CHAPTER IV

MICHAEL ANGELO AS SCULPTOR

IN the letters written by Michael Angelo to his father and brother between the years 1497 and 1512, and in those addressed to Pope Clement VII. between 1524 and 1526, it will be found that he regarded himself as a sculptor first, although knowing his worth in the sister branches of painting and architecture. This description of "sculptor" also appears on the contracts made by him in matters relating to both building and painting. Thus, for instance, when he reluctantly yielded to the wish of Pope Julius that he should paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he wrote to the Pontiff on the 10th of May, 1508: "I, Michael Angelo, Sculptor, have received 500 ducats on account for paintings in the Sistine Chapel, on which I have commenced to work this day." Again, when offering to execute a monument in Florence to the memory of Dante, he wrote as follows to Pope Leo X.: "I, Michael Angelo, Sculptor, also implore your Holiness that I may have your permission to make a tomb of the divine poet." In his poems Michael Angelo refers again and again to his position in life as being that of a sculptor, and in one of them he says:

"Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto
Che un sol marmo in se non circumscriva."

And from this I think there can be little doubt that this manifold genius considered sculpture his first claim. The sculptor's is the highest of all the manual arts, and especially so when, as in the case of Buonarroti, it approaches what may be justly called the superhuman, this being the only word that will apply to some of those statues called forth out of marble by the master's chisel, creations as immortal as the noblest ideals of the greatest poets. Surely humanity should feel a higher conception of the Divinity to find one of His creatures gifted with such a talent! The brain and the hand that wrought out in marble, and painted in colour the *Pietà* in St. Peter's, the tombs of the Medici, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and *The Last Judgement*, and planned the cupola of St. Peter's, equalled, if they did not surpass, any of the world's greatest geniuses, whether that genius be called Homer, Dante or Shakespeare: it would savour of impertinence to praise such work; it should only be approached in a spirit of reverent contemplation. It is to be regretted that Carlyle did not include Michael Angelo among his "Heroes," for not one of those of whom he wrote was more worthy the name.

At the time of Buonarroti's birth Italy only possessed second-rate sculptors. The giants of an earlier day had departed. Ghiberti—the maker of the Baptistery doors at Florence, which Michael Angelo said were worthy of being the gates of Paradise—had already been dead twenty years; Donatello ten; and Verocchio passed away at about the time when Michael Angelo had at length persuaded his unwilling father to allow him to take up art as a profession. Sculpture in the Peninsula

had retrograded, while painting was advancing with mighty strides. Whilst working with Ghirlandajo Michael Angelo's eyes were suddenly opened to the power of sculpture on seeing the collection of antiquities formed by Lorenzo de' Medici. The isles of Greece had been ransacked to add to the already large number of statues brought from Rome by Cosimo. A Venetian named Andreolo Giustinian, established in Greece, and a missionary monk, Francesco da Pistoja, who had visited all the coasts of the Morea, had both helped to make this collection of marbles. It was due to Donatello that the Medicean villa, with the treasures it contained, was thrown open to the Florentines, and the vogue created by the sight of these artistic spoils of old Rome and ancient Greece may be justly considered as one of the chief causes of the quickening of the new art movement in Northern Italy, known as the Renaissance.

