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THE INFLUENCE OF RENAISSANCE NEOPLATONISM
ON MICHELANGELO

by

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ABSTRACT

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The problem of interpreting Michelangelo's art and poetry in terms of the Renaissance philosophy of Neoplatonism has long been debated. After establishing that Michelangelo was personally acquainted with the major philosophers Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, selected major works by the artist are analyzed as to how they illustrate the major concepts of Neoplatonism. Supporting evidence is drawn from Michelangelo's poetry, in which he expressed his esthetic theory, which included the Platonic system of ideal forms; a hierarchical universe; the perfectibility of the human soul through contemplation; and the exercise of human love as preparation for divine love. It is concluded that Neoplatonism was compatible with Michelangelo's personality as well as his devotion to Christianity. Through it he produced a synthesis of philosophy and religion which made him, through his art, the spokesman for his age.
INTRODUCTION

As the foremost and longest lived artist of sixteenth century Italy, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) has been the subject of historical analysis for many generations. Michelangelo's wide diversity of interests; his achievements in art and architecture as well as poetry; his acquaintance with many of the outstanding personalities of the Renaissance; and his exceptionally long life are all factors which make attempts at definitive historical treatment exceedingly complex. Interpretation of his life and creative production must consider his personality and the cultural influences on it, of which Christianity and the Renaissance philosophy of Neoplatonism were dominant. Michelangelo's unique artistic vision was produced by his personal interpretation and synthesis of these two.

The pervasive influence of Christianity on any artist during this period is obvious. The role of Neoplatonism is not so readily apparent however. Whether, and if so how, and to what extent, Michelangelo was influenced by Neoplatonism are questions which remain unresolved in the study of his life and works. Conflicting opinions have been offered by scholars since the nineteenth century and the discussion continues among historians today.
Using the approaches of both intellectual and art historians, it will be demonstrated, based on evidence from Michelangelo's life, artistic production, and poetry, that he was influenced by Neoplatonism, as well as Christianity, throughout his life. Neoplatonism as certainly shaped Michelangelo's personal philosophy as Michelangelo himself shaped our perception of late Renaissance Italy.

In verifying this interpretation it is essential to define Renaissance Neoplatonism; establish that Michelangelo was acquainted with that philosophy from an early age; and analyze how he used it in his life and art. The primary evidence of Neoplatonism is in Michelangelo's art and poetry. Through detailed examination of his major commissions in paint and marble and his private expression in poetry, the continuing influence of Neoplatonism upon him will be demonstrated.

Interpretation of art is necessarily subjective, but that subjectivity may be tempered and further informed by the consideration of others' interpretations. Thus, secondary sources, of criticism and iconography, constitute an additional body of evidence essential to demonstrating Neoplatonism as a dominant influence on Michelangelo.

Chapter II will establish that Michelangelo was acquainted with the major Neoplatonists of Florence during his early patronage by Lorenzo Medici and received informal instruction from them. Twenty years later he was again in
the company of followers of those philosophers. Thus the continuing influence of Neoplatonism on Michelangelo will be demonstrated.

In Chapter III, "Neoplatonism and Michelangelo's Sculpture," the major sculptural works to be examined for their Neoplatonic content are the earliest Pietà, the David for Florence, the tomb for Julius II, and the princes' monuments in the Medici Chapel. Neither Michelangelo's earliest sculptures nor his last will be discussed, because the early works were still the tentative developments of an emerging talent and the later works were either not of monumental scale or remain incomplete. Although many of the earliest and latest works are equally as powerful as the chosen works, they do not, for one or all of the above reasons, contribute significantly to an understanding of Michelangelo's unique synthesis of Neoplatonism and Christianity.

Michelangelo's painted works to be analyzed in Chapter IV are the Sistine Chapel ceiling and the Last Judgment on the altar wall, and the two fresco panels for the Pauline Chapel. Various panel paintings survive but do not contribute significantly to an understanding of Michelangelo's philosophy. As the Sistine ceiling provides 23 separate panels for consideration, it alone could suffice. The Last Judgment and Pauline frescoes are products of the artist's late years and demonstrate the continuity in the development of his personal psychology, faith, and philosophy.
Those few works of obvious pagan theme and inspiration, such as the Bacchus, Leda, and Brutus, will not be discussed. They were executed primarily to demonstrate the artist's familiarity with classical mythology and history and contain none of the elements which would further reveal the impact of Neoplatonism on Michelangelo—that is, a synthesis of classical philosophy and Christianity. In addition, none figures largely in Michelangelo's reputation, which was made by his Christian-inspired works, which incorporate more subtly the Neoplatonic content and reveal the extent of his synthesis of the two systems of belief.

The final chapter will deal with Michelangelo's poetry and demonstrate that his dedication to poetry was influenced by his familiarity with the writings of the Neoplatonist philosophers. It is in his poetry that he most explicitly espoused the major concepts of the Neoplatonist philosophy and expressed its compatibility with Christianity.
CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND

The influence of Renaissance Neoplatonism on Michelangelo is most apparent in his esthetic theory; his choice of themes, and their treatment in painting and sculpture; and in his poetry.

Michelangelo intended to write a treatise on art, and it was perhaps for this purpose that he assisted his pupil Ascanio Condivi in preparing his biography. Condivi stated in his preface that he planned to follow the *Vita de Michelangelo Buonarroti*¹ with a publication on Michelangelo's esthetics. Unfortunately Condivi died before he could write it. It is from the artist's letters and poetry that we gain an idea of the major concepts which formed Michelangelo's theory of art. They are all concepts espoused by the Florentine Neoplatonists, primarily Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

Foremost in Michelangelo's esthetic theory was the conviction that God is the source of all art. This is consonant with the Platonic system of Ideals, which held

that the prototypes of natural forms all exist in the upper spheres of the universe. Francisco de Hollanda recorded Michelangelo's statement that "this sublime science comes not from any single hand, but from heaven." In keeping with Pico's and Ficino's exaltation of the artist as the instrument through which the divine is expressed, Michelangelo believed that the artist receives inspiration and must translate it through his perception of the divine forms.

Michelangelo felt art to be superior to nature because art both improves on nature and illuminates the perfect forms (ideals) which are not contained in individual objects. Art searches for the universal rather than the particular, and in its achievement awards immortality to the artist. By capturing the essential idea in his art, the artist wins fame from the generations to come, who will perceive the timelessness of his portrayal.

This search for the universal accounts for Michelangelo's distaste for portraiture. In this aversion he was unique among Renaissance artists. He felt that portraits offended the Christian humility of the sitter as well as the dignity and license of the artist to search for perfect beauty.

The Neoplatonic reliance on human reason to make rational both the universe and Christianity encouraged art which

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appealed to the mind rather than the senses or emotion. Michelangelo's acceptance of this fundamental rationality of art led him to produce vast, multi-figured programs which required analysis and translation. Even his nude figures are never sensual or volupptuous, embodying, as they do, philosophical conceptions.

Michelangelo's definition of beauty resembled that of Pico and Ficino and the original Neoplatonist, Plotinus. Ficino disagreed with the quattrocento humanists' formulae for beauty, saying that beauty transcends the five senses and reflects the soul. Beauty is a spiritual attribute and may not occur in the evil, or sinning, soul. This paradoxical nature of beauty—it is both physical and spiritual—parallels the Neoplatonist paradox of the soul. The soul is the prisoner of the physical body, which makes the soul's purity apparent through the physical beauty of that body. The discovery and portrayal of that spiritual beauty became Michelangelo's special struggle and determined his choice of artistic themes and their treatment in design and color. He explained this search in his poetry:

"Nor does God, in his grace, show himself to me in any other aspect more clearly than in a beautiful human veil; and that form alone I love, for in it he is mirrored."

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The most frequent subject in Michelangelo's art is the nude figure. "The nude remains the most complete example of the transmutation of matter into form." That the human body, as the reflection of God, was infused with divinity and light was a principle of both Christianity and Neoplatonism. The unclothed body represents a Platonic reality and existence independent of external or earthly trappings. The male nude occurred most often, as it was the male figure which made manifest divine beauty. Michelangelo's figures are heroic ideals: the David, a civic as well as masculine ideal; the Medici dukes are Roman patrician-philosophers; and Christ is Apollo in the Last Judgment. The heroes both represent their ideal forms and symbolize their inherent virtues.

Michelangelo's artistic treatment of his subjects concentrated on a synthesizing of classical themes with Christian ideals. This union most obviously illustrates Neoplatonic influence, as it was toward just such a synthesis that the philosophers Ficino and Pico aimed. Thus allegory illustrated Christian history, as in the Sistine ceiling; the figures of the Times of Day adorning the Medici tombs represent the passage of time and immortality in a Christian chapel; Leah and Rachel personify the Active and Contemplative

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Lives on the tomb for Julius II; and the pagan Charon participates in the Sistine Chapel's Day of Judgment.

Michelangelo's disregard for bright, intense colors in his painting stemmed from his conviction that they were ostentatious, as well as from his familiarity with Pico's scorn of color. His use of subdued colors emphasized the form and emotional expression of his figures and was his attempt to pass beyond decorative appeal to a more profound understanding of the ideal forms which he perceived. As his colors did not appeal to the eye, they spoke instead to the mind.

A subject which formed one of Michelangelo's major creations and which had interested the Neoplatonists, especially Pico, was the creation and history of man. Michelangelo filled the Sistine ceiling with this epic, beginning with the creation of the universe itself and proceeding to the Creation of Adam. In this familiar scene, Michelangelo could well have been influenced by Pico's line from On the Dignity of Man: "O Adam ... thou mayest by thy soul's decision, be born again unto the things above which are divine."

Likewise, the portraits of God which appear in the Sistine ceiling reflect a Neoplatonist interpretation of the nature of God. Michelangelo illustrated God in several

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7Clements, Theory, p. 250.

scenes (the Creation of the Sun, Moon, Man, etc.). Strikingly, the visage of God differs from panel to panel. Michelangelo's God changes according to his creative task at hand. The Neoplatonists, Pico and Ficino, defined God according to Plato's Timaeus, in which God is an active "craftsman" rather than the transcendent, immanent force of Aristotle and of Plato's Republic. As this theme will be discussed more fully in Chapter IV, it is mentioned here only as an example of the influence of Neoplatonism on Michelangelo's selection and portrayal of themes.

In Michelangelo's poetry this understanding of Neoplatonism is also evident. His style and form were those of the Petrarchan sonnet but his topics and commentary are wholly Neoplatonist. His primary poetic themes were beauty, love, the nature of the soul, death, and re-birth. He was preoccupied with the Neoplatonic paradoxes of imagination and reality: the conflicts and relationships between perception and creation, spirit and matter, lover and beloved, beauty and ugliness.9 The subject of love—physical and spiritual—formed a large part of his poetic expression. Love, interpreted as Platonic love, was debated by the Neoplatonists from Ficino, Poliziano, and Lorenzo Medici to the later courtiers of Venice (Baldassare Castiglione) and France (Agrippa d'Aubigne) and the English Neoplatonists, especially John Donne.

Another dominant theme in Michelangelo’s poetry was the purpose and rewards of contemplation and individual struggle for enlightenment. The contemplative life, according to Ficino, was the only path through which the soul could ascend to its fulfillment in union with God. Through his poetry Michelangelo analyzed his soul and divine inspiration. His dedication to Ficino’s ideal defined his personality, making him solitary and awesome, and through it he produced his personal vision in art.

Neoplatonism has been identified as the motivating philosophy in works by many Renaissance artists, including Botticelli, Titian, Raphael, and Michelangelo, by those art historians specializing in iconographical analysis of art works. In the allegorical personifications and symbols used by these artists, they find an artistic representation of Neoplatonist beliefs. Other scholars, notably Kenneth Clark, interpret the message of Neoplatonism in the emotional content of the artists’ forms. Thus, Clark argues for the "quality of pathos" which he finds in all nudes by Michelangelo and which conveys the Neoplatonist description of the soul as captive of the human body.

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Another group of art historians, primarily those concentrating on analysis of the formal qualities of color, line, and composition, avoid interpretation of symbols, allegory, and philosophy. This group denies Neoplatonism as a major influence on artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, basing their objections primarily on the lack of contemporary interpretations of Neoplatonic elements. For Michelangelo this apparent lack of verification may be explained in two ways.

More important is that there is no literary tradition or genre which could be described as art criticism during the first half of the sixteenth century. The humanists and scholars who might be expected to comment on artworks were concerned rather with the analysis of literature. Classical Latin authors and Greek works newly translated into Latin, as well as the growing body of vernacular literature, especially poetry, were the subjects of much commentary, criticism, and emulation. The forms of both historical and political writing were resurrected in the sixteenth century and were based on classical models.

Another reason for the lack of contemporary commentary is the lingering medieval attitude toward official, i.e., religious, art. Art, especially religious art, continued to serve as visual instruction or inspiration. It portrayed

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ideas and events so well known to educated viewers that interpretation was unnecessary. The teachings of the Neoplatonists were as widespread and familiar to informed viewers in the early sixteenth century, especially the humanist literati, as were themes from the Old and New Testaments to the average viewer. "Profound philosophical meanings were often deliberately hidden from the uninitiated in images that seem to have a very different import." 13

Criticism or commentary on art was sporadic and undisciplined until the second half of the century. Giorgio Vasari's Lives of Seventy of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects 14 of 1550 was the first attempt to compile biographical facts about Italy's major artists. From this work the study of "art history" may be dated. It signified a new historical consciousness evident in sixteenth century Italy, of which Francesco Guicciardini's History of Italy and Florence (published 1561) is a notable example. Both Vasari and Guicciardini relied on current oral tradition as well as available official documents for their information.

Vasari's Lives also reflected the change in social status of artists who had become worthy of historical


14 Hereafter referred to as Lives.
observation. By mid-century artists had become effectively free from the craft-guild structure which had bound them.\(^5\) This new social position Vasari attributed especially to Michelangelo, who was the friend of popes and princes. Even Leonardo (d. 1519) had not been accorded such respect and was forced to serve at the pleasure of his patrons, an artist-condottiere traveling from court to court.

By the mid-sixteenth century when the role of the artist had been transformed from hired craftsman to individual genius, and academicians such as Vasari began discussing art and the artist's meaning, the intellectual and religious climate had changed. In the age of the "Counter-Renaissance," as Hiram Haydn termed it, "every aspect of the inherited medieval synthesis and the fundamental principles of Christian humanism was challenged."\(^6\) Neoplatonism's most profound philosophical impact was on the Protestant reformers of northern Europe and the reform movement in Italy itself. The humanist popes Julius II and Leo X were condemned for their excessive worldliness by the

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\(^5\)Vasari planned the Florentine Academy of Design in 1562 as a university of art to "transcend the failed guild structure" and to provide a supreme authority in art. By 1567 it was giving verdicts on such projects as Philip II of Spain's plans for the Escorial. It held Michelangelo's exequies in 1564. Soon after 1571, however, it became a workshop, losing its academic nature and declining in influence. Nikolaus Pevsner, Academies of Art: Past and Present (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1940; reprint ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), p. 49.

mid-century churchmen who were absorbed in what seemed the question of the Church's very survival. Neoplatonism and its paganizing influence were denounced by the Council of Trent. These factors could account for the lack of contemporary (that is, mid-century) recognition of Michelangelo's Neoplatonism. Also to be considered is Michelangelo's own evolution and internalization of his early Neoplatonist training. In his late works, Neoplatonism was so thoroughly fused with Christianity by his personal interpretations of the two that Neoplatonic elements were never so obvious as in his early works, such as the Sistine ceiling.

The attribution of Neoplatonism to works by Botticelli, Titian, Raphael, and Michelangelo relies on detecting a synthesis of classical allegory and symbolism with Christian themes and figures. The Neoplatonic philosophers were particularly interested in the mysteries of the ancient Greeks, and in discovering parallels between the knowledge and morality of the ancients and Christianity. Sandro Botticelli, who received Medici patronage and planned to illustrate Cristoforo Landin's commentary on Dante's Divina Commedia, achieved such a synthesis in his painting, Primavera, or Allegory of Spring (c. 1478). Here a madonna-figure (Venus) is surrounded by mythical figures: Flora, goddess of Spring; Mercury; Cupid; and the Three Graces. It is now generally agreed that its purpose was to recommend to the Medici who commissioned it that he adopt Venus Humanitatis.
a Christianized deity who represented the moral qualities of love, charity, temperance, and honesty, as his guide in life. These are the same virtues Marsilio Ficino advocated for a noble life. These figures and their symbolic meanings were all understood and instantly recognized by Botticelli's audience.

So too with Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican (1509-11), *The Disputation of the Sacrament* and its partner, *The School of Athens*. The *Disputation* portrays the origin of the Sacrament from God, Christ, and Biblical saints, and its reception on earth by the fathers and scholars of the Church. Facing it is the *School of Athens* (an eighteenth century title), in which the pagan philosophers Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and others, debate the universe. Plato points heavenward, indicating the final source of wisdom and truth, and foreshadowing the purer truth to be found in the future Christ. This second panel thus expresses Raphael's theme that the ancient philosophers, notably Plato, laid the foundation which represents the spiritual reality which they presaged.

Raphael's frescoes make obvious the synthesis of Neoplatonic philosophy and Christian theology as no other work by any artist. Michelangelo's intentions and his

\[\text{Clark, The Nude, p. 97.}\]

portrayal of this theme of synthesis are not so readily uncovered. He was a man of greater intellectual and emotional depth and, in addition, outlived Raphael by 44 years—years of violent social and religious change which required personal adaptation as well.

The primary source of information on Michelangelo's personality and career is, in addition to Vasari's "Life of Michelangelo" (1550) in the multi-volume Lives, the Life of Michelangelo by Ascanio Condivi of 1553. Condivi was Michelangelo's pupil and friend, which Vasari was not. Condivi wrote with the intention of correcting the misinformation and errors contained in Vasari. He stated in his preface, without naming Vasari: "There have been some who had written of this rare man, but through not having conversed with him as I have done, have related things, which never happened." He wrote at Michelangelo's direction, making his Life in effect an autobiography. Condivi wrote in his statement to the reader: "I drew them . . . and with long patience from the living oracle of his speech . . . ." It was the first autobiography by a major Italian artist since Lorenzo Ghiberti's Commentario a century earlier, and preceded Benvenuto Cellini's by five years.

Vasari's second edition, which appeared in 1568 (four years after Michelangelo's death), contained much

19 Condivi, Vita, p. ix.


21 Ibid., p. xvii.
information adopted from Condivi. Perhaps because Vasari included 70 Italian artists while Condivi wrote on only one, Vasari has remained in wide circulation while Condivi was out of print (in English) from 1911 to 1976. The material provided by both Vasari and Condivi forms the basis for all scholars who have written on Michelangelo since the sixteenth century. Therefore, the motivations of Condivi and Vasari to record the facts of the artist’s life and their general credibility as primary sources must be examined.

