



# Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces

*Miles J. Unger*

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## **Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces** Miles J. Unger

The life of one of the most revolutionary artists in history, told through the story of six of his greatest masterpieces. Among the immortals--Leonardo, Rembrandt, Picasso--Michelangelo stands alone as a master of painting, sculpture, and architecture. He was not only the greatest artist in an age of giants, but a man who reinvented the practice of art itself. Throughout his long career he clashed with patrons by insisting that he had no master but his own demanding muse and promoting the novel idea that it was the artist, rather than the lord who paid for it, who was creative force behind the work. Miles Unger narrates the astonishing life of this driven and difficult man through six of his greatest masterpieces. Each work expanded the expressive range of the medium, from the "Pieta "Michelangelo carved as a brash young man, to the apocalyptic "Last Judgment," the work of an old man tested by personal trials. Throughout the course of his career he explored the full range of human possibility. In the gargantuan "David "he depicts Man in the glory of his youth, while in the tombs he carved for the Medici he offers a sustained meditation on death and the afterlife. In the Sistine Chapel ceiling he tells the epic story of Creation, from the perfection of God's initial procreative act to the corruption introduced by His imperfect children. In the final decades of his life, his hands too unsteady to wield the brush and chisel, he exercised his mind by raising the soaring vaults and dome of St. Peter's in a final tribute to his God. A work of deep artistic understanding, Miles Unger's "Michelangelo" brings to life the irascible, egotistical, and undeniably brilliant man whose artistry continues to amaze and inspire us after 500 years.

## **Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces Details**

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# **From Reader Review Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces for online ebook**

## **Joseph Adelizzi, Jr. says**

Based on an admittedly very small sample size of 1 (me), I'm inclined to believe in the veracity of the restructured (by me) cliché that says, "Those who can't do read biographies." I can't do, and I love reading biographies, auto-biographies, or primary sources about or from those who can do. So it is no wonder I grabbed Miles J. Unger's "Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces" as soon as I came across it.

Sure one could say learning of all the foibles and short-comings of the geniuses, masters, or good souls among us could be destructive, the literary or emotional equivalent of those n'er-do-wells who took it upon themselves to do damage to Michelangelo's "David" and "Pieta." Unger's work certainly runs that risk, revealing the insecurities, irascibility, arrogance, conceit, and not-a-fun-guy-to-hang-around-with qualities of Michelangelo. However, what always amazes me as I read through these biographies, as I read of the warts on the noses of the greats, is how those warts do nothing to diminish the greatness of their sculptures, their paintings, their designs, their writings, their philosophy, their discoveries, or their genius. I see it as validation of the capability of any person to experience or capture transcendence or meaning or significance or truth or beauty - call it what you will.

Each time I pick up a new biography of some favored icon I know I run the risk of damaging the Pieta, but I keep reading them. And I continue to marvel at what we can do.

As to some specific items concerning Unger's work and the edition I purchased, one thing that bugs me - and this is true for many biographies, particularly of artists - is the many references to works without either conveniently placed plates or pictures of those works or even the presence of any corresponding plates or pictures at all. One thing I really appreciated was the cover - the portrait of Michelangelo (by Jacopina del Conte?) made more fascinating by its placement. The only visible portion of the portrait showing on the cover is the left hand of Michelangelo; his face shows half on the spine, half on the back cover. His hand is visible toward the bottom of the front cover, well below the subtitle "A Life in Six Masterpieces." It's all about the masterpieces, and all about the hand "obedient to mind."

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## **Jody says**

I loved this book. Filled w beautiful photos of artwork, interesting tales and explanatory maps this was a great read. I learned so much about Michelangelo the man as well as the art he created, the times he lived in and the famous benefactors and rivals he interacted with. An added bonus was the appendix on where to find all of Michelangelo's art in Rome and Florence. I wish I had read this before my trip to Italy last year. But even now it made everything I saw (and wish I had seen) become more alive - knowing all the context added greatly to my enjoyment and made me want to go back!

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## **Mary says**

Unger uses an interesting approach to biography in this book. He presents Michelangelo's life by discussing 6 of his masterworks. These range from sculpture The David, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel fresco, and architecture St. Peter's Basilica. He was an artist and a genius. Part of his agenda was to raise the stature of artists from being seen as mere workmen who could create a sculpture or paint your wife's portrait to a higher status in society. He was the main financial support of his extended family. He never married and had no children. The book contains some speculation about possible romances with his young male assistants.

