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MICHELANGELO: REVEALED AS MASTER OF BRONZE

Interdisciplinary research project confirms Rothschild Bronzes as the only surviving bronze sculpture by Michelangelo and reveals him to be a record-breaking maker of bronzes

Four years of ground-breaking research, spearheaded by Dr Victoria Avery from the Fitzwilliam Museum and the University of Cambridge, now reveals a completely neglected aspect of Michelangelo - as an artist fascinated by bronze and personally responsible for record-breaking bronze statues. The interdisciplinary research now confirms the 2015 claim that the Rothschild Bronzes are the only known surviving bronze masterpieces by Michelangelo. The project is the subject of a new book, *Michelangelo: Sculptor in Bronze*, which will fundamentally alter how Michelangelo is considered.

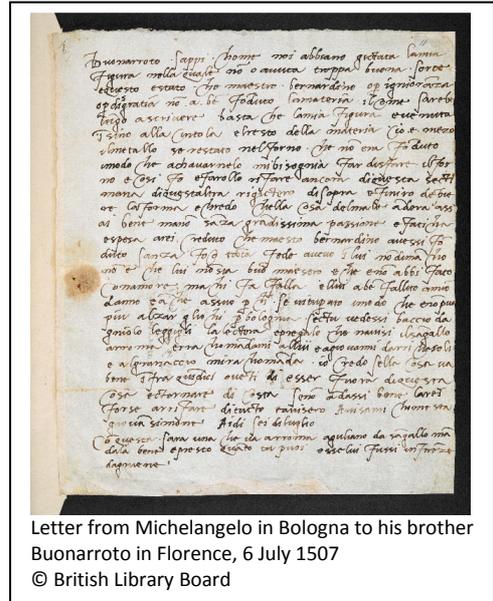
Thirty neglected letters, written by Michelangelo to his family, between 1506 – 1508 while in Bologna making a colossal bronze statue of Pope Julius II tell the unknown story of the evolution of Michelangelo's mastery of bronze.

The letters catalogue in detail the daily struggles Michelangelo faced with incompetent assistants, a cross and demanding Pope, enormous technical obstacles, all in a drought-ridden city suffering a permanent heatwave and where, according to the fed-up and grumpy Michelangelo, he had to sleep four in a bed and even the wine was expensive and bad.

Dr Victoria Avery's close reading of the Italian documents reveals just how experimental and daring Michelangelo was in his approach to bronze casting. Spurred on by his desperation to outdo his older rival, Leonardo, Michelangelo was clearly vying with him to be the greatest *bronzista* who had ever lived; but unlike Leonardo, whose colossal bronze horse project failed, Michelangelo succeeded in casting the largest bronze sculptures since Antiquity.

The letters categorically prove that Michelangelo was involved in all stages of the production of his bronzes, not only making the original models, but also preparing the casting moulds, overseeing the choice of alloy and the pouring of the molten metal, and undertaking the laborious finishing work.

Michelangelo designed, co-cast and single-handedly chased the largest sculpture in bronze since Antiquity in the form of his colossal - 4 m tall - seated portrait-statue of Pope Julius II in Bologna. Rather than the sensible option of casting the colossus in multiple sections and then welding them together, he attempted the cast in a single pour, with 7 tons of bronze being melted in a single furnace. In fact, it took him two pours in the end, as only the bottom half was cast successfully in the first pour. This was an unprecedented technological tour de force that earned Michelangelo the well-deserved title 'Dominator Mundi', Master of the World.



Letter from Michelangelo in Bologna to his brother Buonarroto in Florence, 6 July 1507
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The new research makes Michelangelo the most significant and successful maker of bronze sculpture of his day since Antiquity. The fact that none of his bronze sculpture survives has falsified our awareness and appreciation of Michelangelo's bronze sculptural output, until now.

The Fitzwilliam Museum presented the preliminary case for the re-attribution of the Rothschild bronzes to Michelangelo in February 2015, based on art-historical, technical and anatomical evidence.

Since then, in addition to the new archival research, important new technical analysis has been undertaken by conservation scientists and metal conservators at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, including XRF analysis (to reveal the alloy composition), which further verifies the early 1500s date argued for the Rothschild bronzes.

