

MICHELANGELO: A NEW APPROACH TO HIS GENIUS

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Michelangelo's great sculptures are universally familiar. Casually enough, we have come to accept them as part of our common heritage, like the air we breathe. The great figure of Moses from the Julius Tomb holds no more novelty for us than do the Ten Commandments that the Lawgiver holds in his right hand. But despite this universal recognition, recent scholarship has made many new discoveries which deepen our understanding of Michelangelo's chief works.

Ready aids in renewing our affection for these masterpieces are the reproductions—photographs and casts—which enable those of us who cannot see the originals with our own eyes still to have a fairly accurate visual image of them. And since Michelangelo's sculptures are frequently so placed and lighted that a close examination is not possible, such reproductions assist expert and layman alike. J. Schneider-Lengyel's superlative photographs in *The Sculptures of Michelangelo*, recently published by the Phaidon Press, give just such visual images, making this book important and thrilling.

Casts especially are of great value in this regard. By some strange chance it has been left to them to illumine an aspect of Michelangelo's art that has hitherto passed unnoticed, and it is an exciting aspect. For the first time we can see a number of Michelangelo's most important creations just as they appeared before they left the artist's workshop.

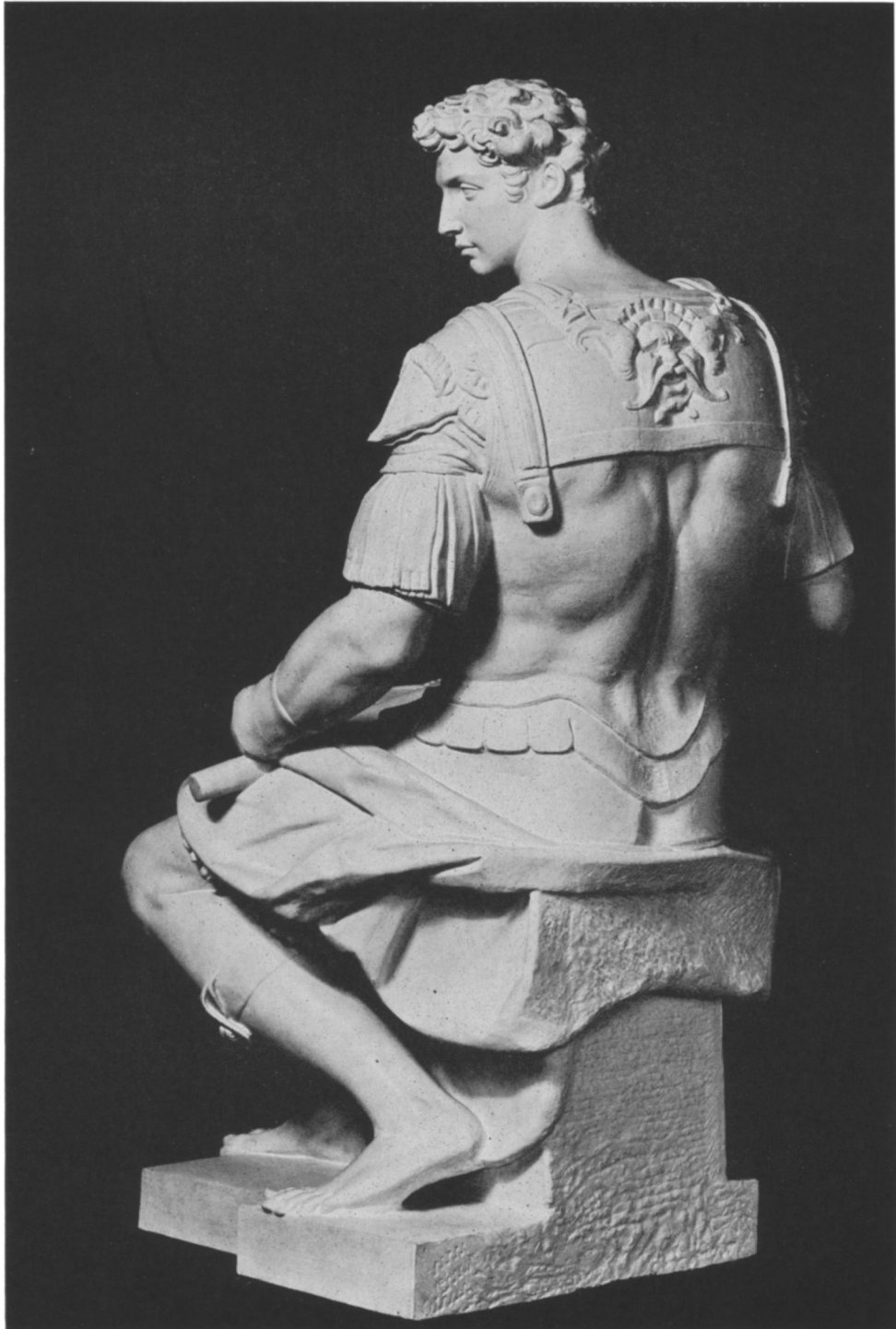
When we come to think of it, most of Michelangelo's marbles have never been visible in their entirety; for they have been placed against walls in architectural settings, or in niches, so that we see them in much the same way as we would a picture—from more or less straight on. The composition of freestanding sculpture differs, however, from that of its sister arts in this fundamental respect. Whereas

a painting and a relief sculpture are composed from one point of view only, the composition of a sculpture in the round is developed from innumerable points of view. In their present position, therefore, many of Michelangelo's freestanding figures tend to lose their intrinsic character and to assume some of the attributes of relief carving, with the walls supplying the background. And although some of these masterpieces were given their present positions by Michelangelo himself, there is, clearly enough, far more to them than meets the eye.

One could wish that more of Michelangelo's statues were, like the monumental David, so placed that they might be fully appreciated as sculptures in the round. Yet actually those aspects of the master's art which, by the nature of their architectural settings, have always been concealed are no longer denied us. For by an act of legerdemain, plaster casts—those friendless orphans of so many museum galleries¹—combined with photography, now work a double miracle. The casts, made by the piece-mold process, a technique which may be used without moving the marbles from their fixed positions, reveal what has been overlooked since first they were set in place. And photography, as our illustrations show, sets this down in a permanent visual record.

How startling a record! Like many of Michelangelo's pen and crayon sketches which were meant for himself alone, these camera views tell us once again of his absolute integrity as an artist. They show that even when he was creating a figure which he knew was des-

¹ The problem of the display of casts in the present-day museum finds one solution in the current practice of the Metropolitan Museum. Casts of renaissance sculptures are being patinated to approximate the effect of the materials of the originals (marble, terracotta, and bronze). Skilled artists are carrying out this work, begun by the WPA and continued by the Museum with the income accrued from the John Taylor Johnston Memorial Fund.