He was a religious man and wrote poetry. His sculptures were remarkable because of their life-like quality. His paintings were unique in their day because of the ways in which he arranged his figures and the way he was able to paint their expressions and manners to express his ideas.

A really interesting book. Unger analyzes each of the works of art he presents and opines on the genius of the piece. He also sets the scene of Michelangelo's life at the time he created the piece and provides background cultural and political information about 16th Century Florence and Rome and Michelangelo's relationships with the various popes who employed him.

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## **Fox says**

I received this book for free from the publisher through the GoodReads first reads program in exchange for an honest review.

Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces is at once more than an art history and more than a biography. In this book Miles J. Unger effortlessly weaves together the life of one of history's most compelling and outspoken artists with the political strife of the world he worked in and the dynamic art he created. Unger paints a vibrant portrait of the mercurial man, amply citing the artist's own writings in the process. I went into the text knowing very little about Michelangelo, and I came out of it feeling nearly as if I knew the man personally.

Unger's writing is at times dry, but it never commits the sin of being boring. I feel that my own response to the text at times was borne far more out of me being entirely foreign to the history itself than due to poor writing. Unger cited so heavily actual accounts of the day, poems, and letters that for a moment I found myself curious to read more about Italy during that period. I found myself nostalgic for the world that was destroyed within Michelangelo's own lifetime, broken and violent though it was.

Unger's descriptions of the art itself is where his text truly thrives. He had a fine eye for detail, and singles out several small sections of paintings and sculpture that I would never have noticed on my own. He is adept at explaining why certain choices were made, and bringing to life the turmoil of the art and artist alike with each composition.

All in all, this is a book that I would feel comfortable recommending to anyone with a curiosity about Michelangelo. Should one wish to know more, the bibliography at the back is extensive. Likewise, there is an appendix that covers where one can best see Michelangelo's artwork and where each important piece is housed.

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## **Louise says**

Through 6 representative works, Miles Unger tells the life of Michelangelo Buonarroti. There are informative transitions, so despite the focus on the 6 pieces, the biography is seamless. While the narrative incorporates the author's scholarship on the times, papal history and art history and appreciation the book is highly readable.

For each of the 6 works you come to understand how the work came to be, Michelangelo's personal and professional life at the time and the political backdrop. Design and technical issues are given, but the highlight for me was the discussion of content and how it related to Michelangelo's outlook and mood and the changing climate of the world around him. The very best of this is the highly controversial "The End of Time".

There are cameos for Rafael and Di Vinci both of whom are shown to be objects of jealousy. Michelangelo's family is shown as a dependent and quarrelsome lot, proud of its "name" despite its fallen status. There is a narrative for each of the 5 popes (there were 9 in his productive life) he served and survived and how each papal transition meant a new political mine field for an artist dependent on noble and curial patronage.

The times are turbulent. There are wars, including those waged by popes. Michelangelo's native Florence is besieged by its former leading family which has changed a republic to a dukedom. Rome is sacked by Charles V. These are only a few of the violent events.

Ungar has a feel for his subject's prickly personality which he sometimes interprets from events and other times allows to come through in Michelangelo's own words. For his limited academic education his letter writing and poetry (yes, many sonnets and other forms) show a high degree of literacy.

The book begins with maps of Rome and Florence and concludes with a guide for seeing the artist's work in these two cities. There are color plates of the items of interest with many black and white pictures of the art work, sketches of the people, sites, drawings etc. Footnotes appear at the bottom of the page. Usually I was caught in the narrative and skipped them; those I did catch were worthwhile asides.

Ungar brings Michelangelo and his times together. For just under 400 pages, there is a staggering amount of content. Both those who know the work of the artist and the general biography reader will find a lot here. Highly recommended.

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## **Linda says**

We all know that Michelangelo was a genius, but until I read Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces, I never realized how radical he was. He was the first to try new ways of showing things. His "The Last Judgment" was considered heretical because he showed chaos at the end, not happy faithful and miserable sinners begging for intercession from the saints. Even the faithful look unsure and confused. Believe it or not, not showing the saints interceding for sinners was considered dangerous and radical. Many of the cardinals in the Vatican wanted the mural destroyed.

