

MICHELANGELO'S PIETÀ



Michelangelo **carved it from a single slab of marble** in less than two years. It is famous for the way Michelangelo has managed to make **stone appear to flow like real cloth** and how well he has **captured the human form and emotions**.

His interpretation of the Pietà was different to ones previous created by other artists.

Michelangelo decided to create a youthful and peaceful Virgin Mary instead of a broken-hearted and older woman, as is often portrayed in earlier version of the image.

Statues help Catholics to reflect on the meaning of suffering.

One of the most famous statues that does this is Michelangelo's Pietà.

It is a **statue of Mary holding the body of her son after his crucifixion**.



Catholic Ambivalence to Suffering

In her sadness, Mary seems **resigned to what has happened**. Jesus, too, is presented almost as if he is in a **peaceful sleep**, rather than having been bloodied and bruised after hours of torture and suffering.

His **wounds are hardly visible**. In supporting Jesus, **Mary's right hand does not come into direct contact with his flesh**, but instead it is covered with a cloth which then touches his side.

This shows the **sacredness of Jesus' body**.

Overall, these two figures are beautiful and idealised, despite their suffering. This reflects the belief of Catholic ambivalence to suffering; **that suffering is somehow part of love and can be a source of blessing**.

'Pietà' is a word which comes from the *Latin word for holiness*. Of all the many different forms of the Pietà by various painters and sculptors throughout history, the one by Michelangelo stands out as perhaps the greatest. It was created in 1499 when Michelangelo was just 24 years old.



Commissioned by a French Cardinal for his own funeral



French cardinal Jean de Bilheres, who served the church in Rome, wanted to be remembered long after he'd died. To achieve this goal, he hired Michelangelo to make a memorial for his tomb that would capture a scene that was popular in Northern European art at the time: the tragic moment of the Virgin Mary taking Jesus down from the cross.

Knowledge Check

Answer in full sentences or copy out the question.

1. What does the Latin 'Pietà' translate to?
2. Who carved this Pietà?
3. What is his sculpture famous for?
4. How is his interpretation different to that of other artists?
5. What scene does the sculpture depict?
6. Who commissioned this sculpture and what was it to be used for?
7. What does the deep shadow created by the fold of the garment next to Jesus symbolise?
8. What does the stillness on Mary's face symbolise?
9. What does the open palm symbolise?
10. What does the large figure of Mary

Choose a Task

1. Design a multiple choice quiz on the topic of the Pietà.
2. Design a **detailed** mind map outlining the Pietà.
3. Design a **detailed** visual poster outlining the Pietà.

Exam Question

Explain what the Pietà reveals about a Catholic understanding of suffering. (8 marks)

For each sentence, use PEEA (Point, Evidence, Explain, Analysis).

For example:

P – Make your point

E – Back it up with evidence or examples

E – Explanation (link back to the statement)

A – Say what is good or bad about the point you have just made

Deep Shadow

Symbol of an open wound

Viewers have pointed out that the deep shadow created by the fold of the garment next to Jesus is a **symbol of an open wound**, reminding us that in her one she holds in her arms is the one she **carried in her womb**, and inviting us to **share the pain of her sorrow**.



Stillness

Some viewers are **surprised by the stillness on Mary's face**, considering she is **holding the body of her dead son**. Mary seems **at peace** with what has happened to her son.



Open Palm

Mary's left hand is positioned with an **open palm**; this again is a sign that **Mary is at peace** after witnessing her son's crucifixion and **accepts what has happened**.



The Large Figure of Mary

Mary is shown **supporting the body of a fully-grown man** on her lap. In reality, that is **difficult for the average woman to do**. In the Pietà, **Mary's figure is larger than that of Jesus**. Her bottom half forms a **sturdy base** for the body of Jesus. Even though this piece is life-like, it is **not realistic**. Mary's size **makes Jesus look small** in comparison. This is another echo of **Mary as the mother of the infant Jesus**; as if she is holding a baby in her arms.



This **represents the love of a mother** and many mothers who have lost their own children report that the **statue is a strange sort of comfort for them**.



S Surprised at the Stillness of the face

P Palm open, Mary is at Peace

L Large Figure of Mary Love of a mother

A Ambivalence to suffering A source of blessing

S Shadow Symbol - open wound

H Holiness

