the talent and inclination to portraiture.

If the artist is commissioned to depict a certain individual in a given situation, they are not able to allow a marble block to participate in the decision of how the figure should be formed or posed. When Michelangelo began working the large block at the *opera del duomo*, he had been appointed simply to use it to create a '*gigante*', a colossal figure. He himself decided that the block was apt for David with his sling, and if not, he would have needed to choose something else.

The most important and stately subject was the human figure, and Michelangelo often omitted narrative detail entirely and abided only by the human figure in general, the 'nameless person'. His task was often defined by nothing more than a few contours and surfaces within which he was to discover nothing further

than what we call a human being, man or woman, child, youth or aged person. He then breathed his own spirit into it and shaped it according to the ideal corresponding to humanity in his own spirit and feeling. For this reason, his art has been described as 'subjective' in a particular sense. We could also call it unusually 'individual' since Michelangelo reveals more of his rich inner life and variety than do any other artists.

Even if it might be the most unique and autonomous aspect, we must not forget that what we have been observing is merely one side of his artistic character. Even he, the most self-sufficient and independent of all artists was in many ways bound to certain historical traditions and had to serve them.

In one of his sonnets he writes,

when the divine art of sculpture conceives the idea for a figure, it begins with a simple model in unassuming materials. That is the original birth of the work of art. Then the hammer begins its task and retrieves the figure from the marble. This is the rebirth of the idea, and it should then live eternally in the marble. My life has been the same. I was first born as a model and for a time I was nothing more than a model, but then I was reborn in a greater state of perfection because of you, my exalted and beautiful lady! If this sketch is to become a marble statue and you grace this surface with your file then you can subdue the wild flame of my love with your instruction and education.<sup>14</sup>

In another sonnet concluding the same as that, the artist again compares himself to a model or sketch for a work of art,

when the divine aspect of humanity has received the idea for the face and pose of a figure, then the artist makes a small and simple model to prepare their work in marble, where the face and the pose are indicated, but not requiring artistic effort. In the same way, the most accomplished painter must also make drafts of the composition on rough paper before seizing the brush with their deft hand.<sup>15</sup>

The activity of a sculptor with the goal of creating a marble figure falls into numerous phases. The first is the creation of a purely intellectual, imaginary model, the second the execution of a small sketch succinctly investing the imaginary model with corporeal form. The third is the development of a larger design satisfying the artistic intention in general as well as in detail, and finally, the fourth is the transfer of the model into marble. We have seen that Michelangelo's model had a peculiarity

<sup>14</sup> Guasti no. XIV, pp. 171-172, Wells, no. 2, p. 5, Creighton Gilbert and Robert N. Linscott, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo*, New York: Vintage, 1963, no. 234, p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> Guasti no. XIV seconda lezione, p. 172.

in his being able to link the first and the last phase, surveying the scale of his marble in relation to his conceptual image. Then there is the fact that the third phase, a larger model, is eliminated. Along with everything else we know about his technique, the poetic statements we have just cited confirm that he needed nothing more than a small sketch in preparing to work in marble. His expressions make it completely clear how deeply he valued this sketch in relation to the work in marble. Both as his goal and point of departure, the actual artistic interest and work were more closely bound up with the marble than was the case with most other sculptors.

It is well known that Thorvaldsen compared the damp clay model to life, the shroud-coloured plaster casts to death, and the clear, shiny, everlasting marble figure to the Resurrection. In preparing his very rare works in bronze, Michelangelo did indeed use plaster and clay, but not so much for his work in marble. He seems to have modelled the small sketch in wax, a material as soft to work as clay, tolerating well both drying and dampness from without – something that must have been particularly important to him as we shall see. A number of sketches in clay and wax have survived around Europe with attributions to Michelangelo. We cannot deal with them here since the examples I myself have seen, particularly at the Michelangelo exhibition at Florence in 1875, do not seem authentic to me and can only be considered to be preparatory pieces for copies.

Michelangelo has himself recorded a remarkable statement about his work in the soft material, plastic, in relation to that in marble, sculpture. A contemporary Florentine scholar, Benedetto Varchi, president of the academy in Florence, had written a short essay about the burning question for the Florentine art world of the time, whether painting or sculpture enjoyed primacy. Varchi expressly desired the most famous artists to respond, and Michelangelo in particular. He therefore sent him his essay and received the following response:

'Master Benedetto!

To prove that I have received your short text, as I in fact have, I would like to respond to your question with a few words, however uninformed they might be. I would say that painting increases its value the more it approaches relief qualities and that relief carving loses quality the more it approaches a state similar to painting. For this reason I have tended to see sculpture as the light of painting and felt the difference between the two to be like that between the sun and the moon. Now after reading your lines that spoken philosophically, things with the same goal are also identical to one another, I have changed my mind. Now I would say that since art gains nothing by being judged as better, involving difficulties or demands to overcome, painting and sculpture are in fact one and the same. For this insight to spread, every painter should also work as a sculptor and every sculptor as a painter. I understand sculpture to mean the art practiced by removing the material, *'per forza di levare'*, while the manner of adding, *'per via di porre'* as that of painting. Enough is enough. Since both painting and

sculpture are practiced by the same intelligence, peace can be made between the two and we can put an end to all disputes since they take up more time than to create the art in the first place. If those who wrote that painting is superior to sculpture had enough understanding of the other, then my cook would be a better judge. Innumerable and as yet unspoken things could still be said about such philosophical questions, but as I say, they would take up too much time, and I do not have so much time, I am old and close to death. For this reason, I ask you to excuse me. I send my regards and thank you for the honor that is greater than I deserve  
Your Michelangelo Buonarroti in Rome.<sup>16</sup>