Another thing I didn't know was that artists of his era were considered common laborers. They were paid by the square foot and not by their artistic creations. So they didn't try very hard to be different than any other

artists. Just paint or sculpt what the buyer wanted. Michelangelo wanted to show that the artist worked with his mind, not his hands. He did what he wanted, not letting even the pope watch what he was doing. He made being an artist respectable and admirable.

While becoming one of the greatest creators in history, he still had the same kind of problems we have today. His father was ashamed of him for being an artist (even though his dad never worked a day in his life and was completely financially supported by the son he was ashamed of.)

I wish there were more illustrations. Many times the author writes about a certain sculpture but there won't be a photo. But there is a nice section of color photos. Just wish there were more.

I learned much from this book that I didn't know about someone we all think we know. I am grateful to have won this in a goodreads firstread giveaway.

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### **Steven says**

I picked this book almost at random from my local library. I haven't given Michelangelo and the Renaissance two thoughts since my introductory humanities class in college. However, I discovered that, despite not thinking very much about Michelangelo, I had formed a concrete and completely inaccurate conception of him. For example, I was shocked to discover that Michelangelo had a last name! And siblings! I was also surprised to learn that he wasn't a pale skinned, muscled mammoth of a man, but rather, a swarthy, scrawny ugly man with a crooked nose. I was impressed that Michelangelo spent an entire year dissecting cadavers just so that he could sculpt anatomy correctly. That's dedication.

As the title suggests, the biography spends most of it's time on six of Michelangelo's most famous works: his first Pieta, the David, the Sistine Chapel, the Medici Tombs, The Final Judgement, and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. These are presented in chronological order and placed in reference to Michelangelo's personal life and the greater political and economic situation in Europe. I'm under the impression that all of Michelangelo's known works are mentioned.

The biography can, at times, be rather sparse. There is a lot of telling and not showing about Michelangelo's prickly personality. However a highlight of the book is quote from the man who, so fed up with the artist, crushed Michelangelo's nose with this fist and then bragged about it for the rest of his life. The author is more interested in the art and the book contains several glossy, high quality photographs of each of the signature works along with lower quality, black and white photographs of his other work. Some of the more metaphysical discussion of each art piece went over my head. But I really enjoyed the discussion of the physics of the different pieces. I also really enjoyed the discussion of how The Last Judgement painting is a response to Martin Luther's Reformation as well as to Michelangelo's own spiritual re-awakening.

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### **Scottsdale Public Library says**

Michelangelo was the quintessential creative genius. He was a man of art, religion, philosophy and science: truly a renaissance man alongside his contemporary – Leonardo Da Vinci. This garnered Michelangelo many fans, rivals, and patrons. These powerful patrons both political, religious and in many cases a combination of the two, caused headaches for Michelangelo as well as opportunities to create divine works of art such as

The David and the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Throughout his life Michelangelo's family was also a constant thorn in his side. The tumultuous state politics of the time as well as internal politics of the church were cause for many failed or incomplete works as well as masterpieces by Michelangelo. Author Miles Unger reveals the vain, perfectionist, breaker of rules, visionary that was Michelangelo. Whether you are an art, history, or biography buff there is something for everyone in this captivating read.

- Amy O.

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### **Wendy says**

I won a copy of this book through the courtesy of Simon & Schuster and Goodreads Firstreads. I truly enjoyed this book. The cover design is beautiful and the text is designed and produced with high quality. What makes this biography unique is that it tells the life story of Michelangelo through six of his most important works. There is a detailed account of the story behind each, an analysis of each masterpiece, and insight into Michelangelo's character and the relationships he had with those who commissioned his work. I found the text very engaging and informative and I highly recommend it to anyone who is an avid reader of art history books.

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### **David Eppenstein says**

I liked this book as it fleshed out the real man the Michelangelo truly was. The historical detail was fascinating but the subjective artistic interpretations of the author may prove daunting to the less artistically inclined reader. While I have seen the works described several times I can understand and forgive the author's wordiness in describing Michelangelo's work. When I first saw his Moses I couldn't believe I was looking at a figure made of stone. I also enjoyed and agree with the author's belief that it was Michelangelo that brought the artist out of the level of low class artisan or craftsman and elevated him to social acceptance on the same tier as intellectuals of the day. This is a book for those interested in art or Renaissance history.

