

Michelangelo Short Guide

Michelangelo by Elizabeth Ripley

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Overview

Michelangelo is widely recognized as one of the greatest artists of all time. A preeminent sculptor of the early sixteenth century, he also painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling and was the principal architect of St. Peter's in Rome.

Michelangelo embodied the ideals of the Italian Renaissance with his breadth of achievement and his artistic integration of classical forms and deeply religious themes. The Michelangelo portrayed in Ripley's biography, however, is not like the idealized demigod of his sculpture David but is instead an ordinary person with foibles and passions. Temperamental and physically unattractive, he vacillates between arrogance and almost abject dependence on the powerful people who support his labor. On the other hand, he forms several tender attachments over the course of his life and exhibits admirable loyalty and self-discipline.

Ripley's biography not only provides fascinating insights into the life of this creative genius but also offers an interesting introduction to the historical and cultural elements of the Renaissance.

By drawing connections between Michelangelo's life and art, Ripley reinforces the book's purpose of showing artistic perfection emerging from a very real and imperfect existence.

About the Author

Elizabeth Blake Ripley was born in New Haven, Connecticut, on June 9, 1906. She attended Smith College, spending her junior year studying at the Sorbonne, in Paris, and graduating in 1928 with majors in French and art.

After graduation, Ripley traveled extensively abroad while free-lancing in both writing and theater design. She steeped herself in the famous works of art that eventually became the core of her life's work. During this period she married Kenneth Ripley, but they divorced after six years.

Ripley began illustrating books for Oxford University Press in 1940, while studying at the Art Students League in New York. In 1948 she began a Christmas card business that did well enough to become a permanent vocation. But following the success of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, she decided to devote herself to a career as a biographer.

Ripley settled in New England, where, in addition to her writing and design work, she enjoyed gardening and had a special interest in the craft of scarecrowmaking. She regularly did volunteer hospital work and made recordings for the blind. She died on June 21, 1969, in New London, Connecticut.

Setting

The Italy into which Michelangelo is born in 1475 is a patchwork of fourteen rival states and kingdoms. Of these, the Republic of Florence—stretching from the west coast of Italy to well east of the city itself—is particularly well placed for the European trade routes, and it has become dominant as a commercial and banking center. The Medici, a banking family, maintain political control of the state. In Michelangelo's youth, Lorenzo de Medici controls Florence, presiding over the blossoming of the Italian Renaissance.

Florentines realize that they live in a very special period in the development of art. Brunelleschi's Duomo, Giotto's Campanile, Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise, and Donatello's sculpture, give the city an unmatched visual identity. The Medici appreciate and lavishly support fine art, and both artists and patrons compare this era to golden ages of the past.

The Medici concentration of wealth and power, however, threatens social stability, and the discontent of the masses simmers beneath the glossy surface of artistic splendor. Lorenzo de Medici, a shrewd ruler, tactfully manages such problems, but his less competent son and heir, Piero, temporarily loses control of Florence to the zealously ascetic monk Savonarola.

This upset forces Michelangelo to seek more diverse patronage, which leads to a second major setting for the story: papal Rome. In this era, the pope's primary function is to provide Rome with a steady source of income by collecting revenues from the western half of the Christian world. The "Great Schism" of 1378-1417—during which two lines of popes were elected, one based in Rome and the other in Avignon, France—previously curtailed this source, but the popes during Michelangelo's lifetime restore Rome to its position of dominance through familiar secular means: warfare, alliances, and dynastic connections. They also celebrate their triumphs in a secular manner, through monumental works of art.

Michelangelo spends his adult life enhancing Rome's monumental splendor and enduring stormy relationships with Pope Julius II and his successors.

Social Sensitivity

Michelangelo's art concerns Christian themes; the artist's strong religious faith inspired some of his most powerful works. Ripley objectively and accurately depicts Michelangelo as a man grounded in Christian belief and culture. Her biography does not focus on the specifics of Christianity but instead explores the universal notion that profound faith or devotion to an ideal can find expression through artistic genius.

Literary Qualities

Michelangelo features the same general format as Ripley's sixteen other biographies of artists, alternating text and black-and-white illustrations in a smooth, brief account of Michelangelo's life. The illustrations match the text to provide a biographical context for many of the artist's works. Some critics have questioned this formulaic approach, suggesting that it blurs distinctions among the various artists that should be highlighted. Critics have also identified some inconsistencies between the purpose and format of Ripley's work, which is aimed at students in grades seven through ten. These critics contend that the naive biographical speculations may be better suited to a younger audience, while the black-and-white illustrations fail to hold the attention of such a young audience. Nonetheless, the succinct art criticism that Ripley offers should encourage readers to pause and contemplate the illustrations and to feel more at home in discussing great art.



Themes and Characters

Ripley describes Michelangelo's sculpture *The Slave* as an expression of the artist's life: "a tragic struggle to realize his gigantic dreams." Michelangelo's imagination seems limitless, but the reality of his human condition brings frustration as well as opportunity. Despite his extraordinary achievements, Michelangelo also experiences moments of resignation and compromise. The counterpoint of success and frustration constitutes the dominant theme in Ripley's book.