BACK VIEW OF A CAST OF THE FIGURE OF GIULIANO DE' MEDICI, BY MICHELANGELO



NIGHT HOLDING A FIRESTONE

tined to stand against a sightless wall he was too great a master to confine his efforts merely to that part of the stone that would be seen. First, as each of our illustrations reveals, he had to satisfy his own highly critical self by creating an all-around, three-dimensional entity. Other sculptors, it is true, have carried to a state of completion or near completion the back sections of figures made to be set against walls. Most generally, however, in European art even the most gifted have dealt summarily with the back; being content to work in what might be called a glorified high relief, they have reasonably enough devoted their best creative efforts to the visible frontal areas. Michelangelo, who, according to accepted standards of his time, was most emphatically not a "reasonable" man, thus ran directly counter to the common practice of the day in his effort to create for himself completely integrated works of art.

Blaise de Vigenère's description of the master hewing away at the marble like a man possessed, suggests that once he took up the chisel he worked persistently until, roughly at least, he had achieved his intention. Michelangelo's problem was both posed and limited by the shape of the stone before him, for he had the stonemason's respect for his material. This is dramatically apparent, indeed, in the profile and back views of such statues as the Moses,

the Giuliano, and the Lorenzo, which are carved with such economy that the exact shapes and dimensions of the original blocks may still be visualized. Although at times he merely suggested the forms of the back sections, the whole concept is always there. The least worked of them have that same grandeur of expression that makes even the so-called "unfinished" Michelangelos, with which we are familiar, such mighty achievements.

Indeed they serve as a reminder that the word "unfinished" when applied to Michelangelo has a very special meaning. In a real sense, of course, his marbles are all finished, for whenever an artist lays down his tools and decides to do no more, the curtain falls on the last act of that artistic production. In a narrower sense, however, some of the pieces may be called unfinished. For instance, the sculptor stopped short of completing the masculine figures of Day and Twilight for the Medici tombs. He purposely left the two heads roughly blocked out, with results that have ever since supplied scholars with material for the deepest speculation regarding his artistic intentions. The backs of the two sculptures also reflect this revolutionary treatment. For although Michelangelo restricted himself to finishing only certain minor passages, these areas give a limiting reality to the backs which otherwise are unhewn or no more than broadly generalized, making them one with the front sides. We can imagine the sculptor, with hammer and chisel in hand, working around these great blocks, as they stood in the center of his workshop, and creating, out of the dissonance of "finished" and "unfinished," works of art complete in themselves.

Casts also throw new light on those sculptures that have in part been reworked by Michelangelo's pupils, telling us the tragic story of what might have been. His Risen Christ has always remained in an artistic limbo; the figure which everyone sees in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome was "completed" by Pietro Urbino (who botched the job) and was then "repaired" by

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Federigo Frizzi. As Michelangelo's friend Sebastiano del Piombo once took care to point out, it does not reveal the hand of the master. Only when we turn to the back areas—which the pupils, reasonable young men, did not trouble to recarve—do we sense the grandeur of the original composition. All the master's genius appears in that stupendous back. Similarly, the Florence Pietà, the great sculptural work of Michelangelo's old age, was, after his death, considerably recut by Tiberio Calcagni. To see the genius of Michelangelo in this work, we must again disregard the recarved areas and turn to the rear, which offers us as brave and monumental a composition as an artist ever dreamed of. Here indeed the "unfinished" state reaches its apotheosis.

Using casts in this manner to review the sculptural works of Michelangelo also raises new points of iconographic interest. Consider for example the lovely figure of Night in the Medici Chapel. We all know that Michelangelo has endowed her with various nocturnal symbols, a crescent moon, a star, a mask, and a garland of poppies and soporific herbs, the latter, incidentally, being an Ovidian notion.² But one other symbol of Night has by some strange fate until now escaped the notice of the countless eyes that have gazed upon her. Night holds in her right hand, which when viewed from the front is quite hidden behind her head, a round, flattish object. It is certainly the firestone or flint that, according to the late sixteenth-century writer Cesare Ripa,³ the figure of Night is often represented as holding in her hand. By striking the firestone with the steel, which Ripa describes her as grasping in the other hand, Night creates sparks to light the candle, another of her symbols.⁴ Ripa further records that a piece of tinder may be placed on the stone to aid in starting a flame. Does our imagination deceive us, or is the fur-

² *Metamorphoses* xi.592–622.

³ *Iconologia* (Rome, 1603), p. 361.

⁴ Note, however, that Ripa describes the stone as being in the left hand, and the steel as being in the right. Michelangelo may not have bothered to distinguish between them—he was himself ambidexterous.



