The background of the cover is a detailed drawing by Michelangelo, known as 'The British Museum Madonna'. It depicts the Virgin Mary seated on the left, holding the Christ Child on her lap. The Christ Child is shown in a dynamic, almost dancing pose, with his right arm raised and his left hand resting on his mother's breast. To the right, another figure, possibly the infant John the Baptist, is shown in a similar dynamic pose. The drawing is executed in a fine, hatched style, characteristic of Michelangelo's work. The overall color palette is a range of earthy browns and tans, giving it an aged, historical appearance.

**MICHELANGELO'S MOMENT:  
THE BRITISH MUSEUM  
MADONNA**

**PETER BARENB**  
(with ARTHUR ...)

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THE BRITISH  
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**Peter Barenboim (with Arthur Heath)**

Michelangelo's Moment: The British Museum Madonna,  
LOOM, Moscow, 2018.

Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1475 - 1564 - Criticism and  
Interpretation.

ISBN 978-5-906072-34-4

The Moscow Florentine Society

PETER BARENBOIM  
(with ARTHUR HEATH)

MICHELANGELO'S  
MOMENT:  
THE BRITISH  
MUSEUM  
MADONNA

Moscow  
LOOM  
2018

*Dedicated to Mons. Timothy Verdon*



*“What can be shown, cannot be said.”*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

*“The world is young: the former great men call to us affectionately. We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavens and the earthly world.”*

Ralph Waldo Emerson,  
Representative Men (1850)

The activity of the Moscow Florentine Society is a valuable testimony of the passionate love for Florence felt by those to whom our city owes so much. Over the past 15 years a group of founders of the Florentine Society has been carrying out several cultural projects intended to better acquaint the people of Russia with Florence and satisfy their growing interest in our city. After the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, which had been dividing Europe for more than forty years, such public initiatives as the Florentine Society have proactively participated in the organization of meetings between the East and West, assisting in the fence-mending and construction of a multinational and multicultural Europe.

Peter Barenboim has played a leading part in the creation of the Moscow Florentine Society.

This book, as well as other publications of the Society, vividly demonstrate that Florentine studies are still yielding remarkable new results. And with great interest we welcome a new piece of research on the Buonarroti's image of the Madonna, which is very important in Florentine art. Despite the creation of the cartoon discussed in the book having taken place in Rome and its recent presence in the British Museum, we consider any work of Michelangelo made or situated anywhere to be Florentine art.

Eugenio Giani,  
*President of the Regional  
Council of Tuscany*



## MICHELANGELO'S MOMENT

The words “Michelangelo’s Moment” in the title of this little book mean the moment and manner in which Michelangelo Buonarroti’s thought made its appearance in his sculptures, paintings and drawings. We have borrowed them from the title and concept of J. G. A. Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment*<sup>1</sup>. We also use these words to signify the particular moment when Michelangelo’s life-long approach to the theme of the Virgin Mary comes to an emotional and dramatic moment in the cartoon<sup>2</sup> that is now in the British Museum, but known mistakenly as the *Epifania*. (Plate1)

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, Princeton University Press, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> A cartoon is a final preparatory drawing on the same scale as the finished painting or other work of art. The word is derived from the Italian for a large piece of paper: *cartone*.

## PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN DRAWING

The “divinity” of the personality and creativity of Buonarroti is central to the topic of Michelangelo as a theologian and philosopher. He was not just a visual exponent of other people’s ideas, including the ideas of Neo-Platonism, as many still believe, but a truly independent thinker. Rafael was a witness to this. Rafael studied from Michelangelo *in absentia*, and then at the beginning of the 16th century they met in Rome as rivals. Supported by Bramante, Rafael even tried to “steal” Michelangelo’s commission to paint the Sistine Chapel. It is to Rafael that belongs the harsh, but probably true, description of Michelangelo: “[He is] lonely like an executioner.” The

rivalry between them for commissions from the Vatican continued under Pope Julius II and Pope Leo X. The latter came from the Medici family and remembered Michelangelo from his childhood as a young sculptor sitting at the Medici dining table. In 1508-1511, Rafael painted the famous fresco *Philosophy* (more often known as the *School of Athens*). In the foreground he portrayed Michelangelo as Heraclitus, the famous founder of dialectics. We also see the image of Michelangelo among the most famous theologians in the foreground of another fresco of Rafael known as the *Disputa*.

Another contemporary, the Florentine poet Francesco Berni, wrote in 1533 at the very time Buonarroti was working on the Medici Chapel, that Michelangelo was comparable to Plato in greatness, expressing his thoughts, however, not in words, but in visual objects (*cose visibili*). Both Berni and Condivi refer to some philosophical

texts of Michelangelo that clearly were not part of the latter's known poetry. No philosophical prose works of the artist have survived, but they may well have existed.

The Russian art researcher and translator Abram Efros, writing about Michelangelo's "philosophical poems," argues that "Michelangelo utilizes not a prefabricated and rigid system of views, taken from somebody else's hands, but rather a live process of passionate and inquiring understanding of reality and relationships with people and the world."<sup>3</sup> In order to recognize Michelangelo as a philosopher corresponding to these evaluations we simply need to know that he could create a philosophical work in the form of sculpture, painting or drawing, without any oral or written comments or any further explanations.

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<sup>3</sup> Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Poems and Letters*, St. Petersburg, 1999, p. 240.

Michelangelo never attended a university, but still received the best possible philosophical education from more than three years of personal interaction with some of the brightest minds of Europe – members of the Florentine Platonic Academy – both in daily life and by attending their meetings. He expressed his thoughts not only in words but also and primarily in the images of his works.

If we ignore the internal intellectual world of Michelangelo and his efforts to express his philosophical ideas, we will almost certainly fail in our attempts to explain the possible meaning of his art.

Michelangelo was an unrivaled master of the human form, inspired by the rediscovery of ancient art. He used this mastery not to record the people of his time but the ideas of the intellectual world in which he lived. It is a great mistake for researchers of Michelangelo to view him as

merely an intuitive artist who expressed himself with physical creativity. That is not true. He created ideas first and then embodied them in his art.