While this letter demonstrates that the aged artist had lost his interest in theoretical discussions, it shows that the aversion was due to an abundance rather than a paucity of reflections and experiences. We must nevertheless take such a statement from front to back as illuminating the character of the artist, unusually valuable in this sense, and we must caution against attributing any authority to it as a valid theory of a great artist. The distinct preference for sculpture as the art 'demanding the greatest judgment and posing the greatest difficulties', together with the admission that painting and sculpture have the same goal is based on such a narrow field for painting as to only apply to Michelangelo's own painting! Another telling element particularly interesting for us is the well-known distinction of the types of art, either removing or adding matter, first spoken by Leon Battista Alberti. The former includes sculpture in marble, and metalwork if it consists in chiselling, and the latter clay and wax sculpture as well as painting and drawing since they apply colour and darkening to a surface.

The first of the artistic modes, consisting in removing, as with marble sculpture, is the one which Michelangelo strongly endorses. We can understand this yet better when we recall the passages we have just seen from his sonnets where he seems to be nearly associating a moral significance to chiselling away from marble. Such a distinction is only valid from the standpoint of the working artist. It is certainly an important difference for the artist whether they proceed with sharp tools against a hard surface, use a stylus or their fingers with soft materials such as clay or wax, or apply fluid colour with a brush. For this distinction to be useful to an actual theory, the effect of the art work as the final product on its beholder must to at least to some degree also be reckoned with. From the standpoint of the viewer, it would never be possible to claim that wax models and painting belong to one and the same mode of art and the marble statue to another. For the viewer it must be clear that the wax model and the marble statue both present an image of volume and with it the same sort of art, while painting an image on a surface is different.

<sup>16</sup> Gaetano Milanesi ed., *Le Lettere di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, Florence: Le Monnier, 1875, pp. 522-523, German trans. Ernst Guhl and Adolf Rosenberg, *Künstlerbriefe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Berlin: Guttentag, 1880, vol. 1, pp. 152-153.

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Even those not at first familiar with the techniques of sculpture will upon reflection very soon recognize how difficult and complicated it is to discover a figure in the dense and hard block of marble, tentatively expressed in the small model, and how difficult it is to extract the detected figure from the marble. Michelangelo had his own particular method for this, and we would like to describe it. Since it is important to us to show how his technique contributed to the completely unique appearance of his works, we must compare them to the technical methods which beside this are most significant to sculpture. We can of course only touch on the most important characteristics.

Today, sculptors are generally only able to execute smaller marbles in their own personal space. For larger works, the sculptor sends their well-wrapped model to Carrara and after a while, receives a reproduction in marble, usually not completely finished, but somewhat in every aspect cruder and heavier than the model, allowing the sculptor to themselves work the outermost layer of the marble and complete the surface to meet their artistic intentions with life and spirit. In most recent times, the work of marble is often finished completely in Carrara without the sculptor themselves touching it again. A versatile and often brilliant, captivating and specialized virtuosity has developed there. Some of the workers are particularly gifted in rendering a surface suggesting velvet, lace, gauze, silk stockings or leather while others have a talent in rendering feathers of birds or flowers. A sculptor can therefore receive their work, decorated with all sorts of small charms that might compensate for gaps in their own genius with no personal strain. Woe to the good men of Carrara if the spirit of Michelangelo were to again glance down at them across the mountains. Like the god Thor, he would have taken his heavy hammer against all the pitiful frills, the deep abasement of marble sculpture spreading from there to art exhibitions across all of Italy, including some organized by famous academicians.

Such excesses aside, the characteristic of marble working today, finding the volume of a figure in the block remains completely technical and depersonalized, usually performed with the help of unknown subordinates. This in itself is nothing to lament. The task is indeed mechanical and mathematical by nature, demanding experience and dexterity that actually has nothing to do with the fine arts. The modern method is outlining with drill holes. Each spot is first marked with a pencil on the surface of the model, serving primarily to determine the scale of the figure, both protruding and receding. Those spots of the model serving as fixed points of reference are marked with plaster lumps with a copper nail permitting measurements using the point of the compass without damaging the surface of the model.

This also ensures against limiting the final size while determining the corresponding points of the marble block, so that, as we have said, enough leeway is left for the final chisel work of the sculptor. Three of the most dominant points in the marble block, most important for the entire scale of the figure are sought on the

model and located in the marble with the greatest care. The triangle resulting from these points, and marked on the model and the marble block, then consistently provide the basis for defining the remaining points. We cannot take time here to describe the method any further for marking the block of stone. It was also used to show where the drill was to be applied in reaching the desired spots or for measuring the necessary depth of the hole. Punctuating machines were invented to operate with infallible precision, and simple tools developed to adequately guarantee the correct location measured from all sides, being confirmed and reconfirmed during the process. As the unused marble was incrementally removed, the desired form eventually emerged.<sup>17</sup>

The punctuating method is perfect for our own time with its demand for exactitude, regular division of labour and its multitude of intersecting artistic trends. It faithfully and blindly serves every sort of aesthetic goal in the arts from the placid and monumental sculpture of Thorvaldsen to the realism that animates so much spirited and teasing work in the present. This method had also been accepted by classical antiquity in Greece and Rome which applied itself so copiously to marble sculpture. We can at least be certain of this about the art of late antiquity when free copies of earlier models were being made so fervently. This because numerous marbles of the time, such as the colossal *Dioscurides* on the Monte Cavallo in Rome, still exhibit the protruding points at certain spots such as the chin, arms and hands, evidently used for marking the block, but were forgotten or neglected even after the final layer was removed and the surface given its final treatment. Antiquity almost certainly used less marker points than our own contemporaries and relied more liberally on the free work of the eye and the hands. They also seem rarely to have used large models, but were usually satisfied with the small sketch.<sup>18</sup> In the marvellous land of Egypt, and its stone sculpture indeed made it a place of marvels, it was possible to settle for a segmentation of the human figure into a number of equally sized parts, essentially adequate to all situations, transferred in various scales and all sizes onto the stone mass.