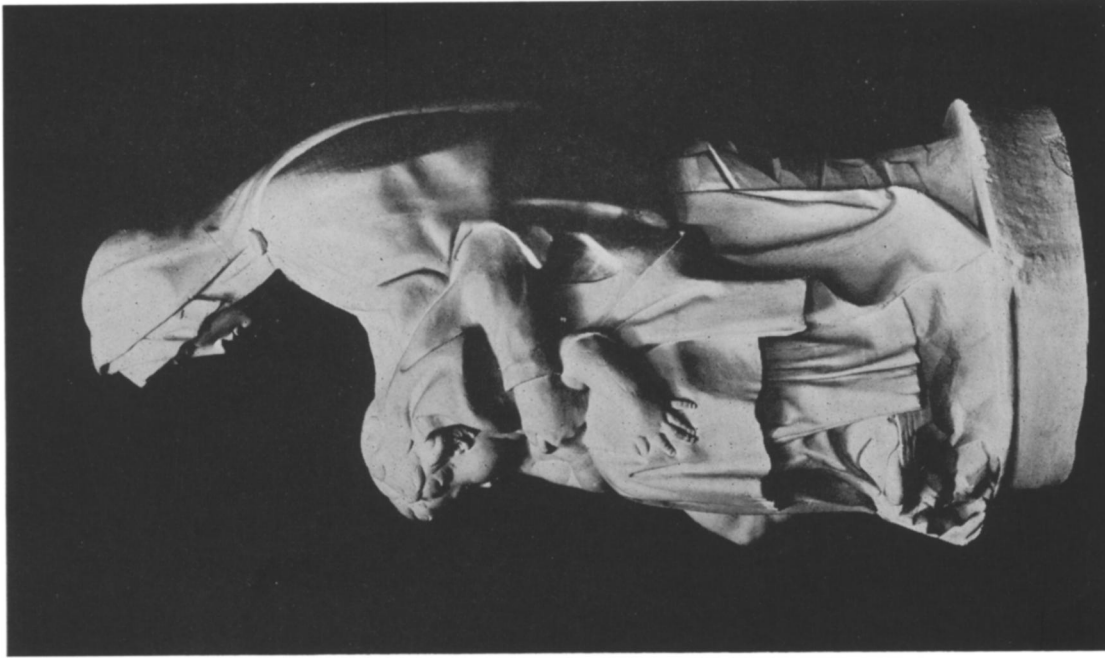
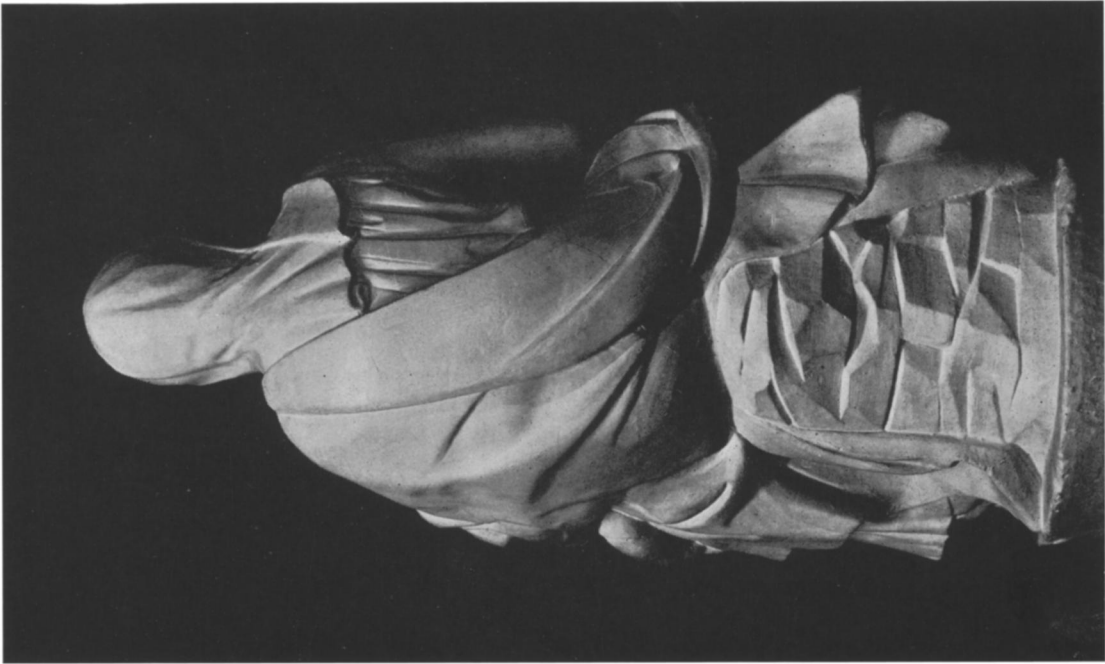
DETAIL OF THE PIETÀ IN ST. PETER'S

row in the stone held by Michelangelo's Night meant to hold tinder? We could, of course, be assured about the intended purpose of this stone, were a steel to be found in Night's left hand. Unfortunately, however, the "unfinished" technique has here triumphed over iconography; Night's left hand is barely suggested by a few rough strokes of the chisel. It is interesting to recall, by the way, that the collar of the renowned Order of the Golden Fleece is composed of interlaced steels connected by firestones which in form resemble closely the one found in the hand of Night. In any future reevaluation of the meaning of the Medici tomb figures, the firestone will be a point of vital significance. It should also be added here that the way in which the backs of the four recumbent tomb figures are carved may assist in solving the much debated problem of the development of Michelangelo's plans for the Medici tombs.

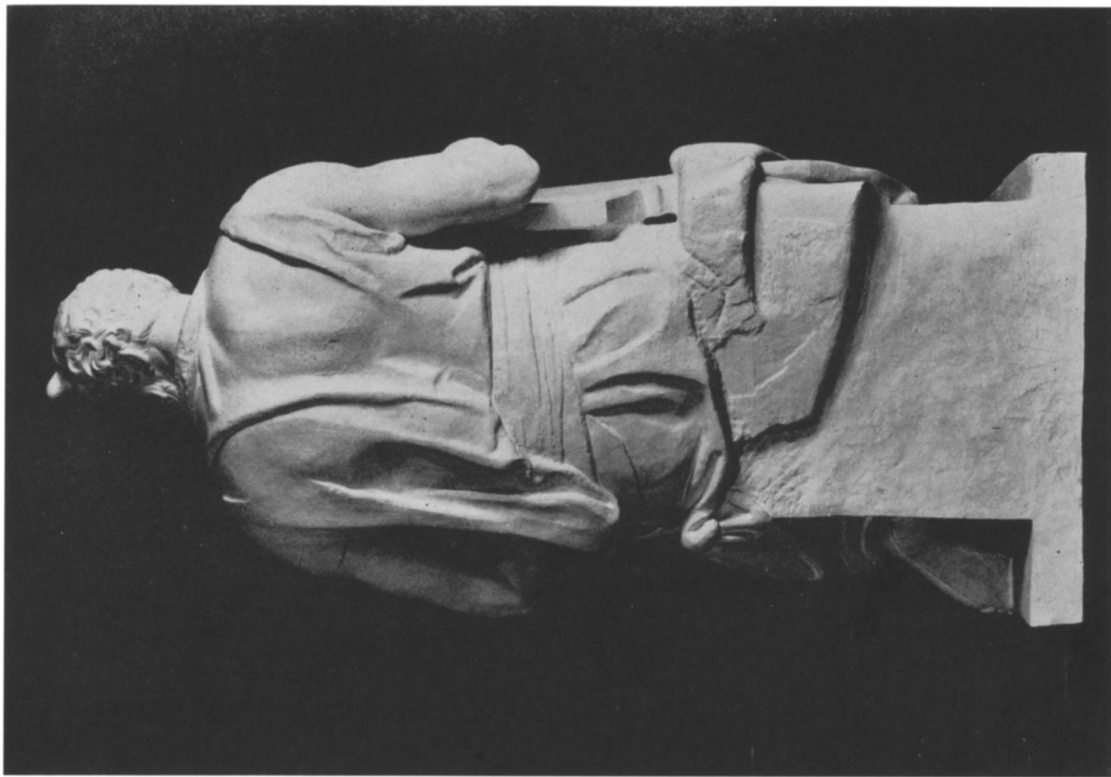
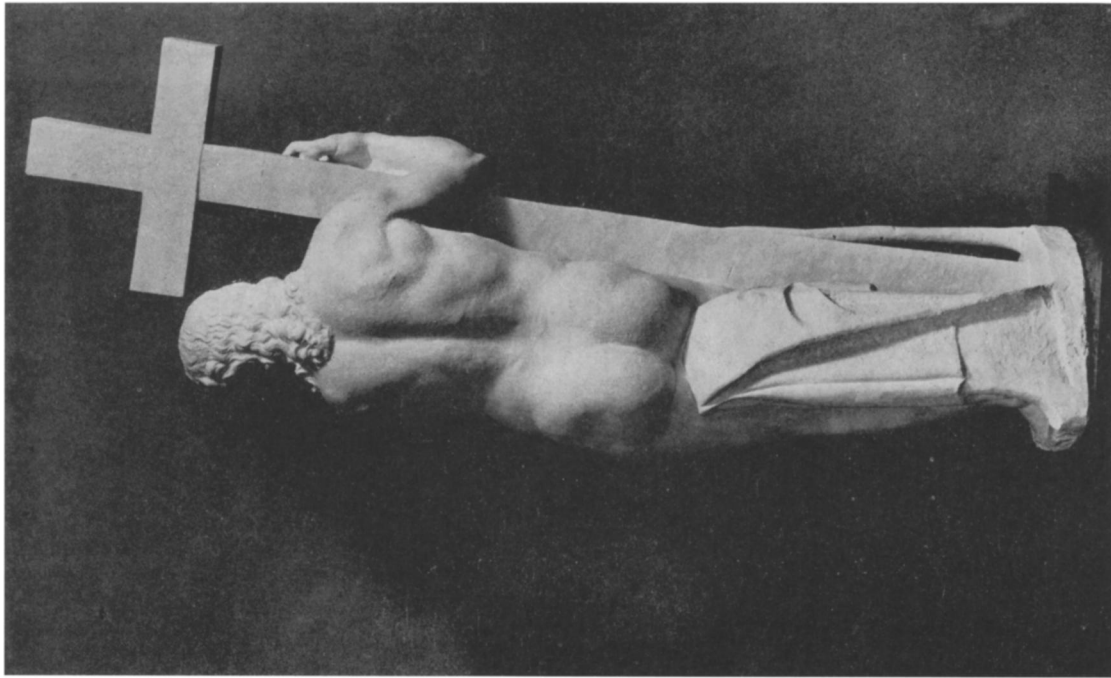
Among the other iconographic surprises are the pile of stones on which the Bruges Madonna sits—she might be called Michelangelo's Madonna of the Rocks—and the grotesque mask decorating the armor on the incredibly powerful back of Giuliano de' Medici, for the first time seen clearly and in relation to the whole figure. The mask is like the one on Giuliano's breastplate, but more human, and deeply anguished.