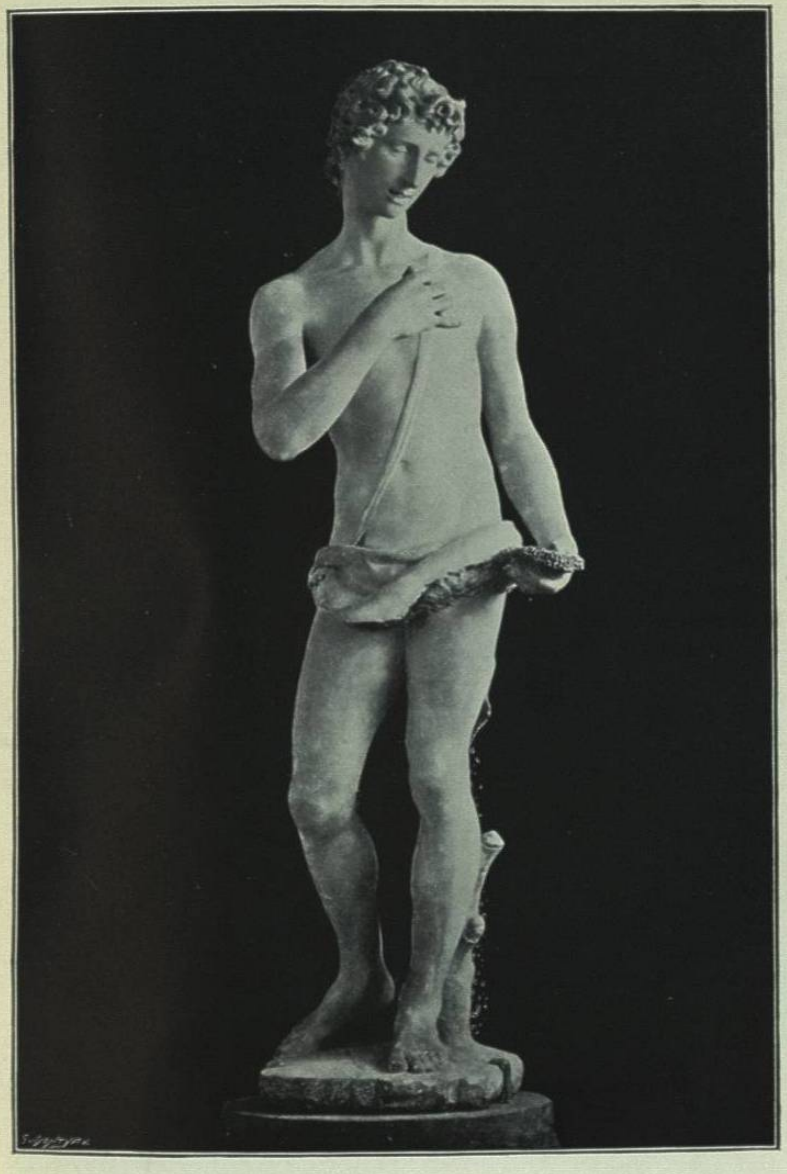
In those spacious gardens by the side of the Arno, and in Lorenzo the Magnificent's palace-villa, young Buonarroti about the year 1488 began his education as a sculptor, his contemporaries little dreaming that he was to carry the expression of that art to the highest point it has attained in the modern world.

The well-known story of the marble mask of a faun or satyr, which is now shown in the museum of the Bargello at Florence, needs no repetition, and whether young Michael Angelo knocked out one of the satyr's teeth to prove the justice of Lorenzo's criticism that an old face should be more toothless, is of no importance beyond showing that the Magnificent bestowed a close attention on the work of the young art students studying in his gardens.

Michael Angelo's earliest works in marble, *The Combat of the Centaurs* and the *Madonna*, in the Casa Buonarroti, are of interest, but none of these early specimens of his talent are of very great merit.

Soon after the death of his princely patron Buonarroti began to study anatomy, the Prior of the Church of San Spirito allowing him the use of one of the monastic cells in which he could dissect undisturbed. It is known that he injured his health by the fierce energy that he threw, as was his wont always when working, into this gruesome study. Earlier Florentine artists had also studied anatomy. Of these the most eminent was Donatello, and the extreme thinness of many of that sculptor's statues painfully recall the dissecting table. There is nothing of this emaciation in the later sculpture of Michael Angelo, although some of his earlier work may be reminiscent of the elder man. But Buonarroti possessed what Donatello lacked, the opportunity of studying not only from dead bodies, but from the immortal forms of the Greek divinities. And thus he combined the knowledge of the body, its structure and physiology, with the human form as portrayed by the ancient Greeks.

After his first visit to Bologna, where his principal work appears to have been the little figure of a kneeling angel in marble, he found on his return to Florence that the city was under the austere influence of Savonarola, and one can readily believe that the great friar's teaching turned Buonarroti's thoughts to the Scriptures, thoughts which he was to translate into deathless paintings on the walls of the Vatican in a manner which no artist had until then attempted.



