

# A late self-portrait of Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) in the cartoon of the *Epifania* in the British Museum

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**Summary.** The scientific literature has shown that the renowned Italian Renaissance artist and genius of human anatomy Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) included his self-portrait into some of his most famous works. It has been suggested that the various self-portraits and self-caricatures the artist used in his works over the years may offer some insight into Michelangelo's physical form and, consequently, provide evidence of his health at different stages of his life. Accordingly, this manuscript presents new evidence [*based on facial features described by Daniele of Volterra (1509-1566) and Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)*] that Michelangelo may have inserted his self-portrait into one of the figures that make up the *Epifania* cartoon, made by the artist in 1553, which is currently in the collection of the British Museum in London, England. Thus, the information contained in this manuscript is not only useful for future analyses of Michelangelo's health [*based on facial features*] when he was approximately 78 years old, but also how the artist, who was known for being very introspective, saw himself physically in his old age. ([www.actabiomedica.it](http://www.actabiomedica.it))

**Key words:** Michelangelo Buonarroti, self-portrait, The *Epifania* cartoon, British Museum

## Introduction

The study of the human anatomy, besides being fundamental to the practice of medicine, has also been part of the daily life of many artists, especially during the Renaissance. Accordingly, the specialist literature describes the renowned Renaissance artist Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) as one of the greatest anatomist-artists of his time (1). Therefore, over the years, as well as historians, many doctors and anatomists have attempted to better understand the inspirations, and even the possible diseases that affected this genius of human anatomy (1-7). Thus, the specialist literature (1, 8-12) has pointed out that Michelangelo's various self-portraits and self-caricatures contained in various of his works produced at different stages of his life may offer some insight into Michelangelo's physi-

cal form and, consequently, provide evidence of his health at different stages of his life. In this context, this manuscript presents new evidence that Michelangelo Buonarroti may have placed his self-portrait on the face of one of the characters represented by the artist in 1553 in the *Epifania* cartoon, which is currently in the collection of the British Museum, London, England. Therefore, the information contained in this manuscript, besides bringing to light a new self-portrait by the artist, may also provide evidence of Michelangelo's physical appearance, and consequently of his health, when he was approximately 78 years old.

## Analysis

The so-called *Epifania* is a full-scale cartoon produced by Michelangelo in black chalk when he was

in Rome around 1550-1553. A 19th-century Scottish collector, John Malcolm of Poltalloch, bought it for only £11 0s. 6d. and on John's death in 1893 his son John Wingfield Malcolm donated it to the British Museum, London, England (13). Although Michelangelo is known to have altered some characters in the *Epifania*, the literature has suggested the central figure in the drawing is the representation of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus sitting between her legs. On Mary's left, pushed by her, is probably the representation of St. Joseph. In front of him is a child who may be St. John the Baptist. The figure of the adult standing on Mary's right is unidentified, however, it has been suggested that it may be the Prophet Isaiah of the Old Testament. The other figures in the background are unidentifiable (Figure 1) (11, 13, 14).

Closer analysis, using a high resolution image, shows that the face of the supposed figure of St. Joseph



**Figure 1.** The cartoon of the *Epifania* (Michelangelo Buonarroti, Black chalk - Dimensions: 232.7 x 165.6 cm, 1553, British Museum, London, England)

in the *Epifania* bears striking similarities to Michelangelo's face. This can be demonstrated by comparison with a portrait of the artist by Daniele of Volterra (1509-1566) made at the same time (1550-1552) that the cartoon of the *Epifania* was drawn (1553) by Michelangelo. Many of the physical features of Michelangelo as represented in the portrait can be seen to resemble those of the supposed St. Joseph in the *Epifania* drawing, such as: the large body (*shoulder blades*), the rounded face, the broad forehead, the nose flattened, thin eyebrows, thin lips, hair and forked beard (Figure 2). All of these features were described by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) in his classic biography of Michelangelo from 1568. As we can see (11):

*[...] He was of medium height, with broad shoulders, but well-proportioned in the body. The face was round, and the forehead broad and square with seven straight lines and the temples more prominent than the ears, which were quite large and flapping. The body was proportional to the face and quite large, the nose somewhat flattened, the eyes fairly small, speckled bluish-yellow in colour, scrawny eyebrows, and thin lips, the bottom one fuller and a little more prominent; the chin well composed in relation to the rest, the black hair, the sparse beard with many white threads, not too long and forked [...].*

Additionally, one can see the figure of St. Joseph seems to be pointing, with his left index finger, to his own forked beard/face, as if he wants to draw attention to something at this point (Figure 1). With closer examination of the forked area of St. Joseph's beard, in its outline, the initial letters of the artist's name are perceptible: *m* and *B* [*Buso method*] (15) (Figure 3).