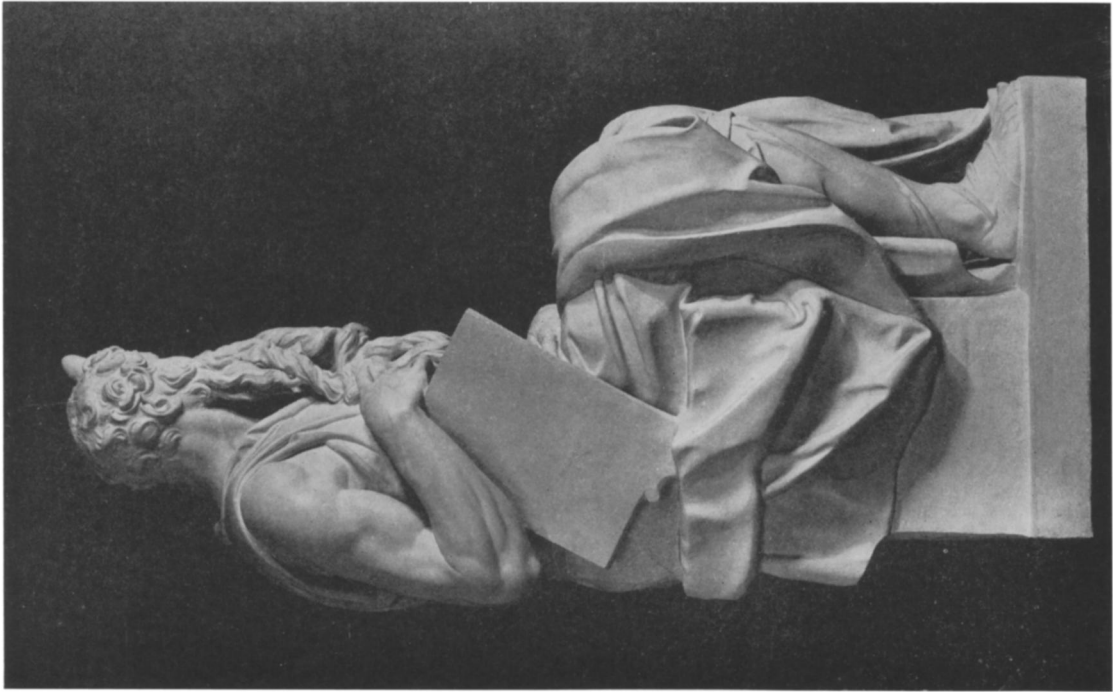
THE PIETÀ IN ST. PETER'S IN ROME



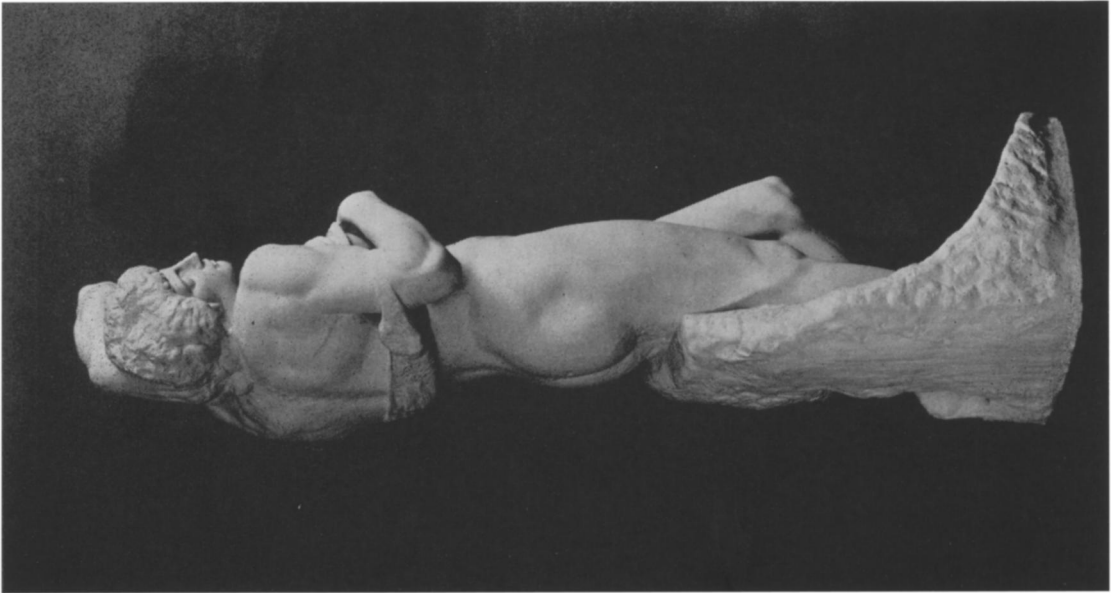
THE MADONNA AND CHILD IN THE CHURCH OF NOTRE DAME, BRUGES