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1571) was a Florentine painter whose major works were official commissions by Counter-Reformation popes and Medici dukes. He was part of the generation following the masters of the High Renaissance who felt that the best in art had been achieved by those masters. Little seemed left to them except imitation. Vasari participated in founding the Florentine Academy of Design which aimed to institutionalize art by functioning as an arbiter of taste. This academic approach was encouraged by the Council of Trent which stated that "no image shall be set up which is suggestive of false doctrine or which may furnish an occasion of dangerous error to the uneducated."²²

Vasari’s first edition of the Lives (1550) placed Michelangelo at the summit of the development of Italian

art. He was called "divine" by Vasari who introduced him
thus: "The Ruler in Heaven . . . resolved to send a spirit
endowed with universality of power in each art, one capable
of showing what is the perfection of art . . . ."23

Vasari corresponded with Michelangelo on the nature
and theories of art and exchanged poems with him. He was
not Michelangelo's student and their relationship was a
formal one. He had little if any information from
Michelangelo himself, and his principal sources were members
of the Medici family and other living Florentines who
remembered Michelangelo's youth. Vasari generally "ignored
the evolution of individual artists" and was "indifferent
to the motivations and circumstances" of the creation of
art works.24

Because of the age difference, Vasari's esthetic
differed from Michelangelo's. Vasari reached maturity when
the artistic ideals of the Renaissance had become stylized
and refined into Mannerism. He admired but did not
understand the strength and violence in Michelangelo's art.
Through his occasional critical observations Vasari defined
what he valued most. Art, he felt, must primarily imitate
nature. He placed great emphasis on technical skill. He
disliked the portrayal of emotion and sought the quality
of "grace."25 Michelangelo, on the other hand, expressed
contempt for those artists such as Dürer who sought to

23 Giorgio Vasari, Lives of Seventy of the Most
Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, vol. 4, trans.
and ed. E. H. & E. W. Blashfield and A. A. Hopkins (New

24 Condivi, Life, p. xviii. 25 Blunt, Theory, p. 92,
reproduce exactly their subjects. He also felt that many mediocre artists had mastered the techniques of their craft but that, lacking an inner conception, they were unable to successfully translate those skills into true art. With his contrary definitions of art, it is not surprising that Vasari failed to elucidate the aspects of Michelangelo's art which the artist himself considered essential to an understanding of it.

Vasari wrote at mid-century when the Counter-Reformation was gaining momentum. Its attempt to return the Church to its medieval position of dominance required that the Church "oppose all the achievements of Renaissance Humanism which had played a considerable part in the development of the Reformation and was therefore anathema."²⁶

Had Vasari been conversant with Renaissance Neoplatonism, and there is no indication that he was, he would have avoided imputing its "pagan" philosophy to the greatest, most widely respected artist of the day. Michelangelo had already been attacked for his version of the Last Judgment, especially for its nudes. Vasari made no attempts at interpretation of Michelangelo's works except in the most general, inoffensive Biblical or symbolic terms. He referred only once to Michelangelo's "secret meanings," and then without attempting to discover those meanings.

²⁶Ibid., p. 104.
As to Michelangelo's character and personal beliefs, Vasari relied in his second edition of 1568\textsuperscript{27} almost totally on Condivi's 1553 account. He duplicated intact Condivi's version of Michelangelo's early years; his devotion to Savonarola, Dante, and Victoria Colonna; and his association with distinguished Romans and Florentines. Writing as he did from the Medici court, Vasari minimized Michelangelo's role in the Florentine Republic in the years 1527-30 and the threats he encountered after restoration of the Medici government. Vasari hoped to persuade Michelangelo to return to Florence in his old age. Such a move would have added to the glories of Florence and the Medici, as well as Vasari's Academy of artists.

Ascanio Condivi (c. 1525-1574) shared Michelangelo's studio. He referred to several cardinals as his patrons, so must have been a minor practicing artist. None of Michelangelo's students achieved greatness and Condivi seems to have been one of these. He was sufficiently talented, however, to become the vehicle through which Michelangelo addressed Vasari's errors. When Michelangelo was nearly 75 Condivi recorded his master's memoirs without criticism or additional verification. Considering Michelangelo's advanced age, however, there were probably few still living who could have supplied information or corrected distorted memories.

\textsuperscript{27}The edition now available.
Condivi had no pretensions about his literary style or ability to understand Michelangelo's philosophical conversation on art. His commentary on works by Michelangelo is generally limited to actual descriptions or glowing praise of their manner of execution.

Vasari's Lives, including as they do critical appraisals of many styles and techniques, remained the chief source on Italian artists from Cimabue to Michelangelo until interest in systematic study arose in the eighteenth century. The first historical life of Michelangelo to incorporate both Vasari and Condivi, as well as other sources such as Guicciardini and Buonarroti family records, was that of Herman Grimm, the German historian, published in 1860. A vast quantity of personal materials, such as the artist's letters and the original drafts of his poetry, were still held by the family in Florence, however, and were not made available to Grimm.

When all the artist's papers and his poetry in its original form became available in the 1890s, the way was opened for new studies and re-evaluations of Michelangelo. Erwin Panofsky, the German-American art historian and iconographer, was the first to credit Neoplatonism with an overwhelming influence on Michelangelo's personality and art. In Studies in Iconology (1939) Panofsky emphasized

literary sources in the formation of Michelangelo's Neoplatonic philosophy. Panofsky was one of the first and certainly the strongest supporter of Michelangelo as a Neoplatonist:

Among all his contemporaries Michelangelo was the only one who adopted Neoplatonism not in certain aspects but in its entirety . . . as a metaphysical justification of his own self. 29

In supporting his own interpretation of Neoplatonism, Panofsky attributed Michelangelo's genius to that philosophy alone. In so doing, he ignored Michelangelo's personal synthesis of many influences, which was the artist's greatest achievement.

A more credible approach is that of Charles de Tolnay in his five-volume study of Michelangelo (1943-60). 30 Tolnay presented the artist's life in five periods from "Youth" to "The Final Years" and analyzed the changing social and political factors which affected Michelangelo's philosophical and religious responses. He included, as well, the artist's personal psychology, which determined his role as artist; his religious attitudes in old age; and his personal fears. Tolnay accepted the early influence of

Neoplatonism on Michelangelo and interpreted many of his major works as representative of that philosophy. He incorporated it as one of many influences which shaped the artist's life.

The American art historian Frederick Hartt has written extensively on Michelangelo and especially in reply to Tolnay and Panofsky. In his survey of Italian Renaissance Art, Hartt totally denied the influence of Neoplatonism on Michelangelo. He concluded that there is "no evidence" in support of Neoplatonism as an element in Michelangelo's art. His argument is based on the lack of sixteenth century comments on Michelangelo's Neoplatonism. This objection has been discussed earlier. Hartt's argument relies on the absence of evidence. It is the intention of this thesis to prove the influence of Neoplatonism by examining the artist's motivations in his art and Neoplatonism as it was made manifest in those artworks, which themselves provide conclusive evidence.

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Hartt, Italian Renaissance Art.
CHAPTER II

MICHELANGELO AND NEOPLATONISM

As Michelangelo never identified himself as a Neoplatonist, evidence that he espoused that philosophy must be sought in the facts of his life as well as in his art. The primary information comes from his biographers Condivi and Vasari, who both recorded that he spent some years during his adolescence in the Medici household in Florence.¹

At 15 years of age Michelangelo won the interest of Lorenzo the Magnificent with a replica of a classical figure in the Medici sculpture garden. Lorenzo took him in as apprentice in the sculpture school overseen by Bertoldo, an aging pupil of Donatello. There, Lorenzo

... caused a goodly chamber in his house to be given to Michelangelo, and provided him with all those accommodations which he desired; nor did he treat him otherwise than as his own son in everything, and even at his table, at which were seated every day persons of noble blood and great affairs, as are always at the table of such a man ... all of whom caressed and encouraged [him] in his honorable art, but especially ... the Magnificent ... ²

Condivi noted that "in the same house lived Politian [Angelo Poliziano]" who was

¹See Appendix for biographical information not related here.

²Condivi, Vita, p. 9.
... forever interpreting and showing him some theme for his work... among other things the battle of the Centaurs, explaining to him the whole of the fable, passage by passage.3

Two years later, after Lorenzo's death in 1492, his son Piero summoned Michelangelo and made known his pleasure that Michelangelo should remain in the house, as in the time of his father; and he gave him the same chamber, and kept him continually at his table as before... And so the youth lived some months with Piero.4

Vasari repeats Condivi in his revised 1568 version of Michelangelo's life, saying that Lorenzo "caused him to eat at his own table with his sons and other persons of worth and quality" and that "by the advice of Politiano, Michelangelo executed a Battle of Hercules with the Centaurs in a piece of marble."5

The Florentine Neoplatonists Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano, and Francesco da Diacceto were also in residence at the Medici palace during the 1490s and were certainly among the "persons of noble blood and great affairs" at the table of Lorenzo. The Medici Platonic Academy was a peripatetic one, now in residence in Florence, now in the Medici villa at Careggi, three miles beyond the city.

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3 Ibid., p. 10. 4 Ibid., p. 11.
5 Vasari, Lives, p. 45.
Ficino wrote much of his commentary at Careggi, where Lorenzo died in 1492. Of Lorenzo's establishment, Guicciardini noted:

So in his lifetime all the best and most famous men in Italy taught there and were very highly paid . . . . Thus the study of the humanities flourished in Florence under Messer Agnolo Poliziano . . . philosophy and arts had Marsilio Ficino, Coun Pico della Mirandola and other eminent men."

Michelangelo, in his fifteenth through seventeenth years, was surrounded by learned men, especially philosophers. One can imagine the discussions, arguments, and details on the progress of works underway which must have dominated the dinner conversations, as well as daily casual encounters in the garden and courtyard. Poliziano, the scholarly humanist, took the time to suggest sculptural themes to the youth and then explained them in great detail. Ficino, Pico, and Lorenzo must have discussed esthetic theory, defining true beauty and its counterpart, love. Doubtless Michelangelo perceived the great attention paid to the value of contemplation and the need to search for inner harmony. Being already dedicated to a life of art, he would naturally seek out these men and their learned opinions and beliefs on the subject. In such an environment, he would have absorbed the Neoplatonic teachings and their compatibility with the tenets of Christianity. Ficino

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\(^7\)Ibid., p. 4.
and Poliziano were both Dominicans, and Ficino performed regular priestly duties.

In addition, Ficino had regularly scheduled pupils who studied Latin and Greek, as well as philosophy, or moral theology, with him. Diacceto was one of these, his name appearing in Ficino's roll book of pupils. 8 Thus, the Medici Academy included not only the prominent philosophers and the Medici patriarch and his sons, but also other young men engaged in philosophical study and debate.

As Michelangelo always denied the influences of other artists' styles on his own, it is not surprising that he did not indicate to Condivi these men of Florence who had shaped his life-long system of philosophy and religion. In addition, the political climate of the Counter-Reformation at the time of Condivi's writing did not tolerate indebtedness to "pagan" philosophy. 9

At the conclusion of his Life, Condivi stated:

I have many times heard Michelangelo reason and discourse upon love; and have afterwards heard from those that were present, that he spoke not otherwise of love, than according to that which is to be read in the writings of Plato. 10

He continued, admitting his ignorance of that philosopher:

"As for me, I know not what Plato may say about this matter." 11

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9 Blunt, Artistic Theory, p. 104.

10 Condivi, Vita, p. 81.

11 Ibid.
This being the case, it is futile to wish that Condivi had included more profound information about the artist in his biography.

Herman Grimm, the German historian, wrote of the Medici household:

... the house of the Medici was not only the place from whence the finest threads of policy were spun on all sides, but religious movements, philosophical studies, poetry, and philology turned thither ...  

Modern scholars have accepted their predecessors' emphasis on the formative influence of the years in the Medici palace. Charles de Tolnay wrote of these early years:

It was probably there that he met the circle of humanists who surrounded the Magnificent: Poliziano, and no doubt also the Neoplatonists, Ficino, Benivieni, Landino, and Pico.  

12 Grimm, Michel Angelo, p. 105. John Addington Symonds wrote similarly in his Life of Michelangelo (1896): "The young sculptor sat at the same board as Marsilio Ficino, the interpreter of Plato; Pico della Mirandola, the phoenix of Oriental erudition; Angelo Poliziano, the unrivalled humanist and melodious Italian poet ... with artists, scholars, students innumerable, all in their own departments capable of satisfying a youth's curiosity, by explaining to him the particular virtues of books discussed, or of antique works of art." (New York: Random House Modern Library, 1928), p. 16.

13 Tolnay, Michelangelo: Sculptor, Painter, Architect, trans. Gaynor Woodhouse (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 173. Likewise, Herbert von Einem wrote in Michelangelo: "The year 1490 found him as a house-guest in the Medici palace, where he lived with the sons of Lorenzo il Magnifico--Pietro ... Giovanni, later Pope Leo X; and Giuliano. It was at this time that he must have become acquainted with the ideas of Platonism and Neoplatonism which play so important a part in his art and poetry. Among the tutors of Lorenzo's sons were the poet Angelo Poliziano, the philosophers Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, and the humanist scholar Cristoforo Landini, famed for his commentary on Dante." Trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Methuen & Co., 1973), p. 11.
Erwin Panofsky in *Studies in Iconology* (1939) also emphasized Michelangelo's early exposure to Neoplatonism. Of the role of literary sources on Michelangelo's developing philosophy Panofsky wrote: "This admixture [of Dante and Petrarch] is negligible in comparison with the importance of genuine Neoplatonism with which the pupil of Poliziano had come in contact as a boy."\(^{14}\) Condivi and Vasari both particularly mentioned that Michelangelo was thoroughly familiar with Dante's work as a result of a lifetime's study. Panofsky noted:

... nobody read Dante without a commentary. And of the ten or eleven editions of Dante printed before 1500 nine are provided with the Commentary by Cristoforo Landino in which every line of the poet is interpreted on Neoplatonic grounds ... \(^{15}\)

Panofsky continued: "It is more than probable that he was also acquainted if not with Ficino's Latin works, with Pico's Italian Commentary on the *Canzona d'Amore* by Benivieni."\(^{16}\) It must be noted, as well, that Ficino translated one of his own major works, the Commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, into Italian immediately after its first publication in Latin in 1475.\(^{17}\) There is no indication that Michelangelo knew either Latin or Greek, as all his writings were in the Tuscan dialect.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{14}\) Panofsky, *Iconology*, p. 179.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid.  
After Lorenzo's death, Michelangelo traveled to Venice and Bologna where he was taken into the house of a local official and remained for a year. There, according to Vasari, he "read the works of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and other Tuscan authors."\(^1^9\) He then returned to Florence, where he attended the sermons of Savonarola, whose writings he continued to read throughout his life.\(^2^0\)

During the years 1517-20 Michelangelo was again in the close company of Neoplatonic scholars at the Sacred Academy of the Medici. This group of over 200 Florentine literary and artistic figures met from 1515-19. As a member, Michelangelo signed the petition to Pope Leo in 1519 requesting that Dante's remains be moved to Florence, and offered to execute a tomb for the poet. Francesco da Diacceto, the pupil of Ficino, acted as leader of this Academy, and signed the petition second after the Archbishop of Florence.\(^2^1\)

Michelangelo's participation in this group indicates that he shared friendship and interests with its members, for his was not a sociable personality. He was profoundly interested in the art of poetry, having spent several years (1503-06) in his youth devoted to its study. At that time, according to Condivi:

\(^{19}\)Lives, p. 50.  \(^{20}\)Ibid., p. 212.

\(^{21}\)Kristeller, Studies, p. 301.
He stayed for some time doing almost nothing in the fine arts, having given himself over to the reading of the vernacular poets and orators and to the writing of sonnets for his own delight.  

This early experience was the foundation for his life-long devotion to poetry and social acquaintance with those similarly dedicated to poetry. Michelangelo's membership in the Sacred Academy, which was led by Ficino's pupil Diacceto, is further evidence of the direct influence of Neoplatonism on Michelangelo's early life.

It has been established that Michelangelo was acquainted with the major thinkers of Florentine Neoplatonism both during his adolescence in the Medici household and again 25 years later with the pupils of those philosophers. It is now necessary to examine those influential personalities and their philosophy, for it is from this early exposure that Michelangelo developed his personal philosophy.

Italian Neoplatonism has been called the "most important post-humanist philosophical movement," because of its appeal to persons from all walks of life: statesmen, merchants, physicians, jurists, musicians, poets, orators, theologians, and artists.  

The diffusion of Neoplatonism in the sixteenth century was so enormous that it is not possible to establish its direct influence on the artists of the age . . . . There was no need for an artist to be a learned man for him to be acquainted with its main doctrines.

The individual responsible for the revival and rejuvenation of Neoplatonism was Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), court philosopher of Cosimo and Lorenzo Medici.

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24 Robb, Neoplatonism, p. 212.
The origins of Renaissance Neoplatonism are found in Alexandrian Neoplatonism; the early Christian Neoplatonism of Plotinus; and the continuing Platonic tradition of Augustine in the Middle Ages. A new interest in Platonism resulted from the migration of Greek scholars to Italy after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, and led to the new translations of Plato in the fifteenth century by Ficino. It is to Ficino that credit for the synthesis of these disparate elements must be given.

Marsilio Ficino was the son of the Medici family physician. He began to study Greek in 1456 under the direction of Greek scholars then in Florence. In 1462 Cosimo Medici established the Platonic Academy in Florence for the purpose of reviving the thought of the ancient philosophers, and named Ficino its master. In 1463 Ficino began translating Plato's Dialogues and Epistles, as well as the works of Plotinus, Pythagoras, and the apocryphal literature of late antiquity, the Orphic Hymns and Hermes Trismegistus, thus making these works available in Latin for the first time.

Ficino led an ascetic life, suffering an extended period of depression due to the seeming irreconcilability of his pagan philosophy and Christian faith. In 1475 he entered the Church as a parish priest and continued to perform a priest's duties until his death. In addition, Ficino was tutor and adviser to Lorenzo Medici, who maintained the Academy after his grandfather's death, along
with his collection of classical antiques and manuscripts. Among the other scholars and humanists who composed the Florentine Platonic Academy with Ficino were Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Angelo Poliziano, Francesco da Diacceto, and Cristoforo Landino.

Ficino's synthesis of Platonist philosophy and Christian theology provided a framework in which humanism could be expressed and its dominant problems resolved. In order to counter the wide-spread doubt and irreligion engendered by the progressive corruption of the Church, Ficino's revival of Platonic philosophy offered confirmation of the Christian religion by providing it with a rational foundation.

From the works of Plato, Ficino found suggestions for a philosophy based on transcendent universal forms and the possibility of their direct apprehension by humans, spiritual love; and immortality of the soul. The principal works of Plato, the Dialogues and the Timaeus, "fail to suggest an order which might become a philosophical system," thus forcing Ficino to search for a systematization in the writings of the Alexandrian and Christian Neoplatonists.

Ficino formally set forth his Neoplatonism in Platonica Theologia, published in 1468. The title significantly juxtaposes the concepts of Christian faith and Greek philosophy which Ficino sought to resolve.

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Ficino based his program on five fundamental concepts: (1) an essentially hierarchical universe, within which the human soul occupies the central position; (2) an emphasis on the contemplative life, which forms the basic human task and purpose; (3) the immortality of the human soul, which ascends to union with God through contemplation; (4) spiritual love as preparation for accepting the love of God; and (5) the conviction that religion and philosophy are complementary rather than antithetical.26

According to Ficino, the universe is composed of five levels, ascending from the material world and animals to God. The human soul, midway between the two extremes, is directed to both God and the mortal body, and mediates between the upper and lower spheres. Human beings are superior, though related, to other animal creatures. Ficino consciously modified traditional Neoplatonism in this central position of the soul, which is neither heavenly nor earthly.27

The second concept, that of the contemplative life, was Ficino's basic concern. Only through contemplation,


27"Such an attempt [to become God] is natural to man no less than the attempt to fly is natural to birds. For it is inherent in all men always and everywhere and consequently follows, not the incidental quality of some man, but the nature of the species itself." Marsilio Ficino, Omnia opera (Basel, 1561), p. 305, quoted in P. O. Kristeller, The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, trans. Virginia Conant (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 170.
which is an inner quest of the intellect for union with God, can the human soul find the fulfillment of its purpose, which is direct knowledge of God through human reason and will.²⁸

Immortality of the individual human soul is essential to attaining the goal, for without the possibility of eternity humans can only rarely hope to achieve apprehension of the nature of God. Ficino's concept of immortality was a Christianized version of Plato's doctrine of the transmigration, or reincarnation in succeeding lives, of human souls. Immortality was the linch-pin of Ficino's Neoplatonist synthesis, and the Platonic Theology offers numerous arguments in support of the concept.²⁹

From immortality of the soul Ficino derived the concepts of both Platonic, or spiritual, love, and the essential dignity of man. Ficino's doctrine of human love is a reinterpretation of Plato, Cicero, and the divine love of St. Paul.³⁰ Love is preparation for the soul's true aim,

²⁸"To sum it up in a few words, philosophy is the ascent of the Soul from lower to higher things and from darkness to light; its cause is the instinct of the divine mind, its means and faculties the disciplines we have mentioned, its end the possession of the highest good, its fruit at last the right guidance of men." Ibid., p. 303, quoted, p. 763.