Egyptian sculptors had achieved such surety in this method that they were able to raise a figure from the quarry in a nearly finished state. At the ancient Egyptian equivalent of Carrara, the granite quarry of Syene, we can in fact still see traces of this astonishing method, that it is possible to even determine where specific colossal figures were originally chiselled away. Such a method was of course only applicable in a culture such as Egypt, where sculpture had such a low status as art, where figures all stand completely straight, limited to a small number of poses, where all seated and kneeling figures do so in the same way. In such a situation, the patron had only to order a seated or kneeling statue of a given size with certain attributes and headgear along with other completely extrinsic details and could rely

<sup>17</sup> Frédéric Comte de Clarac, *Musée de Sculpture antique et moderne*, Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1841, vol. 1, including atlas.

<sup>18</sup> Clarac, vol. 1, p. 113, Karl Otfried Müller, *Handbuch der Archäologie der Kunst*, Breslau: Max, 1848, §310, pp. 430-432.

on the order being suitably filled with the least possible finishing required at its intended location.<sup>19</sup>

Because of the relatively high value placed on the individual and their inventiveness, medieval and particularly European early Renaissance sculptures provide an antithesis to the strictly regulated, slavish working methods of ancient Egypt. In discovering the figure in the stone, all sorts of approaches were then being used with very little assurance of precision. Designs of a desired figure were even made in multiple views.<sup>20</sup> At that time, much less was known of course about the organic nature of the human form. The figures were rarely particularly large and were made from stone that was usually inexpensive and easily manipulated.

Individual artists and theorists had discovered reliable methods by the time of Michelangelo. Leon Battista Alberti recorded precise directions for measuring figures with all poses in an eminently rational way applicable to every scale. His method was naturally too difficult and slow in practice. Instructions from Leonardo da Vinci are more ingenious and better conceived for practical use, actually based on the system of marking points.<sup>21</sup> Leonardo says that in making a marble figure, it is first necessary to create a clay model (of the same size). When it is finished and dry, it should be stored in a cabinet large enough to house the block of marble when the sketch is removed. Holes are drilled into the sides of the cabinet while the clay model is inside. Sticks fitting through the holes are then passed in until they touch the surface of the model and the protruding part of the stick is painted black. Each stick and corresponding hole are numbered or otherwise marked to prevent any confusion. Then the model is removed from the cabinet and replaced by the block of marble and the sticks each placed into the accompanying hole. Then the marble is carved until the stick reaches the spot where the black paint begins.

We do not know whether Leonardo or any others applied this method in practice. At that time, the exchange of ideas was so irregular that even the fruitful idea of so famous a person could remain completely dormant for the time.

<sup>19</sup> On the segmentation of the human form in Egyptian art, Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, book I, 98 and the observations of John Gardner Wilkinson [*Summary View of the Early History of Egypt, Materia hieroglyphica, The Topography of Thebes*], recorded in Ippolito Rosellini, *Monumenti dell'Egitto e della Nubia*, vol. 2, Pisa: Capurro, 1834, pp. 137 ff. I have discussed the form of Egyptian statuary in a lecture, 'Forh. Mellem aegyptisk og graesk Billedkunst,' summarized in *Kort Udsigt over det filologisk-historiske Samfunds Virksomhed 1860-74*, Copenhagen: Gads, pp. 35-38, and in my edition of Wilhelm Lübke, *Kunsthistorien*, Copenhagen: Philipsen, 1872 [1881 ed., pp. 19-27.]. On the quarry of Syene, Rosellini, loc cit., and François Michel de Rozière and Edme-François Jomard, *Description de l'Égypte*, Paris: Panckucke, 1821, vol. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Architecture française*, Paris: Morel, 1875, vol. 8, p. 267.

<sup>21</sup> Taking up a paragraph, actually an aphorism in Leonardo, *Trattato della pittura*, somewhat out of place [Leonardo, *Das Buch von der Malerei*, ed. Heinrich Ludwig, *Quellenschriften zu Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttechnik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* 15, Vienna: Braumüller, 1882, no. 512, vol. 1, Italian and German pp. 502-505].

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Giorgio Vasari, his contemporary biographer, describes Michelangelo's own method and recommends it to be followed.<sup>22</sup> One should take a figure in wax or a different, hard material and place it in a bowl of water. As the figure rises over the smooth and even surface of the water, its most salient points become visible while the lowest or deepest remain concealed. This is continued until the entire figure is exposed. This is the same way to use the chisel in carving a figure out of marble. The protruding parts are dealt with first, and those lying more deeply then eventually reached.