Alinari photo] [*Accademia, Florence*

MARBLE STATUE OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

ATTRIBUTED TO MICHAEL ANGELO

Brogi photo]

PIETÀ

FROM A CAST OF THE ORIGINAL AT ST. PETER'S, ROME

Of the statuette of a sleeping child by Michael Angelo, which was taken for an antique when it was first seen in Rome, we have only somewhat uncertain statements to go upon, and it was not until the month of May in 1495 that a new phase began in the development of Michael Angelo's career. While in Rome between the years 1495 and 1496 Buonarroti's first work as a sculptor was probably the kneeling Cupid now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The upraised arm is a restoration. A more important work, done whilst he was in Rome on this first visit, is the *Bacchus*, now in the Bargello Museum, the statue so much disliked by Shelley and so much admired by Ruskin. This *Bacchus* is as highly polished as a gem; it is of life size, and shows Buonarroti's mastery of the lines of the human form. A French sculptor, M. Guillaume, who is the head of the French Academy in Rome and who speaks with authority both as an artist and as an art critic, places this statue of *Bacchus* among the finest creations of the Renaissance. To this period of Michael Angelo's career belongs, in the opinion of some writers on art, the *St. John the Baptist*, recently discovered at Pisa. But to judge from photographs I myself should be inclined to attribute the *St. John* to Donatello or to one of his pupils.

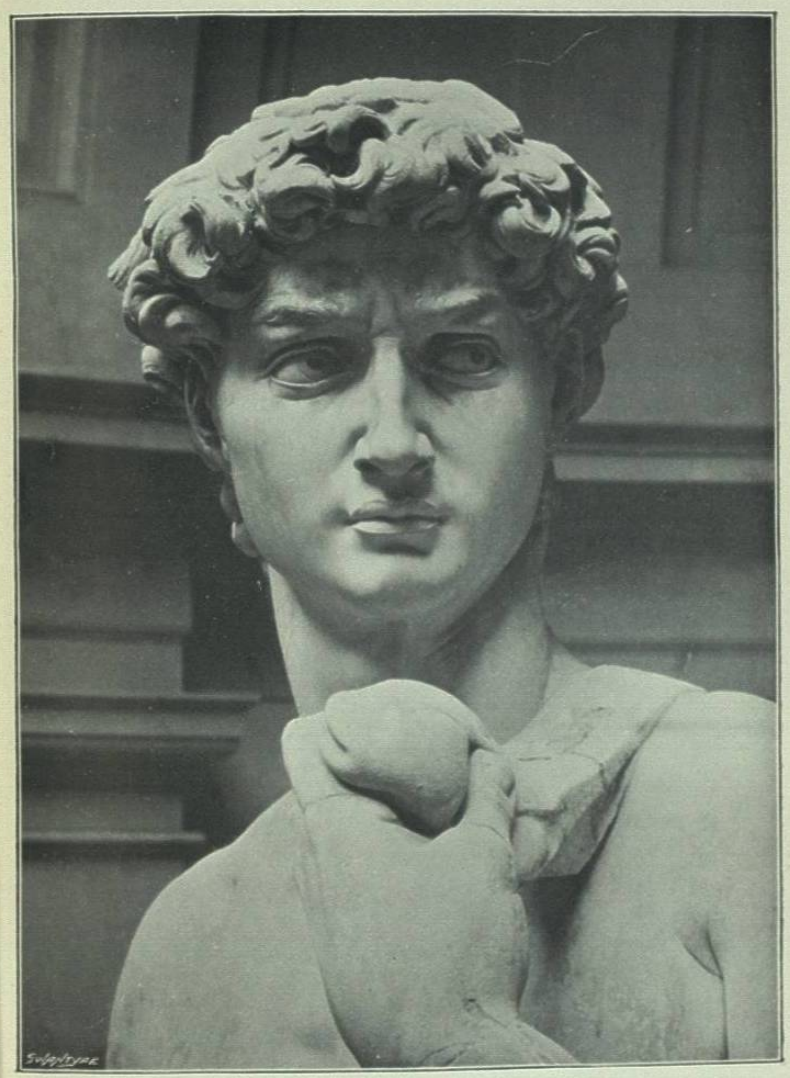
When the news of the tragic end of Savonarola came to Rome a change at once entered into the spirit of Michael Angelo's work—a change that is expressed in that intensely pathetic group of the *Pietà* which belongs to this time. Buonarroti had said, "Io intendo scultura quella che si fa per forza di levan," and he made good this boast.

