

BLUE MADONNA



I think the story of the *Blue Madonna* deserves a section on its own! It all began in 1990 on a trip to Italy to inspect some of my bronzes that were being cast in Pietrasanta. Just inside the medieval gates of the town there is a large square surrounded by old buildings including a church with a marble façade, brick campanile and a café named 'Bar Michelangelo'. On the outside wall of the bar there is a plaque commemorating the fact that in this house the great man signed a contract in 1518 and for the quarrying of some blocks of Carrara marble high up on Mont Ultissimo.

Located next to the 15th-century gates is an atelier where marble copies of antique sculptures are carved. When passing one day Margie inveigled me to step inside to take a look around and on doing so we spotted a circular plaster plaque leaning against a side wall of a workroom. It was about three foot across and covered in dust. When I asked the workshop owner, Spartaco Palla, if we could have a look, he obligingly pulled away some rubbish and brushed down the surface and we found ourselves looking at a plaster of the *Pitti Tondo* that Michelangelo carved in 1503 and is now held in the Bargello in Florence!

We were delighted by what we saw and I determined then and there to persuade someone to have one carved in marble. Several years had to pass before I had the opportunity to show the plaster to Damon and persuade him to commission a carving to hang in a folly he had built in his garden. I negotiated a price with *Scultore Spartaco* for a copy in marble from the same Mont Ultissimo quarry where Michelangelo had obtained the original stone.



Carrara marble copy of the original plaster
Carved by Scultore Spartaco Palla in Pietrasanta, 2001

A year later we returned to Pietrasanta to see the result. It was magnificent and when Robert saw a photograph of it he commissioned another edition for Ramiilaj in Aspen. I am sure that Michelangelo would be delighted to know that his work has a home in Hampshire and Colorado, as well as in Florence!

However, I hope Michelangelo will forgive me for making one slight but I think very important alteration to his tondo! I did it with the approval of my Patrons after I had explained to them why I thought it was appropriate! Michelangelo was 28 years old when he carved the *Tondo*. Later that year he carved *David*! Something very important happened between his finishing the *Tondo* and completing *David*. Following others, such as Donatello, not to mention the Greeks and Romans, Michelangelo started to carve pupils into the eyeballs of his people, thus *giving sight to their eyes*.

David's eyes have pupils, as do all Michelangelo's sculptures from then on, such as *Moses* and *Brutus*, but not so *Mary and the children* in the Tondo. I therefore decided it would be right to carve the missing pupils into the eyes on the tondo, as I believed that it would make their expressions *come alive*.

The first thing I did when Palla's marble arrived in my studio was to draw a pupil on to one of *Mary's* eyeballs, so I could see what a live eye would look like against a dead eye. The effect was miraculous! One eye looked out over my shoulder with a melancholy gaze while the other remained blank. I drew in the second pupil and was even more thrilled. *Mary* had *come alive*! I was convinced that I was doing the right thing and that the great man would have condoned the change, after all he was the master of bringing marble to life.



The first pupil stared over my shoulder...

After my visit in 2000 to the Chauvet Cave, I had discovered that on my computer I could enhance the charcoal drawings with amazing rainbow colours. I had been intrigued by the effect and now wondered what would happen if I applied the same technique to the photograph of the *Tondo*. I adjusted the colour graph and found the result to be absolutely stunning, as it turned it into a beautiful stained-glass window of a glorious Madonna-blue colour. The blue reminded me of shallow tropical seas, a colour that fills me with a sense of Epicurean *peace and tranquillity*.



Computer-enhanced photograph

My niece Georgina had started *Glass Art*. In her search for artist's work to sell she had learnt a lot about glass foundries, so I put my idea to her of a glass tondo by showing her the print-out from the computer. To my delight she was as excited as I was by the possibility of achieving something unique.

One of Georgina's pieces was by Joseph Marek whose studio was near Prague. He was coming over to England soon to deliver work and she thought he would know if it was possible to cast such a large piece and maybe even be the right person to do the job! With the help of son Peter, we manhandled the 400 lbs of marble into a car and drove up to London. When Josef saw the marble he said that he could cast it in glass as it would just fit into his kiln. I gave Josef a rubber mould I had had made in Italy, told him that we would visit his studio when the positive wax was finished and asked him to find some samples of azure glass for us to see when we came.

It was now time to carve the pupils on the marble lying in my studio. I felt a little nervous as I have never carved marble nor did I have any of the right tools. Should I buy an electric engraver or just gently scratch away with my penknife? I decided the answer would come with action. I was frightened by the thought of a spinning drill jumping out of control so I tried the *penknife technique* first. I had drawn in the pupils with a pencil and Mary looked as though she approved of my experiment!