In spite of the fact that this method, which cannot be practiced without plaster or clay model, is certainly not as thorough as marking points and no longer to be recommended in our own day, we can only admit that it is clever, simple, and has many advantages. It clearly and unerringly shows which parts of a figure share the same plane. As the water creates a sharp line around a part of the figure, appearing over its surface, it gives a vivid image of the formal qualities of the model as they are to be rendered in marble. It is an image that could be very useful when a lesser master faces the task of preparing the marble block for the greater artist. We cannot know whether Michelangelo himself devised this method. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century before the point marking approach became popular and grids of regular vertical and horizontal lines were usually used on each side of the block, the famous art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann recommended it highly and discussed it thoroughly in a small but epoch-making publication, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Kunstwerke*, Dresden, 1755.<sup>23</sup> In his enthusiasm for the art, the quiet and then still unknown philologist from Stendal boldly ventured far into the field of practical techniques, and very thoroughly thought Michelangelo's method through, so successfully and accurately that we must return to a few of his remarks.

Winckelmann draws attention to the fact that Vasari's description leaves a number of questions open. It says nothing about where the artist should place the point on the marble surface to correspond to the point in the sketch that first protrudes above the water level, or the points that rise from it simultaneously. It is simple however to recognize what they might do. The container holding the model would require an even, rectangular form with a grid of squares surrounding it, as the painters use when they transfer a drawing or cartoon onto the large canvas. The corresponding partition of squares would then need to be transferred to the block of marble on the larger scale. Roughly, yet with an acceptable exactitude, the artist would define a given segment. Vasari's words also yield no suggestion as to how the depth should be found where one or more points might lie. The water level only

<sup>22</sup> Vasari, *Le vite*, Florence: Le Monnier, vol. 12, p. 273 [*Le vite*, Florence: Sansoni, 1906, vol. 7, p. 273, Vasari, *Lives of the Painters*, Everyman's Library 129, New York: Knopf, 1996, vol. 2, p. 738].

<sup>23</sup> *Winckelmann's Werke*, ed. Carl Ludwig Fernow, Dresden: Walther, 1808, vol. 1, pp. 45-50 [*Gedanken über die Nachahmung*, ed. B. Seuffert, Heilbronn: Henninger, 1885, pp. 33-37. Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, p. 46.]

shows us that a certain group of points, *abc*, share the same level. It tells us nothing about where this level is in relation to another defined by a further sequence of points, *def*. If the side surfaces of the container are divided into squares and transferred in a larger scale to the sides of the marble block, it at least becomes possible to measure the level of the water surface and do the same for the corresponding spots on the marble. This would permit a relatively exact identification of its points to either side.

In pursuing Vasari's description with greater precision, Winckelmann believes he has recovered Michelangelo's actual method and instructs the sculptors of his own time that they can hope to approach the Greeks as closely as Michelangelo had.

It was believed at that time, certainly incorrectly, that this method had been used in antiquity, and they lacked any conception of how antithetical Michelangelo's artistic outlook was in relation to antiquity. His description mixes two separate goals. He would like to make the ancient method available to the art of his own time while also explaining historically how Michelangelo proceeded. For us, interested only in the latter, it is important to keep the two apart and study how Michelangelo applied the method and with what aim. For us, his own work in marble must clarify this, and particularly the uncompleted works. Enough of them survive, indeed, more than the finished examples. A figure of the Apostle Matthew, four ells in height and dating from his most vigorous and brilliant period, is very important in this regard.

Michelangelo had accepted the commission to carve twelve figures of the Apostles for the cathedral in Florence. The plan was soon abandoned, and to our knowledge, this figure of Matthew is all that survives. It stood in the cathedral works, the *opera del duomo*, for a very long time, but in 1831 was moved to the courtyard of the Academy of Arts, for the purpose recorded in a truly Italian rhetorical inscription, 'to provide instruction to sculptors, and allow all of us to admire the powerful imagination of that divine genius who became the first in modern art to rise from the material to the idea, and appear to liberate the figure from the marble as he had already created it in his mind.' Vasari has already accorded this figure an unusual instructive importance, and aptly writes, 'as sketchy as it is, reveals its full perfection and teaches sculptors in what manner figures can be carved out of marble without their coming out misshapen, so that it may be possible to go on ever improvising them by removing more of the marble with judgement, and also draw back and change some part.'<sup>24</sup>

As the artist seems to have planned it, the arrangement of this figure of Matthew has the restless and vehemently animated pose common to Michelangelo. Yet the task of discovering the figure within the marble block naturally becomes all

<sup>24</sup> Vasari, *Le vite*, Florence: Le Monnier, 1856, vol. 12, p. 176 [*Le vite*, Florence: Sansoni, 1906, vol. 7, pp. 157-158. Vasari, *Lives of the Painters*, Everyman's Library 129, New York: Knopf, 1996, vol. 2, pp. 655-656]. A line drawing is available in Cicognara, *Storia della scultura dal suo Risorgimento in Italia*, Venice: Picotti, 1816, vol. 2, plate 55.

the more difficult, the more it turns and twists, the more the surfaces and contours interact at angles, the less the vertical and horizontals, the further it removes from the Egyptian approach to forms. This figure was planned to stand, primarily on its right leg. The other foot, the left, is in such a way propped against a slight rise that the knee moves forward slightly toward the central axis at a slight angle. This left knee is the point protruding the furthest. Since the upper body is turned slightly to the left, the right shoulder also sticks forward as something of a counterpoint from the other side. The third point becomes the left hand steadying the large Gospel book resting on the arm. The right arm hangs down at the side with the hand clasping a corner of the drapery. While the upper body as we have said, turns to the left, the neck twists in the opposite direction, so sharply to the right that the head is nearly seen in profile. This forceful, restless turn of the body expresses a passionate seriousness in the bearded face with the open mouth and widely opened eyes. The clothing consists in a loose garment reaching only the knee with individual sections of folds indicated only by their areas of greatest mass and the parts treated exactly like the bare flesh. There would probably have been a coat descending along the back.

