

ART & ANTIQUES



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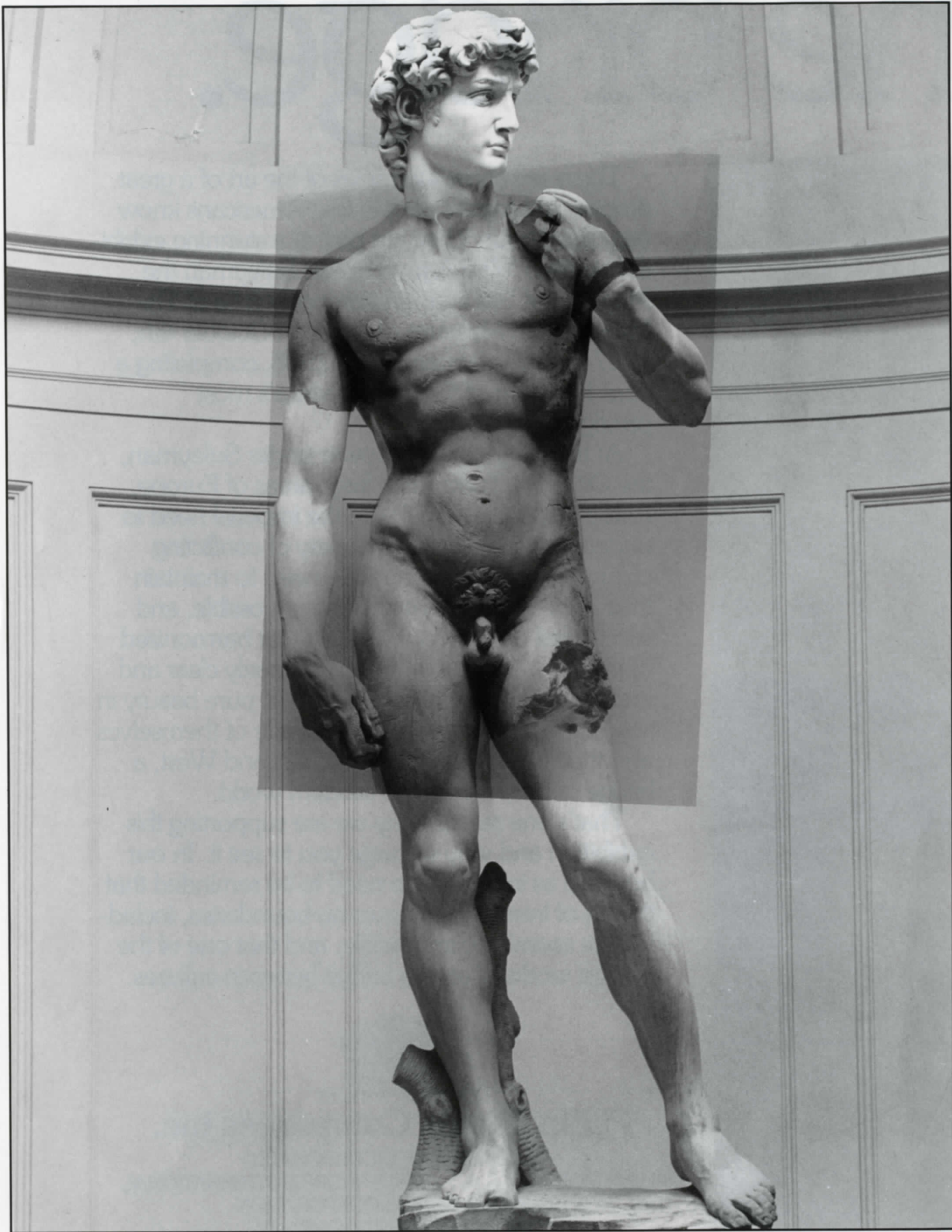
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THE UNKNOWN DAVID:
Michelangelo's lost model.
By Frederick Hartt

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MICHELANGELO'S LOST MODEL

An eminent art historian recounts the discovery of his lifetime—an unknown masterpiece by one of the world's greatest artists.

By Frederick Hartt • Photographs by David Finn

At nine o'clock in the morning of May 22, 1986, my seventy-second birthday, I had just finished breakfast when the telephone rang. I answered, and heard a pleasant voice with a French accent.

"Professor Hartt?"

"Yes."

"This is M— from Paris, France. I am calling from New York. First I want to wish you happy birthday."

Amazement. "Thank you very much."

"I am calling on the part of the owners of a document of Michelangelo, who would like me to come to Charlottesville to show you this document."

