

Michelangelo's Moses



When Michelangelo finished sculpting David, it was clear that this was quite possibly **the most beautiful figure ever created**—exceeding the beauty even of Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. Word of David reached **Pope Julius II** in Rome, and he asked **Michelangelo** to come to Rome to work for him. The first work Pope Julius II commissioned from Michelangelo was **a tomb for the pope**.

When Michelangelo began the Tomb of Pope Julius II, his ideas were quite ambitious. He planned a **two story structure** decorated with more than **20 sculptures—each of these life sized**. Pope Julius II asked Michelangelo to pause his work on the tomb to paint the ceiling of the **Sistine Chapel** and he was never able to complete his plan for the tomb. After experiencing trouble with Julius' heirs, Michelangelo eventually completed a **much scaled-down version** of the tomb, which was installed in **San Pietro in Vincoli** (and not in St. Peter's Basilica as planned).

Moses is an imposing figure—he is **235 centimeters high** sitting down! He has enormous muscular arms and an angry, intense look in his eyes. Under his arms he carries the tablets of the law—**the stones inscribed with the Ten Commandments**.

In this story from the Old Testament book of Exodus, Moses leaves the Israelites, who he has just delivered from slavery in Egypt, to go to the top of Mt. Sinai. When he returns, he finds that the Israelites have **constructed a golden calf** to worship and make sacrifices to. They have, in other words, been acting like the Egyptians and worshipping a **pagan idol**. One of the commandments Moses received is **"Thou shalt not make any graven images,"** so when Moses sees the Israelites worshipping this idol and betraying the one and only God who has just delivered them from slavery, he **throws down the tablets** and breaks them.

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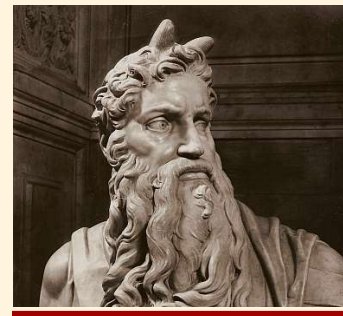


We can see the figure's pent-up energy. The entire figure **is charged with thought and energy**. Moses is not simply sitting down; his left leg is pulled back to the side of his chair as though he is about to rise. And because this leg is pulled back, his hips also face left. Michelangelo, **to create an interesting, energetic figure**—where the forces of life are pulsing throughout the body—pulls the torso in the opposite direction. And so his torso faces to his right. And because the torso faces to the right, Moses turns his head to the left, and then pulls his beard to the right.

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