The subject of the *Pietà* has been represented in a

thousand churches, but never has its awfulness been treated as we see it, by the hand of Buonarroti, in the incomparable group in St. Peter's. "Purity enjoys eternal youth," Michael Angelo answered to someone who found fault with the youthfulness of the Madonna's appearance, but few were found to criticise, and Michael Angelo had redeemed his pledge, which Galli had given the Abbot of St. Denis (called by Vasari the Cardinal di San Dionigi), that "no master of our days could make a finer work."

With this *Pietà* commenced the series of Buonarroti's greatest works, culminating in the tombs of the Medici in the Sacristy of San Lorenzo at Florence. The marble group of the *Madonna and Child*, in the church of Notre Dame at Bruges, dates a little later than the *Pietà*. In this group the Child has a most mournful expression, as if in presage of all the ills and sufferings that were to come; the Madonna's face is somewhat expressionless, in fact almost sheepish.

In 1501, when again in Florence, where his fame had preceded him, Michael Angelo was given a colossal block of damaged marble to fashion as he would. Out of this shapeless block issued the splendid figure of the youthful *David*. It should be remembered that this marble had already been worked upon, and this added difficulties to a difficult task. While at work on the *David* Buonarroti also made a figure of *St. Matthew*, as well as two circular alto-rilievos of Madonnas. The *St. Matthew* is only roughed out in the marble, and has in consequence the appearance of a gigantic human fossil. More remarkable for the difficulties the sculptor had to surmount in hewing it out, and for its size, than for its beauty, the



Alinari photo] [*Accademia, Florence*

HEAD OF DAVID

David has great merit; the head recalls those of the youths of Monte Cavallo, and the sculptor doubtless had been inspired by those heroic figures during the time he had spent in Rome.

