

StonExcerpt

David B. Williams, self-described 'Geologist/Writer' has a keen interest in stone types that have, due to their geological qualities, proved attractive to man-the-builder and for that reason became intimately involved in our cultural history. In *STORIES IN STONE* he profiles such building stones as New York Brownstone, Boston Granite, Carmel Granite, Minnesota Gneiss, Florida Coquina, Indiana Limestone, Colorado Petrified Wood, Carrara Marble, East Coast Slate and Italian Travertine. We are made aware of formative processes that have endowed these lithic entities with their peculiar character and the way in which they have been articulated, particularly in the urban environment.

from Chapter 8:

THE TROUBLE WITH MICHELANGELO'S FAVORITE STONE

(The references to Amaco here relate to the description, earlier in the chapter, of the problems caused by the fateful decision on the part of Amaco's chairman and the architect (Edward Durrell Stone) to use six thousand tons of noble Carrara marble to clad their corporate headquarters in Chicago.)

If you want someone to blame for Amoco's marble problems, you have to look no further than Michelangelo. Whether in sculpting or architecture, he exploited the brilliance and luminosity of marble as few have ever done. His work gave marble, particularly Carrara marble, the prestige that made it the material to use in corporate boardrooms, prestigious law firms, and rarefied social clubs. Marble good enough for Michelangelo had to be good enough for Standard Oil.

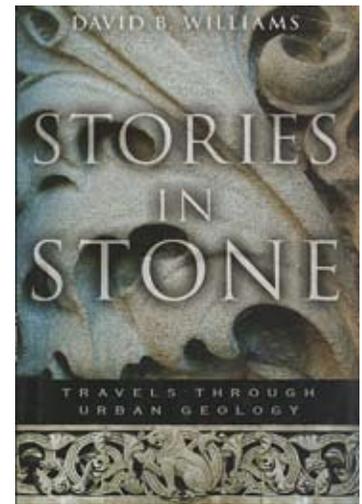
Michelangelo first became attracted to stone at a young age, or so he told his biographer Vasari. "Giorgio, if I have any intelligence at all, it has come from being born in the pure air of your native Arezzo, and also because I took the hammer and chisels with which I care my figures from my wet-nurse's milk. Like so many others, his first experiences were hammering his local rock. Born in 1476 in Caprese, about fifty miles from Florence, Michelangelo spent his early years in the quarrying village of Settignano, where the stone carvers, or *scarpellini*, worked a blue gray sandstone known as *pietra serena*.

Suckled on stone or not, Michelangelo did not start as a sculptor. His father apprenticed the youngster to the great fresco painter Domenico Ghirlandaio. Michelangelo soon surpassed his master, who recommended his protégé to Lorenzo de' Medici, the head of Florence's ruling family. It was in Lorenzo's garden that Michelangelo discovered marble, at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Lorenzo was a renowned patron of the arts, with a rich collection of Greek and Roman sculptures, plus a resident sculptor, Bertoldo di Giovanni, a student of Donatello, the greatest sculptor of the early to middle 1400s.

Again Michelangelo's precocious ability aided his development. Vasari described how the young artist so impressed Lorenzo with his first effort in sculpting—a copy of a faun—that Lorenzo invited Michelangelo to move into his house, gave him fine clothes, and allowed him to sit at the family dining table. Perhaps apocryphal, the faun has never been found, but Michelangelo did begin to work regularly with marble in the Medici garden. He remained in Lorenzo's care for two years, until his patron's death in 1492.

Over the next dozen years, while living in Bologna, Florence, and Rome, Michelangelo completed as many as ten sculptures. These include the *Sleeping Cupid*, which he dirtied up and tried to pass off as a Roman antique, and his first surviving life-size piece, a fleshy, staggering *Bacchus*. He also traveled to the quarries in Carrara, seventy-five miles east and north of Florence, for the first time to find a piece of marble. Out of a brilliantly white, crack-free block he carved the sublimely holy Vatican *Pieta*.

Next came his colossal *David*, hewn from a block of Carrara first quarried in 1464, and later dragged through the mud to Florence and worked by two other carvers, before sitting outside in Florence for over three decades.



What unites his work, particularly the *Pieta*, *David*, and later *Moses*, is that Michelangelo had transcended his medium. He had become an alchemist, turning stone into living beings. When you look at any of these great statues, it is hard not to think that you are looking at works carved of flesh and cloth. Every fold, every muscle, every feature is so realistic that you expect *David* or *Moses* or *Mary* to become animate and to tell of the great thoughts revealed in their faces. It feels as if they are present.

By finding the essential elements of humanity and transmitting them to stone, Michelangelo had in turn bestowed a sense of grace on marble. No one who has seen the *David* or the *Pieta* could every look at the material again and not be reminded of refinement, of the ethereal spirit of humanity. And those qualities eventually became synonymous with the stone, whether the viewer had seen Michelangelo's work or not.

Everything about *David* is awe inspiring—his size, his location in the Galleria dell' Accademia in Florence, the feeling of reverence in the air around him—yet only a few yards away is the Gallery of the *Slaves*, with its roughed-out statues. The figure in each appears to be wrenching himself out of his marble bounds. In all five you can see the process of how Michelangelo chiseled a man out of rock, of how he missed precise and rough cuts, of how he revealed the textures and light within the stone.

These pieces are not made of flesh. You know Michelangelo was working with rock. They are not sensuous. They have a density and a mass. They are grounded.

Michelangelo described his process of sculpting as the "art which operates by taking away." Other sculptors have written of releasing the spirit or story within the stone. I do not have the experience or knowledge to question artists' beliefs, but the unfinished blocks illustrate a profound link between man and stone, a link where a man recognized the strengths and weaknesses of stone and worked with them to create astounding works of art. Exploited to its fullest by Michelangelo, the bond between stone and humankind is central not only to sculpting but also to architecture.

Like Amoco, Michelangelo also suffered for his decision to use Carrara. Instead of losing face and 70 to 80 million dollars, as Amoco did, Michelangelo almost died twice to get at the stone. In December 1516 he convinced Pope Leo X and Cardinal Giulio de Medici that they should let him design a new façade for the church of San Lorenzo in Florence. The façade would be "both architecturally and sculpturally, the mirror of all Italy," wrote Michelangelo to the cardinal's treasurer and liaison, Domenico Buoninsegni. Michelangelo proposed a more audacious undertaking than anything he, or anyone since antiquity, had done. The last great all-marble building in Italy had been constructed in 203, and the entire façade of San Lorenzo would be marble, including a dozen monolithic columns.