²⁹"Likewise, the Soul, since it either is natural life itself or has life for its natural accompaniment, cannot admit death, inasmuch as it is its opposite, as I have said. If Soul does not admit death, it is immortal just as fire, not receiving cold, is incapable of cold." Ibid., p. 150, quoted, p. 132.

³⁰Kristeller, Eight Philosophers, p. 48.
the love of God. This philosophical concept of love led Ficino and Neoplatonism to an intensely personal approach to religion.

The concept of human dignity is founded on man's free will, by which he is free to accept or reject the ultimate soul as Ficino described it. Attainment of direct knowledge of God by the intellect and will is never inevitable, due to the dual nature of man and the conflicting tendencies of body and mind. Thus, the immortal soul is always miserable in its material body, as the soul strives to overcome the baser impulses and seeks union with God. That union, once attained, brings the vision of truth in which all contradictions are reconciled, and is the stable reality underlying beauty and perfect good.

"The peculiar character of Florentine Neoplatonism is its insistence on man's power to seize reality by his

\[31\]"Hence, the impulse of the lover is not extinguished by the sight or touch of any body. For he does not desire this or that body, but admires, yearns for, and wonders at the splendor of the higher light shining all over the bodies. The lovers do not know what they wish or desire, because they do not know God Himself, whose secret flavor infused some sweet odor of Himself in His works." Ficino, Opera omnia, p. 1326, quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Ficino, p. 268.

\[32\]"Why do we judge that the Soul is better than the body, if not because it is closer to the highest goodness? If there were no highest goodness, but an ascent from good to good without end, the body would be distant from the highest goodness by an infinite interval, and the Soul also by an infinite interval." Ibid., p. 95, quoted p. 83.
own efforts.\textsuperscript{33} It is consistent with Plato's definition of the mind as the creator and ruler of all. Because of man's free will to acknowledge either the aspiration of his soul or material desires, evil is a response of man, not God. In the mind of God, therefore, exist the universal ideals of all levels of the universe, and true beauty. Through contemplation and denial, the individual soul seeks union with perfect truth and beauty.

Ficino adopted the concept of God found in Plato's \textit{Timaeus} in which God is a dynamic, creating force, rather than the transcendent, self-sufficient God of the \textit{Republic}.\textsuperscript{34} He thus led Neoplatonism away from medieval Christian mysticism. "There is an idealized human, not divine, love; and the charity of Christ, repentance for sin, and the contemplation of a personal God are entirely lacking."\textsuperscript{35} Italian Neoplatonism rejected the need for an intermediary between man and God; emphasized human dignity rather than frailty; gave a prominent place to individual effort; and looked to a final absorption into divine nature rather than a final contemplation of a personal God.

Ficino wrote: "Therefore, because God has joined himself unto man without intermediary, it behoves us to remember that our felicity consists in being turned to

\textsuperscript{33}Robb, \textit{Neoplatonism}, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{34}Haydn, \textit{Counter-Renaissance}, p. 329.
him, so that without intermediary we may cleave unto
God." The human soul seeks always, and cannot be satis-
fied until it finds, God.

In this personalized concept of religion, Ficino's
Neoplatonism shared certain similarities with northern
Calvinism. It directly influenced the prominent Italian
reformers of the sixteenth century--Juan de Valdes,
Vittoria Colonna, and Cardinal Reginald Pole. Neoplatonists
and Calvinists alike repudiated the intermediary; defined
man's final happiness as purely intellectual contemplation
of God; and rejected the Christian-classical "principle
of limit" in defining concepts of God's nature. The
Neoplatonist philosophy has been characterized as "the
denial of limit," as it challenged "every aspect of the
inherited medieval synthesis and the fundamental prin-
ciples of Christian humanism" even to "rejection of the
established exaltation of reason . . . ."

Ficino has been called by Paul Oskar Kristeller
"the greatest Florentine philosopher and metaphysician . . . ,"
who left his "imprint on a whole period of Florentine
culture for several generations." Outstanding among the
other scholars around Ficino in the Medici Academy was
Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), who joined the

36Robb, Neoplatonism, p. 87.
37Haydn, Counter-Renaissance, chap. 6 passim.
38Ibid., p. xiii.
39Kristeller, Eight Philosophers, p. 50.
group 26 years after its inception. Pico "never claimed
to revive Platonic philosophy . . . and did not even call
himself a Platonist," even though he called himself a pupil of Ficino. 40 Pico was educated in Greek, Latin,
canon law, and theology at the Universities of Ferrara,
Padua, and Paris. He was reputed to be acquainted with
22 different languages. 41 In 1486 he published 900 theses
of theological and philosophical topics for public debate.
They were condemned by papal authorities and Pico fled to
Florence, where he was protected by Lorenzo Medici. Shortly
after, in 1488, he joined the circle of philosophers in the
Medici Platonic Academy. His most extensive writing was a
12-book treatise against astrology, which was published
posthumously. In his last years he became a devoted
follower of Savonarola and even contemplated joining the
Dominican order. 42

Pico's philosophy was syncretistic and built on
Ficino's theory of natural religion. It was, however, more
comprehensive than Ficino's, because of his consideration
of Aristotelian and Cabalistic literatures. His personal
goal was a reconciliation of Aristotelianism and Platonism

40 Ibid., p. 55.

41 William Roscoe, The Life of Lorenzo de Medici,
Called the Magnificent, 9th ed. (London: Henry G. Bohn,

42 Robb, Neoplatonism, p. 00.
("I have arranged the fruit of my thinking on both the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies . . . ."43) to which he added his knowledge of Arabic and Jewish thought, especially the mysticism of the Cabala, which he supposed to be the original Egyptian mysteries. Pico stated that he was "pledged to the doctrines of no man."44 Among his sources were Duns Scotus, Aquinas, Plotinus, Averroes, Zoroaster, Orpheus, Plato, Moses, Mohammed, and the Pythagoreans.

In his "Oration" to the 900 theses, Pico related the creation of man; his nature as granted by God; the value of philosophy as a guide; and the universal truth to which all philosophies contribute.

Man's nature was determined by the Creator's original intention:

He [God] took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: 'Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam . . . . Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand we have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature . . . thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.'45


Pico's emphasis on human freedom to assume any position within the universal hierarchy contributed to Renaissance philosophy characteristics which are uniquely human: dignity and free will. He described the different sorts of life available to humanity: vegetative, brutish, rational, or intellectual. If a human chooses the latter, "he will be an angel and the son of God." To attain this state, contemplation and philosophy are required. "If we pass our time in contemplation, considering the creator, we shall be all ablaze with Cherubic light." Philosophy provides the "steps of the ladder" to the "highest heaven." Pico cited both Moses and Plato's *Timaeus* for the moment of man's creation, referring to God as the "Craftsman" as Plato had done. Of the correspondence between the Jewish and Christian religions, Pico stated that when he read the Cabala he saw the Christian religion: the Trinity and the divinity of the Messiah. "But in those parts which concern philosophy you really seem to hear Pythagoras and Plato . . . ." His conviction that all philosophies have a share in universal truth distinguished him from Ficino. Man is the only creature whose life is determined by free choice, rather than nature. Humanity thus constitutes a separate level in the hierarchy, according to Pico. Whereas Ficino utilized Platonism as a solution to Christian

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theology, Pico found religion itself to be a fulfillment beyond philosophy ("we shall be made perfect with the felicity of theology.")\textsuperscript{52} His system was more comprehensive in its acceptance of all philosophies.

With great intensity and energy he turns to the world of the human soul and human mind alone. In this direction lies his personal achievement which carries him beyond his mystical and Neoplatonic sources; he becomes the herald of a new ideal of human freedom.\textsuperscript{53}

Pico's elaboration on man's dignity and freedom was his major contribution to Florentine Neoplatonism. His version of the creation of man; ideas on the nature of God and the role of philosophy for religious enlightenment; and distinctions between the active and contemplative lives all profoundly influenced Michelangelo and appeared later in his art and poetry.

Two other scholars associated with the Medici Academy in the last decade of the fifteenth century were Cristoforo Landino and Angelo Poliziano. Landino (1424-1492), like Ficino, was associated with the Medici family for many years. In 1457 he was appointed professor of poetry and rhetoric at the University of Florence and became, along with Ficino, a tutor to Lorenzo and Giuliano.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., p. 230.


\textsuperscript{54}In his Commentary on Plato's Symposium, Ficino included a speech by Landino on Plato's myth of the nature of man, and addressed him as "the most accomplished Orphic and Platonic poet of our times." p. 154.
Landino knew Greek so well that Ficino consulted him for his translations of Plato.\textsuperscript{55} He is noted for his \textit{Disputations Camaldulenses}, published in 1480, which is the, perhaps fictional, report of a debate among Lorenzo and Giuliano Medici, Leon Battista Alberti, Ficino, Landino, and others, in 1468. They discussed Platonic dogma, and Landino recorded the conversation. This work also included critical notes in an allegorical style on Virgil's \textit{Aeneid}.

Landino's best known and most influential work was his 1481 \textit{Commentary} on Dante's \textit{Divina Commedia}, in which he interpreted the journey in Neoplatonic terms of ascent from the mortal to the divine guided by love. He was widely revered by the Florentines for this analysis of Dante and was granted a villa by the city government in recognition of his achievement.\textsuperscript{56} One of the editions of the \textit{Commentary} was illustrated by Botticelli with Landino's advice.

Michelangelo, who later became so well versed on Dante that he offered to debate Leonardo in the streets on the subject, proved his familiarity with Landino's commentary when he disagreed with some of his interpretations:

\begin{quote}
. . . in explaining Canto IX of Purgatory, he [Landino] contradicts himself . . . Even though he in all other matters was a singular man and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{55} Koscoe, \textit{Life of Lorenzo}, p. 92.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 241.
worthy of the greatest praise . . . 57

It is significant that Michelangelo, who produced two figures for Julius's tomb, Rachel and Leah, which illustrated Dante's version of the Active and Contemplative lives, and included Dantean characters in his late painting of the Last Judgment, was so well acquainted with Landino's interpretation that he recorded seeming contradictions.

Another major figure in the Medici Academy was Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494), a poet and classical scholar. He alone of the Academy was specifically mentioned by Condivi as one who had spent considerable time with the young Michelangelo. He was recognized as a great Florentine author in the tradition of Dante and Petrarch by his contemporaries.

Poliziano was educated under the protection of Cosimo and later Lorenzo Medici. He studied Greek with Landino and philosophy with Ficino, and later became a tutor and librarian in Lorenzo's household. In addition to poetry, he also wrote commentaries on ancient Roman authors. Like Ficino, Poliziano was a canon at the Cathedral of Florence.

Although there is no record that Poliziano wrote philosophical speculations, his interest in classical legend and myth led him to translate their allegorical significance

in Neoplatonic terms. That his influence on Michelangelo was profound is demonstrated by the fact that he was remembered when Michelangelo dictated his memoirs to Condivi 60 years later.

Of the many pupils who attended the peripatetic Florentine Academy, Francesco da Diacceto (1466-1522) is the only one who is recorded as having pupils of his own in early sixteenth century Florence. Diacceto studied at the University of Pisa, where he was acquainted with Giovanni (later Pope Leo X) and Giuliano Meucci. In 1492 he returned to Florence where he became a pupil of Marsilio Ficino. After Ficino's death in 1499, Diacceto was regarded as his successor, although there is no evidence that the Platonic Academy survived Ficino. Diacceto was a professor at the University of Florence from 1502 to 1522 in moral and theological philosophy. All his works were published posthumously, though his most important, De Pulchro, was completed by 1499.

This work on metaphysics defends Plato's system of Ideas against Aristotle's philosophy. He also argued that the chain of reality ends in matter and that matter is the cause of evil rather than good. He attributed to

58 Poliziano praised Ficino as "more fortunate than Orpheus, [who] brought back to life the true Eurydice, in other words, Platonic wisdom." Opera omnia (Basel, 1553), p. 310, quoted in P. O. Kristeller, The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 22.

59 Kristeller, Studies, p. 298. 60 Ibid., pp. 287-336.
man the powers of sense, reason, and mind. His Latin work, De Amore of 1508 (in Italian, 1511), discusses Ficino's concepts of love as the guide of the soul; the five degrees of the universe, descending from God through body to matter; and two distinct kinds of beauty and love.61

As a university scholar, Diacceto was well acquainted with the teachings of Aristotle, and, like Pico, he attempted to reconcile Plato and Aristotle. From Ficino, however, he adopted the ideas of a hierarchical universe in which the soul was at the center; the possibility of human ascent through contemplation; and love as the guide through that ascent. Diacceto abandoned Ficino's Christian-Platonic synthesis, admitting their dualism and granting an inherent superiority to religion, as had Pico.62

As the leading Florentine Neoplatonist of the sixteenth century, Diacceto was associated with attempts to institutionalize the philosophy in studies of literature and philosophy. A little-known group, the Sacred Academy of the Medici, held regular meetings between 1515 and 1519 for poetry readings, music, and lectures. It held a papal charter and listed officers. It is generally considered to be a revival of the Medici Platonic Academy, whose major personalities--Ficino, Pico, Poliziano, Lorenzo, and Landino--had all died before the end of the

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61 Kristeller, Studies, pp. 308-11.
62 Ibid., p. 318.
preceding century. The principal document by which this group is known is the petition described earlier, which was signed by 200 members in 1519 and addressed to Pope Leo X, requesting the transfer of Dante's bones to Florence. Diacceto's signature appears on this petition, along with Michelangelo's, who signed as "Michelagnolo schultore."63

Diacceto held office under the Medici government in 1520, and delivered the funeral oration for Prince Lorenzo in 1516. His biography was written by the Neoplatonist academician Benedetto Varchi in 1561, and was based on information provided by Diacceto's grandson, who was a member of the then-current Florentine Academy.

Diacceto provided a continuity between the early Florentine Neoplatonists and the mid-sixteenth century academicians who were trained by Diacceto and his students. Neoplatonism changed from a philosophical system to scholarly methods and procedures. Varchi, who lectured on poems by Michelangelo and described him as a Platonist, was of this later generation for whom the philosophy itself held little interest.

The diffusion of Florentine Neoplatonism into the philosophical thought of Florence, other parts of Italy, and northern Europe was rapid, owing to its direct appeal

63 Ibid., p. 301.
to the serious issue of reconciling Christianity based on revelation and faith with the newly-recovered ideals and philosophies of the ancients. Ficino, Pico, and the other Florentine Neoplatonists presented a comprehensive, rational resolution, which maintained the fundamental Christian doctrine of immortality, while offering plausible proofs from the pagan Plato. They presented the universality of truth within the obvious continuity of seemingly opposed traditions. This Neoplatonic philosophy was absorbed by Church reformers such as the Florentine priest Savonarola, who preached on philosophy and faith, truth, and the power of contemplation beyond the senses, even as he condemned the Medici Platonists.64 In Rome itself a Platonic academy was founded, though it was more extreme in its emulation of pagan society than that of Florence was.

Outside Italy, the impact of Neoplatonism was one of religious and literary influences. The topic of Platonic love received considerable treatment by many European authors. In Italy, however, Neoplatonism continued to have sporadic institutional connections. In the second half of the sixteenth century, chairs of Platonic philosophy were established at the Universities of Ferrara, Rome, and Pisa.65 The many academies which were formed in


65 Kristeller, Studies, p. 291.
the sixteenth century took their inspiration from the
Medici Platonic Academy. These differed widely in their
purposes and durations, but most were founded to promote
vernacular poetry and literature. The Florentine Academy
formed the most direct connection with the Medici Academy.

The Accademia degli Umidi was formed in Florence in
1540 by pupils of pupils of Ficino and Diacceto. The next
year it became the Florentine Academy and received official
Medici patronage, becoming, in effect, Florence University.66
Varchi, the biographer of Diacceto who also delivered
Michelangelo's funeral oration in 1564, was professor of
Petrarch at the Academy.

Florentine Neoplatonism became "a living tradition,
a philosophia perennis,"67 whose influence later extended
to Descartes, Sir Thomas More, Kepler, Spinoza, Kant,
Goethe, and even to the nineteenth century Romantic poet
Coleridge, who read both Ficino and Plotinus.

When he [Ficino] died [1499], the movement
initiated by him had conquered all Europe
and, changing in content according to time
and place, remained a major force in Western
culture for many centuries.68

Its doctrine was a triumph of unity, proposing all reve-
lation as fundamentally one, the universe and humanity
dominated by a continuous "spiritual circuit."

67 Kristeller, Eight Philosophers, p. 53.
68 Erwin Panofsky, Renaissance and Renascences in
Western Art (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960), p. 182.
That the Renaissance world-view differed from the medieval must be attributed at least in part to Neoplatonism. The concept of man as central to the universe, through his reason and free will able to move within the hierarchy, was widely disseminated. This concept in turn engendered self-awareness and personal expression. The Renaissance world-view emphasized the natural world, rather than the supernatural; personal achievement over privileges of birth; the dignity of man, rather than his misery; and reason, rather than faith. At the same time, spiritual crisis was epidemic, often resulting in renewed faith and rejection of the rational. Thus Neoplatonism both shaped and reflected the Weltanschauung of the sixteenth century.

Neoplatonism had a significant and continuing impact on the visual and literary arts. A distinctively Neoplatonic esthetic theory dealt with the concepts of harmony, hierarchy, symbolism, moral consequences, and art as the microcosm of universal macrocosms.69

Neoplatonism's appeal to the arts is found in the role assigned to artists by Plato, Plotinus, and Ficino. Plato wrote that "the real artist, who knew what he was imitating would be interested in realities and not in imitations."70 Of the artist, Plotinus wrote: "The arts . . . go back to the Ideas from which Nature itself


derives . . . . The stone brought under the artist's hand is beautiful not as stone . . . but in virtue of the idea introduced by the artist."71 Ficino assigned the artist the "priestlike task of providing that manual guidance which enables the human mind to ascend."72

Art was thus the interpretation of the divine Ideals. As God was the source of these Ideals and thus art itself, the artist was exalted as the perceiver and translator of those forms. The task was not to imitate nature, but, through solitary contemplation and the exercise of the rational mind, to grasp those Ideals. Art was superior to nature, as nature itself is only an imitation of the Ideal forms.

Beauty, according to Plotinus, was the physical reflection of the perfect forms. The artist, in order to grasp it, must "arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away forever from the material beauty that once made his joy."73 Beauty in human forms reflects "all the virtues." No ugly or imperfect soul can be beautiful. The artist who seeks this higher beauty must suffer "wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight." These "lovers of the beauty outside of sense" are the true artists.74 Ficino adopted this definition

71Plotinus, The Enneads, quoted in Weitz, Problems in Aesthetics, p. 35f.
72Panofsky, Renaissance, p. 187.
73Plotinus, Enneads, p. 33.
74Ibid., p. 29.
of the higher purpose of art and beauty. He rejected the rigidly mathematical and proportional formulae of fifteenth century artistic theorists such as Alberti.

