

# Michelangelo: The Early Years

## SYNOPSIS

This program, with narration by Jose Ferrer and Peter Ustinov, covers Michelangelo's life from his birth in the Italian village of Caprese to his completion of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling frescoes at the age of 37.

The program explores Michelangelo's early years as an artist: his introduction to the art of Florence; his apprenticeship to the popular painter, Domenico Ghirlandaio, at age 13; his entry into the household of Lorenzo de' Medici a year later; and his friendship with the prior of Santo Spirito, which resulted in his study of human anatomy.

The program follows Michelangelo to Rome where he executed his first masterpiece, the Pieta-then back to Florence, where he created the giant statue of David for city fathers. Also explored are the personalities and events that shaped Michelangelo's life and work. The program details Michelangelo's turbulent relationship with Pope Julius II-who became the artist's most important, and demanding, patron. It closes with a discussion of the great masterpiece that Michelangelo executed for Julius: the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

## Questions to ask before viewing

- During the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, what city was the center of the Italian Renaissance?
- What city became the center of the Renaissance art after 1500?
- What family bore a major responsibility for shaping the art and culture of Renaissance Florence and Rome:

## Questions to ask after viewing

1. When and where was Michelangelo born? (He was born on March 6, 1475, to Lodovico and Francesca Buonarroti, the second of the couple's five sons. The Buonarroti were an old Florentine family; Lodovico had been appointed mayor of Caprese and Chiusi, two small towns that lay about 40 miles southeast of Florence. Michelangelo was born in Caprese, and sent a few weeks later to a wet nurse in Settignano, where is family owned property.)
2. How did Michelangelo spend his early years? (Until age ten, Michelangelo lived mostly with his nurse and her husband. Settignano was the site of several stone quarries, and most of the village families made their living as quarryworkers. Michelangelo learned to use a hammer and chisel before he could read or write.)
3. When he was ten, Michelangelo came to Florence to live with his family and stepmother. What position did Florence occupy at the time? (Florence was the artistic and intellectual center of the Renaissance, comparable to Athens in the Golden Age. It was a wealthy, open society that

nourished the arts in both the private and public spheres.)

4. Florence was a republic under control of its leading family, the Medicis. Who were the Medicis? (They were one of the world's pre-eminent banking families, who used their wealth to become Florence's most important patron of the arts. In Michelangelo's time, the family was led by the widely respected Lorenzo de' Medici, called "The Magnificent.")
5. How did living in Florence affect the young Michelangelo? (Since art was an integral part of life in Florence, Michelangelo's attraction to painting and sculpture intensified. He learned a great deal by studying and sketching the artwork in Florence's great architecture.)
6. The men of Michelangelo's family were traders and government officials. How did Michelangelo come to enter the world of art? (Despite his father's objections, he was apprenticed at age 13 to the studio of Domenico Ghirlandaio, the city's most popular painter. Later, Michelangelo was recommended to study with Bertoldo di Giovanni, who had formed a school for sculptors. At the school, Michelangelo came to the attention of Lorenzo himself, who took the boy into his home.)
7. In the Medici household Michelangelo was tutored, and heavily influenced, by members of the Plato Academy-intellectuals devoted to the philosophy of Plato. How did the Neoplatonists mold Michelangelo's view of art? (They imparted the idea that physical beauty is the manifestation of noble spirit, that admiration of beauty can lead to admiration and love of God.)

Note: Michelangelo took classes with Lorenzo's sons and nephew. One of the sons, Giovanni, later became Pope Leo X. The nephew, Giulio, became Pope Clement VII. Both commissioned work from Michelangelo later in life.)

8. Michelangelo produced his first real work. The film showed two bas-reliefs executed a year apart—the *Madonna of the Stairs* and the *Battle of the Centaurs*. How do these works differ? (The first piece, the *Madonna of the Stairs*, shows the influence of Donatello, who had been the teacher of Michelangelo's teacher, Bertoldo. In the *Battle of the Centaurs*, however, Michelangelo's own original technique and spirit come to light.)
9. After Lorenzo de' Medici's death in 1492, Michelangelo formed a friendship with the prior of the Santo Spirito monastery, which housed a large hospital and morgue. What was the upshot of this friendship? (Michelangelo was allowed to dissect the bodies in the morgue (although it was illegal) and learn about human anatomy first hand.)
10. Shortly before the death of Lorenzo, Florence had come under the spell of a fiery Dominican monk. Who was he? (Girolamo Savonarola, the prior of San Marco, who denounced the Florentines' corruption, sensuality, and love of luxury. He was an enemy of the Medici. But Savonarola's apocalyptic sermons had a strong impact on the young and impressionable Michelangelo. Biographers note the monks' teachings instilled in him "a consciousness of sin" that influenced his later work.) In 1494, Michelangelo fled the city of Florence. Why? (Savonarola's followers won control of the city government. Michelangelo—fearful of his life because of his close association

with the Medici—left the city just before the Medici was forced into exile.)

