

# THE STORY BEHIND Michelangelo's Four Pietàs

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**C**ABLEGRAMS are flying back and forth between New York and Rome. Their subject: plans for transporting one of the most precious cargoes ever shipped across the Atlantic.

At the urging of Cardinal Spellman, the Vatican has agreed to send its Michelangelo Pietà to New York for exhibition at the 1964 World's Fair. This will be the first time that the statue has left St. Peter's since Michelangelo installed it there himself in 1500.

This Pietà is possibly the most beloved and the best-known art work in Christendom. Yet it is not the only Pietà created by Michelangelo. During his 75 years as a sculptor, he carved three other versions—which are startlingly different from his first and most famous one.

The first Pietà was created for French Cardinal Groslye, who had been given permission by Pope Alexander VI to "leave something behind him of beauty in Rome." It was Michelangelo's first well-paid commission.

To find the solitude and the quiet for concentrated carving, Michelangelo moved into two rather poor rooms overlooking the Tiber. He purchased a tremendous block of marble and brought in Jewish models from Trastevere in order to sketch his Christ and young Roman matrons to sit as Mary. Then he entered the marble and began blocking out the Pietà.

From the very outset it was a revolutionary concept. He planned two life-sized figures, the Virgin and Jesus, where before the Christ had been a small secondary figure. He placed the life-sized Jesus on His sorrowing mother's lap. And he kept the beautiful face of the Virgin as youthful as the day the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her at the Annunciation.

Disturbed by this, Cardinal Groslye asked Michelangelo: "How does the Madonna's face remain so young, younger than her Son's?"

"It appeared to me, your Grace, that the Virgin Mary would not age," replied Michelangelo. "She was pure; she would have kept the freshness of youth." The Cardinal accepted Michelangelo's spiritual logic. Since the statue was so unconventional, the sculptor and some of his friends had to sneak it into the Chapel of the

Kings of France in the old Basilica of Constantine. But this was not the worst of the indignities. Although it was the Jubilee year of 1500, few of the tourists bothered to come into the gloomy chapel to look at the Pietà.

One day Michelangelo walked into the chapel and found a large Lombardy family standing in front of his carving, quarreling about its authorship. He heard the mother say: "I tell you I recognize the work. It is by that fellow from Osteno who makes all the tombstones."

"No, no," cried her husband. "It is one by our countryman, Cristoforo Solari, called 'the Hunchback.' He has done many of them."

Michelangelo was so outraged that that night he once again sneaked into St. Peter's, but this time with a candle in his cap and a hammer and chisel in his hands. On the band that ran across the Virgin's bosom, he cut the words, *Michelangelo Buonarroti of Florence made this*. It was the only carving he ever signed. Many people think it is his finest work.

Michelangelo always wanted to sculpture another Pietà. Yet circumstances and his demanding patrons kept him from getting back to the theme for almost 50 years!

In his Duomo Pietà, the theme remained the same, the Virgin Mary supporting the dead Christ in her arms. But half a century of bitterly hard work, frustration, grief, suffering, and disappointment had changed Michelangelo. The aura of almost sublime beauty is no longer to be found in the faces, and the marble is roughhewn.

**M**ICHELANGELO WAS 80. Thinking he was dying and wanting this Pietà for his own tomb, he carved a likeness of himself standing behind Mary and Jesus—and he included the bashed-in nose he had received from a fellow student in sculpture school.

Ironically, Michelangelo somehow broke part of the marble block or perhaps stumbled across a hollow vein. Furious at himself, he gave the unfinished Pietà away. Another sculptor added a disproportionately small and delicate Mary Magdalene which detracts from the statue.

This second Pietà dropped out of sight for nearly 100 years, and then for two centuries it was kept behind the main altar of the Florentine cathedral, where it would not be too conspicuous.

Today it occupies the first chapel of the left apse, where it is seen by all. But Michelangelo is buried in Santa Croce, his neighborhood church; he never did get this Pietà to adorn his tomb.

Michelangelo's third Pietà, carved about 1556, is known as the Palestrina Pietà. It is a strange piece, the only major Michelangelo carving that is not cut out of the pure white Carrara marble he so dearly loved. It is made of an antique marble-colored limestone.

The Palestrina Pietà is not beautiful. It is harsh and severe; the body of Christ is enormously massive about the shoulders and chest, and His legs are shrinking and spindly. The Virgin's crudely blocked face is that of an aging peasant under a crushing burden in attempting to hold up her dead son. Nevertheless, it has enormous emotional power.

**T**HE FOURTH PIETÀ, known as the Rondanini, has the most dramatic story. Michelangelo began it when he spoiled the Duomo Pietà, and he was still carving on it at the time of his death at 89. Several years before, when he had almost completed it, he grew discontented with it and changed the statue in amazing fashion.

Originally it appears to have been a single massive Christ. In converting it to a Pietà, Michelangelo changed Jesus's head into Mary's head, then carved Christ's head out of what originally had been His shoulder. The legs of Christ remained untouched and are magnificent, but Michelangelo died before he could complete the face of the Virgin. There is also the phenomenon of Christ's right arm. It had been attached to the original shoulder, but it now stands free in space, cut off at the elbow.

Michelangelo never was able to return in his own mind or in his carving hands to the sweet and gentle sorrow of the St. Peter's Pietà, or to its divine beauty. Life walked harshly over his years; and his chisel moved harshly over the Duomo Pietà, the Palestrina Pietà, and the Rondanini Pietà.

Yet where high polish is missing, where compassion is roughhewn instead of refined, there comes in its place the deep self-agony of the man who has suffered everything life has to offer—and consequently feels a spiritual sympathy and kinship for all mankind.