

To what extent did Michelangelo imitate nature in his sculptures

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ABSTRACT. In Michelangelo's art world, naturalism is a very important and obvious aesthetic pursuit. Regarding this feature, both Vasari and Condivi mentioned in the biography of Michelangelo. Especially in his sculptures, the use and understanding of natural elements have multiple levels and deep expressions. Through the study of to what extent did Michelangelo imitate nature in his sculptures, we could have a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of Michelangelo's artistic theory and achievements, thereby helping to better understand the greatest artist in the world.

1. Introduction

Vasari pointed out in the preface of the first part of *the Lives of the Artists*, that art is similar to the essence of our life, with its birth, growth, aging and death process. He hoped to use this analogy to make regenerated evolutionary process of art easier to understand [1]. According to Vasari's view, the progress of art in the classical period could be divided into three specific periods, namely childhood, youth, and adulthood. The art of the third period, that is, in Vasari's own time, reached a state of full maturity. Michelangelo in the third period is undoubtedly the most outstanding artist in Vasari's mind. He once praised Michelangelo that "The man who wins the palm among artists both living and dead, who transcends and surpasses them all, is the divine Michelangelo Buonarroti, who reigns supreme not merely in one of these arts but in all three at once." [2] However, among the many praises of Michelangelo, Vasari mentioned that he not only surpassed those artists who almost conquered nature, but even surpassed the most outstanding ancient artists who had undoubtedly conquered nature.

On this point, he coincides with Condivi's description of Michelangelo's art. (Condivi describes Michelangelo's art as being on nature.) [3] "Nature" is very obvious and multi-leveled in Michelangelo's works. We could even think that the reason why Michelangelo can bring art to a perfect situation and makes his works more elegant and pure, because his works are infinitely close to nature, even transcending nature itself, thus obtaining a kind of spiritual freedom. In this article, I will use his sculptures as examples to analyze how Michelangelo embodied his understanding and pursuit of naturalism in his sculpture career, and the element of "naturalness" presented in different forms and degrees in sculptures of different periods and themes.

In general, the ways that Michelangelo relied on nature in his sculpture creation could be roughly classified into five, and these five ways of presenting nature from the outside to the inside. These five ways not only have synchronic creative passion in harmony with each other, but also it has gradually deepened in the diachronic creative experience.

2. Main using ways

2.1 The way1 ---- by the appearance and decoration of sculpted characters

The first way is through the appearance and decoration of sculpted characters, which includes the real shaping of the physical texture and facial expressions of the characters, and the natural carving of external decorations such as the characters' clothing. In fact, this was the first skill that the artist learned and presented in the work, and in the subsequent time, the artist continued to strengthen and optimize this skill to the point of complete control. Here is an example of one of his very early sculptures. *Madonna of the stairs* (see Figure1) was created in about 1491 and is a representative work of Michelangelo's youth. The Madonna is sitting on a square marble next to the stairs. The Holy Light frames her classically beautiful side face. The folds of the clothes extending from the line of the nose are carved out between the Holy Light and the face, so that the face of the Madonna looks more three-dimensional and natural. However, the face of the Madonna is portrayed very alienated, showing the physical and psychological distance from her child and the viewer. The reason why the face of the Virgin is portrayed in this way is because in Renaissance art, Christ usually sleeps in childhood implying the final death of Christ, the child's drooping head indicates his sleeping state, so the Madonna should have foreseen the final tragic fate of the child in her arms. It cannot show the common mother's love for the child, instead, it shows worried and helpless, and the indifferent expression of the Madonna can be understood naturally. At the same time, down the main character's face, the folds of the clothes are scattered in a soft and gentle manner, covering the shoulders of the Madonna, surrounding her arms and legs, covering the marble seat and on the bottom edge of frame carved. The sleeping child is embraced by the mother, the head and sturdy arms of the son and the folds of the clothes of the mother are handled quite naturally as well.



Fig.1 Michelangelo, Madonna of the stairs, about 1491, Casa Buonarroti, Florence

As far as the portrayal of the facial expressions of the characters is concerned, Michelangelo seems to imagine the most appropriate and natural expressions of the characters according to the characteristics and real situations of the characters in different works, such as sculptures related to the theme with the Madonna and Child, *Madonna of the stairs*, *the Pitti Tondo* (see Figure2), *the Bruges Madonna* (see Figure3) and *the Taddei Tondo* (see Figure4), etc. Although these sculptures were formed in different periods of Michelangelo, the same thing is that the expressions of the Madonna all have the undetectable sense of sadness and alienation.