Profound skepticism. This sort of thing happens far too often to people like me. Strangers write or call up about Giulio Romanos (naturally, after my book nearly thirty years ago), but also about Botticellis, Raphaels, Titians, and on and on. They even turn up in my driveway with the work of art itself. Nine times out of ten I have to disappoint them. I was especially dubious about Michelangelo, after I'd been shown some dismal drawings, and, a dozen years back, a marble statue, for which a huge commission was brandished if I would only "authenticate" it (dreadful word: the only person who



can authenticate a work of art is the artist who made it).

But I have had a lifelong devotion to Michelangelo, which began when, at fourteen, I drew from plaster casts of his statues, including the head of the *David*, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. My master's thesis in 1937 dealt with Michelangelo's sources; since then I've published four books and a number of articles on Michelangelo, with several more projected, including the text for the official publication of his Sistine Chapel frescoes. So I outlined the policy I've had to establish out of self-protection and to discourage frivolous questions. No problem. "*C'est normal.*"

Next day, the most beautiful day of the year, in perfect light, with every mountain and tree looking its best, M— and his wife arrived on my front porch. What would the "document" be—an un-

published letter or poem? A quick sketch for a work of architecture? I had forgotten that in French a *document* can mean a work of art. A portfolio was opened and a group of large, clear photographs were drawn forth. The dimness of my library was defeating, so we moved into the living room, normally flooded with soft light. Even then I felt compelled to bring the photographs to a window.

I was utterly unprepared for what the light revealed. At first, partly due to the astounding quality of the work, partly

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Superimposed on the David (left), the fragmentary model, less than four and a half inches tall, reveals telling differences: the wasp waist has been thickened for greater solidity, and the deeply arched chest flattened, so the face would be seen from below.

because it had been reduced to hardly more than a torso, I thought I was looking at photographs of a noble, lifesize Greek fragment from the fifth century B.C. The subject was a bony, rangy young man, tense and proud. My mind was simply not working. Then a photograph of the *David* was brought out. It was clear the statue and fragment were closely related. In methodical, art-historical fashion, I began to compare.

"How big is it?"

"The size you see in the photographs."

At last my mind began to tick. Different...physically another type...not the smooth, idealized beauty of the statue...anatomical features observed from life, without reference to the statue...pose slightly different...slingshot strap in not quite the same place...perhaps not a copy but an original study from a living model....

The material, which looked like marble, was exquisitely finished down to the wrinkles under the arms, the circles around the nipples, and the meticulously patterned locks of the pubic hair. Although the head, the left arm and leg, and most of the right arm and leg were missing—and much of the left side and back appeared to be burned—every remaining anatomical element was treated in the same sharply projected manner as in the *David*. What had changed was the conception, the spirit of the work. The statue represents a "boy of the people," as I once put it, and the muscles and the bony structure beneath them, and above all the massive hands, radiate the kind of power that springs only from hard and energetic work. Yet we do not feel we could ever have seen a body of such magnificence in our daily lives.

Without in any way sacrificing its workmanlike aspect, the marble *David* is a hero, sprung from a superhuman race. Jesus Christ, after all, was "of the house and lineage of David." The young Michelangelo (he was only twenty-six when, on August 21, 1501, he was awarded the commission) must have been conscious of David's dual role of prophet and ancestor, as he was of David's traditional significance as protector and defender of the Florentine people.

But in this model it was possible to feel the rugged youth who posed tremble and sweat as the demanding artist exhorted him to assume and hold a breathless state of abdominal tension, intolerable for more than a few minutes at a time. A similar muscular tension runs through all Michelangelo's early pen drawings of the nude male figure from both classical and living models.

I even recalled a drawing Michelangelo had made of the same young man, a vibrant study in the Louvre of a tall, gaunt, yet muscular youth so close to the model as to suggest that the

same individual had posed for both. He was, perhaps, one of the mountaineer quarrymen from Carrara. Such a lean build, especially the contrast between broad, muscular shoulder and taut, tiny waist, would be the normal result of habitually rotating the torso while swinging a heavy hammer against the iron point used to split the marble. "*C'est le même personnage!*" exclaimed M— when I showed him a photograph of the drawing. The bony structure, the vibrant muscles, the wonderful ungainly grace—like a basketball player's—all were the same.

In a flash all my defenses crumbled. Though there are six or seven authentic, fairly rough *bozzetti* (sketches in clay or wax), this was the only true, small-scale, finished model by Michelangelo in existence. And it was the actual model he had used for the creation of the most beloved of all his statues, the marble *David* in the Accademia in Florence.