However, only the foremost part of the figure has been carved out of the block. In examining the sides and rear of the marble, we see the completely rough and formless block without the slightest trace of the artist's chisel and no suggestion of any form. From the front we see the complete contour of the figure, or what we might call its phenomenon, that is the figure as it presents itself to the eye of the beholder from a given side, designed evenly and in their entirety with all parts executed or not to the same degree. None of the forms are freely worked in the round, not even the protruding left knee. In this uncompleted form, the statue presents itself as a sort of relief against a surface ground that is not smooth or even, but rises or recedes according to the pose of the figure and degree to which its various parts seem to project or retire.

It is quite remarkable how firmly and distinctly Michelangelo has fixed this image of the figure as seen from this side in such an intermediate phase. Those parts not seen frontally are provisionally completely untouched even if the form faithfully reproduces the sketch. On the left side for instance, he has only begun the hand, especially the fingers clutching the edge of the book, but has not pursued the form to the upper or lower arm because they are in an area not visible to the eye from the front. Individual surfaces on the front of the figure situated more horizontally, such as the feet, are less finished than those with a more vertical disposition. We are tempted to describe such a method that consistently considers the eye of the viewer as more painterly than relief carving. There is no need to underscore what a great difference this is from modern carving with the point marking system. The borderline between the forms already being treated, and the rough block is often marked by a rather dense row of deep points delineated by Michelangelo with the drill to further tackle the marble. Within these limits, the forms are indicated in long diagonal lines by a large gouge like rills of hatching. However far the surface is from

a complete state of finish, we can nonetheless sense how fine and perfect Michelangelo would in his mastery have treated it. Though far from being realized, certain details such as the veins in the right inner elbow are already indicated clearly enough.

The work impresses us generally as being done with great awareness and surety. Here again we meet a characteristic we have already mentioned in Michelangelo, namely that the block of stone is completely exploited with the lowest point, the right foot almost dipping slightly too far into the base, while the highest, the crest of the head even reaches the topmost spot of the block. The Italians already admired the assurance, surety and mastery evident in this work during his own lifetime. It cannot be denied however that however marvellous was Michelangelo's command of the stone, the block of marble also exercised a dominant power over the artist. When a sculptor wishes to maximize their use of the block in all of its dimensions, as is the case here, there is always a risk of distorting correct proportions. In this case, the right shin has become slightly too short, and the pose of the head seems to have been determined by the form of the block. The artist has not only turned the neck, but also bent it backward to the right. This also appears as much a result of external necessity as an artistic consideration. The face and profile are treated so much in terms of relief carving that we cannot but feel that Michelangelo intended to later completely remove or change what in individual parts is already very clear and emotionally expressive. He wanted to press the nose much further inward to the right in the face and alter the other relationships so that the head would bend further to the right than is already the case. Otherwise it would appear quite abnormal and could never be viewed from any other angle than this and not be apt to a statue. If the shape of the block checked him here, this might have been the reason that the work stalled mid way.

The figure of St. Matthew is an excellent illustration of what Vasari says about Michelangelo's technique. We can imagine exactly how he submerged his wax sketch in the water with the front facing upward and faced his large marble block with the front vertical side matching the top horizontal surface of the water. Also the way he continued working further downward as the individual parts of the sketch emerged from the water and were chiselled in the marble always further downward and always from the same side, finally using the plumb line over the marble block to find the points corresponding to those at the same levels on the sketch, the vertical of the marble always equivalent to the horizontal of the sketch. We can also better understand what he meant by the distinction between the two approaches to art as removing or adding.

We imagine him facing a hard, opaque, vertical surface with the task of creating a figure. There are two possibilities. He can either put colours onto the surface to create the illusion of a round form, or else penetrate the actual form at the various levels by striking at the hard surface with his chisel. For him, and we stress only for him, this distinction is extrinsic and purely technical since the goal remains the same. In carving the marble he is above all devoted to roughly laying out the

total impression of the form, be it painterly or relief-like. Other examples among his uncompleted statues, such as the so-called 'Apollo' in the Museo Nazionale in Florence, reveal how he applied the gouge in exactly the same way until he had retrieved the figure from the block, completely free and in the round. Only after this did he apply himself to the actual surface. It is probably possible that he turned the various sides of the model around in the water when dealing with working the form in the round.

On the other hand, the procedure evident in the figure of St. Matthew does not sustain the presumption by Winckelmann that even working according to his own method, Michelangelo could have used a fixed system of geometric sections or the like to make them as precise and secure as possible. Nearly all of Michelangelo's work in marble reveals the irregularities we have observed as well similar phenomena making Winckelmann's idea unlikely. He created so many and such a variety of works in this manner, and his artistic career extended over so many years that we can hardly establish any rules in the matter. There were instances when he would approach the work completely freely as we can learn from a naked crouching figure the lowest part of which is begun in the same way as the St. Matthew while the head and entire upper part are not approached with the chisel, being nothing more than a forward leaning square block. Here he did not even use the method of the sinking water level, to say nothing of precautionary measures – in such a case he would have recovered the head from the stone block much earlier.