## Discussion

The specialist literature records that while in his teens, Michelangelo had his nose broken by Pietro Torrigiano (1472-1528). Since then, this physical feature would become a notable mark in any representation of Michelangelo's face, including those made by the artist himself (1, 9, 11). Due to this distinctive facial feature of Michelangelo, it can be inferred that the artist inserted his self-portrait in several of his works, especially those in which there were characters





**Figure 2.** (A) The face of Michelangelo Buonarroti drawn by *Daniele of Volterra* in 1550-1552 [Dimensions: 29.5 x 21.8 cm, *Teylers Museum, Haarlem, Netherlands*]. (B) Detail of the cartoon of the *Epifania* showing St. Joseph's face. Note St. Joseph's face has the same facial features as Michelangelo, such as: the drooping eyelids of old age, the rounded face, the broad forehead, the flat nose, the thin eyebrows, the thin lips, the shape of the hair and the forked beard

or narratives that he considered special. Given this, it has been postulated that he produced some *spiritual self-portraits* (1, 9, 11, 12, 16). Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to infer that Michelangelo may indeed have placed his self-portrait on the face of St. Joseph, who was a prominent character in Renaissance works. Specialists (17-19) point out that St. Joseph, as from Pope Sixtus IV in 1479, and later, with Isidoro Isolano's *Summa de donis Sancti Josephi* [composed between 1514-1521], came to have considerable importance throughout Italy, especially in Renaissance art.

Another key aspect in the context of the analysis of this manuscript is that a few days before his death Michelangelo burned many of his drawings. On the matter, Giorgio Vasari wrote the following (13):

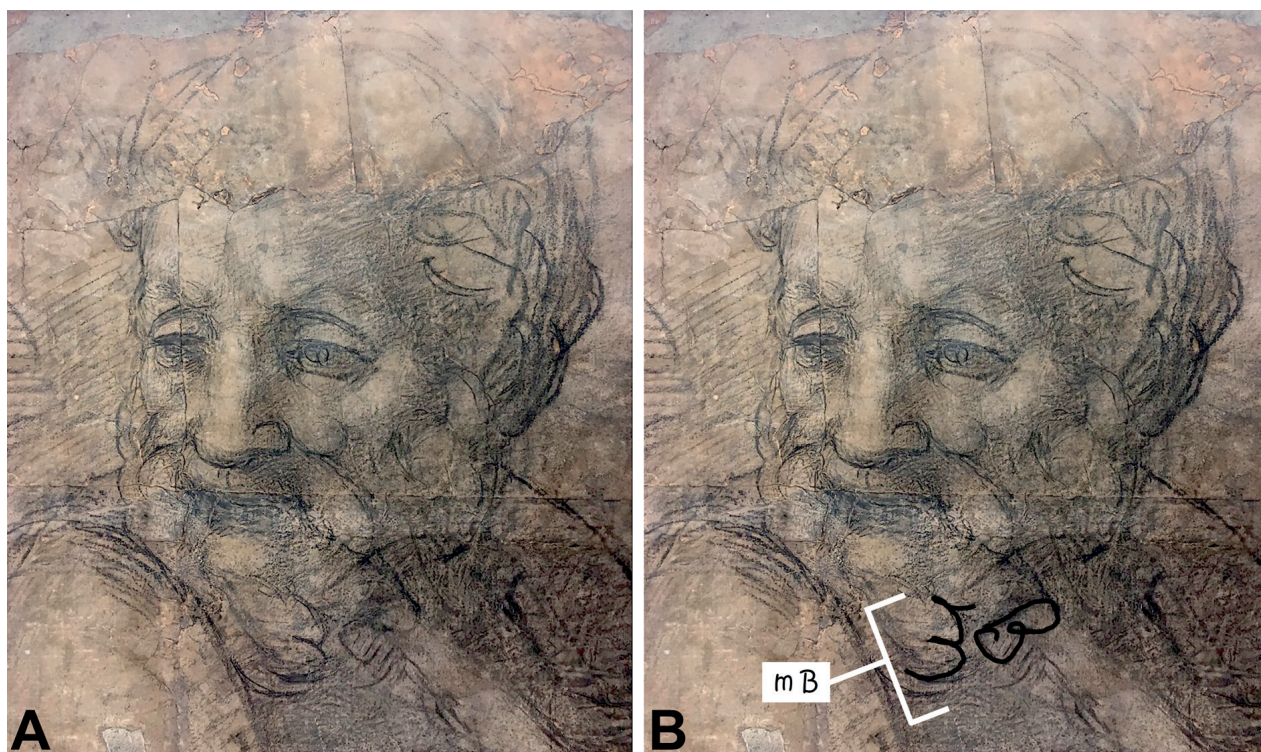
*"His imagination was so perfect that he could not realize with his hands his great and sublime conceptions, and so he frequently abandoned his work and*