In addition, the sculptures related to the theme of Pieta are relevant with this point as well. Unlike the theme of the Madonna and the child yet, in these series of sculptures, the Madonna embraced in the arms is not the infant son, but the dead adult Christ. Therefore, the expression of the Madonna is expressed by the artist with a sense of sadness greater than a sense of alienation. Michelangelo has carved three works related to the pieta through his life, *the Roman Pieta* (see Figure5), *the Florentine Pieta* (see Figure6) and *the Rondanini Pieta* (see Figure7). The first work *the Roman Pieta* was completed earlier (1498-1499), and it is also one of the most famous and beloved works. The latter two belong to Michelangelo's very late works, especially *the Rondanini Pieta*, which could almost be regarded as the last work of Michelangelo. Compared with the exquisite and completeness of *the Roman Pieta*, the last two works are among the many "unfinished" works by Michelangelo. But similarly, whether the face of the Madonna is greatly carved and polished or roughly presented in general, it does not prevent the viewer from reading the deep sadness that is only to a mother from her face.



Fig.2 Michelangelo, the Pitti Tondo, about1504, Bargello Museum, Florence



Fig.3 Michelangelo, the Bruges Tondo, about1504, Notre-Dame, Bruges



Fig.4 Michelangelo, the Taddei Tondo, about 1504, Royal Academy, London

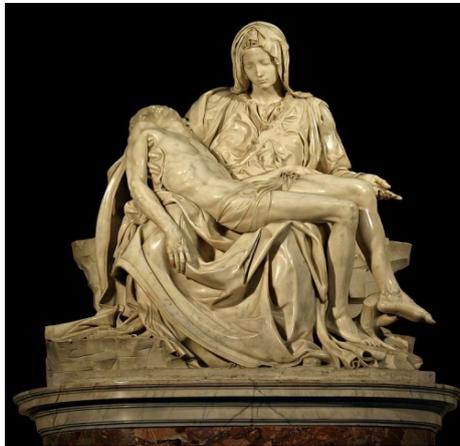


Fig.5 Michelangelo, the Roman Pietà, 1498-1499, Basilica di San Pietro in Vaticano, Roma



Fig.6 Michelangelo, the Florentine Pietà, about 1547-1555, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence



Fig.7 Michelangelo, the Rondanini Pietà, about 1556-1564, Castello Sforzesco, Milan

As far as the decoration of the character is concerned, this is also a very important part of the image of the character that looks nature. The artist's treatment of this aspect must be in harmony and the indivisible degree with the character's own temperament and shape, which could be regarded as natural and appropriate. Michelangelo did do it. In *Bacchus* (see Figure 8), in order to show the identity of Bacchus, the artist highlights the typical element of grapes. We are able to see that the grapes hang down from the head of Bacchus, in addition to the bunch of grapes in the hands of the goat man. They are very naturally combined with the hair of Bacchus, making it easy for viewers to confuse the two. But it is for this reason that the god of wine is also portrayed in a more unique way.

Besides, Michelangelo will also use some more detailed decoration techniques to strengthen the characters. He was used to cutting a thin line on the marble on the forehead of the Madonna. This detail could be found in *the Bruges Madonna*, *the Roman Pietà* and so on. If this thin line is viewed from a distance under the light state envisioned by Michelangelo (i.e. natural light from top to bottom), this thin line will produce a shadow line that seems to be absent, and thus it allows the viewer to naturally produce an amazing illusion effect as if seeing the Madonna wearing a light and airy veil.[4] Michelangelo succeeded in creating an artistic effect that is easy to achieve on canvas but difficult to accomplish in sculpture.



Fig.8 Michelangelo, Bacchus, about 1496-1479, Bargello Museum, Florence

2.2 The way2 ----- by the external objects

Michelangelo created a natural environment and a sense of real atmosphere by carving external objects. Simply speaking, when Michelangelo was sculpting works, in addition to focusing most of his energy on the main character, he often sculpted some minor external objects in order to make the overall image of the characters more natural. This is different from the above-mentioned decorative objects by carving characters. The former is to make the characters themselves look more vivid, while the latter is to make sculpture in a natural and real environment. Generally speaking, the external objects Michelangelo chosen are not complicated, and are mostly natural elements, such as branches and stones. When he designed *Bacchus*, he carved a stone plinth for his portrait, because this work was originally designed to be placed in the Jacopo Galli Garden (see Figure9), so it would look real natural on the outdoor ground.