The artistic personality, according to Ficino, found three different expressions: as Eros, absorbed in love and enthusiasm; as Hermes, who expressed himself in allegory; or as Saturn, the personality of genius, whose stars decreed tragic destiny and solitude. This blend of the artist's mystical perception of unseeable forms through rational efforts was the curious synthesis of Neoplatonism which differentiates it from earlier humanism. The great artists of the Renaissance, Botticelli, Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo, realized Ficino's role of man as god on earth \([\text{deus in terris}]\), and through their genius understood the Neoplatonic doctrine of artistic revelation and the unity of truth.

In their re-discovery of ancient sources and practices, the Neoplatonists, especially Ficino and Pico, revived magic, ritual mysteries, and allegorical symbolism. They discovered in mythology a means of interpreting Christian doctrine with symbolism providing the fundamental relationship between sacred and profane wisdom. Moses' life and significance was thus seen as paralleling Plato's, as Socrates' did Christ's. The universal religion of Pico

\[^{75}\text{Chastel, Marsile Ficine, p. 171.}\]
provided a system of allegorical representation which was adopted in the visual and literary arts.76

The writings and philosophy of the Neoplatonists also influenced artists' choice of subject in the arts. In addition to allegorical messages, Neoplatonism's system of Ideal forms and exalted interpretation of man encouraged nude human figures in art. As God's creation, the nude body assumed the new dignity which Pico attributed to it, and represented the true reality unadorned by earthly, material trappings. These nudes were rarely sensuous, however. The Neoplatonists' emphasis on human reason and its ability to perceive the true forms influenced artists to capture ideas and virtues in their works. Botticelli's nudes, for example, are chaste and ethereal, while Michelangelo's are so robust that they deny correspondence with actual humans. The paradox of the soul as a prisoner of the body led to a spiritualization of beauty as well as personal interpretations of it.

The Neoplatonists' interest in ancient and Biblical history was an impetus to artists to re-interpret traditional Christian themes and to devise new ones. Among the latter is Raphael's scene of all the Greek philosophers in the Vatican. Michelangelo created his own version of Christian history, beginning with the creation of the universe, in

the Sistine Chapel. Among his productions are other figures which traditionally appeared in Christian art: Moses, the Prophets, Christ, and the Virgin. But his conception of them is unlike any before him, as will be explained in the following chapters. It is the Neoplatonist philosophy which accounts for this difference.

Neoplatonism acted on the arts especially through its theories of ideal beauty and the universal nature of man. Beauty, as transcendent, eternal, and unchangeable, is independent of its earthly manifestations.

But the new idea which triumphed in the teaching of Ficino, was that of the fundamental unity of all human activity, from poetry to architecture; and the affirmation of an impulse common to all the arts sufficient to transform the spiritual horizon of the age.\footnote{Chastel, Marsile Ficino, p. 61 [translation mine].}

The difference between fifteenth and sixteenth century visual arts is primarily a psychological one in both the artist and his society and, in effecting that change, Neoplatonism was instrumental.

The artist gained increased social prestige in the first half of the sixteenth century. Pico's "theodicy"\footnote{Cassirer, "Pico," JHI, p. 333.} of art postulated a new spiritual goal of art. This new attribution to the artist of innate freedom to create endowed him with a higher power, and from it he could bring forth a new nature. This involved a cult of beauty which was thoroughly universal: "Art is for [Pico]
not a particular realm of human activity, but the expression and revelation of the primary creative nature of man. 79

Plato's furore, or divine frenzy, was incorporated with the contemporary interpretation of outstanding men as melancholics. Thus the concept of the genius who pursues his lonely path through his ability to be creative under divine inspiration was developed. The artist who translated his interior vision assumed a heroic role in society.

Ficino adopted Plotinus's postulate that the concept within the artist's mind has absolute priority over his subject matter, and additionally encouraged the new spirituality in art. 80 As a realization of that inner concept, art became an activity the "nobler the more it succeeds in imposing inner, spiritual forms on the subject . . . to give visible expression in this earthly prison to the concept of eternal truth." 81

This artistic subjectivity created a tension between art as imitation of nature, and art as the language of concepts within the artist's mind. Neoplatonism, therefore, offered many new conflicts for individual artistic

79 Ibid.

80 "We have such Ideas of works of art in the mind . . . that following the model of a single Idea we can talk and fabricate something corresponding to it, even though we may not produce anything on the model of another concept." Ficino, Opera omnia, p. 187, quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 306.

81 Einem, Michelangelo, p. 261.
resolution: conflicts of the active and contemplative life; human and spiritual love; classical antiquity and contemporary Christianity; reality and ideality; the temporal and the eternal; imitation and an inner vision of beauty. The postulation of God as the source of ideal forms and beauty made the artist's primary task the discovery and portrayal of those forms.

Many of the fundamental concepts of Ficino and Pico were adopted by Michelangelo as he developed his mature philosophy. These ideas were incorporated into his art and poetry throughout his life, as will be demonstrated in later chapters.

He adopted the basic ideas of Ficino and Pico on the position of man within a hierarchical universe; the value of the contemplative life; a reliance on immortality; spiritual love as a path to knowledge of God; and the definition of human free will. The central position of the human soul within the hierarchy, torn between physical desires and divinity, was the subject of much of Michelangelo's poetry. It was also depicted in the creation of Adam in the Sistine ceiling, who emerges from earthly substance by the divine gift of life passing from God's hand.

Michelangelo's was a solitary personality which recognized the importance of contemplation. As Conditi noted: "The love of virtue . . . rendered him solitary . . . the company of men gave him no contentment but even brought
him displeasure, since it drew him away from his meditations . . . ." Through contemplation Michelangelo sought knowledge of God and the divine inspiration through which he must act as an artist.

Immortality, according to Ficino, was a necessity for attaining the eternal quest for union with God. Michelangelo believed, however, that immortality was one's continued remembrance by future generations. Immortality was, to Michelangelo, earthly fame itself, rather than the means to a spiritual goal. His concern with posterity was especially expressed in the Medici tombs where he idealized the figures of the dukes, remarking that in a thousand years no one would care to see their exact faces. This comment in turn leads to Michelangelo's Neoplatonic definition of beauty.

Michelangelo adopted Ficino's definition of beauty as the reflection of the divine in a pure soul. Michelangelo could hardly have perceived these two princes, one of whom died insane, as being pure in spirit. He therefore transposed to their figures the beauty he wished to see in those who ruled Florence or were in any way "princes."

The concept of spiritual, sometimes called Platonic, love was regarded by the Neoplatonists as well as by Michelangelo as preparation for the divine love of God. By resisting sensual love, one could deny the baser human instincts and focus instead on the distinguishing human

82 Conditi, *Vita*, p. 77.
characteristic, reason, and the powers of the mind. Since Freud's hind-sight analysis of Leonardo's homosexuality, Michelangelo's own numerous intimate associations with males have been similarly interpreted. It is indisputable that some of his love poetry is addressed to men; that he never married nor seemed to have fathered any children; and that the one woman to whom he addressed poetry was cloistered, and at a time when he was beyond middle age. What is important, however, is that he consistently denied the scandalous rumors about his sexual preferences and maintained that his friendships were spiritually motivated. His poetry to Vittoria Colonna makes clear that theirs was a non-sexual relationship of spiritual love.

The majority of those poems in which he addressed "Love" contain feminine pronouns. There is no record in his letters, biographies, or in his contemporaries' writings of him, of a woman who could have inspired these sentiments. Thus it is reasonable to assume that he addressed the abstract Love of Plotinus and Ficino--the Love which the artist must bring to his search for beauty and the Ideals.

Human free will was postulated by Ficino and more fully developed by Pico. Every individual soul is free to accept or deny through the application of reason its search for knowledge of God. This involves necessarily a conflict between the soul and the body. Michelangelo frequently referred in his poetry to his miserable body,
which entrapped his purer soul. After the age of 50 he became convinced of his imminent death and looked forward to the release from the confines of his body.

Ficino's definition of God as a personal force which needed no intermediary to communicate with individual human souls also influenced Michelangelo's religious attitudes. Because of it he turned readily to the Italian reformist movement in the 1540s which sought changes within the Church. This group espoused the concept of salvation through grace similar to that of the northern Protestants. The influence of that concept on Michelangelo may be seen in the Last Judgment, wherein fate is the predominant determiner. The saved rise to heaven with no hesitation, while the damned fall to hell before the judgment of Christ.

In defining himself as an artist, Michelangelo adopted the Neoplatonists' concept of the supremacy of art and the artist, who alone may receive and translate divine interpretations of universal forms. Michelangelo refused to be addressed as a tradesman, as artists still were in his time. He felt that through meditation he received the Idea which was already contained within a block of stone. His task was to uncover it for the inspiration of his audience. He avoided artists, such as Leonardo, who sought the pleasing line and rich color, and who faithfully portrayed natural objects. His was, indeed, a divine
calling, which, while often distasteful and always demanding, could not be refused for fear of risking his own soul.
CHAPTER III

NEOPLATONISM AND MICHELANGELO'S SCULPTURE

Michelangelo insisted throughout his life that he was primarily a sculptor, even regretting in his later years that he had been "so unfortunate" as to have at times spent "ten to twelve years without having done anything in that art." \(^1\) It is appropriate, therefore, to consider first his sculptured works in demonstrating the Neoplatonic influence on the artist.

Michelangelo's earliest work, exclusive of reproductions of classical Roman statues housed in the Medici gardens, was a marble relief depicting the Battle of the Centaurs. This theme, according to Condivi, was suggested and interpreted to Michelangelo by Poliziano. \(^2\) He completed it just before Lorenzo's death in 1492.

This panel is a tumult of nude figures in every possible pose of action, and conveys the influence of classical reliefs with which Michelangelo was familiar in the Medici collection. For his earliest work he chose the nude human body for his subject, a subject which could express the ideal human form with timeless universality.

\(^1\) Condivi, *Vita*, p. 11. \(^2\) Ibid., p. 10.
It is probable that at this time Michelangelo was also making anatomical studies of corpses. After Lorenzo's death Michelangelo carved a wooden crucifix for the Prior of Santo Spirito in gratitude for the bodies provided him. These early studies assured Michelangelo's fundamental knowledge of human musculature and anatomy, which he would later exploit and exaggerate. Thus, Michelangelo's first original creation was a scene from classical mythology executed with the advice of a scholarly humanist, who was schooled in analyses of the classical past and in the appropriate methods of translating it into allegory.

Michelangelo's early exposure to treasured Roman and Greek sculptures in the Medici garden instilled in him a life-long reverence for the works of the ancients. He was present, for example, when the Laocoön, that tortured sculptural group from Hellenistic Greece, was unearthed in 1506. Its influence is seen in the prominent musculature and vigorous poses of Michelangelo's style thereafter. Two of his earliest patrons in Rome, Cardinals Riario and Giuliano della Rovere (later Pope Julius II), were notable collectors of ancient statuary.

3 Tolnay, Michelangelo, p. 173.

4 Although allegory was frequent in medieval philosophy and art, the re-discoverers of Platonism were especially dedicated to concealed meanings. Pico wrote: "Plato himself concealed his doctrines beneath coverings of allegory, veils of myth, mathematical images, and unintelligible signs of fugitive meaning." Heptaplu, trans. Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965), p. 69.
Michelangelo's first journey to Rome in 1496 resulted in a commission from a French cardinal for a *pietà*, the term given to the representation of the dead Christ mourned by his mother. This work, perhaps Michelangelo's best known, was an unusual treatment of the traditional theme. Michelangelo depicted the two figures as equally young, beautiful and unmarred by suffering. It was his first sculpture in which he expressed his dedication to ideal human beauty, regardless of traditional interpretations. The Virgin, as mother of Christ, must, according to nature and tradition, appear older than her son. Michelangelo abandoned this reasoning, however, and stated with his art that Art is concerned with a higher realm, with capturing essential ideas. Thus Mary, as the Queen of Heaven and mother of Christ, embodies the idea of pure womanhood and its virtues, as well as her role of intercessor for mankind in heaven. Michelangelo chose to portray those ideas rather than adhere to the traditional narrative, which focused on Mary's maternal grief after the crucifixion.

The voluminous draperies which envelop the figure of Mary contrast with the almost-nude figure of Christ. He is awkwardly laid across his mother's lap, but seems to exert no substantial weight on her. Michelangelo divinized the figure of Christ so that his wounds and facial hair are barely apparent. Christ's body is the physical remnant by
which Michelangelo conveys the spiritual message inherent in the theme. For his love of mankind Christ has suffered and died. Mary symbolizes humanity, which remains to mourn him and to ponder the message of that love. Michelangelo expressed with his Pietà the highest degree of spiritual love which both Christianity and Neoplatonism advocated as the goal of the human spirit. His interpretation of this traditional theme is that the artist can transcend the narrative content and the medieval concept of art for the purpose of instruction. The artist must seek to portray the ideal forms found in the higher realm and personality philosophical concepts. That he felt he had succeeded is perhaps the real reason that he chose to sign this work.

The Pietà is unique in Michelangelo's oeuvre. The surface is more thoroughly finished and highly polished than any other of his works and it is the only one bearing his signature. The signature, on a band crossing Mary's breast, was added, according to Vasari, when he overheard a tour guide attributing it to another sculptor. It succeeded in establishing Michelangelo's fame, not only as a virtuoso in marble, but as a respected creator of genuine art. After it, he had no need to affix his name to his creations.

When Michelangelo returned to Florence in 1501 to solicit a monumental (15 feet high) block of damaged marble owned by the city government, his reputation was such that it was readily granted him. From the marble he modelled

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5Vasari, Lives, p. 55.
the young warrior David. The theme of David traditionally held both religious and political significance. David was the ancestor of Christ. His victory over the enemy Goliath also paralleled Christ's victory over Satan. 6 Politically, David personified civic bravery in the face of overwhelming foes. Vasari simplistically recorded this as Michelangelo's sole intention: "To intimate that, as David had defended his people and governed justly, so they who were then ruling that city should defend it with courage and govern it uprightly." 7

Michelangelo's David differs from its fifteenth century Florentine predecessors (Donatello's and Verrocchio's Davids) in its total nudity and great muscul arity. It was a symbol not only of the Florentine Republic but of all humanity raised to superhuman grandeur and beauty. The David can be considered a "synthesis of the ideal of the Florentine Renaissance." 8 It combined the new scientific spirit, in its precise anatomy, and the heroic concept of man, in its strength of pose and straight-forward gaze which confronts the future. The David is Michelangelo's statement of masculine perfection, as the earlier Pietà represents female beauty.

In 1505 Michelangelo was called to Rome by the new Pope, Julius II, to design his tomb. It was a commission

which determined the future course of Michelangelo's career. The tomb was to be erected in St. Peter's, which Julius was re-building, and was designed by Michelangelo as a monumental, free-standing structure of three stories' height. The design was revised many times and remained incomplete for 40 years, plaguing Michelangelo into his old age. His continuing obligations to Julius and his heirs bound Michelangelo to life in Rome and labor for the succession of popes.

Because the design of the tomb was changed six times in its four decades of construction, it is difficult to state the artist's exact intentions, especially as its completed forms reflect progressive abbreviations and actual execution by lesser talents.

Briefly, the history of the tomb and its evolving states is as follows. The earliest plans for the tomb, according to Condivi, depicted it with four sides with niches on the ground level, containing 40 statues representing the liberal arts and virtues, which "had become with Pope Julius prisoners of death." The second story

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9Ibid., p. 69.

10Depending on the version chosen as most representative of Michelangelo's meaning, interpretations of the tomb vary. Scholars generally agree that the overt purpose of the tomb was to apotheosize the Pope and, by extension, the Church. The artist's philosophical statement is more subtle and elusive to modern viewers. It is the discovery of this more profound statement which will be discussed here.

was to hold four corner statues, including Moses and St. Paul. Above it the Pope's sarcophagus, supported by angels, would be placed. Michelangelo quarried a vast quantity of marbles and had them sent to Rome. Julius then diverted him from the tomb to decorate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, on which he worked from 1508 to 1512.

Upon Julius's death in 1513, a new design was approved by his heirs. It involved 38 colossal statues. In 1516 another contract with the heirs was signed by Michelangelo. The width of the entire structure was reduced by half and the number of statues to 19. Also in that year, Pope Leo X ordered Michelangelo to Florence to construct a new facade for the Medici church, San Lorenzo. Michelangelo worked on it, and the Medici funerary chapel, until 1534.

Sixteen years after the second plan (1532), another design was made which reduced the statues for the tomb to six and abandoned the plan of erecting it in St. Peter's. This version, which was finally installed in St. Peter ad Vincoli, from which Julius had taken his cardinal's title, required the completed Moses and five other statues.

In 1541, after completing the Last Judgment for Pope Paul III, Michelangelo again turned to the tomb. He rejected two completed "captives" and began the figures of

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12 Symonds, Life of Michelangelo, p. 87.
13 Ibid., p. 89. 14 Ibid., p. 91.
Rachel and Leah, allegories of the contemplative and active lives taken from Dante's *Purgatorio*, which Condivi quotes as Michelangelo's source.\(^{15}\) The final contract of 1542 required the Moses, Rachel, and Leah by Michelangelo, and three additional figures to be completed by an apprentice. In 1545 the figures were installed and the tomb completed. The recumbent figure of the Pope which now caps the structure was also carved by a student according to his own, not Michelangelo's, design. As completed, it is a wall facade which surrounds the statues.

The whole matter of the tomb was a tragedy for Michelangelo. Its incompletion haunted him and made him bitterly protest other, more realizable, commissions. His original design was a vast program which alone could have occupied his entire career, combining as it did both architecture and sculpture, in both marble and bronze. And it is the original design which must be analyzed, for it is there that Michelangelo revealed his earliest comprehensive interpretation of the metaphysical universe.

Tolnay describes the original design as a

\... cosmic building which reveals the degrees of the life of the human soul ... the abbreviated image of the universe, with its ascending progression of the soul from earthly to heavenly life ... symbolizing the states of the soul and [supposing] a perfect parallelism between the inner life of the soul and the external structure of the world.\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Canto 27, *Condivi, Vita*, p. 61.

\(^{16}\) Tolnay, *Tomb of Julius II*, p. 25.
To understand how Michelangelo proposed to illustrate these "states of the soul" requires a description of the tomb in its earliest design, for it is that version which was most inclusive. Michelangelo began his plan as soon as he received Julius's commission, probably in 1506.

He was then 31 years of age and at the height of his creative vigor and physical energy. His design for the tomb reflected his youthful assurance of mastery of his craft and magnificence of his interpretations. His earlier successes with the Pietà and David encouraged him to now proceed, with Papal munificence, with a complex, multi-figured work which would be an entire philosophical program. It would be his personal statement of the universe, Christianity, the Church, and the concepts of the life of the human soul--its temptations, struggles, and victories, both in life and in eternity. It is probable that the Pope shared Michelangelo's interpretations of these concepts. The Neoplatonic definitions of the soul and universe which Michelangelo proposed in no way conflicted with Christian dogma. It is unlikely that any pope would have objected to the personal glorification which Michelangelo incorporated into his design.

As originally planned, the first level was to contain numerous triumphant figures or "victories," symbolizing the human soul freed through reason; and bound figures or "captives," representing humanity restrained by
natural, earthly desires. These were "familiar to the Renaissance as moral allegories." The chief victory of the human soul, according to the Neoplatonists, is achieved by reasoned contemplation. Thus the figures on the lowest level, which represent the two natures of man, introduce the second-story figures of St. Paul and Moses, who were "constantly grouped together by the Florentine Neoplatonists as the greatest examples of those who through a perfect synthesis of action and vision attained spiritual immortality." 

Vasari described the earliest design of the uppermost level:

Above the cornice the fabric gradually diminished, exhibiting a frieze of stories in bronze, with figures of angels . . . and over all, the summit of the work, were two figures, one of which represented Heaven; the other Cybele [goddess of Earth], who appeared to be weeping at her misfortune . . . . The fabric resembled a temple.

The "stories in bronze" would probably relate Julius's victories on earth. The angelic figures which were to convey the spirit of the dead Pope into heaven conclude the tomb as a "vision of a realm beyond mere political and military struggles and triumphs." 

