



# Art Profiles For Kids

# MICHELANGELO

Jim Whiting





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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Jim Whiting has been a remarkably versatile and accomplished journalist, writer, editor, and photographer for more than 30 years. He has had the opportunity to see much of Michelangelo's work firsthand during the course of his travels and relishes the opportunity to convey the excitement and wonder that these works have generated in him. A voracious reader since early childhood, Mr. Whiting has written and edited over 200 nonfiction children's books. He lives in Washington State with his wife and two teenage sons.

**ABOUT THE COVER:** The images on the cover are paintings by the various artists in this series.

**PHOTO CREDITS:** pp. 3, 28—Super Stocks; all other images are the works of Michelangelo.

**PUBLISHER'S NOTE:** The facts on which this story is based have been thoroughly researched. Documentation of such research appears on page 46. While every possible effort has been made to ensure accuracy, the publisher will not assume liability for damages caused by inaccuracies in the data, and makes no warranty on the accuracy of the information contained herein.

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# CHAPTER 1

## one

### Discovering a Genius

Slowly the two horses picked their way along the rugged mountain road in north-central Italy. The route was winding and steep. The road wasn't in very good condition. Parts were muddy, some with large potholes. Rocks the size of fists—and even larger—were everywhere. The footing wasn't very secure.

Lodovico Buonarroti was riding one of the horses. Only about thirty years old at the time, he was a minor Italian nobleman who clung to a strong sense of family honor. The Buonarrotis had a long aristocratic heritage stretching back more than 250 years, but their fortunes had steadily shrunk. By now, Lodovico and his brother Francesco owned only a house in Florence and a small farm near the village of Settignano.

Lodovico considered working with his hands to be beneath his dignity. It had been a stroke of good fortune when he was appointed podestà (governor) of the small towns of Caprese and Chiusi, even though the appointment was for only six months.

Lodovico brought along his nineteen-year-old wife, Francesca, and their first child, Lionardo. Francesca was several months' pregnant with the couple's second child. She was already in frail health, so the journey was difficult for her.

Suddenly Francesca's horse stumbled over a rough place in the road. The abrupt movement caught her unaware and she fell off the horse.

Falling off a horse can lead to serious injury. Francesca was fortunate. Although she was shaken by the fall, her injuries were minor. The couple



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Michelangelo's *David*. The artist wanted to emphasize David's bravery, so he depicted him at the moment he decided to fight the Philistine giant Goliath. The statue stands in the center of a large vaulted room in Florence's Galleria dell'Accademia, where tourists can walk completely around it and view it from any angle.



## DISCOVERING A GENIUS

rested for a few days so that she could recover. Then they resumed the journey.

Several months later, Lodovico wrote, “Today this sixth of March [1475] . . . there was born to me a male child; I named him Michelangelo and he was born Monday morning before four or five o’clock and he was born when I was Podestà at Caprese . . . I had him baptized on the eighth of the same month in the Church of Santo Giovanni di Caprese.”<sup>1</sup>

Lodovico had no idea that this was the first mention of a person who would become what many people consider the greatest artist of all time.

For some people, Francesca’s survival and quick recovery—enabling her to give birth to Michelangelo—was a clear sign that God’s hand had reached down to protect her. As Giorgio Vasari, one of Michelangelo’s first biographers, wrote, “The benign ruler of heaven [God] graciously looked down on earth, saw the worthlessness of what was being done, the intense but utterly fruitless studies, and the presumption of men who were farther from true art than night is from day, and resolved to save us from our errors. So he decided to send into the world an artist who would be skilled in each and every craft, whose work alone would teach us how to attain perfection in design. . . . Moreover, he determined to give this artist the knowledge of true moral philosophy and the gift of poetic expression, so that everyone might admire and follow him as their perfect exemplar in life, work, and behavior and in every endeavor, and he would be acclaimed as divine.”<sup>2</sup> Such a gifted person had to be protected while he was still inside his mother, waiting to be born.

Vasari wasn’t alone in his admiration for Michelangelo. Nearly everyone who met him recognized his genius, which had begun to be apparent when he was still a teenager. When he died, he received the type of funeral customarily reserved for kings or popes of the Catholic Church.

Of course, Michelangelo’s future fame and accomplishments were nowhere in evidence at his birth. In fact, Lodovico would have been shocked to know that his son would grow up to be an artist. Lodovico had little or no interest in art. He was a very practical man who looked down on artists. After all, they worked with their hands.