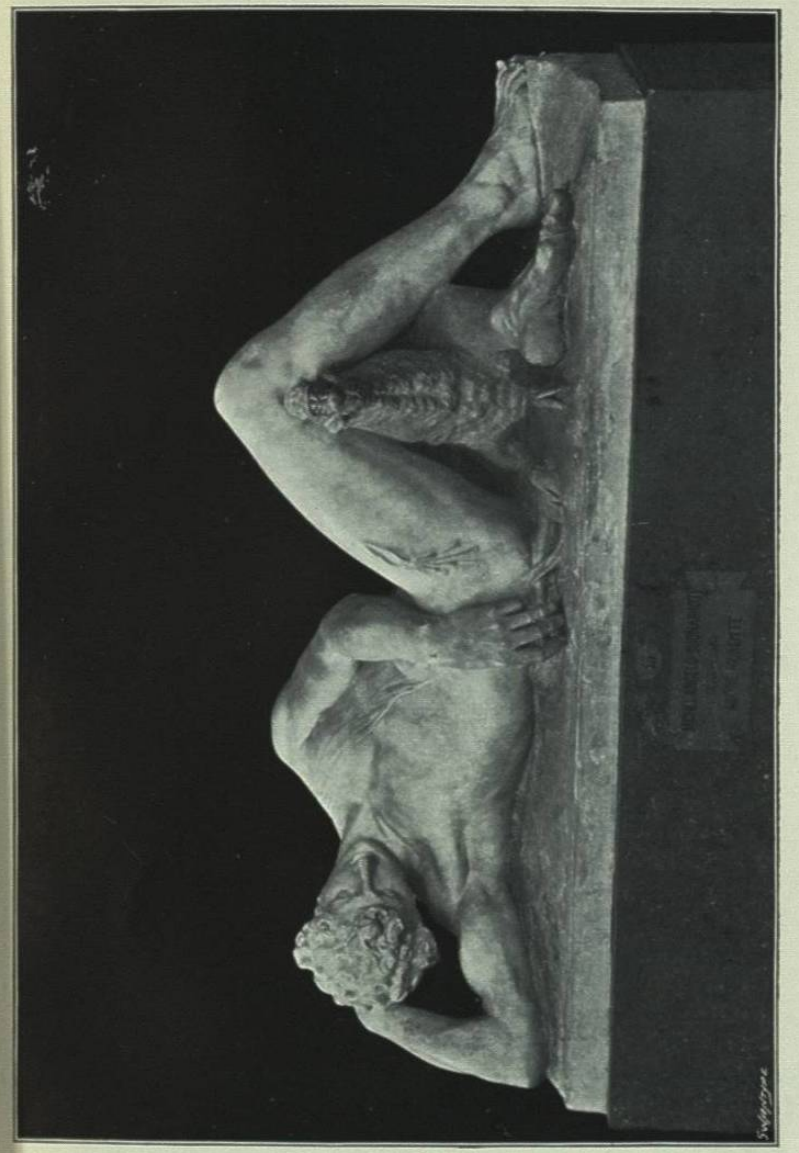
Models in wax of the *David* exist, both at Florence, in the Casa Buonarroti, and in London. When commencing to work Michael Angelo seems to have frequently sketched out his first idea in this material; there are three fine models in wax in the National Gallery at Edinburgh of the *Madonna and Child*, and of the two Medicean Dukes in the Sacristy of San Lorenzo. The Victoria and Albert Museum is also very rich in these wax models of Michael Angelo. It possesses no less than eleven, all most valuable for the student, and for those who admire the sculptor's genius. In them we have the very touch of the master's hand, and they are consequently as precious as the MSS. of some great writer. There are indeed few plaster shops which do not possess casts of some of his works, so widely are they known in the art emporiums of Europe. At the Victoria and Albert Museum there is also a mask in terra-cotta, which is described in the inventory of the Gherardini Collection as the work of Michael Angelo. Though so small in dimension (it is but three inches high), it has all the *bravura* of Buonarroti in its expression of warlike ferocity, wonderfully rendered by a few masterful touches. By some it is thought to be the first idea for the mask which lies beneath the figure of *Night* in the San Lorenzo Sacristy. Besides all these, and the kneeling Cupid in marble, the Victoria and Albert Museum contains an unfinished statuette in marble, three feet high, of *St. Sebastian*, which belonged to the Gigli-Campana Collec-

tion. The saint is represented standing, with his arms bound behind him. The arms and legs are merely roughed in, the marks of the chisel and drill still showing on its surface.

The *Dying Adonis* in the Museum of the Bargello is believed to have been modelled by Buonarroti whilst working on the *David*, as well as the beautiful figure of a youth standing in a contemplative attitude, his feet treading on the form of an old man. This is known as the *Victory*, and is in the same museum.

The greater part of Michael Angelo's later life, as we have seen, was passed in Rome, and there forty years of his career were given by him to the work on the tomb of Pope Julius II. The fifty statues which were originally intended to decorate that monument dwindled down to the solitary *Moses*, and the two attendant figures, and in the church where Julius is *not* buried sits the great Lawgiver, looking like the mighty god Pan. The *Moses* was not finished until 1534. Michael Angelo had lived for thirty years with this statue in his studio, and when at length it was completed it became, according to Vasari, a kind of idol to the Jews of Rome, who flocked to it on their Sabbath, "like a flight of swallows, men and women, to visit and worship this figure, not as the work of the human hand, but as something divine." It was certainly extraordinary that the Jews should have made this weekly pilgrimage to a Christian church, and as Vasari is not always reliable, considerable doubt exists as to the truth of this tale, which was probably an exaggeration used by Vasari to glorify still further the talent of the master.

Although the *Moses* is in some respects the most com-



THE DYING ADONIS

[*Bargello Museum, Florence*

Anderson photo]