Michelangelo may have heard references to one of the first Gnostic movements, Manichaeism, and have remembered from them that its founder Mani was not only a prophet and philosopher but a great painter who considered a painting to be as equal a description of the essence of any religious teaching as a written text. No painting of Mani has survived across the millennia. We also have observations of St. Augustine that Mani considered music a message from God. Mani declared himself to be an “apostle of Jesus Christ”, and extant Manichaean poetry frequently extols and reveres Jesus and his mother Mary. Manichaean tradition even claims that Mani was the reincarnation of various religious figures including Zoroaster, the historical Buddha and Jesus<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>Wikipedia.

Aside from incorporating the symbols and doctrine of major religious movements, Manichaeism incorporated the symbols and deities of indigenous traditions, in particular the Hindu deity Ganesha, into its fold. This is exemplified by the image appearing in Hans-Joachim Klimkeit's article *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy*. Manichaeism maintained a sporadic and intermittent existence in Mesopotamia, Africa, Spain, France, Northern Italy and the Balkans for a thousand years until the 15th century; it flourished for a time in Persia and spread even further east to Northern India, Western China and Tibet.

One of the leading scholars of the Florentine Academy and close in age to Michelangelo (15 - 20 and 25 - 30) was Pico della Mirandola who based his ideas chiefly on Plato, but retained a deep respect for many gnostic teachings. The ideas of Pico were rather close to Manichaeism, and he would have known the teachings of Mani

from the works of his admired Augustine as well as from other sources, including Arabic, Aramaic and Hebrew sources because he knew those languages. Thus Michelangelo may had a direct source of knowledge about Mani. In the *Last Judgment* he painted his demise in exactly the same manner as Mani met his end by being flayed according to the famous poem the *Shahnameh* written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi. (Plate 2)

In order to understand the meaning of Michelangelo's works we must often employ a certain amount of "imagination". It helps to look to the official teachings of the Church, to Dante's poetical visualization of religious subjects, to the teachings of the radical Florentine religious and political reformer Savonarola, to the intellectual currents of Michelangelo's time and place and even to the deeply informed imagination of Michelangelo's fictional biographers of the modern era.



Michelangelo was a deep thinker with his own sophisticated intellectual world. As a young spectator at meetings of the Florentine Platonic Academy he was in a philosophical and theological center of European scope, where Erasmus also learned many of the ideas with which he later influenced the development of the Northern and English Renaissance and the giant Thomas More.

Great painters and sculptors express their wisdom and thought in their art. Michelangelo devoted his art, first of all, to religious subjects, and many of his religious, philosophical and theological thoughts can be found in his art. Mons. Timothy Verdon is right to call Michelangelo a “theologian” in the title of his book<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Mons. Timothy Verdon, *Michelangelo teologo: fede e creatività tra Rinascimento e Controriforma*, Milan: Ancora, 2005.

The Madonna was a constant theme of Michelangelo. We believe that he derived her image not the only from a few pages of the New Testament but also from discussions of her in the Platonic Academy and from his own thoughts and feelings. Norbert Wolf, author of a book on Dürer, writes that “the most plausible seems to be the version of Erwin Panofsky, who interpreted the meaning of Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia* in the context of three talents ruled by Saturn: imagination, discursive reason and divine intuition. According to the ideas that existed during the time of Dürer, artists were to stay in first, the lowest and inferior of these three spheres.”<sup>6</sup> As we can recall, the times of Dürer and Michelangelo almost coincided. It is very unlikely that Dürer himself would propagandize the “inferior role of an artist.” The U.S. researcher David Finkelstein writes that Dürer hardly shared the “na-

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<sup>6</sup> Norbert Wolf, *Dürer*. M., 2007, p. 48.



ive Neoplatonic cosmology of spheres.”<sup>7</sup> Here we also note a very important aspect: Michelangelo could not agree with the Neoplatonic interpretation of an artist’s place in the spheres of life and thought. Throughout his life and work he claimed the artist was a representative of the highest spheres.

The gods of the Greco-Roman Pantheon such as Saturn could not have been all that important to Michelangelo. His works depicted the one and only God of the Bible. Michelangelo contemplated Him, addressed Him in his poems (sometimes quite boldly so, as an equal!). Michelangelo was neither an ironic philosopher combining the ancient beliefs of the Greeks and Romans with Christianity, as Ficino was, nor a mere illustrator of the ideas of others.

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<sup>7</sup> David Finkelstein, *MELENCOLLA I: The Physics of Albrecht Dürer*, received from df4@mail.gatech.edu.



### *Plate 3*

One need only look at the bas-relief *Madonna of the Steps* (Plate 3) by which he opened the series of his incomparable “Michelangelo Madonnas” depicted in sculpture, drawing and painting, the meaning of many of which continues to puzzle Michelangelo researchers. The bas-relief was created by Michelangelo at the age of fifteen, at the same time as his “training” at the Platonic Academy surrounded by Ficino and his brilliant colleagues. The *Madonna of the Steps* shows the deep roots of Michelangelo’s biblical thinking. (Plate 4)

We are lucky to have Buonarroti’s own thoughts about the obligations of an artist toward biblical matters in art. We call it “Michelangelo’s Rule”.

