



## “L'AMOR DI MICHELAGNOLO E LA FATICA INSIEME”

### *The Casts of the three Pietà*

#### PIETÀ OF ST. PETER — ♦ — *Vatican City, St. Peter's Basilica*

The contract for the *Pietà*, placed since 1749 in the first chapel on the right of St. Peter's Basilica, was signed on 26 August 1498 by the twenty-three year old Michelangelo and Cardinal Jean de Bilhères, Abbot of Saint-Denis, titular of the basilica of Santa Sabina and ambassador of the King of France Charles VIII to Pope Alexander VI.

Michelangelo personally went to Carrara to supervise the quarrying of the best quality block of Apuan white marble, carving it on site before transporting it to Rome. Sculpted in about two years, the *Pietà* would commit the artist to an iconography, more Nordic than Italian, in which the dead Christ lies prone on the knees of the Madonna.

In addition to being the only work signed by Buonarroti, the sculpture is among the smoothest and most finished of his production, as Giorgio Vasari recalled, according to whom “it is a miracle that a stone from the beginning, without any form, has ever been reduced to that perfection that nature with difficulty forms in the flesh”.

#### BANDINI PIETÀ — ♦ — *Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo*

So called because it belonged to the Florentine banker Francesco Bandini, to whom the artist himself gave it in 1561, the *Bandini Pietà* was seen during its execution (1547-1555) by Ascanio Condivi, who noted that Michelangelo wanted to “donate this Pietà to some church and, at the foot of the altar where it is placed, to be buried”, which invests it with a religious significance full of personal values.

Speaking of this work, one of the many unfinished by the master, who destroyed the left leg of Christ perhaps because he was exasperated by the hardness of the marble, Vasari wrote that “if it were finished by him in the world, every other work of his would be surpassed by it”.

The Florentine *Pietà* depicts the dramatic moment when Nicodemus hands the lifeless body

of Christ to Mary, a smoothed and polished body, unlike other parts left in a rough ‘unfinished’ state. Michelangelo has attributed his likeness to Nicodemus, depicted embracing Jesus, Mary and Mary Magdalene.

**RONDANINI PIETÀ** — ♦ — *Milan, Museo del Castello Sforzesco*

The *Rondanini Pietà* (1552-1564) was left unfinished in Michelangelo’s Roman studio in Macel de’ Corvi, not far away from the Campidoglio: a “pietà in the arms of Our Lady”, identifiable with this one, is in fact recorded at his studio in a letter from Daniele da Volterra to Vasari dated 17 March 1564, a month after Buonarroti’s death.

As in the case of the *Bandini Pietà*, the destination of this one was also private and here too, at least at an early stage of the work, it must have been a man holding the body of Christ, as evidenced by the male tunic open at the left knee, which authorises the hypothesis that it was Nicodemus.

In some ways an indecipherable masterpiece, the *Rondanini Pietà* is the last fruit of the inexhaustible creativity of an artist by now in his twilight years, who “goes bent over and with fatigue raises his head”, as Don Miniato Pitti wrote to Vasari on 10 October 1563, but who “still waits to continually scarp away his head”.