



The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti

John Addington Symonds

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It's possible that Michelangelo is the most famous artist in history, but it's also possible that he's an underrated artist. The vast influence of his career is reflected by the fact that he is not only known for his own art but has also come to embody an entire epoch of Western art. Along with Leonardo da Vinci, there are no other artists who so fully capture the spirit of scientific and artistic discovery that characterized art during the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Moreover, Michelangelo's career is distinguished from that of his peers through his seamless ability to work within different art forms, receiving acclaim regardless of the medium. After first rising to fame as a sculptor, he also painted and served as an architect, and since his death, Michelangelo has also become decorated for his prolific output as a poet. The diversity and high standard of his work, no matter the medium, make it difficult to even arrive at a most famous work. People can make a compelling argument for at least three works: the statue of David (1501-1504), the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1508-1512), or the design for St. Peter's Basilica (worked on from 1546 through his death). That the same artist produced these canonical monuments of Western art is remarkable, but that each was made through a different medium defines Michelangelo as a *sui generis* talent.

To top it off, Michelangelo's work came at the height of a period in Western civilization known for its scientific and artistic exploration. As Michelangelo biographer George Bull noted, this period carries many titles: "The period of Michelangelo's lifetime has been variously characterized as the age of printing, the age of humanism, the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, Catholic Reform, the waning of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the age of Discovery." The different titles reflect the sheer amount of activity that took place during this critical era of Western Civilization. Although the different labels can frustrate attempts to clearly define the era, each one of them is important to remember in the context of Michelangelo's career.

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