Michelangelo said:

*“In order to imitate to some extent the venerable image of our Lord it is not sufficient merely to be a great master in painting and very wise, but I think that it is*

*Plate 4*



*necessary for the painter to be very good in his mode of life, or even, if such were possible, a saint, so that the Holy Spirit may inspire his intellect...*

*And therefore if a poor man of this earth so commanded by edict concerning his image, how much more reason have the ecclesiastical or secular princes to take care to order that no one shall paint the benignity and meekness of our Redeemer or the purity of Our lady and the Saints but the most illustrious painters to be found in their domains and provinces? And this would be a very famous and much praised work in any lord.*

*And even in the Old Testament God the Father wished that those who only had to ornament and paint the Ark of Covenant should be masters not merely excellent and great, but also touched by His grace and wisdom, God saying to Moses that He would imbue them with the knowledge and intelligence of His Spirit so that they might invent and do everything that He could invent and do.*

*And therefore if God the Father willed that the ark of His Covenant should be well ornamented and painted, how much more study and consideration must He wish applied to the imitation of His Serene Face and that of His Son our Lord and of the composure, chastity and beauty of the glorious Virgin Mary...*

*Frequently, the images badly painted distract and cause devotion to be lost, at least in those who possess little; and, on the contrary, those that are divinely painted provoke and lead even those who are little devout and but little inclined to worship to contemplation and tears, and by their grave aspect imbue them with reverence and fear.’<sup>8</sup>*

The stormy spirit of Michelangelo is still raging in his frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, forcing the cardinals present constantly to sense and “re-read” the Bible.

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<sup>8</sup> Francisco de Holanda, *Dialogues with Michelangelo*, London, 2006, p. 114 – 116.

Emerson wrote, “We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavens and earthly world”. Michelangelo also must have been guided by some such motto when he worked on biblical episodes, particularly on the story of Mary.

That brings us to the heart of this little book. What is the hidden meaning of the cartoon found in Room 90 of the British Museum?

## THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The so-called *Epifania*<sup>9</sup> is a full-scale drawing in black chalk produced by Michelangelo when he was in Rome around 1550–1553. It is 2.32 meter tall by 1.65 meter wide. A 19th-century Scottish collector, John Malcolm of Poltalloch, bought it for only £11 0s. 6d. and on John's death in 1893 his son John Wingfield Malcolm gave it to the British Museum. It is on display in Room 90 of the British Museum. Michelangelo's fellow artist Ascanio Condivi used this cartoon as the basis for an unfinished and not very exceptional painting.

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<sup>9</sup> Italian for “Epiphany”

The traditional title of the cartoon *Epifania* has no justification. That fact seems to be recognized in the following official British Museum description contained in the tablet next to the drawing:

*“This cartoon is drawn with black chalk on 26 sheets of paper and is over two metres high. It was used for an unfinished painting by Michelangelo’s biographer, Ascanio Condivi (about 1525-74), which is now in the Casa Buonarroti, Florence.*

*...This is one of only two surviving cartoons by Michelangelo.*

*The aged Michelangelo, then in his mid-70s, made numerous changes to the figures, such as in the position of the Christ Child’s head. The cartoon is recorded in Michelangelo’s studio after his death in 1564. It was wrongly described then as an Epifania (the adoration of the newborn Christ by the three kings). The subject remains mysterious, but the position of Christ between his mother’s legs (observed on the right by the Infant*

*Baptist) suggests that one of its themes was his miraculous incarnation...”.*

One rationale for the cartoon's title *Epifania*, i.e. that the figures in the painting were originally thought to be the Three Kings, may be the reason for the title, but those figures are more often understood to be Christ's siblings, Joseph's sons by a previous marriage. The New Testament mentions that Christ had brothers but never describes them as siblings from a previous marriage. Moreover, some religious traditions consider their existence to be evidence that Mary gave birth to other children: Christ's brothers and sisters are mentioned in Matthew (12:46-50), Acts (1:14), John (2:1-4, 2:12), Mark (6:3), and Galatians (1:18-19). Because one can see in Michelangelo's cartoon a strong disagreement taking place between the participants in the scene, one might well doubt how the subject of a bitter discussion in Joseph's family could be interest-

ing for Michelangelo. Also this scene cannot be found in any biblical description.

Every work of art needs to be looked at intensely. Its meaning can reveal itself under the glare of our eyes.

Interpretation of this darkened and faded cartoon, consisting of 26 sheets of paper, pasted together on a wooden board, is quite a difficult task. The history of its transmission from the hands of the Vatican into those of several private collectors until it was finally donated to the British Museum is almost completely undocumented, but for the sake of our analysis that history presents scarcely any interest.

The work was undoubtedly authored by Michelangelo, which can be confirmed by the fact that the cartoon was discovered in the master's house immediately after his death. A few days before his death, Michelangelo burned up a great

number of his other drawings. Vasari recalls in his *Life of Michelangelo*:

*“His imagination was so perfect that he could not realize with his hands his great and sublime conceptions, and so he frequently abandoned his work and spoiled many, for I know that before his death he burned a great number of his designs, sketches, and cartoons, in order that no one should perceive his labours and the efforts of his genius, that he might not appear less than perfect”<sup>10</sup>.*

So, using Vasari’s approach, we may conclude that Buonarroti considered this cartoon to have been perfect enough and kept it in his house until he died.

We believe that this mysterious composition is in fact a picture of the Virgin Mary (whose

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<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Life of Michelangelo*, London, 2006, p. 193 – 194.

face looks very similar to Michelangelo's drawing *Cleopatra* (Plate 5) made 30 year earlier).

Margaret Miles, Professor Emerita at the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, stressed that even the significance of the images of Madonna's naked breast "was never explicitly contested"<sup>11</sup>. The Virgin of the so-called *Epifania* is depicted with her right breast bared, as if she has recently been suckling her infant son; this recalls the theme of the Virgin breast-feeding, a common theme of medieval painting. (Plate 6) This configuration is quite similar to the *Manchester Madonna*. (Plate 7) The Christ child is sitting between the Virgin's legs as in the *Vittoria Collonna Pieta*. (Plate 8) It is interesting to note that the drawings for the Vittoria Colonna

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The secularization of the breast, 1350 – 1750*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2008, p. XI.

*Plate 5*



*Plate 6*



*Pieta*<sup>12</sup> place the dead body of Christ between the legs of the Madonna, who looks skyward with uplifted hands and an expression on her face that seems to challenge the heavens and to complain of her son's death.