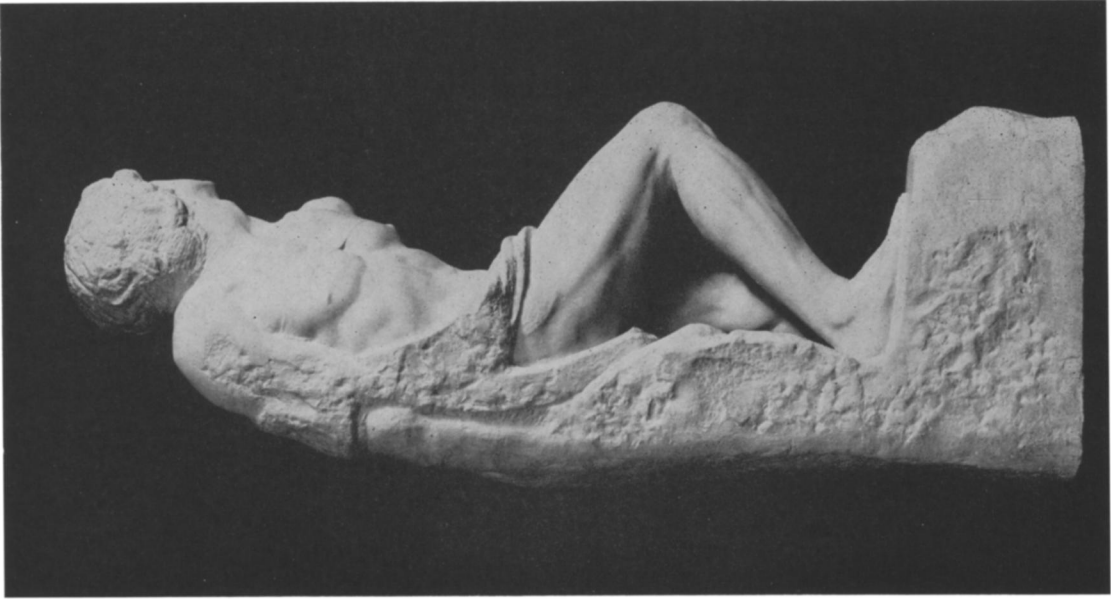
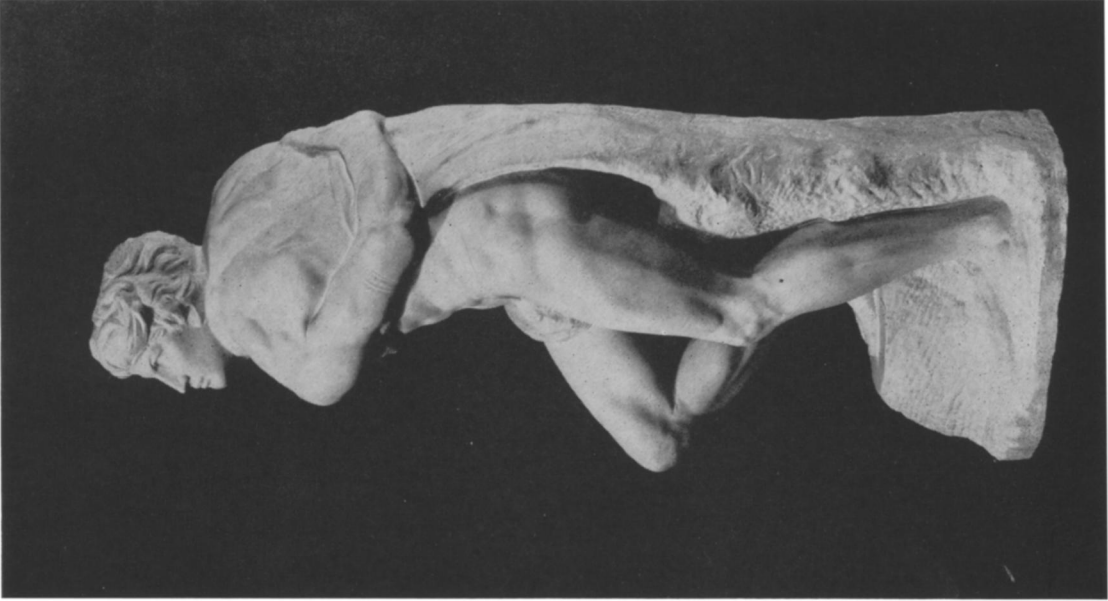
THE RISEN CHRIST IN SANTA MARIA SOPRA MINERVA, ROME, AND THE MOSES IN SAN PIETRO IN VINCOLI



THE STATUE OF MOSES IN SAN PIETRO IN VINCOLI, ROME



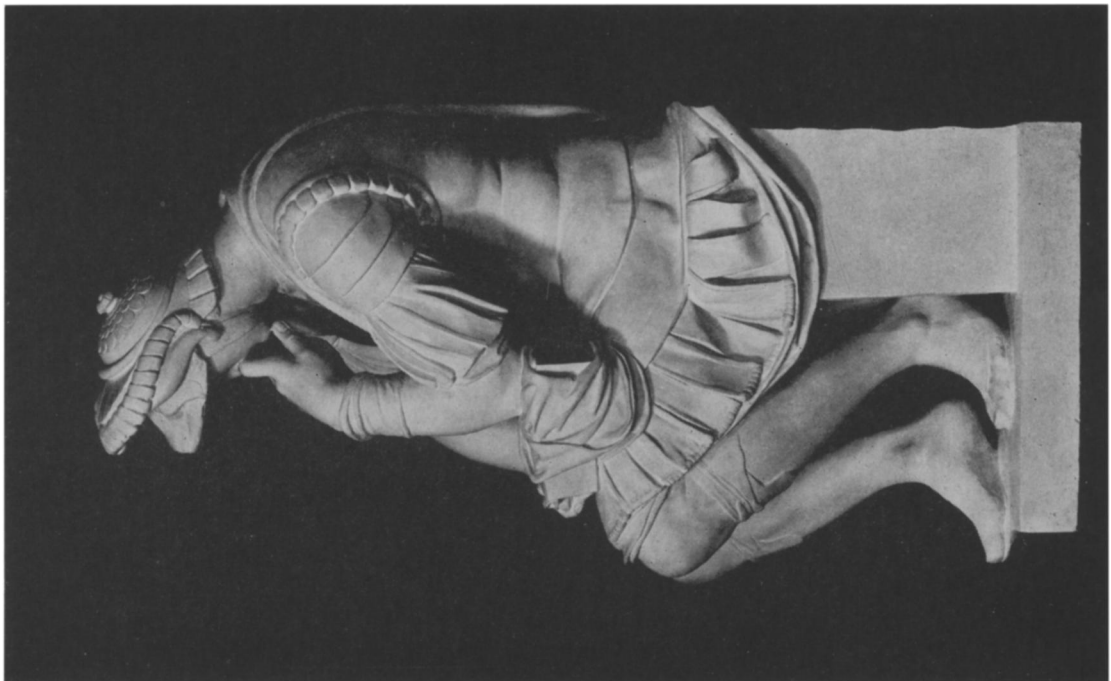
THE DYING CAPTIVE. IN THE LOUVRE IN PARIS.