As thus designed, the tomb would indeed represent "an image of the universe," as Tolnay termed it, invested with transcendent meaning, scenic representations,

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17 Panofsky, *Studies*, p. 194.  18 Ibid., p. 192.

allegories, and personifications. It would have been a visual demonstration of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*, as Michelangelo understood it and the Neoplatonists' essential conceptions. There are 11 sculptures extant in various states of completion which were to be included in one or another version of the tomb: seven captives, a victory, the Moses, Rachel, and Leah. Only the last three now form part of the tomb. The remainder are dispersed in the Louvre and in Florence.

The Dying and Rebellious Slaves were the first figures completed for the tomb. The Dying Slave, eyes closed, languidly stretches in his bonds--he has ceased his struggle against the forces which enslave him. This resignation, according to the Neoplatonist Pico, was the option of mankind, whose life is determined not by nature but by his own free choice. This figure embodies the sentiments which Michelangelo expressed in the following stanza:

> Whenever a master keeps a slave in prison  
> Locked in strong fetters, and entirely hopeless,  
> He grows so much accustomed to his anguish  
> That he would hardly ask again for freedom.  

The Rebellious Slave, however, strains against his captivity. He twists forward, his arms restrained behind him. In this

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21 Ibid., p. 198.  
pair, Michelangelo personified the choice inherent in man's nature: whether to struggle to rise in the hierarchy of the universe through human reason, or to acquiesce to the baser instincts of physical life. Its theme seems to refer directly to Pico's version of God's command to mankind:

"... in accordance with thine own free will . . . thou shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine."

The remaining five slave figures exist only as rough forms within blocks of marble. These were probably all begun in the 1530s when Michelangelo again attempted to finish the tomb. It is difficult to know what Michelangelo intended with each one. As they now appear, however, the slaves are powerful statements—the uncompleted forms seek to break free from the rough marble which envelops them. They testify to Michelangelo's absorption with the idea of human bondage and the struggle which is necessary to attain freedom and its attendant state: awareness and perception of the nobility to which man may aspire.

Michelangelo completed one *Victory* figure for the original design of the tomb. It is a fully articulated male nude which rests one knee on the bent back of a

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bearded figure who forms the pedestal. The Victory twists one arm up to pull the cloak from around his neck. The head possesses the ideal male beauty which Michelangelo would use again in the Medici funeral monuments. The moment portrayed is the pause for exultation after the tension of the struggle. With his foe securely defeated, the Victory reflects on his triumph.

The contrast of youth and age which Michelangelo poses here has many possible interpretations. The most obvious is that everyman yields to death in spite of youth's conviction that inexorable time can be conquered. As a partner of the Dying and Rebellious Slaves, however, the Victory represents the glory which results from life's struggle when the individual human soul attains its perfected ideal form.

These figures, then, the Slaves and Victory, were proposed for the first level of Julius's tomb. Above them, in the original plan, were to be St. Paul and Moses and two other, unknown, figures which were not identified on the artist's original drawings. The St. Paul was never begun. The Moses, however, was completed to Michelangelo's own satisfaction. It was begun for the first design in 1513 and probably completed within three years. 26

The model for Moses' posture appears in the Sistine ceiling. Moses sits, one leg drawn back, as though about

26 Einem, Michelangelo, p. 83.
to rise; his right arm cradles the tablets while his left reaches towards them. His head is turned, his eyes blazing, a frown creasing his face. The beard and cloak tumble across his chest and knees. All these attributes produce a vision of controlled passion.

Michelangelo showed Moses in a moment of outrage restrained, and explored the internal psychological response of God's chosen leader. It is a dramatic moment in Christian history which Michelangelo revealed in this figure. But is an eternal attitude as well. Moses symbolized direct knowledge of God and was the leader of his people. His intensity represented the Active life which Moses allegorized to the Renaissance.

Pico referred to Moses as an example of the Active life, which is based on worldly knowledge. He recommended contemplative philosophy as the "bond of the first minds," but admitted the difficulty of judging or loving things unknown. Whereas "Moses loved a God whom he saw... we who are but flesh and know of the things of the earth..." Pico, Oration, p. 228. must search the writings of the ancients for knowledge of the divine. St. Paul's writings on this subject are the result of that apostle's experience in the divine realm, "when he was himself exalted to the third heaven." 28

The turmoil which Michelangelo portrayed in the

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27 Pico, Oration, p. 228. 28 Ibid., p. 229.
face of Moses was in some measure a self-portrait of his own inner state as he struggled with his art. Julius II, whose personality was remarkably similar to Michelangelo's, was also incorporated in the Moses. Julius himself personified the ideal of the Active life in service to the Church and God.

The sculpture of Moses was designed for the second level of the tomb, above the viewer's head. The vertical knee would attract the eye up and the vigorous pose would command attention from a distance. Moses was finally placed, instead, on the ground level in the center of the tomb.

The two figures of Rachel and Leah which, with Moses, are the extent of Michelangelo's work in the completed tomb, are said by Condivi to represent the ideals of the Contemplative and Active lives. When Michelangelo moved Moses to the central position on the ground level of the completed tomb, he also changed that figure's role. The new position and design abandoned the complementary pairing of Moses and St. Paul. Moses came to represent instead the Pope in his earthly life, as God's representative and leader of the faithful. Moses is placed directly below the recumbent figure of the Pope on the highest level, in his spiritual role. Rachel and Leah, then, embody the two ideal states of Action and Contemplation, and flank Moses.
As female forms Rachel and Leah are distressingly immobile. Both are enfolded in rigidly volumetric drapes which betray no anatomy beneath. The feet, arms, necks, and heads which protrude are of masculine planes and proportions. Neither matches the intensity or magnificence of the Moses. It would seem that after his earliest masterpiece, the Pietà, Michelangelo never again attempted to portray specifically feminine beauty. He chose the masculine form as the ideal human state and imbued even his female forms with it. The figures of Rachel and Leah are strictly classical in their facial features, expressions, and dress. They are uniquely without inspiration in Michelangelo's body of work, revealing perhaps his exasperation with the project of the tomb. They were the final figures for it and were completed in 1542, when he was finally released from his obligation to Julius and his heirs.

The three levels of the tomb represent the hierarchy of the Neoplatonic universe. The lowest level, of humanity both enslaved by its physical nature and freed through its reason, represents earthly existence. Through dedication to contemplation and good works, personified by St. Paul and Moses, the human soul may rise to union with God. The upper level of the tomb depicts this ascent of the soul, personified by Julius.
Whether Michelangelo attributed such greatness to Julius personally is speculation. The Pope was notable, even in a time of strong popes, for his dedication to the arts as instruments for glorifying God’s representative, the Church. As the "warrior Pope," Julius sought to strengthen the Papacy as ruler of that Church by subordinating his provinces. His actions, therefore, would have made him suitable for the tribute Michelangelo proposed in his earliest design. Likewise, the purpose of the tomb—assuring Julius’s fame for posterity—coincided with Michelangelo’s Neoplatonic reliance on immortality through earthly fame.

Michelangelo’s next major sculptural commission was the funerary chapel in Florence for the Medici. (See Appendix for a description and history of this project.) There are more design drawings and artist’s documents extant for this commission than any other that Michelangelo performed. Though the existing chapel is incomplete, that it is not a distortion of the original intentions is verified by Michelangelo’s drawings. It is "the one work about which Michelangelo wrote iconographical notes"²⁹ in the margins of his preparatory drawings.

A comprehensive interpretation of the Chapel includes contemporary philosophical concepts and the artist’s psychological response to the existing political crisis,

in which he was personally involved.\textsuperscript{30} This interpretation proposes that the Chapel "eternalizes Michelangelo's philosophy of death,"\textsuperscript{31} in this period of his life of resigned reflection, quiet melancholy, and contemplation of the universe. He expressed the continuity of death and life, frequently remarking on his age and fatigue. He could, then, be expected to render the Chapel into an image of that universe which he pondered.

Consistent with the Neoplatonic conceptions he demonstrated in the Julius tomb, Michelangelo designed the interior of the Chapel in hierarchic stages. Condivi described it thus:

The sarcophagi are placed against the lateral wall, and above [each of] their lids lie two great figures larger than life, namely a man and a woman; and Michelangelo intended to signify by these, Day and Night and by the two together, Time which consumes all things.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30}There has been much discussion of the artist's conception. Some art historians read it strictly as a monument to the princely power of the Medici dynasty and glorification of the Church. This interpretation depends upon the gaze of the two Princes being directed to the figure of the Virgin, in spiritual contemplation. (See Hartt, \textit{Italian Renaissance Art}, pp. 488-92.) Others have construed the Princes as representatives of Active and Contemplative personalities. This reading centers on the figures' composition: one, Giuliano, is an open, dynamic pose of princely power; the other, Lorenzo, is surmounted by an elaborate helmet and rests his chin on his raised arm, as though lost in thought. The four Times of Day figures are used to reinforce this interpretation: Night and Day below Giuliano; the more shadowy times of Dawn and Twilight below Lorenzo. (See Panofsky, \textit{Studies}, pp. 205-12.)

\textsuperscript{31}Tolnay, \textit{Medici Chapel}, p. xii.

\textsuperscript{32}Condivi, \textit{Vita}, p. 51.
Surmounting all are the figures of the two immortalized Dukes. It is interesting to note that Conditi, doubtless at the direction of Michelangelo, never mentioned or named the Medici whom the Chapel honored: "There are also other statues which represent those for whom the tombs were executed; all, in short being divine rather than human."33 This emphasis that all the figures are "divine rather than human" discredits the interpretation that Michelangelo intended to glorify the Medici rulers. The artist himself stated to his biographer that they were ideal forms, not individuals.

On a 1521 drawing of the tombs Michelangelo wrote: "Fame holds the epitaphs."34 Though the figure of Fame was rejected in the final version, the concept was retained. A concern for posterity and the immortalizing of fame originated with Petrarch, who stated that death yields to the triumph of fame, which in turn yields to the triumph of time itself. Fame persisted as a Neoplatonic correlate of immortality, however, and was a recurring theme in Michelangelo's work. His contemporaries noted that the figures of the Princes were not recognizable portraits, to which Michelangelo replied that "a thousand years hence no one would be able to know that they were otherwise."35

33 Ibid. 34 Gilbert, "Texts and Contexts," p. 393.

35 Quoted in Harit, Italian Renaissance Art, p. 490.
Creighton Gilbert, translator of Michelangelo's poems, writes that he, doubting the oft-used reference to the Dukes' gaze on the Virgin, paced off the direction of their gazes and found they met at the entrance door instead. He proposes that Michelangelo so arranged them, with their blind, pupil-less eyes of the dead, as participants in the future with those who visit their chapel. Gilbert notes that all other finished statues by Michelangelo have drilled pupils. The Dukes, however, hear their visitors approach and have turned, expectantly. Thus they live on, immortally, in their funeral chamber, through the fame which the artist alone gave them.

Michelangelo was singularly aware of his power as an artist to so enhance the lives and personalities of his patrons. The Neoplatonists Pico and Picino had assigned to the artist the role of interpreter of the ideal or divine forms. Only the artist who perceived them, through dedication and contemplation, could give them expression. Michelangelo knowingly accepted this task, which required isolation and personal anguish. Even his personality was formed by his allegiance to this conception of his duty. He wrote in a sonnet to Vittoria Colonna:

Thus I can give long life to both of us, portraying either in color and in stone the face of each; so that a thousand years after we have departed, one may see how thou wast beautiful and how I miserable, and how I was not unwise in loving thee.  

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37 Quoted in Clements, Theory, p. 135.
Again as in the tomb for Julius II, Michelangelo posed, in the two Princes, two figures who personify the Platonist-Christian complements of the Active life which, through good works in human society, earns its reward in eternity, and the Contemplative life which realizes spiritual unity with the divine forces through withdrawal and mental discipline. It is doubtful that Michelangelo intended to attribute to these specific dukes the attainment of those ideals. The commission for their tombs, however, presented him with an opportunity to once again express his dedication to the possibility of human perfection. The Dukes' idealized physical beauty reveals the purity of spirit which, according to the Neoplatonists, rewards those who pursued divine knowledge by both paths.

Giuliano is seated in a pose of princely power. He represents the Active life, which, according to Pico, "burns with the fire of love" and is given over to "the care of the lower beings." In his hand are coins to indicate his philanthropy and good works. In contrast, Lorenzo is caught in a moment of meditation and personifies Pico's injunction:

If, unoccupied by deeds, we pass our time in the leisure of contemplation, considering the Creator . . . then let us fill our well-prepared and purified soul with the light of natural philosophy, so that we may at last perfect her in the knowledge of things divine.  

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Both styles of life bring divine favor. The Active life is "strengthened with the firm stability of Thrones" or judgment, while the contemplator attains "Cherubic light" or love.  

Resting on the sarcophagi below the Dukes are figures termed the "Times of Day" by Condivi, which allegorize the torments of earthly life subject to the vicissitudes of time. In these figures is seen Michelangelo's creative manipulation of philosophical concepts. The "Times of Day" were without iconographic tradition in the visual arts until their appearance in the Medici Chapel.  

It is probable that their source was Plato's Phaedo, which was translated by Ficino and is Socrates' argument on immortality, in which he poses the states of wakefulness and sleep as opposites, as are life and death. Michelangelo's pairing of the opposites—Night and Day, Dawn and Twilight—corresponds as four variants on this motif. The two Princes are in a "pure dwelling place up above," as are Plato's reborn dead. Michelangelo was probably acquainted with the Phaedo from his early exposure to the discussions of the philosophers of the Platonic Academy or his own independent reading. Condivi testified to Michelangelo's familiarity

40 Ibid.


42 Ibid., p. 283.
with Plato's works and thought. No other source for his use of these figures has been proposed which is more convincing. As there is no indication of an adviser, either humanist or theologian, Michelangelo may be credited with the unifying concept related here as a remarkably original, and complete, program which expressed his personal interpretations of death, fame, and immortality.

Thus Michelangelo's major sculptural works embody the concepts of the Neoplatonic philosophers. His dedication to idealized forms to represent the ideal human states attained through reason and the mind is consistent. The Pietà and David, for example, represent simultaneously human physical perfection as a reflection of the pure soul within, as well as ideals of Christian love and civic duty. They are his earliest statements of Neoplatonism. The tomb for Julius, in its original form, was Michelangelo's comprehensive statement of the universe, and encompassed the concepts of a hierarchy through which humanity may ascend from its physical bondage to the divine. Transcendence to the divine state is attainable through the mind's efforts in contemplation, or through active leadership in the world. These concepts are likewise incorporated in the Medici Chapel: the divine forces of the Princes, and the figures which personify mortality and the transience of earthly life.

43 Condivi, Vita, p. 81.
CHAPTER IV

NEOPATONISM AND MICHELANGELO'S PAINTINGS

Michelangelo's earliest commission in paint, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, provided him with an opportunity to portray the Neoplatonists' version of Christian history and the nature of man and the divine. This chapter will discuss these themes, as well as demonstrate how the philosophy led him late in his life to a renewed Christian devotion which was represented in the Last Judgment and the frescoes for the Pauline Chapel.

Although Michelangelo identified himself as a sculptor, his production in paint rivals his sculptural works. Painting by its very nature provides an opportunity for fully developed, complex programs which sculpture must imply in a more condensed form. Michelangelo's major commissions in paint were the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; its altar wall (the Last Judgment); and the twin frescoes of the Conversion of Saul and the Crucifixion of St. Peter for the Pauline Chapel. These three spanned his life: the ceiling was begun when he was 32; the altar wall scene of the Last Judgment when he was 60; and the Pauline frescoes were completed when he was 75. Together they reveal Michelangelo's changing philosophic and religious attitudes,
as well as the distinctions between the different popes who commissioned them.

In 1506 Michelangelo was in Florence engaged in painting a vast fresco with Leonardo da Vinci in the city's Council Hall.\(^1\) His established reputation was that of painter no less than sculptor. He was called to Rome by Julius II and given the task of designing and executing that pontiff's tomb. Shortly after Michelangelo began work on it, however, he was re-directed to paint the Sistine ceiling.

It is unclear why the pope changed his mind. Forty years later, when Michelangelo recalled those years to Condivi, he attributed it to a conspiracy by his rivals Raphael and Bramante, who persuaded Julius to give Michelangelo the task of the ceiling. Their motivation, according to Michelangelo, was that he would fail in his task and be disgraced.\(^2\) Other evidence does not support this version, however, and it may have resulted from Michelangelo's frustration over the matter of the tomb. This delay for the ceiling destroyed any chance of his beginning the tomb according to his original monumental design. Whatever the reasons, Julius commissioned Michelangelo to decorate the Chapel's ceiling, and he began designs for it in 1508.

The Sistine Chapel was built by Julius's uncle, Pope Sixtus IV, in 1477 as part of the new church enclave

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\(^2\)Condivi, *Vita*, p. 34.
on the Vatican Hill. The Chapel was dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin and served as the election chamber for new popes. It is, then, the symbolic center of the pope's legitimacy bestowed by tradition and the convocation of cardinals. The interior of the Chapel is a barrel-vaulted chamber whose length is twice its height and three times its width. The walls had been decorated in frescoes by the fifteenth century masters Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Signorelli, and Perugino, and featured 30 martyred popes and scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The ceiling was painted blue and studded with stars to indicate the heavens above in the early Christian manner.

Julius, who brought new vigor and grandeur to the papacy, envisioned for the ceiling heroic figures of the Apostles, who would serve as the forerunners of the already-present popes below. Michelangelo's first design proposed 12 seated apostles above the windows. The vault above was to be divided into framed geometric shapes. A second scheme added more simulated architectural designs. At some point, however, Michelangelo conceived the grander scheme which now appears on the ceiling. In a letter of 1523 Michelangelo related this change:

The first design for the work [vault of Sixtus] was for twelve Apostles in the lunettes and the usual ornamentations to fill the remaining area. After the work was begun it seemed to me that it would turn out a poor affair, and I told the Pope that if the

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3 Seymour, Sistine Chapel, p. 82.
Apostles alone were put there it seemed to me that it would turn out a poor affair. He asked me why. I said, 'because they themselves were poor.' Then he gave me a new commission to do what I like ... 4

Whether Michelangelo in fact "did as he liked" is questionable. There are three distinct changes in style and proportion which occurred during the execution of the painting. It would seem that Michelangelo received the advice of someone during this time. Speculation on this source ranges from Julius himself to other noted theologians.\(^5\)

As has been noted, Michelangelo had accepted the advice of Poliziano for his earliest sculptured work. The ceiling is an exceedingly complex program of Christian history and symbolic relationships. If we accept Michelangelo's assertion that it was his conception alone, the ceiling then becomes his personal interpretation of Christianity, demonstrated by Neoplatonic relationships and conceptions as he understood them from the Florentine philosophers.

Michelangelo began painting the ceiling in January

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1509. It was formally opened in October 1512. Condivi states that "he finished his entire work in twenty months" by which he must mean the actual time spent painting.

The ceiling as completed is composed of 343 figures in eight window lunettes; 12 enthroned prophets and sibyls; four corner spandrels; and nine center panels, all divided by simulated architectural elements. The ceiling visually divides into three zones; the lowest above the windows (the lunettes) is that of terrestrial, or human, life. These 40 figures are identified by plaques bearing Hebrew names, and are the ancestors of Mary and Christ as listed in Matt. 1:1-25. Among them are Jesse, Aminadab, Josiah, and Jacob. These figures, directly above the quattrocento papal portraits, carry the motif of ancestry into Michelangelo's addition to the Chapel's decoration. As the "iconographical tradition provided only individual figures," Michelangelo's imagination was free to portray these ancestors as he wished. Instead of painting them as identified portraits, he depicted them in scenes of home and family life with children and wives. They are humans in their original state, untouched by grace or the knowledge of Christ's coming.

