

MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI



Excerpted from Kathleen Krull, *Lives of the Artists*, 1995

Influential Italian sculptor and painter considered by some the greatest artist who ever lived, especially famous for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

"I HAVE KNOWN every shame, suffered every hardship," the man known as the Divine Michelangelo once wrote. During his long, mostly lonely life he made few friends and numerous enemies.

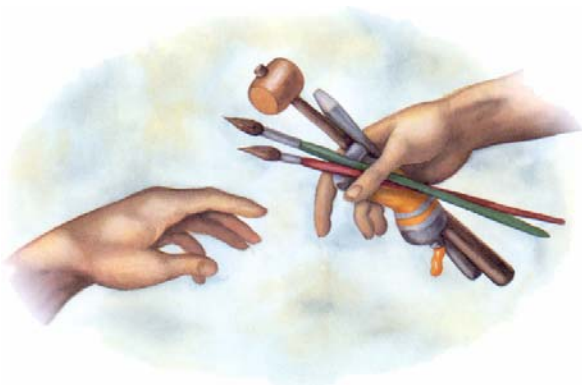
With his strong personality and forceful speech, Michelangelo created an impression of messiness, fierce pride, and gloom. Legendary for doing battle with anyone he disagreed with, he was the first to describe himself as "mad and wicked." He could insult a fellow artist to the point where he would get sued for libel (and lose). The broken nose in his famous profile resulted from a fistfight with a rival sculptor. His rivalry with Leonardo was especially intense, and he taunted the older man in public. He once got even with a critic by painting him into a picture, smothered by a coiled snake. Another time a duke who resented Michelangelo's

independent spirit would have had him killed if the pope hadn't intervened.

Michelangelo also had a stormy relationship with his father, whose violent disapproval he had to overcome in order to study art. Yet Michelangelo was always loyal, once writing to him, "All the troubles I have borne, I have borne out of affection for you." During his life he made great sacrifices to help his father and four brothers (his mother died when he was young).

Michelangelo's love for stone, he often said, came from a stonecutter's wife who had nursed him when he was a baby. His favorite material to work with was expensive marble, and he was at the mercy of wealthy patrons who could afford it. But he could work with anything and once, upon request, created what may have been the world's most magnificent snowman.

Eventually he became wealthy, but he always acted as if he weren't. During his last thirty years he lived in a small, dark house in an alley. It was decorated with cobwebs and his drawing of a man carrying a coffin. He seldom bathed or even took off his dogskin boots. When he did remove them, sometimes bits of his feet came off, too, as he didn't



believe in buying socks. He wore black quilted jackets and broad-brimmed felt hats. He ate crusts of bread while he worked, and at night when he couldn't sleep he put a device on his head that held a candle made of goat grease (which dripped less than wax). It created weird shadows that must have perplexed the neighbors but shed enough light for him to work by.

Michelangelo could be generous in helping younger artists, but he had few real friends until he made time for them late in life. One was a young Roman nobleman, Tommaso de Cavalieri, and the other was a noblewoman and poet, Vittoria Colonna, whom he greatly respected. He loved to have long conversations with her in her garden, sitting against her ivy-covered wall. Because of his passion for the male form (he used male models even for the women in his art), most people assumed that Michelangelo was homosexual.

Michelangelo remained lean and strong, and even in old age he could split blocks of marble with a single strike of his mallet. He rode horseback in the country every day, whatever the weather. He worked right up to the then unusual old age of eighty-eight, when he caught a fever after riding in the rain and died a few days later.

ARTWORKS

- At age twenty-three Michelangelo finished the sculpture called the *Pieta*. After delivering it himself in a handcart, he overheard an awed spectator say Michelangelo was too young to have created the work. Angry, that night he returned and chiseled his name on it. The *Pieta* is the only work he ever signed.
- Michelangelo once fought with Leonardo over a block of marble that had been stored for years in a cathedral work yard. Michelangelo won and worked on his new sculpture for almost three years, the marble chips piling high as he chiseled away. The result was *David*, the biblical hero, and the work that made Michelangelo world famous.
- One of the wonders of the art world was created under what may have been the worst working conditions. While painting the enormous ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome, Michelangelo developed numerous ailments from spending more than four years sixty feet in the air, head bent back, paint splattering his face. Now as many as seven thousand tourists come every day, craning *their* necks to see Michelangelo's ceiling.

NOTE: This reading assignment also includes [Michelangelo, Tell Me O Soul](#).