The whole thought process, which looks so lengthy on paper, might have taken me sixty seconds. For the first time in my long, professional life I had encountered an unknown masterpiece by one of the world's greatest artists. Until then my most intense experience of Michelangelo's work was an unforgettable moment in 1944. In the dark basement of a villa outside Florence used as a storehouse for sculpture evacuated from the city in fear of bombardments, I climbed on a huge crate and saw through the bars of a window a ray of sunlight strike the face of Michelangelo's *Dawn* from the Medici Chapel. But now, the realization that I was looking at the model for his *David*—the first colossal nude statue of the Renaissance, and thus the first complete visual affirmation of the power and dignity of the natural

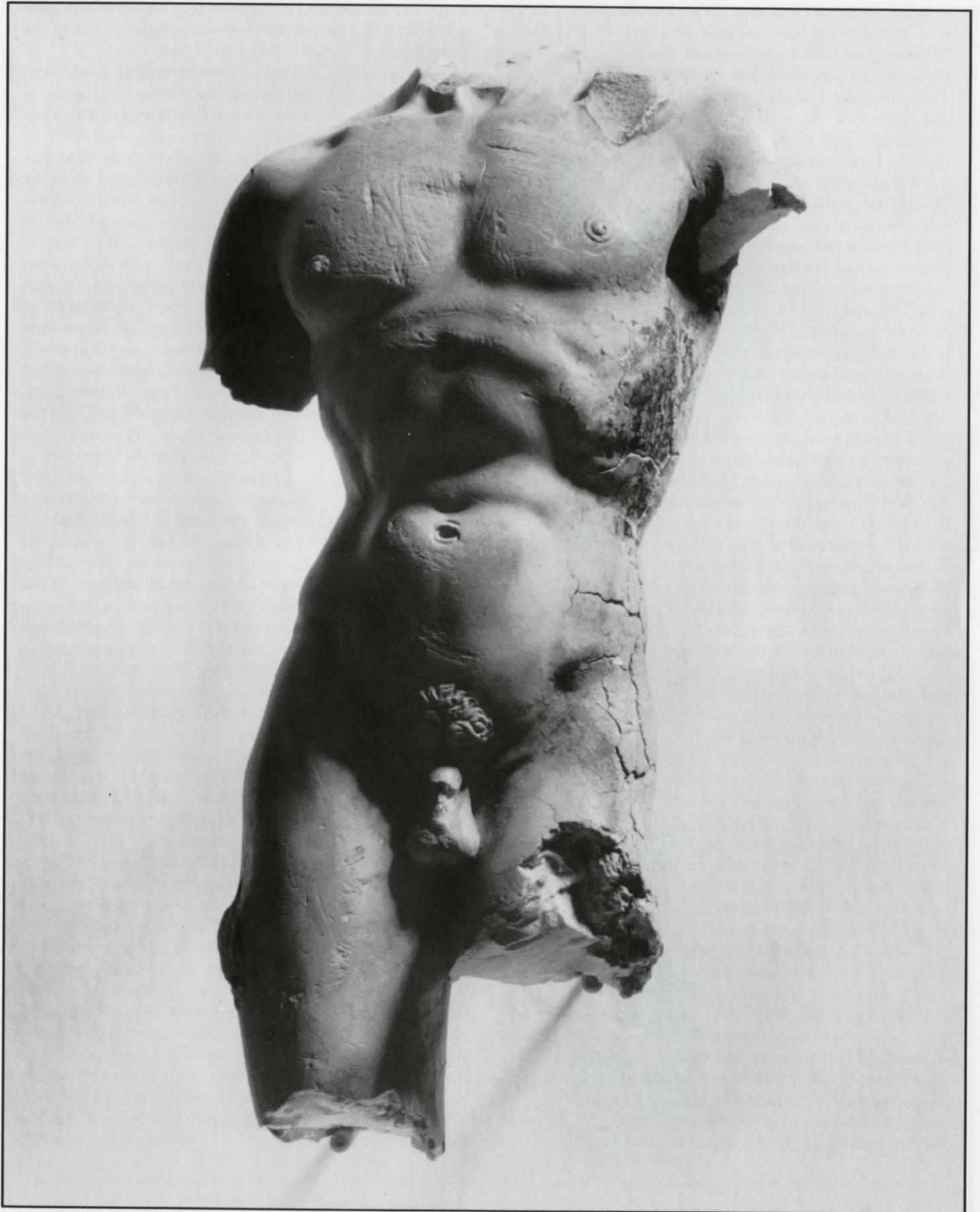
human being—unseen by any scholar's eyes save mine, transcended even that moment. I began, literally, to shake.

