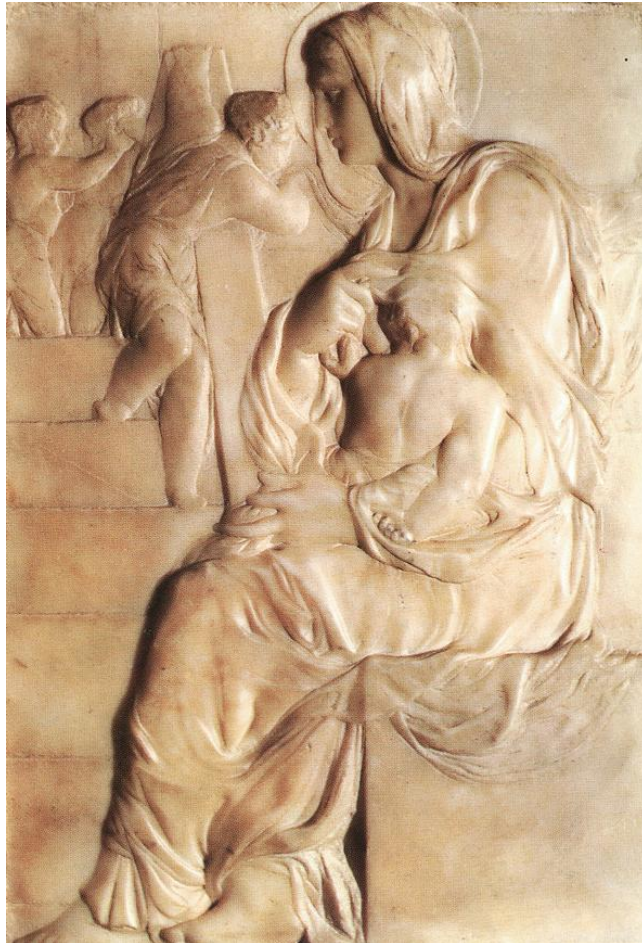


Michelangelo's *Madonna of the Stairs*

by Simon Abrahams



Michelangelo, *Madonna of the Stairs* (c.1491)
Marble. Casa Buonarroti, Florence

Michelangelo's first truly mysterious work was made during his teenage years, the *Madonna of the Stairs* (above). Despite its small size, the young sculptor's imagination was already working on a colossal scale.¹ Yet even at first sight the scene looks strange, an immediate barrier to understanding that decades of scholarship has done little to dent. Why, for instance, does Christ have his back turned and why is he so muscled? What are the stairs for? Why is the nursing Virgin so impassive? The answers appear, and the incongruities resolve, *only* if one tries to think through Michelangelo's mind.

Michelangelo believed that a divine spark resides in each of us. As a sculptor he could only reach heights of creative perfection by so purifying his soul that it unites with God. Once achieved, the sculptor (in his mind) is reborn and becomes Christ-like, taking on the symbolism of an infant to convey his newly-born status. At least during the conception of this sculpture, Michelangelo was Christ.²

Michelangelo's Christ-soul in the *Madonna of the Stairs* faces away from us because, hidden under the veil of normal perception, he is hard at work carving a colossal statue of the Madonna. That hand, curled behind his back, grips an unseen hammer and will soon come over his shoulder to strike the "sculpture" of the Virgin with force. This, in turn, explains her inanimate expression. She is "stone" while he is active and "alive".³ Moreover, this is said to be almost the first time in art that the Virgin and Christ's gazes are not linked in some way.⁴ By not linking them Michelangelo signals that the two figures are indeed in separate realities: one sculpture, the other sculpting. The third principal figure, Christ/Michelangelo's *alter ego* on the steps, also "chips away" at the Madonna's figure using the stairs to reach her face as a sculptor might use a ladder. Doubling, like the double self-portrait in Jeremiah's beard and those revealed in Balas' *Michelangelo's Double Self-portraits*, is a common feature in his work.⁵ Here, even as infants, Michelangelo presents himself in duplicate. His double on the stairs stretches an arm to hold himself up while the other actively links him to the Madonna. As an archetype, stairs or a ladder (eg., Jacob's Ladder) indicate the approach towards a higher state of consciousness: above and beyond is fame, glory, and divinity. Christ moreover is placed at the Virgin's breast, then a rare scene in Florentine art, because on a mystical level Michelangelo gains his power as a supreme artist by imbibing the Virgin's milk. Indeed he later claimed that the *source* of his genius was the stone-dust in his wet nurse's milk: he said she had been a stone-mason's wife. He used the same basic idea in the *Medici Madonna* (below).



Michelangelo, *Medici Madonna* (1521-34)
Marble. San Lorenzo, Florence

The dynamic figure of Christ, twisted like a dynamo, is sculpting the idealized stone-faced Virgin. Moreover, the Medici Virgin's left shoulder area, where Christ is "sculpting", is less finished than the rest of her figure. He is still at work; *non-finito*, a part intentionally left unfinished, has meaning.⁶

Endnotes

¹ James Hall, *Michelangelo and the Reinvention of the Human Body* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux) 2005

² Michelangelo's use of *putti* in this early work helps explain the mystery of all those *putti* on the Sistine ceiling, all looking alike. They too exist internally, and not necessarily just as psychological symbols. According to Dempsey, it was widely believed in the Renaissance that everyone had *putti* inside their bodies transmitting messages from our brains to our limbs. They were pictorial signs for the nerves which were then little understood, telling the various parts of our body when to move. Charles Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press) 2001

³ The stone lady is a well-known literary conceit, used by both Petrarch and Dante.

⁴ Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 10

⁵ Edith Balas, *Michelangelo's Double Self-Portraits* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press) 2004; For Jeremiah's beard, see Abrahams, *Michelangelo's Art through Michelangelo's Eyes*, Part 2, p.16

⁶ Another Michelangelo figure in the act of sculpting is St. Sebastian in the *Last Judgment*. Most scholars believe that his pose is that of an archer without a bow imitating his own death. Wang believes that "such an interpretation shifts the focus away from the important display of arrows, which are the cause of his suffering." She is right; it is an unexplained conundrum. However, the logic resolves once one recognizes that the movement of an archer mimics a sculptor's. Thus while it makes no sense that St. Sebastian *kills* himself, it is quite in keeping with Michelangelo's practice *if he sculpts himself*. See Aileen June Wang, *Michelangelo's Self-fashioning in Text and Image*, PhD Dissertation (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University) 2005, p. 101, n. 46.