In imagining Michelangelo facing the marble block with his chisel and hammer in hand, we must overcome the idea that he saw his task as copying his own sketch. The sketch was nothing more for him than a minor technical aid, a thread from Ariadne for finding the figure in the labyrinthine darkness of the marble block, by no means a model with any sort of authority over the carving of the marble. What he had to say artistically is expressed in marble and not in wax. His sculptural material was the hard, resounding and chipping stone. Today, a subordinate workman is there eager to obediently transfer the forms and proportions they have measured on a model prepared by another and of no personal interest. For Michelangelo, the situation was completely different. He did not allow any other to participate in the preparation, but did everything himself.

We must first consider the uniqueness of his method. While the point marking method immediately approaches the mass of the marble from all sides to give it a geometric shape closer to the figure being envisaged but tentatively completely enshrouding the form, Michelangelo's method immediately reveals the organic plastic form as soon as the water level goes below the very first parts of the protruding sketch. The sculptor's chisel immediately assumes the task of retrieving this form from the rough block, first in the coarse outlines yet recognizable and sculptural. We must also recall the idiosyncratic qualities of Michelangelo's personality, his temperamental tendency to solitude and the strong preference apparent in all ways, to work completely alone. If it was absolutely necessary, he could reconcile himself to the idea of another completing a work he had left

unfinished and possibly lost interest in. While he was working though, he could not abide assistance or preparatory work from any others. More than one example can testify to this. In this sense he presents a sharp contrast to artists such as Raphael, Rubens or Thorvaldsen who as the heads of large artistic workshops, depended extensively on the assistance of their students and subordinate talents to gratify the great demands placed on their art by the world. Michelangelo was primarily devoted to satisfying his own pretensions. For him the work of the artist was the satisfaction of an overpowering, passionate urge, an intellectual necessity to inhale the fiery air of this urge and this enthusiasm. Any help from others would be of as little use as assistance in eating or drinking. He did not shy away from himself performing either the crudest or the most refined work. The task of finding a large figure in a block of marble demands much rough work, but in the absence of precise geometric methods, also the greatest amount of sculptural intelligence. If it is to be completely successful it also requires a large amount of quiet discretion, careful and exact gauging and examination, patience and resignation. These virtues were not native to him, and for this reason he often rushed to arrive at the more interesting parts of the work, as we can imagine on the part of a great artist, often relied excessively on his extraordinary experience and intelligence, often creating problems for one or another part that could no longer be rectified.

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The artist who among other things painted *The Creation of Adam* on the Sistine ceiling can truly be called a man of ideas. This is an example where a subject presents itself from a particular aspect, and due to a possibly unmatched amplitude of substance, Michelangelo can be taken as a symbol or image of the artist in the abstract, with an idea reaching to the centre of the earth and then rising high to the heavens. This is by no means the only great idea he created. In spite of this, Michelangelo is not among the artists richest in ideas. He is not comparable to either Thorvaldsen or Raphael in that regard, but the earth is not so rich in its various types. He created innumerable figures as a sculptor and painter, but we cannot find two that repeat one another. Yet this richness primarily expresses his boundless interest in variegations of the human form regarding pose, movements, moods as well as the way they develop before the eye of the beholder. A large part of his work expresses one and the same urge. Thorvaldsen's spirit was a quiet lake sheltered from storms with the ideas rising from its depths to the surface in the clearest and purest possible form while the actual ego of the artist restrains itself and barely dares to breathe. Michelangelo's spirit was a roaring, eternally restless waterfall with all of his energies active simultaneously. His own self and will assuming the utmost place in his art. He explores, experiments, his technique is an eternal struggle with the material. We learn what he desired for himself and all of humanity from the figures he created. Their facial expressions radiate a superhuman intellectual and emotional force, their powerful limbs testify to Herculean power. He himself achieved more in this way than any other artist, perhaps any other human being. While Thorvaldsen demanded as little as possible of the technical side

and did not wish to reap any fame by his technique, Michelangelo demanded as much as possible from it and was technically ambitious. It was the seed for his boastful artistry and outward virtuosity as it would develop so lavishly in the following artistic generations and brand him as such a difficult example for followers. While Thorvaldsen's artistic life was in some sense like that of a philosopher, Michelangelo was above all a practical worker, manual, even a mason though undeniably not of the usual kind. He himself recognized the close relationship between his divine art and the work of the mason. As a newborn he was given to a foster mother who was the daughter of one mason and married to another. As an old man he would tell his friends of this stroke of fate, and add that it is no wonder that he should love to work with the chisel 'whether this reason is serious or not'.<sup>25</sup>

If he had managed to control his own destiny, he might never have practiced any other art than sculpture in stone. Whenever as an old man he would again see a work from his early youth, such as the marble relief of *Hercules Battling the Centaur*, done at the age of 16-17 and indisputably revealing astonishing promise of a great future, he would complain about not having followed the provisions of nature and exclusively practicing the art of sculpture.<sup>26</sup> In his later period, 'because of others', entire years could go by without his producing anything of consequence in that art.<sup>27</sup> His works in bronze, none of which can be identified with certainty, were few in comparison to marble. When Pope Julius II brought Michelangelo to Bologna in 1506, as he says, 'pulled with a rope around his neck', and demanded that the artist make a colossal bronze statue of the pope in bronze, Michelangelo excused himself by saying that 'bronze casting is not his art'.<sup>28</sup> It had no effect. The people of their time believed that they could demand anything of genius from men such as Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci. When the pope coerced him to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he assured both the pope and his friends that 'he was not a painter' but it fortunately did not prevent him from creating what some would consider the greatest work of painting.<sup>29</sup>

It might have been primarily his native choleric temperament that drew him irresistibly to marble sculpture, to have something hard to work against, his forceful will that instinctively sought out obstacles and resistance. Things soft and light repelled him in every form. In the course of time, such work even became something of a physical requirement. At a late age he needed to spend 'a certain amount of time each day' with his hammer and chisel, convinced that 'using the hammer kept him physically fit'. His work was not limited to the daylight hours. Frugal and abstemious as he was, at times even quite demanding of himself, he was

<sup>25</sup> Condivi, chap. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Hercules Battling the Centaur*, now Florence, Casa Buonarrotti.

