

The genius trail

Catch the highlights of Michelangelo's stunning works, from his first sculptures to his final one in a history-soaked journey through Florence, Siena, Rome and Milan.

Text **Kalpana Sunder**

The thing about travelling through Italy is that you can be on a food trail through Piedmont, shop till you drop in Milan, lounge at a beach in Naples or just sail down the serene lakes with no real agenda. But for an Italian trip with a twist, try being on the trail of a visionary who redefined art, architecture, sculpture.

Although Michelangelo Buonarroti was Florentine and proud of it and even left word that he be buried in Florence, he spent most of his years outside his native city. Nevertheless, we start at the Bargello in Florence, a small museum often overlooked, with an astonishing collection of sculptures. There are a couple of standout sculptures here – 'Bacchus' and 'Brutus'. Michelangelo depicted the god of wine as a drunk adorned with grapes, but this was not approved by his patron.

History lessons in Florence

The Casa Buonarroti is an extraordinary museum which has a large collection of Michelangelo's early work like 'Madonna of the Steps', carved when he was a teenager, as well as papers, drawings and correspondence. A fascinating piece is the 'Battle of the Centaurs' (depicting a popular Greek myth), carved in white Carrara marble for Lorenzo de' Medici. The San Lorenzo Church and the market around it is, today, a bustling part of Florence. This was where Michelangelo had spent three years creating drawings and models for the façade, but his work was abruptly cancelled by cash-strapped patrons. Later the Medici family came back to him for their family chapel at the church. The graceful Laurentian Library was designed by Michelangelo, too, for the Medicis. The grand vestibule and the spectacular

staircase was one of the greatest architectural achievements ever.

Meeting the star

At the Accademia in Florence, people flock to see 'David'—the complete man. Commissioned in 1501 by the Opera del Duomo which gave the artist a leftover block of marble ruined by another artist, it was meant to commemorate the recently-won independence of Florence. The statue does not have perfect proportions—the head's a little too large for the torso (it was originally meant to adorn the outside of the Duomo and seen from a distance), but it's still the epitome of grace.



▲ Piazzale Michelangelo is designed by architect Giuseppe Poggi and dedicated to Michelangelo, with bronze duplicates of some of his works found elsewhere in Florence.



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We also see the four unfinished but evocative ‘Slaves’ crafted by the genius, struggling to free themselves from stone. Wandering around town, you will see many brilliant copies of ‘David’ all over Florence and to the untrained eye they would look quite genuine.

We pay our respects to Michelangelo at Santa Croce where his tomb lies along with other Renaissance luminaries. Come sunset we are at Piazzale Michelangelo on a hill, overlooking the city, designed by architect Giuseppe Poggi and dedicated to Michelangelo. It has bronze copies of many of his famous works including ‘David’ that nine pairs of oxen had to carry to the hill in 1873! It’s the perfect place to get a ‘postcard’ panoramic view of this city: the rolling hills, the red rooftops, the Duomo in the burnished sun and the sinuous Arno River winding its way through. From here it’s easy to understand what inspired the artist about this beautiful city

Under the Tuscan sun

Rose-beige farmhouses, cypress and olive trees and green rolling hills, Tuscany is one of the most beautiful parts of Italy. Siena in Tuscany, is one of Italy’s best preserved medieval towns: set on the slopes of several hills, it has a gargantuan fan-shaped square, a Gothic town hall and a 12th-century Duomo. The Duomo’s interiors are unique—zebra-striped pillars, a vaulted dome with gold stars and an inlaid mosaic floor with scenes from the Old Testament. In the altarpiece there are four sculptures made by young Michelangelo between 1501 and 1504 of



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A popular anecdote claims that when finishing his ‘Moses’, Michelangelo violently hit the knee of the statue in a temper shouting, “Why don’t you speak to me?”

Saints Peter, Paul, Gregory and Pius. It is said that Michelangelo was distracted by the pressures of various assignments while undertaking these statues and they’re not some of his best work.