Perrig's belief that the entire drawing was authored by Condivi<sup>13</sup> and the belief of de Tolnay that the figures in the background were drawn by Condivi both obviously contradict the *modus operandi* of Michelangelo, who highly valued his own work and who would hardly have saved a piece of someone else's work ten years after he parted with Condivi. It is even less possible to imagine Condivi finishing Michelangelo's work in his presence. The fact that Michelangelo allowed his pupil to use his work for a commissioned fresco

<sup>12</sup> At the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

<sup>13</sup> A. Perrig, *Michelangelo's Drawings: the Science of Attribution*. London, New Haven, 1991.





## Plate 8

cannot change anything said above. Moreover, the fresco painted by Condivi on the basis of the cartoon discussed here and presently housed in Casa Buonarroti, as well as Condivi's other creative talents, have received little praise from most art critics.

The cartoon also reveals the hand of Michelangelo in the strong effect produced by the expressiveness of the Madonna and the mystery of precisely what scenario it portrays. Its incompleteness is not a problem; it may be that Michelangelo made it *non finito* (unfinished) deliberately. Its unfinished state is perhaps, to use the words that Alison Cole applied to the Taddei Tondo, (Plate 9, 10) “its most powerful and ravishing aspect”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Alison Cole, Michelangelo. *The Taddei Tondo*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2017, p. 50.



*Plate 10*



Alison Cole made a significant reference to Pliny the Elder's "remarks in a passage flagged by the poet Petrarch (whom Michelangelo revered) ...that unfinished pictures of artists are more admired than those they finished because in them are seen the preliminary drawings left visible and the artists' actual thoughts, "that a truly great master always knows when to 'take his hand away'"<sup>15</sup>.

Most art critics agree that the cartoon depicts the Virgin Mary, who has the infant Jesus reclining between her legs and that the child standing to her left is John the Baptist. As to the other figures opinions differ. Since most interpretations support the theme being the Holy Family, the figure of the man to Mary's left is usually deemed to be St. Joseph. (Plate 11) The identity of the man to Madonna's right is a matter of controversy. (Plate 12)

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<sup>15</sup> Cole, Op. cit., p. 60.



According to Hirst the subject matter of the cartoon is exceptionally enigmatic.<sup>16</sup> Tode exacerbated the already complicated problem by suggesting that the man in question is Isaiah, the Prophet of the Old Testament who foretold the coming of Christ.<sup>17</sup> But such a mixture of the Old and New Testament's characters seems far-fetched, and Tode remains alone in his bold interpretation. To be fair, however, we must point out that Michelangelo in his drawing the *Annunciation* combines the Archangel Gabriel in the foreground with Moses breaking the tablets of the Ten Commandments in the background. (Plate 13) But putting Isaiah the Prophet here expressively saying something to the Madonna would be much less logical. We believe, as does every one else but Tode, that it is more logical to remain

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo and his drawings*, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Catalan Wikipedia.



within the confines of the New Testament in trying to identify the man to the Madonna's right.

The Vatican inventory takers used the term "Epifania" to identify the cartoon with a concept of Epiphany appearing in the Gospels. The term is still used in English and Russian art history in its Italian transcription, in contrast to biblical Greek, where "Epiphany" means "Theophany".

From the beginning of Christianity until approximately the time of Michelangelo the concept of Epiphany included the themes of the Nativity of Christ, the Adoration of the Magi and the Baptism of Christ received in the waters of the River Jordan as an adult. Now, it is mainly the Adoration of the Magi that is associated with the Epiphany, and this is why the name given to the cartoon by the inventory-takers is so emphatically rejected by virtually all art historians. But we should return to the obvious theme of the composition. Even conceding its novelty in



Christian art, it significantly narrows the scope for plausible interpretations. Mary's relationship with the man to her right looks seriously strained. With her hand she rejects and pushes away the bearded man to her left, which emphasizes the drama unfolding before our eyes. The Magi clearly have nothing to do with it.

Nevertheless one should at least consider the cartoon from the perspective of whether it depicts Mary as having just delivered the infant Christ, because only that might justify the existing name. The English researcher James Hall writes (admittedly in a different context) that giving birth while standing was a commonplace practice in ancient times, quoting a 13th-century author who wrote that Mary had given birth to Christ while standing and leaning on a pillar<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> James Hall, *Michelangelo and the reinvention of the human body*, London, 2005, pp. 19-20

If the contact between Christ's head and the womb of St Mary is so clearly indicated in the drawing, then, despite the large size of the child, what is shown here symbolically is arguably the appearance of Christ into the world and hence the Epiphany.

But could the Nativity have occurred in the midst of Joseph's family circle, in which the adopted brothers of Jesus from Joseph's previous marriage have continued to live? Such an interpretation of the cartoon is shared by a number of art critics. (We are speaking not of the precise moment of birth, but the presence of Jesus into the circle of the family). The family could have accompanied Joseph and Mary on their way to the census in Bethlehem and back to Nazareth. That arguably could be the reason for such tension: if Joseph had his children from the previous marriage living with him, they might have known that their father had not touched

his young wife and they could have treated her tensely during the nine months of her pregnancy and after the birth of a child whose father remained unknown to them. After all, Joseph and Mary had no right to share the Divine Revelation with everyone. Mary at the time of childbirth and immediately after it could thus have found herself in a difficult domestic situation.

Is this not what the art historians who hold this interpretation have in mind? Among them is the authoritative art historian Ernst Gombrich, who believes that those standing behind Mary are Joseph's own children while St Joseph himself is being pushed away by Mary in order to emphasize her purity and virginity, which has been restored after the birth of Christ. The beardless man to Madonna's right, Gombrich argues, could be St Julian. According to Gombrich some kind of "family conflict" still can be advanced as a possible explanation of the drawing's subject

matter. But then the Epiphany theme as that of a nativity completely evaporates because under such circumstances the scene is too ironic, and we simply cannot expect irony from Michelangelo here... And again there is a problem with the age of the bearded man behind Mary, who must be as old as Joseph himself, and this puts the whole hypothesis of the “family scene” in doubt.