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7Condivi, *Life*, p. 58.


Above them are seven Old Testament prophets alternated with five pagan sibyls. This zone represents the enlightenment of pre-Christian thought. These figures perceive their vision through spiritual contemplation, and personify the Neoplatonic ideal of knowledge through contemplation. As Pico wrote:

If you see a pure contemplator, one unaware of the body and confined to the inner reaches of the mind, he is neither an earthly nor a heavenly being; he is a more reverend divinity vested with human flesh... This is the bond of the first minds... the chief of contemplative philosophy. 10

As companions of Christ's forebears, the Prophets and Sibyls foretell the future salvation of mankind in Christ's coming, and imply the fulfillment of God's covenant with mankind through Noah, who appears in the zone above. The pagan sibyls were much discussed in the Middle Ages. The Erythraean sibyl, for example, foretold the Day of Judgment, according to St. Augustine in his Civitas Dei. The Cumaean sibyl appears in Virgil's Aeneid as the guide through the underworld who also foretold the virgin birth. 11 So too the prophets: Jonah's expulsion from the whale foreshadowed the resurrection of Christ, and Isaiah heard God's voice proclaiming the virgin birth (7:14).

These first two zones are thus concerned with the themes of earthly, unenlightened life; the compatibility of

10 Pico, Oration, pp. 226, 228.
11 Einem, Michelangelo, p. 90.
Biblical and classical thought; and human redemption through God's promise to Noah. Above them, in the curvature of the vault, are nine separate panels which depict the creation of the universe and the history of man. Incidentally, included throughout the heroic figures is the decorative motif of acorns and oak leaves, which is both the Roman symbol of eternal life and the heraldic device of the della Rovere family of Julius II.¹²

The nine vault panels contain the unfolding history of mankind in scenes from Genesis. Beginning from the altar end of the Chapel, the scenes progress chronologically to the entrance at the far end: the Separation of Light from Darkness; Creation of the Sun, Moon, and Plants; the Congregation of the Waters; the Creation of Adam; the Creation of Eve; the Temptation and Expulsion from Paradise; the Sacrifice of Noah; the Flood; and the Drunkenness of Noah. Seen backwards, from the entrance door, the scenes portray man's earthly physical state (drunkenness as a metaphor for ignorance and bestiality) and the ascension to his perfected, ideal state as a creation, and partner, of God (in the Creation of Adam).

This portrayal of varying degrees or states of existence in itself parallels the Neoplatonic concept of ascension to perfection. Pico wrote:

¹²Seymour, Sistine Chapel, p. 80.
... there is a ladder extending from the lowest earth to the highest heaven ... using philosophy through the steps of the ladder ... we shall be made perfect with the felicity of theology.  

It is the nine central panels which are the focus and culmination of this philosophy applied to religion.

This narrative of history also corresponds to the Neoplatonic conviction of human perfectability and position midway in the hierarchy. Pico defined human nature thus:

... man is the intermediary between creatures, the intimate of the gods, the king of the lower beings ... by the light of his intelligence ... Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life ... . Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.  

The Temptation and Expulsion panel depicts the first exercise of the "soul's judgment" and its consequences.

The countenance of God, too, demonstrates the Neoplatonic interpretation of his nature. The God of Plato's Timaeus is a deliberate, creating craftsman, unrestricted in his nature. He can assume any visage, according to his task. Michelangelo varied the face of the Creator in each of the five panels as he undertakes the various stages of the universe. God is a vigorous swirling figure when he commands the sun and moon; a more beneficent torso arises over the congregating waters; and a perfect, fully revealed, male appears as he passes his spirit to the inert Adam.

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13 Pico, Oration, p. 229.  
14 Ibid., pp. 224-25.  
The Creation of Adam, the center panel, occurs midway between the creation of the physical universe and the disgrace of mankind, represented in the drunkenness of Noah. In the Adam panel, God appears as an ideal human form. He is clothed in a diaphanous gown which reveals his perfect body, in contrast to the other creation scenes in which his form is hidden in heavy robes. The moment captured recalls Pico's version of man's creation:

He finally took thought concerning the creation of man. But there was nothing among his archetypes from which he could fashion a new offspring . . . . He therefore took man . . . assigning him a place in the middle of the world . . . . Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will . . . shall ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. 16

Viewed as a whole, the ceiling design is the union of the Old Testament (the creation of man and God's covenant with him from Genesis) and the New Testament (the ancestors of Christ from Matthew). It is also a union of Biblical wisdom (the Prophets) and classical thought (the Sibyls). This essential compatibility between philosophy and religion was the fundamental message of the Neoplatonists, who, it will be remembered, were all closely allied with the Church while studying the philosophy of Plato. Michelangelo in the Sistine ceiling translated that reconciliation into a visual statement, a "creation of a universal language through ancient inspiration . . . a creative synthesis in

16 Pico, Oration, pp. 224, 225.
visual symbols of transcendent idealism."\textsuperscript{17}

This synthesis required that he abandon the rigid classicizing which prevailed in quattrocento art. His violation of rational perspective (there are four conflicting directions of vision) and abstraction of narrative order (the scenes can be read laterally from window to window across the vault as well as down it from altar to door) served his new style in ceiling decoration. He also magnified his figures to an heroic scale by applying sculptural volumes and planes. The poses which he evolved in the ceiling reappear in his later sculptures, especially the Moses and Giuliano Medici. His use of color is also sculptural. Flesh becomes greyish-brown, as in marble, and the colors in robes and natural forms are muted. This may be attributed to Ficino's postulates on art, wherein he advised "not to think that beauty consists in agreeableness of color."\textsuperscript{18}

The Sistine ceiling forms an "overwhelming vision of the sublimity of God and the potential nobility of Man."\textsuperscript{19} Michelangelo fused Christian history with the wisdom of the ancients to illustrate the progressive divinity of man's soul through knowledge of God, as the Neoplatonists proposed. When he was commissioned by a later pope, Paul III, to

\textsuperscript{17}Tolnay, \textit{Sistine Chapel}, p. 117.

\textsuperscript{18}Ficino, \textit{Commentary on Plato's Symposium}, p. 169.

\textsuperscript{19}Hartt, \textit{Italian Renaissance Art}, p. 450.
portray the Last Judgment on the altar wall, it provided an appropriate conclusion to this history.

In 1533 Michelangelo was in Florence working on the tombs for the Medici and Julius II. Pope Clement VII (Giuliano Medici) called him to Rome to execute the scenes of the Last Judgment and the Fall of Lucifer in the Sistine Chapel. Clement died shortly after Michelangelo's arrival in Rome. His successor, Paul III (Alessandro Farnese), renewed Michelangelo's contract and in 1535 appointed him chief architect, sculptor, and painter to the Holy See. The "Fall of Lucifer" was abandoned and Michelangelo began designs for the Last Judgment. This theme was especially relevant to the political circumstances of the papacy eight years after the Sack of Rome.

The placement of the Last Judgment on the wall before which the pope himself offered Mass buttressed the pope's function as God's vicar on earth. This role was currently denied by many in Europe. Michelangelo's version of the Day of Judgment was an apocalyptic statement to these dissenters and reaffirmed the supremacy of the Roman church.

His work on this commission spanned the years 1536-41, Michelangelo's late middle age. It was at this time that he formed his intense relationship with Vittoria Colonna, and through her was acquainted with the Italian

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20 Einem, Michelangelo, p. 141.
reform movement of Juan Valdes and Cardinal Reginald Pole. These influences led him to a spiritual rebirth and reassessment of his faith. The reformers had much in common with the Northern protestants. While never denying papal authority, they criticized clerical decadence and the abuse of offices and indulgences, and advanced the concept of faith as the true path to salvation. The Italian reformers held in "uneasy association an insistence on salvation by faith alone and a demand for assent to the whole apparatus of Catholic devotion and tradition." Vittoria Colonna wrote that Cardinal Pole advised her "to believe that she could only be saved by faith, but to act as if she could only be saved by works." They denied the role of the intermediary from man to God, as had Ficino, and concentrated on the individual soul's experience of religion. Michelangelo's religious commitment earlier in his life had been more ritualistic than inspired, though he was profoundly impressed by the reformer Savonarola in his youth. His close relationship with Vittoria Colonna and the Italian reformers brought him to a re-conversion with new religious fervor. It is significant that only a movement which


emphasized the personal experience of religion, as had the Neoplatonists, could exert such an influence on Michelangelo. The Last Judgment was Michelangelo's vision of the end of mankind, inspired by an intensity of conviction which surpassed even that seen in the ceiling program.

The scene is a dramatic unified event. To provide space for it required the destruction of two lunettes in the ceiling. The moment depicted is that of Christ's imminent judgment, which produces chaos and fear in the multitudes surrounding him. The Bible and Dante seem to be the only literary sources Michelangelo consulted. He used Matthew's vision (24:30-31) of the Second Coming, while portraying Christ according to John (3:19) as the "light come into the world." The universe seems to open up behind the violently posed Christ, who is the Judge. The standing figure of Christ conveys the turmoil of the moment--one hand is raised to condemn, while the other beckons the saved. He is nearly nude and his exaggerated musculature conveys his super-natural, though human, nature. As the "light of the world," he is equated with the sun and Apollo. Michelangelo's Christ represents both the classical and Christian deities.²³

Next to Christ is the figure of his mother. She turns away from the scene, aware that her intercession for the souls of humanity is no longer possible. Her beauty

²³Tolnay, Michelangelo, p. 59.
allies her with Venus, giving her too a dual, and universal, role.

Round about these two are numerous figures who enact the Day of Judgment. According to Condivi they are:

... the seven angels described by St. John in the Apocalypse who call the dead to judgment ... and two other angels with the book open in their hands, in which every human soul, reading and knowing again his past life, has to be judged as if by himself. 24

Tombs open and skeletons and figures in winding-cloths arise. Many struggle and plead for mercy while others tumble into the regions below. There they are scooped up by Charon in his boat "just as Dante describes him in his Hell." 25 The blessed rise to heaven aided by angels whose divine nature is revealed only by their perfect beauty.

Behind Christ and Mary are Adam, the Apostles, and the saints, "each one showing to the awful Judge the thing by which he was deprived of life ... St. Andrew, the cross, St. Bartholomew the skin." 26 Other angels display the objects of the Passion: the crown of thorns, the nails, and the column.

In his summation of the history begun on the ceiling, 27

24 Condivi, Vita, p. 63. 25 Ibid., p. 64.
26 Ibid., p. 65.
27 This interpretation is not universally accepted. Tolnay states: "It was not intended to be considered as a part of the Chapel's already existing pictorial decorations." The Final Period, p. 28. Einem, on the other hand, suggests that "the Sistine Chapel [was] perhaps planned in its entirety from the beginning, to be executed step by step, and including the Last Judgment and the Fall of Lucifer." Michelangelo, p. 143.
Michelangelo dispensed with rational time and space in the Last Judgment. There is, at the moment of judgment, no longer time to earn salvation either by faith or good works. Thus, the scene is frozen in the present instant, depicting Christ's eternal rule. It is a personal vision of reality—there is no single viewpoint and each group of figures is magnified according to its importance. Michelangelo here denied all the ideals of Renaissance art to convey his meaning. It is necessary to understand the Last Judgment as Michelangelo's personal statement, for it poses both his answer to the crisis within the Church and his new resolution of religion and philosophy at the same time.

As witness to his intense involvement with the scene, Michelangelo included his own face in the swirling mass of the dead. St. Bartholomew holds aloft his flayed skin, the attribute of his martyrdom. The face on the skin is Michelangelo's. By this rendering of himself Michelangelo conveyed his own guilt, suffering, and unworthiness of salvation. This inner turmoil plagued him all his life and was particularly acute in his later years. His conception of the artist as translator of divine forms, a Neoplatonist-inspired definition, made him susceptible to the concept of religious faith advocated by the Valdesians. 28 The despair of his self-evaluation and his conviction that

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28 The Italian reformers who took their name from Juan Valdes and are also known as the spirituali.
he had proved unworthy resulted in his tortured visage in
the scene of the Day of Judgment.

In his poetry, Michelangelo also dealt with the
theme of the soul which sheds its physical skin to escape
into the higher realm of the universal:

I say what dies cannot appease desire
In one who lives, nor ought we to expect
Eternity in time, where men change skin.

With grace to all, to itself only scorn,
A wretched beast is born in grief and pain,
Clothes other's hands, but its own hide unskins,
And only in dying may be called well born.

So too I'd want to have my fate adorn
My Lord, while living, with my dead remains;
As on the rock the serpent sheds its skin,
Only in death can my condition turn.

The primary themes of the eternity and manifest
justice of Christ-as-God; the necessity of faith for salva-
tion; and the universal nature of Christ-Apollo and Mary-
Venus constituted Michelangelo's late-life synthesis. The
Last Judgment is the ultimate statement of the compatibility
of Christianity and Neoplatonism, and Michelangelo's adap-
tations of both. The overt ingredients of Neoplatonist
thought, as distinct from Christian thought, and as seen
in the ceiling, are absent. The concept of the fulfilled
human soul's natural ascent to union with God is, however,
a major one. Likewise, the wretchedness of the damned,
those who chose to ignore the search for divine knowledge

29 Complete Poems, trans. Creighton Gilbert, p. 75, #103,
stanza 3, lines 1-3.

30 Ibid., p. 68, #92, stanzas 1 & 2, lines 1-8.
and yielded to human vices, is amply portrayed. These two states reflect Pico's observation on human fate: "A two fold nature present in our souls, by one side of which we are raised on high to the heavenly regions, and by the other side plunged downward into the lower." Here is an assertion of human choice and free will, whether to accept the "lower forms of life, which are brutish," or to be "reborn into the higher forms, which are divine." Beyond this natural freedom, however, looms a final judgment of those choices, and inexorable justice. The ceiling portrays the nature of mankind, created by God and given the gift of free will. The altar wall portrays the day of reckoning for man's exercise of that will. Christ's giant form dominates the scene and emphasizes his omnipotence. This moment is the conclusion of the universe to which Neoplatonism, Christianity, and all the earth's religions and philosophies allude. The Last Judgment is the final moment of all human activity and history.

The Last Judgment is the central monument of mid-sixteenth century painting and was described by Vasari thus: "This work is the example of a great picture sent by God to men, thereby to show them how Fate proceeds." With its completion in 1541, the cult of Michelangelo was assured. He was widely hailed as "the divine" by Hollanda

33 Vasari, Lives, p. 145.
(1548) and Varchi (1549), as well as by Vasari and Condivi. To Michelangelo, however, his past was worthless, and he was consumed with guilt.

He regarded his art as a worship of God, who was his collaborator, and often remarked that only good Christians create good art. This reaction may be attributed both to his advancing age, a traditional period for preoccupation with death and an afterlife, and to the widespread concern with salvation and the future of the Church. Northern protestants threatened the very survival of the Church, and paganizing humanists, as epitomized by the Medici Pope Leo X, were now blamed for introducing the corruptions which seemed responsible for the imminent destruction of the Church. It is not inconceivable that Michelangelo blamed himself for contributing to these ideas, which may account in part for his biographers' studious neglect of pagan, i.e., Neoplatonist, expressions in his art.  

34 Francesco da Hollanda, Dialoghos em Roma, 1548 and Benedetto Varchi, Due Lezziioni, 1549.

35 Pietro Aretino, who spread scandals about Michelangelo's personal life, also accused him of valuing art more than faith because of the prevalent nudity in the Last Judgment (see Symonds, Life, p. 334). Such criticism resulted in the addition of coverings to 36 nude figures by Michelangelo's pupil on the order of Pope Paul IV within a decade of its completion, a testament to the new conservatism within the Church. The Last Judgment was criticized by the new reformers who preferred Biblical accuracy to Michelangelo's moral allegory. Their targets were the wingless angels; the standing Christ who they felt should have been seated in glory; and the pagan Charon (Giglio da Fabriano, quoted
When he completed the Last Judgment in 1542, Michelangelo hoped to return to sculpture. Pope Paul III insisted, however, that he provide decoration for his newly-completed private chapel in the Vatican. The commission was for two fresco panels in the center of the side walls. Michelangelo chose the themes of the Conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus and the Crucifixion of St. Peter. "The scenes of conversion and martyrdom thus offer two successive stages of lives dedicated to God."\(^{36}\) They were completed eight years later, when Michelangelo was 75.

Michelangelo's interpretation of these scenes reflected, as did his poetry, the pressures of age and his absorption in the soul's struggle for enlightenment and divine grace. As such, they are Neoplatonic statements on the true nature of the soul and its role in the universal hierarchy.

There is no pagan content in these paintings. Instead, the focus is on internal revelation and testimony to faith. The first completed, Saul's Conversion, captures the moment when Saul, thrown by his horse, lies blinded on the ground and listens to Christ's voice (Acts 9:1-8). He shields his face with an uplifted arm and turns to the

\(\text{in Blunt, Artistic Theory, p. 112). In fact, figures continued to be increasingly covered for 200 years. The last additions were made in 1762, although Pope Pius XI considered further "corrections" in the twentieth century (ibid., p. 119, n. 1).}\)

\(^{36}\) Tolnay, Michelangelo, p. 64.
vision of Christ and angels overhead. An aide assists him while others stand speechless, "hearing a voice but seeing no man."

Contrary to the Biblical story, however, Saul appears as an old man. His face is Michelangelo's self-portrait as seen in the Last Judgment. In Saul's conversion Michelangelo has depicted his own spiritual dedication and the crisis within the souls of both Michelangelo and Saul. The Neoplatonic content in this late work is the emphasis on the life of the individual human soul, and its search for perfection and return to God.

The facing panel, the Crucifixion of St. Peter, depicts that saint's ultimate sacrifice for his faith. The story of Peter's martyrdom is apocryphal and was elaborated by medieval theologians. Instead of the traditional portrayal of this scene (in which St. Peter is already crucified), Michelangelo chose the more dramatic pause in the erection of the cross. Peter is thus able to twist forward and confront the viewer with his gaze. He draws the viewer into the scene, making him a witness for all time. Surrounding Peter and his executioners is a crowd of contemporary witnesses, who seem to speak to each other or ponder the meaning of the moment. Those in front present their backs to us, further drawing us in by extending the

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37 Leo Steinberg, "Michelangelo's Last Painting, the Crucifixion of St. Peter," Smithsonian, December 1975, p. 76.
ranks of witnesses. Peter's stare makes him a hero rather than a victim as he faces his inevitable, predestined end. His martyrdom, he knows, will provide the Church's foundation.

Interspersed among the crowd are figures bearing Michelangelo's portrait in youth, middle, and old age. They suggest his own life-long spiritual odyssey; his suffering, like Peter's; and his life of artistic service to the Church. Thus both panels for the Pauline Chapel, Michelangelo's last paintings, are autobiographical statements as well as historical narratives of the Church.

In the paintings Michelangelo once again abandoned perspective, as in the Last Judgment, and used startling variations in scale to create an atmosphere of abstract reality which contributes to the ritualized symbolism of the moments shown. The subdued pastel colors, similar to those in the earliest Sistine ceiling, reflect the artist's transcendence of conflicting passions and acceptance of suffering as necessary for the soul's purification. Both are monumental statements devoid of identifiable place and time, and are powerful conclusions to the career which began with the Sistine ceiling. In the Crucifixion, the timeless figures all reflect universal emotional states when confronted with the moment of the founding of the Christian church, the moment to which pagan authorities alluded as participants in the universal truth of the
ultimate nature of man, which is God. The overpowering significance of the event provokes the profound contemplation of the eternal shown by several of the Michelangelo figures.
CHAPTER V

NEOPLATONISM AND MICHELANGELO'S POETRY

Michelangelo's poetry reveals "the private person whose more public self was expressed in painting and sculpture." His poems form a spiritual autobiography which spans his entire life. Most were written for himself alone, although he at times exchanged sonnets in his correspondence. One such exchange resulted in the public lectures by the Florentine academician Benedetto Varchi, who, in 1549, concluded that Michelangelo was a superior poet whose works were "full of Platonic conceptions." The collected Rime were not published until 1623 and then in a much revised form by a grand-nephew. Michelangelo was an amateur poet and as such his style was frequently difficult and unpolished.