The artist’s home

Rome, the Eternal City, has some of Michelangelo’s best works. Pope Julius II summoned Michelangelo to Rome to design his tomb. This could have been one of his most prestigious assignments but Julius passed away, the contract was redrawn several times and funding diminished. The tomb is now famous for the controversial statue of Moses, which we see at the St Pietro in Vincoli Church (St Peter in chains) in Rome. Moses is on a marble chair between two decorated columns holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments. He is depicted with horns in his head (our guide explains that perhaps this was due to a mistranslation of the Hebrew scriptures into Latin where one word meant ‘light’ or ‘horns’). This was created by Michelangelo when he was 38, at the height of his genius. A popular anecdote claims that when finishing this statue of Moses, Michelangelo violently hit

▼ Clockwise from below: Michelangelo’s ‘Moses’ has horns because of his face being described as *cornuta* (horned) in the Latin translation of Exodus; The Sagrestia Nuova was intended as a mausoleum for members of the Medici family; In Basilica di Santa Croce, Michelangelo is buried along with other Italian greats like Galileo and Machiavelli.



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the knee of the statue in a temper shouting, “Why don’t you speak to me?”

Michelangelo’s most famous works are at the iconic Sistine Chapel. On the ceiling is a neck-cracking canvas of scenes from Genesis. Behind the altar is the ‘Last Judgment’—a compendium of the *Divine Comedy*—about 300 figures depicted with amazing coherence and clarity. As we enter St Peter’s Basilica through massive bronze doors opening to marbled floors, we look at the dome designed by Michelangelo in sheer awe. He’s supposed to have said of the dome, “Many believe and I believe that I have been designated for this work by God!” Also mesmerising, is the ‘Pietà’, his only signed statue, across a ribbon on Mary’s chest. It is inside a glass case today because of attempts to vandalise it.

Piety and devotion

The lesser known Porta Pia in Rome is one of the gates in the ancient Aurelian Walls, designed by Michelangelo. It was through a hole in this wall breached by artillery that soldiers entered Rome and completed the unification of Italy. This gate, facing Rome city, not outside, looks more like an element of Roman city as a theatre. It gave vent to his creativity and was one of the last works of the genius. Just behind the Pantheon in Rome we visit the Santa Maria sopra Minerva to see the famous statue of Jesus carved by Michelangelo. This statue of a

muscular risen Christ was so popular, that devotees touched the toes as a mark of adoration, and this began to wear away. The church officials had a bronze shoe made for the foot, and later, a loin cloth drapery was added to the statue.

Milan today, is a fashionista’s town, and though many people know it as the home of da Vinci’s ‘Last Supper’, not many are aware of Michelangelo’s last work—the ‘Rondanini Pietà’ at the Castello Sforzesco, where our trail ends. The ‘Rondanini Pietà’ is a statue of Mary holding a dying Jesus—an outstanding feat for a man aged 90! Despite all his super-human achievements, Michelangelo was disappointed with himself for not achieving more. He wrote poetry, had tempestuous relationships and in his own words:

*My freedom is a slave; my divinity has made itself Mortal.
Oh, unhappy state!
To what misery, to what life I’ve been born!*

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to Milan from Delhi. Milan is well-connected to the rest of the country by road and train. For details on rail connectivity, see www.trenitalia.com

Accommodation

There are a range of hotels and guest houses available which can be booked on the internet or through the official website for Italian tourism.

For more information Log on to www.italiantourism.com



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◀ Clockwise from left: Santa Maria sopra Minerva houses the ‘Cristo della Minerva’—one of Michelangelo’s earliest works to be covered due to censorship; Despite the expertise on display in the frescos of Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo resented the commission; His ‘David’ is an interpretation of an ancient Greek theme—the standing heroic male who’s nude; The figures of ‘Pietà’ are out of proportion, owing to the difficulty of showing a grown man cradled in a woman’s lap.



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