I was surprised just how soft the marble was, finding it only a little harder than dental plaster. Having discovered that the material was quite soft, I searched for a tool that would do the job. I needed a sharp high-tensile steel chisel with a point that had a right angle on one side and was curved on the other. The perfect tool turned out to be the top blade of a pair of kitchen scissors! It took an hour to finish the first pupil and I was thrilled with the result as Mary now had one *live eye* with which to look at me. The next step was to make sure I didn't give the poor girl a squint, so, very carefully I drew a larger triangle than necessary on her second eyeball which would allow me to go a fraction one way or the other to make a correction. It worked! I then did the children's eyes but very faintly just to give a suggestion of a pupil. It was time to call Margie over and I am glad to say she was as pleased as I was!

Winter had set in before Joseph emailed saying that the wax was ready for inspection. Peter and I set off well rugged up for our trip to the heart of frozen Eastern Europe with thoughts of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow swirling around in our heads like snow in a blizzard. We landed in Prague to be met by Josef and also, much to our delight, by a beautifully sunny afternoon with the thermometer standing at 70 degrees, far warmer than England!

The sun was setting by the time we had arrived at his studio two hours later. He had made two wax casts of the tondo just in case of mistakes, one of a mixture of beeswax and resin and a back-up of just beeswax. The addition of resin strengthens the wax and although good for casting, it does make the wax very hard to carve, so I wondered how I would get on next day. Putting all that out of my mind we went out to dinner to celebrate Josef's success.

Next morning we set up a table in the yard so I could inspect the waxes in the sunlight before starting to carve the hard wax and resin cast. As I had expected it was difficult, but I was able to repair my mistakes with beeswax. In comparison the soft beeswax cast was a dream to work on and was finished in a few minutes. In case Josef had to correct any errors that might appear in the sand mould when he melted the wax out, I had brought over a plaster cast of the eyes I had carved into the marble so he could copy my original.



Carving the pupils into the wax

Josef explained to us the process he used for casting the glass. A cocktail of sand and chemicals is poured over the wax that is hardened by pumping in a gas that turns it into a sandstone mould, which is then inverted over a steam bath to melt the wax out. He turns the mould back to become a soup plate, hammers ten-inch square tiles of one-inch thick glass into a fine gravel and carefully lays the broken pieces of glass in the mould right to the brim. The mould is then placed in the furnace and he slowly raises the temperature to 850C, which turns the glass chips into a molten soup.

He said it would take 30 days for the glass to cool after being liquid, as the temperature must only drop by one degree an hour to avoid shattering it into a million pieces. It was going to be a long job and all we could do was pray it would be in one piece when it was cold. It would either be a brilliant success or an utter disaster, but then, that is the fun of art, you just never know exactly what is going to happen.



Wax Tondo and Josef Marek

On the way back to the airport we stopped at a glass manufacturer that Josef thought could produce the colour we required. Unfortunately neither Josef nor the chemist understood exactly what we meant by Madonna Blue or the Caribbean Sea! However, Peter spotted two glass samples sitting on a windowsill that when held together turned to an amazing azure blue, and this solved the problem. The chemist promised to produce exactly the same colour, but he pointed out that the problem with glass was that often colours are not stable and the glass that is melted as blue can, when cooled, turn into a surprising range of colours from yellow to black! We would have to wait and see. It was a bit like not knowing what sex a child is going to be until it is born!

Through my life I have been blessed by remembering my dreams, which sometimes are exceptionally vivid. I have made Margie laugh over many a breakfast by recounting them. I have never put too much store on dreams as I suspect that they mainly reflect anxiety. After this trip I awoke one morning having had a most bizarre dream, which definitely reflected my worry over the success of the *Blue Madonna*!

The dream went as follows: *Josef led me into the dark laboratory of an alchemist, dimly lit by candles that gave just enough light to see a workbench. On the bench was a small black tray with an iron spike sticking up from it. Stuck on the tip of the spike was a tiny*

blob of tar-like substance, which someone then lit with a match causing it to burst into a ball of blazing bright blue light the size of a grapefruit glowing like a ball of burning phosphorus, although the room remained dark because the luminosity seemed to be contained within its own circumference. I was transfixed with joy as I gazed at the light!

“What have you burnt?” The alchemist explained that he had made the black paste by grinding together hundreds of blue wings from dead butterflies!

A month later the parcel arrived from Joseph with the glass sample. I gingerly unfolded the paper and found a small square of the most perfect tropical-sea coloured glass. I took it over to the tondo in the studio and laid it on Mary’s white marble cheek and wished Josef luck for a successful casting of what I believed would turn out to be a truly unique work of art.

Leonardo and Michelangelo were poles apart as men. Leonardo was illegitimate and brought up in the small country village of Vinci by his grandparents. Michelangelo, on the other hand, came from a well-connected Florentine family and was raised by Lorenzo Medici in his palace as a son.