<sup>27</sup> Condivi, chap. 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Le Lettere*, ed. Milanese, p. 427.

<sup>29</sup> We know this from his biographers and his own bitterly humorous sonnet to his friend Giovanni da Pistoia about the travails of such work, Guasti, Sonnetto 5, p. 158.

never serious about sleeping at night and in his youth slept in his clothes to save the effort of disrobing and dressing and be quicker back at work. At an advanced age he would rise at night when unable to sleep and work with his chisel by the light of a candle. He made caps of thick paper to fit a tallow candle on the top and illuminate the entire space and leaving his hands free.

The character and emotional or intellectual life of a person largely result from their daily occupation. Various technological possibilities exist for the working artist to constantly repeat something, grope their way forward and continue their studies during the process of work itself. This can involve drawing with chalk or lead, oil paintings or modelling in wet clay or wax. As stolid and monumental as bronze working might appear, it must also be included here since the actual artistic aspect is primarily in the modelling while the casting lies completely outside the field of art and the chasing only affects the surface. All activities of this sort move the spirit into a cautious and sedate movement, and urge renewed consideration of the work. The situation is different with the artist who draws on white paper or paints a fresco. They are forced to have completed their studies and decided everything in advance. Since they cannot repeat their work, or only with the greatest difficulty, they need to know exactly what they want ahead of time and have everything ready at the proper moment. Their work involves a greater tension and requires higher intellectual concentration. They are not chewing their cud, but are more comparable to one of the large predatory animals, attentively lying in wait and then tackling their prey in one powerful movement. In this regard, there is no work similar to marble sculpture where there is more to be done than touching up or smoothing the surface.

Since his approach was idiosyncratic, the tense quality of this work is amplified in Michelangelo. His relations to the material barely have any comparable example in the history of art – dimensions larger than had been used in the preceding periods, demanding a different treatment, the insistence on working with only a single block, and a freedom in his working method at times bordering on what we might even call improvisation in the hard stone.<sup>30</sup> There is also the uniqueness of the commissions he received. Like every sculptor, he saw his task as achieving the most difficult thing – the human figure. However, Michelangelo conceives this more rigorously with his distinct preference for the naked organic form, most clearly feeling its bondage to the relentless laws of nature. This demands the greatest sum of insights gleaned from innumerable earlier studies always available for realization at the decisive, given moment. Michelangelo is no friend of enshrouding garments and even less so of appended ornament that gives a greater space for artistic whimsy. In technical terms, relief carving is a simpler task for marble sculpture since it is essentially limited to a single surface, and it has only a subordinate place within his oeuvre. He consistently works with the freestanding

<sup>30</sup> On the changes he made to his final Pietà-group, cf. Lange, 'Michelangelo-Udstillingen i Florents,' *Tidskrift för bildande konst och Konstindustri*, 1876, no. 1, pp. 18-27.

sculpture in the round, even seeking out rather than avoiding difficulties in poses and movements. He tied this tight a knot for his own art to resolve in every aspect with his own personal energies. He disdains any help. There have been individual great architects such as Anyhemius and Isidorus designing the dome for St. Sophia in Constantinople, or Brunelleschi while he was building that for the cathedral in Florence, who assumed unprecedented missions in construction and led lives largely caught within a highly tensile situation. Tellingly, Michelangelo was ultimately also commissioned to design a dome, indeed, the largest of them all, the dome of St. Peter's in Rome. From his earliest youth to his greatest age, he was committed to fully applying all of his energies. When everything goes smoothly, then his idea lives eternally in the marvellous material 'while the years grind the artist himself to ashes', as he himself expresses it in one of his poems.<sup>31</sup> He had the strongest feeling for the beautiful aesthetic urge toward artistic immortality, the feeling that monumental art 'vanquishes the quickly changing nature'. One mistaken stroke however, and the work of years with its valuable reflection can be lost, to say nothing of the expensive material. His contemporaries expressly recalled how he avoided even 'the smallest mistake', since he after all, did not indulge in repairs.<sup>32</sup> Marble he judged to be good might delude him and reveal hidden flaws, veins or fissures, blocking his path like a teasing fate. It is no wonder that in the end, his brow had seven deep lines of care. Some were surely due to the skewed way of the world in general and the moods of the princes, but others must certainly have been due to his worries surrounding the marble. The marble was his best friend, but could also be his worst enemy, and he always faced it with the strength of a confrontational personality. He was not always content to leave things as they were if the master did him a vicious turn, and could even resort to personal revenge and break the entire piece into small parts.