The man to the Madonna’s right is either arguing with her or is telling her some dramatic news. If the scene is symbolic, could this be Simeon announcing the future death of Christ? But Simeon testifies about his own advanced age (Luke 2: 26 – 31), and the much younger character in the drawing simply cannot be him. (Plate 14)

We are convinced that such trivia as family scandals were not worthy of Michelangelo’s attention and could not interest him in any way. It was not for this that the seventy-five-year-old master had spent so much time on the cartoon,



## *Plate 14*

had changed the position of Madonna's left hand from lowered to a forbidding gesture, had changed the turn of her head, by fixing her eyes on the beardless man, had kept the cartoon in his possession for almost 15 years and finally had saved it from incineration with his other drawings and sketches several days before his death, Michelangelo was a giant of philosophy and art who had a unique understanding of the theme of Madonna, which he had consistently and, judging from the dominance of his works among the world's images of Mary, successfully introduced into biblical iconography.

He started working on this subject matter at the age of 15 with the *Madonna of the Steps* and finished his work on it at the age of 75 with the cartoon in the British Museum that we are discussing here. His independent views on theology and philosophy allowed him to express and develop over the course of his life biblical ideas

that ultimately became canonical, such as his *Pietà* (Plates 15, 16) and the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel. They are the Vatican's "global brand". An explanation that lowers this great work to the level of depicting a family scandal, even within the extended Holy Family, has nothing in common with Michelangelo!

The hypothesis of a family conflict suffers most when we try to explain the image of the beardless man standing to Madonna's right. According to Gombrich the man was Saint Julian, who was much revered for his unblemished life, but had yet nothing to do with the Holy Family. Another candidate was St. John on the grounds that during the creation of the cartoon Michelangelo had been engaged in the design of a church for the Florentine colony in Rome that was to be consecrated to San Giovanni. The weakness of these random suppositions is so obvious that they do not really deserve serious consideration.

After all, none of these saints present a logical basis to be depicted as engaging in any dispute with the Madonna, let alone in the context of the Holy Family. Luciano Berti<sup>19</sup> and Charles de Tolnay<sup>20</sup> agree that the relative position of the child and his mother symbolizes, as it were, her desire to take him back into her womb in order to protect him. According to De Tolnay, the presence of Christ here “is esoteric”.

An artist incorporates in a work his original meaning or meanings, some of which may have been added subconsciously. There may be just one solution to the question of meaning or a multitude of them. The best approach is to prefer conclusions drawn from direct observation

<sup>19</sup> Luciano Berti, *Miguel Ángel: Volumen II: Los dibujos*. Barcelona: Editorial Teide, 1978.

<sup>20</sup> Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo V/ The final period. Last Judgment, frescoes of the Paoline Chapel, last Pietàs*, Florencia: Ed.Princeton, 1960.



*Plate 15, 16*



of the artwork itself. Michelangelo's beloved Vittoria Colonna wrote that she examined his drawings under the light, in a mirror and with magnifying glass.<sup>21</sup>

In any case it seems likely that the image in the cartoon is a culmination of one of Michelangelo's most persistent themes, the unwillingness of Maria to accept the future tragic destiny of her son.

We should remember that Mary was told by Gabriel that she will know happiness with her son.

<sup>28</sup> *And the angel being come in, said unto her: Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.*

<sup>29</sup> *Who having heard, was troubled at his saying, and thought with herself what manner of salutation this should be.*

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<sup>21</sup> Catherine Whistler, *Michelangelo & Raphael drawings*, Oxford, 2004, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> *And the angel said to her: Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God.*

<sup>31</sup> *Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus.*

<sup>32</sup> *He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the most High; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of David his father; and he shall reign in the house of Jacob forever.*

<sup>33</sup> *And of his kingdom there shall be no end.*

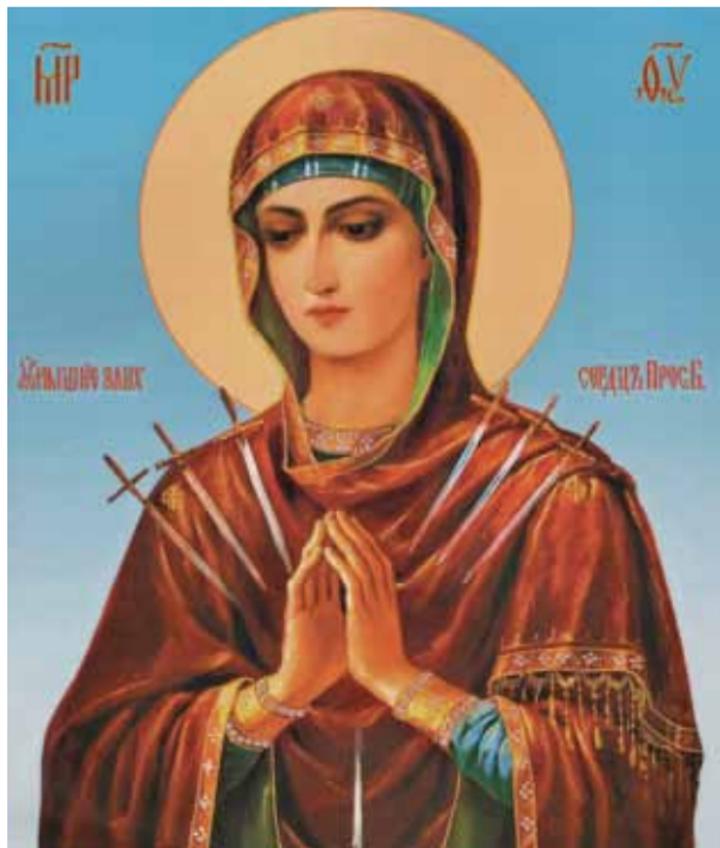
It was only after Mary had given birth to Jesus that she was told about his tragic future:

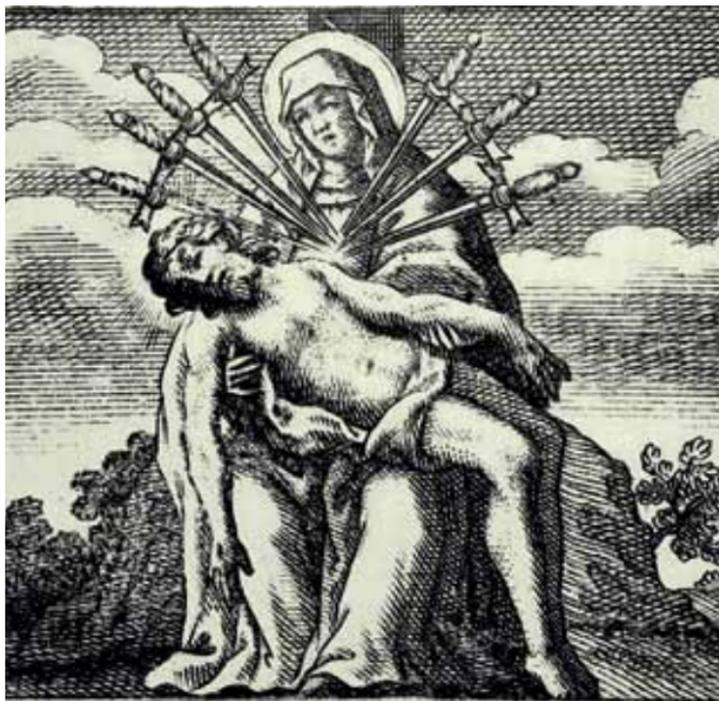
<sup>34</sup> *And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary his mother: Behold this child is set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted;*

<sup>35</sup> *And thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that, out of many hearts, thoughts may be revealed.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Douay-Rheims Bible*, 1899 American Edition, St. Luke, 1 : 28 – 35.





Mons. Timothy Verdon, philosopher, former Canon of Santa Maria del Fiore and head of the Office for Catechesis Through Art of the Archdiocese of Florence (whom one can rightly call a modern Marcilio Ficino both because of his wisdom and because Ficino was also Canon of the same Cathedral) has paid special attention to this biblical moment. Let us quote from his description:

*“The biblical basis of this devotion is the Gospel passage in which Simeon, holding the newborn Jesus in his arms, prophesies the Passion and announces to the young mother that a sword will pierce her heart too”<sup>23</sup>.*

In commentary tradition it was not one but seven swords. See, for example, the Orthodox Icon (Plate 16) and the engraving from a Jesuit book printed in 1700. (Plate 17)

As Robert Browning says,

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<sup>23</sup> Verdon, *Mary in Florentine Art*, 2003, p.88.

*“Our Lady borne smiling and smart  
With a pink gauze gown all spangles,  
and seven swords stuck in Her heart!”*<sup>24</sup>

Mons. Verdon pays a lot of attention to the “psychological martyrdom” of Mary. He writes:

*“In devotional and theatre texts of the 15th and early 16th centuries Mary, sometimes recalls Christ’s sepulchre in relations to her pregnancy and to her Son’s infancy. In one devout text, for example, we read that the “new tomb” which received Christ’s body when he was deposed from the cross “stands for the virginal womb of his mother.”*<sup>25</sup>

Timothy Verdon states that in the *Doni Tondo*, (Plate 18) we have “important interpretive problem... with Michelangelo’s ‘Joseph’ also new in its typology, a break with earlier tradition”.

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Browning, *The Major Works*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.163

<sup>25</sup> Verdon, *Op.cit.*, p.88.



## Plate 18

According to this author, in previous art Joseph was normally shown as physically and psychologically separate from Mary and the Baby “whereas in *Doni Tondo* Michelangelo shows us an extraordinarily virile old man who, with unheard-of familiarity spreads his legs around the Virgin’s body: an interpretation of the theme without any precedent and simply shocking... The old man in the *Doni Tondo* seems to flaunt the tradition of a passive Joseph, separate from Mary, for the simple reason that *he is not Joseph*: he does not represent the surrogate father, but the real one, God, from whom the Son proceeds *ab aeterno*. Vasari was mistaken when he said that the old man “takes” the baby from Mary; it is rather the baby who “emerges” from the Father, with his left foot on the Father’s thigh and his little hand in Mary’s hair to maintain his balance. The Baby with his right foot on Mary’s arm is about to push himself up and over, in order to descend into the Virgin’s womb... In this work, Michel-



*Plate 19*

angelo expands the idea of “‘artistic subject’ to the fullest degree.”<sup>26</sup>

In his preface to Verdon’s book, the Archbishop of Florence Ennio Antonelli wrote: “The text by Mons. Timothy Verdon helps readers to rediscover Mary”.<sup>27</sup>

We would suggest that just as in the Doni Tondo we may be seeing “the real Holy Family” and the “real father” of Jesus Christ in the cartoon in the British Museum. An adult male figure to the left of the Madonna might be the real father, God, exactly as in the Doni Tondo. (Plate 19)

And old man behind the Madonna on the cartoon is Joseph.

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<sup>26</sup> Verdon, p.93, 97-98.

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Verdon, *op.cit.*, pp. 9.

The figure standing to Mary's right in the cartoon might be the Archangel Gabriel<sup>28</sup>. (Plate 20) A very similar moment of rejection appears in *The Annunciation* at the Uffizi in Florence (Plate 13). Verdon continues:

*"In mystery plays of the period, Mary, accompanying her son's dead body to burial, reproves the Archangel Gabriel for having duped her, asking poignantly 'Is this then the joy you promised, saying that I would be blessed among women?'"*<sup>29</sup>

In his two-meter-high cartoon in the British Museum Michelangelo, who was already in

<sup>28</sup> The fact that these figures lack any distinctive features identifying them as God or Gabriel does not undermine the validity of this interpretation. One has only to look at the Michelangelo's portrayals of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to see that Michelangelo used idealized human figures to represent God. The context, not clichés, provides the identification.