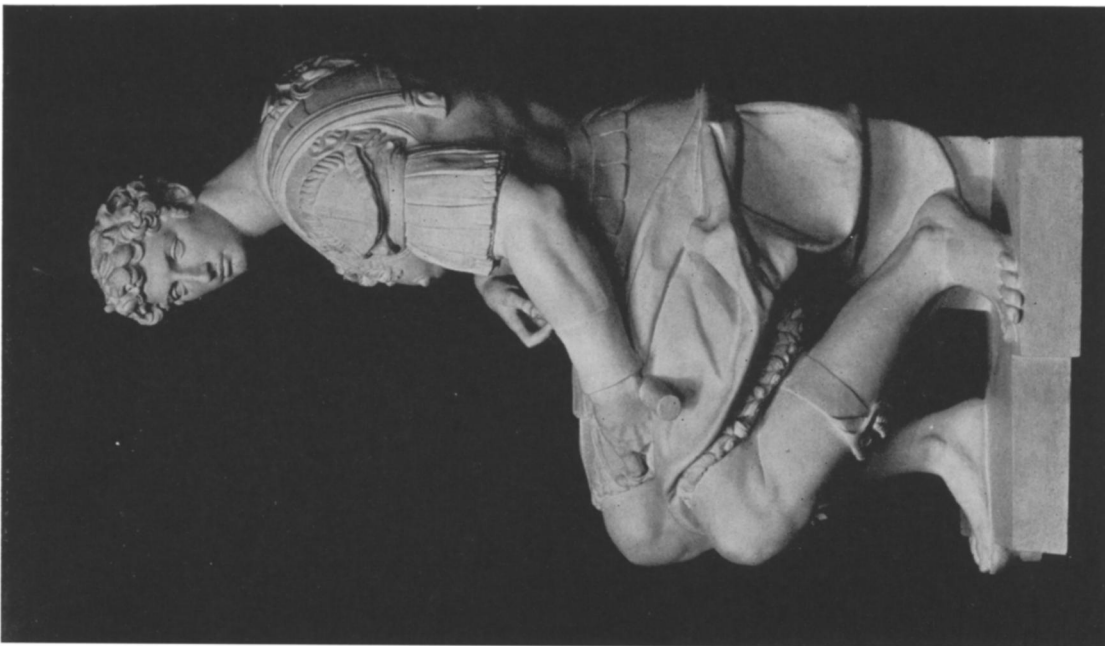
THE HEROIC CAPTIVE. IN THE LOUVRE



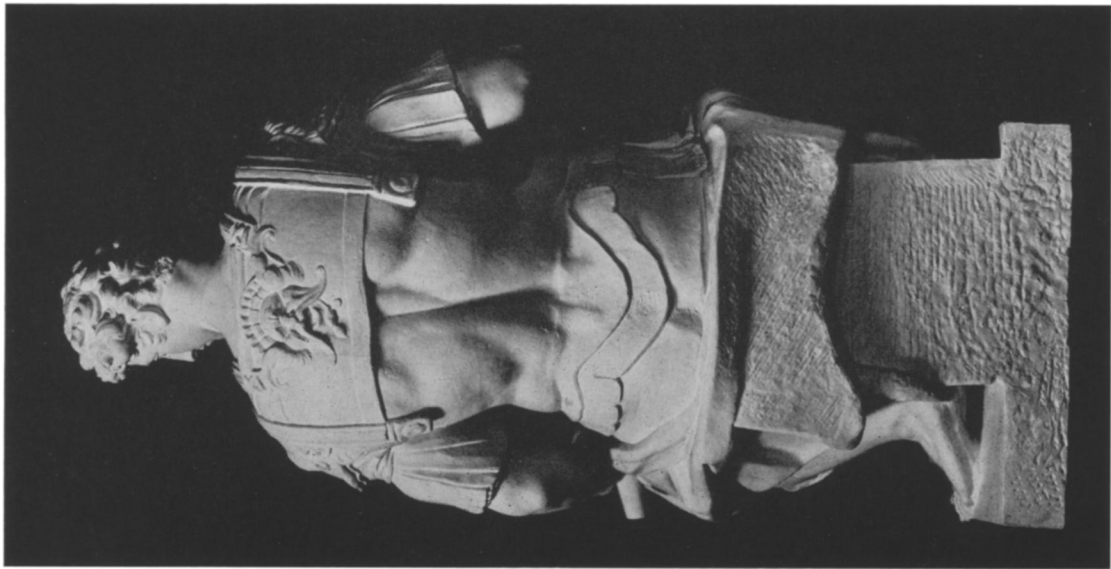
LORENZO DE' MEDICI. FROM HIS TOMB IN THE NEW SACRISTY IN THE CHURCH OF SAN LORENZO, FLORENCE



LORENZO DE' MEDICI. FROM HIS TOMB IN SAN LORENZO



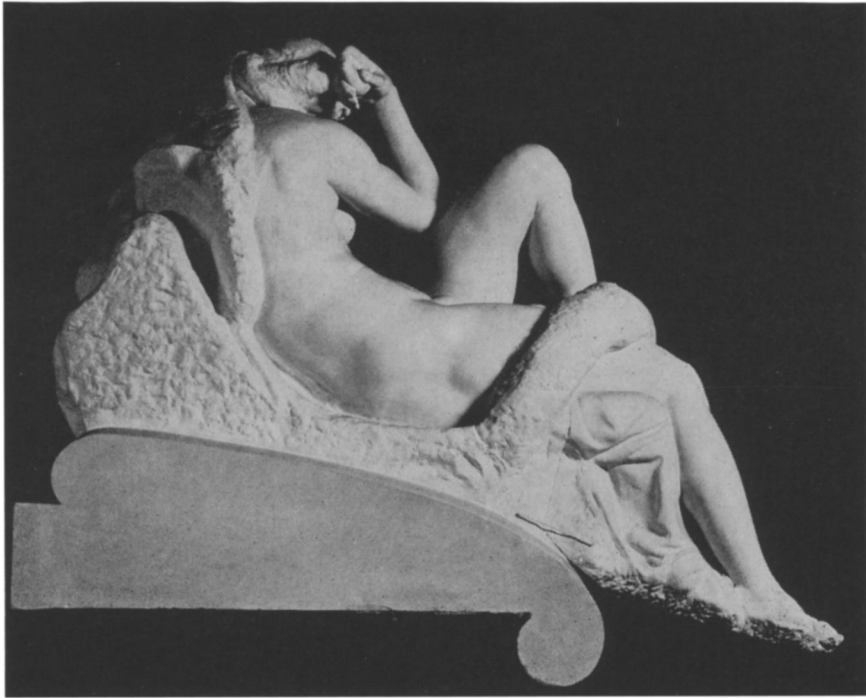
GIULIANO DE' MEDICI. FROM HIS TOMB IN THE NEW SACRISTY IN THE CHURCH OF SAN LORENZO, FLORENCE



