

Michelangelo: The Later Years

Synopsis

This program, with narration by Jose Ferrer and Peter Ustinov, explores Michelangelo's life and work in his middle and later years, to his death at age 90 in 1564.

The program begins with Michelangelo's work on the Medici family church, San Lorenzo. It details the artist's aborted effort on the church façade, then examines the funerary sculptures he created for the Medici Chapel and, finally, his design for the Laurentian Library. Michelangelo's role as chief of fortifications for the city of Florence is set against a study of the politics and tensions of the period.

Michelangelo spent the last 30 years of his life in Rome, engaged on painting and architectural projects. The program studies his painting of the *last Judgment*, and looks at two other frescoes that he produced for the Vatican's Pauline Chapel. A final segment discusses the project that occupied Michelangelo's final years: his work as chief architect on St. Peter's Basilica.

Questions to ask before viewing

- Of what arts was Michelangelo a master?
- What monumental building in Rome bears the stamp of Michelangelo's genius?

Questions to ask after viewing

1. At the beginning of the program, two famous statues from antiquity were shown, both of which influenced Michelangelo's work. What were these statues? (The Apollo *Belevedere* and the *Laocoon*. After their unearthing, both statues were claimed by Pope Julius II for the Vatican.)
2. Michelangelo is said to have been present at the unearthing of the *Laocoon*; echoes of the statue can be found in two sculptures of his own. What are they? (*The Dying Captive* and *The Heroic Captive*—now in the Louvre, but originally intended for the tomb of Julius II, on which Michelangelo had been working for years.)
3. Michelangelo's old schoolmate, Giovanni de' Medici, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, became Pope Leo X in 1513. He engaged Michelangelo on a project that would never actually be started. What was that project? (The façade for the Medici family church, San Lorenzo. Before his death, Pope Julius had arranged for the Medici family to return to their old position of power in Florence. Family members immediately turned their attention to San Lorenzo. They decided that stone for the façade would come from their newly discovered quarries at Pietra Santa. But there were problems in getting the marble to San Lorenzo; shipments were delayed and sometimes damaged. After three years, the disastrous project was abandoned.)
4. Despite problems with the façade, Pope Leo and his cousin, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, offered Michelangelo another project at San Lorenzo. What was it? (The building of a new sacristy, which would house the family chapel and mausoleum. Michelangelo worked on the sacristy over a ten-year period, until he was 60. In addition to the funerary sculptures, he designed the interior and dome of the chapel.)
5. Only two of the tombs were actually completed. Which ones were they? (The tombs of Lorenzo de' Medici's son and grandson—Giuliano, Duke of Nemours, and Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino. Michelangelo never began work on the chapel's main tomb—that of Lorenzo the Magnificent and his brother, Giuliano.)
6. The statues for the tombs of the young Medici bear no resemblance of the men themselves. Why is that? (Michelangelo created them as idealized portraits of the Contemplative Life and the Active Life. Below each statue are two more allegorical figures: *Night* and *Day* beneath Duke Giuliano; *Dusk* and *Dawn* below Duke Lorenzo.)
7. When he assumed the Papacy as Clement VII, Giulio de' Medici commissioned from Michelangelo still another architectural project for San Lorenzo. What was it? (The Laurentian Library, which housed the family's collection of illuminated manuscripts. In his design for the interior of the library's Great Hall, Michelangelo also planned the carved lecterns, wooded ceiling, and parquet floor. The staircase leading to the Great Hall was completed years later, based on Michelangelo's clay model.)

8. Michelangelo's preoccupation with San Lorenzo was interrupted by the Siege of Florence. What were the events that led to the siege? (In 1527, the mercenary army of Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, captured Rome and besieged Pope Clement VII in his fortress outside the Vatican. For eight months, the army despoiled the city in the destructive Sack of Rome. Taking advantage of the situation, Florence decided to rebel against Medici rule. After Pope Clement was freed, he sent an army to recapture Florence for the family.)
9. What was Michelangelo's role in the siege? (He designed the fortifications that protected Florence. The situation was a difficult one for Michelangelo, because he had been a protégé of the Medici since adolescence. After the city fell, he went into hiding. But Pope Clement soon forgave him. Michelangelo again took up his work on the chapel—but when Clement died he left Florence for good.)
10. Michelangelo labored for over 40 years on the seemingly-endless project of Pope Julius II's tomb. The project was finally completed in 1545. What relation did the final tomb bear to Michelangelo's original design? (Almost none; the final version was but a shadow of his original conception. Only one statue bore the stamp of Michelangelo's genius; the severe and monumental *Moses*.)
11. Twenty-five years after he had finished the Sistine Chapel Ceiling frescoes, Michelangelo was at work again in the Sistine Chapel, on a commission for Pope Clement's successor, Paul III. On what project was he engaged? (The Last *Judgment* fresco for the Chapel's altar wall.)

12. How does the *Last Judgment* differ from the earlier ceiling frescoes? (Its somber theme of judgment is in stark contrast to the earlier theme of salvation. Michelangelo no longer emphasized physical beauty. The Neoplatonic ideals reflected in his ceiling frescoes were replaced by the fire-and-brimstone spirit of Savonarola. The *Last Judgment* reflects the uneasiness and pessimism that followed the Sack of Rome—as well as Michelangelo’s own personal losses.)
13. A year after the Last Judgment project, Michelangelo began two more frescoes for Pope Paul III. What were these paintings? (The *Conversion of St. Paul* and the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*. Both were for Paul’s private chapel at the Vatican, and reflected Michelangelo’s deepened religious feeling.)
14. In his old age, Michelangelo formed close friendships with young nobleman and a young poetess. Who were they? (The young nobleman was Tommaso dei Cavalierie, who may have been the inspiration for Michelangelo’s Victory statue. The poetess was Vittoria Colonna. She was the only woman in Michelangelo’s life, and had a strong effect on his religious thinking.)
15. During the last 17 years of his life, Michelangelo was engaged as chief architect on a monumental building project. What was the project? (St. Peter’s Basilica—which had been started 40 years earlier in order to house the tomb of Pope Julius II. In the intervening years, work had been sporadic on the church. Michelangelo’s design for the Basilica took the shape of a Greek cross; its dome was influenced by Brunelleschi’s dome for the great cathedral in Florence, with which Michelangelo had grown up.)

Michelangelo’s architectural work is highly regarded by scholars. Why is his work considered so original? (He treated architecture as a form of sculpture; his buildings are expressive, living entities. The buildings he designed are molded by light and shadow, and have a sculptor’s sense of rhythm and movement.)

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Annotation

Much of Michelangelo’s later life was devoted to architecture and painting. This program covers his work on St. Peter’s Basilica, the Medici Chapel and the Laurentian Library in Florence, as well as his painting of the *Last Judgment*. Produced by NBC News Productions, Inc.

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AIMS
Discussion
Guide

Michelangelo: The later years

Objectives

- To study Michelangelo’s middle and later years.
- To examine the historical figures, places and politics of the High Renaissance.
- To show how the center of the Renaissance art moved from Florence to Rome in the 16th Century.
- To examine Michelangelo’s later work in sculpture, painting, and architecture.