<sup>29</sup> Verdon, *Op.cit.*, p. 88 – 89.





*Plate 21*

his declining years, must be depicting Mary's attempt at rebellion (albeit short-lived) against the fate chosen for her son. The cartoon thus shows the Madonna in bitter conflict with others. At the same time Mary seems to squeeze the infant Jesus between her legs as if trying to take him back into her womb.

Michelangelo, as always, manages to conceal his true intent from everyone, including his pupil Condivi, to whom the design of this cartoon was given as a gift on which to base a commissioned fresco. The result was a rather mediocre performance by a not very ungifted student, who was not even informed by his teacher of the true meaning embedded by him in the cartoon.

Irving Stone wrote that from the time of his first marble Madonna, the Madonna of the Steps,<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, pp. 139-140.

*Michelangelo was thinking “about Mary and her child, and her moment of decision”. He thought that in all the other well-known paintings of her she had been given no choice. But God cannot force such destiny on Mary without her knowledge and consent. God’s wisdom and mercy allowed her the opportunity to reject it. And if Mary did have freedom of choice, when would she have been likely to exercise it? At the Annunciation? When she had borne child? At the moment of suckling while Jesus still an infant? Knowing the future, how could she subject her son to such agony? Might she not have said, “No, not my son. I will not consent. I will not let it happen”?*

The judgments of this novelist often surpass those of even famous art historians because, if the latter had paid attention to Irving Stone’s words, they would have found the true sense and content of Michelangelo’s cartoon in the British Museum half a century ago.

Since the cartoon's commonly known name *Epifania* has long been recognized as erroneous, the drawing should be renamed after the place where it is housed.

For how long will a clear mistake by an inventory taker in 1564 prevail in the history of art? Keeping the wrong title of the cartoon risks misleading those who view it because their first and lasting impression of a work of art is usually determined by its title. In accordance with the tradition accepted in art history, the new name of the cartoon should be *The British Museum Madonna* by analogy with *The Manchester Madonna*.

Thereafter *The British Museum Madonna* will take its rightful place in the series of Madonnas that punctuate the artistic career of Michelangelo.

COMPETITION  
WITH  
LEONARDO

Some new interpretations of Michelangelo's art, such as the approaches of Timothy Verdon, may help us to try to understand more deeply Michelangelo's intentions.

According to Vasari a famous and bitter dispute between Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo arose out of an ambiguous passage in Dante. Irving Stone in his fictional biography of the sculptor imagined that this passage was in Canto XI of the *Inferno*,

*"Philosophy" my master answered me,  
To him who understands it, demonstrates*

*How nature takes her course, not only from  
Wisdom divine, but from its art as well....”*<sup>31</sup>

Irving Stone’s choice of this passage shows the subject of philosophy being discussed on the steps of the Cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore 500 years ago and Michelangelo being regarded as an expert to whom Leonardo forwards an explanation of the meaning of Dante’s verses.

This is but one example of open competition between the two geniuses. We can consider the cartoon with its new title *The British Museum Madonna* as another episode in the competition with Leonardo many years after his death.

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*«Filosofia», mi disse, «a chi la’intende  
nata, non pure in una sola parte,  
come natura lo suo corso prende  
dal divino ’ntelletto e da sua arte....*

The theme of Mary portrayed as sad and internally conflicted over the destiny of her son (“a woman with problems who must struggle to remain faithful to her vocation”) was well-known in the Florence of the time in the devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows, officially sanctioned in 1423.<sup>32</sup> It was promoted in Florence by the Order of the Servants of Mary at the Santissima Annunziata. The biblical basis of this devotion is the Gospel passage in which Simeon prophesies the Passion and announces to Mary that a sword will pierce her heart.<sup>33</sup>

For the community of the Order of the Servants of Mary Leonardo used the ideas of such devotion in drawing his cartoon of the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*. These same ideas help one to understand the Louvre version of the

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<sup>32</sup> Verdon, Op. Cit., p.87.

<sup>33</sup> Verdon, Op. Cit., p.88.

*Virgin of the Rocks*.<sup>34</sup> Leonardo created “a tight-knit human unity through groups of persons whose contrasting emotional reactions unfold as in classical tragedy... Leonardo shows a woman whose fluid, changing state of mind suggests the conflict between nature and grace within her. His subject is the dramatic coexistence in Mary of perfect docility before God’s will with her nature as a human woman who – although free of sin – must still struggle to remain obedient”.<sup>35</sup>

Timothy Verdon mentions that according to Giorgio Vasari Florentines rushed to admire Leonardo da Vinci’s cartoon, when it was exhibited in 1501, for his “amazing capacity to interweave complicated and nuanced relationships in the form of human drama... These reflections sketch contexts and define limits within which

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Verdon, Op. Cit., p.88.

the religious imagination of the late 15th century moved with considerable freedom... Both paintings [of Leonardo] take for granted – in the ‘actors’ (the personages shown) and in the ‘audience’ – enlarged psychological and emotional capacity, broadened moral aperture and new greatness of spirit”.<sup>36</sup>

Michelangelo was a Florentine, a “student” of the Platonic Academy and, of course, he shared a humanistic view of traditional religious ideas. In 1501 he had been in Florence and saw (surely without pleasure) the admiration for Leonardo’s cartoons by the spectators gathered around them. He was very competitive, especially towards Leonardo. And he had a long memory in such matters. One of the present authors has already written of how Michelangelo after 40 years competed in his hidden marble female triad in

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<sup>36</sup> Verdon, *Op. Cit.*, p.89.

the Medici Chapel with the now well known (but hidden at the time) female triad in the paintings of Botticelli.<sup>37</sup>

We believe that with his cartoon *The British Museum Madonna* Michelangelo 50 years after the exhibition of Leonardo's cartoon in Florence created his own drawing of the subject but extended its theme to the point of the Madonna's rebellion. Actually, it was not a full rebellion but a "rebellious moment". But the times were completely different. There were no traces of 15th century's religious freedom remaining by the middle of 16th century.