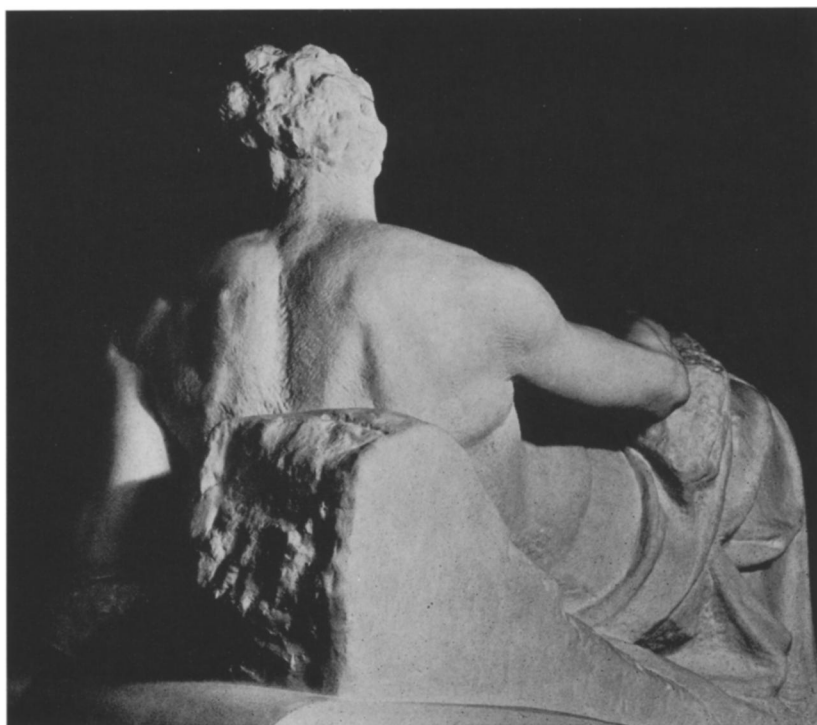
GIULIANO DE' MEDICI. FROM HIS TOMB IN SAN LORENZO



DAY AND DAWN. FROM THE MEDICI TOMBS IN SAN LORENZO



NIGHT AND TWILIGHT. FROM THE MEDICI TOMBS IN SAN LORENZO



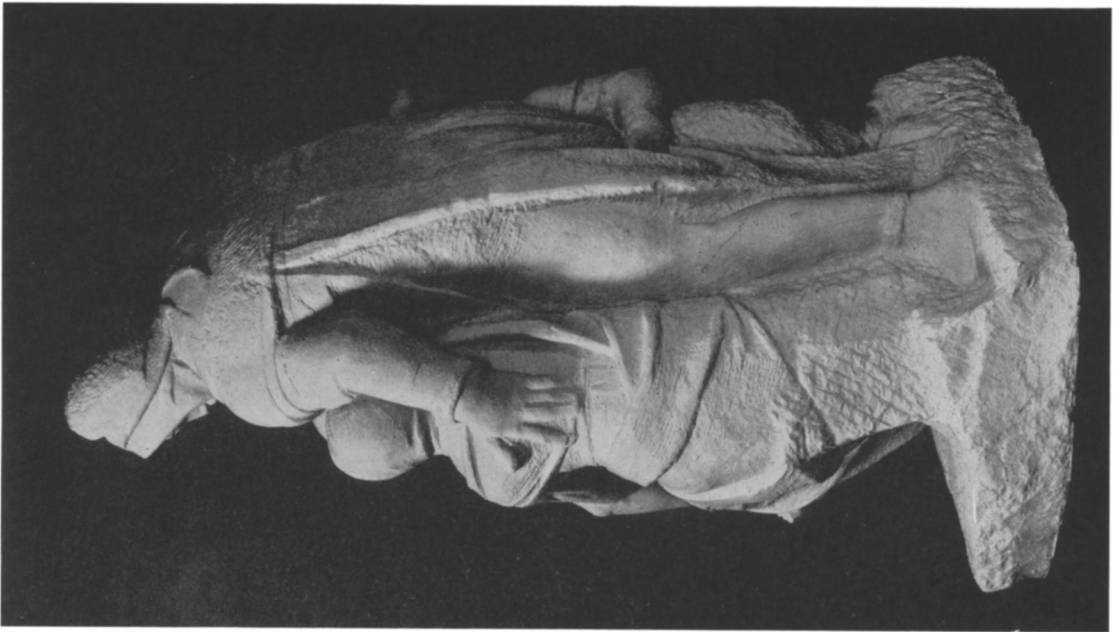
DAY AND TWILIGHT



DAWN AND TWILIGHT, AND DAY AND NIGHT



THE MEDICI MADONNA. IN THE NEW SACRISTY IN THE CHURCH OF SAN LORENZO, FLORENCE



THE PIETÀ WITH NICODEMUS. IN THE CATHEDRAL IN FLORENCE

BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Though the John Taylor Johnston collection of renaissance casts—a superb group given to the Museum over fifty years ago by its first president—contains most of Michelangelo's freestanding sculptures, it is far from complete. And since war, a deadly enemy of art studies, confines our action to local engagements, we cannot attempt here to deal with Michelangelo's work as a whole. So for our illustrations we limit ourselves to casts found in the Museum, excluding from that number such pieces as the Bacchus and the David, with which, thanks to numerous photographs, we are already familiar as sculptures completely in the round.

The pieces selected for illustration are the Pietà in St. Peter's in Rome; the Madonna and Child in the church of Notre Dame in Bruges; the Risen Christ in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome; the Moses from the Julius Tomb in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome; the two Captives in the Louvre in Paris; the several figures from the Medici Chapel (Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici, Day and Night, Dawn and Twilight, the Madonna and Child) in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence; and the Pietà with Nicodemus in the cathedral of Florence.

Here a word of caution in regard to casts in general. Some of them are better than others, for variations exist in casts, just as they do in prints. An earlier impression in plaster is always sharper than a later one. Occasionally, too, casters have taken the liberty of smoothing rough surfaces which they thought would never be seen. And in some instances where the bases of the figures actually touch the

walls, those parts—as, for example, the base of the Pietà in St. Peter's—have necessarily been left uncast. At such times the resulting plain surfaces are obviously not the work of Michelangelo. All these qualifications, however, are minor ones. The casts which reveal this fascinating and until now unknown aspect of the master's work stand as honest and substantially accurate versions.