Fig.9 Maarten van Heemskerck, *Drawing of the Bacchus in the sculpture garden of Jacopo Galli, about 1533-1536*

We could also find the similar situation in his other works such as *David*, *the Roman Pieta*, *the Rebellious Slaves* (see Figure10), *the Dying Slaves* (see Figure11), the tree trunks and branches that appear in time extend from behind characters. This clever design is not only to provide a stable and reliable supporting point for portraits (especially a large-scale portrait) naturally, it can also help the characters create a realistic environment at the same time. And for the sculptures of the characters from the distant ages, the environment from nature is easier for viewers to enter the artistic conception of the work and achieve a more real feeling.



Fig.10 Michelangelo, the Rebellious Slave, about 1513-1516, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig.11 Michelangelo, the dying Slave, about 1513-1516, Musée du Louvre, Paris

2.3 The way3 ---- by sculptural proportions adapted to the specific visual situation

The third method is to adjust the proportion of the characters according to the real function of the specific sculpture and the expected placement position, so as to achieve the visual naturalness of the viewer. If this kind of work is viewed from an ordinary perspective, it will usually show the inconsistency in the proportion of the portrait. For example, in *the Pitti Tondo* commissioned by the Pitti family, we would notice the low and awkward proportions of the Madonna on this circle relief. Michelangelo made the head of the Madonna protrude from the stone slab, and the proportion of the lower body was reduced to a certain extent than the normal proportion. William E. Wallace explains about this point that Michelangelo has learned a lesson from Donatello, knowing that this round piece will be placed high on the wall. At least it will exceed the height of dado. So he adjusts the

shape of the portrait according to this situation. Looking through the front-down perspective from top to bottom (*di sotto in situ*), the proportion of the Virgin is not strange at all, but rather natural.[4]

A similar situation also happened to *David*. If the viewer looks at *David* up close, he will find that his head is disproportionately large, even on his huge body (see Figure12). This is actually a performance effect deliberately used by Michelangelo, because the sculpture was originally placed in the entrance square of the Town Hall as a symbol of the city of Florence. So this sculpture is not only in a huge outdoor environment, but also visited by citizens of the city. Therefore, the abnormally sized head is to correct the natural shrinking feeling of viewing a portrait from a distance. Likewise, in the sculpture of *the Risen Christ* (see Figure13), the proportion of the portrait is often criticized, which is specifically expressed as a heavy torso and wide hips supported by thin legs. In fact, the concept and creation of *the Risen Christ* are based on shrines, which will also limit the viewer's perspective. Michelangelo should be very clear about the location of this work, so the angle of the rear view of this sculpture has been sacrificed. When viewed from the front, especially from front-left view, the overall image of Christ presents a reasonable effect and the proportions of the human body looks more natural, the body and the cross in his hand merge into an elegant and harmonious structure as well.



Fig.12 Michelangelo, David, 1501-1504, Accademia Museum, Florence



Fig.13 Michelangelo, the Risen Christ, 1519-1520, Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, Roma

From this treatment we can see that Michelangelo's naturalistic aesthetic philosophy was not simply to make the work look beautiful and harmonious, but rather to combine external particulars on top of that, in pursuit of natural beauty in practical effect.

2.4 The way4 ---- by character's behavior and movement

This method lies in the design of the character's behavior and movement. Michelangelo was an expert in creating a non-fixed dynamic and natural effect by designing unique and smooth body language. Firstly, he was good at designing portraits. We can see that the action modeling is difficult or even distorted in reality, but there is a unique and natural presentation in his works. Secondly, he had ability to make the work feel different no matter from which angle it is viewed by shaping the movement of the portrait, so that the viewing method changes from a traditional single and focused mode to a full-view surround mode.

In terms of the former feature, the two works *Night* (see Figure14) and *Day* (see Figure15) in the Medici chapel statues both present a posture that is difficult for common people to complete. However, this weird form is presented in a very natural way, so that it is difficult for the viewer to perceive what is inappropriate. In *Night*, this female image with a masculine body shows her in a distorted posture to show the fuzzy feeling between sleep and awakening, and the tranquility it exudes is the same as the tranquility of the night with fascinating air.[5] And the extreme distortion of the figure statue in *Day* causes all the muscles to tighten, which seems to imply the huge energy contained in the gradual rise of the sun. Michelangelo made his works have extremely high artistic value by using such a unique and natural way.