Any of those interested in human nature and the degree to which a conjunction of spiritual and physical energy can succeed, will be familiar with the phenomenon of Michelangelo. He began his greatest work in marble at the age of 74 or 78, with more difficult compositions than any he had done earlier, a group with *The Lamentation of the Dead Christ*, in four larger than life-sized figures now standing behind the high altar of the cathedral in Florence. He originally planned it to be placed on his own grave, yet he gave up after working on it for five to six years because he discovered deep flaws in the marble block which is said to have originally been the colossal capital from an ancient column. Each of the figures has been completely carved from the marble, and although no parts are complete, it conveys a forceful impression of the artist's deep feeling for the subject. A French author living in Rome at the time, Blaise de Vigenère, many years later described

<sup>31</sup> Guasti, Sonnetto 17, p. 175.

<sup>32</sup> Vasari, ed. Milanesi, Florence: Le Monnier, 1846, vol. 12, p. 248 [ed. Sansoni 1906, vol. 6, p. 243, Vasari, *Lives*, Everyman's Library 129, New York: Knopf, 1996, vol. 2, p. 716.]

Michelangelo's character while carving this piece, just as he had witnessed it. He says, 'although he was more than 60 years of age', in reality he was far older,

I saw Michelangelo carve away more pieces of the hardest marble in fifteen minutes than three young sculptors could manage in three or four times as long. None who have not themselves seen it could ever believe it. He worked with such energy and frenzy that I thought the entire block would fall to pieces. He knocked away pieces four inches thick with a single stroke, and reached his goal with such precision that if he had gone just the slightest bit further he could have ruined the entire project.

I believe we can allow the sanguine Frenchman his judgment on what the aged Michelangelo could achieve in comparison to 'three young sculptors', but consider this much quoted passage to be something of an exaggeration.<sup>33</sup> It nonetheless provides unquestionable evidence of how astonished the visitor was at this unusual scene and how it inspired his imagination. This states what we ourselves sense in facing Michelangelo's works, that this man worked with a unique strength of attack, guided his chisel with a southern European passion, a fire glowing with both intelligence and artistic sense, bubbling with ambition and a venturesome will. Once the work approached its final phases, the artist could pass from that powerful *fortissimo* to the most refined *piano*. Michelangelo had more than simply a very refined conception of what a truly perfected work can demand. In the end he might even have been able to physically embrace his beautiful material. The blank and luminous surface of his works in marble in those areas where they are completed show us how highly he revered the painterly beauty of the marble. The expressive qualities of the form are not enhanced by the glossy highlights of the surface merging with the direct light to clarify the form.

The results correspond to the invested work. It is highly significant across the entire world of art that the sense of form and treatment in general are nurtured and developed by the technical practice that ultimately expresses them. Somebody trained to play the flute will not become a great violinist, cannot transfer their experience with the flute to the violin. If a sculptor is accustomed to expressing themselves in wet clay, as far as the surface treatment and intellectual-emotional expression of form is concerned, their sculpture in marble will be less appealing than the work of another who works with the hammer and chisel from morning to night. No marble sculpture since the days of Greek antiquity has a surface so radiant of intellect and energy and including such a range from coarse breadth to the most perfectly refined resolve. No other chisel in the modern period has created such exquisite hands as those of his *Giuliano de' Medici*, facial traits expressing such a spirit as his *Moses* or *David*, or musculature as vivid as his *Slave* in the Louvre, or the *Aurora* or *Day* at San Lorenzo in Florence. None have comparably impressed the

<sup>33</sup> Vigenère 76 note 1

marble with such character. The greatest marble work of antiquity certainly had greater mildness, nobility and beauty. The blood seems to infuse the forms with a calmer and happier health beneath the fresh flesh. In their treatment of the marble, Michelangelo's works have less in common with the Parthenon or the *Venus of Melos* than with Greek sculpture from a later period, such as the *Laocöon* or the *Belvedere Hercules-torso* which he was after all familiar with. Those examples from antiquity express a similar forceful accentuation. They do not surpass Michelangelo in grandeur, but they do in their refined sense of beauty and nobility of form. We must bear in mind that those ancient artists benefitted from that historically unique training with beauty based on the traditions of Greek life and the age-old deeply rooted Greek art, while Michelangelo did not discover any power in his own period or its art that could or would provide authority for his own work. Artistic will and whimsy are more prominent in his works and his sense of beauty can falter or derail, but his works have the greater attraction of being unusually vivid and appealing.

Michelangelo's entire working process led not merely to some irregularities in the overall arrangement of the figures and their proportions, but is also partly responsible for the fact that so many of his works in marble remained unfinished. The uncompleted state of these works is not exclusively due to mistakes or mishaps with the marble. It is a quality of broader significance for the art of the period and particularly its greatest figures. Aside from Michelangelo, it is also true of Leonardo da Vinci. These heroes of the art world were possessed not merely of a joy in technical experimentation, but also of an urge for purely artistic perfection that could never be completely achieved. People of the time recognized and honoured this characteristic of their personalities and that their ideal hovered high above anything possible for human hands. Michelangelo himself said that if he had been able to satisfy his own demands in his work, he would have finished very little or even nothing. This is why his hands could tire or his interest lapse before it was finished, that some parts are finished to a degree that would never be attained or surpassed in the future, and in others left to posterity as only begun.

We can stop here on the subject of the vast realm of perfection which the artist felt lying ahead of him. The following generations did not strive so far but instead viewed what Michelangelo had achieved as their own unattainable ideal. Such an extraordinary exertion of force was succeeded by a laxer spirit that felt temporarily comfortable resting on their laurels. When the work of sculpture was again seriously taken up, the historical clock had moved so far as to point toward goals that no longer had anything in common with Michelangelo.

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