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### **Kristy says**

I have always had a fascination for art and art history. It may be due to my mother's influence—I spent the better part of my childhood being dragged from museum to museum, gallery to gallery while my mom worked on her degree in Fine Arts. Or it may be because the lives of the artists themselves were so interesting to me. I suspect it may be a mix of the two. Michelangelo was one of a select group of artists my mom could spend hours talking about. As an adult I was able to see up close the sculptures and paintings I had seen in my mom's art books. And while I knew a lot about Michelangelo's work, I knew very little about the man. So when the opportunity arose to read Miles J. Unger's labor of love, "Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces", I was thrilled.

From the beginning I could tell that the author was truly passionate about Michelangelo and took great care to portray his life as honestly as possible. To achieve this, he used letters from the artist, his family, his friends, and his contemporaries. Unger does a fantastic job balancing each perspective to separate the legend from the man, which must have been a difficult task because not only was Michelangelo a gifted artist but he was also gifted in self-promotion.

The six title pieces are: *The Pietà*, *David*, *The Sistine Chapel ceiling*, *The Medici Chapel*, *The Last Judgment*, and *St. Peter's Basilica*. The author does discuss many of Michelangelo's other works but they are used to show the artist's growth or to add perspective in regard to the timeline. Of the six pieces featured I have personally seen five. The one I did not see was the Medici Chapel, it was on my list of places to see but morning sickness, the line to see David, the train schedule, and the best strawberries and cream ever, prevented me from seeing it.

What I enjoyed the most was reading about how Michelangelo evolved as an artist and reading about the little behind the scenes details about some of his most famous pieces. I know that art doesn't just appear, but sometimes you forget the amount of work and the difficulties that went into each piece. It put a lot of things in perspective and gave me a whole new appreciation for his art and the art of his contemporaries.

Unger's writing was fluid and engaging. Michelangelo was a pleasure to read and I plan on reading the author's other works on Lorenzo de Medici and Machiavelli, and I hope to see more from him in the future. Anyone interested in art, art history, the Renaissance, Italy, or biographies will enjoy this book.

For this review I was provided a digital copy from NetGalley, which had some formatting issues but I was so engrossed in the book that I was able to overlook most of the issues. I really loved this book. So much so, that I have ordered the print copy to add to my collection—if my mom doesn't steal from me first.

You can see this and more reviews on my blog Latte-Books

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## **Eustacia Tan says**

One of my favourite types of biographies would be those that center around topics, rather than narrating the chronological history of a person. For example, *The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things* did this perfectly. So when I saw Michelangelo, *A Life in Six Masterpieces*, I had to request it.

This biography of Michelangelo takes six of his masterpieces and uses them as the focus for a particular section of Michelangelo's life. The six pieces in question are: *The Pietà*, *David*, *The Sistine Chapel*, *The Last Judgment*, the tombs he carved for the Medici and the vaults and dome of St. Peter.

Mixed in with the biography are plenty of analysis of the six pieces, using the historical context as a base for extracting meaning. I liked reading the analysis, but I've always been terrible at analysing art, so I have no idea if they're accurate (or even conventional).

Personally, I liked the first few chapters much better than the last few. The first few chapters felt much more closely tied to the work in question, but the last few chapters felt as though they were trying to cram in as much information about Michelangelo's life as possible.

But, I guess I shouldn't complain about that, because Michelangelo's a fascinating guy. This is the first biography of him that I've read, and I've found out so much about him. I knew he was a perfectionist, but I didn't expect him to be this fussy and temperamental (as well as so enthusiastic about editing his own history).

This book is for fans of Michelangelo, and art history students. I found it to be an interesting book, and I



learnt a lot from it.

Disclaimer: I got a free copy of this book from the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for a free and honest review.

This review was first posted at Inside the mind of a Bibliophile

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### **Gary Anderson says**

Miles Unger views the life of Michelangelo through the lens of six of the artist's greatest works: the *Pieta*, *David*, the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the Medici tombs, *The Final Judgment*, and the dome of St. Peter's basilica in Rome. Michelangelo's acts of creation and his writings are the most interesting aspects of this biography, while the critical analyses of the works and the papal intrigues surrounding them are less compelling.