Michelangelo's patrons stood at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of Catholic Church, who sought and used Michelangelo's talent to propagandize the teachings, traditions and authority

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Barenboim, *Michelangelo Drawings as the Key to Medici Chapel Interpretations*, Moscow, 2006.



*Plate 22*

of the Church. And one must remember that Michelangelo lived in an extraordinarily dangerous time and milieu<sup>38</sup>, in which the expression of ideas could have fatal consequences. The fact that Michelangelo's means of expression were visual rather than verbal could be a source of safety, but they accordingly could also be a source of uncertainty in understanding his hidden meaning.

The genius of Michelangelo related to theology as well as art. So if some modern authors, such as Malcolm Easton, mention in relation to the *Taddei Tondo* "that no Florentine theological source from this date alludes to the Christ Child's early fear of the Passion"<sup>39</sup>, they need to

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<sup>38</sup> Suffice it to note that his long life spanned the lives of Savonarola, Luther and Henry VIII, to name just a few of the protagonists in the mortal struggles of this period.

<sup>39</sup> As quoted in Cole, *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

take into account that Michelangelo himself is a “Florentine theological source”. The same could be said about Mary’s “early fear of the Passion”, expressed by Michelangelo in the cartoon in the British Museum.

Because Michelangelo gained the attention of spectators through the following centuries to Mary’s human drama and to the “new greatness of spirit” mentioned by Mons. Verdon, it seems to us that Buonarroti won his competition with Leonardo.

## AFTERWORD

### British influence on Russian art history studies of the Renaissance

Russia turned her attention to the Renaissance Art of Italy only at the end of 19 century and had no original art history studies on this subject before the start of 20th century. The pioneering figure here was Pavel Muratov (1881 - 1950), whose research retains considerable value even today. He must be called the Founder of Russian studies of Western art. The importance of his work has been recognized more recently in the West.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For example, Wikipedia cites D. Beaune-Gray, *L'itinéraire intellectuel de Pavel Muratov*, in *Colloque Les Premières Rencontres de l'Institut européen Est-Ouest*. –

Australian writer Clive James has called Muratov an example of “just how brilliant somebody can be and still be a forgotten man,” and called his book *Obrazy Italii* (Images of Italy), published in three volumes in 1911, 1912, and 1924, “one of the most dazzling books of its type ever written. As a book on the Italian Grand Tour it not only stands directly in the tradition of Goethe, Gregorovius, Burckhardt and Arthur Symons, but it is better than any of them.”<sup>41</sup>

Muratov was an engineer and never studied art at a university. His theoretical education in

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Lyon, ENS LSH. – 2 – 4 décembre 2004; P. Deotto, *Mito e realita nelle «Immagini d'Italia» di Muratov in L'Est europeo e l'Italia: Immagini e rapporti culturali. Studi in onore di Piero Caszola*. Geneva: Slatkin, 1995, pp. 419-428; P. Deotto, *Pavel Muratov (1881 – 1950) in Twentieth-century Russian emigré writers*, Ed. by Maria Rubins, Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Clive James, *Cultural amnesia: necessary memories from history and the arts*, N.Y., 2007 p. 127.

art came mostly from reading and translating into Russian the book of the English art critic Walter Horatio Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*.

Unfortunately Muratov's major Italian research has not been available in English until now. But that gap is expected to be filled soon with the publication of *Images of Italy* in 2019, which will make this important book available to an English language audience.

The present small book of Peter Barenboim and Arthur Heath published by the Moscow Florentine Society may be regarded as a respectful continuation of Muratov's school of art research.

Michael Trushin  
*International vice-president  
of the Moscow Florentine Society*



*Plate 24*





*Plate 25, 26*





*Plate 28*



## Illustrations

All works are by Michelangelo unless stated otherwise.

Cover and pp. 10, 45, 47 Epifania, the British Museum,  
London

p. 6 Jacopino del Conte, Portrait of Michelangelo,  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

p. 19 The Last Judgement, Vatican

p. 22 The Sistine Ceiling, Vatican

pp. 24, 26 Madonna della Scala, Casa Buonarroti, Florence

p. 36 Cleopatra, Casa Buonarroti, Florence

p. 39 The Manchester Madonna, National Gallery, London

p. 40 Pieta, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

pp. 42, 43 Taddei Tondo, Royal Academy, London

pp. 49, 54 Annunciation, Uffizi, Florence

pp. 58, 59 Pieta, Saint Peter's, Rome

p. 62 Orthodox Icon

p. 63 Flemish Jesuit's book, printed in 1700

pp. 66, 68 Doni Tondo, Uffizi, Florence

- p. 72 Pitti Tondo, Bargello National Museum, Florence
- p. 88 Madonna del Silenzio, The Portland Collection, England
- p. 89 Sketches of the Virgin, the Christ Child Reclining  
on a Cushion, and Other Sketches of Infants.  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
- pp. 90, 91 Madonna of Bruges, Notre-Dame, Bruges
- p. 92 Madonna and Child, Casa Buonarroti, Florence
- p. 93 Medici Madonna, Sagrestia Nuova, San Lorenzo,  
Florence

First published 2018 by LOOM,  
Moscow, Lublinskaya st., 42  
[www.loombooks.ru](http://www.loombooks.ru)  
Printed in Russia

Cover design by M. Mironova

This book vividly demonstrates that Florentine studies are still yielding remarkable new results. And with great interest we welcome a new piece of research on the Buonarroti's image of the Madonna, which is very important in Florentine art. Despite the creation of the cartoon discussed in the book having taken place in Rome and its recent presence in the British Museum, we consider any work of Michelangelo made or situated anywhere to be Florentine art.

Eugenio Giani,  
*President*  
*of the Regional Council of Tuscany*

28 pages of illustrations

ISBN 978-5-906072-34-4



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