Poetry was a form of expression which Michelangelo adopted in his youth and continued throughout his life. It was a medium in which he could record his personal emotional states; his responses to crises; his theories about art; and

1Creighton Gilbert, Introduction to Complete Poems of Michelangelo, p. v.

his philosophic and religious explorations. As he was a solitary personality, these were intensely-felt subjects which he was unwilling, perhaps unable, to discuss with his friends and acquaintances. It was to his poetry that he committed the expression of his struggle for spiritual enlightenment and perfection, and to realize his artist's perceptions. His poetry forms a self-portrait, in which he revealed himself and his truest feelings.

Michelangelo's early years in the Medici household introduced him to the study of poetry and literature. Ficino believed poetry to be superior to any of the arts "since it speaks not only to the ear but also directly to the mind [and] . . . through its effect it can lead the listener directly to God himself."\(^3\) The nature of poetry was that it

. . . originates in the inner or spiritual elevation of the mind. Therefore, it is consistent to say that true poetry is given only to a pure mind and that the true poet who receives his art from God must also return to God and take Him as the object of his poetry.\(^4\) Thus poetry was a spiritual exercise comparable to contemplation for the Neoplatonists.

Lorenzo the Magnificent was known for his poetic ability and dedication to excellence in style. Poliziano was hailed as one of Florence's best poets, following in the tradition of Dante and Petrarch. He advised Lorenzo on

\(^3\)Ficino, Commentary on Plato's Symposium, p. 231.

\(^4\)Ficino, Opera omnia, p. 790, quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 616.
composition, and doubtless instilled in the young Michelangelo the rudiments of poetic creation.

The years 1503-06, which Condivi asserted were dedicated to study and the composition of poetry, were the basis for Michelangelo's life-long habit of recording his thoughts in poetry. It is probable that he studied the works of the ancients which were then popular, Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Horace, as well as the contemporary Petrarchists Bembo and Tasso. He was devoted to Dante and committed a considerable part of his works to memory. His familiarity with Landino's Neoplatonic commentary on the Divine Comedy strengthened his philosophical appreciation of Dante.

It was in his middle and late years, however, from 1530 to 1560, that Michelangelo composed most of the poems which remain today. These were the years of which Tolnay has written: "The art of dying with dignity was the greatest problem which absorbed him for almost thirty years."

These years saw two of his most intense love affairs, with the young Roman Tommaso Cavalieri and the widow Vittoria Colonna, and occasioned many sonnets. After Michelangelo left Florence in 1534 he lived in Rome for the remainder of his life. There, through his acquaintance with the Italian spirituali, he experienced a deepening of religious feeling which also contributed to his production of poetry. In his

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6Tolnay, Michelangelo, p. 100.
last 20 years (1545-64), Michelangelo "returned to the Neoplatonic mode of imagination, which was complementary to his quest for Christian redemption." 7

The changing themes, interpretations, and purposes of his poetry reflected his internal evolution. It is in his poetry that Michelangelo made the most overt statements on philosophy, religion, and metaphysical speculation, and it is there that Neoplatonism is most obviously expressed.

Michelangelo's poems stand as his philosophy of art and concentrate on "the inward experience of passion and the intellect." 8 In them, he "sought authority for his ambitions and attempted to unite Christian orthodoxy and Neoplatonic reality." 9 As a Neoplatonist and a Christian, he asserted the primacy of love and dealt with the Neoplatonic paradoxes of the artist as creator; creation as the discovery of the self; and the love of God paralleling the love of self. He used the Neoplatonist philosophy to "support the authority of love for it led to love of God and self." 10 The problems of platonic, or spiritual, love form the subject of much of Michelangelo's poetry. His late verses are purely religious in theme. They are all in sonnet form with no clever conceits, but of difficult syntax and many obscurities. His

7 Altizer, Self and Symbolism, p. 33.
8 Robb, Neoplatonism, p. 241.
10 Ibid., p. 62.
imagination became a "passive receptacle of grace."  
Michelangelo abandoned, however, the Neoplatonic interpretation of love as a series of steps to absorption in the beloved, believing instead that love transforms the lover into "the very person of the beloved." His love of Tommaso Cavalieri and Vittoria Colonna was a means of rediscovering his own soul.  

The struggle between the human mind and the material body epitomizes the Neoplatonist philosophy. The opposition of forces results in a series of paradoxes: of love and death; passion and the mind; imagination and reality; beauty and ugliness; lover and beloved. The tension created by the apposition of the particular and the ideal is revealed in the tortured language and twisted conceits of his poetry. Michelangelo's language assumed the metaphors of paradox. Ice, symbolizing death or the quenching of passions, and fire, representing physical desires, are the most frequent. Other topics of Michelangelo's poems which are found in the writings of the Neoplatonists are the nature and meaning of beauty; God as the source of art and the artist's inspiration; the superiority of art in interpreting the ideal forms; the soul's struggle for perfection; and spiritual rebirth through

11 Altizer, Self and Symbolism, p. 41.  
12 Arthos, Dante, Michelangelo, p. 63.  
13 Ficino wrote that love is "a perfect concordance of two Souls in the worship of God." Opera omnia, p. 634, quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 279.  
14 Arthos, Dante, Michelangelo, p. 88.
love. He adopted the language of Neoplatonism, which "becomes convincing because it corresponded with his artistic and religious experience."¹⁵

In his late poems, Michelangelo became increasingly concerned with religious themes of grace; the soul's immortality; and its release through death. To these orthodox Christian subjects he brought a Neoplatonist-inspired interpretation. His acceptance of salvation by faith alone, itself a rejection of Catholic dogma of good works, may be found in Ficino's denial of the priestly intermediary; Savonarola's advocacy of Church reforms; and its mid-century corollary, the Valdesian movement. Thus his later life "return" to Christianity was more in the nature of a synthesizing, inspired by approaching death, of lifelong influences.

As an artist and a Neoplatonist, Michelangelo dedicated much of his poetry to beauty. Those who pursue beauty must be, according to both Plotinus and Ficino, lovers.¹⁶ Love is the means by which beauty is apprehended, because beauty is contained only in the divine forms. Knowledge or perception of those ideals may only be attained through the struggle of the mind. This struggle is love. Plotinus wrote:

¹⁵Robb, Neoplatonism, p. 244.

¹⁶Ficino wrote in De Amore: "When we say love, one must understand the desire for beauty, for this is the definition of love among all philosophers." Opera omnia, p. 1322, quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 263.
... those who see with the Soul's sight... are moving in the realm of Truth. This is the spirit that Beauty must ever induce, wonderment and a delicious trouble, longing and love... those only that feel the keener wound are known as Lovers.17

Ficino wrote of his search in similar terms: "Wisdom... warns her philosophical lovers that if they truly desire to gain possession of their beloved, they should always seek the highest summits rather than the lowest of places..."18

Thus beauty and love are frequently synonymous in Michelangelo's poetry:

Love, do my eyes, O tell me as a favor,
See the actual beauty I desire,

Of the torments of love, Michelangelo wrote:

O lovers, run from love, run from the fire,
The flames are cruel and the wound is deadly.

Love seizes me, and beauty keeps me bound...

God is the source of beauty which the artist seeks...

For her fresh beauty has been made by God;
Thus I'd content you, at your high desire,
And that not I, He only, could create...

17 Plotinus, Enneads, quoted in Weitz, Problems in Aesthetics, p. 29.

18 Quoted in Ernst Cassirer, Paul O. Kristeller, and John H. Randall, Jr., eds. Renaissance Philosophy, p. 193.

19 Complete Poems of Michelangelo, trans. Creighton Gilbert, #40, stanza 1, lines 1-2. Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts of Michelangelo's poetry are taken from this translation.

20 Ibid., #25, stanza 1, lines 1-2.

21 Ibid., #39, stanza 3, line 1.

22 Ibid., #57, stanza 2, line 3.

23 Ibid., #176, stanza 4, lines 1-3.
The true beauty is that which transcends its natural form and reveals its divine essence:

My eyes saw no mortal thing... but saw within, where every evil is unwelcome... if that were not created in the image of God, I would no longer desire other than the outward beauty which pleases the eye; but because this is fallacious, it loses itself in the form of universal beauty.  

In this poem Michelangelo distinguished between the universal beauty created by God and the outward, or physical, beauty which is obvious to all. This natural beauty is subject to decay with progressive age, whereas the universal beauty is immortal and eternal. For that reason only the universal beauty must be sought for adoration--it alone is true--and is the proper subject for the artist if he seeks immortality in his art.

Only that love is tainted with false hope that dies with beauty which lessens every moment, for, in this way, it is subject to the changing of a fair face.

Michelangelo addressed the beauty he pursued as "Lady" and wrote of the torments she brought him.

Lady, up to your high and shining crown
By the long narrow route
None can attain, without
Your adding your humility and grace.
The climbing stiffens and my strength runs down,
And by the halfway point I am out of breath.
It seems the ranking place
Your beauty holds can make my heart content,
Which yearns greedily for all special height;
And yet, to revel in your loveliness
I long for your descent
Where I can reach; thus reassured in thought

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25 Ibid., p. 169.
That your foreseeing slight
Toward me who hate your high state, love the lower
May grant yourself forgiveness for my error.  

It times he despaired of attaining his goal and wrote of his

hopelessness:

My eyes, nearby or far away, can truly
See your fair face wherever it may appear,
But feet are not allowed to carry there
My arms and either of my hands, 0 Lady.
The soul, the mind when it is sound and steady,
Rises up through the eyes wider and freer
To your high beauty; yet so great a fire
Gives no such privilege to the mortal, heavy
Body of man, wingless as well, which thus
Can scarcely follow if an angel fly,
And boasts and praises only are for sight
And if you can in Heaven as with us,
Then make my body all one single eye,
No part of me not having your delight.  

This Neoplatonic search for perfect beauty was Michelangelo's
task as an artist. The sonnet which was best known to his
contemporaries, because it was the subject of Varchi's
published lecture in 1549, is perhaps Michelangelo's ulti-
mate statement of himself as the hand which translates the

divine forms.

The best of artists never has a concept
A single marble block does not contain
Inside its husk, but to it may attain
Only if hand follows the intellect.

The good I pledge myself, bad I reject,
Hide, 0 my Lady, beautiful, proud, divine,
Just thus in you, but now my life must end,
Since my skill works against the wished effect.

It is not love then, fortune, or your beauty,
Or your hardness and scorn, in all my ill
That are to blame, neither my luck nor fate,

26Complete Poems, #154.  27Ibid., #164.
If at the same time both death and pity
Are present in your heart, and my low skill, 28
Burning, can grasp nothing but death from it.

Here he suggested that those ideal forms wait to be revealed
by the artist's personal conception which is realized through
his mind and hand.

In another poem Michelangelo appealed to the Lady
Beauty to inspire him and wrote of his "faithful slavery"
and sufferings in her pursuit:

How will I ever dare
Without you, my belov'd, to keep alive,
If I can't ask you to help me as I leave?
Those signs and those sobbings and those tears
That went with my wretched heart, Lady,
To you, have demonstrated painfully
That I am hurt and that my death is near.
But if it is true that in my absence
My faithful slavery may be forgot,
I leave my heart with you, mine it is not. 29

He related how his conception appears and then fades in an
unfinished sonnet of 1529:

While toward the beauty that I saw at first
I bring my soul, which sees it through my eyes,
The inward image grows, and this withdraws,
Almost abject, and wholly in disgrace.
Love, using all his wits, and with his rasp,
So I won't break the thread, turns back and goes. 30

That Michelangelo defined himself and his entire
life as a lover of beauty, dedicated to understanding the
divine forms, is demonstrated in the following sonnet in
which he equated his soul with an unfinished block of
marble:

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28Ibid., #149. 29Ibid., #12. 30Ibid., #42.
Just as we put, O Lady, by subtraction,
Into the rough, hard stone
A living figure, grown
Largest wherever rock has grown most small,
Just so, sometimes, good actions
For the still trembling soul
Are hidden by its own body's surplus,
And the husk that is raw and hard and coarse,
Which you alone can pull
From off my outer surface;
In me there is for me no will or force. 31

Some satisfaction was found in the fame which his art would bring him long after his death.

Above myself so high,
Lady, you make me leap,
Not only I cannot speak
But cannot think it, being no longer I.
Then why do I not fly,
If you will lend your wings,
Rising more often to your lovely face,
Thereby with you remaining,
If Heaven will allow
My body to ascend to paradise?
Only that, by your grace,
I am cut off from my soul, and it alone
With you evades its death and makes my fortune. 32

As an artist, Michelangelo felt himself born with the gift to perceive beauty. Even so, he was required to apply his human reason to his art if he hoped to "reach the holy."

As a trustworthy guide in my vocation,
When I was born I had a gift of beauty,
In both the arts my lantern and my mirror,
Who otherwise believes has a false notion;
Only this to the heights the eye will carry
Where I prepare to be painter and sculptor.

And even if judgments that are rash and futile
tie sense to beauty, which will only bear
To Heaven the most wise intelligence,
No eye can reach the holy from the mortal,
Infirn and always firmly set just where
It's vain to think of mounting without grace. 33

31 Ibid., #150. 32 Ibid., #152. 33 Ibid., #162.
Through the mind's contemplation the artist is able to grasp his vision of the divine. Ficino wrote of the artist's task: "Whoever achieved anything great in any noble art did it mostly when he withdrew from the body and fled to the citadel of the Soul."  

The Neoplatonic conviction that art, in its pursuit of the higher forms, is superior to nature, which is itself merely an imitation of those forms, was Michelangelo's conviction as well. The artist's creation outlives the natural forms as well as the artist himself.

How can it be, Lady, what long acquaintance
Lets everyone observe, that the live figure
In the hard mountain stone can last far longer
Than its maker, whom age returns to dust?

The causes yield and bow to the results;
Hence it is art that overpowers nature.
I know, I've tested it in beautiful sculpture,
Time and death to the work will not keep trust.

Thus I can give a long life to us both,
By either means, with carving or with paint,
Portraying both the faces of us two,

So that a thousand years after our death
They'll see how you were beautiful, I faint,
And that I was no fool in loving you.

Spiritual love as advocated by Ficino and Pico was a guide to knowledge of God. Its achievement required solitude and contemplation. This concept was a Christianized version of Plotinus's description of the seekers of wisdom and beauty as lovers. It would seem that Michelangelo

[34] Ficino, Opera omnia, p. 286, quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 216.

adopted love as his guide and god. "Can't you do what you want, / O Love, if you're a god?" A large number of his poems appeal to love for advice, for strength to persevere, or to resign and accept failure. In these poems Michelangelo recorded his emotional states from depression to exaltation. Love is addressed as a feminine concept, though there is no evidence of a real-life attachment. Thus, the abstract ideal of love, to which he could express his artist's temperament, anxieties, and hopes, was the one constant to which Michelangelo could appeal throughout his life. A 1529 sonnet expressed his frustration in capturing the true form:

Love, do my eyes, O tell me as a favor,  
See the actual beauty I desire,  
Or is it in me, so that as I state  
At every point I see her face in sculpture

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

The beauty that you see comes from her truly,  
But, in a better place, grows by its climb;  
Through mortal eyes into the soul it flies.

There it becomes beautiful, chaste and holy,  
As the immortal wills a thing like Him;  
It's this, not that, that leaps into your eyes.  

The pains and torments of love were many:

Love, rather burn, for those who die  
Have no wings else on earth for a heavenly journey.  

A heart on fire, on fire for many years,  
Will alter, though the mind extinguishes:  
No longer a heart at all, but char and ashes.  

36Ibid., #260, lines 1-2.  37Ibid., #40, stanzas 1, 3-4.  
38Ibid., #37, stanza 2, lines 3-4.  39Ibid., #90, lines 11-13.
The goal of platonic love, the union of two souls by which each transcends matter and prepares to ascend to God, also appeared in Michelangelo's poetry:

And if two bodies have one soul, grown deathless,  
That, with like wings, lifts both of them to Heaven,  
If love's one stroke and golden dart can burn  
And separate the vitals of two breasts,

Neither loving himself, but each one each,  
With one delight and taste, such sympathy  
That both would wish to have a single end, . . . .

In late life he addressed love and death synonymously, recognizing that old age and approaching death meant the end of his talent.

Now Death, O Love, out of the very place  
Where once in me you lorded it, stripped bare,  
As much as with your bow and pricking dart,  
Drives you away and slights you, its grim ice  
Quenches and leaves few days to your sweet fire.  
You count for less than it in each man's heart;  
Even though I was caught  
By wings you wear, you run away with fear;  
All blooming youth is shy at the last hour.

There are poems which Michelangelo addressed to his most intense real loves, Tommaso Cavalieri and Vittoria Colonna. A 1553 sonnet to Cavalieri expressed Michelangelo's dedication to their relationship and the joy he found in it. He does not refer to love, but does speak of a "chaste fire that consumes," and concludes with a wish for physical intimacy.

Since through the eyes the heart's seen in the face,  
I have no other way so evident  
To show my flame; let this then be sufficient,  
O my dear Lord, to ask you now for grace.

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40 Ibid., #57, stanzas 2-3, lines 5-12.
41 Ibid., #165.
Perhaps your spirit, gazing at this chaste
Fire that consumes me, will, more than I credit,
Have trust, and be with me speedy and lenient,
As grace abounds for him who well entreats.

0 happy that day, if this is true!
Then at one instant in their ancient road
The hours will be stopped, time, sun, the days,

That I may have, though it is not my due,
My so much desired, my so sweet lord, 42
In my unworthy ready arms for always.

e friendship with Tommaso Cavalieri continued from the early 1530s until Michelangelo's death in 1564, with sporadic interruptions of conflict, jealousy, and reconciliation.

His madrigals to Vittoria Colonna in the 1540s were different concerns. In them Michelangelo wrote of new spiritual matters: of heaven, grace, and death. Vittoria Colonna and her association with the Valdesians was significant, because through her Michelangelo experienced what some authors have referred to as his "conversion." 43 Michelangelo undoubtedly found a new interest in Christianity, in accepting the concept of faith alone for salvation, a new interpretation of his religion.

Now on my right foot, now upon my left one,
Toward my salvation shifting in my searches,
Between vices and virtues
My heart wearies and burdens me, distraught
Like one who sees no Heaven
And upon every road is lost and late.
I offer a clean sheet
To take your sacred inks:

42 Ibid., #70.

43 Steinberg, "Michelangelo's Last Painting," Smithsonian, p. 82.
Let love inform me, truth be inscribed by pity; 
Free to itself, the spirit 
Not bend toward our mistakes 
My short time left; let me not live so blindly. 
Tell me, high sacred Lady, 
Whether in Heaven less honor is bestowed 
On humble sin than on the sovereign good.44

The human soul, which Ficino assigned to a central place in the hierarchy of the universe, can, through reason, achieve truth and beauty. As Plotinus wrote: "The Soul thus cleansed is all Idea and Reason, wholly free of body, intellecutive, entirely of that divine order from which the wellspring of Beauty rises . . . ."45 Michelangelo wrote of this purified soul:

O lovely soul . . . within, as in the outward face appear . . . things so rare / No beauty ever had . . . . 46

While toward the beauty that I saw at first 
I bring my soul, which sees it through my eyes, 
The inward image grows . . . .47

Its purpose, according to Ficino and Pico, was to return to the divine.48

Soul, which can see the error, 
Is glad to have it die 
And turn to Heaven, whither it aspires.49

44 Complete Poems, #160.
45 Plotinus, Enneids, quoted in Weitzl, Problems in Aesthetics, p. 31.
46 Complete Poems, #39, stanza 2, lines 1-4.
47 Ibid., #42, stanza 1, lines 1-3.
48 Ficino wrote: "As long as we are representatives of God on earth, we are continually troubled by nostalgia for the celestial fatherland, even if we are unaware of it, and in this exile no earthly pleasures can comfort the human mind, since it is eager for better things," Opera omnia, p. 383, quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 211.
49 Complete Poems, #91, lines 8-10.
The soul is imprisoned by the physical body, a theme which Michelangelo expressed in his "captives" for Julius's tomb and again in his poetry: "Here below, the soul in prison lies."  