11. In 1496, at the age of 21, Michelangelo entered Rome for the first time. What was his first important commission there? (*A Bacchus* for the banker Jacopo Galli.)
12. Galli was so pleased with Michelangelo's work that he arranged a commission which would make the sculptor famous. What was it? (The *Pieta*. Michelangelo executed the statue for French Cardinal Jean de Villiers de la Groslaye, who was returning home and wanted to leave the Vatican a sculpture. At the time Michelangelo completed the *Pieta*, he was just 24 years old.)
13. What drew Michelangelo back to Florence in 1501? (The chance to carve a 17-foot piece of Carrara marble that had been abandoned 40 years before. Michelangelo agreed with the council of Florence to carve a colossal *David*. Much of his Neoplatonic thinking was evident in the idealized figure, which owed more to the Greeks than to the Bible. The statue was a symbol of the city's liberation: Savonarola had been put to death in 1498 and the city had been restored to some semblance of its earlier self. The *David* was instantly acclaimed when it was unveiled in 1504.)
14. After completion of the *David*, Michelangelo was considered to be one of the two greatest artists in Italy. Who was his rival? (Leonardo da Vinci, who was primarily a painter.)
15. In the years 1501-1505, Michelangelo created four interpretations of an eternal theme in art. Who are the subjects of these four artworks? (The *Madonna and Child*. The works included the statue of the *Bruges Madonna*; two bas-reliefs: the

*Taddei Madonna* and the *Pitti Madonna*—where experts see the influence of the *Mona Lisa*; and a painting, the *Domi Tondo*—which is the only easel painting generally recognized to be by Michelangelo.)

16. In 1505, Michelangelo was summoned to Rome by the new Pope, Julius II—who would become his most important, and demanding, patron. Julius commissioned Michelangelo to start work on a project which would occupy the artist over the next 40 years. What was it? (Julius's tomb. Michelangelo's original design called for a free-standing structure containing more than 40 larger-than-life statues. Since no existing church was large enough to accommodate the work, Pope Julius decided to build one—a new Basilica of St. Peter's. But, as the design of the new basilica occupied more and more of the Pope's attention, he lost interest in the tomb itself. When Julius stopped paying Michelangelo's expenses for the project, the artist stormed back to Florence.)
17. When Michelangelo again returned to Rome, it was to execute a project that would become his greatest challenge—and greatest masterpiece. What was that project? (The painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Michelangelo did not want the job. He considered himself a sculptor, not a painter, and felt that the magnitude of the task called for a skilled painter like Raphael. But Pope Julius insisted, and Michelangelo finally undertook the commission. During the next four years, he worked unaided to cover the 5,800 square foot ceiling surface with more than 300 figures.)
18. How did Michelangelo arrange the figures on the Sistine Chapel ceiling? (In the triangular panels at

the bottom he painted figures from the Bible. Above them he put the prophets and sibyls, or oracles. In the middle of the ceiling he painted nine panels with scenes from Genesis. These include the drunkenness of Noah; the flood; the sacrifice of Noah; the temptation and expulsion of the Garden of Eden; the creation of Eve; the creation of Adam; the gathering of the waters; the Creation; and the separation of light from darkness. The order of the nine panels represents the Neoplatonic idea that life is a progression from the servitude of the body to the liberation of the soul.)

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AIMS  
Discussion Guide

### Length

➤ 29 minutes

### Subject areas

➤ Art History

### Audience Levels

➤ Senior High-Adult

### Catalog number

➤ 8485

### Annotations

This program follows Michelangelo from his birth in the Italian village of Caprese to his painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Produced by NBC News Productions, Inc.

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## Michelangelo: The Early Years

### Objectives

- To study the youth and early manhood of Michelangelo.
- To examine the historical figures, places, and politics of the era in which Michelangelo lived.
- To discuss the role of Florence in the Italian Renaissance.
- To show the artists and artworks that influenced Michelangelo.
- To study Michelangelo's work from his first sculptures to his painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