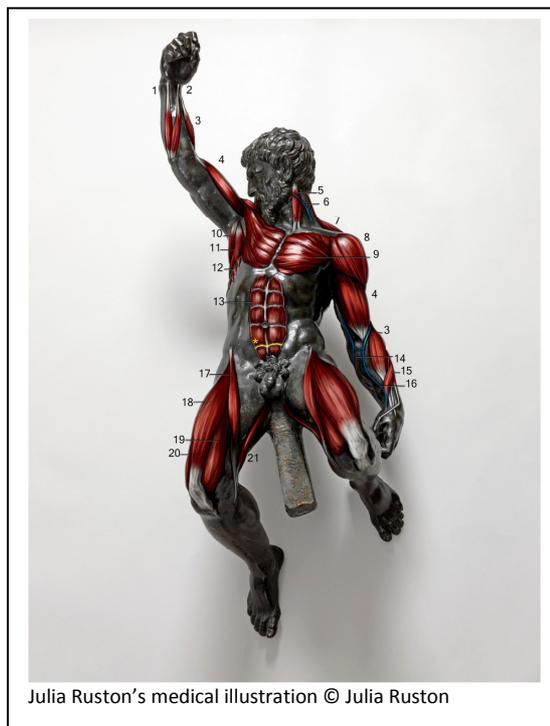
The conclusions of the conservation scientists were then put to the test by sculptor-founder Andrew Lacey who undertook a series of historically accurate experimental reconstructions of the older Rothschild male nude, basing his materials and techniques as closely as possible on the original. Through systematic experiments, Lacey eventually succeeded in creating an identical bronze copy

which replicates all the imperfections and casting issues of the original. Lacey's ground-breaking work provides invaluable insights into the working practice of sculptors and bronze-casters in the early sixteenth century, and confirms the proposed early 1500s date of production of the Rothschild bronzes.

New anatomical research has also been undertaken by Professor Peter Abrahams, a clinical anatomist at Warwick University and a specialist in the anatomy of Leonardo. Abrahams undertook extensive research into the incredibly accurate anatomy of the Rothschild bronzes and how this compares with that of undisputed works by Michelangelo, as well as that of his contemporaries. Abrahams concluded that it was Michelangelo who had made the original models.

Not only did Michelangelo love the male body but he also had the necessary talent to portray the muscles so accurately and in such complex positions. Moreover, Michelangelo is one of very few early Renaissance artists documented as having personally dissected cadavers, which explains the presence on the Rothschild males of deep muscles (such as the Sartorius) not actually visible on the surface of living humans.

Furthermore, the Rothschild bronzes have certain anatomical anomalies (visible 'eight-pack') as well as accuracies (anatomically correct pubic hair and testicles) and deliberate inaccuracies for artistic effect (bulging heads of gastrocnemius wrongly contracted in given position of knee flexion), which are constantly seen in undisputed works by Michelangelo but which are not present in the work of other contemporary artists.



To be doubly certain that the Rothschild bronzes could not have been modelled by anyone other than Michelangelo, Abrahams then undertook a detailed and systematic examination of how every other major sculptor contemporary to Michelangelo portrayed anatomy (Ammannati, Bandinelli, Cellini, Leonardo, Rustici, Sansovino, etc.). He concluded that none of these artists portrayed anatomy in a way that was comparable to that of the Rothschild bronzes, thereby definitively eliminating all the other possible contenders and confirming Michelangelo as author of the Rothschild bronzes.

According to Dr Eike Schmidt, Director of the Uffizi Galleries, Florence 'This book is a game-changer. It provides a completely new – and indeed long overdue – integrated interdisciplinary approach to Michelangelo studies. It proves what can be achieved when there is genuine collaboration between internationally-regarded experts in fields as diverse as art history, conservation science, anatomy and technical archaeology.'

The importance of the Rothschild bronzes is further proved by the very recent emergence from the historical collection of an Italian noble family of a pair of reduced-scale copies, likely made in the 17th-century, which are to be sold by Christie's, London, on 4 December 2018.

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About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

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The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission
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