In 1544, two years after completing the Last Judgment, Michelangelo wrote these lines, in which he stated his certainty of the soul's immortality and its ultimate resurrection:

When the body rises up divine to Heaven
Out of this tomb, and thus revenge the earth.

Here I'm though dead; for the world's cheer I lived,
A thousand true loves' souls were in my breast.
And therefore I'm not dead, though life is lost,
Merely through having one of them removed.

That the soul stays alive outside the body ...

If, as it does, the soul outlives the body,
Released from what against its will it schools
Only while God so rules,
Not till then is it blest, only forthwith
After it is made holy
By dying, as it had been born for death.

While the concept of the soul's immortality is Christian dogma, it was also a necessity of Neoplatonist philosophy.

It is in the purpose which Michelangelo assigns to the soul

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Ibid., #195, line 4. Ficino wrote: "Whilst the Soul is surrounded by the dark dwelling of this body it ... never ceases its lower function ... Therefore, that admirable work [union with God] is not attained in this body and is hardly ever enjoyed by an individual." Opera omnia, p. 306., quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 224.

Complete Poems, #186, lines 3-4. Ibid., #188.

Ibid., #189, line 1. Ibid., #190, lines 1-6.

Ficino described immortality: "The body will be resurrected to become entirely immortal. For from the beginning
The soul is imprisoned by the physical body, a theme which Michelangelo expressed in his "captives" for Julius's tomb and again in his poetry: "Here below, the soul in prison lies."  

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Here I'm though dead; for the world's cheer I lived,
A thousand true loves' souls were in my breast.
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Merely through having one of them removed. 52

That the soul stays alive outside the body . . . . 53

If, as it does, the soul outlives the body,
Released from what against its will it schools
Only while God so rules,
Not till then is it blest, only forthwith
After it is made holy
By dying, as it had been born for death. 54

While the concept of the soul's immortality is Christian dogma, it was also a necessity of Neoplatonist philosophy. 55

It is in the purpose which Michelangelo assigns to the soul

50 Ibid., #195, line 4. Ficino wrote: "Whilst the Soul is surrounded by the dark dwelling of this body it . . . never ceases its lower function . . . . Therefore, that admirable work [union with God] is not attained in this body and is hardly ever enjoyed by an individual." Opera omnia, p. 306., quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 224.
51 Complete Poems, #186, lines 3-4. 52 Ibid., #188.
53 Ibid., #189, line 1. 54 Ibid., #190, lines 1-6.
55 Ficino described immortality: "The body will be resurrected to become entirely immortal. For from the beginning
after death that Neoplatonism is most obvious. Death itself provides the higher fulfillment of the soul, "made holy by dying." The souls of which Michelangelo wrote do not await Christian resurrection, but pass into a transcendent state, as if in Plato's progressive reincarnations.

But if, as some believe, I too acknowledge, We shall return to life, then in that lot I'll serve you, if perchance my art will follow.\(^\text{56}\)

Michelangelo was concerned with his advancing years---the change in his physical energy and creative ability---and attempted to accept approaching death. He expressed in his poetry his response to these changes within himself. At times he valued the experience which life had brought him:

Searching through many tests and through much time, The wise man will attain the true idea, Only when death is near . . . .\(^\text{57}\)

Often, however, he despaired of conquering the passions which had ruled his life:

A flame in what by rule are freezing years, Like mine for a woman, makes the Heavens angry . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Since love inflames us only when halfway, And that's true, for I'm old but burn within . . . .\(^\text{58}\)

God disposed the order of things in such a way that to the rational Soul, which is both eternal life and the natural form of the body, its matter . . . may correspond in that particular respect, that through the Soul, always living and always naturally desiring to animate, the body may always live."\(^\text{Opera omnia, p. 417, quoted in Kristeller, Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, p. 196.}\)

\(^{56}\) Complete Poems, #282, stanza 2.\(^{57}\) Ibid., #239.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., #259, stanza 2, lines 1-2; stanza 4, lines 1-2.
He accepted his diminishing artistic ability as a result of being increasingly absorbed in contemplation and life after death.

The soul gains more the more it's lost the world, And death and art do not go well together.

Art, in fact, is a distraction to which he should not yield.

There's no painting or sculpture now that quiets The soul that's pointed toward the holy Love That on the cross opened its arms to take us.

In his old age Michelangelo came to embody the Neoplatonic ideal of the contemplative life, in which the individual soul is dedicated to seeking knowledge of God and the divine state. Even his life-long solace in art held no appeal in comparison to the longings of his soul. This Neoplatonic search was compatible with the religious ideals he found first in Savonarola and later in the Valdesian movement. His acceptance of faith alone as the key to salvation, which itself found its roots in the Christian Platonism of Ficino, contributed to his rejection of his artistic labors in the service of the Church as attempts at salvation by good works, the Catholic dogma. Michelangelo brought to his search for grace the same intensity with which he addressed love and beauty in his earlier years.

My soul ... / finds in itself no cause but some great sin Unknown to it, but still not therefore hidden. From the huge grace that is a wretch's aid.

59 Ibid., #281, stanza 2, lines 1-2.
60 Ibid., #283, stanza 4.
61 Ibid., #278, stanza 1.
In a sonnet of 1555 he pleaded for the "heavenly gift:"
"I speak of faith./ I by my fault have not complete full grace."  

He relied on mercy as he despaired of achieving worthiness of salvation:

Lord, in the final hour,
Stretch out thy pitying arms to me, take me
Out of me, make me one that pleases Thee.  

He addressed Death itself in a poem honoring a dead friend and could have been referring to his own age:

Death did not wish not to destroy without Years as its weapons, and superfluous time,
The beauty lying here, but let it climb,
To Heaven now, not having lost a trait.  

Even though Michelangelo did not date the majority of his poems, they may be given a chronological outline according to their theme. Beauty and the nature of art occupied his early and middle years. Love, too, appeared in these poems, but as a means of perceiving the divine beauty. In his middle years, the 1530s, Michelangelo's love poetry assumed the platonic relationship which he attempted to find in his love for Tommaso Cavalieri. In the next decade, the 1540s, his poetry became more concerned with religious concepts, and he incorporated Ficino's Christianized Platonism in his search for divine grace and mercy. With old age, the 1550s, Michelangelo's poems increasingly

62 Ibid., #287, stanza 2, lines 3-4.  
63 Ibid., #159, lines 14-16.  
64 Ibid., #180.
referred to death and a rejection of the art which filled his earlier years. The soul's immortality, its efforts to ascend to the divine realm of the hierarchy, and its future resurrection absorbed him.

As has been seen in the poems, Michelangelo's imagery relates the interdependence of creation and destruction. He deliberately employed the archaic forms of inverted syntax and grammatical obscurities. Michelangelo's poetic originality is found in "a tendency to abstract imagery inherited from the Tuscan lyric tradition; a refusal to use conceits metaphorically; and a rearrangement of syntactic elements." This manipulation strengthened the symbolic character of his writings. Altizer, in comparing Michelangelo with John Donne and Agrippa D'Aubigne, asserts that all three poets revealed a "profound self-consciousness," which indicates that the

sixteenth century synthesis of Christian dogma and classical philosophy was becoming problematic . . . in the new complexity of society, religion, philosophy and scientific events.67

Their task was to "create a new image of reality, to find a new symbolic union of self and other."68 Thus Michelangelo's

65 Altizer, Self and Symbolism, p. 4.


68 Ibid.
preoccupation with problems of imagination and reality, and the relationship of conflicting states of being, reflected the dislocations he felt within society as he aged.

Michelangelo's most original vision as poet-artist transcends both Neoplatonism and Christian doctrine in its insistence on the active imagination's ability to create and be created by its own forms of reality. 69

Thus in his poetry Michelangelo revealed his life's development. The constant modes of expression are the Neoplatonic definitions of the universe; the role of the human soul; and its struggle through love to perceive the ideal forms. Christianity, which was never antithetical to Ficino's Neoplatonism, became the dominant theme in the later poems, but was always expressed with a Neoplatonist's interpretation of the soul's destination.

69Ibid., p. 33.
CONCLUSION

Since 1549, when Michelangelo's contemporary, Benedetto Varchi, attributed an understanding of Platonic wisdom to Michelangelo as shown in his poetry, scholarly opinion on the extent of Neoplatonism's influence on the artist has varied. Depending on the author's acquaintance with the tenets of Neoplatonism, much or little has been made of Michelangelo's early years in the Medici household. Erwin Panofsky was the first art historian to apply extensive familiarity with the writings of Ficino and Pico to the analysis of Michelangelo's art works and poetry. He concluded that Florentine Neoplatonism solely accounted for Michelangelo's genius and personal struggle. Reaction to Panofsky's zealous oversimplification is found in the more recent writings of Frederick Hartt, who denies any Neoplatonist-inspired content in Michelangelo's art. Kenneth Clark, who accepts the validity of Panofsky's assertions, assumes the influence of Neoplatonism without providing concrete demonstration.

It has been asserted here that the proof of Neoplatonism lies in Michelangelo's personal synthesis of Christianity and Neoplatonism, and it is that synthesis which made him the greatest Italian artist of the sixteenth
century. His esthetic theory, choice of artistic themes, and interpretation of them were inspired by his familiarity with the thought of the major Florentine Neoplatonist philosophers. His personal acquaintance with them dated from his early years in the establishment of Lorenzo Medici, and their impact continued throughout his life.

It was in his poetry that Michelangelo expressed his theory of art and the artist's task, which derived directly from Ficino and Pico. The Neoplatonist concepts that God is the source of art and the universal forms (Ideals); that beauty is a psychological attribute and reflection of divine perfection; and that the artist is perceiver and interpreter of the Ideals, are all discussed in Michelangelo's poems. The value of contemplation; the nature and necessity of love; and the soul's struggle for perfection and union with the divine--concepts which figure largely in Ficino's doctrine--also form much of Michelangelo's creation in verse.

The themes, and Michelangelo's interpretation of them in painting and sculpture, likewise demonstrate his acceptance of the teachings of the Neoplatonic philosophers. Primary in his oeuvre is the nude human figure, which represents both the natural and the purest state of human existence. The body, as container of the soul, is both prison and revealer of the divine origin of humanity.
Michelangelo's earliest sculptures, the *David* and *Pietà*, embody ideal physical beauty as well as Ficino's beauty of soul. Their inherent attributes—the former, civic virtue, the latter, human love for the divine—have transformed them. So, too, have the princes' figures in the Medici tomb been transformed. As they are personifications of the ideals of the Active and Contemplative lives, Michelangelo gave them a beauty which denies portraiture.

Those ideal states are again expressed in the *Moses* for Julius's tomb. Moses represented to the Neoplatonists the rare combination of the two: the worldly philosopher, who both led his people and received from God his laws and wisdom. Moses is the central figure in the tomb which was, in its original design, to be Michelangelo's model of the hierarchy of the universe as described by Ficino. On the lowest, or terrestrial, level were numerous bound figures. The "slaves," as they are commonly called, represented the soul's captivity in the mortal body. The body, subject to physical needs and desires, restrained the soul, which sought to transcend those desires to reach knowledge of the divine. The human soul, as Ficino described it, occupied a position midway between God and the lower earthly forms.

This dual nature of man is expressed more fully in the Sistine ceiling in the Creation of Adam. Here the human form, although a younger image of the Creator, is inert and empty before receiving its spirit from the hand of God. The
ceiling also represents the Biblical version of the universe's creation reconciled with Plato's similar myth. God appears as the craftsman of the Timaeus, as well as the Judaeo-Christian partner of humanity. The Old Testament prophets and ancient sibyls, too, express the compatibility between seemingly opposing traditions.

Michelangelo's last paintings, the Last Judgment and the Pauline frescoes, are more Christian in message, but also incorporate less obvious Neoplatonic concepts. They primarily express Michelangelo's renewed religious devotion, inspired by the Italian spirituali. The Italian reformers provided Michelangelo with an interpretation of Christianity to which he was originally attracted by the preachings of Savonarola. In addition, they adopted Neoplatonism's emphasis on the individual soul's struggle for enlightenment or salvation. Michelangelo resolved the seeming contradictions between the pagan philosophy of Plato and the religious devotion of Christianity through his own personality, which required both rational explanation and personal faith.

Thus the Last Judgment poses Christ as the Greek god Apollo surrounded by martyrs and saints of the Church. The souls of humanity are beyond the further possibility of good works for redemption, and instead are condemned or saved according to their past devotion, which is their fate. Overall, the scene expresses the artist's own passionate intensity and the spiritual struggle which characterizes his late works.
The Pauline frescoes are less violent, but include numerous self-portraits of Michelangelo at various ages of his life. They re-affirm his dedication to the Church, but also depict his life-long spiritual search. Neoplatonism here forms his painterly style rather than the content. The subdued colors and poses express timeless truth and the fulfillment of the ideal state which humanity must seek.

Very few of Michelangelo's works are overtly classical in subject. His treatment, however, consistently bespeaks the inspiration of Neoplatonism, from the early Sistine ceiling to the last Pauline frescoes. Michelangelo's poetry confirms the influence of the philosophy. Neoplatonism provided the rational foundation which Christianity lacked in the sixteenth century, and its impact on Michelangelo made him the artistic representative of his age.
APPENDIX

Condivi stated that Michelangelo was born in 1474 (old calendar) of "prodigious nativity" under the influences of Mercury, Venus, and Jupiter.\(^1\) He was apprenticed to the Florentine painter Domenico Ghirlandaio at 14, but became dissatisfied and left that artist's establishment. He then received the patronage of Lorenzo Medici for two years until 1492. When Lorenzo died, Michelangelo travelled and read widely for the next four years.

From 1496 to 1501 Michelangelo worked in Rome, where he executed his first major sculpture, the Pietà, commissioned by a French cardinal. The young artist's fame was established by this work, and he returned to Florence in 1501 to solicit an enormous (15 feet high) piece of damaged marble belonging to the city government.

From it he modelled the young warrior David with the intention, Vasari says, "to intimate that, as David had defended his people and governed justly, so they who were then ruling that city should defend it with courage and govern it uprightly."\(^2\) It was widely acclaimed as surpassing "all others whether ancient or modern, Greek or Latin . . . [none] can be compared with it, to such perfection of beauty

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\(^1\)Condivi, \textit{Vita}, p. 3. \(^2\)Vasari, \textit{Lives}, p. 57.
and excellence did our artist bring his work."

In 1505 Michelangelo was called to Rome by Pope Julius II to execute a monumental tomb for that pontiff. After much time was spent in the quarries selecting marbles for it, Michelangelo was diverted from the tomb and set to painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling, on which he labored from 1508 to 1512. He then returned to work on the Julius tomb, completing three figures, the **Rebellious** and **Dying Slaves** and the **Moses**.

When Leo X was elected to the Papacy, he sent Michelangelo to Florence in 1516 to erect a new facade for the Medici church of San Lorenzo. When this proved too costly, Leo and his nephew Cardinal Giulio Medici (later Clement VII) directed Michelangelo to rebuild the family chapel as a funerary chapel to honor the late Princes Lorenzo (grandson of "The Magnificent") and Giuliano (murdered in 1478). The project involved actual design and construction of the building which was to house the tombs, as well as the monuments to the four Medici, and the decoration of the structure's interior.

Michelangelo worked on this chapel intermittently throughout the turbulent decade of the 1520s--the death of Leo X, the pontificates of the Flemish Adrian VI and the Medici Clement VII, and the Sack of Rome in 1527 (during which all funds from Clement stopped). In May 1527 Clement

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Ibid., p. 59.
was imprisoned in Rome and the Medici party driven from Florence. Michelangelo directed the fortifications of the town for the republican government. He was in Florence in 1530 when the city capitulated to the combined Papal and Imperial armies.

Michelangelo, fearing retribution, went into hiding. According to Condivi, "he fled to the house of a dear friend where he remained hidden many days." Pope Clement VII sent orders that if Michelangelo should be found, he should "proceed with the work of the tombs ... and be used with courtesy." Thus saved, Michelangelo "in a few months executed all those statues that are to be seen in the sacristy of San Lorenzo, urged on more by fear than by devotion."  

Condivi continued:

Nevertheless, Michelangelo lived in great fear, inasmuch as the [Medici] Duke Alessandro, a young man, as everyone knows, cruel and vindictive, deeply hated him. Nor is there any doubt that had it not been for his reverence of the pope, he would have made away with him .... Michelangelo had good cause to live in fear. And certainly it was by the aid of God that he was not found at Florence when Pope Clement died, having been called to Rome by that pontiff ....

It is not difficult to imagine Michelangelo dictating this passage to Condivi to provide his own version of these terrifying years. Vasari, on the other hand, not understanding or ignorant of the events, acted on behalf of the Medici princes in later years by continually pleading with Michelangelo to return to Florence. 

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4 Condivi, Vita, p. 50. 5 Ibid., pp. 51-52. 6 Vasari, Lives, see e.g., pp. 180-82.
In 1532 Michelangelo met Tommaso Cavalieri, a young Roman. Their friendship was to last until Michelangelo's death, and was the inspiration for much of his love poetry. Two years later he moved to Rome, voluntarily exiling himself from his native, though dangerous, city.

In 1534 Michelangelo left Florence at the command of Clement, leaving behind the completed sculptures of the younger Princes Lorenzo and Giuliano, the four allegorical Times of Day, and the nearly completed Virgin, as well as the completed architectural structure which would house them. The monuments to the Magnifici (Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano) were never begun, and the others were installed in 1545 according to Michelangelo's written instructions. The two patron saints, Damian and Cosmas, now flanking the Virgin, were executed by other artists.

In Rome Michelangelo associated with cardinals and artists, including Andrea del Sarto, Benvenuto Cellini, and Pontormo. His friends there were often exiles from Florence, through whom he maintained ties with the intellectual and philosophical attitudes of his youth. He was commissioned by Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese) to paint in fresco the scene of the Last Judgment on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, and worked on it from 1536 to 1541.

During 1536 he met and formed a profound friendship with Vittoria Colonna, a noble widow who had retired

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7 Tolnay, Michelangelo, p. 182.
into religious contemplation. She too was inspiration for much of Michelangelo's poetry. Through her he became acquainted with the circle of Italian reformers, Cardinals Pole and Contarini, and Juan Valdes. As a result, Michelangelo experienced a deepening of religious sentiment, and was introduced to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Certain conversations between Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna were recorded by Francisco de Hollanda in 1538 and published ten years later as the Dialogos em Roma (in Portuguese). These provide another source of first-hand information about the artist's views on religion, art, and love.

In 1542, at the age of 67, Michelangelo began his last commission in paint, the frescoes of the Pauline Chapel, which occupied him until 1550. In 1545 he at last completed work on the tomb for Julius II, begun 40 years earlier. After 1550, he turned increasingly to architecture, which required only designs and occasional supervision of construction. He continued writing poetry and sculpting for personal satisfaction until days before his death in February 1564. His body was returned in secret to Florence, where the Florentine Academy of Design held memorial services for him.

8 Conditi, Vita, p. 78.

9 Although an Englishman, Reginald Pole spent many years of self-exile in Italy.
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