We called the owners in Geneva from my study. When it was my turn to talk to the discoverer of the model, I faltered and fumbled, my voice trembling from excitement. I must have communicated my enthusiasm, for I was promptly invited to come see the original. We chose a date for my trip and, after excursions to Monticello and the University of Virginia, my visitors flew back to New York, leaving the photographs with me.

I spread them out on a table in my study, under slabs of glass; for hours I could not take my eyes off them. I slept very little that night. I was assailed by doubts. I thought of all those certificates bearing the signatures of "experts," shown me by dealers trying to interest me in impossible pictures in those far-off days when I directed the Smith College Art Museum. Was I at last going to join *that* lineup? Then I remembered

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In fact, there are
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Michelangelo.*

The David possesses perfect poise, but the dynamic model is more intense. The chest swells and the abdominal muscles contract in a way that recalls fifteenth-century crucifixes, but the torso also corresponds to the physique a Carrara quarryman would actually have had.



a remark by the art historian Walter Friedländer to a dealer who was showing him a superb oil sketch by Van Dyck: "What do you want a certificate for? The picture is genuine." If the model was authentic, surely it would certify itself.

Next morning I hurried to my study in my dressing gown and slippers. In the early light the photographs were overwhelming. There could be no doubt. Nonetheless, after breakfast I continued to study them, applying every comparison I could think of, from the photographs of the marble *David* in the great book on Michelangelo by Charles de Tolnay and in my own books to those of related figures in Michelangelo's drawings and paintings. The model passed every test. The forms were Michelangelo's, the anatomy showed his knowledge, the power was his alone. I compared the model with the bits and pieces of Michelangelo sculptures that have never won professional acceptance and it showed them up for what they were. Above all, it was a study *for*, not a copy *after*. If not Michelangelo, then was there some other sculptor around just as good?

During the next two weeks I collected more information, all of it strengthening my conviction that this was the original model. The essential difference between the model and the finished *David* is that Michelangelo saw and studied with intense penetration a person who looked like the young man in the model. There is an assumption abroad that Michelangelo went at the marble directly without preliminaries—such was the intensity of his grasp of form—to liberate the figure dwelling inside. This is about as realistic as the notion that he painted the Sistine Ceiling lying on his back. It stems from a misreading of his poems, and as anyone who has practical experience in sculpture will bear witness, it is literally impossible. No sculptor, however great a genius, could keep control of the proportions and relationships of a large-scale work without a preliminary tryout.

Michelangelo would have made a wax model for the *David* on an armature, so that he could model head, arms, legs, and base in the greatest detail. Then he would have made a plaster mold around it, separating the front half from the back by means of a strip made of thin pieces of metal inserted into the wax before the plaster for the mold was applied. Then he would have cast the model in two halves (the mold marks are still clearly visible) pouring in stucco or gesso, possibly made from alabaster, which would account for the model's marblelike luster. Once the two pieces of the mold were removed and the cast found to be satisfactory, both the mold and the wax original would have been destroyed. The plaster

model could then stand in the workshop, impervious to summer heat, which would have softened a figure in wax to the point where it would no longer be usable.

In its immediacy and dynamism the realistic model is in some ways more intense than the ideal statue. Michelangelo had thickened the waist in the statue, as if to give it a greater solidity in keeping with its enormous scale. And while he was at work on the marble, he must have concluded that if he had kept the chest as strongly arched as it is in the model, it would have detracted from the face when seen from below, and in consequence he decided to flatten it. But in

creating his tiny model, Michelangelo almost miraculously went farther than anyone in history had yet done to portray certain anatomical subtleties. (I would eventually learn, after consulting James Elkins, an expert on the anatomy exhibited in Michelangelo's work, that in two areas—the upper abdomen between sternum and umbilicus, and the right inguinal region—the model shows greater precision than the marble colossus. In fact, there are no less than seven features in the model virtually unknown outside the work of Michelangelo.)

As a final clincher, there were the discoverer's notes on the entry in Ugo Procacci's meticulous catalogue of the Casa Buonarroti in Florence. The original model for the *David*—in stucco, not wax, Procacci underlined—was recorded in an inventory of the ducal collections in the Guardaroba Secreta (private storerooms) of the Palazzo Vecchio in 1553. In the inventory of 1554-55, the model appears as "*Un' modello di stucco di gighante di man' di Michelagnolo*," but in 1570 and 1574 its title is "*David*." The model reappears in 1609 and 1640, although the artist's name does not.