Early in 1503 Leonardo da Vinci returned to Florence from Milan where he had recently completed painting *The Last Supper*. When he arrived Michelangelo must have finished the *Pitti Tondo* and started working on *David*, because he completed it by the end of 1503. The interesting thing about 1503 is that it was also the year that Leonardo painted the *Mona Lisa*, so he must have been doing so at exactly the same time as Michelangelo was carving the *Tondo*, which I find to be a remarkable coincidence. If Leonardo was painting the *Mona Lisa* only a couple of streets away from where Michelangelo was carving the *Tondo* it is inconceivable that they would not have known about the other’s work, or maybe even seen it, as Florence was then a small town!

It is now thought that the model for the *Mona Lisa* was the pregnant wife of a poor merchant, and the reason Leonardo refused to part with the painting throughout his life was that the woman looked like his peasant mother, who his father refused to marry and drove from the house, leaving her son to be raised by his paternal grandmother and his uncle.

Lorenzo Medici never commissioned any work from Leonardo. In 1504 Leonardo was a member of the Board of Inspectors that met to advise on a site for the *David* sculpture, either in the Loggia della Signoria with Cellini’s *Persens*, or outside the castle where a copy now stands? Leonardo apparently was in favour of the Loggia, while Michelangelo wanted it to be in the more prominent position in front of the castle!

Michelangelo’s *Pietà* in Rome and his *Madonna* in Bruges both have the same highly-polished finish like *David* but were done before 1503. The *Pitti Tondo* was carved early in 1503 in what is sometimes called the *Michelangelo finish*, where the surface shows the fine chisel marks, while in some places the background is almost hacked out. For me the fine chisel marks on the faces of the *Pitti Tondo* make them come alive. Just maybe this was the first time Michelangelo tried his famous *unfinished* look.

Michelangelo’s Bruges *Madonna* depicts Mary holding the Holy Scriptures closed on her lap, symbolising that the Mother of God is Eternal Wisdom. Margie and I went to Bruges to see this masterpiece and when you look at the sculpture you can only gasp with disbelief at Michelangelo’s magnificent workmanship. However, note that she and the child both have half closed eyes and therefore no pupils!



Madonna and Child, by Michelangelo, 1501, Bruges

To say that there was rivalry between the two artists is to understate the matter and the tension was soon to rise to boiling point! The City Fathers announced that they wanted a great battle scene painted for the hall of the castle, where the council met, and commissioned Leonardo for the job. Immediately Lorenzo Medici commissioned Michelangelo to paint another battle scene on the wall opposite Leonardo's painting! The conflict between the artists came to be known as the *Battle of the Battles*. Leonardo was furious and sulked, for which I don't blame him one bit, as he was a proven painter and Michelangelo was a sculptor. I can imagine the tension between the rival artists, which was fuelled by the audience who came to watch them working on opposite sides of the room! The *Battle of the Battles* ended in being a fiasco, as

the King of France ordered Leonardo back to Milan, and the Pope ordered Michelangelo to Rome to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, so unfortunately neither mural got beyond the cartoon stage!

Dürer carved the woodcut entitled *Holy Family with Three Hares* in 1497. Dürer shows the infant Jesus as opening the Holy Scriptures, an act that symbolises the Christian belief that 'Jesus is the Word'. I wonder if Michelangelo had seen a print of this woodcut by the time he carved his Madonna six years later in 1503, as he uses the same symbolism in the *Tondo* showing Jesus gazing down at the open Holy Scriptures.



'The Holy Family with Three Hares', by Albrecht Dürer, 1497

At last the extremely heavy wooden crate containing the *Blue Madonna* arrived at the studio in Somerset and I unscrewed the lid. The excitement of removing the packing and taking the first look at what was inside was heart-stopping.

With the help of son Mark, we gingerly lifted the three-foot wide, 250-lb tondo from the box. When we freed it from the dark and allowed light to penetrate the glass, it started to glow! When we carried it across to the windows and stood it up it sprang into life, the sunlight bringing out the full glory of the colour. I don't think I have ever seen anything quite as beautiful. A mystic aura surrounded the three heads and quite took our breath away.



Blue Madonna, Agecroft, 2002

When I showed Damon photographs of the glass tondo he immediately thought of the new Catholic cathedral in Los Angeles, which he had just visited, and sent off an exact-size poster to Cardinal Roger Mahony and offered it as a gift. On October 2nd 2002 the cardinal wrote back saying that he would be delighted to accept it. It is hard to believe that quite by chance the *Blue Madonna* was unveiled in 2003, exactly 500 years after Michelangelo had carved the original.

I couldn't resist having an edition cast for Margie and myself. It sits in the studio where we dinner in the summer and gives us untold pleasure, as it glows with life in the setting sun. This edition can now reside in St. Helier Parish Church on the Channel Island of Jersey.



John the Baptist, Mary and Jesus



Nicodemus, by Michelangelo, 1555, Pietà del Duomo, Florence

Thought to be a self-portrait of the artist