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### **Jennifer Stringer says**

Thoroughly researched and well-written. Erudite in the extreme which detracts from its readability (I've only been reading it since March), but had many thoughtful things to say about Michelangelo. I appreciated that it focused on his work, and less speculation about his sex life, unlike so many articles written about this guy. Don't think I'll add him to my fantasy dinner guest list. Sounds like a rather prickly guy, but if he was willing to share his thoughts, he'd certainly be fascinating. If you are feeling extremely nerdy, you can read it along with a tablet/computer and virtually visit the works of art that are being discussed. How cool is that?

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### **Tony says**

He was prickly. And he was paranoid. He was courageous in and for his art yet was a coward in the face of physical threat. He was less concerned about money than fame. He was secretive and had few friends. He could be disingenuous and prone to sarcasm.

That pretty much ends any similarities with the reviewer. For Michelangelo was a true genius, imaging things unlike anyone else.

This is a superb biography and also an art study. The life of Michelangelo is told but there is also an analysis of his six (in the author's opinion) greatest works: the *Pieta*, *David*, the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, the Tombs of the Medici, *The Last Judgment* and St. Peter's Basilica. So there is Michelangelo: painter, sculptor, architect; and there is Michelangelo: son, brother, uncle, a man of Florence. He loved the nude male form, and lived in torment. He was subject to changing politics and power. His unfinished works are as prized as those he completed. His greatest sculptures have been vandalized; his greatest paintings retouched by lesser hands; his buildings finished in competing styles.

This life is well-told here, a book both instructive and entertaining. There's beauty in the telling.

Of the *Pieta*:

*This symbolic function helps explain Mary's calm demeanor, for Michelangelo's Pieta is not meant to conjure the moment in history when Christ's body was taken down from the Cross and placed in his mother's lap, but rather the entire arc of history in which Man's fall was redeemed through the death that makes possible our eternal life.*

Of *David*:

*David, for all his self-assurance, is a verb, not a noun; he represents a state of becoming rather than of being, defined by a supreme act of will. His identity is not complete but forged in battle driven by a fierce spirit.*

Of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling:

*Michelangelo is an artist, not a pedant, a conjurer of sacred mysteries rather than a transcriber of received wisdom. He is a profound but unsystematic and unorthodox reader of Scripture, reveling in the unexpected, flirting with heresy, celebrating his own illicit passions and exploring morbid pathologies.*

Of the Medici Tombs:

*Michelangelo plays a kind of conceptual peekaboo throughout the chapel in which he cuts against the grain of our expectations. His fascination with visual paradox extends to sculptural elements that are deliberately unresolved, strained, or even contradictory. Perhaps the most obvious example involves the strange costumes he has chosen for the two dukes. Despite the fact that both wear ornate cuirasses, their chest muscles and the fleshy creases of their bellies are clearly delineated as if their armor were nothing more than a sheer, skin-tight fabric. Such garments have no historical or practical justification, but they reinforce that disquieting sense that we have entered a realm where the laws that govern everyday life no longer apply. Like the false doors and broken pediments, the ducal armor exists as pure symbol, stripped of any functional role, as if to highlight the fact that these two men are warriors in name only, their battles more metaphysical than real.*

Of *The Last Judgment*:

*Before the Protestants and the Catholic reformers revealed that grace could not be bought, the path to heaven had been well marked; it was even supplied with toll booths that allowed the faithful to proceed onward and upward after the payment of a nominal fee. The clergy served as both toll collectors and traffic cops, and the rites they administered constituted rules of the road that all could follow. Michelangelo has done away with this neat, well-regulated scheme. All is chaos.*

Of the Basilica:

*Nowhere can Michelangelo's unmatched feeling for sculptural form -- for imparting to obdurate matter an almost sexual element of tumescence as stone seems imbued with pulsing life -- be seen to greater effect, as the great stone vaults yearn skyward in a climax that is equal parts sensual and spiritual.*

And so, Felix Unger's structural device here helps explain the subject and his works. Michelangelo soars once again.

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