The biography's strict linear progression limits characterization in the usual literary sense. Except for Michelangelo himself, characters pass through the story too quickly for their motivations to become clear. For instance, Ludovico Buonarroti, Michelangelo's father, initially disapproves of his son's artistic career. Lorenzo de Medici changes Buonarroti's mind, but Ripley never clarifies whether Lorenzo achieves this by buying Buonarroti's principles or by inspiring him to embrace higher ones.

Buonarroti shows concern for his son in subsequent letters, which Ripley quotes briefly, but the relationship is not developed. Likewise, Lorenzo, one of Michelangelo's two most important patrons, appears only as a source of support, not as a well-rounded character.

Michelangelo's second important patron, Pope Julius II, is better developed than Lorenzo as a character. Aman of some vision, he is also haughty and arrogant. The chief source of friction in the artist's life, he recognizes Michelangelo's unique talents and keeps him subservient by offering unparalleled opportunities for grand achievement.

As Michelangelo advances in years, loyal and loving friends surround him.

Ripley notes their support but describes only one friend in particular: Vittoria Colona, whom Michelangelo meets when he is sixty-three. He receives inspiration from her for three years, before she enters a convent and soon afterward dies. Michelangelo draws strength from this relationship, the closest thing to a romantic element in the story, for the rest of his life.

Michelangelo himself appears alternately arrogant and humble, energetic and exhausted, egalitarian and elitist.

Throughout his life he maintains a deep religious devotion and a dedication to perfection in his art founded upon capturing the beauty of the human form.

Paradoxically, the flesh ultimately elevates his art, even while it establishes his own physical limitations.



Topics for Discussion

1. Michelangelo's experiences as a youth demonstrate that there are both advantages and disadvantages to possessing an exceptional talent. What are some of the problems young Michelangelo faces? How are they resolved?

2. Ripley's biography shows that Michelangelo, a brilliant artist and basically a good man, also has serious flaws in his character. What are these flaws?

How do they affect his art and career?

3. What sort of person does Lorenzo de Medici seem to be? How does he change Michelangelo's life?

4. Why does Ripley see Michelangelo's Madonna of the Stairs as a turning point in the history of art?

5. Do you think Michelangelo is a sincerely religious man? How does his work reflect his devotion?

6. What do you think drives Michelangelo to endure the hardship of working on the Sistine Chapel ceiling?

7. How do you think Michelangelo feels about the rich and powerful people who employ him throughout his career?

What evidence does Ripley present of his feelings?

8. Michelangelo continues to work up to the time of his death. What particular problems and rewards does old age present him?

9. Discuss the symbolism of the statue Michelangelo intends for his own tomb.

What sort of message do you think he has in mind?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is meant by the word "renaissance"? When did the Italian Renaissance begin? What were the chief factors in its inception? Who were the most important people associated with the Italian Renaissance?
2. Research and write a brief biography of Lorenzo de Medici, Giotto, Savonarola, or Leonardo da Vinci.
3. Recent efforts to restore the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel have given rise to controversy. Using newspaper and magazine indexes, research the restoration methods being used, and decide whether you favor or oppose the restoration effort.
4. Using a more comprehensive illustrated source, examine a work by Michelangelo not discussed by Ripley. When, where, and under what circumstances did Michelangelo create this work?
5. Research and report on the Medici family and the roles played by several of its members in the Italian Renaissance.

For Further Reference

Allen, Agnes. *The Story of Michelangelo*.

New York: Roy Co., 1957. This biography for young readers offers more detail than does Ripley's.

Buell, Ellen L. "The Titan." *New York Times Book Review* (March 14, 1954): 24. A capsule review of Ripley's *Michelangelo*.

Coughlan, Robert. *The World of Michelangelo, 1475-1564*. Time-Life Library of Art Series. New York: Time, 1966. A useful substantive background study for high school students and teachers.

Day, Ronald. "Recent Children's Books in the Field of Art." *Horn Book* 30 (October 1954): 343-358. Ripley's *Michelangelo* and Leonardo da Vinci are briefly reviewed.

Hibbard, Howard. *Michelangelo*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. Intended as the first popular biography of Michelangelo, this book is accessible and thoroughly illustrated.

Salmi, Mario, et al. *The Complete Work of Michelangelo*. New York: Reynal, 1966. Thorough and comprehensive, this book features chapters by different authorities on different aspects of Michelangelo's work. Includes many detail photographs, most in black and white.

Wadley, Nicholas. *Michelangelo*. London: Spring Art Books, 1965. A typical collection of color and black-and-white prints, this book includes a chronological chart of Michelangelo's works and an interesting sampling of Michelangelo's own writings.

Weinberger, Martin. *Michelangelo the Sculptor*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967. A detailed academic study of the artist, concentrating on his work as a sculptor.

Related Titles

Michelangelo is part of a series of seventeen introductory biographies of great artists that Ripley wrote for young adults. In addition to Michelangelo, Ripley's more successful biographies include Leonardo da Vinci, which supplies reproductions of Leonardo's fascinating drawings of visionary projects, such as a flying machine; Durer, which reproduces the artist's striking self-portraits at ages thirteen and twenty; and Velasquez, Hokusai, and Copley, which provide sharp insights into the cultures of seventeenth-century Spain, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Japan, and eighteenth-century America, respectively.



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