At nine in the evening of December 17, 1690, a fire—probably caused by a pot of live coals placed between sheets as a bedwarmer by a careless serving woman—devastated twenty-seven rooms of the Palazzo Vecchio, including the Guardaroba Secreta. The Grand Prince Ferdinando, known as a far-sighted and munificent patron of the arts, hurried to the scene, according to an eighteenth-century account, "with the aid of cavaliers and armed guards, and with all the common people of the city, by whom were evacuated the most precious objects of the Guardaroba." It was feared that the whole ancient structure would be gutted, and indeed not until the seventh hour of the night was the fire brought under control. The little model seems to have been forgotten in the general debacle. It must have fallen forward into the rubble and been buried by

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*On December 17,
1690, a fire devastated
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The little model seems to
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rubble and been buried by
smoldering embers.
Did some local soldier or
townsperson simply pick
it out of the ruins
and make off with it?
Or did the authorities
no longer care?*

The model's back also diverges from the finished statue. The buttocks are more tensed; the slingshot strap, lacking the groove it has in the David, is wider at the top and projects more naturally across the lower back, as it actually would have hung.



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continued from page 73 smoldering embers, for many abrasions are visible, as well as signs of direct fire and intense heat. Did some local soldier or towns-person simply pick it out of the ruins and make off with it? Or did the grand-ducal authorities no longer care, in view of the damage? We will doubtless never know. At any rate, the model must have been more nearly intact than now, because the broken limbs show no sign of damage by fire. At some later time it was buried, as earth stains are evident. Oddly enough, only the broken neck shows the stains, but not the stumps of the limbs, which therefore must have been broken still later.

About the later history of the model I would hear two slightly different stories, neither of which could be absolutely verified. According to one account, the composer Arthur Honegger, then living in Béziers in southern France, acquired the model from an unknown source and kept it in front of him as he was writing his *King David* oratorio. The other account, current in the Honegger family, no living member of which was born at the time, identifies the work as a gift to the composer from an unknown admirer of the oratorio after its first performance in 1921. In neither case was any particular attention paid to the model, which was considered a good copy but of slight importance. The present owners acquired the model from Honegger's heirs in 1985.

On Sunday, July 9, I arrived in Geneva, where I was met by my original visitor and driven to a hotel. That evening I visited the M-s' apartment, and the model was promptly set before me, in the soft light coming from tall windows.

There it was at last! I could hold it in my hands, move it about to obtain a variety of lights and shadows, turn it over, look at it from every conceivable point of view, enjoy the soft, inner glow of the stucco, and mourn the damage by fire and fracture. The model was even greater than I had thought. Within its tiny compass I could feel in germ not only the marble *David* but the whole race of heroic beings with whom Michelangelo had populated his famous, classic compositions. As a monuments and fine-arts officer in Italy during the war I had sometimes found myself carrying

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paintings by Duccio or Masaccio on my lap or between my knees in a pitching jeep, on one occasion pulling out a sculptured relief by Benedetto da Maiano from the ruins of a church bombed the night before. I have held thousands of drawings by great masters in my hands. I may even be the only person living who has handled all of Michelangelo's drawings three times. Whenever I undertake such responsibility I always feel a sense of awe. Never have I felt more so than in the case of this unknown masterpiece.

In the absence of a genuine signature or a document of commission and a record of continuous possession, very little in regard to older works of art can ever be proved beyond a shadow of a doubt. But after studying the model I have concluded that to disprove its authenticity one would have to demonstrate:

1. That the sculpture was carefully fabricated first from wax, then cast in stucco with great skill.
2. That an imitator was familiar with Michelangelo's creative processes and his anatomical research and knew the Louvre drawing.
3. That he realized that the model had been kept in the Guardaroba Secreta and had subsequently disappeared.
4. That he knew his way around the inventories of the Guardaroba Secreta and could thus cope with sixteenth-century script.
5. That having made this beautiful thing he was able and willing to damage the object by fire without destroying it, sacrificing the head in the process.
6. That he buried it in the earth long enough for the outer layers to become completely impregnated by clay.
7. That he dug it up and broke off the limbs.
8. That after all this study and labor he would be willing to part with his product in 1921 without any claim to its authorship.
9. That he was as good as Michelangelo. □

David—By the Hand of Michelangelo: The Original Model Discovered by Frederick Hartt, with photographs by David Finn, will be published next month by Abbeville Press. Copyright 1987 by Cross River Press, Ltd.

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