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His lack of interest in the arts was somewhat unusual for his time, when Europe was going through the early stages of the Renaissance. The word *Renaissance* literally means “rebirth.” It refers to the rebirth of classical ideals that reached back to the time of ancient Greece and Rome, many centuries earlier. These ideals were reflected in sculpture, painting, literature, architecture, and other forms of art. It was an exciting and stimulating time to be alive.

Nowhere was this more true than in Florence, one of the small city-states that dotted the Italian peninsula. These city-states competed fiercely with one another. With good reason, Florence was especially proud of its art. Many of the most famous Renaissance artists lived and worked in the city or the surrounding area.

These Florentine artists were supported by wealthy noblemen. Foremost was the powerful Medici (MEH-duh-chee) family. The Medici would play a key role in the development of Michelangelo’s genius.

Michelangelo’s birth came just before the end of Lodovico’s term as podestà. It soon became apparent that Francesca couldn’t nurse her new baby—it was too much of a strain on her health. Lodovico sent his new son to a nurse who lived near Settignano. Like most men in Settignano, the woman’s husband worked in the stone quarries. Michelangelo later told Vasari, “Giorgio, if my brains are any good at all it’s because I was born in the pure air of your Arezzo countryside, just as with my [nurse’s] milk I sucked in the hammer and chisel I use for my statues.”<sup>3</sup>

It’s not clear how long Michelangelo lived with the stonecutter’s family. His mother had three more sons—Buonarrotto, Giovansimone, and Sigismondo—within the next six years. Each new child weakened her already delicate health. She died in 1481. Michelangelo spent considerable amounts of time in Settignano rather than with his widowed father in Florence. He gained experience using a hammer and chisel but did not yet attend school.

When Michelangelo was ten, Lodovico remarried and Michelangelo returned to Florence. His father wanted him to be educated, in preparation for a “respectable” career, such as a banker, merchant, or government

## DISCOVERING A GENIUS



Michelangelo dissected corpses to learn how the human body was put together. He used this knowledge when he made sketches for his paintings. He used this sketch of a man to paint the female prophet, the Libyan Sibyl.

official. He hired a tutor for the boy. In three years, Michelangelo learned how to write and read but not much else.

Not much else, that is, except art. He often sneaked away from his lessons to draw what he saw around him. One of his close friends was Francesco Granacci. Francesco worked as an apprentice to a firm of family painters headed by Domenico Ghirlandaio, at the time the city's most popular and successful artist. He and his brothers made a good living by painting frescoes (FRES-kohz). Frescoes are a particular type of painting. First, the artist coats a surface with a thin layer of plaster, then quickly paints directly onto the wet plaster. The paint dries into the plaster. It is a delicate, painstaking process.

Francesco urged Michelangelo to join him. Michelangelo was only too eager to drop out of school and become an apprentice. His father didn't



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approve. There were furious arguments, and sometimes Michelangelo was even beaten.

Michelangelo's intense desire to join Ghirlandaio was among the first demonstrations of one of his most characteristic qualities. He was very stubborn. Once he had made up his mind about something, it was often impossible to get him to change it.

Michelangelo finally wore down his father's resistance. In April 1488, Lodovico signed a three-year apprenticeship agreement with Ghirlandaio.

According to art historian Bernard Berenson, Michelangelo made the right choice. "The penwork in these early drawings, and indeed more than one trick of shorthand of later date, tell truthfully that Ghirlandaio was the man who first put a pen into Michelangelo's hand and taught him how to use it,"<sup>4</sup> he wrote.

Michelangelo proved to be a very quick study. According to Vasari, "The way Michelangelo's talents and character developed astonished Domenico, who saw him doing things quite out of the ordinary for boys of his age and not only surpassing his many other pupils but also very often rivaling the achievements of the master himself. On one occasion it happened that one of the young men studying with Domenico copied in ink some draped figures of women from Domenico's own work. Michelangelo took what he had drawn and, using a thicker pen, he went over the contours of one of the figures and brought it to perfection; and it is marvelous to see the difference between the two styles and the superior skill and judgment of a young man so spirited and confident that he had the courage to correct what his teacher had done."<sup>5</sup>

Incidents such as these may have made Ghirlandaio realize that he didn't have much to teach his headstrong young pupil. Yet he needed to find something for him to do for the next three years.

Not far away, Lorenzo de' Medici was about to make a decision that would solve Ghirlandaio's problem.

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