*spoiled many, for I know that before his death he burned a great number of his designs, sketches, and cartoons, in order that no one should perceive his labours and the efforts of his genius, that he might not appear less than perfect"*.

However, for some reason, the cartoon of the *Epifania* was not burned like the other designs. The literature records that the *Epifania* was kept and protected by Michelangelo for many years, so much so that it was only discovered shortly after the artist's death in 1564. Thus, it has been suggested that Michelangelo indeed considered the cartoon of the *Epifania* special (13), possibly because it may contain his self-portrait in the form of St. Joseph's face.

Furthermore, some authors (1, 11) have pointed out that from 1550, although Michelangelo continued actively engaged in his works, he already had developed some weaknesses due to age. This can be seen in *Mi-*





**Figure 3.** Detail of the cartoon of the *Epifania* showing St. Joseph's face. (B) Note that in St. Joseph's forked beard there is evidence of the presence of the initial letters of Michelangelo Buonarroti's name: *m* and *B*

Michelangelo's *Pietà de Bandini* [*Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence*] produced between 1550 and 1555, in which the artist portrays himself in Nicodemus's face, with his drooping eyelids, alluding to his weakened eyesight (Figure 4) (1). Moreover, there is evidence in the literature to show that during the elaboration of *Bandini's Pietà* Michelangelo noted many inaccuracies, probably caused by the artist's own physical weaknesses, especially in the hands and eyes (1, 5, 6). We must consider that in this period (*from 1550*) Michelangelo's hands and eyes could no longer accurately accomplish what his mind's eye had projected for his works, and inevitably some inaccuracies could arise (1). This may explain, at least in part, the inaccuracies in the making of the cartoon of the *Epifania*, and even why the artist made numerous modifications to the drawing (13).

Although the *Epifania* has been previously described (13) as a work by Michelangelo, the specialist literature (1, 13, 14, 20-30), makes no reference to any possible self-portrait of the artist on the face of

St. Joseph. However, the absence of any description of this probable self-portrait does not constitute evidence of its absence. This is especially due to the fact that the similarities between Michelangelo's depiction of St. Joseph's face and the descriptions of his own face (at approximately 78 years old) provide the necessary evidence to justify that attribution.

Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to infer that St. Joseph's face as depicted in the cartoon of the *Epifania* could indeed be Michelangelo's self-portrait, as, apart from the notable physical similarities, it is an essentially a private and intimate drawing by the artist, where he could simply be making a *spiritual self-portrait* in the image of an important biblical character. Given this, this manuscript may serve as the basis for future studies that seek to analyse Michelangelo's physical form [*based on facial features*], and consequently his health around 1553, when the cartoon of the *Epifania* was drawn. Moreover, it may also show how the artist, who was known for his very introspec-



**Figure 4.** (A) *Pietà de Bandini*, made by Michelangelo Buonarroti in 1550-1555. (B) Note the face of the hooded man [*Nicodemus*] it is in fact a self-portrait of Michelangelo Buonarroti with drooping eyelids, highlighting his weak eyesight [*Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy*]

tive behaviour (1) saw himself physically, especially in his old age.

*“Look within. Let neither the peculiar quality of anything nor its value escape thee.”*

*Marcus Aurelius Antonius (121-180), Meditations*

**Conflict of interest:** Each author declares that he or she has no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article

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