The whole problem of Michelangelo's work as a sculptor is reopened in this way. Indeed this article might well serve as an introduction to a new study dealing with what unique side and back views are able to tell us about his technique, style, and compositional plans. For the present, let us accept these unfamiliar aspects of the artist's work for what they are. If, as it appears, the cloth has at length been removed from sculptures only partially unveiled in the past, we can feast our eyes in the excitement of discovery. And perhaps we shall come to look at the originals themselves in a somewhat new light. We may, for example, appreciate even more fully the monumental grandeur of the Moses; we may find that the Giuliano becomes quite another person than the generally unloved youth sitting high above his tomb in the Medici Chapel; and that the figure of Night, if possible, gains in dignity. For only in their entirety, as we now for the first time see them, is captured the full essence of Michelangelo's genius.

As a convenient reference for those studying the illustrations, an appendix is added, giving descriptions of the marbles from which the casts were taken. There are also small photographs, as a reminder of how the original sculptures appear.

APPENDIX

Michelangelo made the Pietà for St. Peter's between 1498 and 1500 on the order of Cardinal Jean de Villiers de la Grolaye, the French ambassador to the Holy See. The sculpture's first location was in the French chapel of Santa Petronilla in the Old Basilica of St.

Peter's. With the construction of the new St. Peter's, it was placed about 1535 in the chapel of Santa Maria della Febbre (St. Mary of the Fever), a title of votive significance. Since then the Pietà has often been called the Madonna della Febbre. In 1749 the group was moved to

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THE PIETÀ IN ST. PETER'S



THE MEDICI MADONNA



THE BRUGES MADONNA



THE LOUVRE CAPTIVES



THE RISEN CHRIST



THE FLORENCE PIETÀ

its present position on the altar of the capella del Crocifisso, where it is placed with its back directly against the wall. The bronze angels were probably added at the time of this last change of location. The lower part of the rear side, being set against the wall, could not be cast. The corresponding surface of the Mu-

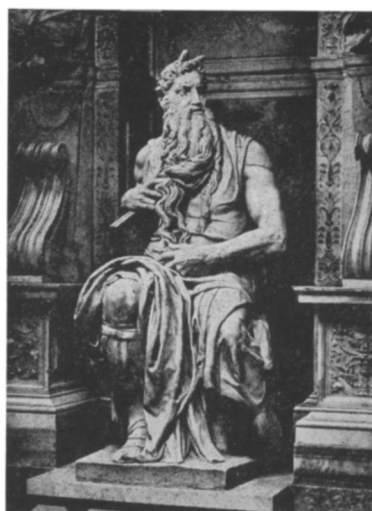
seum's cast is simply the work of the caster.

The Bruges Madonna was made sometime between 1500 and 1506 for the church of Notre Dame in Bruges by order of Flemish merchants named Mouscron. Dürer commented on it as being in this church, when passing through the city in 1521. The statue was taken

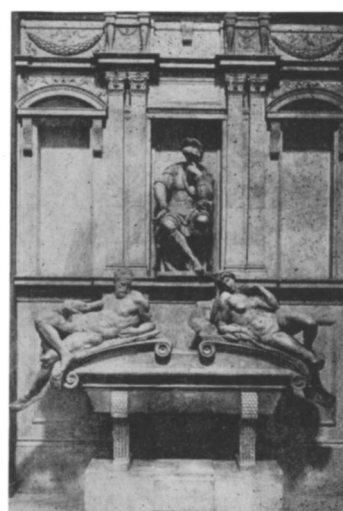
BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



THE GIULIANO TOMB



MOSES



THE LORENZO TOMB

to Paris during the epoch of Napoleon's conquests but in 1815 was returned to Bruges. It now stands in a deep niche as the altarpiece of the chapelle du Saint-Sacrement, where members of the Mouscron family lie buried.

The Dying and Heroic Captives belonging to the Louvre in Paris were made between 1513 and 1516, having been originally planned for the Julius Tomb. After the design of the tomb had finally been settled upon without the two figures, Michelangelo gave them in 1544 to his banker friend Roberto Strozzi. In 1550 Strozzi presented them to Henry II of France, who shortly thereafter bestowed them upon Constable Anne de Montmorency for his château at Ecouen. In 1632 they belonged to Cardinal de Richelieu; in the eighteenth century they again became French royal property, through this last channel eventually passing to the Louvre. Since the backs have been somewhat touched up by the caster, we here show only the side views.

The seated Moses in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome was made between 1513 and 1516. It was placed in its present position in 1545 as the central feature of the Julius Tomb, against which it stands. The lower part of the base at the back is obviously not a cast of the marble.

The Risen Christ found in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome was made between 1519 and 1520. A Roman, Metello Vari, and two friends commissioned the work and presented it to the church. Two of Michelangelo's assistants, Pietro Urbino and Federigo Frizzi, put on the finishing touches, but they confined their efforts to the front. Only the remodeled areas are now visible, since the sculpture stands against a heavy pilaster. Later additions are the bronze halo, drapery, and shoe. Possibly the caster may have slightly retouched the back sections.

The sculptures in the New Sacristy of the church of San Lorenzo, Florence, were made at various times between 1524 and 1534. The chapel was ordered by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, who in 1523 became Pope Clement VII. Michelangelo's sculptures (the six tomb figures and the Medici Madonna) were set in their present positions in the sacristy by Giorgio Vasari some twenty years later, in accordance with instructions given him by Michelangelo. They are all either against the walls or in niches.

The Lorenzo Tomb holds the remains of Lorenzo de' Medici (1492-1519), who was Duke of Urbino and grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Beneath the seated statue of

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Lorenzo are the recumbent figures of Dawn and Twilight. The lower extremity of the rear of the base of the statue of Lorenzo represents the caster's work. It should be noted, also, that the casts of the recumbent figures on both Medici tombs are set on the sarcophagi at angles differing slightly from those of the original monuments.

The Giuliano Tomb holds the remains of Giuliano de' Medici (1478-1516), who was the Duke of Nemours and son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Beneath the seated statue of Giuliano are the recumbent figures of Day and Night. In completing the Giuliano, Michelangelo was assisted by Fra Giovanni Montorsoli, but judging from our photographs, the assistant had little if anything to do with the work.

The Medici Madonna fits tightly against a plain stucco wall, and a complete cast of the back is therefore impossible. The surface shown in the illustration, while approximat-

ing the original, obviously represents the work of the caster.

The unfinished Pietà, or Entombment, in the cathedral of Florence was made between 1550 and 1563, the year of Michelangelo's death. The sculptor had originally planned this group for his own tomb, portraying himself in the figure of Nicodemus. Dissatisfied with it, however, he broke the stone and gave the fragments to Francesco Bandini. Tiberio Calcagni, a pupil of Michelangelo's, repaired the group for Bandini, finishing some of the front sections. For years the Pietà was left in neglect in the gardens of the Bandini villa on Monte Cavallo in Rome. It was later stored away in the basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence. It was at length resurrected in 1722 by Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who placed it in the Florence cathedral, at the back of the main altar. Recently it has been placed on the altar of a chapel in the transept, so that it may now be seen from all sides.