

Pietà

Historical notes: The sash running across the Virgin's breast bears the following inscription in lapidary letters: MICHEL ANGELUS BONAROTUS FLORENT FACIEBAT. This is the only work that Michelangelo signed, perhaps because it was his first absolutely personal creation that made no attempt to imitate or counterfeit the antique. The contract for this work was signed on August 26th or 27th, 1498, by the artist and Cardinal Bilhères del Lagraulas, abbot of Saint-Denis and Charles VIII's ambassador to Pope Alexander VI, in the presence of the banker Jacopo Galli. The marble was procured in Carrara at once and the artist worked on it until 1499, when the statue was placed in the Roman church of Santa Petronilla, where the cardinal had his tomb. Later it was moved to St Peter's and set up in numerous different places until, in 1749, it was placed in the first chapel on the right, where it still stands today. In 1972, a lunatic attacked the masterpiece with a hammer, breaking off around fifty pieces. Thanks to the existence of plaster casts, it proved possible to repair the statue.

Iconography: Vasari and Condivi attributed a symbolic meaning to the Virgin Mary's youth: the immaculate nature of the mother of God. More recently there has been a tendency to see the group as a premonition of death or as a tragic and sorrowful meditation on it. The pose, though undoubtedly derived from *Pietà* of German origin, lacks their tragical quality and realism.

Style and technique: The volume of Mary's lap is amplified by the drapery, so that Christ's body is supported by it without difficulty, fitting perfectly into the pyramidal scheme that underlies the whole composition. The group is organic and balanced and conforms to the aesthetic ideals of unity, harmony, and perfection, accentuated by the beauty of the figures and the refined finish of the marble, which has been polished with wads of straw. Here Michelangelo achieved an astonishing perfection of technique, producing effects of «translucence» or waxy softness. Vasari commented that «it is certainly a miracle that a formless block of stone could have been reduced to a perfection that nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh.»