Fig.14 Michelangelo, Night, 1520-1534, the Medici chapel, Florence



Fig.15 Michelangelo, Day, 1520-1534, the Medici chapel, Florence

In terms of the latter feature, the requirement for dynamic is more emphasized. Freud once tried to describe the common characteristic of many marble statues of Michelangelo and thought that they all behave as an expectation, as if something is coming, and that is a key which gives them natural life and dynamics.[6] When we are watching *David* (see Figure16), only by turning to the side and back of the portrait can we see that he is holding a stone in his right hand and the other end of the sling and the belt, besides, we can see that the body's center of gravity moves to the back of the right leg and tension in the buttocks. Combined with the full facial expressions, the artist freezes this tense moment and make it flow forever. Everyone who sees this hero could feel his bravery and the tension of war.



Fig.16 Michelangelo, David, 1501-1504, Accademia Museum, Florence

2.5 The way5 ---- by an unfinished-skill

The last way is to use unfinished techniques to make the work. The naturalness shown in this way is more abstract, which could be understood as an inner nature. That is, Michelangelo mentioned at the beginning of the article not only has the ability to conquer nature, but also has the ability to transcend nature. At this time, the meaning of nature also becomes profound, which should be understood as being able to see eternity in his works as nature and time.

Regarding Michelangelo's "unfinished", it could be divided into two situations. One is actual "unfinished", that is, due to various reasons and circumstances, restricting or stopping Michelangelo's creation of works. In fact, there are many such works through Michelangelo's life. The second is deliberate "unfinished", that is, Michelangelo realized that "unfinished" can be used as a sculpting method and artistic technique to shape and express works [7]. This may also be the origin of the earliest modernist sculpture art.

In the traditional sense, it may be considered that a complete and perfect sculpture has a complete image and is perfectly polished. The artist needs to hide the specific carving traces and all the details in the creation process. In fact, this could only represent a form of sculpture. To a certain extent, the use of "unfinished" sculpture methods can more stimulate the potential of portraits, closer to reality and nature, because it gives the viewer more possibility to make up for the gap of imagination. For example, in *The Taddei Tondo*, the unfinished technique was used for the first time to create a completed work. We could clearly see that on the left side of the Madonna and Child, the childhood St. John is still part of the rough stone, and the Madonna is not yet completely emerge from the blurred background. This way of presentation not only makes the picture more three-dimensional, but also makes the overall image of the characters more interesting. More importantly,

the style of relief is closer to the nature with air of life. It is said that the first viewer of this work was Raphael, and it was also appreciated by the Taddei family.

The same method is also used in *the Pitti Tondo, Day and Dusk* in The Medici Chapel Status. Especially in *Dusk*, the head of the portrait also uses the "unfinished" performance. The rough cutting facial expression contrasts strongly with the smooth body. As William said that the eyes staring from under the broad forehead, the firm lines of the lips, all allow this face to make expressions that are not possible in more "complete" works. Especially, what we seem to see inside is the deep dusk and the coming of night through the rough eye socket outline. As a result, the anthropomorphic image of dusk is closer to the feeling that dusk can bring to people in nature, and even is beyond the natural world, with eternity and divinity.

3. Critical thinking and summary

However, we still need to be clearly aware that his naturalistic style is not clearly expressed in all works. As far as sculpture is concerned, on the one hand, some of his works also focus on other art forms to present the form of the work and express the meaning of the work, such as the statues of the two Medici dukes in the Medici Chapel (*Giuliano* and *Lorenzo*). It is said that some people criticized Michelangelo for not allowing the statues to be closer to them, but Michelangelo replied that no one will remember their looks in a thousand years. In fact, it is true, and now only their powerful symbolic image is left impressive. This kind of symbolic artistic technique is also one that Michelangelo is good at.

On the other hand, we are usually unwilling to think that top artists, like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael have normal works with low artistic content. However, we I have to admit that the fact that not every piece of art works is perfect. Especially during the Renaissance period, most of the art works were not created by the subjective wishes of the painters, and many of these were ordered. Therefore, some works may be completed as tasks, and then the works may not have a higher value of artistry. Correspondingly, for the naturalness that needs higher artistic requirements, the degree of authenticity of naturalism shown in the relevant works is not very high. For example, the two wooden statues of *Saint Gregory* and *Saint Pius* carved by Michelangelo for the Piccolomini Altar in his early years, compared with his other works, the whole effect of the portraits are lacking in vitality. What we should understand is that it does not explain the level of the artist, nor can it be used to doubt his achievements. As we known David was created not long after this same period.

In summary, Michelangelo roughly uses these five methods to interpret the naturalism in sculpture. And the degree of interpretation goes from the outside to the inside, from shallow to deep. There is no doubt that in Michelangelo's art, he pursues natural beauty and strives to achieve harmony and unity between natural beauty and artistic beauty.

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